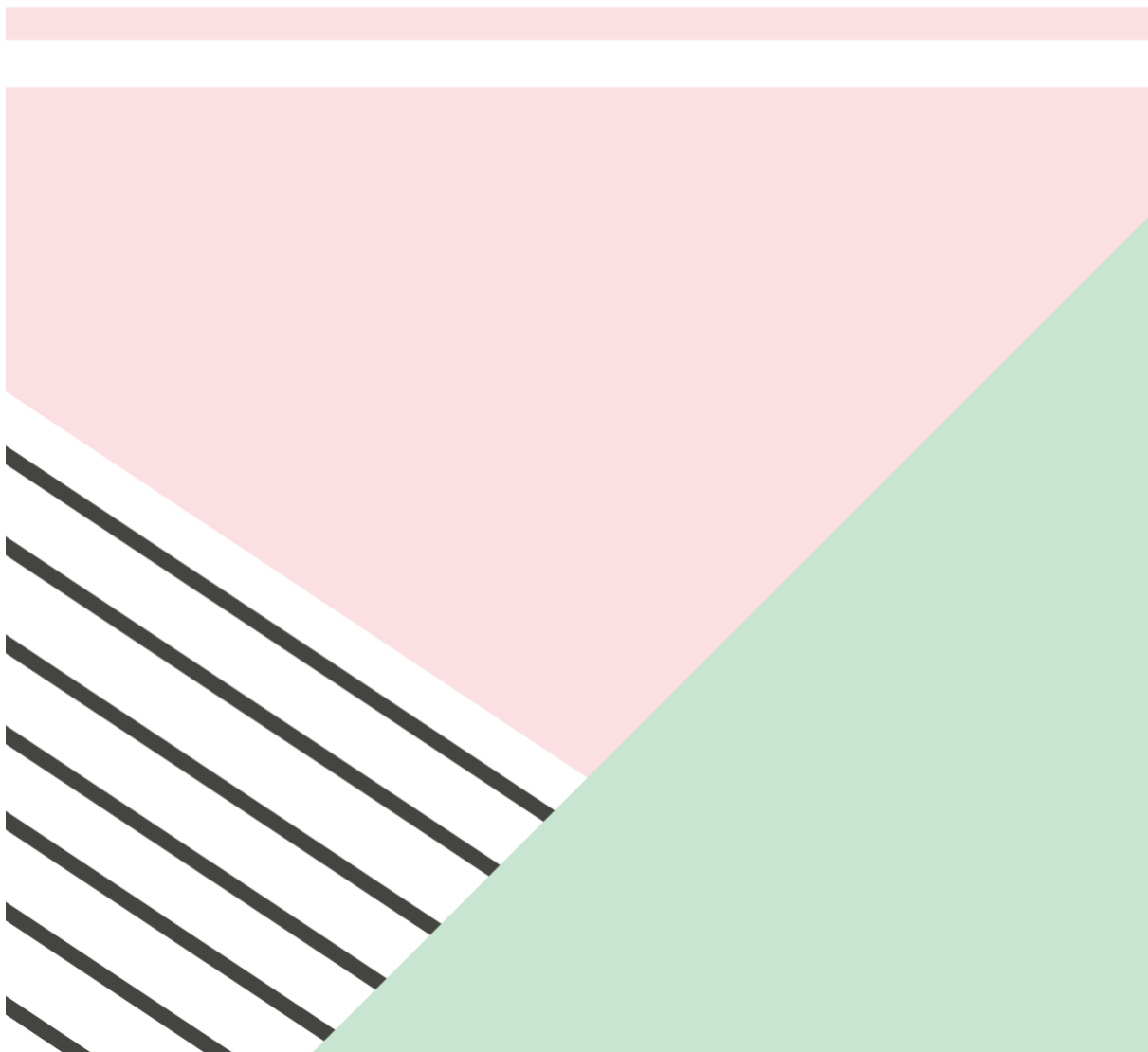


LABOR AND WORKFORCE SUSTAINABILITY IN LIBRARIES, ARCHIVES, AND MUSEUMS

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INTRODUCTION

Precarious labor - also often referred to as contingent, temporary, grant-funded, or contract labor - in libraries, archives, and museums (LAM) has been an ongoing issue over the past several decades and has only grown in scope and severity. As full-time jobs are eliminated or made out of reach for all but the most highly qualified and experienced (and often privileged), memory and knowledge institutions like libraries (both public and academic), archives, and museums have filled the void with contract positions. These temporary positions vary in length, but many are grant-funded and thus subject to a finite budget source. Contingent positions such as these also frequently do not provide benefits like healthcare or pension plans or allow for workers in those positions to be represented by the union to which their full-time colleagues may belong. Contingent labor issues are by no means limited to the LAM fields - the rise of the gig economy is proof of that - but precarious labor in LAM has some unique contributing factors and effects.

THE PROBLEM

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Wendy Brown's work examining the rise of "governance" under neoliberalism and how it has undermined and replaced collective action and explicit power structures by using things like "best practices" and "streamlining" to obscure and devolve authority and responsibility is essential for understanding how and why LAM has become rife with temporary workers. She ties together neoliberalism's use of governance to transform all aspects of life into economic

frameworks with the “depoliticizing” and weakening of worker power and solidarity. This hyperfocus on individualizing and isolating responsibility has played a large role in encouraging and sustaining contingent and precarious labor practices. Of particular relevance is Brown’s analysis of “shared sacrifice” under neoliberalism, where citizen-workers are not only encouraged but expected to shoulder the burden of economic difficulties - be it through unemployment, precarious labor, lower wages, etc. - that are actually occurring at the institutional or societal level.¹

