

Reaction to Volunteer Resource

Resources for Volunteer Programs in Archives was jointly produced by NARA and SAA. It was envisioned, compiled, and edited by NARA; it was reviewed by the SAA Publications Board with production done by SAA. It was launched in November 2012 as a free online publication (<http://www2.archivists.org/publications/epubs>).

Some tweeters and bloggers provided immediate feedback on the publication. To get an idea of their reaction, see:

- <https://alexandramc85.wordpress.com/2012/11/29/wading/>
- <http://offtherecord.archivists.org/2012/11/13/hanging-together/>
- <http://storify.com/eehikes/volunteer-resource-debate>

All three include a variety of linkages.

For your reference, this packet contains copies of those posts (but not the linkages) as well as a preview of the U.S. Archivist's column—"Volunteers Help NARA Do Its Job, Support Professional Archivists"—for the Jan./Feb. 2013 issue of *Archival Outlook*.

May Subdivide Geographically

NOVEMBER 29, 2012 · 6:47 PM

Wading into that Volunteering Debate

Over the past weeks I've been following the responses to SAA's publication of [Resources for Volunteer Programs in Archives](#) with interest, but it's taken me until now to organize my thoughts and type them up. I worked in archives for four years during and after graduate school in a position that involved interacting with and occasionally supervising volunteers. For a variety of reasons, I'm currently working as a high school librarian, not as an archivist, and I am once again involved with a volunteer program. Additionally, I have some experience on the other side as a volunteer.

First off, for anyone who has not been following the [debates](#) over *Resources* these are the two statements that sparked most of the discussion.

At a time when the volume of archival records created is increasing monumentally, it is common in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world for budgets to be cut and paid staff to be reduced.

It's a pretty benign statement. Archives are facing a lot of budget cuts. But what you might not expect is that this is an answer to the question, and the question is not "Are archives currently well funded?" but "Why have volunteers in archives?"

There is a feeling among some staff, including supervisors and managers, that volunteers diminish the status of the archival profession. Some staff fear that volunteers will replace them and take away their jobs.

The fears are presented as obstacles to implementing a volunteer program that managers must overcome.

I agree with [Rebecca Goldman](#) that the idea that an institution should find volunteers to do what would otherwise be paid work is not an ethical solution to budget reductions. Lack of funds does not make it okay to take advantage of someone's professional skills. I strongly believe that volunteers make valuable contributions to many archival programs, but object to the idea of SAA, the national professional organization for archivists, suggesting that unpaid labor is an acceptable substitute for professional positions.

Since I think Rebecca [and others](#) have raised valid and important concerns, I was very disheartened by the [response from Terry Baxter](#) that characterized any of those raising objection to *Resources* as whiny children:

But if you can only see SAA as a problem and as 'them,' then set up your own friggin' organization and WORK to fix the problems. *Talk is cheap, kids.* [Emphasis mine.]

I have two responses to this:

1) I am relatively young and relatively new to the profession. I'm employed full-time and not worried that my employer will replace me with a volunteer. I also have friend—former classmates—from their 20s up to their 60s who have thus far only been able to stay in the field by accepting unpaid volunteer positions. Yes, new archivists are especially concerned about the growing reliance on volunteers, because we both want jobs and sometimes *are* those volunteers. But it's not because we're all silly kids that don't know anything. And no, we will not get off your lawn.

2) New archivists *are* organizing and trying to effect change from within SAA. Just this year the Students and New Archivists Roundtable (SNAP) made its SAA debut, and already the group is taking on new projects suggested by its membership and, in my opinion, is making a difference in students' and new archivists' participation in SAA. The suggestion that no one is taking action strikes me as disingenuous, or at least misinformed. Whatever the case may be, can we please disagree about the publication without ageist implications that some of us are young and therefore our arguments are invalid?

The answer to “why have volunteers in archives?” should never be “because we can't afford to pay our staff.” Why not focus instead on things like the benefits of a volunteer program as a form of outreach to the community? Flipping it around, the answer to “what do we do about budget cuts?” should never be “just get volunteers!” Bobbi Newman wrote a [blog post](#) that I liked in which she wrote that librarians need to “stop saying we can do more with less.” I believe the same is true for archivists. We need to advocate for more. Anything less is a disservice to the profession. How can we as a professional community on one hand assert that professional archivists are truly necessary—that the professional credentials and experience that we worked hard to earn were worthwhile—while on the other saying it's possible to make do without?

Unfortunately, newer archivists are often poorly positioned to be the best advocates. I'd like to see SAA use its national reach to take on a stronger advocacy role. It's also important for individuals to get involved. Seasoned archivists, especially those in management positions, should work to convince resource allocators that funding for archives is essential.

Let's all push toward archives with enough staff positions to accomplish our missions... and while we're at it, let's set up some great volunteer programs to complement that work, maybe by following some of the examples in *Resources*.

