Perspectives on Precarity: A Multifaceted Look at the Status of Project Archivists

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R: This is the third time Amy, Sheridan and I have talked about this topic, which we each approach with varied perspectives.

Introduction / Background

- Perspectives
  - Amy: Project archivist, diversity
  - Sheridan: Early career advocacy, labor equity
  - Rebecca: Past manager, sustainability
- ArchivesGig (2014-2020): 24.2% of jobs posted are project positions

	Count (2014)	Percentage (2014)	Count (2019)	Percentage (2019)
Temporary	243	25.7%	296	25.2%
Permanent	701	74.2%	876	74.7%

A: My name is Amy Vo, and as an early career professional, the obstacles and challenges I have faced in obtaining work have pushed me toward research about labor practices in our field and their impact on diversity and the retention of under-represented archivists.

S: My name is Sheridan Sayles and because of my previous experience as a project archivist, I've committed to labor advocacy and helping early career archivists, both through the Issues and Advocacy Steering Committee and serving as the MARAC Mentoring Chair.

R: My name is Rebecca Johnson Melvin. I began my career as a project archivist and I am a past manager who has employed several project archivists, finally convincing administrators to hire a continuing appointment for what had been a turn-over position. I care a great deal about supporting new archivists.

A: In all of our discussions about precarity, we circle around to managerial advocacy and what the state of the field is. Thanks to Meredith Lowe, we had access to data from Archives Gig, and were able to find that a sizable 25% of job postings are for project positions.

Research Question

What factors cause a gap in perspectives between project archivists and managers related to the experience of term-limited positions?

- Demographics
- Hiring details
- Output
- Morale
- Benefits
- Experience
- Transition
- Sustainability
- Personal reflections

Will a study of practices and issues related to employment of term-limited project positions help us identify advocacy points for the benefit of both employees and employers in the archival profession?

A: We wanted to know how the perspectives of project archivists and managers differ regarding temporary project positions. So we structured a dual survey approach to answer this question. We identified several important employment themes related to project positions to structure our survey, such as output, morale, and sustainability.

A: Specifically, we wanted to know if a study of practices and issues would help identify advocacy points, and if there are any points of agreement between project archivists and their employers regarding benefits or negatives of temporary positions.

Methodology

- Extensive study
- Grounded theory approach
- Two online Qualtrics surveys (employer/project archivist) designed with corresponding questions
- Non-probability, self-selection sampling
  - Listservs
- Quantitative and qualitative data
  - Descriptive statistics
  - Thematic analysis (coding in progress)

R: From the start, we realized we wanted to share our findings, so we obtained IRB approval. We used Qualtrics for our survey tool, and are exploring other tools for data analysis.

A: We wanted a broad picture of current trends in our field regarding temporary positions, so we created an extensive study based on a grounded theory approach. We designed two corresponding surveys to compare responses between project archivists and employers. Participants were self-selected. Since responses included both quantitative and qualitative data, we are using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The work has been slow since we have been learning about research and data analysis as we go. We're currently calibrating our code dictionary in preparation for analysis of our qualitative data.

Sample

- Number of complete responses:
  - 284 project archivists, 83 employers
- Number of total responses:
  - 373 project archivists, 129 employers
- Limitations:
  - Incomplete surveys
  - Shared through SAA, regional, and local archives, lib, and DH listservs
  - Responses from in-field members only

S: We distributed our survey in April 2019 and, after three months, received 284 complete responses from Project Archivists and 83 complete responses from Employers. There were 373 total responses from project archivists and 129 total ones from employers. We attribute the number of incompletes to the roughly 20-30 minute completion time of the survey.

S: Our recruitment method was a limitation of our study, as we shared the surveys through national listservs on archives, libraries, and the digital humanities, leaving out museum archivists. Our regional listserv distribution weighted heavily on the East Coast where we are based, which may have underrepresented the West Coast, Midwest, and non-contiguous states. This also left out those who are entirely out-of-the-field or unable to afford memberships.

Results: Demographics

- Age of project archivists skewed younger, between 25-32 years
- Length of contract
  - Overall average is approx. 18 months
  - Reported PA range (in months):
    - 0.5-48, with 60, 102, 120 as outliers
  - Reported E range (in months):
    - 0.5-36, with 48, 60 as outliers

A: Our demographic data shows that the age of project archivists skewed younger, between 25-32 years.

A: We found that the overall average of contract lengths is about 18 months, with ranges spanning from several weeks to 3 or 4 years. A small number of project archivists reported “temporary” positions lasting as long as 5 or even 8 years.

