
Overnight College Historian: Historical Whiplash and the Flexibility of New Archivists

by Louise LoBello

Introduction⁴

No one said it was easy to start a job, and the archival field makes sure of that. In 2020, I started my first full-time permanent position. That first year, the constant anxiety of a pandemic, and the pressure to learn as much as I could about the history of the institution I represented, compounded into complicated feelings of being exposed as an intellectual fraud. The “impostor” phenomenon was worsened when one considers the scarcity of permanent, full-time entry-level work in the archival field.

Newness and Illness

I graduated with my Masters of Information in spring 2019 from Rutgers University. After months of interviews and part-time work processing the historic library of a family in Piscataway, New Jersey, I accepted a role as a full-time collections management specialist at Franklin & Marshall College (F&M) in the Archives & Special Collections (A&SC), in January 2020.

Franklin College was founded in 1787 and, in 1853, merged with Marshall College to form Franklin & Marshall College, a small liberal arts college in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The F&M College Library’s A&SC documents that 200-year history, which comprises fifteen record groups in the College Archives, and over seventy manuscript collections in Special Collections. Additionally, A&SC houses miscellaneous collections of prints, newspapers, local maps and photographs, and an ever-growing rare book collection with over 8,000 volumes.

In March 2020, I moved to a new city at the very same time coronavirus was rolling through the United States. By the time I began working, F&M had shut down its campus and my colleagues were already working remotely. I jumped into my new position from behind a computer screen in my unfurnished studio apartment. As an added challenge, I was almost immediately diagnosed with COVID-19. With many unknowns about the virus, I navigated a mixture of “new job” and “mysterious illness” anxieties simultaneously.

4. Author’s note: throughout, I use the word “archivist” to broadly refer to the many titles for library, special collections, and archives workers.

Sickness aside, I was extremely excited to start this new adventure. My understanding was that about half of my responsibilities were to focus on collections management, and I was thrilled to dive into rare book cataloging, something I hadn't had the opportunity to fully explore. With limited access to my office, this part of my job was greatly neglected, and in-person training with colleagues was minimal. Work-from-home tasks instead focused on metadata cleanup for a migration project, which translated very well in a virtual environment.⁵ The librarian who spearheaded the project and I met frequently, which provided a welcome structure to my days when it was often hard to find my footing otherwise. Though I felt useful, I was still unfamiliar with a lot of essential institution history and organizational knowledge. Working in the archives, I knew that I accepted the responsibility of digesting this history. However, I am a tactile learner, and I knew that simply reading books on campus history wouldn't make it all stick.

In summer 2020, protests around police violence increased around the country. F&M started to reckon with its own history and initiate intentional conversations on campus. Part of that process began when faculty members asked A&SC to develop virtual presentations on the history of underrepresented groups on campus. Interested, I took on this hugely important task.

There's an Imposter in the Archives (and It's Me)

Already feeling like I wasn't fulfilling my primary job duties, "imposter syndrome" really set in when I realized I was to be the "voice of college history," though I was first exposed to it mere months prior. The imposter phenomenon, or, the experience of self-doubt and feeling like an intellectual fraud despite one's achievements, has been widely discussed in the psychological field, and was first associated with high-achieving women in a 1978 clinical study.⁶ Subsequent studies revealed that the imposter phenomenon affects people of all genders, races, and geographic areas.⁷ It is also not limited to folks who have achieved career successes; imposter phenomenon is also not a new topic in the library profession.⁸ Studies have pointed to various stressors that can lead to "imposter syndrome" in library professionals, including a lack of guidance and preparation in library school, for the difference in organizational politics and culture, minimal orientation and on-the-job training resulting in isolation, and unclear

5. Brianna Gormly and Louise LoBello. "Collaboration in Isolation: Migrating Legacy Finding Aids during a Pandemic," *Journal of Digital Media Management* 11, no. 2 (2022): 121–30. <https://digital.fandm.edu/islandora/collaboration-isolation-migrating-legacy-finding-aids-during-pandemic>

6. Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Ament Imes. "The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice* 15, no. 3 (1978): 241–47, <https://doi.org.fandm.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/h0086006>.

7. Jaruwan Sakulku and James Alexander, "The Impostor Phenomenon," *International Journal of Behavioral Science* 6 no. 1 (2011): 73–97, <https://doi.org/10.14456/ijbs.2011.6>.

8. Sakulku and Alexander, "The Imposter," 73.

expectations in terms of one's scope of work responsibilities.⁹

Though this feeling of fraudulence was not necessarily new to me, the simple fact that I had, literally, barely stepped a foot into F&M's archives that year was intimidating enough. I almost rejected the faculty request, but, after talking to my supervisor, I was met with calm trust that helped me confidently prepare a presentation. Despite the encouragement, I was still overwhelmed by the reality that I was to reckon with a 200-year-old, predominantly white institution's relationship with Black history. On top of being acutely aware of the presentation's sensitive nature, and the care I needed to take with the material, I simply lacked confidence in my ability to speak on much of campus history.

The Whiplash of Absorbing New Institutional History

There is something to be said about the sudden insertion into an institution's history when one starts a new archival position, which I do not think is addressed enough in the archival profession. I won't list the reasons why archival work is so rewarding—ask any archivist what they love about their job and most will say something about the gratification from making history accessible. And yet, deep historical knowledge takes time to accumulate and crystallize. It takes years to solidify these stories to memory. This experience of "historical whiplash" is all too prevalent in a field in which early-career professionals accept contract-based work—out of necessity—and jump from position to position.

