

# SCA Labor Issues Task Force Final Report

*Submitted to the SCA Board July 9, 2021*

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## Introduction

### Charge

The Society of California Archivists Labor Issues Task Force was charged by outgoing president Teresa Mora in the summer of 2019. The official charge was as follows:

- A. This special committee is tasked with reviewing labor issues within the archival profession. Specifically the Board is interested in gathering information on how labor issues might result in barriers to entry into the profession, opportunities for professional growth, and retention, and for the Task Force to suggest ways SCA can better advocate for its membership in this regard. The Task Force will be convened for a **two-year period** in which time it will produce the following deliverables:
- One member of the Task Force will serve as a formal liaison to work with other similar professional groups (for instance SAA's Issues & Advocacy Section and DLF's Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries) to share updates and magnify/combine efforts of all groups towards common goals.
  - Develop and distribute a survey of the SCA membership to determine the nature and scope of current labor issues among archives workers in the region (to be completed and analyzed by the **Fall Board Meeting**).
  - Develop recommendations for guidelines and best practices for labor in archives.
  - In its **first year** of work the Task Force will organize and facilitate opportunities for open discussions of the issue amongst the community.
  - As part of a **final report** the Task Force will make recommendations as to how best SCA can provide ongoing forums for discussion amongst the community.
  - As part of the **final report** the Task Force will make recommendations for guidelines and best practices for labor in archives.
  - Consider the need for a new committee for labor, advocacy, and similar issues of interest to archives workers and as part of a **final report** make recommendation to the Board.

## Task Force Membership

Led by co-chairs Courtney Dean (UCLA) and George Thompson (CSU Chico) the membership consisted of Richard Boyden, NARA, Archivist; Chris Doan, Archives of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, Archivist; Erin Hurley, UCSF, User Services and Accessioning Archivist; Anne Mar, Occidental College, Asst. College Archivist and Metadata Specialist; Peggy Tran-Le, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Archivist and Records Manager; and Sue Tyson, California History Room, California State Library. A concerted effort was made by the co-chairs to select individuals which represented a variety of institutions.

## Liaisons

Several Task Force members were concurrently involved in other labor advocacy efforts across the profession. Courtney Dean served as the group's liaison to the Society of American Archivists (SAA) Issues and Advocacy section and ad hoc working groups on salary transparency and ethical term positions. Erin Hurley served as the group's liaison to the Digital Library Federation (DLF) Labor Working Group and as part of the IMLS-funded Collective Responsibility Project.

# Summary of work

## Survey

In order to gather information concerning working conditions, compensation, the nature of archival positions, and other issues, the Task Force developed a survey; open from December 2019 through February 2020, it received 197 responses.

The survey featured 45 questions concerning institutional characteristics, unions, job satisfaction, temporary positions, salaries, safety issues, demographics, and the role of professional organizations.

The survey was made open to non-SCA members and archivists who previously worked in California, and was relaunched in January, 2020 in an attempt to solicit a wider response. Efforts were made to distribute the survey as widely as possible to different archivist professional networks including local, academic, community, and religious, among others.

The survey respondents reflected a demographic that was weighted towards academia, and with nearly 80% identified as being white. The Task Force acknowledges that this representation means that the responses support a specific kind of context and is also revealing of which groups were left out, eg. the unemployed and BIPOC archival workers.

The survey responses also provided insight into how California archivists viewed SCA's role in helping to address the issues (over 60% of the respondents were SCA members). A free text question asking what kinds of labor-related advocacy/workshops/toolkits could SCA offer yielded responses weighted toward receiving information on unions and management training in advocacy work. Additionally, nearly 70% of respondents had generally positive feelings about SAA not promoting unpaid internships.

Specific suggestions that were provided in the survey's open-ended question (Q42) are included in the Recommendations section of this report.

## First Friday Presentation

In September, 2020, Task Force members Courtney Dean, Erin Hurley and George Thompson presented the results at the SCA First Friday meeting, which was followed by discussion breakout rooms to facilitate discussion and a shared document for attendees to contribute to.

The meeting was the Task Force's first opportunity to hear feedback from our community about their views of the survey. Especially noteworthy is that the sharing took place six months into the pandemic, which provided the discussion with additional perspectives on labor precarity in archives and workplace wellness concerns. Some of these include institution-imposed furloughs

and layoffs, a reduction in or freezing of retirement benefits, and the elimination of student positions.

