

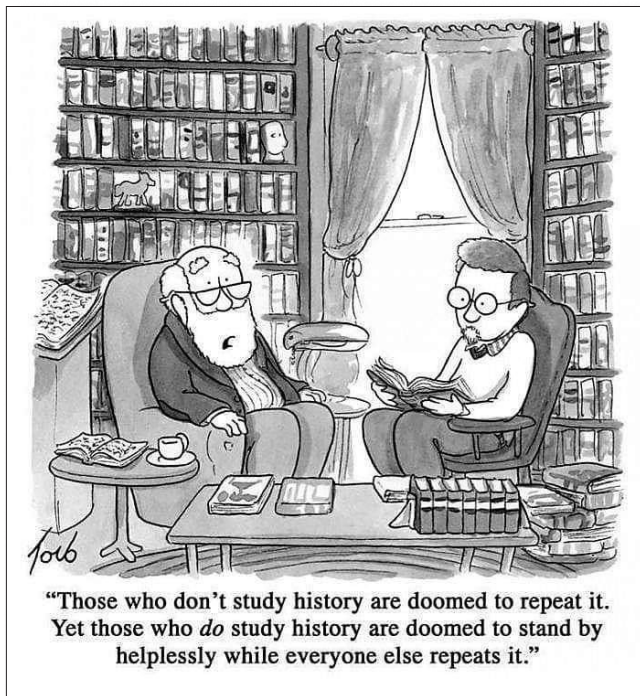
Up-and-Comers: News for Student and New Archivists

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Archives Education and Student Work in the Time of COVID-19

By Kristen Whitson, 2020 Graduate of the Information School at UW–Madison

Those of us who study archives and history have a unique perspective on the world these days: we have studied daily lives and documentation and historical records from centuries of human life, so we have a deep understanding of the unprecedented nature of COVID-19.



Cartoon by Tom Toro, published in *Litro Magazine*, July 24, 2012

As archives and cultural heritage institutions around the country set about collecting community materials documenting this moment, archives students are both experiencing and recording significant shifts in our studies and work.

As you read this, I will have finished my master’s degree in library and information studies at the Information School at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. My path to this degree was long and winding; it’s a second career for me, after 15 years in human resources. Because I was fortunate to be able to switch careers midlife, the past two and a half years of graduate study have been especially wonderful. I’ve relished every classroom debate, every paper, every assignment and job that has required me to seek out another archival collection full of history and wisdom.

As I write this in my home office, my wife is sewing masks next to me. This is the fourth or fifth batch of masks she’s sewn for the employees of her manufacturing plant; they’re an essential business, making fans for hospital isolation rooms/wards. While they have access to the KN95 masks (the knockoff version of N95s), the cloth masks provide about as much protection and are more comfortable.

This is the extreme shift in perspectives we’ve undergone at breakneck speed: from worry over arrangement and description class assignments, to calculating how many masks we can finish in one evening.

The week of March 9—the before-times—was a typically hectic one for me. The lead-up to graduation was intense: two part-time jobs on campus, coauthoring a book, three different ongoing volunteer gigs, three student organization leadership roles, plus 10 graduate credits. I’m helping raise my wife’s two kids, we have nine chickens, a cat, and a beautifully supportive network of family and friends. It’s a lot, but it felt like I’d finally gotten into the groove of how to balance 150 percent of my obligations in 100 percent of my time. Every week was a marathon, a carefully choreographed dance between what I wanted to accomplish and what I might have to let go that week and pick up the next. I collapsed into bed every night, happy and exhausted.

Over the past two years, I felt so fortunate to have these opportunities that I threw myself into them wholly. I took as many credits and extracurricular activities as I could handle, and more. This year, I got involved in TLAM (Tribal Libraries, Archives and Museums) and our school’s student chapter of SAA. I applied for and was appointed a student representative role on our University Library Committee. I’ve reveled in the long and far-ranging discussions we had about the importance of representation in the archives or the impact of neoliberalism on processing times. I designed and completed an independent study on critical theory in the archives. My jobs in the Madison LGBTQ+ Archives and the Division of Housing’s records management office gave me the opportunity to try out different aspects of archives. My volunteer work in the Ho-Chunk Nation Language Division, Circus World

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Archives, and my high school's theater archive were ways to explore organically grown community archives. I was asked to help research and write a book for teenagers on Wisconsin's LGBTQ+ history.