[About these ads](#)

4 Responses to *Wading into that Volunteering Debate*

Jackie Dooley

December 1, 2012 at 5:09 pm



Hi, Alex—

I really appreciate your post. The discourse on this topic has been rather laden with bile—extremely unfortunate, IMHO. We all need to be able to discuss tough issues in a collegial and constructive manner

without overtly offending others whose perspectives or opinions may differ. You've done a great job of that.

I'd like first to assure you and your readers that the SAA Council is listening to this discussion. In fact, even before the Volunteers debate erupted, members of Council held a Skype session about jobs issues—one of a host of such conversations we'll be having on issues related to SAA's strategic priorities before our meeting in January. Just yesterday we put out a call to the SAA leader listserv (steering committees of sections and roundtables, as well as committee and task force chairs) to send in comments about the issues that they see as most important for our Society to focus on in the next few years. You'll be seeing a general call to the membership very soon. I encourage graduating students and other new archivists to speak up about employment issues and other areas of concern. Please be as specific as possible about how we might focus our energies, and realize that we're powerless to do certain things such as directly create more jobs.

Next, we're fully aware that the new Volunteers publication has raised lots of hackles, with the most attention being paid to the paragraph that you quoted. It's really unfortunate that the pub starts out with a statement of need that's so very limited—I too find it skewed and misleading. I encourage you to give equal standing to David Ferriero's intro on the previous page, which says this, among other things: "volunteers ... do not manage themselves, and volunteers do not (usually) train themselves! Staff members play valuable roles; they serve as project managers, human capital specialists, teachers, and more. They also create tools to assist in the volunteers' efforts." I hope there's no perception that NARA hires volunteers to replace paid staff—they do everything they possibly can with the finite budget they receive from the government. And they pursue keeping that budget healthy with great fervor.

Third, the post that Terry Baxter did on our SAA leadership blog has been severely criticized without mention of the things he said that are supportive of jobs issues, such as "The most compelling argument from this conversation is that SAA should advocate more strongly (or at all) for archivists' workplace issues. We have not done nearly enough to insure that archivists have more jobs, better paid jobs, more fulfilling jobs," and "The role of SAA leadership should be, as much as anything else, the removal of barriers to let smart and energetic members get things done. We are always trying to do that, but ... we can be better." Terry is well known as a huge advocate for labor issues (not to mention being a guy with a highly irreverent sense of humor!), and I confess I was surprised that his "tough love" message was received with widespread scorn. His heart and his ongoing actions are right there with you. He has posted on the blog in support of workplace issues. He's a true "voice of the people" on Council. We've learned something from this about participation of SAA leaders in the social media realm: we can't come across as harsh or negative without some members hearing it as "SAA is against us. SAA doesn't support us." Please be aware that Off the Record is NOT NOT NOT an official voice of SAA—though we now realize that what we say there will be taken as such, no matter what we say on the About This Blog page.

Finally, I hope those who have spoken so vehemently against volunteer programs can come to realize that it's truly rare for an institution to use volunteers in lieu of paid help when their budgets would allow the latter—or to start a volunteer program solely in response to reductions in paid staff. As the many examples in the Volunteers publication make clear—implicitly echoing David Ferriero's introduction—volunteers generally do closely-defined tasks under very controlled circumstances, supervised and trained by paid staff who necessarily spend a lot of time working with them. And, in my experience, volunteers generally want job criteria such as these: very part time work with a flexible schedule, tasks that aren't very demanding, and no responsibility for directing programs or managing other people's work. Many of them are retired—including lots of retired archivists—and looking for rewarding ways to pay back society now

that they have time on their hands and have completed their own life's work.

Are you looking for any of those criteria in your future employment as an archivist? If so, you have yet to develop a realistic view of what being a professional archivist is all about.

Reply

Alex

December 7, 2012 at 11:43 am



Thank you, Jackie, for taking the time to respond to my post. It's very encouraging to know both that the SAA leadership is paying attention to the discussion and taking employment issues very seriously.

You pointed out David Ferriero's introduction to the volunteer guide, and I think that he does a good job of laying out the reality that volunteers are only free as in kittens, not as in beer. As far as I know, no one has suggested that NARA is replacing paid staff with volunteers. Despite the strong focus on how much NARA values its volunteers, the introduction does not offer an alternate reason why archives should have volunteers in the first place.

It is precisely because I agree with Terry Baxter that it is both appropriate and necessary for SAA to take on an increased advocacy role for labor and employment issues that I was troubled by some of his other comments. Because I'm not personally acquainted with him, I cannot speak to his sense of humor, but at least to me, the implication that I and my peers are children and as such should not be taken seriously wasn't funny.

I have not read any arguments that are completely against having volunteer programs. The opinions I've read are critical of certain aspects of volunteer programs, or the framing of those programs' purposes, not their existence. As I mentioned in my post, we have a volunteer program in my school library. In fact, supervising and training volunteers are part of my responsibilities. I am definitely not opposed to volunteers.

