

Perspective

Wages for Intern Work: Denormalizing Unpaid Positions in Archive and Libraries

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ABSTRACT

While no comprehensive studies have yet been published quantifying the extent of unpaid internships within archives and libraries, their prevalence is easily recognized as widespread. Unpaid internships are offered and facilitated based on the implication that they correlate positively to future job prospects, although recent studies point to evidence that complicates this idea. Instead, the prevalence of unpaid internships may negatively impact efforts for diversity and inclusion among information workers while contributing to greater precarity of labor throughout the workforce. Meanwhile, professional organizations and academic programs often do not discuss the realities of unpaid internships, and some MLIS programs require or encourage students to work without remuneration for course credit at their own expense. Situating unpaid internships within larger questions of economic access, labor laws, indebtedness, and neoliberalization, this paper advocates for the denormalization of unpaid internships within archives and libraries, especially for those institutions that articulate social justice as part of their institutional values. Although rendering these positions obsolete is likely beyond the power of any one entity, this paper identifies strategies that can be taken at the individual- and institutional-level to advance economic justice and the dignity of all work that occurs in our respective fields.

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“To do volunteer work...is to make our work even cheaper and more dispensable, to scab on ourselves.”¹

–The N.Y. Wages for Housework Committee, 1976

INTRODUCTION

Although workers in archives and libraries pride themselves on professional values that transcend the logic of capitalism, these institutions and their employment practices are not beyond its reach. Within an ethical continuum of uncompensated labor under capitalism lies the unpaid internship, born from the post-industrial transition from a manufacturing economy to a service economy in parallel to the erosion of resources for higher education under neoliberalism. Information studies scholars Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee put forth a working definition of neoliberalism in their essay “Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field” as “[the restructuring] of economic, political, and social life in ways that focus on individual responsibilities, reduce state interventions and funding for them, draw attention away from systemic oppressions, use ‘chronic underfunding, disaster, and state failure’ as excuses for privatization, and ‘obfuscates or renders invisible forms of labor that are deemed undesirable.’”² Echoing these shifts, writer Ross Perlin contextualizes the particular emergence of the unpaid internship in his 2011 book *Intern Nation* as occurring just at the time where the “federal government [...] increasingly shifted the financial burden of a college education onto students and their families” while companies instituted a “similar stratagem by transitioning from training programs and entry-level jobs to internships.”³ For those of us early in our information careers or navigating professional transitions, the message often presented to us is that the cost of entry to a career in libraries and archives is a willingness—and ability—to work for free.

While no comprehensive study has yet been published quantifying the extent of unpaid internships within archives and libraries, the prevalence of these positions is widespread, especially as a core—and sometimes mandatory—element of the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) degree that has come to serve a gatekeeping function for information work that has been categorized as professional. The present-day MLIS program often places emphasis on internships, practicums, fieldwork, and other

¹ The N.Y. Wages for Housework Committee, “Housework – No Experience Necessary,” *Women’s Time: A Newspaper for Women on Long Island* 1, no. 6 (February 1976): 1.

² Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee, “Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, no. 1 (January 2017): 3–4.

³ Ross Perlin, *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy*, 1st ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2011).

forms of experiential learning, each with different levels of accompanying instruction and supervision that all warrant further examination to determine their relative value to both individuals and the field as a whole. There is important work to be done extracting trends and defining the boundaries between the different forms of experiential learning within MLIS programs in terms of their respective effectiveness, legality, and effects on power dynamics, however, for the sake of specificity, this essay will focus principally on the unique factors at play particular to the form of the unpaid internships.

