

Still the “Accidental Archivist?”
Recruiting Professionals for the Twenty-First Century
By
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Throughout my career I have participated in numerous discussions with colleagues concerning how they came to the decision to join the archival profession. Their accounts are frequently amusing, always interesting, but unsettling when you stop to think about the fact that, at least in my own experience, most archivists were headed into careers ranging from insurance salesmen to lawyers, to public school social studies teachers and only stumbled into the archival profession by accident. To hear them tell it, many owe what they describe as a rewarding and challenging career choice to pure chance: a class assignment that forced them to use primary sources or a part time student job in their college’s archives. What would have happened to them otherwise?

I think we have become a profession heavily populated by “accidental archivists” for several reasons. The first of these relates to that old issue of our image, or lack thereof. Without going into this an any length, can we just agree that while children grow up wanting to be doctors, lawyers, nurses, baseball players, teachers, or musicians, becoming an archivist is not a goal to which young people aspire. We have almost no meaningful presence among the pre-college population and this means we get a late start in the race to attract qualified, quality people to join our ranks.

Second, I believe that one of the historical reasons for our lack of initiative and success in attracting more people to our profession is the fact that for many years graduate archival education programs were housed in graduate-level history departments or library schools in

which producing archivists was not considered to be a significant “cash crop.” Further, in both cases, archival education programs were sustained almost exclusively by adjunct instructors who had other full time jobs. After teaching a course or two on an overload basis, and then supervising fieldwork students, writing letters of recommendation, giving advice on letters of application and resumes, and perhaps working with a local Student SAA Chapter, we could not have reasonably expected the outcome to be otherwise. Although this approach had many drawbacks, I believe that the use of adjuncts had a positive side as well. It brought an immediacy and a “real-life” perspective to classes that was attractive to students and encouraged many to pursue careers in archives. This is changing now with an increased number of full time faculty in departments of history and in library schools and I believe we now have opportunities that we could not realistically have exploited a decade before or earlier.

Third, given that we have had no concerted, planned, or sustained effort to recruit new members to our ranks, it goes without saying that we have remained a profession that is almost 90% Caucasian. Given the changing demographics of the country, this represents a serious problem if we are to remain a credible presence during the coming century.

Initial findings from the NHPRC-funded “Archival Census & Education Needs Survey in the United States (**A*Census**) has revealed some interesting data from respondents concerning what led our current generation of professionals to begin working in their first archives-related job and whether working in an archives is their first career. The **A*Census** also has documented the continuing low percentage of minority representation among archivists and the gradual increase in the percentage of female archivists in the profession.

The purpose of my presentation will build on some of the information emerging from the **A*Census**, as well documentation from other sources in an effort to shed additional light on how

and why archivists first entered the profession. There is very little other information on recruiting archivists or on why archivists chose to enter the profession and although there is information from other professions, I decided not to use this information and attempt to extrapolate to our own profession.

Instead, I decided to conduct a totally unscientific survey of approximately fifty archivists whose only common characteristic is that I know all of them and I could be pretty sure that they would respond to a request on six questions as a favor to me. They range from former SAA Presidents, to beginning archivists who have been on the job for only a few years. They include archivists with backgrounds in academic institutions, government agencies, historical societies, religions organizations and businesses. The responses and ideas are intended to stimulate discussion in an effort to consider some more effective approaches to recruiting or encouraging people join in the work of the archival community.

1. **At what point did you actively become interested in entering the archival profession?**

I wanted to test the conventional wisdom that most people have come into the profession either accidentally or when they were pursuing other career options. I was not surprised that virtually of the respondents did not develop an interest in archives until they were undergraduates or graduate students. Only respondent one had any idea of becoming an archivist prior to entering college.

2. **What career options had you been considering prior to becoming interest in archives?**

I have long been interested in what other careers people had been aiming at when they “discovered” archives and whether we can use this information in recruiting or partnering in order to gain access to new groups of potential archivists. There were the usual

number of respondents who had thought about careers working in libraries or museums, but I was struck by the number who mentioned that they had ambitions to become teachers and this struck me as a possible area for further exploration.

3. What was the reason (or the reasons) that nudged you in this direction?

Although this question is asked with several options in the **A*Census**, with this question I was interested in learning what role mentors such as instructors or working archivists played in bringing new members into the profession, or what other circumstances might have played a role. It has been interesting to see how many respondents just thought the work looked “interesting” or as one put it, “I was getting paid to be a voyeur!”

4. Were you ever recruited in any way? (for example by an instructor, someone who was an archivist)

I was interested to learn whether any formal or informal recruiting of archivists was evident in the experience of working professionals, other than the encouragement that might have come from instructors or working archivists. Not surprisingly few spoke in terms of any formal recruiting efforts that prompted them to enroll in graduate school to become archivists. In fact, some noted that they were discouraged from doing this from history faculty.

5. Are you involved in any activities that involving recruiting people to become archivists? If so, in what way(s)?

With this question I was interested in learning how working archivists consider themselves (or not) to be involved in recruiting new members to the profession. I also was interested in how working archivists perceived their role in this effort in a time when there are an increasing number of full time archival educators working in graduate schools. Many of the respondents consider themselves actively involved in recruiting

through their work making presentations to classes or encouraging student employees to consider archives as a profession.

6. **What strategies do you think archival professionals (archival educators or practicing archivists) could use to recruit to attract new members to the profession (list up to four ideas)**

This is the question that I thought had the potential for the most interesting and I was not disappointed. It reinforced my belief that effective recruiting efforts need to be cooperative and include not only working archivists but also might effectively employ faculty from departments other than history and library science. Those who responded to my short survey had many different ideas about recruiting potential archivists. Most seem obvious when at first glance, but I was surprised that few have actually been employed on an ongoing basis. A number recommended making contact with younger students through career days or other activities aimed at high school aged students; offering archives-related course work to undergraduates; and taking better advantage of recruiting in conjunction with regional archival association meetings.

The results of the **A*Census** information and my informal survey have given me some new ideas and I look forward to sharing these with others who attend the “Choices and Challenges” Symposium.

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