I obviously can't speak on behalf of anyone but myself, but I think most parties involved in the discussion of the volunteer guide realize that currently situations where volunteers have been used as a substitute for paid staff are uncommon. The fear is more that it could become more common—and the phrasing of those statements in the overview section of the guide seems to point to that. Time and time again I hear new graduates ask what to do when they're having trouble finding a job in archives to be told "go volunteer!" When the "go volunteer" advice exists in the same milieu as "get volunteers if your budget shrinks" that fear doesn't seem to be completely unfounded. Why hire someone with an MLS or a CA if you could just have their work for free?

What do I think new archivists want? (Well, jobs, obviously, but we're all well aware that no organization, large or small, can simply create them out of thin air.) In this case? To be taken seriously. To have our opinions respected, and not be talked down to, even by those who disagree with us.

Finally, I think you raise some interesting points, but I guess I don't understand why my hopes for future employment came into play. Although I know that people do enter graduate programs with misconceptions about the real work of libraries and archives, I did not come to the profession expecting

an easy and flexible part time job. As someone who has worked in libraries and archives for over a decade now, I feel like I have a good idea if what being an information professional entails.

Reply

nixonara

December 9, 2012 at 6:12 pm



An interesting exchange, Alex and Jackie. Good tone and thoughtful points by both.

Just to make it clear, Alex. You refer to David Ferriero in one paragraph, then say in the next that you agree with Terry Baxter on one point. The antecedent for the next part is not explicit but I think I am reading it right. When you then write that “I’m not personally acquainted with him, I cannot speak to his sense of humor,” I take it that by him you mean Terry, not David. I know Terry in the virtual world and David in person. As an aside, I’ll just say I like and respect both.

Both men do a good job of speaking for themselves although their writing styles, as their professional positions (by which I mean jobs held at present) are different, of course. I will say that David Ferriero writes with a range of styles, from very serious to whimsical, depending on the purpose of the piece, intended audience, and other factors. I’ve read enough of Terry Baxter’s writing to recognize his style while already knowing his good-hearted vibe. But your point is a good one, to a “cold reader” some of what he wrote might be jarring. I don’t think he intended any of it except to be supportive in a tough love way.

As to the debate over volunteers in archives, I have seen on Twitter, at least, some assertions that *all* unpaid labor is wrong, with implications that its use is flat out unethical. Some of that vibe came across in comments at blogs, as well. Where it exists, it comes across as drawing a line in the sand. A flat out rejection of volunteers, without distinguishing them from interns, or looking at the very different situations in which they work, creates hurdles in airing out some of these issues.

I much prefer face to face convos to online ones because you can see unspoken reactions in body language and such. And correct course as needed before things implode. Truth be told, it’s not just young archivists who want to be treated with respect in conversations, most of us do, regardless of age, or so it seems to me. The importance of one’s sense of self knows no age boundaries. People signal how they look at each other in different ways, up and down the line, across age ranges, through messages and metamessages. I don’t know many people of any age who like being called names or demonized or having their points reflexively rejected or cherry picked. There’s a lot that can go on behind the stoic masks some of us wear!

There are areas in this debate where I lack empirical information. For example, I do not know how often unemployed or under-employed archivists are told to “go volunteer.” Anecdotal evidence certainly suggests that it happens but it is not the sort of question for which there is hard data.

I would be interested in hearing who makes such suggestions, how sophisticated they are in assessing market conditions, what motivates them, what knowledge they bring to the suggestions, and what they draw on. Are the comments thrown out reflexively or after thoughtful consideration? As a “I feel badly for you, what can I say to give you hope or make you feel better” or as a “let’s talk real

world?” Such things make a difference. Yet they are hard to suss out, especially the part about sophistication and motivation.

As to “get volunteers if your budget shrinks,” in the federal environment, where I’ve been working for nearly 40 years, relying on volunteers for certain can be a way to preserve appropriated funds to hire people. Some institutions, such as NARA (my former employer) use some volunteers for general tasks but others for short term, narrowly targeted specialty knowledge projects. They do that in order to save precious slots to hire paid workers in whom they can invest long term. That is why they use retirees who once worked for NARA or for other federal agencies in pretty high paid jobs.

I know some such people. Matching their prior end of archival career salaries (in some cases quite hefty) by hiring them as contractors, instead of accepting their willingness to volunteer, would eat in to NARA’s budget. And the tasks are specialized enough that new hires could not do them. So using some retirees as unpaid volunteers actually derives from opposite motivations than those attributed to employers by some of the people who have been debating the issues. It’s to enable NARA to hire new talent with the mix of skills and potential to contribute long term that it seeks.

TL:DR? Perhaps. But your post was thoughtful and I thought it worth joining you in wading in.

Richard L Hess

December 10, 2012 at 5:36 pm



It is interesting to note this discussion. The one involvement that I had with volunteers in archives actually also centers around some Richard Nixon-related tapes—an oral history collection in Southern California which included people who know Nixon growing up. This happened about ten years ago.

