SNAP, new archivists, and other things that keep me up at night

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SNAP, new archivists, and other things that keep me up at night

Rebecca Goldman
Chair, Students and New Archives Professionals Roundtable
November 29, 2012

http://www.flickr.com/photos/swedish_heritage_board/5814048439
Compared to many new archivists, I've been very, very lucky. All my employment since graduation has been non-project-based, FT and benefited. I also had two paid internships while I was in grad school. I'm in my first professional position, but I'm also a manager, and I supervise a not-at-all-new archivist. So even though I'm entry-level in terms of experience, my job definitely isn’t.

All my archives experience has been in academic institutions. So if I make any generalizations that just aren’t true outside of university archives, please call me out!

I have no special expertise on labor issues.

I don't really think I'm the first person to raise any of the issues I want to raise today (but maybe the first to put them all together into one talk).

If you disagree with the stuff I'm saying here, I'd rather hear about it tonight than read your complaints later on the Internet.
I started my archives career as a cartoonist, and somehow ended up as an activist. This was never my goal, okay? I used to try really hard to make my cartoons as un-controversial as possible. I started making comics because I wanted there to be a webcomic for archivists, and no one else was doing it. And I started SNAP because I wanted there to be a group for new archivists, and no one else was doing it.
In 2010, after my first SAA, I returned home with lots of thoughts about the place of new archivists within SAA and within the archival profession. I made this comic, Post-SAA Howl, and it was my most-commented comic ever.

Inspired SfNP in the UK, but no sustained efforts here

My take? The active people found good jobs and stopped caring
Then, almost a year later, I posted this innocent tweet.
Note the date—this came in a few hours after I posted my tweet
A blog

Why a roundtable for new archivists?

JULY 25, 2011  38 COMMENTS

Other professional organizations have established groups to meet the needs of new professionals. ALA has a Young Professionals Working Group. The Society of Archivists has a Section for New Professionals. We think the Society of American Archivists needs a similar group for new archivists.

Here are some things we think an SAA roundtable for new archivists could accomplish:

- Advocate for new archivists within SAA and within the archival profession
- Provide a space for discussion of issues affecting new archivists
- Allow new archivists to gain leadership experience through roundtable service

And why a roundtable, as opposed to some other type of group? Check out the SAA Council Handbook section on roundtables. We think our goals fit the description of a roundtable pretty nicely.

What do you think? Does SAA need a roundtable just for new archivists? What might it accomplish? (And if you’re wondering what makes someone a new archivist… don’t worry, that’s an upcoming post.)

Our petition that we submitted to SAA started out as a Google Doc that anyone could comment on.
I think SNAP has done a fabulous job starting the discussion, and now it’s up to us to actually DO something.
A few starting points

- Issues that affect new archivists affect ALL archivists
- Archivists are professionals and need to be paid for their work
- Many of the problems in archival employment are not unique to archives

A few starting points: if you don't agree with me on these, it's going to be real hard for us to have a productive conversation

Issues that affect new archivists affect ALL archivists. Devaluing entry-level labor through unpaid internships and terrible project positions devalues the labor of all archivists

Archivists are professionals and need to be paid for their work

Many of the problems in archival employment are not unique to archives, and can't be solved without some radical changes in the workforce as a whole. Archives don’t exist in a vacuum, and we can’t fix archives in a vacuum

Anyone want to argue with me on any of these?
Finding a job is hard
Breaking into the field is hard
Permanent, full-time employment is disappearing
Employers don’t want or expect to have to train their new hires
they don’t just want experience, they want experience with specific software, metadata standards, etc.
Unpaid internships are the norm
Many more grads than jobs
Grad schools have no (financial) incentive to limit the number of students coming out
Are grad schools required to find jobs for their grads? No, but if your grads aren’t finding jobs, it sure doesn’t reflect well on your program.
Expensive degree as barrier to entry
Since these problems are not specific to archives, when we think about solutions, let’s look outside our field and see what other professions are doing
I see many similarities to what’s currently happening in the legal field: http://www.salon.com/2012/11/21/a_judge_searches_for_free_labor/
More archives-specific issues

- Entry-level and temporary work is fundamentally different from permanent and non-entry-level work
- (Some) archivists aren't dealing with born-digital records and digital preservation
- Reliance on grant funding
- Lack of public awareness of the archives profession
- Continually trying to do more with less
- High cost of entry vs. low salaries

Entry-level and temporary work is fundamentally different from permanent and non-entry-level work

Entry-level jobs are mostly processing, and mid-career/managerial jobs aren't
(Some) archivists don't want to deal with born-digital records and digital preservation
I'm not bashing older or more experienced archivists here! I've met too many current archives students and recent grads who hate technology and want to work in archives to avoid it. It's not an age issue, it's an attitude issue
Sometimes archivists don't care, sometimes archivists don't realize they should care, sometimes archivists don't have the time or money or other resources,
In academia, I've noticed a pattern where the archives is for paper records, and the library is for digital records and digital projects. Clearly, this model has some problems.
In terms of staffing and funding, many archives aren't set up to handle born-digital records
Reliance on grant funding is not going to work for digital preservation and digital projects
People don't realize that being an archivist requires specialized training (and should be compensated appropriately)
The idea that we should always be trying to do more with less, or continue to do the same amount of work when budgets and staff positions are cut, is dangerous
Maybe we could solve the health care crisis if doctors and nurses work for
free!
Maybe we could ask teachers who can't find jobs to volunteer in underperforming schools!
If there are no consequences for cutting archives budgets, archives budgets will just keep getting cut
Archivists have never earned huge salaries...but the cost of entering the profession has never been higher
And...it could always be worse
We have it so much better than adjunct professors
How can archivists build tech skills while balancing their existing work requirements? How can we better explain what archivists do? (How should we answer questions like "You need a masters to do filing?" or "Can't you just digitize everything?") How do you advocate for archives when money is tight and budgets are being cut? How do we make the funding case for digital preservation? (tech, staff, etc.) What would ethical and sustainable volunteer/internship/project positions look like? How can hiring/ supervising archivists support interns and new archivists in their organizations? How can we advocate for better working conditions for colleagues outside of archives? (e.g. adjunct faculty)
Who can do what?

- What can local orgs do?
- What can roundtables and special-interest groups do?
- What can SAA do?
I don’t have all the answers.

That’s why we’re having a discussion instead of me talking at you guys for an hour. I have ideas, but I don’t know if they’re the best ideas because I haven’t heard yours yet!
I’m not really a new archivist anymore, and I’ll be retiring from SNAP leadership when my term as chair is up. I’m not saying I’m going to stop caring about these issues when I leave, but that other people will be responsible for keeping the group going.

I really hope SNAP doesn’t die when I leave.