

# CREATING ETHICAL TEMPORARY POSITIONS IN ARCHIVES:

Best Practices and Case Studies



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POCKET BURGUNDY

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# 1. Introduction

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Temporary labor in the American workforce is not a new phenomenon, and several recent books have traced the history of this shift from the norm of permanent, full-time employment to a reliance on cheaper, contingent workers (Hyman 2018; Hatton 2011). Perhaps most notable in this trajectory was the restructuring in American business from a model in which temporary labor was seen as a supplement to full-time labor in the 1950s and 1960s to temporary workers becoming a permanent feature of the US workforce in the latter half of the twentieth century (Hyman 2018, 6–9).

The 1980s saw an explosion in precarious employment. An article by Anne E. Polivka and Thomas Nardone in *Monthly Labor Review* traced the origins of the phrase “contingent work” to Audrey Freedman at a 1985 employment security conference (1989, 9–10). In attempting to provide an operational definition, the authors discussed the various forms that contingent labor can take, including part-time, contracted, and self-employed work arrangements, with the overarching theme being “a low degree of job security” (10). Reasons for this fundamental shift in working arrangements, particularly during the mid- to late-1980s when employment was high, frequently reference the cost-saving benefits for employers. However, despite the fiscal benefits, Polivka and Nardone were quick to note observations by economic analysts that “contingent staffing methods have detrimental effects for both employees and employers” (9).

Fast-forwarding to the 2020s, the system of unstable employment has been given the seemingly anodyne label of “gig work,” with a heavy emphasis on the alleged flexibility it affords workers. But as Mark Graham and Joe Shaw from the University of Oxford point out, for all the new technological changes and supposed freedoms associated with the gig economy, “the old challenges and politics of work have not disappeared, they’ve just taken on new shapes and forms” (2017, 4). While project archivists share many of the same struggles regarding job insecurity as Uber drivers, for example, perhaps the closest professional parallel is that of adjunct faculty.

Throughout higher education, humanities departments have long been undergoing an erosion of tenure-track jobs. As Rob Jenkins notes, the phrase “adjunctification” came into use in the early 2000s and is used as convenient shorthand for the overreliance on adjunct faculty members (2014). A 1994 statement by the Modern Language Association (MLA) speaks to the increasing number of part-time and full-time adjunct faculty appointments in language and literature departments and how “excessive reliance on an adjunct faculty can damage individual faculty members,

students, institutions, and the profession.” This sentiment echoes current project archivists’ arguments that the harmful effects of temporary labor extend beyond individual workers. In addition to job instability, decreased pay, and fewer benefits compared to tenure-track faculty, it is noteworthy that the statement also references the fact that adjuncts “receive little recognition or respect for their contributions to their departments” (1994), a feeling similarly surfaced in recent surveys of temporary archivists (Bredbenner et al. 2022; Dean 2019).

A 2020 article from *Inside Higher Ed* notes that 70 percent of the higher education teaching force was made up of non-tenure-track faculty (Flaherty 2020). Faced with pandemic-era austerity measures and varying levels of access to sick leave, the American Association of University Professors’ (AAUP) Committee on Contingency once again repeated the refrain that unequal treatment of contingent faculty “undermines student learning conditions in the short term and the institution of higher education in the long term” (American Association of University Professors 2020). Jenkins, while referencing the damage to academia that overreliance on contingent faculty creates, also recognizes that, “as a practical matter, state funding for higher education isn’t likely to increase anytime soon, so colleges will continue having to balance the potential harm from the overuse of adjuncts against the harm that might result from not using them enough” (Jenkins 2014). This theme of underfunding in particular runs parallel to the situation in which many archival repositories find themselves, with no money to hire permanent archivists.

Contingent or temporary employment in libraries has followed a similar pattern to that of academia. As adjunctification increased across higher education, academic libraries also began to rely more heavily on temporary positions to cover ongoing operational work and ease budgetary pressures (Chervinko 1986; Bladek 2019). James S. Chervinko explored the new phenomenon in a 1986 article, which delved into why libraries had begun incorporating temporary positions into their staffing plans. His survey found that, though the practice was relatively new for most respondents, the range of work performed by temporary librarians was vast—from shifting and shelving to selection and cataloging. However, most of the libraries surveyed relied on temporary employees for high-level, expert work. The advantages for libraries were primarily financial; that is, libraries could leverage critical expertise without the budgetary commitments required by permanent employees. Chervinko offered some managerial advice for libraries employing temporary staff, including adequate training and preparing for turnover as temporary employees leave for permanent opportunities. However, it is notable that Chervinko’s analysis and recommendations center the well-being of the organization,

even downplaying salary and benefits as factors in turnover and giving little consideration to the drawbacks for working librarians or the profession as a whole (219–220).

There is some evidence that academic libraries utilize temporary labor at much lower rates than other academic units, but the reason for this is unclear (Mayo and Whitehurst 2012, 512). Recent literature indicates that very little has changed since 1986 in terms of reliance on temporary labor; in an era of ever decreasing budgets, temporary employees are a cost-effective way for libraries to serve their core mission. The flexibility inherent in employing temporary staff enables libraries to complete special projects without overburdening permanent staff, to cover temporary vacancies, and to realize cost savings that help their bottom lines (Mayo and Whitehurst 2012, 517; Bladek 2019, 489). One significant element that has changed, however, is the awareness and acknowledgment that contingent labor adversely affects librarians as employees and the library profession in general. Marta Bladek’s 2019 analysis is explicit about the advantages of temporary employment accruing primarily to organizations while librarians themselves bear the brunt of the disadvantages, including destabilization and devaluation of their expertise comparative to their salaries (491).

Though temporary positions continue to be a staple of library staffing plans, the *Library Journal’s* annual report on placements and salaries indicates that the number of recent graduates employed in temporary positions has decreased significantly in the past decade. In the report analyzing placements and salaries for librarians who graduated in 2013, the data showed that 69.6 percent of placements were in permanent professional positions, which was up from 61.2 percent the previous year (Maata 2014).<sup>1</sup> By the report on 2017 graduates, 9 out of 10 full-time positions were permanent (Allard 2018), and the numbers stayed high through the most recent report, which shows that 94 percent of newly graduated librarians were hired into permanent positions (Allard 2022).

While libraries are trending toward hiring permanent positions, the employment landscape for archivists has been disrupted over the same period. Ironically, a growing national interest in increased access to unique materials sits at the heart of this shift. Between 2008 and 2014, The Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, awarded more than \$27 million as part of their Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives program, an initiative to identify and catalog special collections “hidden” from the research community due to lack of processing or extant description. The

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<sup>1</sup> It is unclear from the data presented in the article whether the remaining 30 percent of positions were only temporary or a mix of temporary, part-time, and paraprofessional positions.

results were significant. CLIR funded 128 projects in the United States and Canada involving 170 unique institutions, and the final report states that the program exposed over 6 million unique items across multiple formats and facilitated the processing of over 4,000 archival collections by participating institutions. These Hidden Collections grants were undeniably beneficial to the participating institutions and, with 90 percent of grantees meeting or exceeding their project goals, the program was a resounding success (Banks 2019, 11).

That success was due not only to the financial windfall of the project grants, but also to the archival labor employed during the granting period. In fact, CLIR explicitly stated that the hiring of new project staff was a goal for the Hidden Collections project. Institutions providing detailed reports to CLIR on staffing levels indicated that the funding resulted in the hiring of 80 limited-term archival staff positions, and 62.5 percent of the projects funded involved the hiring of new professional or paraprofessional staff (Banks 2019, 14).

While many of the funded institutions invested in permanent positions and committed to supporting robust archival programs, these grants helped accelerate the already established trend of using temporary processing staff to achieve specific, finite goals toward a broad acceptance of short-term positions as a solution to ongoing operational needs. Concurrently, a historic global economic downturn further entrenched the trend of libraries divesting from permanent labor. An American Library Association survey found that library usage soared during the 2008 financial crisis, despite 41 percent of states reporting a decline in state funding for public libraries in the fiscal year 2009 (ALA 2009, 3). The critical reduction of state and federal funding, along with flat or reduced endowment incomes, led many libraries and archives to focus resources on collections rather than workers: 63 percent of member institutions responding to the Association of Research Libraries' (ARL) Survey on "Base Budgets, 2008–2009," chose to reduce or restructure their staff rather than cut their acquisition budgets. In a 2009 follow-up survey, 59 percent of the cuts involved staff and operations alone. While most institutions led with the elimination of vacant positions and hiring freezes, 28 percent of the ARL survey respondents eventually turned to layoffs, furloughs, early retirement incentives, and salary reductions (Lowry 2010, 44).