Closely tied to Brown’s scholarship is that of Karen Nicholson. Nicholson’s analysis takes Brian Quinn’s concept of the “McDonaldization” of academic libraries and dives deeper into how trends towards privatization, customization, and “flexible” workforces have transformed management of libraries and library workers. Nicholson ties this “shift from a ‘bureaucratic-professional’ model of accountability toward a ‘consumer-managerial’ model” to the commodification of information and library practices and the suffusion of neoliberal values and frameworks in the library and information professions and institutions. For example, the “core values” promoted by professional organizational programs and initiatives like the ALA’s *Emerging Leaders* program and ACRL’s *Value of Academic Libraries* initiative both buy into and promote business strategies and innovation that neither suit LAM institutions nor effectively address the troubles (e.g. budgets, an underpaid and overworked workforce, etc.) that plague them.²

¹ Brown, Wendy. “Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics.” *Constellations* 23, no. 1 (2016): 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12166>.

² Nicholson, Karen P. “The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries and the Values of Transformational Change.” *College & Research Libraries* 73, no. 3 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.76.3.328>.

The supposed panacea of “innovation” has made its way from the corporate world to the LAM world with little to no pushback at the institutional level. LAM institutions’ adoption of a false “innovate or die” binary in response to budgetary crises and other external pressures has resulted in an undermining of their professional workforces. The fetishization of innovation and new technologies has led to problems such as so-called “entry level” positions involving technology that are in fact highly skilled labor; an assumption that new professionals will somehow already have these skills by virtue of their youth excludes those seeking entry into the field who don’t yet have those skills - but who could learn easily on the job - or under-compensates those who do have the skills already.³ Another persistent and long-standing erroneous assumption undermining information professionals as a sustainable labor force is that unpaid internships and other un- or under-compensated positions are a necessary step to entering the LAM workforce.