Results: Demographics

Gender identity comparisons between our two surveys

Gender Identity	Project Archivists		Employers	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Male	54	15.08%	30	24%
Female	294	**82.12%**	91	**72.80%**
Non-binary	8	2.23%	1	0.08%
Prefer not to answer	2	0.56%	3	2.40%
Total	358	100%	125	100%

A: In terms of gender identity, our respondents were more male in the employers survey, suggesting that more men are in positions of power despite our field being overwhelmingly female.

Results: Demographics

Race/ethnicity comparisons between our two surveys

Race/Ethnicity	Project Archivists		Employers	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
American Indian or Alaskan Native	3	0.79%	1	0.79%
Asian or Asian American	16	4.22%	2	1.59%
Black or African American	11	2.90%	2	1.59%
Hispanic / Latinx / Spanish origin	18	4.75%	1	0.79%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
White or Caucasian	325	**85.75%**	117	**92.86%**
Prefer not to answer	6	1.58%	3	2.38%
Total	379	100%	126	100%

A: Though our field is majority white, this whiteness is even more apparent at the managerial level.

Results: Demographics

Gender identity comparison to previous demographic studies

Survey Comparisons (Gender Identity): A*CENSUS (2004), WArS/SAA Salary Survey (2017), Term-Limited Positions Survey (2019)				
	2004	**2017**	**2019 (PA)**	**2019 (E)**
Female	64.50%	82.10%	82.12%	72.80%
Male	34.10%	13.70%	15.08%	24.00%
Nonbinary (2017 and 2019 only)	--	0.80%	2.23%	0.08%
Prefer not to answer (2019); I choose not to specify a gender or skipped question (2017); Rather not say, no answer (2004)	1.40%	1.1 %	0.56%	2.40%

A: Earlier demographic studies in our field include the 2004 A*CENSUS survey and the Women Archivists Section Salary Survey of 2017. The 2019 surveys in this table are data from our two surveys. Compared to previous demographic studies in our field, the current numbers of those identifying as female in our 2019 study are nearly the same as the numbers from 2017.

Results: Demographics

Race/ethnicity comparison to previous demographic studies

Survey Comparisons (Race/Ethnicity): A*CENSUS (2004), WArS/SAA Salary Survey (2017), Term-Limited Positions Survey (2019)				
	2004	**2017**	**2019 (PA)**	**2019 (E)**
Latinx/Hispanic	2.10%	3.60%	4.75%	0.79%
African American	2.80%	3.10%	2.90%	1.59%
Alaskan Native	0.10%	0.00%	(combined with Native American)	
Asian/Asian American	1.00%	1.90%	4.22%	1.59%
White/Caucasian	87.70%	87.70%	85.75%	92.86%
Native American/American Indian	0.019%	0.60%	0.79%	0.79%
Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.004%	0.10%	0.00%	0.00%
Other	0.029%	--	--	--
Total non-Latino and Non-White	7.60%	--	--	--

A: Similarly, the percentage points of those identifying as white in our field have not changed significantly since 2017. I would also like to note that examining data on race and ethnicity is difficult because of how constructed it is! The categories were different across the three studies.

Results: Layers of Undervaluing Work

Types of Projects Funded

	Processing	Cataloging/Description	Digitization
Primary	63.95%	13.66%	9.88%
Secondary	11.16%	25.79%	10.56%

- "I was hired to process the backlog collections and only given one year for over ten years worth of backlog. I only made a dent in one year."
- "As a small organization with no permanent archivist on staff... my work helped them fulfill the requirements of the grant they had received, putting them in a good position to apply for future funding."

S: We asked respondents to identify primary and secondary work assignments of their project from a pre-populated list. Processing, cataloging/description, and digitization were the top three duties and combined they accounted for 87.49% of all selected primary duties. They were also well represented in secondary duties, showing that project positions weigh heavily in technical services.

S: Preliminary readings of our qualitative data suggest that project labor is used as a stop-gap solution to programmatic shortcomings, as illustrated in quote one, and additionally that there is an over-reliance on grant funding to meet these basic needs, as shown in quote two.

Results: Layers of Undervaluing Work

Project Archivists with Separate Work Spaces

Workplace physically separated	Workplace not physically separate
38.92%	61.08%

Opportunities for Continuing Appointment at Current Institution

Yes, permanent	Yes, temporary	Still employed	Not after term ends
14.53%	33.43%	13.95%	38.08%

- 48% have project lead to other work, 71% will need to keep looking for work

S: When asked whether their work spaces were physically integrated or separate from the main staff, close to 40% of respondents reported that they did not share a space. In the following qualitative section on the topic, respondents reported that this separation led to issues such as difficulties in communication, a lower profile for the project work, and lack of resources for the project archivist.