This paradigm shift has had a damaging impact on both archival workers and archival work, particularly on archivists entering the field. In her 2010 survey of early career archivists, Amber L. Cushing noted that 66 percent were dissatisfied with the temporary nature of their employment. "I'm the breadwinner for my family," reported one respondent. "I'm a grownup with



a mortgage and I feel totally disrespected by being offered back-to-back projects. I'd much rather not have to panic (and apply for jobs) every 6–9 months!" (610).

A study of job postings in ArchivesGig from 2014–2020 found that 24.2 percent of jobs posted were term positions, suggesting a high reliance on temporary labor in American<sup>2</sup> archival repositories in which most work is of an ongoing, iterative nature (Johnson Melvin, Sayles, Vo 2020, 2). In 2020, the Inclusion and Diversity Committee of the New England Archivists charged their Contingent Employment Study Task Force with conducting a study to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data about contingent employment in the region. This study was a follow-up to similar work conducted in 2016, and the results indicated that little had changed in the employment landscape in the intervening years. The task force found that over half of the 217 archival positions posted in New England during the study were contingent, and that among institutions that advertised the duration of the term, nearly 95 percent lasted two years or less, and 73 percent lasted one year or less. The report detailed the many negative impacts on contingently employed archivists, including the need to defer significant personal decisions such as marriage, buying a home, or starting a family; financial distress; social isolation; increased commute times; and the necessity of living apart from a partner or family, among others. The report also noted that 18 percent of survey respondents said they had been contingently employed for five to seven years over the course of their careers, and nearly 17 percent had been contingently employed at least eight years. These numbers are not isolated, and the impact on workers is stark: "Every single respondent reported at least one aspect of contingent employment that they disliked or that negatively affected them in some way. Out of 83 respondents, only one person said that they would choose to be contingently employed if given the choice" (Bredbenner et al. 2022).

Considering the evidence that "beginning a career with a fixed-term position can cause an earnings loss over a professional career that even under the best of circumstances will likely take a decade to reverse," it is no surprise that fixed-term or project positions are less attractive to new professionals (Booth, Fancesconi, and Frank 2002, F189–F213). The field's growing reliance on temporary positions has locked many workers in a cycle of term positions. A 2019 self-reported study of active project archivists noted that, of respondents who had completed a term position, 48 percent had held one to two such positions, and 52 percent had held at least three project positions (Johnson Melvin, Sayles, and Vo 2020).

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<sup>2</sup>Though the US is the focus of this research, Canada appears to share this issue (Henninger et al. 2020).

Project archivists suffer stagnation in wages; may have difficulty meeting financial needs (particularly if they have no additional monetary support); face a slower transition into a stable position; and are unlikely to transition into mid- or high-level positions. These added stressors resulting from temporary employment often cause burnout and low morale in temporary employees (Rodriguez et al. 2019). The net result is an exodus of skilled archivists from the field.

The growing influence of neoliberalism in the humanities and allied fields finds market rhetoric applied directly to the work of libraries and archives, leading to a reduction in programs, services, and staff, and a focus on profitability and cost effectiveness over long-term commitments to cultural guardianship. Productivity metrics based on private sector models frame archives users as consumers and emphasize deskilled work products generated for immediate consumption over human-centered, professional labor. This paradigm devalues the judgment and experience of the archivist as well as the heterogeneity of the historical records in their care (Cifor and Lee 2017, 12). Likewise, as staff positions are replaced with project-based workers (or are eliminated entirely), the long-term survival of the archive, and the archival profession, is at risk. Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee contend that these models, “mean that the archival profession opens itself just to those in the privileged financial situation to be able to undertake such labors, thereby replicating problematic inequalities in the profession” (13).

These “problematic inequalities” persist even as the archival community at large has begun to grapple directly with its historic whiteness (Skinner and Hulbert 2023, 19). Institutions that are unable to diversify their staff will be unable to meet the needs of their collections and the communities they serve. Additionally, while diversity residencies aimed at recruiting people from underrepresented groups have created many post-graduate positions specifically for BIPOC archivists and librarians, many are formulated as term positions without structure, scaffolding, or assurances that the worker will be able to transition to a permanent position, leading to a negative impact on the very communities these positions are intended to support. Thus, the field should be particularly concerned about the effects of contingent positions on BIPOC employees and organizational efforts toward diversity, inclusion, and equity (Kendrick 2020). Institutional DEI work and the necessity of moving toward a more diverse profession are both urgent, ongoing needs that must be carried out by the profession as a whole. In short, diversity initiatives must come hand-in-hand with long-term investment in people. As librarian April Hathcock observes:

Rather than being framed as a shared goal for the common good, diversity is approached as a problem that must be solved, with diverse librarians becoming the objectified pawns deployed to attack the problem. With this white-centered thinking at the fore, many LIS diversity initiatives seem to focus primarily on increasing numbers and visibility without paying corresponding attention to retention and the lived experiences of underrepresented librarians surrounded by the whiteness of the profession (2015).

Inspired by the session “Looking Back to Move Forward: Evaluating the Hidden Collections Era in Archives and Special Collections” at the 2020 Society of American Archivists (SAA) Annual Conference, an ad hoc group of archivists concerned with the prevalence and harm of term positions and other forms of contingent employment in the archives field formed the Term Labor Best Practices (TLBP) Working Group. Reflecting on the impact of the “hidden collections” era and the resulting proliferation in grants and grant-funded temporary positions, the TLBP working group raised the issue that a lack of professional best practices for designing ethical temporary positions perpetuated the harm caused by unethical term positions. Following the conference, Alison Clemens (Beinecke Library, Yale University) posted an open invitation on the archival processing Slack channel inviting anyone interested in this issue to attend an initial meeting to discuss how to fill the gaps identified during the conference.

Published in January 2022, the *Best Practices for Archival Term Positions* presents best practices for administrators, hiring managers, and supervisors to put into action when planning for and utilizing archival term positions. At the foundation of this document is the recognition that temporary labor is detrimental to employees and to sustainable and holistic collection stewardship. In July 2023, SAA officially endorsed the original version of the *Best Practices* as an external standard.

While drafting the *Best Practices*, it became evident that there was a scarcity of published research on the history of temporary labor in galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM professions). Additionally, archival literature lacked a full examination of why and how we have come to rely so heavily on contingent positions to perform core operational work. Members from the original TLBP Working Group submitted a proposal to CLIR, seeking to enhance the original best practices guidelines through additional research. The work presented here, including literature review, survey findings, and case studies, aims to meet the need for in-depth context and analysis of temporary labor in the archival profession. This endeavor seeks to foster a deeper understanding of archival term positions, which is essential to minimize the use of such positions and ensure ethical practices.

## 2. Study of Contingent Labor Practices in Archives

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To measure the impacts of temporary labor, the TLBP Working Group designed a two-phase project to provide a quantitative footprint of temporary labor practices as well as qualitative insight into how these practices impact the well-being of staff and institutions. The study included a short survey followed by interviews with a subset of survey respondents. The TLBP Working Group chose to analyze the two data sets together to show the prevalence and widespread nature of temporary labor practices while also providing context as to why institutions rely so heavily on project positions. The Institutional Review Board of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, approved the project as exempt (Appendix A).

### 2.1 STUDY METHODOLOGY

The goal of the first phase of the project was to study the institutional contexts of archival employers, including the prevalence of temporary positions and working conditions. To accomplish this, the TLBP Working Group developed a short survey (Appendix B) to collect data about institutional dependence on term archivists, resources invested in hiring, expectations for candidate qualifications, on-the-job accomplishments, and institutional contexts that reinforce the use of project labor. The TLBP Working Group distributed the survey through national, regional, and local listservs, and collected data over the course of one month.

The final question in the survey offered an opportunity to volunteer for a follow-up interview over Zoom to provide qualitative insights to the TLBP Working Group (Appendix C). All respondents indicated that they were willing to be contacted, but only thirteen responded to a call for interview participation. Two members of the working group conducted individual interviews via Zoom with each of the thirteen volunteers to discuss their thoughts on and justifications for term labor, hurdles to creating permanent positions, and impacts of term labor on professional development.

The following sections include a more in-depth discussion of survey methodology and findings. Interview analysis is presented in section 3.

### 2.2 SURVEY RESULTS

The survey examined trends and decisions made by institutions when recruiting term positions, focusing on institutional practices and attitudes,

not on the experiences of project archivists. Other surveys, including the New England Archivists' recent examinations of term labor, focus on the term laborers themselves (Broadnax et al. 2017; Bredbenner et al. 2022). The design of this survey ruled out current term archivists, interns, and volunteers by limiting participants to permanently employed archivists and supervisors of archivists. This design aimed to prevent potential conflict of interest and any potential risk to vulnerable term employees. The TLBP Working Group distributed the survey primarily through SAA section listservs, regional and local professional organization listservs, and social media channels such as the Archivists' Think Tank Facebook Group. The TLBP Working Group published the survey on May 15, 2023, left it open for four weeks, and closed it on June 12, 2023.