Pushback against unpaid internships has gained strength in recent years, and scholarship on the exploitative practice is emerging. Karly Wildenhaus’s analysis of the issue and recommendations for addressing it are a much-needed contribution to the field. It connects unpaid internships and other un- or undercompensated positions to lack of diversity in libraries and archives and the growing trend in precarious labor; it also situates these positions “within larger questions of economic access, labor laws, indebtedness, and neoliberalization.” Although the piece does not explicitly name the sustainability of a professional workforce as something at stake, Wildenhaus makes very clear the negative

3 Rodriguez, Sandy, Ruth Tillman, Amy Wickner, Stacie Williams, and Emily Drabinski. “Collective Responsibility: Seeking Equity for Contingent Labor in Libraries, Archives, and Museums.” White Paper. University of Missouri – Kansas City, 2019. <https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/handle/10355/69708>.

impacts that unpaid labor has across the LAM fields. Wildenhaus examines how unpaid internships are far from guaranteed to lead to paying work - contrary to the common assumption of many people working in LAM - and also provides a number of concrete actions that workers, employers, and MLIS programs can take to combat unpaid internships and their wide-reaching negative impacts.⁴

THE STATE OF THE PROFESSIONAL WORKFORCE TODAY

Recent research by the Collective Responsibility project - a grant-funded undertaking that aims to “address the specific problems of precarity” created and reproduced by contingent positions in LAM and “how those positions impact the lives and career of workers, particularly workers from marginalized and underrepresented populations” - has shown that while many institutions promote temporary positions as an entry to full-time work, these contingent jobs in fact simply lead to more contract work; in a survey of 100 current and former grant-funded digital LAM workers, 66% who were rehired to the same institution were rehired into temporary or contingent positions.⁵ The attitude often found in LAM institutions, particularly among workers who have been employed longer and in less precarious roles, is that taking temporary and/or underpaying positions is an effective way to “get a foot in the door” in the field and that better and more stable positions will follow as a result. Ongoing analysis and research has indicated that this is far from true.

Results from the Collective Responsibility project’s survey indicate several major themes among contingent workers in LAM, including a lack of professional and personal support and

4 Wildenhaus, Karly. “Wages for Intern Work: Denormalizing Unpaid Positions in Archives and Libraries.” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no. 1 (November 25, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v2i1.88>.

5 Rodriguez, Tillman, Wickner, Williams, and Drabinski, 2019.

advancement in the field and the precarity of contingent labor forcing workers to be highly and often problematically dependent on their direct supervisors for support at work. As the project continues, it aims to articulate and evaluate these issues in order to allow for collective leverage and bargaining among contingent workers.⁶

An increasing problem related to precarious labor is burnout as a result of mental and emotional distress. Burnout among LAM workers - particularly workers from marginalized and minoritized communities and identities, and especially those in contingent positions - is becoming increasingly common. There isn't much comprehensive research on this subject yet, but it's become a growing point of discussion in LAM scholarship. Fobazi Ettarh's writing critically engages with the longstanding idea of "vocational awe" in librarianship - a conviction that one's work saves, educates and ennobles not only the saved or educated but also the worker. Treating LAM work as a vocation requiring sacrifice is common in those fields (as it often is with teaching as well), and Ettarh's analysis provides another dimension to the "sacrificial citizenship" that Wendy Brown examines. Ettarh delves into the mythos surrounding much of librarian work, how that mythos is in dialogue with and supported by institutional and structural oppression in LAM, and how the interaction between them leads to so much burnout among non-White and other minoritized LAM workers. Her discussion of under-compensation and job creep is particularly pertinent to short-term and precarious positions.⁷

Precarious labor has become a self-perpetuating cycle in many institutions, and solutions must be found to disrupt, break, and even reverse this trend. We must interrogate

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ettarh, Fobazi. "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves." *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (2018). <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe>.

why this mistaken belief that temporary work will logically and eventually lead to a full-time, stable position still persists and what an alternate vision for more equitable, stable and just “early career” and other full-time positions would be.⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS

FURTHER RESEARCH

So much of the scholarship in LAM regarding precarious labor is from the past few decades, and is either lacking concrete data or relies upon outdated data. More research with solid and robust data on the professional LAM workforce is needed - research and data about the number of workers in temporary positions, about the availability of and compensation for these positions as well as “entry-level” positions, about the rates of burnout amongst LAM workers (particularly among marginalized or minoritized community members), about unpaid internships, and more.

