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# On Volunteering: From the Instructor and the Archivist

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## **On Volunteering: From the Instructor and the Archivist**

*By Amy Cooper Cary, Marquette University*

I've had the good fortune to be involved with volunteers in the archives for many years, so I read "On Volunteering: A Personal Account" in the October 2013 issue of this newsletter with interest. I agree with the anonymous author of this piece on many points. Clearly, volunteer positions have both benefits and drawbacks. In a highly competitive job market, I will still argue that volunteer positions can give newly minted professionals an advantage in their job search. The ability to gain actual archival experience, the opportunity to garner a strong reference from a fellow professional, and the ability to learn archival practice beyond the classroom are all benefits that can't be had outside of the workplace. I also agree with the author and editors of the piece that it is important for new professionals to commit to a project, to fully participate in the experience, and to realize that the experience itself will be what you make of it. A volunteer is trading time and effort for experience and recognizes that monetary exchange is not at the crux of this relationship. As the author notes, it can be a "dicey situation."

This, however, is where the perspectives of instructor and archivist serve me well. While teaching at UW—Milwaukee's School of Information Studies, I arranged hundreds of volunteer opportunities for our students. Now, as head of Special Collections at Marquette, I work with student volunteers. These experiences allow me to see this relationship from a slightly different angle. I'm sure that many archival professionals share this perspective. Volunteering—and I include both students who are doing work for the purposes of course credit as well as students and new professionals who are honing skills—is a collaborative effort. To encourage mutual respect, the professional who welcomes a volunteer must accept a hefty responsibility. Volunteers must have specific tasks, a set schedule, and the opportunity to ask questions and explore areas that will enhance their professional development. If the only work available is a series of menial tasks, professionals need to be honest about that and be ready to accept that a volunteer may be looking for a different kind of experience. Both the volunteer and the professional should take the time to negotiate the tasks before making an agreement. And, as a volunteer is selecting a specific repository, the professional too should be selective about who to bring in. I'd disagree with the argument that a repository can or should "take whatever help they can

get." Volunteers should "fit," and a quick interview will determine if you can provide them with the experience they're looking for and whether they are willing and able to commit to and accomplish the work you have in mind. This step will save both parties frustration down the road.

I would argue that it is incumbent on professionals to provide our "up-and-comers" with meaningful work and realize that accepting volunteer help—especially from those who are in archival studies programs or have finished their degrees—entails a commitment to ongoing education. Volunteers are often trying to learn something. Anonymous noted that he/she "...found myself in the uncomfortable position of creating more work for the people I was trying to help..." In fact, professionals working with new archivists as volunteers must be prepared to answer questions and provide training as well as reap the benefits of "free work." Seasoned professionals should be ready to explain to new professionals not only *what* task they are doing, but *why* it is important and what kind of contribution they expect it to make to the overall function of the repository. While volunteers do have limited autonomy, professionals must accurately judge skill level, provide the opportunity for autonomy where it is appropriate, and give guidance where it is needed. The responsibility for accuracy of work and integrity of the project always lies with the professional. Credit for the work done is always given to the volunteer.

Professionals must always honor their volunteers' needs—a set schedule provides structure, but if the volunteer can't come in, that is entirely his or her decision. Volunteers decide their availability. Because of this, professionals must be prepared to have regular conversations with volunteers about project status, how their volunteer time is fitting into their schedule, when to expect delays in the project, and how outside factors (job search, school, family commitments) will impact their project status. I'm always prepared for a volunteer to make the decision to end his or her work. The best relationship is one that ends because the volunteer has succeeded in landing a job—not one where the volunteer leaves in frustration.

It's true that archivists hear the word "volunteers" and think of the arm-long list of projects that might possibly get done with their help. Our eyes sparkle at the thought

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## Lone Arranger Regional Contacts

Do you ever feel like you have no one to talk to who can relate to your situation as a lone arranger? Do you wish you had someone nearby with whom to discuss archival issues in a small shop? The Society of American Archivists Lone Arrangers Roundtable’s regional contact list is just the place to go to make a connection!

The archivists listed in this directory welcome the opportunity to touch base with other lone arrangers in their area. They can be a valuable source of information as well as a supportive ear as you work through a perplexing archival issue. To find a contact in your area, visit the SAA Lone Arrangers’ Roundtable page at [www2.archivists.org/groups/lone-arrangers-roundtable/lone-arrangers-roundtable-membership](http://www2.archivists.org/groups/lone-arrangers-roundtable/lone-arrangers-roundtable-membership).

Are you interested in becoming a contact for lone arrangers in your area? Some states and regional organizations are still without contacts. If you would like to volunteer your time and talents to assist other lone arrangers, please contact Ann Kenne at [amkennel@stthomas.edu](mailto:amkennel@stthomas.edu).

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of backlogs falling away. We can very easily set up high expectations—especially for trained volunteers—not recalling that this is a training ground and an opportunity to learn and practice skills before moving on. If it’s incumbent on volunteers to fully participate in the volunteer experience, it’s also incumbent on professionals to fully participate and accept the responsibility of providing volunteers with a good experience. This means recognizing the responsibilities and limitations that come with accepting volunteer work. I know that coaching and hosting volunteers have made me aware of the need for good experiences for our students, have benefited my repository, and, ultimately, have made me a better advocate for new professionals. It’s not too much to say that when both volunteers and professionals work together, the benefits of a strong and collaborative volunteer program send ripples through the profession.

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