## White paper/summary of findings

A White Paper was produced to include background information about the survey and a summary of the key findings.

In summary, respondents noted a need for more attention to diversity in recruitment, hiring, and retention; disparities in treatment and job stability between librarian and archival positions; and a lack of understanding of and/or respect for archival work among administrators, many of whom, it was noted, seemed to see student workers as acceptable replacements for trained archivists.

A complete summary of the survey's findings is provided in a separate section of this report.

The White Paper was distributed to participants at SCA's First Friday discussion, referenced in the SCA newsletter Winter 2021 edition, and used in the SCA AGM Brown Bag session.

## Article in SCA Newsletter

Article written in the Winter 2021 edition of the SCA newsletter highlighting some of the White Paper's findings; and with an embedded link to the survey responses (excluding free text).

## SCA AGM Brown Bag

The Task Force hosted a Brown Bag session at the SCA AGM in April, 2021, over a year after the survey was completed, and more than six months after our initial feedback session on its results. The Brown Bag session was an opportunity to raise the question of how we might reach those individuals who are currently experiencing the issues and challenges mentioned in the survey. Seven breakout groups were formed, and below is the list of guiding questions with a selection of the responses that were recorded:

*What should SCA focus on in terms of labor advocacy?*

- Workplace safety, and disability rights.
- Elimination of term positions and transparency in salary information.
- How to advocate for oneself.

*How do we recruit and retain BIPOC archival workers in our institutions and in the profession?*

- In addition to offering scholarships, the most recommended idea was to actively conduct outreach, recruitment, and mentoring opportunities for students from all educational levels and different backgrounds.

*What issues may have become more pressing over the last year?*

- Workplace safety and labor precarity.

*Do you think you are more likely to try to organize now, or less?*

- A limited number of responses were recorded for this question however, they are in alignment with the ones received in the survey meaning, some individuals stated they are already organized; others work for institutions that prohibit unionizing; and those who want to advocate for fair and responsible labor practices are interested in learning how that is achieved through unionizing or by other means.

## Summary of Findings

In 2019, as part of its mission to advocate for SCA's members, the Society of California Archivists Board convened the SCA Labor Issues Task Force to review labor issues within the archival profession. In order to gather information concerning working conditions, compensation, the nature of archival positions, and other issues, the Task Force developed a survey featuring 45 questions, many providing the opportunity for free-text commentary in addition to pre-formulated choices. Questions concerned institutional characteristics; union membership and perceptions about unions; job satisfaction and factors influencing perceptions about employment; the extent and impact of project, contract, temporary, and unpaid positions; salaries; benefits; safety issues; demographic information; and more.

The survey was open December 2019 through February 2020 and received 197 responses. The complete survey results are available [here](#).

## Key Finding

According to our findings from the survey, archivists consider the biggest challenges to fair and ethical archival labor to be the prevalence of temporary and term employment (83%); inadequate pay (81%); and a lack of diversity (54%) in the profession, followed closely by the prevalence of unpaid internships and lack of promotion potential. Respondents noted a need for more attention to diversity in recruitment, hiring, and retention; disparities in treatment and job stability between librarian and archival positions; and a lack of understanding of and/or respect for archival work among administrators, many of whom, it was noted, seemed to see student workers as acceptable replacements for trained archivists.

## Additional Key Findings

The survey also yielded key findings regarding employment, person well-being, workplace safety, and perspectives on unionizing. Specifically, results showed that:

*Regarding employment:*

- Though a majority of respondents (about 63%) held permanent positions at the time of the survey, nearly 78% had held project, contract, or temporary positions in the past. Of 144 responses, the average number of project positions was 2.7, with one having held seven. Just over 28% had held one position; 21.5% two; and 24% three.
- Most respondents consider themselves to be inadequately compensated for their work, and many (just over 16%) said that they relied on an additional source of income, such as from a spouse or second job.
- Most respondents see no potential for growth in their current positions. Said one, “As a temporary employee, I think the best case for me is to be renewed,” a view often echoed in the comments. Said another, “There is no promotion path. The salary is what it is. For ever. Having great performance evaluation[s] every year does not translate to compensation ...”
- Many respondents described what one described as a “general devaluation of library and especially archival and special collections labor,” such that they “constantly [hear] that the institution at which [they] work needs to ‘add value’ to the archives.”
- In their temporary positions, archivists have performed a wide range of professional duties, including research; writing, including academic writing; exhibit building and website creation; digital curation and preservation needs assessments; rare book cataloging; vendor relationship management; curriculum and project development; and training other staff.
- Just over 47% said that a transition to permanent status was not possible, while just under 20% said that it was. Said one, “The best, or clearest, situation I was ever in was when I was clearly told, ‘a permanent job is not going to happen,’ and the worst when a permanent position was “dangled in front of me like a carrot in order to manipulate me into completing the project to an unreasonably high standard ... “