Some attempts are already being made to collect and analyze this data; the Collective Responsibility project is one, and an impromptu salary survey conducted via a Google spreadsheet distributed among Society of American Archivists members is another example. SAA and other professional organizations can perform more regularly censuses of their members - SAA’s census is 15 years old at this point - to assist in collecting data for research and analysis.⁹ MLIS programs are also in a position to aid in this task; documenting the numbers

⁸ Berry, Dorothy. “Developing Imagination.” *Collective Responsibility*, June 24, 2019. <https://laborforum.diglib.org/2019/06/24/developing-imagination/>.

⁹ ArchivesAware. “Responses & Retrospectives: Rachael Woody’s Annual Conference Coverage on the Value of Archival Labor Sessions,” September 6, 2019. <https://archivesaware.archivists.org/2019/09/06/responses-retrospectives-rachael-woodys-annual-conference-coverage-on-the-value-of-archival-labor-sessions/>.

of students working unpaid (as well as paid) internships, and potentially even job placement post-graduation, can provide a useful data pool for researchers.

CONCRETE ACTIONS FOR WORKERS AND EMPLOYERS

One of the most positive and effective trends in the LAM workforce at the moment is the strengthening of and push for organized labor. At UCLA, the local UC-AFT librarian bargaining unit has filed a grievance on behalf of six temporary archivists - known as the UCLA Six - in an attempt to curtail the misuse of contract positions within the library. At MOCA in Los Angeles, over 100 workers recently voted to unionize with AFSCME and have successfully had their union recognized by management.¹⁰ The MOCA union drive is occurring at the same time as many other LAM institutions (especially art museums, which frequently lack the preexisting unions of many libraries) are forming or revitalizing their unions and labor activism. Building solidarity among workers not just institutionally but across the LAM fields - as well as related fields such as teaching - can only serve to improve conditions for the workforce; temporary labor not only negatively impacts the workers in those positions as discussed above, but undermines the bargaining power and professionalism of the full-time workers.

At the institutional level, employers need to look seriously at their labor practices. Using temporary labor to perform permanent work - as is the case with the UCLA archivists - is unsustainable for both workers and their employers and, in the long term, will lead to things like loss of institutional memory, workers unable to advance their careers, and higher costs in recruitment and hiring processes as a result of high turnover rates. If the only jobs available to

¹⁰ Miranda, Carolina A. "MOCA Will Voluntarily Recognize New Employee Union; Marciano Closure Is Permanent." Los Angeles Times, December 7, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2019-12-06/moca-recognizes-employee-union-afscme-marciano-closure-permanent>.

new LAM professionals are temporary and/or under-compensated, institutions will slowly but surely find themselves struggling to fill later-career positions as older professionals retire and take their experience and institutional knowledge with them.

LAM institutions, professional organization, and MLIS programs should also actively push back against unpaid labor, most often in the form of internships. MLIS students and other new LAM workers can fight against this trend as well by refusing to take on unpaid work, but rapid change will only occur if institutions discontinue the exploitative practice. Devaluing the work that LAM professionals do undermines the workforce as a whole as well as institutions themselves. Fairly compensated and permanently employed workers are valuable assets to LAM institutions economically as well as for their knowledge and soft skills. Professional organizations and MLIS programs also have a vested interest in promoting and upholding the value of LAM labor; as such, they should be fierce advocates and allies for workers in the quest for ethical and sustainable labor practices.

CONCLUSION

Scholarship and research have a ways to go to fully capture the scope and ramifications of the explosion of precarious labor in LAM institutions. The impacts of neoliberalism at the institutional level, particularly in academia, has been devastating for LAM workers, especially those just entering the field. “Innovation” will not solve the problem of precarity or under-compensation; instead, LAM workers must organize, build solidarity, and advocate for themselves from a place of strength. Institutions must rethink not only their reactionary tendencies towards austerity and budget issues, but also how their hiring practices and treatment of their workforce can undermine their missions, values, and reputations. The

systematic devaluation of LAM labor is not new, but a critical dialogue surrounding it is gaining strength.

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