It was too much.

And I loved it all, in all of its too-muchness.

Graduation was the light at the end of the tunnel, and every day when I woke, still exhausted, and pushed through my days (exhausted), I'd picture myself in front of the auditorium full of my classmates and professors and friends and family, having graduated with a master's degree in library and information studies.

That vision of graduation kept me going for two and a half years.

On March 11, I, like thousands of students, got the text message that UW–Madison asked us not to return right away after spring break.

The next week—what was our “Spring Break” week—was a blur of grief. I heard from my jobs, my volunteer sites, and my classes, one after another: *Don't come in. We're canceled. It's all canceled.* The rest of the semester is gone. Unique to graduating students this semester: we wouldn't see our classmates or professors or supervisors or librarians again. On one particularly heartbreaking day, in-person commencement was canceled. Not only was the light at the end of the tunnel gone; so was the tunnel.

Everything stopped. The finely tuned machine of my days and weeks came to a silent, immediate halt. I went from rising at 5:00 a.m. and going to bed at 10:00 p.m., with carefully scheduled blocks of time filling each day, to having no idea what time it was—and not particularly caring, either.

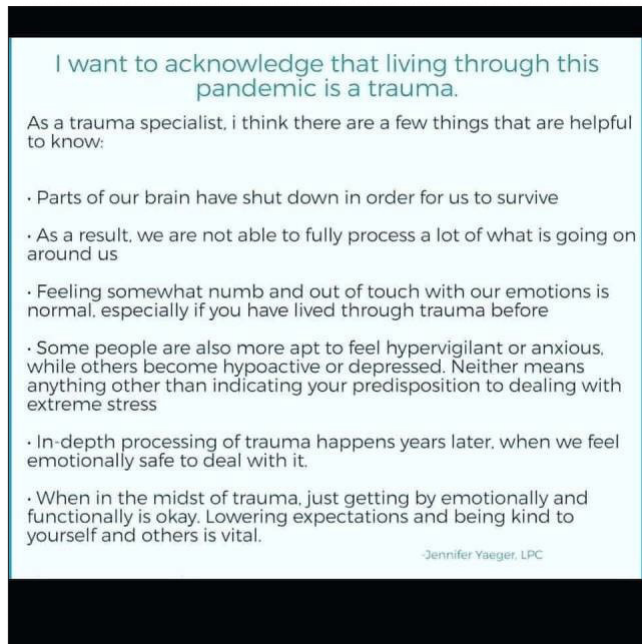
This semester was meant to be the crowning achievement in a degree program that I never thought I'd have a chance at; a program that had been deeply fulfilling and carried with it significant self-awarenesses I wouldn't have realized any other way. I have been so proud of my own work, my brain, my contributions to our program and to my classmates. It felt like a marathon I was running, successfully, with great form and in great time.

And with 25 miles behind me and only a mile left to go, the race was canceled. For me and for everyone.

That first week, my cohort's Facebook group was filled with disbelief, grief, shock, rage, and depression. Several people had job interviews scheduled around the country and were navigating the choice to fly, perhaps unsafely, or cancel the interview, perhaps losing the opportunity. Others were making the choice to go home to parents' houses over spring break, perhaps to return or not. Within a few days, it became clear that our student jobs in campus and city libraries and archives were tenuous at best, as many libraries needed to preserve remote work for their full-time staff members. The University Archives was fortunately able to provide remote work to several of us students, so I'm still working one job. My other job in records management in University Housing isn't available for remote work.

Post-Spring-Break, online classes started or continued. Academic and Library Twitter were filled with reminders that online instruction takes years to master and many months to effectively design, and that professors should cut themselves and their students lots of slack as they pivoted to unplanned-virtual-learning in a matter of days. In my experience, that was absolutely the case. One professor discovered firsthand how painstakingly time-consuming it is to write and record lectures; she quickly scrapped assignments that asked us students to do the same thing. Another professor, previously unfamiliar with tools like Zoom, Slack, Google Hangouts, Blackboard Collaborate, or Canvas, declared herself willing to learn and asked for help from more tech-savvy students. We all jumped in to set up ongoing methods of communication. Professors have handled the switch in varying ways with varying degrees of success; some have let go of the synchronous class obligation and others have carried on during normally scheduled class times.