*Regarding personal well-being:*

- A significant number of respondents sometimes or regularly consider leaving the profession, and several expressed satisfaction at having left the field in order to work as librarians or in the tech industry.
- A significant number of respondents suffer from low morale, burnout, and a sense that their work is undervalued; many also indicated experience of workplace hostility along with mental and physical health issues due to their working conditions. Said one, noting that they had suffered from all of these as an archivist, “it was brutal,” a situation alleviated only by a career switch to librarian, where they “feel none of these”; another described an “ever present anxiety over the temporary nature of the job,” adding that it was difficult to plan for the future given employment that needed to be renewed each year.
- While 70% reported that they had not experienced safety issues in the workplace, the 30% who had described a range of hazards and harm, including repetitive motion injuries, poor ventilation and the presence of chemicals and mold, unstable ladders, lack of emergency plans, dangers from lifting heavy boxes and, in some cases, potential threats from patrons.

*Regarding unionizing:*

- While only 39% of archivists responding are in unionized positions, a majority of those not in a union either are either interested in becoming unionized (31.4%) or have a need for more information about unions (36.36%).
- Barriers to unionizing described by respondents included high number of “small shop” and “lone arranger” employment or wide dispersion of workers with heterogenous roles across institutions.
- Some respondents stated that unions did not seem to understand the jobs and needs of archivists and librarians, and thus were inadequately prepared to effectively advocate for them.

*Regarding support that SCA can provide:*

Respondents provided a wide range of suggestions to this open-ended survey question (Question 42). Among these were the following:

- Advocacy for more diverse recruitment and emphasis on living wages.
- Advocacy workshops and toolkits for archivists in order to increase understanding of their value to institutions
- Workshops and toolkits for managers to become better advocates for those they supervise
- Workshops on unionizing and the importance of unions
- Understanding one’s rights in California labor codes and laws, including AB5
- Cultural competency
- Basic workplace safety and ergonomics
- Creation of a network of contacts for job-related advice and mentoring

Many respondents stated that they would like to see the SCA support efforts to decrease the reliance on temporary labor in the archival profession. Comments included the following:

- “Please advocate for abolishing the trend of temporary and contract work. It has so many negative consequences - it keeps salaries in the field low, prevents people from receiving benefits, devalues the work we do, requires moving frequently (which interferes with raising a family), and is a huge barrier to entry for anyone that doesn't have a second income to rely on (which means that those at a socioeconomic disadvantage are not welcome, leading to a lack of diversity in the field). Not to mention it leads to a product that may be unfinished or rushed, which further reflects poorly on us. Almost all other issues facing archivists seem to stem from this one issue.”
- “Either push to eliminate project-based work or develop a union hiring hall structure for project archivists so they can have benefits and more secure transition from project to project. It would be helpful if SCA provided workshops on unions and what being part of an organized workplace means in terms of benefits, pay, and protection and how to organize your workplace.”
- “It would be better for professional organizations to not promote the type of predatory, temporary jobs that this profession is saturated in. There's too many six-one year positions that offer no benefits or unpaid internships. I understand the need for project

archivists but too often these are filled by graduates w[ith] few other options to gain ‘experience.’ The SCA needs to condemn these kinds of practices or little will change.”

- “Creation of a network of contacts for job related advice and mentoring; a community of practice throughout the state; creation of an archivist in residence program for new graduates; toolkit for diversity hiring and recruitment; education about unions and unionizing / exploration of an archivists union. Advocacy: changing the national culture of institutional reliance on soft money and grant funded projects; abolishing the idea of project archivists that are temporary; reexamining/rejecting the culture of metrics-based assessment fostered by granting agencies and used to determine project funding and terms.”

Respondents also sought more discussion of the impact of student loan debt on archivists; ways for archivists to find entry into related fields; and ways to join forces with other professional organizations addressing similar labor issues, such as the Digital Library Federation and the Association of Moving Image Archivists. Many saw the work of the Labor Task Force as an important move towards beginning a necessary conversation.