S: When asked if the project archivist was offered continuing appointment at their institution following completion of the project, 14% reported that they were offered a permanent position, 33% were offered another project position, and 38% left the institution entirely. While 48% had continued work after the project, due to the temporary nature of project work, 71% of respondents will need to keep looking for another position.

Results: Layers of Undervaluing Work

Post-Contract Precarity

	Yes	No	N/A
Did you find employment before leaving position?	55.45%	17.88%	26.67%
Did you complete project before leaving?	53.03%	20.61%	26.36%
Post-project, did you continue with archival work?	68.58%	6.65%	24.77%

	Choice	Necessity
Was your next job primarily a position of choice or necessity?	59.67%	40.33%

S: Next, we asked project archivists about their post-contract employment and status of their project upon its completion. Unsurprisingly, 55% found another job before leaving their position, and 20% did not complete their project before leaving. What was surprising was that 40% of project archivists took their next position out of necessity rather than choice.

Results: Satisfaction Ratings

PA Satisfaction with Project Experience		PA's Perceived Employer Satisfaction	
Scale Rating	Percentage	Scale Rating	Percentage
1-4	7.44%	1-4	3.20%
5-7	41.43%	5-7	16.34%
8-10	**48.13%**	8-10	**80.45%**
Mode (7)	22.98%	Mode (10)	35%

Employer's Perceived PA Satisfaction		Employer Satisfaction with PA Performance	
Scale Rating	Percentage	Scale Rating	Percentage
1-4	5.94%	1-4	11.22%
5-7	42.57%	5-7	29.59%
8-10	**51.48%**	8-10	**59.19%**
Mode (10)	25.51%	Mode (8)	29.70%

R: Our surveys included 2 questions asking respondents to rate their own satisfaction with the project experience and their perceived satisfaction of the other group on a Likert scale, with a low-to-high rating of 1-to-10.

R: The highlighted rows of these tables show highest percentages of responses. All of them are in the 8-10 range.

R: There is an important discrepancy in perception of satisfaction. The mode of 10 for PAs' perception of their employers' satisfaction was 35%; the mode was also 10 for employers, but only 25% of that group perceived that the PAs were satisfied at that level.

R: For elaboration on their satisfaction ratings, we also asked 4 qualitative questions of each group, about the benefits and disadvantages of the project position to themselves, and the perceived benefits and disadvantages to the other group. These open-ended questions indicated much more dissatisfaction.

Results:
What Do We Lose with Project Positions?

What are the disadvantages of employing project archivists?

Employer: “That it is terminal!”

Employee: “I crave community and the feeling of all working towards a common goal.”

R: Both groups repeatedly cite personal issues such as inequity in pay, benefits and peer status; and inability to plan personal life and career trajectories. Both also cite issues such as loss of institutional knowledge, developed expertise, and sustained archival programs in the workplace.

R: In the 2 quotes here, the employer is getting to the painful bottom line of precarity; the employee is reminding us that PAs are career-minded: they just really want to contribute and belong to the profession.

Suggestions

- Further research on scope and impact of employment trend
- Dobetterlabor.com / SAA guidelines on ethical project positions
- Increased advocacy on managerial level to address career precarity
- Cultural shift in profession to increase value of technical services work

S: After this research we have a few suggestions. First we would like to highlight the inherent stress and precarity of project work, and we would like to see further study of its impact and scope.

A: We are interested in finding advocacy points to offer managers. One place to start is for SAA to develop and offer guidelines on creating ethical project positions. A similar document was created by a subgroup of the Digital Library Federation Labor Working Group. The “Do Better” - Love(,) Us document are guidelines for developing and supporting grant-funded positions in digital libraries, archives and museums.

R: We are advocates for appreciation of archival labor and those who perform it. We challenge managers to create sustained employment opportunities for early career archivists, or as one manager noted in our early MARAC presentation on this topic, we need to quit calling our work “projects.” Backlogs live and grow.

S: Finally, our research has shown that the most invisible labor is technical services labor and processing archivists are repeatedly hired for term-limited positions. We as a field need to support and recognize the value of technical services work. The Digital Library Federation, the UCLA 6, and others are speaking on invisible labor in the archives, and our research data provides hard numbers that support their voices.

Questions?

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S: Thank you for viewing our presentation. We will answer questions at the end and now move to the next group.