The details of instructional methods aside, I've heard and read from graduate students near and far that the work feels impossibly hard, ridiculously disconnected, and totally insurmountable. Though no one's fault, the details of cataloging or coding seem so outside of reality. A few weeks ago, I video-chatted with a friend about EAD tags while hearing the anti-Stay-at-Home protesters outside his apartment. We talk most days and usually start our conversations reviewing the happenings of the world outside before getting to the inanity of finishing a graduate degree.



This graphic has been making the rounds online, and I want to tell you that it has been absolutely true for me and my classmates. I've heard from classmates who can't focus for more than a few minutes at a time—especially because they feel an urge to check the news that often. Some of us feel very numb, myself included, because to begin to acknowledge the pain of what we're losing is falling into an abyss we cannot afford until the schoolwork is finished. And the weight of expectations, our own and others', is a daily conundrum: we're in graduate school *because* we are people who love to read and learn and achieve at high levels. Unable to meet our own expectations of ourselves adds heavy layers of guilt and anxiety at a time we can least afford it. Professors are understanding, sympathetic, and flexible, and still have to turn in grades in a few weeks.

We have continued to do the work, to whatever extent we are able. As a group, we check on each other and keep checking in. We're exhausted now as we were before, but in a totally different way—emotionally exhausted and drained by constant video calls, rather than exhilarated at our progress. I've watched my cohort plan video calls to do virtual readings of Shakespeare's plays and a To-Be-Read Book Group. We message each other when we have the energy, a person here and a person there. We bring each other food when we can. We offer money to those who are in dire straits. These are not our most self-actualized moments; they're moments of community survival.

I'm finishing this degree by dragging myself across the finish line and graduating into a job market vastly different than the one I expected. I always knew that getting an archives job would be difficult, particularly because I'm (gladly) bound to the Madison area by family obligations. My backup plan was to get some kind of related position at the university and keep volunteering with community archives, watch for job openings, work my way up in the University Archives or the Wisconsin Historical Society or nearby cultural heritage organizations.

Over the last six weeks, librarians and archivists have been furloughed and laid off across the country. Hiring freezes have been implemented, locally and nationally. Any of the few archives job openings—even fewer here in Madison—will be inundated with applications from incredible archivists who can relocate and who have years of experience and accomplishments that far surpass mine. I'm considering going back into HR; I have an interview next week with the Unemployment Insurance division. They need help, and so do the 392,408 unemployed Wisconsinites who have filed in the last six weeks.

Cultural heritage workers do what we do because we believe that future generations will care what we have to tell them. Terry Baxter, in his fantastic *Off the Record* blog for SAA, says that

Bridging the temporal spans between generations is what archives and archivists have always done. . . . The creation of archives (or story, or memory, or community) is an act of love, a way of saying: Elders, you did this and it will matter to you, Offspring. Archivists commit to being the connective link, not just among those on the earth today, but among all people.

I remain committed to the archives field, to what we do and why we do it. In my own backyard, UW–Madison's University Archives and the Wisconsin Historical Society have both undertaken community documentation projects that are already bearing rich fruit. Both organizations, and many others, are scouring their collections for artifacts that hold up mirrors to today's society: from past pandemics, past crises, past evidence of community support. I believe in our work.

While it feels surreal to be working in a "normal" job for the Madison LGBTQ+ Archive, where I find and write about collections to share with the public, I'm glad for the

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Meredith Lowe, Assistant Editor

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chance to practice my craft. I asked several gay friends in the early days of COVID-19 if this felt like the HIV/AIDS pandemic. *No*, they said. *No one cared when we were dying. No one shut down businesses and states to keep us safe. This doesn't feel at all like that.* Their stories still matter, even and especially now, and they are why we do what we do.

I was fortunate to meet Terry Baxter at a conference last year. I shook his hand, bought him a beer, and told him that this quote from his blog hangs on my wall at home—one that my professors and friends will recognize, as I find a way to work it into every paper and conversation. It's my professional touchstone, the reminder of why we do what we do:

Archives are relational through time. They bind us, for good and for bad, to our human relatives both in the past and in the future. Our ancestors are rooting for us. They have clamored to have all of their stories heard. Fought for a deeper and more truthful narrative of us humans. Archivists uncover those stories, add them to the sum of human understanding, and move them forward through time. Why? So that our great-grandchildren will know that their ancestors are rooting for them, too.

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