

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

AMY C. VO, REBECCA JOHNSON MELVIN, and SHERIDAN LEIGH SAYLES

Abstract: Now that SAA has defined standards for both intern and volunteer workers, it seems fitting to look toward another hallmark of archival employment: project positions. Through project positions, managers can meet needs to get large and small scale projects off the ground, but this can sometimes come at a cost to project archivists, especially early career archivists. Funding and project employment deadlines make it difficult for short-term archivists to complete their work, and the stressors of the project-based work makes the job search a constant reality. To study this issue, a research team from University of Delaware, New York University, and Seton Hall University distributed a nationwide, IRB-approved dual survey that collected 284 full responses from term employees and 83 employers, and discussed topics ranging from demographics to personal reflections about the work. This platform talk presents the survey methodology and preliminary findings of the survey. The data has brought out the difference between the experience and perspectives of this work. Through discussing the different demographics of project archivists and their supervisors, the ways in which archival labor is undervalued, and what is lost through project employment, the team hopes to show the value of advocacy on the managerial level and additional standards from SAA.

About the authors:

Amy C. Vo is the Cold War Collections Project Archivist at New York University, the Newsletter Editor for SAA's Archivists and Archives of Color Section, and member of MARAC's Finding Aids Award Committee. She has been in the archives field for the past six years, working and interning at municipal government archives, university special collections, historical societies, and house museums in Texas, New Jersey, and New York. During these years as a new professional, her experiences pushed her toward more deeply engaging with discussions and research about labor practices in the archives field, their impact on the retention of underrepresented archivists, and the personal and institutional tolls that short-term and contract positions inflict.

Rebecca Johnson Melvin (B.A. Wake Forest University; M.I.L.S. University of Michigan) is Manuscripts Librarian and Curator of the Joseph R. Biden, Jr., senatorial papers in Special Collections and Museums at the University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press. She began her career there with a 2-year project appointment and later managed several project archivists. Her areas of expertise and current interests include archives administration, congressional collections and political papers, literary manuscripts, scrapbooks as an autobiographical genre, photography and visual materials in collections, women's collections, and Delaware history. She has past leadership, service and presentations with ALA/ACRL RBMS (Manuscripts & Other Formats Discussion Group), SAA Congressional Papers Roundtable, and MARAC.

Sheridan Leigh Sayles is the Technical Services Archivist working for the Special Collections and University Archives in the Library. She received an MA in American Studies from Rutgers University-Newark and an MLS with a focus in Archiving from the University of Maryland. She has previously worked as Assistant Archivist at Trinity Church Wall Street and as Archivist for the Senator Frank R. Lautenberg Papers at Rutgers University. She is active in both the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference and the Society of American Archivists, where she works to advocate for early career archivists and also share her experiences with a number of collections. She is active on the Steering Committee of Issues and Advocacy, (and was recently

elected to the Congressional Papers Section).