I was asked to assess this collection and found two things:

- tape with deteriorated binder (holding the magnetic record to the base film)
- less than ideal environmental conditions dictated by budget constraints which were the likely cause for accelerating the binder deterioration

The archivists in charge took my assessment seriously, and one in particular bit the bullet and said we are going to make preservation copies of these tapes.

We obtained some good publicity—I was interviewed in the Orange County Register—and people offered time and equipment (to what better use could they put that old reel tape machine that was languishing in their garage).

In the end, the archive set up several workstations, some with donated equipment, and ran through the whole lot of somewhere over 5000 tapes, making two gold CD-R copies of each. I believe these CD-Rs are retained in two separate locations (that was the intent, but I have not confirmed it).

Between donated, leased, and purchased equipment, the work of two or three dedicated staffers and a horde of volunteers, they got the job done—perhaps not in the very best way possible, but the lead archivist knew what to listen for (I spent a fair amount of time training her) and we even had a seminar on-site which spread more awareness through Southern California.

This would have never happened if the job had been outsourced or a series of term employees were hired. There was no budget for it and no likelihood of ever obtaining one. These volunteers were able to create a massive parallel processing environment and all playbacks were monitored (which is important to make certain nothing is going wrong). Now that the job is finished, some of the equipment was sold off, the leases terminated and the equipment returned, and the volunteers were happy to have contributed.

Overall, I see this as a win-win situation. My personal involvement is that the company I worked for at the time was paid a consulting fee for my time, I spent some additional time volunteering with help, I leased them some of the equipment at very favourable rates (reflecting my good fortune at obtaining equipment at bargain prices), and I followed the project with joy.

Richard L Hess
Aurora, Ontario, Canada

[Reply](#)

<http://offtherecord.archivists.org/2012/11/13/hanging-together/>

Off the Record

Join the conversation with SAA leaders

Hanging Together

Posted on [November 13, 2012](#) by [Jackie Dooley](#) | [14 Comments](#)

A provocative new guest blogger joins the *Off the Record* roster today. The SAA Council was discussing last Friday's tweetfest questioning whether the new SAA/NARA publication [Resources for Volunteer Programs in Archives](#) inappropriately advocates for the use of unpaid workers, and Terry Baxter leapt into the fray and answered my call for a blog post in response.

He expresses his opinion in typical unfettered [Beaver Archivist](#) fashion (matching the level of passion used by last week's tweeters). The faint of heart may be taken aback just a bit. Gird your loins, read on, and then build the comment thread.

Whew! I was so involved in participating in an archival advocacy panel in Seattle and putting together my fantasy football roster that I almost missed one of the biggest exposés on Twitter. No, it wasn't that [Barack and Michelle](#) love and respect each other. Or that the State of Washington loves [pot](#), [gay marriage](#), and [supermarket booze](#). It's that this [mysterious cabal](#) exists called "[Society of American Archivists](#)" and it is secretly unleashing the beast "[volunteers](#)" on an unsuspecting archival workforce.

The conversation, and subsequent [post and comments](#) on one of my favorite [blogs](#) (they've even let me author there), purported both to critique the recent SAA/NARA publication [Resources for Volunteer Programs in Archives](#) and to protest SAA's support and promotion of it. I say purported because this conversation seems to use volunteers to make a much broader point about SAA.

First of all, volunteers are not the problem. I have certainly seen programs attempt to make the case that they can use a volunteer workforce to substitute for a professional one. But this is extreme and uncommon. Most programs see volunteers as an add-on to stretch the capabilities of existing, often marginally funded, professional programs. In addition, the idea that work should just sit there undone because it might be done by an unpaid worker is also unproductive.

Comments that all unpaid work is theft or that no other profession uses unpaid volunteers next to paid workers (teachers, firefighters, search and rescue, librarians, nurses, therapists, coaches, etc.) are extreme and miss the point. What we should be focusing on is the broad and complex system of exploitative labor practices that faces archivists in particular, but really all workers. It would also require a clear-eyed review of the current system for creating, funding, and employing professional archivists and less just yelling “[MOAR](#) HIGH-PAYING JOBS.”

Second, SAA is not the problem either. The most compelling argument from this conversation is that SAA should advocate more strongly (or at all) for archivists’ workplace issues. We have not done nearly enough to insure that archivists have more jobs, better paid jobs, more fulfilling jobs. That has been a major hole in SAA’s advocacy efforts and should be corrected. SAA Council will be addressing the advocacy agenda in January and ideas for how to include this issue are certainly welcome.

There is an undercurrent here, though, that “SAA” is some malignant “them,” not only ignoring the needs of archivists, but actively working against them. Really? Because like any member organization, SAA is about “us.” I’m not opposed to criticism or ideas for making us better. But if you can only see SAA as a problem and as “them,” then set up your own friggin’ organization and WORK to fix the problems. Talk is cheap, kids. The people I know in SAA are working diligently (unpaid, I might add) to make a better world. If all you want to do is talk, join a sewing circle.