The Task Force views these and the rest of the survey’s results not only as catalysts for advocacy, but also as spurs to further discussion. Such continued attention is especially urgent given the increased precarity many have experienced or may yet experience in light of the pandemic, which has likely given rise to different or new labor-related concerns.

## Recommendations

### Fair Labor Principles

The Task Force recommends the adoption of Fair Labor Principles, which may include the following:

- Imagine that it’s your job as an employer/manager/colleague to take care of your employees. This could look like: full benefits, adequate time off, mental health days, professional development funding, etc. Make sure that contingent workers receive the same benefits and opportunities as permanent workers.
- Encourage institutions to consider the [costs of sustainable stewardship](#) in areas such as collecting, staffing, digitization, and digital preservation. Strive for sustainability and consider it when planning projects, temporary or otherwise.
- If it is *absolutely necessary* to create a contract position, try to create a 2 year position. One year positions should be avoided and positions lasting less than one year are strongly discouraged.
- If it is *absolutely necessary* to create a temporary position, carefully consider what you are asking the worker to do. Emotionally demanding work, such as reparative description projects, processing sensitive collections, or even projects involving unusually difficult or demanding donors, to quote Jessica Tai, “should not fall upon students, temporary or

project archivists, or people of color, and...it is imperative to disrupt the structures and systems that continually drive this unequal distribution of labor” (Tai, “Cultural Humility...” p 17).

- The power structures that we work within have taught us to consider and value the opinions and experiences of leadership, managers, and administrators more than those of contingent workers, students, and volunteers. Repeatedly reflecting on and disrupting these power differentials is the only way out of this dynamic.
- Be aware that workers with more positional and relational power within these hierarchies are in a better position to advocate for contingent workers. As long as contingent workers have a reason to fear retaliation in the form of contract non-renewal, changing responsibilities, etc., it will be necessary for them to form mutually beneficial relationships with permanent employees to seek equity.
- Recognize that issues of economic and racial justice are inextricably bound, and that a reliance on contingent or unpaid labor will continue to harm communities of color disproportionately.
- Be mindful that labor advocacy work is *work* that is often both unpaid and emotionally demanding and, as such, shouldn’t fall only to contingent workers or the people already doing this work. Seek new labor allies to mitigate this burden.
- The ultimate goal of labor advocacy work is the complete elimination of contingent labor, though we understand the many barriers to achieving this goal. However, accepting responsibility for one’s role in allowing or perpetuating the contingency cycle is the first step towards a better future for archivists.

## Action Items

### Standing labor issues committee

The Task Force recommends that the Board form a standing labor issues committee. Due to the recently revised scope of the SCA Advocacy and Public Policy Committee, particularly the responsibility to monitor “larger issues of diversity, parity, and inclusion within the profession,” we believe that making the labor issues committee a subcommittee of the larger advocacy committee would be appropriate, and help prevent any duplication of effort. The Task Force strongly recommends that the labor issues committee be composed of diverse institutional representation, one or more contingent workers and individuals currently precariously employed, and at least one individual who is in a hiring manager position. Members of the committee should continue to liaise with other regional and national labor advocacy efforts.

### Regular surveys

The Task Force recommends repeating the survey on labor issues in archives every 3-5 years, using the same structure as the original survey so that results can be compared and tracked longitudinally, and allowing for refinement of questions and minor updates made, eg. add a “None” response to the Benefits question. The recurring contingent employment survey issued by the New England Archivists is a good model for this.

Further, we recommend making a concerted effort to reach those individuals who are currently experiencing the issues and challenges identified in the survey. When the survey is relaunched, reach out and mention that SCA would especially appreciate hearing from them, and find channels / spaces in which this survey might reach them.

## Labor-related programming and workshops

A number of survey respondents felt they lacked information about unionizing, including organizing basics (i.e. how to organize your workplace, researching appropriate local unions) and information on how unions work and the benefits and/or drawbacks of union membership. Workshops on these topics would likely be appreciated and have a large audience.

## Spotlight labor work

The Task Force suggests a regular means of sharing information about labor issues facing archivists, perhaps in the SCA Newsletter. A recurring column could spotlight ongoing labor work and advocacy efforts, including, but not limited to success stories and how-tos, new resources, workshops, and more.

We also recommend posting resources to the main SCA website, including the white paper developed by this Task Force and the labor survey findings. Future advocacy toolkits or resource lists could also be housed in a section of the website.