During this time, representatives of 31 institutions participated in the survey. Of the institutions represented, a majority (55 percent) were academic special collections, and an additional 16 percent were college or university archives. Outside of academia, respondents came from government archives, museums, corporate archives, public libraries, and historical societies. No respondents from Tribal archives, community archives, religious archives, or manuscript and special collections repositories not affiliated with a university participated.

Seventy-seven percent of respondents reported hiring and using term labor in the last five years, hiring anywhere from one to more than ten project archivists. The following survey analysis examines three main components of hiring practices: recruitment trends, employment practices, and retention (or term renewal) options. Each section approaches the survey results holistically, and one result may be used in multiple sections as it may reinforce interconnected issues. "Recruitment Trends" focuses on how jobs are advertised and how institutions hire term employees as well as who they consider and hire for these positions. "Employment Practices" discusses equity for, treatment of, and administrative attitudes toward term positions, while "Retention Options" speaks to the loss of term positions and practices that surround extending the terms for these positions.

### **Recruitment Trends**

Hiring practices, including the minimum requirements for a position, often reflect the resources an institution is willing to invest in both the recruitment process and the incumbent. Educational qualifications, for example, can illustrate the extent to which an institution can or will invest in training a temporary employee. When asked if a master's or higher-level degree was required of a project archivist, 73 percent of respondents noted

that they did require an MLIS or related degree, while only 27 percent did not. In addition, only 20 percent of respondents did not require experience at the time of hire, while 40 percent of respondents required up to a year of experience, and 27 percent required one to three years of experience; the remaining respondents noted that experience requirements varied based on the position. This shows that most employers expect project archivists to come in with enough previous professional experience to require minimal on-the-job training.

Institutional resources are also evident in data about where institutions advertised jobs. When asked how their institution recruited project archivists, 81 percent of respondents noted that they posted job ads on professional listservs, and 71 percent also posted positions on professional job boards. Sixty-five percent of respondents reached out to MLIS programs specifically to target emerging archivists, and 19 percent utilized other methods including word of mouth, internal promotion of positions, and use of professional networks. In addition to archivally focused methods, 58 percent of respondents noted that they shared postings on general hiring boards such as Indeed.com.

Institutions hire project archivists to fill gaps, either cultural or operational. When asked why they hired project archivists, 71 percent of respondents said they had finite projects that exceeded their existing staff's capacity, 52 percent had no internal funding for permanent archival work, 35 percent had deadlines or mandates to process high-value collections, and 13 percent required specialized skills that their existing staff did not possess. Even when operational needs are met, some institutions use temporary positions to fill cultural needs, as seen in the rise of diversity fellowships and similar inclusivity-focused positions. Close to a third (29 percent) of respondents noted that they use temporary labor to increase diversity in their staff.

A common approach for addressing budgetary shortfalls is to seek out grant funding, and respondents provided multiple reasons that they have felt the need to apply for grants. Approximately 90 percent of participants noted that they have needed funds for a project that internal funding could not support, and 33 percent cited needing more staff. While the majority of respondents noted a budgetary need, 33 percent said that they received pressure from their administration or similar parties, and 20 percent noted that institutional prestige of a grant was a factor in deciding to apply. While the responses show that financial need is the primary reason that institutions apply for grants, the influence of outside pressure from administration, including the desire for social prestige, plays a significant role in the decision to apply.

## Employment Practices

Employment practices vary from institution to institution, particularly in libraries. Because there is no industry standard, individual libraries can make arbitrary decisions about the classification of professional work. What one library considers professional work to be done by a librarian with faculty or faculty-equivalent status, another library might consider to be paraprofessional work performed by individuals without the status or protections of tenure (assuming tenure is available). Attitudes toward both the hiring and treatment of staff can demonstrate institutional priorities and how those priorities may lead to term positions.

The survey examined why institutions chose (or were required) to create temporary rather than permanent positions. Largely, the answers were: inadequate funding and time or project management pressure. Many institutions have a large number of “finite” projects yet lack funding for permanent positions; thus, all respondents reported an institutional need for full-time archivists. This outcome may be a result of respondent bias since the survey targeted archival professionals and not administrators; nevertheless, this outcome indicates a misalignment between need and support that often results in short-term solutions.

Employment practices, including salaries, benefits, and managerial support, vary widely across term positions, resulting in inequalities between term and permanent staff. Organizations may offer temporary staff different or limited benefits due to institutional requirements during their initial years of employment. Financial and personal incentives, such as vestment in retirement packages or increased time off through years of continued service, are irrelevant when term positions do not last long enough to qualify for those incentives. Furthermore, employment packages often include intangible benefits, such as support for external professional development or opportunities to contribute to internal committees. Survey data confirmed these variations across organizations, and while some institutions do practice equitable support, a significant number still treat term workers inequitably. Twenty-six percent of respondents reported that project archivists do not receive salaries equitable to those for permanent positions, and 23 percent stated that project archivists do not receive equitable benefits.

This data implies that institutions are largely, though not entirely, treating temporary workers similarly to permanent employees concerning compensation. However, there are caveats when examining the 26 percent who reported that project archivists do not receive salaries equitable to those of permanent staff. One survey respondent wrote, “It depends on the

position and how it's defined. Some are benefit-eligible, some are intended for graduate students and are 10–15 hours per week, more comparable to a student job. It's variable.” This response implies that some temporary positions are being advertised to graduate students, likely because their labor is less expensive, instead of being aimed at professional archivists or paraprofessional staff, and it illustrates one way that compensation can influence employment decisions.

Another benefit often included in compensation packages is professional development. The archival community values professional contributions at both the institutional and national level. Activity in the larger archival community is beneficial to employees' advancement in many institutions, especially libraries, where criteria for promotion may include accomplishments such as committee membership or publication. For term positions these activities may be more critical; engaging with the professional community provides necessary networking opportunities that may facilitate the transition to a permanent position. Lack of support can harm future job prospects when employers favor candidates with demonstrated participation in the profession. When asked, 33 percent of respondents could not confirm that their institutions provide support for temporary employees to contribute outside of processing tasks.

### **Retention Options**

While retention is not a primary concern with term positions, particularly term positions of less than two years, it is still relevant to the field and a component of employment practices. For the purpose of this study, the TLBP Working Group defined retention as either the transformation of a temporary position to a permanent one or the extension of a temporary position beyond its original term. Indeed.com, a leading recruitment website, describes the benefits of retention as saving administrative costs, boosting morale, and improving business efficiency (“Retaining Employment” n.d.). In archives, business efficiency can include critical institutional knowledge ranging from local practices to in-depth collection knowledge.

The survey captured critical information about retention. Most importantly, the survey asked what happened when a project was not completed due to the early departure of term staff. The most common outcomes were adding the project to the institution's backlog (58 percent) and permanent staff completing the project (45 percent). This suggests two things: one, that leaders do, in fact, see processing projects as part of the iterative work of permanent staff, therefore, not requiring the assistance of term-limited specialists; and two, that project terms are



frequently of insufficient length to allow project staff to complete the assigned work. Interestingly, the percentage of responses confirming that term positions would be extended to facilitate project completion was the same as the percentage for those who hired a different temporary archivist to complete the work (32 percent). This indicates that institutions are not using temporary positions strategically and leads to a pair of questions: Are projects appropriately scoped at all levels from the outset, and is hiring a temporary employee necessary? Projects must be planned to include financial, administrative, and logistical considerations as well as task- and time-specific input from experienced archival staff. Increasing advance planning and seeking input from archival staff can be critical in determining whether a project is terminal or iterative in nature.

The lack of retention options revealed in the survey results is concerning. The ACRL Library Worker Retention Toolkit describes strong retention strategies as critical to institutional DEI efforts, “building a cohesive team, increasing productivity, and improving morale” (ALA 2023). The loss of a project archivist, leading to either project completion by a separate project archivist or completion by permanent staff, damages the project, impedes the work, interrupts other operational workflows, delays user access, and ensures the loss of important institutional and project knowledge. Reconsidering temporary labor as a retention issue is necessary not only for term employees, but also to improve working conditions and morale for permanent staff. Additionally, because institutions use term positions to increase staff diversity (30 percent of respondents confirm), examining retention is critical to examining the treatment of archivists of color.