As one anecdotal example of the pervasiveness of unpaid internships in the absence of more comprehensive data, of the fifty-seven internships undertaken for credit by MLIS students at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) between fall 2017 and winter 2018, 65% of the internship placements were unpaid.⁴ While calculations can vary widely based on the term, individual student's course load, and their respective residential tuition status, for each internship, California resident UCLA MLIS students without financial aid or fee remissions could expect the cost per unpaid internship taken for credit during the regular academic year to be at the minimum \$3,188.67 based on combined tuition and opportunity costs compared to a minimum wage job. This cost can increase dramatically when accounting for variables such as non-California resident tuition and when basing the opportunity cost on living wage, which together can bring the cost of a single internship up to \$5,171.47 and is compounded for each subsequent internship.⁵ University professors interviewed in Perlin's book point out that "internships represent 'a very cheap way to provide credits'" and that "[t]here's much more money coming from these internship credits than [there is] going into sustained internship programs" for students.⁶

⁴ For fall 2017, 9 internship placements were paid (29%) and 22 were unpaid (71%), and for the winter 2018 quarter 11 internship placements were paid (42%) and 15 were unpaid (48%). Data from Snowden Becker, instructor of INF STD 498 ("Internship") at UCLA, provided to the author on January 31, 2018.

⁵ The example costs are based on academic year tuition at UCLA for the 2017–2017 year (\$16,818 for California residents; \$31,920 for non-California residents); the standard course load of three classes per quarter; the 120 hour requirement per the INF STD 498 ("Internship") class; California minimum wage in 2018 (\$11.00/hour for employers with 26 employees or more); and living wage for Los Angeles County in 2018 as calculated by the MIT Living Wage Calculator (13.54/hour for one adult without children). See UCLA Graduate Education, "Tuition & Student Fees," accessed March 21, 2018, <https://grad.ucla.edu/funding/tuition>; California, Department of Industrial Relations, "Minimum Wage," accessed March 21, 2018, https://www.dir.ca.gov/dlse/faq_minimumwage.htm; "Living Wage Calculation for Los Angeles County, California," *Living Wage Calculator*, accessed March 21, 2018, <http://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/06037>.

⁶ Perlin, 85.

Unpaid internships are offered and facilitated by MLIS programs in part on the assumption that they correlate positively to future job prospects. Given increasing tendency towards precarity and job scarcity throughout information work, it is difficult to blame prospective interns for pursuing the available and institutionalized methods for establishing their respective professional competency. Many participants in unpaid information work—employers, schools, and sometimes even interns themselves—are inclined to justify this status quo, and thus it is necessary to “call in” information workers implicated within the unpaid internship system, a strategy that writer and activist Ngọc Loan Trần offers as a process of compassionately holding one’s peers accountable. Doing so helps us to locate and address the structural pressures that render unpaid labor seemingly inevitable, a process Trần describes as a “radical unlearning of everything we have been configured to believe is normal.”⁷ To further support the strategy of calling in, the terms “information work” and “information workers” are used throughout this text in order to work towards a common identity for archivists, librarians, catalogers, records managers, data curators, researchers, LIS professors, and others working in similar information environments.⁸ Together we can recognize how unpaid internships affect us all in our ability to advocate for the value of our work.

FROM WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK TO WAGES FOR INTERN WORK

Demanding remuneration for work that has been systematically deemed as having no economic value is not without precedent: building on feminist strategies in the United States from the 1880s through the 1930s, the Wages for Housework movement originated in Italy in the early 1970s before spreading internationally. Wages for Housework demanded payment from governments for the reproductive labor of women that made other forms of labor possible. As founding member Silvia Federici writes, the group’s principles were intended to revolutionize the “orthodox Marxist approach to domestic work and the figure of the house-worker,” and Wages for Housework and its

⁷ Ngọc Loan Trần, “Calling IN: A Less Disposable Way of Holding Each Other Accountable,” *BGD Blog* (blog), December 18, 2013, <https://www.bgdblog.org/2013/12/calling-less-disposable-way-holding-accountable>.

