A Work in Progress: Improving Labor Practices in Digital Libraries

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Introduction

Labor sustains cultural heritage and yet it is undervalued across libraries, archives, and museums (LAM). LAMs furthermore normalize contingency through practices like using short-term funding to create short-term positions in support of long-term programs and services. Conversations about labor practices and workers' well-being in LAM often frame these issues as individual concerns. However, the impacts of LAM labor practices spread beyond the growing number of undervalued, invisible, and contingent workers that characterizes this field. In academic libraries, for example, workers with job protections (such as non-contingent faculty status) face mounting workloads as they find themselves unable to support and retain talented colleagues. These protected workers may also find it difficult to scale down their units' responsibilities, even as undervalued and contingent workers depart. And when library workers depart or become burned out, what becomes of libraries' ability to sustain access to information, teaching and learning, and high-quality research collections?

In this session, we'll discuss our recent work with the Digital Library Federation Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries, Archives, and Museums (https://wiki.diglib.org/Labor), which focuses on two research areas: foregrounding the experiences of contingent and precarious workers; and developing a research agenda for valuing labor. We'll briefly review each research activity in the first half of the session and devote the second half to discussion with participants. This session will be interactive but we hope you'll stay!

Setting the Scene

What is the Digital Library Federation (DLF) Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries, Archives, and Museums?

The DLF Working Group on Labor formed in early 2017.[1] One of the group's facilitators, Ruth Tillman, was motivated to start a working group around labor practices after reviewing grant

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[1] "Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries, Archives, and Museums," DLF Wiki, last modified April 19, 2019, 15:48, https://wiki.diglib.org/Labor.

applications the previous year that proposed "heavily problematic" labor practices.[2] These practices included requiring a Master of Library Science (MLS) or comparable degree for non-professional-level work; funding just 15 hours of work per week, requiring applicants to simultaneously seek other part-time work; hiring staff for one-year projects, placing the burden on workers to relocate and also quickly begin applying for a new job within a short period of time; and offering all of the above in cities without library schools, such that current and aspiring students could not take advantage of them.

The working group accrued membership through a Google Group and survey for participants to describe their interests in the topic of labor. New members also introduced themselves over email. Working group facilitators synthesized these interests and experiences into two subgroups: Valuing Labor, co-facilitated by Amy Wickner and Melissa Chalmers, and Contingency and Precarity, co-facilitated by Ruth Tillman and Sandy Rodriguez. Members in both groups communicate via email and a Google group, through remote conference calls and online meetings, and in person at sessions at the annual DLF Forum.

We'll next describe activities to date for each sub-group. We'll also offer brief comments on what motivates our personal involvement.

The Valuing Labor Sub-Group

I (Amy) participate in the Valuing Labor sub-group because I am a longtime undervalued worker – including by myself – and also a longtime participant in systems that do not value labor. For example, I entered the field of libraries, archives, and museums (LAM) through a series of unpaid, underpaid, and contingent positions, many of which involved performing professional-caliber labor for far less compensation than a degree-holding librarian or archivist. I came to LAM from architecture and landscape architecture, professions in which long, un(der)paid hours are the standard expectation for getting a foot in the door.

To date, major activities of the Valuing Labor sub-group have been developing a research agenda and holding monthly conversations. The goal of the *Research Agenda: Valuing Labor in Digital Libraries* was to establish a framework for research by and for digital library workers, addressing undervalued, unacknowledged, and erased labor as a collective, structural concern rather than as an individual issue.[3] The introduction to the research agenda establishes our rationale for undertaking this research and describes the iterative, collaborative process by which the framework came together. We then propose five major topics, associated research questions, and suggested projects for addressing the research questions.

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[2] Ruth Tillman, "A New DLF Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries, Archives, and Museums," DLF blog, February 15, 2017, https://www.diglib.org/proposal-for-a-dlf-working-group-on-labor-in-digital-libraries-archives-and-museums/.

[3] Digital Library Federation Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries, *Research Agenda: Valuing Labor in Digital Libraries* (2018), https://wiki.diglib.org/Labor/Valuing-Labor/Research-Agenda.

Major topics in the research agenda are:

- **Organized Labor:** To what extent and how are digital library workers organized? How do workers relate to one another through organizing?

- **Valuing Maintenance:** How is the maintenance of systems, services, collections, and other library functions visible and valued, or not?

- **Categories of Labor:** What categories of work and workers exist in digital libraries?

- **Transitions and Relationships:** What are the experiences of workers as they enter and progress through careers in digital libraries? How do workers relate to one another at different stages of their careers?

- **Institutional Self-Assessment:** How do digital library institutions value labor? What are the relationships between labor practices and cultures of assessment in digital libraries?

The sub-group has been holding monthly (or so) calls for the past three years. In 2017, we focused on getting to know one another by discussing personal experiences and concerns related to valuing labor. In 2018, in search of a tangible project for the group, we took up Roxanne Shirazi's suggestion to develop a research agenda. In 2019, we are holding working sessions to build organizing capacity and new partnerships – such as meetings with The Maintainers and Tech Workers Coalition – and to develop the Working Group's wiki page into a more robust resource for others interested in labor issues.

The Contingency and Precarity Sub-Group

I (Liz) have been involved in this subgroup since the group formed, and was drawn to the work of this group because my whole experience working in digital libraries has been rooted in contractual and/or grant-funded work. Many of you know that I was the project librarian for the Maryland newspapers digitization project here for about 3.5 years; this was funded by an NEH grant. Though I am lucky to say that my experience was largely positive, there were many frustrations and uncertainties associated with my position, and I knew I was far from the only person in this type of position. I also know that it's extremely difficult to advocate for yourself as a contractual worker because you're often new to the organization, its policies, and bureaucracy. You may also be anxious about speaking up or being perceived as a troublemaker, especially if you're hoping to have your contract renewed or converted to a permanent position. When this group started, I was in a permanent-status track position, and wanted to help make positive change for those professionals still doing contingent work.