## 3. Case Studies in Contingent Labor

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In addition to the survey, the TLBP Working Group sought to gain qualitative insight into term labor and its impact on the well-being of both staff and institutions through interviews with self-selecting survey respondents (Appendix C). Case studies drawn from these interviews highlight barriers to hiring permanent positions. They also attempt to repudiate the idea that processing work is inherently project-based or a necessary rite of passage for early-career archivists. The interviewers approached the case studies with the expectation that participants would share their insights regarding term positions, including challenges, successes, and failures in moving term roles into permanent positions or creating permanent positions for term hires. Of particular interest were the ways in which archivists and supervisors circumvented common hurdles and attempted to meet institutional goals while offering term workers a path for growth.

In July and August 2023, interviewers from the TLBP Working Group conducted 13 Zoom interviews with information professionals with varying levels of professional experience from 12 institutions across the country. Each participant had volunteered for further discussion during the initial survey. Interviewees work primarily in university-based archives, though some work for public organizations, government agencies, corporate archives, and museums. Each interview took between 45 and 90 minutes over Zoom, and all participants completed the interview.

All 13 participants acknowledged that their organization has attempted to hire permanent staff and shared examples of arguments advanced by themselves or their colleagues. Five out of 13 participants succeeded in transforming temporary positions into permanent positions. Four were still in the planning stages of their proposal, and two were unsuccessful in creating permanent roles.

### 3.1 PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS ON TERM LABOR

#### Undesirable positions

Participants found term positions undesirable but acknowledged that their institutions hire temporary labor to complete large processing projects, believing that processing work is inherently finite. Participants admitted that term work and its associated job precarity created anxiety for contingent workers, and most sought to create permanent positions or to identify development opportunities that would make their temporary

staff more competitive in the job market. Comments from participant 3 reflected the widespread belief that term labor started as an intermediate step between graduate school and a permanent, professional job, but is now a path that traps archivists and stunts upward mobility; participant 3 identified at least one professional in their network who had been working six-month positions for almost six years.

The participants agreed that organizations suffered from the loss of institutional knowledge and training resources when projects ended. Participant 9 explained, “Every time someone comes in and leaves that is a loss. I train them and then they leave.” The loss of term workers also took an emotional toll on permanent staff, particularly managers, in the form of guilt and the anxiety they felt for term workers’ futures. They noted that term labor did not solve underlying staffing needs; participants added that they would prefer the work not get done than use temporary labor.

### **Operational and ongoing work is incompatible with term work**

Most interview participants argued that term positions limited their ability to set and meet strategic goals because of the iterative and ongoing nature of archival work, and almost all participants pushed back against the use of term labor for reference, outreach, management, and donor relations. Participant 13 equated using term labor for ongoing operational work to using unpaid labor for professional work, reflecting the view that using internships for operational work is an exploitative practice (SAA 2014). Participants pointed out that setting goals based on processing staff levels was difficult without an ongoing commitment to building or maintaining those staffing levels. They also felt that using term labor was a reactionary measure that signaled to their leadership that they did not require permanent positions in their department. However, participants cited leadership demands as well as limited funding, deadlines, and growing backlogs as reasons they continued to hire term positions even while acknowledging that term labor would not meet or sustain their institution’s processing goals. This led participant 8 to question why, if their collecting activities continue to increase, their processing staffing levels did not also increase.

### **Soft money and external funding**

Soft funding is ubiquitous in archives, and participants addressed the disadvantage of using soft money as a replacement for standing budgets, noting that reliance on grants to support ongoing operational work is not a sustainable business practice. If an organization is constantly renewing a term position, that is evidence that the role should be permanent.

Participant 1 refused to fill a term position after multiple renewals based on soft funding, eventually convincing leadership to add a standing budget line. Participant 12 noted that librarians rarely required term labor and observed that their grants did not usually include labor requirements; they asked why archivists are held to a “project-based philosophy.” Participants indicated that any work not completed during project terms as well as ongoing collections support work such as stewardship and outreach, became the responsibility of remaining permanent staff or was simply left undone. This frustration led participants with limited funds, limited timelines, or limited staff to forgo applying for additional grants and to lament that the additional burdens of conceiving, writing, and managing grant projects further decreased their available time and resources.

### 3.2 JUSTIFICATIONS USED BY CASE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Participants offered a variety of arguments for converting term roles into permanent positions, but they consistently repeated four main themes: using metrics, systematic organizational expansion, changing the mindset of decision-makers, and persistence. Providing administrators with hard numbers illustrating the relationship between staff hours and productivity was the most effective strategy; focusing on more accurate and reliable goal setting also added to successful requests. Participants acknowledged that sometimes it was simply a matter of persistence or timing.

#### Data and metrics

Participants emphasized the significance of data in advocating for permanent staff in their departments. Almost half highlighted the effectiveness of linking increased outputs to securing approval for permanent positions by showcasing the potential to reduce backlogs, enhance access, and support researchers more efficiently. An identified business need was the most common reason leaders approved a permanent position. Participants also noted the following as successful strategies when approaching leadership; they noted that these strategies largely centered on backlog management:

- Calculations of the institutional backlog and time to complete it. Participant 11 noted they approached their administration with relevant statistics and that while “it still took two years for [the approval] to fully go through,” the supporting numbers were instrumental.
- Participant 5 “went box by box through a survey and . . . used our processing stats [to find] it was going to take 10 years . . . it did not make sense to hire someone for a two-year job to make progress on a 10-year project.”

- Identifying the extent to which permanent staffing could reduce the institution's storage budget through backlog remediation.

A few participants moved beyond these simple metrics to include how permanent staff could improve the quality of processing work, increase the volume of researcher interactions and requests, meet the growing needs and expectations of the research community, and better support the work of the organization's leadership. They used an increase in the number of reference requests and delayed response times (especially during COVID-19) to demonstrate the need for more permanent staffing. In addition, participants invoked the frustration of users who struggled to access un- or under-processed collections to show leaders the very real implications of having an inaccessible backlog.

Participants also identified unacknowledged work done by their staff in support of other departments or within their communities that competed with their own objectives and goals. Participant 4 explained that the special collections staff was responsible for most of the library's fundraising, even as they struggled to complete their primary work; participant 12 shared that their archives supports the grant-funded work of other departments without receiving any funding allocations from those grants.

### **Systematic expansion**

Some participants expressed concern that even when their data demonstrated a direct correlation between permanent positions, increased effectiveness, and lowered costs, they were still unable to convince their leadership that hiring permanent staff with specialized skills was necessary. Participants noted that changes in leadership were sometimes necessary to successfully convert term roles into permanent positions, and that leaders with a growth mindset tended toward systematic expansion of staff. However, some acknowledged that even when their organization took this view, expansion did not always include the archival staff. Participant 2 shared that they were pressured to expand their collecting activities without expanding their staff.

In many cases, successful participants framed their request for new positions as strategically increasing capacity, allowing the manager to expand the team's knowledge and skills through the addition of new staff and continued training of current staff. Participant 6 justified making a term worker permanent by explaining that the worker would have the additional role of applying for and managing grants. Others identified the need for permanent staff to conduct outreach or to create relationships

with communities. Participant 10 explained that a term worker had been leading a program that directly aligned with the organization's strategic goals and succeeded in making the position permanent based on the growing popularity of that program. Participant 4 used strong public interest in a particular collection as justification for making a term worker permanent, explaining that the role required skills learned over time, such as completing collection processing, working with researchers, identifying related donors, and increasing outreach relating to the collection materials.

### **Changing mindsets, internally and across the profession**

Participants explained that changing the views of their leadership and a shift in the broader profession's mindset on term work supported efforts to create permanent positions. Many spoke about the challenge of their leadership "not knowing what the archives does" and having to learn how to "speak the decision-maker's language." Most participants needed to educate their leadership about the work of archives, identify the increase in their workload, and articulate the important role of archivists in their organizations. Participant 9 color-coded their calendar to visually represent their increased responsibilities; another participant engaged in outreach to new colleagues across the organization to build knowledge about the work of the archives. Many interviewees mentioned teaching their leadership how to process archival materials, with participant 8 noting that "it could take a whole day to get through one Hollinger box." A few respondents acknowledged that their leaders understood how unfinished projects pushed permanent staff over capacity and negatively affected staff retention, but this understanding did not lead to an increase in the number of full-time, permanent positions to the department.

Interviewees made justifications and encouraged their leadership to take progressive action based on the direction of new literature and scholarship on archival labor. Participants 1 and 6 cited the work of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant project Collective Responsibility: National Forum on Labor Practices for Grant-Funded Digital Positions (Rodríguez et al. 2019), while participant 1 used their own support of the UCLA Temporary Librarians Open Letter to frame discussions with decision-makers in their organization (Dean et al. 2018). Participants also pointed to staffing discrepancies between their organizations and peer organizations to make a case for more permanent staff.