## Community recommendations

The following are recommended advocacy areas identified by the greater SCA membership via the survey, First Friday meeting, and AGM brown bag session.

- Salary advocacy
  - Encourage the inclusion of salaries in job postings; provide standard salary ranges for different types of positions to promote pay equity
  - Salaries should be proportional to the cost of living in California, i.e. one of the most expensive places to live in the country. Salaries and making a living wage are even more important here.
  - Gather historical data on salaries, if possible.
- More opportunities for information sharing and transparency around unions and organizing and labor issues at large
  - Also include corporate and other non-academic archivists in this work
- Workplace safety issues, especially post-pandemic
- Mentoring and job seeking assistance via resume reviews, mock interviews, etc.
- Advocacy around eliminating short-term contracts in favor of permanent archival positions
- Support for recruitment and retention of BIPOC archivists
- Advocacy for disability rights and increasing accessibility of archival web portals
- Adding more membership levels: contingently employed; unemployed; etc.

- Paid internships and related advocacy
- Agency in having interns identify what skills they would like to acquire (vs. doing “grunt work”)

## Conclusion

The Labor Issues Task Force appreciates the SCA Board’s consideration of archivists and their well-being, and the organization's commitment to archival workers as well as the collections we steward. We hope that our findings and recommendations can further the ongoing advocacy work within SCA, and the archival profession at large, and can aid in carrying this vital work forward.

## Resources

### [Best Practices for Archival Term Positions v. 1](#)

Review Copy of best practices document created by an ad-hoc group of archivists from across the country, composed of current and former term workers as well as hiring managers.

### <https://calnonprofits.org/publications/article-archive/683-a-few-resources-for-nonprofits>

The California Association of Nonprofits’s COVID-19 Resources for California’s Nonprofits

### [Collective Responsibility Labor Advocacy Toolkit](#)

Collects resources developed to document and change the landscape of contingent labor in Libraries, Archives, and Museums (LAM).

### [Digital Library Federation \(DLF\) Labor Working Group:](#)

The DLF Labor Working Group has been leading the conversation on labor advocacy for years and members of this group are responsible for the above-mentioned Collective Responsibility project. This group is active, passionate, and always looking for new members.

#### <https://wiki.diglib.org/Labor>

For a recap of their mission and work, to join, view meeting minutes, etc.

#### <https://wiki.diglib.org/Labor/Resources>

The most comprehensive list available of all labor advocacy work in the GLAM community.

### [https://www.fairlabor.org/sites/default/files/documents/reports/fair\\_comp\\_strategy\\_2020.pdf](https://www.fairlabor.org/sites/default/files/documents/reports/fair_comp_strategy_2020.pdf)

The Fair Labor Association’s 2020 Fair Compensation Strategy

MIT Living Wage calculator:

<https://livingwage.mit.edu/>

<https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/managing-nonprofit-employees>

The National Council of Nonprofits' Managing Nonprofit Employees

### [Organizing Power](#)

a 20-page Risograph-printed booklet designed by Bay Area artist Jessalyn Aaland to provide arts/nonprofit workers with tools to organize a union at their workplace. Physical copies of this beautiful, practical resource are available for the cost of shipping.

Tai, Jessica. "The Power of Words: Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description," in "Radical Empathy in Archival Practice," eds. Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/120>.

University College London's "[Report and Support](#)" website is an anti-bullying resource that would serve as a good model for other universities to adopt. Bullying is not uncommon in contingent positions. These resources and University-specific or more general [whistleblower policies](#) should be made widely available, where appropriate. The University ombudsperson is also a helpful resource for mediation and conflict-resolution.

<http://www.xpdnc.com/links/links.html>

The XPDNC Labour Directory is not secure but recommended by Cornell University Library. Their description of the site:

This is an excellent directory of labor-related Internet sites around the world (*This site has ads and pop-ups which may obscure content, scroll past to locate the directory*). In addition to listing web sites for international, national, and local labor unions, XPDNC has organized web sites under useful and interesting categories such as Corporate Agenda, Labour Online, Media Outreach. Web sites within each category are organized by geographic area.

Wildenhaus, Karly. "Wages for Intern Work: Denormalizing Unpaid Positions in Archives and Libraries," in "Evidences, Implications, and Critical Interrogations of Neoliberalism in Information Studies," eds. Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no.1 (2019). doi: [10.24242/jclis.v2i1.88](https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v2i1.88).