Up-and-Comers: News for Student Archivists—Justin Seidler, Assistant Editor

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On Volunteering: A Personal Account

By Anonymous; editorial introduction and postscript by Justin Seidler and Gregory Stall

Introduction

As with any endeavor, there are two sides to the nature of volunteer work in the library and archives community. Volunteering, especially in a job market as difficult as this, is a necessary step for most students and recent graduates pursuing a career in information science. As the next generation of professionals, we have the opportunity and obligation to pave our way to gainful employment with hands-on experience and the development of networking skills. These skills, informed by proper workplace conduct and the observation of professional relationships in the community at large, should help you form positive habits that are the foundation of a long and successful career. On the other hand, the up-and-coming professional must be aware of inherent and often unavoidable difficulties to develop a realistic picture of what it means to volunteer. It is wise, therefore, to understand not only the privileges but the complications you may encounter during the journey to a full-time salaried position.

The need for and benefit of volunteer work speak for themselves. Everyone must start somewhere, and the willingness of a library or archives to give greenhorns the opportunity to prove themselves is a privilege not to be taken lightly. It is important, however, to note the inherent difficulties that must be overcome regarding the work itself and the volunteer's place in such an endeavor. The following account comes from an MLIS graduate and up-and-coming professional who chooses to remain anonymous. This personal account is intended not to discourage but to provide one perspective on the objective and subjective realities of volunteering in the information science community.

On Volunteering: A Personal Account

As degree mills continue to churn out increasing numbers of freshly minted archivists into a market that has little place for them, it is inevitable that many of these unemployed souls will turn to volunteer work to flesh out thin resumes and fill the empty hours. While volunteering can be a wonderful way to gain real-world experience and hold an unsullied archivist over until that first job opens up, it is not without its downsides.

First, allow me to say that I am, and will always be, eternally grateful to the organizations that have given me a chance to continue to hone my skills as an archivist. Without these opportunities, I (and many like me) would have spent the first year out of graduate school doing little else but sitting around in misery waiting for interviews that never came. Instead of a blank curriculum vitae, I can now say that I have created an archives for a private K–8 school and completely revamped the archives of a small liberal arts college. The work itself was satisfying and offered new challenges that made me a better archivist and kept me sane at an otherwise depressing time. Beyond the long-term career benefits, it simply felt good to get up and go to work every day, and it reaffirmed my conviction that those who choose to work in the library and archives professions are among the nicest and most helpful people on earth. That being said, there are pitfalls to volunteerism that one would never experience as an employee, and it is best to go into such situations with eyes wide open.

The largest problem facing volunteers is also the most obvious: volunteers are not employees. Decisions that you have just paid an extraordinary amount of money to learn to make are not yours to resolve. Having worked in an archives as a graduate assistant, I was already well aware of the chasm that exists between textbooks and reality, between ideals and budgets. Questions regarding whether to buy a hygrothermograph or use EAD for finding aids were never asked. I did, however, have an expectation that at this point in my life I would be able to make *basic* decisions unilaterally—after all, I have this degree that says I know how. Yet, without the benefit of a contract or the reassurance of a paycheck, I found that even small rulings, including simple questions of arrangement and materials, had to be run up the chain of command first. A job is a vote of confidence that you know what you are doing; a volunteer position is an acceptance of the reality that most archives are understaffed and underfunded and will take whatever help they can get. This dynamic not only slows down your labors, it also creates more work for the people for whom you are volunteering.

At the college archives, I found myself taking 20 to 30 minutes of the director's time every other day to make sure that what I was doing had official sanction. I felt terrible every time I had to knock on the office door and go through a series of questions I already knew how to answer

but could not implement without consent. Directors, who seem always to be juggling 50 things at once, do not need another problem taking up their time. Yet, repeatedly I found myself in the uncomfortable position of creating more work for the people I was trying to help, and who had been nice enough to give me a break in the first place.

Employers often speak of getting employees to buy in or take ownership of their jobs, but taking ownership of an archives you are not officially a part of is difficult to say the least. How exactly does one buy in to the mission of an organization that thinks you are good enough to help, but not really good enough, or cost efficient enough, to hire? It is a dicey situation that can lead to slacking off and a lack of true commitment on the part of the volunteer and resentment on the part of the institution.

I would never for a moment advocate against volunteering. Most archives need all the help they can get, and gaining knowledge while doing something you believe in can be a richly rewarding experience. But be aware of what you are getting into. First, you should make sure that you can truly commit to volunteering—from the Latin *voluntārius* meaning, "willing, of freewill, self-constituted." If you do not wish to get up every morning to drive into work to not get paid, then do not do it. The odds are that you will only end up hurting your reputation, as those around you will see you as someone who does not want to be there.

My other recommendation is to set clear parameters and guidelines before you start a volunteer project. Be especially wary of the organization that tells you to come in as often as you like and they'll find something for you to do. You will soon be knocking on someone's door every 15 minutes with questions, and your supervisor will come to hate you for it. Set up the project in advance and make sure to ask exactly what you can and cannot do on your own. Then buy in. Commit. We all know that the archives field is a small world. Those who see you giving your full effort in a volunteer situation will often go out of their way to help you find more permanent employment.

Editorial Postscript

As the author states, it is important to fully *participate* in your volunteer experience; not only in the sense of the work itself but in designing and guiding its direction. The aforementioned experience is that of one individual, not all, but the issues that arise therein should be considered in the course of establishing one's self in the information science community. Good luck and happy job-hunting, Up-and-Comers!