Understanding that some leaders are unpersuadable, some respondents acknowledged that they saw changes in leadership as a net positive to staffing requests. Some actively waited for a leadership change that would be amenable to new positions. Participant 1 said they took the initiative to

make the ask when a new leader came in with a stated goal of transparency, which changed how the organization planned for and hired new employees.

### **Timing and persistence**

Participants recommended presenting requests for new staff early and often and emphasized that managers should not be shy in repeatedly making requests for permanent roles. Most said that requests should be made early in a new manager's tenure. Participant 13 said they would "rather ask for forgiveness instead of waiting around for years for permission." Three participants explained that their initial requests were not seen as "pushy," since they were new, and that a person new to an institution may feel more empowered to try something different than someone who has repeatedly heard no. Two respondents added that, as they learned more about how their institution's budget was allocated, they knew when to be ready with their requests for staffing.

### **3.3 BARRIERS TO HIRING PERMANENT STAFF**

All participants, even those successful in creating permanent positions, had to overcome an initial rejection. Reliance on soft money was the most common hurdle; leadership preferences for term labor or competition with other departments for funding were also cited as factors. Some noted that they never received a specific reason for the rejection.

Many participants felt a responsibility to advocate for the work of the archives, understanding that most archival organizations are understaffed. Participant 1 said that "there were so many thorny issues on how to staff the archives, and I wanted to have a voice in that conversation... I was worried about what would happen to these people in [archives] if I did not have that power." The most difficult position some faced was a rejection to their request with no (or vague) rationale. Participant 6 spoke to a leadership mentality of "just ask for what you need, and we'll tell you yes or no," with little explanation for the decision. This kind of response discouraged some interviewees from making follow-up attempts because they could not provide new justifications without a framework for the initial refusal. The lack of transparency left many respondents unsure how to continue the conversation.

Participants frequently cited a sense of competition between departments as a hurdle to securing funding, especially for staff positions. Participant 1 shared that their leadership included department heads in funding decisions, using ranked choice voting to identify where there is greatest need. This required the archivist to not only make the case to their

supervisors, but also to colleagues who were seeking funding from the same pool. Participant 6 expressed frustration that such competition set managers up to view relationships within the organization as tit-for-tat.

Without formal strategic planning, departments cannot hire thoughtfully. Participants noted that term work made planning impossible for both the department and the term employee, and one participant stated that it was not a sustainable business practice to continue these soft money-based, year-to-year, operational positions. They acknowledged the ubiquitousness of grant funding in archival departments and the damage soft money does to departmental goals. They described donations driving priorities for processing rather than internal metrics such as collection usage or demand from researchers. This reactionary approach to goal setting leaves archivists chasing soft money and hiring temporary labor to meet expectations instead of strategically expanding the department to meet the organization's needs.

All participants admitted that temporary positions were less desirable to potential employees and brought in less qualified applicants, usually new professionals, as most experienced professionals self-select out of term position pools. Participant 11, having hired concurrently for temporary and permanent roles, noted that the applicant pools were drastically different, with the term position attracting a smaller number of candidates with significantly less experience. However, most participants acknowledged that requests for term positions (especially those with outside funding) were more successful than those for permanent ones. Participant 11 explained that their organization moves faster when hiring term positions than with permanent roles, which caused a well-trained and integrated staff member to accept a permanent job elsewhere when the hiring process took too long.

### **3.4 SUCCESS AND TERM POSITIONS**

While divided on the ultimate goal of term positions, all participants agreed that the relationship between the term archivist and the institution should be mutually beneficial, with participant 4 saying, "The person is here for a specific amount of time, and it should be as beneficial to them as it is to us." Participants believed that term positions required specific and attainable goals while incorporating the flexibility to allow for skill building, such as enhancing speaking or teaching skills through presentations that share project outcomes. Participant 2 initially converted open positions to term positions intending to create a pathway into the profession for emerging archivists. They sought to create a training program for new professionals through hands-on work in the archives, but



their organization did not hire new professionals for permanent roles; the interview participant explained that this was the compromise they found. They expressed an “obligation, even in smaller organizations, that we have to support younger professionals,” adding “if we only hire experienced people, how do people get experience?” However, their attempt to create educational conduits into the profession failed, for all the reasons that term positions often fail, and they eventually reverted to permanent positions when they had the option, noting that institutions should hire more early career archivists but “avoid hiring them only as term labor.”

Hoping to move away from term positions (which they viewed as exploitive), participants explored options for completing projects using graduate student work instead of creating term positions for professional archivists. The benefit, participant 11 explained, was that no one needed to go through the stress of moving since the students were already onsite, and this provided developing professionals with strong skills and experience to move from school into a permanent position. Participant 12 implemented an apprentice program for post-baccalaureate students with a demonstrated interest in pursuing a library degree. The participating students rotated throughout the library to expose them to different facets of library work, and they were mentored through the library school application process, scholarship applications, and navigation of their degree programs. Another interviewee disagreed with the idea of using students for processing work, adding that students who are not adequately supervised often put out lower quality work. Regardless, student labor is not a solution to the problem of temporary labor; best practices emphasize the need for an educational outcome for student positions, particularly graduate internships (SAA 2014).

Most participants in the in-depth interviews conducted by the TLBP Working Group admitted that they hired term workers out of a sense of desperation. Many felt pressured by organizational leaders to hire term workers to meet processing goals, to make collections immediately available, or as a response to demands from patrons and donors. Many acknowledged that it was expedient to hire term positions because of leadership support for the model, even if early turnover diverted permanent staff time to complete unfinished projects. A few were hopeful about future trends, adding that more professional research, increased attention to staffing metrics, and overwhelming backlogs of unprocessed and inaccessible collections were putting them in stronger positions to negotiate for staff expansion. Most participants stated they did not want to hire term positions going forward and hoped to create permanent positions at their institutions.

## 4. Best Practices in Action

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National professional organizations abound with guidelines and standards addressing good stewardship of materials and the ethical behavior of professionals (SAA, n.d.-a; SAA n.d.-b; ALA, n.d.). Furthermore, they purport to support and advocate for their membership and the profession at large (SAA 2019; ACRL 2011). However, at the time of the TLBP Working Group's original publication in 2022 (Clemens, et al. 2022), no existing standards or guidelines addressed the use of term positions in the field. The recommendations put forth by the TLBP Working Group were intended to fill that gap by establishing professionally endorsed ethical labor practices for term positions that advocate for both the work and the workers. Summaries of the best practices are reproduced here.

While acknowledging that term positions may be an inevitable aspect of carrying out cultural heritage work, the best practices recognize at their foundation that temporary positions, if not created thoughtfully, are harmful to individual professionals and staff, institutions, and the unique materials in their purview. These practices aim to mitigate that harm. Managers, administrators, and workers should engage with their institutions to contribute to discussions related to position development whenever possible; supervisors should use these best practices as guidance to advocate for more ethical term positions; and project staff should be empowered to use these best practices as a tool to advocate for themselves.

### 4.1 DETERMINING THE NATURE OF THE WORK

**Term positions should be exceptional and finite.** An example might include interim coverage for employees on temporary leave or reassignment.

**Term position lengths should be 12 months minimum for interim staffing, but 24 months minimum for temporary projects,** accounting for the significant time always needed for onboarding, setup, and planning.

**Term positions should be subject to a special position review process** by the institution's administrative body to ensure that the positions meet these best practices.

**Work supporting an organization's mission with ongoing core operational needs should be the responsibility of permanently funded positions.** Examples of core work: collection development, including diversification of collections; community outreach; reference services; initial and iterative processing, including reparative description; creating

or revising policies, such as processing guidelines; and the development, administration, implementation, and/or migration of new systems and workflows.

**Managerial and policy or workflow development positions should not be filled by temporary staff.** Management and administrative positions should be permanent, full-time positions due to their strategic functions within the organization and the crucial role they play in ensuring the success of staff and programs.

**Term positions should be classified appropriately and accurately reflect the skills and qualifications needed for the project.** The level of the work required by the project should be scoped ahead of time and match the experience and educational requirements asked of candidates. Not all term positions are necessarily entry-level, nor are all processing projects appropriate for early-career archivists. Entry-level term positions should not require years of experience; hiring managers should anticipate recruiting professionals who have just finished their archival education. Entry-level positions require significant time and planning investments on the part of the institution. Institutions should strive to treat term positions as professional, and not paraprofessional work, and they should rate the qualifications accordingly. If a master's degree is required, institutions should categorize the term position as professional work.

