

Volunteers, Advocacy, and the Archives

Today's post comes to us from Jarrett Drake with a unique perspective on volunteers in archives.

Lately, there has been much ado about the role of volunteers in archives. Specifically, individuals have raised concerns about the ethics of archival institutions seeking volunteers for work that some consider professional. A common—but far from uniform—response to this allegation is the reality that many archival institutions' budgets are stretched thin, and thus the only way to stay afloat with requests for services is to place a call for volunteers.

These viewpoints, diametrically opposed as they appear, are not wholly irreconcilable. In fact it is because of the need to prove the value of archives and archivists that the SAA student chapter at the University of Michigan has created more volunteer opportunities for our student membership, not fewer.

Allow me to explain. Our executive board outlined three goals for the 2012-2013 school year, the first of which is to “advocate for archives, students, and the discipline in spaces beyond the traditional archival community.” The primary method for achieving this goal has been to coordinate volunteer projects around campus and Ann Arbor. The key distinction, however, is that these volunteer projects have not been in the conventional institutions—libraries, archives, and museums—but instead have been at a campus radio station, a botanical garden, and local theatres.

The truth is, to gain a foot in the professional world, archives students will more than likely need to do something for free. It's not about “earning one's stripes” or “paying dues” and more about empowering students to think creatively about their skill sets and manage a project in its entirety. Furthermore, this functions as a form of advocacy by bringing archival skill sets to organizations that have never had an archivist and more than likely never will. The archivist as consultant may emerge as a viable, if not necessary, way to find work.

These partnerships, vis-à-vis ongoing projects, build the advocacy base from the bottom up as opposed from the top down. That is, one way to prove value and provide evidence of that value is to expand the purview of our craft and bring it to people and organizations that typically haven't employed an archivist. This model wouldn't necessarily work at other campuses, and it's far from a panacea for the larger profession. But it's our way of taking lemons and making lemonade, and it may work for you in your situation.

Jarrett M. Drake is an MSI student at the University of Michigan School of Information, where he serves as an officer for the SAA Student Chapter. The views in this post are his own.

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About Lisa H

Lisa is the archivist/librarian at the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center at Augustana College. She stumbled into archival work by way of the museum world and is always seeking ways to break down the silos of these professions. Lisa has worked in museums, libraries, and archives in Illinois, New York, and Alaska. While not at work, Lisa spends her free time biking, working on art projects, and putting her useless knowledge to good use on bar trivia teams. You can find her on Twitter @lisahuntsha.

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