If, on the other hand, you are working in SAA to make things better and are frustrated with barriers to participation and the glacial pace at which much change happens, you’ve got my ear. The role of SAA leadership should be, as much as anything else, the removal of barriers to let smart and energetic members get things done. We are always trying to do that, but like with so many other things, we can be better. But we have to all work together, not against each other, to make it happen. So keep pushing, hard if you want to, to make me better. I’ll do the same for you.

14 RESPONSES TO HANGING TOGETHER



terryx | [November 13, 2012 at 1:38 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

1.

nb.

1. I would never link to the urban dictionary. 2. I would never use friggin’.



2. [**Jennifer S.**](#) | [November 13, 2012 at 1:41 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Thank you, Terry! I thought about posting on my own blog about this issue, but decided against it. I completely agree that we need to work together. The tone of the post last week upset me more than anything related to the Resources Guide.

I was thinking about the whole volunteers issue and came up with an analogy, that may or may not be accurate. I recently saw a movie called “Food Stamped,” in which a couple tries to eat natural/organic food on a food stamp budget for a week. It reminded me of archives funding, both being from the government. To survive on the limited funds, the couple found ways to supplement, such as cashing in soda cans. In the archives we supplement with volunteers. It isn’t perfect, but it’s what we have.



3. [**Brad H.**](#) | [November 13, 2012 at 3:33 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

The author’s note is far and away the best part of this post.

Anyway. This was going to be a much longer comment before my computer ate it... I agree that this sort of “Us v. Them” mentality to which the aforementioned conversation escalated is not especially helpful, and I, at least, appreciate posts like this that are actively encouraging people to provide feedback and participate in the destiny of their professional organization. At the same time, there was a point that was made in the pre-escalated conversation that SAA didn’t do much in the way of seeking comment before endorsing/promoting this document. Jackie (and I think Kate) indicated that this is generally not SAA Publications Board policy, but I think on a subject as potentially touchy as labor issues, a little deviation from policy might have saved quite a bit of pixelated ink from being spilled. Insert aphorism about prevention, cures, and the relative exchange rates thereof here.

(Admittedly, I say this with the benefit of hindsight– I’m not sure that I would have been able to spot the problems with this document on a quick pass– though I will note that the bit in which the document addresses professional concerns about volunteer programs reads as reductive and dismissive of those concerns as many of the examples in this post.)

@Jennifer, *my* initial take on it was that we shouldn’t accept the situation in which archival institutions have to scrounge for the metaphorical food stamps, nor should we encourage the

normalization of that situation. Terry correctly notes that “We have not done nearly enough to insure that archivists have more jobs, better paid jobs, more fulfilling jobs,” which I think is the nub of this whole conversation. I would definitely like to see SAA do more advocacy on this, but I also think resources such as this, which can be read by administrators without an archives background and interpreted as a reason not to renew that project archivist line, move the needle in the wrong direction. I hope that that is not seen as overheated criticism.



4. **Jennifer S.** | [November 13, 2012 at 5:08 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

No, not overheated criticism. Yes, SAA should advocate more. But – and this is meant as a rhetorical question – where is the money for any of this going to come from? We want SAA to spend more on advocacy, but none of us wants our dues raised. Etc., etc. So, to add more pop culture and borrow a line from a Girl Scouts song, let’s make new friends (friends who offer jobs) and keep the old (friends who label folders).



5. **Rebecca** | [November 13, 2012 at 7:43 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Terry and Jackie, what would you say to SAA members who think SAA puts the needs of experienced archivists above those of new professionals? I ask this because the archivists who were most upset by *Resources* were those who, rightly or wrongly, saw it as part of a pattern of SAA failing to consider new archivists in its decision-making.



6. **nixonara** | [November 13, 2012 at 7:48 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Wait. Terry. Dude. Are you saying we are not seeing an unexpurgated version of your post here? Whoa. Seriously, I’m glad to see you advocate for talking through these complicated issues. Count me as someone who is drawn to light more so than heat.

I have deep immersion on the NARA and Fed issues but only superficial knowledge of what goes down in other places (public and private sector). Fedland has particular circumstances that sometimes affect its projects and workforce. (Just one arcane example here, “Volunteer Ventures.”: <http://www.archives.gov/publications/record/1998/05/oss-project.html>) I’d like (and

need) to learn more about circumstances outside Fedland that affect archival institutions, given that is the only place I've worked.

Would be great to see the reaction to the publication used to have a wide ranging conversation about budgets, fiscal issues, market forces, stakeholders, constituencies, demographics, legislators, etc. Political forces (def in the mix in some cases) trick9er. And to explore the managerial and administrative issues in a 360 look at some of this.