**Contract work (i.e., contracting archival workers from consulting firms rather than hiring individuals directly) should not be seen as a viable alternative to temporary positions.** Relying on contract work often results in institutional disinvestment in permanent positions and enables institutions to avoid creating and supporting sustainable staffing models. In addition to having many of the same issues as temporary workers, contract positions perpetuate disparities between contract staff and permanent employees in working conditions, benefits, and professional development opportunities. Contract work circumvents hiring permanent staff based on expertise and instead supports hiring trained professionals (often at lower rates), without a guarantee that they will have access to essential professional development opportunities offered to direct staff. This structure creates a harmful dichotomy between permanent and contract workers.

## 4.2 COMPENSATION AND QUALIFICATIONS

**Term positions should have salary and benefits equitable to those available in permanent positions within the institution.** Institutions should consider paying a higher salary for term positions as compared to similar permanent positions to partially compensate for relocation and

transition costs as well as financial risk incurred by the instability of the position.

**Term positions should provide adequate compensation to account for the cost of living in the area.** Institutions should judge whether compensation is adequate based on data-driven resources, rather than personal judgment, and determinations should assume that the worker may have student loans and/or dependents.

**Institutions should provide relocation assistance or increase pay in compensation for relocation expenses.** This may also take the form of assisting with short-term housing arrangements. Term positions, as compared to similar permanent positions, often have relocation and transition costs at both the beginning and the end of the contract, which should be factored into compensation.

**Salary and benefits should be on the same compensation scale and system as non-term positions at the institution.** If that is not possible, the institution should ensure that the pay is equitable with that of similar permanent positions and appropriate to the term worker's years of experience. Workers in term positions should receive cost of living (COLA) increases commensurate with increases for permanent staff. The institution should also ensure that the position's overall benefits (i.e., health, retirement contributions and benefits, time off, merit increases, flexible hours, telework options, union membership, access to purchasing cards) and professional development opportunities are equitable to those available in permanent positions within the institution.

**Retirement options should be made transparent when the initial job offer is made, and the hiring manager should discuss institutional plan options and individual preferences with the prospective term employee at their point of hire.** The institution should provide options to opt out of required individual contributions to retirement plans, particularly when plans will not vest during the term of the position; this will allow the term worker more financial flexibility. If it is not possible to allow someone to opt out of individual contributions, their salary should be adjusted accordingly. If the length of a term is less than the time required to be vested in the retirement plan, the institution should either make accommodations for a term employee to be vested earlier or make other arrangements to ensure equity in regard to these benefits.

**Professionals who have been hired with experience in non-entry-level term positions should be both compensated and rated equitably with professionals in similar term positions** and should not be treated as entry-level.

### 4.3 POSTING THE POSITION

**Job postings for term positions should be detailed, humanistic, and transparent.** The posting should include as much information as possible, making it clear to potential applicants that the position is time-bound and project-based. The start date and duration of the position should be given along with the project's purpose and clearly defined deliverables. Specific responsibilities should be listed along with the percentage of time estimated for each.

**The posting should list all compensation, benefits, and professional development being offered.** A salary range should be given as well as information on covering relocation costs. The status of the position within the organization should be clear, i.e., internally or externally (e.g., grant funded; exempt or non-exempt; full- or part-time (including number of hours per week); and whether the position is represented by a union. If the term position is created with new professionals in mind, the posting should describe the experience and skills that will be learned throughout the process of carrying out the project work. Professional development should be considered as a key role in the job description, not as an additional responsibility that can be cut if time constraints become an issue.

**The job description should be unambiguous.** If any aspect of the position description is underdeveloped or cannot be disclosed, reasoning should be provided. For example, if start and end dates are known and nonnegotiable, include that information in the job description; if the salary is nonnegotiable, that information should be included in the job posting. Positions with an undefined term length are strongly discouraged because they are incongruous with ethical term positions due to their negative impact on individuals; institutions; and diversity, equity, and inclusion. If hiring managers are not able to share that information in the job description, they should discuss those decision factors with candidates during the interview process.

**The interview is an opportunity to clarify the limitations and expectations of the job, including grant deliverables, if applicable.** Clear, direct, and honest communication at this point in the hiring process is essential. Under no circumstances should the worker be promised or led to believe that anything such as contract extension or a permanent position is possible if funding has not already been secured. If travel is required to attend an interview, costs should be covered up front by the institution, rather than assuming that the candidate can wait to be reimbursed. This is especially important for candidates interviewing for temporary positions as they may be especially vulnerable to financial instability.

#### 4.4 SETTING THE NEW HIRE UP FOR SUCCESS

**The new hire should have a single supervisor; administrative, physical, and technical accommodations congruent with permanent staff; and mentorship to support their work and development.** Upon starting, the term worker should receive a comprehensive onboarding equivalent to that received by permanent employees. They should be made aware of departmental and institution-wide organizational charts, strategic plans and goals, and their project's role and relationship therein. Technology and systems access should be congruent with that of comparable employees. Term workers should have the same rights and responsibilities (e.g., building access, raises) as permanent staff members, and any specific HR policy- or classification-based differences should be confirmed and disclosed at the point of the offer and reiterated during onboarding. Onboarding for term workers in grant-funded positions should include reviewing and discussing the grant documentation. Supervisors should account for and accommodate differing amounts of onboarding, training, and support time required for entry level positions. Supervisors should also be prepared to offer coaching and mentoring tailored to the needs of the individual and to allow them to participate in any institutional mentorship programs, if available.

**Expectations for term accomplishments and deliverables should be clearly defined at the start of the project and should be congruent with institutional capacity, resources, history with similar projects, classification, expertise, and time available.** The position supervisor is responsible for ensuring that the term worker is adequately trained and equipped to take on project work. The supervisor should outline the exact deliverables for the project—or each phase of the project—to the term worker, preferably with examples; any style guides and institutional standards or preferences should be made clear before the start of the project or project phase. Additionally, members of the institution and institutional partners should provide the term worker with the agency and resources required to create necessary buy-in for their work. The term worker should also be empowered and given support to question these norms, both for the institution to consider change in professional practice and in supporting the agency and professional growth of the project archivist.

**The position supervisor should ensure that the term worker will be acknowledged appropriately for their contributions and that sharing their work within and outside the institution is part of their documented job responsibilities.** Examples of sharing one's work include meeting with library leadership to discuss the project and the experience of

the term worker; presenting at institutional staff meetings or professional conferences; creating social media or blog posts; and publishing in institutional or professional publications.

**Timelines for term positions should account for an appropriate portion of the term worker’s time to be spent on professional development, relationship-building, and mentoring.** The term worker should also be provided with professional development funding and time equitable to or exceeding that available to permanent positions, particularly for opportunities to share their work.

**The position supervisor should provide opportunities for the term worker to get to know the organization and build relationships with people in their area(s) of interest.** The term worker should be provided a workspace similar to that of their permanent staff colleagues, including reasonable accessibility/disability accommodation requests, and the term worker should be provided with opportunities to formally and informally engage with their colleagues, whether through thoughtful planning of desk assignments or inclusion in meetings or social gatherings. Before the term worker starts, it should be made clear to permanent staff what the scope of the work is and how they can support the term worker. The position supervisor should support the term worker’s participation in research and service activities within the profession and the institution. The position supervisor should have regular, one-on-one meetings with the term worker in which they discuss the project, takeaways, and the term worker’s future goals. The position supervisor should try to connect the term worker with professional contacts at their institution and across the profession, as appropriate and as benefits the worker.

#### **4.5 SUPPORTING THE TERM WORKER IN THEIR TRANSITION TO FUTURE POSITIONS**

**Because of the instability of term employment, most term workers will continue looking for permanent positions throughout their appointment.** Their supervisor and institution should support them in finding secure employment, including skill building to be competitive on the job market, and not begrudge them when the term worker leaves their position to secure employment elsewhere, whether before or when their term ends.

**The position supervisor and the term worker should work together from the beginning of the project to ensure that the term worker is prepared to move into their next position.** This includes allowing for the kinds of opportunities mentioned in “Setting the Incumbent Up for Success.” This also requires the supervisor to have ongoing conversations

with the term worker about their career goals and how the position can help them achieve those goals. This preparation should not be left until the end of the appointment.

**The position supervisor should also work closely with the term worker to ensure that the term worker is encouraged and empowered to secure continuing employment, regardless of the amount of time left on their project.** Term workers should be empowered to find more secure employment at any stage of their contract; supervisors should make that explicit, and the assessment of their quality of work in references should not be impacted by potentially leaving positions before the end of their term.

