Refreshing the profession: our commitment to employing the next generation of archivists

This is a timely and important topic, one that has caught the attention of SAA, ARL, and other organizations.

Why hire entry-level? Some trends and observations

The Archival profession is changing -- according to SAA’s A*CENSUS survey conducted in 2004 the profession has seen changes on a number of fronts:

- Gender: from male dominated (67% in 1956) to a total reversal by 2004 (65% female)
- Rise of MLS/MILS as primary degree for archival education: 20% in 1982; 40% in 2004
- Retirement: Almost 30% of those surveyed in 2004 plan to retire in the next ten years (mirrors statistics for librarians as well)

The wave of pending retirements is a major cause of concern to employers and the archival profession. What are we doing to replenish this departing pool of talent? In an informal survey of the 39 jobs presently posted on SAA’s online employment bulletin I found that only one position that is clearly described as entry-level; three others maybe could be considered entry-level. I also found it interesting that the one entry-level position was posted by a past SAA president and archival educator who has been a strong advocate for creating entry-level opportunities. Recent and soon to be grads have already discovered how tough the market can be for those fresh out of school.

So how do we create entry-level jobs? The work of archives has become increasingly complex and we have pressure to perform at high levels by our institutions. The expectations for fast information service keeps rising. When do we have the time to train
new staff that don’t come with at least 2-5 years of experience? Several things need to happen:

- Commitment to entry-level employment has to extend beyond the archives to the parent institution. Realistic expectations and understanding that new staff must be trained.
- We need institutional support for external training for new employees (such as SAA workshops)
- We need to re-evaluate the status quo when positions come open – can duties be shifted among staff members to rewrite the job description? This can also help with succession planning – do you have a promising employee who can take on more responsibility and free up more entry-level type duties?
- New graduates often come with more up-to-date IT skills; are there ways to incorporate this into your vacancy?

Processing or technical services archivists are a good examples of the type of position where hiring at the entry-level makes sense. Most archival education programs, especially when combined with a processing internship, prepare their graduates well for this type of job. In most cases even experienced processors must learn local practice and rules, so the training component remains.

**The importance and value of internships**

By now you are thinking – this sounds great, but we rarely have a vacancy – so how I can help train and prepare the next generation of archival leaders? The answer is by providing internships, ideally ones that pay and have benefits, but any opportunity for these bright students to get real work experience helps the profession, makes them more marketable, and also helps you with important projects.

Types of internships:
- **Field experience/practicum**: With these, the students usually pay to work for you! Actually, they are paying their grad school for course credit, but many MLS or public history programs allow students to get course credit for completing a semester-long directed internship (ca. 120 hours or roughly 10 hours/week during an academic semester). As the archivist directing the internship, you should design a mutually beneficial project that ideally has a tangible result – an archival finding aid, an exhibit, a collection guide, or a website are some examples. This tangible result can be added to student’s work portfolio as well as meet a need for your archive. At Duke, we generally try to keep a list of such short-term projects that interns can tackle. If you go this route, be sure to let the archival education programs in your region know that you are willing to host field experience students.

- **Paid internships**: Depending on where you work, you may have funds allocated for graduate assistants in your regular or can leverage special funds. At different institutions, I have found funds for internships from a variety of sources, such as:
  - Endowments
  - Grants
  - One time funds and outside sources (such as including intern costs as part of budget for gifts to support processing of collections)

Over the years I have learned that most donors like to know that their gifts not only support the processing and preservation of archival collections, but only play an important role in training and educating prospective archivists. Collection donors also appreciate that their records can offer a “teachable” moment.

As an added bonus, we also budget registration for the SNCA meetings as part of our internships in University Archives. A small expense but helps introduce student to the professional associations and further their training and prep.

**Some examples of intern projects turned into training:**
Processing an archival collection seems to be the most typical internship project and while valuable, it shows only one aspect of the work of archives. How can you turn processing an archival collection into broader training?

- Involve the intern in the acquisition of the collection; this can include assisting with pick-up and packing of the collection; setting up collection file; asking the donor questions about the collection (when possible).
- Create more than a finding aid – does the collection merit an exhibit (real or web)?; can a brief article about the collection be written for an institution newsletter?; can a FAQ be written from the collection (if you provide such content)?; have the intern make a presentation to your staff about the content of the collection.

Processing doesn’t always have to be the focus of an internship. Other projects can include creating a FAQ for a difficult topic, assisting with remote (email) reference, writing content for websites, and helping with exhibits or major events such as assisting with public programming. No matter how basic it may seem to you be sure to place the work in context for the intern so they understand how it supports the operation or fulfills the mission of your organization. A good example for us was a massive barcoding project we undertook in 2002. We had to get create initial inventories (basically box-level lists) and barcode over a 1,000 boxes my first summer at Duke in order to take advantage of the Duke’s offsite storage (and free up stack space). We worked in teams with the interns to make this happen – while routine and often repetitive work, I tried to make sure the interns understood the goals of the project and had them help me with space planning. As we all know, stack space planning is a fact of life in Archives and I felt that these interns gained valuable experience through this effort.

Final Thoughts

Value of interns and entry-level employees:

- creative problem-solving
- fresh viewpoints
- energy, enthusiasm, and excitement
- questioning the status quo
- reminder of how your operations mesh with national standards