Brad, I understand your concern that some administrators might misinterpret the "message" of the publication. But I just can't assess the extent to which that might actually happen. No data. It's hard for me to predict how non-archival administrators would react to this publication because really good managers are savvy and apply executive skills well in areas beyond their own academic discipline. They're trained in analytics and doing due diligence on issues, to ensure they handle well and hold their own jobs. Others face more challenges..

That reflects my experience since 1993 in being a direct report to executives outside my academic discipline. 1993 was the last year I reported to anyone trained in historical research and archival issues. That can work any number of ways. Plus I've heard about some of the let's say very varying experiences of people in similar situations to me in Fedland. To the extent people can talk publicly about some of their experiences, from the managerial as well as the subordinates perspectives, tht would be useful, too, at least for me.

Thanks for giving me so much to think about Terry. Rock on, dude.



7. **Anne Foster** | [November 13, 2012 at 9:05 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Volunteer programs can be advocacy programs if conceived with that purpose in mind and designed to fulfill that mission.



8. **Maureen Callahan** | [November 14, 2012 at 8:15 am](#) | [Reply](#)

I'm disappointed that this is how the SAA council chooses to deal with dissent. Let people have their opinions. Let them not like your publication. This post (and the firestorm on twitter) was, in my

view, an over-reaction to reasonable critiques. In fact, reading Terry's post, it sounds like most people agree that 1. SAA members would like SAA to do more to advocate for professionals and 2. volunteers are neither a solution to labor problems nor a cause of them. As I see it, the only problem is a manufactured one — some people on SAA council don't like it that SAA dues-paying members don't like the publication.

I'm sympathetic to the position that members tend to be too hard on their unpaid and overworked representatives — I agree, and I've definitely been there. But I think that calling Rebecca's post (and others' comments) cheap, or likening them to a sewing circle (I wonder about the gendered choice of analogy, btw), is unfair. There is a role for critique, for analyzing how useful our professional organization has been to us. Further, there HAS been extremely important work done by some of the very people making this critique to advocate for the interests of students, new professionals, and others that may reasonably feel that they are unsupported and that SAA isn't doing enough for them.



9. **James** | [November 14, 2012 at 8:35 am](#) | [Reply](#)

This response from SAA (and yes- it's an official SAA statement) is rather shameful. It fails to address legitimate issues raised by Ms. Goldman, and it attacks an imaginary perception that she sees SAA as a monolithic entity. The use of "youtube videos" of Godzilla lowers the level of the conversation.

And as to Terry's protestations that these are all workplace exploitation issues, well- let's remember Hyatt in Chicago when no one gave a good goddam. Let's not pretend.

If you want a decent discussion on thei issues, go to Rebecca's post and the comments at :

<http://eatingouryoung.wordpress.com/2012/11/09/advocating-for-archives-without-advocating-for-archivists/>

The "kids" do it right, Terry.



10. **Lance S** | [November 14, 2012 at 10:43 am](#) | [Reply](#)

So far, everyone has been awesome at being provocative and wrongly generalizing the other side, this post included.

In my view, the most important point Rebecca made in her post was the ethical question of volunteers doing professional level work. I presented on it at SAA in 2011 (<http://newarchivist.com/2011/11/17/free-labor/> notice I removed my “MOAR HIGH-PAYING JOBS” slide), and my presentation built upon another great presentation from the 2009 conference. I am using these as examples to show that people have been trying to engage in this discussion for a while. It ain’t working, and, to my great disappointment, this post goes a long way in answering why. Just as a note, I really do appreciate the comments made on several venues by folks like Jennifer S and Brad H. Though we are not all of the same opinion, it is a pleasure to discuss these issues with people who bring unique perspectives to the table, and understand that we are all fighting for what we think is right. I look forward to continuing to engage with you and folks willing to have an actual discussion.



11. [nixonara](#) | [November 14, 2012 at 11:14 am](#) | [Reply](#)

“So far, everyone has been awesome at being provocative and wrongly generalizing the other side, this post included.” Isn’t that a generalization, too, k to say everyone has been provocative and wrongly generalizing? Would you write a history of that this way? I wouldn’t.



12. [nixonara](#) | [November 14, 2012 at 11:21 am](#) | [Reply](#)

What is keeping people from asking questions of each other and addressing the points made in various comments and posts? The same points have been repeated but there is little engagement. Why be afraid of each other? We’re all just people. Stating and re-stating the same instead of being open to new points and what wasn’t known at the start of the conversation would be awesome to see.