**The position supervisor and the institution should provide or connect term workers with resume or curriculum vitae and cover letter review and other job search assistance.** Early-career archivists are likely to need guidance and mentoring around the job search and interview process. Setting up mock interviews with colleagues is one way to provide this support, in addition to offering feedback on application materials or connecting the worker with other professional resources such as SAA's career center. The position supervisor should also allow for flexible scheduling, if possible, to ensure that the term worker is able to attend interviews and other opportunities necessary to procure continuing employment.

**Supervisors should be clear about extension possibilities as early as possible, and extensions should be offered at least six months before the end of the term,** to allow the term worker time to make informed decisions about their next steps. If there is no possibility of an extension, that should also be made clear as early as possible.

**Supervisors should have end-of-tenure discussions (e.g., exit interviews) with the term worker, both to gather feedback on the term worker's experience and to ensure that project deliverables and knowledge are fully transferred.** Supervisors should do their best to listen to feedback in an open, non-reactive, non-defensive posture and accept that not all feedback will necessarily be positive. Supervisors should also provide the term worker with resources or contact information for other institutional offices (such as HR, union, or the Ombuds) where confidential feedback can be provided. The term worker should not be contacted with questions about the project after they are no longer employed by the institution.



## 5. Conclusion

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Archival term positions are inherently detrimental to workers, institutions, collections, and the archival profession. The current over-reliance on temporary staff undermines the mission and integrity of libraries and archives, hurting both employers and employees in the process. Term positions should be the exception and should only be used to fill archival work that is truly of a finite nature that does not meet core operational needs. Band-aid approaches to systemic challenges, such as relying overwhelmingly on temporary labor, student workers, volunteers, or outsourcing, are exploitative labor practices that devalue the professional skills necessary for archival work. These approaches also require added labor on the part of permanent staff in the form of detailed training and close supervision.

Institutions must critically examine their staffing structures and resource allocations regularly and consider the very real issue of “capacity constraint” before creating new term positions. Capacity constraint is defined by OCLC’s *Total Cost of Stewardship* as “Factors that limit production, performance, or output.” The *Total Cost of Stewardship* further notes that “a capacity constraint impacts an institution’s ability to accomplish collection management activities” (Weber et al. 2021, 3). Term labor stands in opposition to sustainable and holistic collection stewardship and has a very real impact on institutions. When resources allocated to acquisitions outweigh resources for collection management, the long-term result is a Sisyphean battle against growing backlogs that prohibits engagement in the essential ongoing and iterative work of collections maintenance. It is unethical and ineffective stewardship to devote most resources to support continued collecting and purchasing of collections without a sustainable staffing model that can maintain and provide access to all archival holdings for the foreseeable future.

Engaging term employees requires an investment of time, money, and personnel to sufficiently recruit, onboard, train, and orient those employees to local practices and procedures. These expenses are lost rather than recouped as each project is completed, and such losses are often not considered when designing temporary projects and positions. Furthermore, due to the nature of their work, archivists develop a singular familiarity with the collections under their purview, often including both a knowledge of minute detail and an intangible understanding of a collection’s content and structure which far exceed what can be captured in a finding aid. As such, archivists are positioned to offer in-depth reference

and user assistance years after processing activity is finished. To rely on short-term project staff to process marquee collections is to guarantee that deep institutional knowledge will vanish from the institution once the project archivist departs. The same is true for large-scale digitization or reformatting initiatives, digital humanities projects, and other labor adjacent to collections management. High turnover, unfinished work, a loss of institutional memory, and an incomplete or inconsistent understanding of the relationships among collections have considerable, and unintended, downstream impacts on donor relations, collection development, and public services (Johnson Melvin, Sayles, and Vo 2020).

Over-reliance on term positions happens for a variety of reasons, including underfunding, unbalanced resources in institutions that prioritize acquisitions over ongoing collection stewardship, and pressure to apply for grants or to seek other external funds regardless of the institution's capacity to appropriately manage the resulting projects (Weber et al. 2021; Rodriguez et al. 2019). Term positions directly cause archival workers to experience job insecurity, financial instability, and a lack of continuous healthcare access (Bredbenner et al. 2022). Amidst a global pandemic, a recovering job market, and a precipitous rise in inflation and the cost of living across North America, this should not be taken lightly.

Research-based data and the authors' personal experiences indicate that term positions are being used to fill ongoing needs in archival repositories, particularly to provide labor for functions tied to collection management work (Dean 2019). Survey responses from archivists engaged in hiring at 31 institutions bear out this fact. The 13 professionals from 12 institutions who participated in follow-up interviews in the summer of 2023 likewise expressed frustration with term positions while also acknowledging concerns that they could find no other way to complete projects due to lack of funding and a lack of available staff. Many interview participants have shared the stories and statistics behind this work with decision-makers at their institutions to transform term positions into permanent positions. Across the board, there was a distinct desire to avoid term positions because of how detrimental these positions are to individuals, institutions, and the archival field.

The research presented in this publication, comprising a targeted survey, focus group interviews, and a comprehensive literature review on the history of temporary labor in the United States and specifically within libraries and archives, helps to fill a glaring gap in professional literature. By investigating the development and usage trends of term positions within archival repositories, this research aspires to contribute to the career satisfaction and ethical employment of archivists. A more

nuanced understanding of term positions, coupled with actionable insights for advocating for permanent positions, has the potential to drive positive change in labor practices. This, ultimately, can foster a more professionalized archival labor force that values the intellectual and iterative work performed by archivists.

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## Appendix A: Exempt Research Information Sheet

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Exempt Research Study  
Information Sheet  
**Department of University Libraries**

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**Title of Study:** Creating ethical temporary positions in archives: best practices and case studies

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The purpose of this study is to determine reasons that archival institutions rely on temporary labor and identify the challenges leaders face when attempting to create permanent positions in order to create best practices and case studies for creating ethical temporary positions. You are being asked to participate in the study because you meet the following criteria: You are currently employed in a full time position, either non-managerial, managerial, or administrative, or you are retired from such a position, in any type of archives.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: Participate in an interview, via Zoom.

This study includes only minimal risks. The study will take 45 minutes to 1 hour of your time. You will not be compensated for your time.

For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted you may contact the **UNLV Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects**.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

**Participant Consent:**

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

Signed:



## Appendix B: Survey

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### Introduction

The employment of term-limited archivists, often called “project archivists,” is a common labor practice in libraries and archives. We invite participants to participate in an online survey, written in support of a CLIR publication on Best Practices and Case Studies for archival term positions, which aims to determine the main reasons that repositories hire project archivists.

The survey is intended for hiring managers, unit heads, directors, administrators, and anyone else making hiring decisions or engaged in strategic planning related to project archivists. It should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. **We ask that student employees, volunteers, and interns not participate.** For convenience, a PDF of the survey is attached to this email and available for viewing prior to beginning the survey.

There are minimal risks associated with the survey. Participants may refuse to participate or withdraw from the survey at any time. Participants will not be compensated for participating in this voluntary survey. There are no direct benefits to participants, but there is the potential for archivists and employers to contribute to discussions on the design of mutually beneficial short-term employment conditions.

At the end of the survey, individuals may self-select to be considered to participate in a follow up interview by sharing their name and contact information. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Volunteers for the follow up interview risk the loss of confidentiality by disclosing their personal information to the research team. This information will not be shared outside the research team.

By proceeding with this survey, you attest that you are over the age of 18.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

### **Investigators** (for questions about the project):

Sarah Quigley, Principal Investigator, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Sheridan Sayles, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

Camila Tessler, Yale University

Laura Starratt, Emory University

Kit Messick, Getty Research Institute

Courtney Dean, University of California, Los Angeles

Monika Lehman, Yale University

- By checking this box you acknowledge that you have read the above and consent to the terms of this survey.

## Survey Questions

*\*mandatory question*

1. Are you a student employee, intern, or volunteer? *\*mandatory question*

- Yes
- No

[If yes, survey ends.]