Sub-group work so far has included compiling a list of articles and resources in a shared Zotero group, which people continue to add to.[4] We evaluated existing guidelines for labor practices

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[4] "Library," Zotero, dlf-labor-wg, updated May 3, 2019, 11:42, https://www.zotero.org/groups/1235192/dlf-labor-wg?.

and discussed the pros and cons of each. In 2018, we began working on a draft set of *Guidelines for Developing and Supporting Grant-Funded Positions in Digital Libraries, Archives, and Museums*.[5]

Collective Responsibility: National Forum on Labor Practices for Grant-Funded Digital Positions

The work of the Contingency and Precarity sub-group led directly into another research activity. After drafting the guidelines mentioned above, the intended next step was to ask representatives of grant funding agencies to review and provide feedback – what would be the point of creating these guidelines if no one would adopt them? In the course of these conversations, Ruth Tillman and Sandy Rodriguez were invited to submit a grant application to hold an IMLS National Forum on grant-funded digital positions. The objective of *Collective Responsibility: National Forum on Labor Practices for Grant-Funded Digital Positions* is to "bring together representatives and stakeholders from the three primary groups involved—workers, funders, and management (to include administrators)" in order to "develop a more systematic understanding of the labor conditions created by grants and collaboratively develop benchmarks and recommendations toward the development and evaluation of proposed positions which funders and institutions may adopt."[6]

The application was successful and the forums are taking place in April and October 2019. Sandy and Ruth are Co-Principal Investigators, while Amy, Emily Drabinski, and Stacie Williams are Co-Investigators. Liz was selected to attend and share her experiences as a grant-funded laborer. The first forum, held April 24-25, 2019, in Pittsburgh, PA, aimed to center the experiences of grant-funded workers and contextualize their perspectives within larger patterns and systems shaping digital LAM and other contexts of labor.[7] The grant team is currently at work on a white paper synthesizing themes from this forum.

Breakout Discussion

In the breakout discussion, we asked participants to consider and talk with one another about the following questions in groups of four to six:

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[5] "'Do Better' -Love(,) Us: Guidelines for Developing and Supporting Grant-Funded Positions in Digital Libraries, Archives, and Museums," updated July 9, 2018, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1C0VSpyM4z5co9BrrhgQX0Jtvhc79Wtmlq_va4kQYiR0/edit?usp=sharing.

[6] "Home," Collective Responsibility: National Forum on Labor Practices for Grant-Funded Digital Positions, https://laborforum.diglib.org/.

[7] "Forum 1: Experiences," Collective Responsibility: National Forum on Labor Practices for Grant-Funded Digital Positions, https://laborforum.diglib.org/forum-1/.

How do contingency and precarity influence ...

… your work?

… your unit?

… your department?

… the libraries?

… information professions in general?

Comments from the Group

In the final part of the session we asked members of each group to share back one or more points of discussion. We also encouraged participants to follow up with us via email or in person with additional comments. Notes from the conversation follow.

- If you're in a precarious position related to technology, information literacy, or digital literacy, you have to spend more of your personal time and resources to develop skills to help you get a position that may not last more than a few months.

- How do people facing precarious situations influence the rest of the library? If they are working extra jobs, does it take a toll on the quality of work? Can you expect someone to give 100% under those circumstances?

- Speaking from a departmental context in which there are a lot of contracts, it's generally bad for morale to be surrounded by people who feel as unstable as you do. It's not motivating. Everyone feels just as nervous, just as crappy. We're usually taught that if you work hard enough you can succeed, but when it comes to contracts, hard work doesn't ensure renewal; this is stressful.

- Inability to do strategic planning with contractual staff who won't even be there to support the implementation of a plan. How to do sustainable projects without a sustainable infrastructure?

- We spend so much of our days at work, including time spent building relationships, but these relationships can be disrupted when people leave for any number of reasons, including seeking better opportunities, self-preservation.

- In a library that is constantly hiring adjuncts, it's hard to constantly work to (re)develop relationships with faculty members and build up or establish those liaison positions.

- There is a larger culture in different universities around constantly having to use contractual labor, even when the financial reality is that institutions could make some of those workers or positions permanent. Where does this culture come from?

- Many library workers are feeling complicit but may not have the power – or may not feel they have the power – to intervene.

- Thinking about concrete solutions: People with leverage are the people in the best position to change this. This means people who are no longer in contingent positions. For example, hiring managers could refuse to give job candidates a choice between unemployment and contingency. Be the hiring manager who refuses to offer the low salary. This may mean putting your own job at risk. It also means balancing an ethical stance against institutional priorities: "I need a librarian [to do certain work] but I refuse to post this contingent position."

- There is a real difference between willing to accept a certain salary and being willing to offer that salary to someone else.

- The creep of contingent duties that move from being "special projects" into being core duties harms departments. In addition to job overload, departments lose institutional knowledge as contracts end and/or people leave for various reasons.

- Returning to grant-funded positions, it's important to create a grace period after the "active" part of the grant is over, to give contract employees more time to find positions and figure out next steps. There is often a lot of follow-up work to do right when a grant is done. It's also relevant for sunsetting "special projects" or transitioning them to core work after a certain period.

Acknowledgements