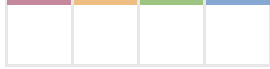
Find the best of social media

Create Story

Login

by eehikes

a month ago



Conversations on 'Resources for Volunteer Programs in Archives'

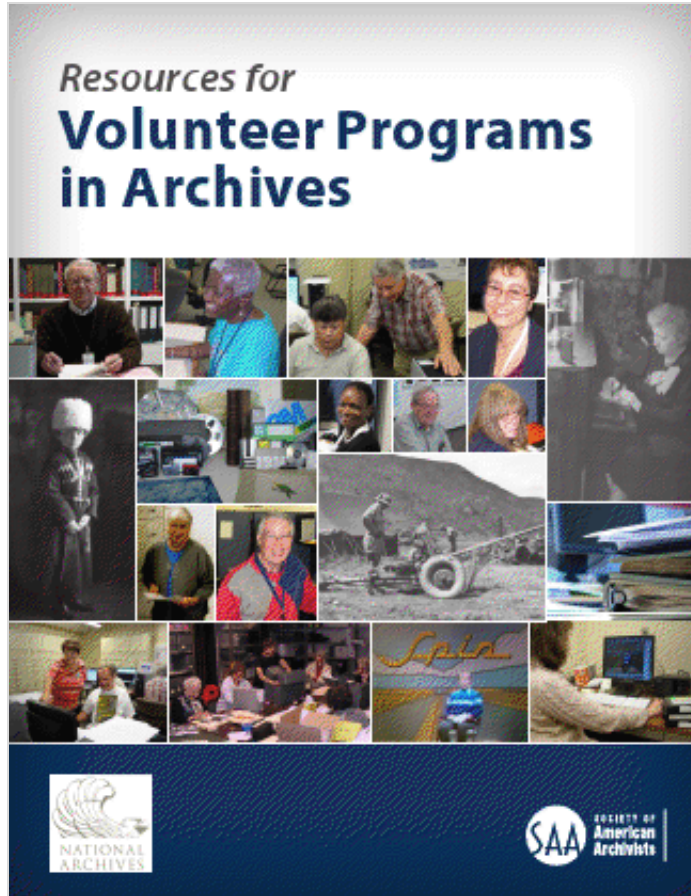
Resources for Volunteer Programs in Archives, published by NARA and SAA, was released on Nov. 7 and triggered conversations on Twitter and a blog post about labor ethics, job market, prof. advocacy, and even philosophical questions about the nature of archives as necessity vs. luxury.

Like 26k

Follow @storify 65K followers

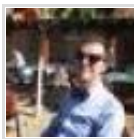
Guided tour About Contact Blog Jobs Tools API Terms Privacy © 2012

Storify



 Archivists

Blog Post Responses



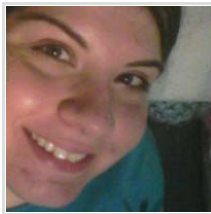
[Advocating for archives without \(advocating for\) archivists](#)

Let's play Jeopardy! Here's an answer from a Q&A in a recent SAA publication: "It is in the nature of archives to have backlogs-sometimes..."

 Rebecca

[SAA volunteer program resource guide](#)

November 8, 2012 · 3:54 am Looks like the SAA wrote up a guidebook of sorts for archives wanting to create volunteer programs. I'll be ho...



 Laura DeMuro

A day in the life ...

OK, so today wasn't exactly a routine day in my role as the current SAA President; SAA issues pretty much dominated it, which isn't always...

 Jackie Dooley



Benefits of their collective expertise

In January 2009, President Barack Obama issued a directive on Transparency and Open Government. It stated "Government should be participa...

 Wordpress

Hanging Together

A provocative new guest blogger joins the Off the Record roster today. The SAA Council was discussing last Friday's tweetfest questioning...

 Jackie Dooley



It's easy to be comfortable

I've been thinking about change a lot recently. This post is one of a series on the topic. The setup was my post on the Veterans Day holi...

 Wordpress

My next job is going to be bunghole inspector. No one is going to do that for free, right?

The title to this post comes from a tweet I sent in response to Rebecca's post. I posed it like that, in part, because I'm still a 12 yea...

 Jeremy



STFU or....?

As archival noobs and veterans debated a new publication on resources for volunteers in archives, at the History News Network David Walsh...

 WordPress

Twitter Responses

Thursday, November 8, 2012

Recommended that you start reading from the bottom in order to follow the thread chronologically.



@LanceStuch @tn_archivist very true

Jennifer S. @CyclinArchivist

a month ago



@cyclinarchivist @tn_archivist I understand that, really. But using unpaid staff to cope with lack of funding is unsustainable for all of us

Lance Stuchell @LanceStuch

a month ago



There's another one of these at storify.com/eehikes/volunte..., more discussion of Archives as Luxury, which I largely left out of mine

Brad Houston @herodotusjr

a month ago



I am grateful for @derangedescribe for her role in these convos, makes them easy to Storify ;) Archivists on labor: sfy.co/gBSr

Brad Houston @herodotusjr

a month ago



@Hungryghoast @chrbal @herodotusjr @LanceStuch recordkeeping culture at US nat'l level is weak; compare against states & other countries [-]

Mark A. Matienzo @anarchivist

a month ago



@Hungryghoast @chrbal @herodotusjr @LanceStuch this is just as true when a State *sometimes* has the interests of its people in mind [+]

Mark A. Matienzo @anarchivist

a month ago



@anarchivist @chrbal @herodotusjr @LanceStuch this is what i'm saying. Don't make me make everyone read Archives Fever again. Don't.