2. What best describes your institution? *Choose from the following list.*

- Academic
- College and University Archives
- Community archive
- Corporate/for-profit
- Government (federal, state, local/county/municipal)
- Manuscripts/Special Collections repository
- Museum
- Public library system
- Technology-based organization
- Nonprofit
- Historical society
- Religious organization
- Tribal government agency
- Tribal cultural heritage agency
- Other:

3. Who makes hiring decisions? *Choose from the following list.*

- Manager/supervisor
- Administration
- Board of directors
- Search committee
- Other:

4. Does your institution currently hire project archivists?

- Yes
- No

5. How many project archivists have you employed in the last 5 years?

6. How many of these were replacements for previous project positions?

7. How many times can a project position be renewed?

8. Do you see project positions as a way to increase the diversity of your staff?

- Yes
- No

9. How do you recruit project archivists? *Select all that apply.*

- Professional listservs (SAA, regional archival organizations)
- Professional job boards
- MLIS programs
- General job boards (LinkedIn, etc.)
- Other:

10. How many project archivists do you currently have on staff?

11. How many permanent archivists do you currently have on staff?

12. Why do you hire project archivists? *Select all that apply.*

- No internal funding for permanent archival work
- Deadlines/contingencies to process high-value collections
- Belief that archival work is inherently project-based
- No need for permanent archivists at my institution

- Need specialized skills current staff don't have
- Have a finite project that current staff don't have capacity for
- Other:

13. Do you require project archivists to hold an MLIS or other advanced degrees?

- Yes
- No

14. How many years of experience do you require project archivists to have?

- no experience required
- up to 1 year
- 1-2 years
- 2-3 years
- 3-5 years
- Over 5 years
- Other:

15. How many permanent, full-time staff actively collect and acquire material?

16. Is operational impact (e.g. storage costs, staff availability, salary costs, digitization costs, current backlog, etc.) a consideration when acquiring material?

- Sometimes
- Always
- Never

17. How does your institution fund archival processing work? *Select all that apply.*

- Institutional funding (permanent)
- Time-limited institutional funding

- State/federal funding
- Grant funding
- Donor-based funding
- Other soft funding
- Other:

18. Which of the following are reasons you apply for grants? *Select all that apply.*

- Pressure from Administration (Dean, Provost, University Librarian, Executive Director)
- Pressure from Development
- Pressure from faculty
- Prestige
- Need funding for projects that internal funding can't support
- Need more staff
- Other:

19. Do project archivists at your institution have these same resources as permanent staff? *Select all that apply.*

- Comparable salaries
- Benefits: retirement, health insurance, etc.
- Access to professional development funding and service opportunities
- Opportunities to contribute to the institution outside of processing work
- Onboarding and other HR trainings
- Access to technology and systems
- Work spaces such as offices
- Other:

20. What happens when a project archivist is unable to complete a project? *Select all that apply.*

- Project archivist term extended
- Permanent staff completes
- Another project archivist hired
- Gets added to backlog
- Other:

21. Have you attempted to advocate for permanent archival positions at your institution?

- Yes
- No

*If yes, explain here:*

22. What barriers have you faced when advocating for permanent archivists? *Select all that apply.*

- Misunderstanding of the impact or nature of archival work
- Institutional prioritization of collection development
- Lack of funding
- Belief that backlogs are inevitable
- Other:

23. Are project archivists required to take on additional department responsibilities?

- Yes
- No

24. What additional types of work do project archivists take on? *Select all that apply.*

- Reference
- Instruction

- Outreach
- Digitization
- Committee work
- Supervision (of permanent staff)
- Supervision (of project staff)
- Other:

25. Would you be interested in a follow up interview?

- Yes
- No

*If yes, please provide contact information and indicate your preferred method of being contacted:*

## Appendix C: Follow-up Email and Interview Questions

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### Follow up Email

SUBJECT LINE: Employment of Project Archivists – Case Study Interview and Follow-up

Please excuse cross-postings.

The employment of term-limited archivists, often called “project archivists,” is a common labor practice in libraries and archives. You have completed a survey, written in support of a CLIR publication on Best Practices and Case Studies of Archival term positions, to help determine the main reasons that repositories hire project archivists. In the survey, you have selected that you would be interested in an optional follow up interview. In this follow up interview, we are interested in looking a little deeper into the viewpoint of professionals who have created or been involved with the creation of permanent positions in a time where staffing solutions are usually solved with term labor. Anyone currently employed in full time positions, including non-managerial, managerial, and administrative positions, as well as anyone who has retired from such positions, in any type of archives can participate in the interview.

We are interested in the work you have done in creating a permanent position, your interest in this topic, your experience moving into a permanent role, or any reason you gave for further input into this topic. The interview will take between 45 minutes and one hour. If you still wish to participate in the interview and meet the above criteria, please respond to this email to coordinate a date and time with the interviewers.

Interview participant identities are known to the research team, however, no personal information that could identify participants will be kept with the interview responses. Any information revealed in this interview that might identify an individual or institution will be kept strictly confidential. Any information obtained will be aggregated into anonymous reports and summaries in our published work and any identifying information will be redacted or removed. The interview will be conducted over Zoom. Neither the video nor audio will be recorded during the interview. The interviewee can elect to keep their camera off. The interviewee will be asked to ensure that they are in a private space where they can speak freely.

There are minimal identified risks associated with this interview, and these risks are being mitigated by not collecting or retaining identifiable



information about the participants. Also, participants may refuse to participate or withdraw from the interview at any time. Participants will not be compensated for participating in this voluntary interview. There are no direct benefits to participants, but there is the potential for archivists and employers to contribute to discussions on the design of mutually beneficial short-term employment conditions.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

**Investigators** (for questions about the project):

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Camila Tessler, Yale University

Courtney Dean, University of California, Los Angeles

Laura Starratt, Emory University

Monika Lehman, Yale University

Kit Messick, Getty Research Institute

## Interview Questions

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- Position type (e.g. leadership/director, manager, supervisor):
- Organization type:
- Can you explain your background and how you came to hold the position you now have?
  - How many archival organizations have you worked in during your professional career?
    - Have you worked in non-archival history- or information-based organizations
- How does your (current) organization view the setting of goals v. staffing expectations
  - How do you set goals? (do you have aspirational goals v concrete goals?)
  - How do you gauge the success of individual staff? Of a team?
  - How do you approach budgets?
  - What are the largest portions of your budget?
  - How is material acquired at your institution?
  - Does your institution have a backlog?
    - Is the backlog a priority?
- Have you ever successfully created a new permanent processing position or converted a temporary position into a permanent position?
  - What was your justification to the library administration for needing the position?
  - What was the organizational environment like that made you feel confident to move forward (within your department and in the larger organization)? What was going on in your department/organization that made you think this was the right time?
  - What was your role at the time?
    - How long had you been in that role?

- How long had you known the position was needed?
  - What was your impetus to push for a new position?
- When did you actively start making moves to add new positions to your staff (after deciding the position was necessary)?
  - What were the factors that helped you move forward in proposing the position?
- Did you propose a temporary position or a permanent position?
  - Did you start with a permanent request and get permission for a temporary position?
- What were the biggest hurdles you anticipated before you started?
- What were the hurdles you faced when you were going through the process?
  - How would you advise someone else to avoid those?
- What were your considerations when creating the position (e.g. skill set, years of experience, etc.)?
  - For the organization? (what salary/rank expectations were there?)
  - For the staff in the position? (did you consider what benefits the staff in this position would receive?)
- Do you feel you were successful?
  - If not, why and what do you think could have made it successful?
  - If yes, are there suggestions or options you think could have made the process easier?
- What aspects of your processes did you consider most successful?
  - Would you recommend these to others?
  - Why/why not?
- In the future, would you hire position based on a project?
  - If you would, why would you consider that type of position for a project?
  - If not, why would you not hire based on a project position?

- Was the experience of supervising a person or creating a project position a positive experience?
  - If so, what made it a positive experience?
  - If not, what made it a negative experience?
- What are your key takeaways from creating a project position or supervising a person in that position?
- What advice would you give to someone considering creating a project position at their institution?

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## About the Authors

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**Sheridan Leigh Sayles** currently works as the Archivist at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City and has been in this role since June 2022. Before taking this position, she served as the Technical Services Archivist at Seton Hall University, the Assistant Archivist at Trinity Church on Wall Street, and the project Lautenberg Archivist at Rutgers University. She is active in both SAA and MARAC and has been a member of the Best Practices for Archival Term Positions Working Group since 2020.

**Laura Starratt** is the Head of Processing at the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University and has been a practicing archivist for fifteen years. She earned her master's, Information Science from the University of Tennessee, School of Information Sciences in 2009, and started her first job as an archivist at the Atlanta History Center in 2010. Laura started as a Manuscript Archivist at Emory in 2012, moving into the Senior Collections Archivist position before settling in as Head of Processing in 2022. She is an active member of the Society of Georgia Archivists, holding many leadership roles since 2010, as well as a member of the Society of American Archivists since 2009.

**Camila Zorrilla Tessler** is an archivist at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. She has a former life in the theater, where she acted, directed, stage managed, designed costumes and sound, and stood up for labor. She has a particular interest in increasing and uplifting Latine and Indigenous voices and experiences in special collections, archives, and community history and cultural heritage institutions.



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