Over the last two decades, entry-level archival positions have been increasingly contract-based. The 2004 SAA-sponsored A*CENSUS survey—the first wide-scale survey of the archival profession in the United States—did not include questions asking if the respondents were in permanent or temporary positions, only part-time or full-time.¹⁰ In contrast, 2022's A*CENSUS II went further and asked if full-time, part-time, or retired respondents held a contract position, and found that 11% indicated they held contract positions. These kinds of positions can last anywhere from a few months to multiple years, often depending on institutional funding. A*CENSUS II also found that, of the 11% of respondents in full-time contract positions since 2017, only 30% eventually secured full-time permanent positions.¹¹

For new-career archivists who periodically switch institutions due to temporary contracts, this feeling of starting over is jarring. Archives and library workers through-

9. Lacy Sajni and Melanie Parlette-Stewart, "Jumping into the Deep: Imposter Syndrome, Defining Success, and the New Librarian," *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research* 12 (1): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v12i1.3979>.

10. "A*CENSUS: Archival Census and Education Needs Survey in the United States," *The American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (2006): 326.

11. Makala Skinner and Ioana Hulbert, "A*CENSUS II All Archivists Survey Report," Ithaka S+R, Last Modified August 22, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.317224>.

out the United States have started to analyze this growing phenomenon, and the toll it takes on health, morale, and commitment to the profession. A 2019 survey from the SAA Issues & Advocacy Section on Temporary Labor found that temporary positions affected respondent's anxiety, stress, financial insecurities, and feelings of self-worth.¹² Similarly, the New England Archivists Contingent Employment Study Task Force report from 2022 found that over 60% of survey respondents' mental or physical health was affected by contingent positions, and over a third had experienced periods of unemployment.¹³ It is also essential to acknowledge how race, class, and gender reveal even more demographic inequities in the results of these studies.¹⁴

This is further contextualized by on-the-job stressors mentioned in the previous section that can lead to feelings of "imposter syndrome." I am aware I speak broadly when I say that many archivists do not consider themselves historians, but that does not remove the fact that other people often do. And, in a small institution, like F&M, one might play every role in the archive—that is, campus historian, cataloger, processor, reference librarian, digital archivist, social media manager, and more.

Prior to F&M, I held a number of internship positions at a variety of institutions. From corporate archives of one of the nation's first telecommunications companies, to government records of federal conservation programs, to twentieth-century family records—every few months I dove deep into a new, riveting area of history. It was a blast, developed my resume, and I think every new professional should be as lucky to experience such historical diversity. But, each time I left a position, I felt I was just starting to feel comfortable and familiarize myself with important dates, people, and events. For those of us who want to dive deeply into these stories, temporary positions impede this process.

This complicated experience—veneration for archives and a sense of dread that accompanies being pulled away from finally sinking our feet into a position—echoes Fobazi Ettarh's 2018 discussion of vocational awe, where the belief of libraries (and, in this case, archives) as inherently good and sacred places affects our ability to criticize issues in the field.¹⁵ A supervisor once told me, "You probably won't really start to feel comfortable with the collection until three to five years on the job." This, though scary, was honest, and actually comforting. Yes, I can't expect to suddenly

12. Courtney Dean et al. "Survey on Temporary Labor: A Quick Look," *Issues and Advocacy Section Meeting, Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting*, 2019. Accessed February 28th, 2024. <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1wF78rJ3LJTF-vmhzyRBWJsIQNuINb5U7>.

13. Kimberly Barzola et al. "Nothing About it Was Better Than a Permanent Job": Report of the New England Archivists Contingent Employment Study Task Force," Report, 2022.

14. This is beyond the scope of a lightning talk, but worth investigating in further scholarship.

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

have an encyclopedic knowledge of this institution’s history—but it sure would’ve made things easier! This is especially relevant and hard to reconcile when one considers the increase in temporary positions for new professionals. It is evident that the “imposter syndrome” experienced by many librarians and archivists is enhanced and exaggerated by the precarious nature of so many archival positions.

I feel I emerged from the multiyear swamp of COVID confusion and I am finally getting my land legs. That first F&M presentation in 2020 ended up going well, and I have since tackled additional projects on the subject. I still feel I over-prepared, and I attribute my success to that hard work—which cleanly falls into the imposter cycle described by Clance, where people experiencing this phenomenon tend to point to the fact that they only achieved their successes through hard work, not ability.¹⁶ Four years into this position, I still constantly learn new things about F&M and all the collections we steward, and I still need to reference our Comprehensive Historical Timeline¹⁷ for reminders on major dates and figures.

However, we all deserve a bit of grace—for ourselves, and for our colleagues. I am grateful to my supervisor and colleagues, who went out of their way to make me feel welcome and empowered during a time where the closest thing we could get to “on-the-job training” was a three-hour Zoom call. A question that lingers is how much is the current state of the field—with the increase in short-term contract positions—putting new professionals at a legitimate disadvantage, and how much is just “imposter syndrome?” I would argue it’s quite a bit of both, with the former enhancing the latter.

Archiving Against Professionalism

by Lia Warner

I. Defining Professionalism

This article addresses how historical and moral notions of professionalism in the archival context artificially constrict workers’ understanding of their roles with regard to interpretive power and intellectual production, and thus hinder communication of the value and potentiality of the archival endeavor to outsiders. Based on historical analysis of grounding texts of archival theory, engagement with critical theory and the literature of the “archival turn,” and recent critiques of professionalism by working

16. Pauline Rose Clance, *The Impostor Phenomenon: Overcoming the fear that haunts your success* (Atlanta: Peachtree, 1985).

17. “Franklin and Marshall College Historical Timeline,” Franklin & Marshall College Library - Archives & Special Collections, last modified 2021, https://library.fandm.edu/ld.php?content_id=48242896.