Archival Job-Hunting Advice for Students: Tips from the Field of the Resume Wars

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Midwest Archives Conference

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June 12, 2010, was one of the happiest days of my life, as I realized a lifelong dream: the completion of my M.A. in public history from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. Yet it was also one of the scariest days of my life, as I thought, “Now what?” Job hunting in one of the worst recessions in U.S. history is certainly daunting for me, and I am sure it must also be intimidating to many students reading this column.

While I would love to offer you the assurance that you will get a job right out of the gate, a number of my fellow public history students and I have struggled to find a job in this economy. Experience is the key. For recent graduates needing to get health insurance, to pay for car repairs, or begin repayment of those student loans that creep in six months after graduation, lack of experience can be a curse. Of course, for any profession experience is necessary; for young archival students, however, positions providing the experience necessary to then get full- or part-time employment as an archivist can seem few and far-between.

I would like to give archival students some pointers, based upon what I have learned, on their preparation for the job market—tips learned from many failures and a few near-successes.

First, do anything and everything you can to become knowledgeable in multiple archival specializations or areas of historical study. The three biggest archival specialties right now are metadata and digital archives, audiovisual records, and electronic records management. For historical subjects, African-American history, ethnic history, and modern American history are at the fore. Specialization gives applicants a niche that few are able to fill, offering a better chance at a job. It is still advisable to seek out a variety of experiences, but specialization will aid you in rising above the rest in a pile of resumes.

Second, do not discount positions that are connected to archival work, or that can add skills which you can use as a full-time archivist. Counties need records and digitization clerks, and the medical profession is always looking for medical records assistants. Be creative, and look for ways to gain management experience, audiovisual editing skills, experience with collections management software programs, and social networking proficiency as related to an organization’s outreach efforts.

Third, realize that there are a number of people who are applying for the same job as you are, and that number gets larger with every graduating class of archival students. You should always assume that there are going to be at least one or two people applying who are more qualified, and you must find the means through your experiences to make your application stand out. Even though I have not yet gotten a job, I have often been told I was on the short list of applicants. I am hopeful that with more experience, a job will present itself. Do not rest all your hopes on one job application, or expect that a job will come to you, or give up an opportunity for a seemingly better option—volunteer locally, take paid internships, or write articles for publication. This past summer, I took a paid internship with the Kentucky Historical Society that required research in archives throughout the state; previously, I had done four internships at archives and historical societies. Last year, I turned down a good opportunity for another position I was promised, only for the latter position to fail through because the anticipated grant funding never materialized. These are the types of situations you and potential employers can expect to face in this economy.

Fourth, do everything you can to stay relevant in the field. I have started a syndicated blog for young archivists; am on an archival association committee; am now an assistant editor for the MAC Newsletter; and I continue to work on publishing my own personal historical research. Through these experiences, I am not only staying relevant, but I am also making connections and networking so that the next time I apply for a position, perhaps the person reading my resume will recognize my name and my work, and my application will go to the top of the pile. Another way to stay relevant is to apply for and take the Academy of Certified Archivists Exam, which may give you a leg-up on your fellow applicants. Remember the annual application deadline is May 15, so get the application in early.
Fifth, always have a backup plan. The summer I graduated from Wright State, I applied to both a Ph.D. program and another graduate program for a more detailed study of digital archival preservation. I was accepted for the master’s program, which is mostly on-line, leaving me the flexibility to get a job anywhere in the U.S. I am also delaying my student loan repayment, which allows me to stay afloat on part-time jobs and dedicate more time to additional archival experiences. If you do not jump at the opportunities which are afforded you, someone else will take them—and potentially your future job, as well!

You may be in a library science program and say, “I love books.” You may be in a history program concentrating on archives and say, “I love history.” While these are great sentiments, you have to remember that this job market requires us to be not only passionate but competitive. Ultimately, you need to balance the enthusiasm you have for the field against the costs associated with finding a job. If you truly love this profession and can make others see that you have a knack for the work, you will find a job to match your interests. Best of luck!

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**Recent Archives Conference at Indiana University**

*By Danielle Emerling,*

*President, SAA Student Chapter, Indiana University–Bloomington School of Library and Information Science*

For three years, Indiana University’s SAA Student Chapter (SC) has hosted a conference for graduate students and beginning professionals in library science, archives, and rare books. Through this event, the SAA-SC seeks to give new professionals and professionals-in-training the opportunity to showcase their research, gain valuable presentation experience, and connect with their peers.

The 2011 conference, “Preserving Our Cultural Heritage,” drew 55 attendees from 12 different institutions around the country. Fifteen presenters shared their insights on a range of archival issues and presentation topics, including digital preservation in the Jim Henson Company’s Archives, case studies of both audio and film preservation, and an assessment of open source electronic recordkeeping. In addition, attendees had the opportunity to tour six Indiana University (IU) repositories and participate in workshops on handling archival materials and paper conservation.

The IU SAA-SC is planning its fourth conference to be held in March 2012 and looks forward to providing more tours, workshops, and opportunities for up-and-coming professionals to develop their skills. Students and new professionals who are interested in presenting their work or attending the conference should visit the organization’s Web site at http://www.indiana.edu/~saarchiv/index.html or contact saa.iub@gmail.com for more information.

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**Lora J. Davis Receives Theodore Calvin Pease Award**

*By Amy Cooper Cary,*

*Director, Archival Studies Program, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee School of Information Studies*

Lora J. Davis, a student at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (UWM) School of Information Studies, received the Society of American Archivists’ (SAA) Theodore Calvin Pease Award during a ceremony at SAA’s 75th Annual Meeting in Chicago. The award recognizes superior writing achievements by students of archival studies. Amy Cooper Cary, director of the Archival Studies Program at UWM, nominated Davis’ paper, “Providing Virtual Services to All: A Mixed-Method Analysis of the Web Site Accessibility of Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCL) Member Repositories.” The paper explores whether PACSCL repositories’ Web sites meet the needs of archives users with disabilities. Accessibility for disabled users is relevant to all repositories making their holdings available on-line, and this paper provides a model for repositories to follow.