Hungryghoast @Hungryghoast

a month ago



.@Hungryghoast @chrbal @herodotusjr @LanceStuch archives are not luxuries when they are necessary for the operation of a State. the end.

Mark A. Matienzo @anarchivist

a month ago



@LanceStuch @chrbal @herodotusjr yo, fuckin' this. Collecting or not, mandates or not, theft is theft.

Hungryghoast @Hungryghoast

a month ago



@hungryghoast @chrbal @herodotusjr Mandates to collect do not supersede our obligations to be fair, luxuries or no luxuries </sanctimonious>

Lance Stuchell @LanceStuch

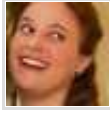
a month ago



@herodotusjr whether PEOPLE make a connection or not is a question of advocacy and activism.

Hungryghoast @Hungryghoast

a month ago



@LanceStuch I have not read it, so I cannot comment on the content.

Kate Theimer @archivesnext

a month ago

Read next page

Did you find this story interesting? Be the first to **like** or comment.

Say something...

Don't miss more stories by eehikes [+ Follow](#)



eehikes

[+ Follow](#)

2
STORIES

1
FOLLOWER

1
FOLLOWING

Total views **35**

storify.com 34

other 1

MORE FROM EEHIKES

Items of Interest in Archives

BY [EEHIKES](#) · 6 DAYS AGO

69 views

Archival Outlook – Jan/Feb 2013
From the Archivist of the United States
By David Ferriero

Pull quote: Volunteers can never take the place of professionally trained archivists. It's preposterous to think so.

Volunteers Help NARA Do Its Job, Support Professional Archivists

One of the things that has most impressed me since I came to the National Archives three years ago is the work of our corps of dedicated, knowledgeable volunteers. What they do for us—and for the American people—is amazing.

They write hundreds of item-level descriptions, annotate thousands of photo captions, and assist with digitization projects so the past recorded on paper isn't left behind in the digital era. They index tens of thousands of records; answer researchers' questions; write articles about the records for our magazine, *Prologue*, and posts for our blogs; and present lectures to the public.

That's *some* of what they do as volunteers. These volunteers are essentially what we now refer to as "citizen archivists," individuals who volunteer their services to help us fulfill our duties as the nation's record keeper.

At a senior staff meeting on his first day in office in 2009, setting the stage for his Open Government Initiative, President Obama said: "Our commitment to openness means more than simply informing the American people about how decisions are made. It means recognizing that the Government does not have all the answers, and that public officials need to draw on what citizens know. And that's why, as of today, I'm directing members of my administration to find new ways of tapping the knowledge and experience of ordinary Americans. . . ."

At the National Archives, we carry out this mandate with the help of our citizen archivists. In our Washington-area facilities alone, we have nearly 300 individuals who work as volunteers who contributed more than 42,000 hours of their personal time to various projects during the past year. Nationwide, we have about 1,600 volunteers.

The National Archives has had a volunteer program for 35 years. Now we're sharing some of our experiences so other archives—public and private, large and small—can learn how to tap the knowledge, skills, and abilities of people in their own cities and towns, cultural institutions, and college and university campuses.

A new publication produced jointly by SAA and NARA, *Resources for Volunteer Programs in Archives*, serves this purpose. It provides details on how volunteers have been deployed in projects at several of our locations and at other archives around the country. For example, it describes how two volunteers at our Fort Worth archives are helping to process Confederate court records. It details how the project is managed, the training required, the equipment needed, the schedule, and many other aspects.

The book was compiled, written, and edited by NARA staff members, with additional editing by SAA, which was in charge of production. We're proud to have partnered with SAA to produce this fabulous and helpful guide. It's free and online at http://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/Resources-for-Volunteers_Final.pdf.

While volunteers are vital to our programs at NARA, their makeup has changed quite a bit in the last few years. We are now welcoming retired baby boomers who bring high-level skills and broad experience and want to give back. We get students who need experience in a professional environment. We get career changers and job seekers who want to gain archival experience as well as be occupied. And we get a lot of retired NARA staff archivists. We're pleased and honored that they come to us to stay engaged, learn, and share what they know.

But they cannot take the place of well-educated professional archivists, who are schooled in modern archival practices, including (and especially) information technology, so they'll be able to do their jobs effectively and efficiently when *all* the records coming to them are electronic. Volunteers—some of our citizen archivists—can never take the place of these professionally trained archivists. It's preposterous to think so.

The budget picture for the federal government will remain austere for some time, so we won't be able to hire as many professional archivists we would like to. Meanwhile, volunteers are lightening the workload on our professional archivists. This frees up our professionals to ensure that the most important records are identified and preserved properly for future generations.

This is important work, and we will always need help, and we will always welcome it.