⁸ These terms are also intended to operate in the legacy of the name of the Art Workers’ Coalition (1969–1971), which during its brief tenure, united the concerns of working artists, critics, curators, administrators, and others in order to collectively mobilize its members through collective action around the economic and representational politics of art institutions. Writing on the group, art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson asserted that by redefining artists and other art professionals as “art workers,” its members aimed to produce a new model of common identity within the confines of capitalism. See Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

many affiliated organizations “argued that, far from being the legacy of a pre-capitalist society, housework has been a fundamental element of capitalist accumulation, being the production of ‘labor-power’ and, as such, the condition for every form of work.”⁹ By performing care work without the expectation of compensation including maintenance, cleaning, cooking, raising children, and emotional labor, women were producing wealth even as they lacked access to it.

Although Wages for Housework was focused primarily on a form of labor outside the system of skill-building and professional development that shapes our contemporary conception of professionalization, their intersectional advocacy was not limited to domestic work. The movement also advocated around broader economic issues such as welfare, daycare, healthcare, affordable housing, racial justice, sexual assault, sex work, sexuality, and even the modes of access available to women in order to enter the larger workforce. In a 1976 newsletter, the N.Y. Wages for Housework Committee addressed a form of unpaid labor undertaken by women in the process of seeking employment outside the home in an article titled “Housework – No Experience Necessary.” The authors point out how women who pursue education and work opportunities in order to enter the workforce do so on top of their second shift of housework, often at their own expense. The article’s authors write, “we have to pay for the privilege of doing ‘field work,’ and ‘acquiring experience’—which is nothing but volunteer work with an aura of professionalism.” By working in an unpaid capacity, the N.Y. Wages for Housework committee argues that workers essentially scab on themselves by undermining their own leverage to demand wages that could come from their refusal to participate without compensation.¹⁰ This sentiment echoes the many paradoxes experienced by workers early in their career entering the information fields today, who must make critical decisions about how to value their own work even before they may feel they have established the power to demand a wage.

The superimposition of the efforts of Wages for Housework onto a demand for wages for intern work is inherently complicated by the nuances particular to the differences between work performed inside versus outside the domestic sphere, but their efforts are introduced here to contribute to a genealogy of thought and rhetorical strategies. Other contemporary advocacy groups have done the same, most notably in the context of the visual arts, where the group Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), curator Laurel Ptak’s Wages for Facebook manifesto, and Leigh Claire La Berge’s essay “Wages Against Artwork: The Social Practice of De-commodification” all cite the legacy of Wages for Housework in addressing how some forms of labor are valued

⁹ Sylvia Federici, “Introduction: Wages for Housework in Historical Perspective,” in *Wages for Housework: The New York Committee 1972–1977: History, Theory, Documents*, ed. Sylvia Federici and Arlen Austin (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2017), 18.

¹⁰ The N.Y. Wages for Housework Committee, 1.

over others.¹¹ Furthering the potential resonance of demanding wages for intern work within this feminist and intersectional lineage is an extensive body of literature by LIS scholars on the feminization of librarianship,¹² as well as evidence that, much like other forms of social and economic injustice, unwaged work in the form of the unpaid internships perpetuates existing structural inequities. One of the few comprehensive quantitative surveys on the broader phenomenon of unpaid internships revealed that undergraduate women in internship positions were 77% more likely to be unpaid than interns who were undergraduate men.¹³ Another report determined that the unpaid internship positions that were considered competitive, “desirable,” relatively less exploitative, and/or resulted in better outcomes in terms of human capital tended to be occupied by those who are already socioeconomically advantaged.¹⁴ Writing on whiteness in librarianship, Angela Galvan points out how “only students with access to money can afford to take an unpaid internship” ensuring “the pool of well-qualified academic librarians skews white and middle class.”¹⁵ The gendered and racialized

¹¹ See “W.A.G.E.,” accessed March 16, 2018, <https://wageforwork.com>; Laurel Ptak, “Wages For Facebook,” 2014, accessed March 16, 2018, <http://wagesforfacebook.com>; and Leigh Claire La Berge, “Wages Against Artwork: The Social Practice of Decommodification,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 3 (2015): 571–593.

¹² For historical context of the conception of librarianship as a feminized profession see Roma M. Harris, *Librarianship: The Erosion of a Woman’s Profession* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishers, 1992); and Dee Garrison, “The Tender Technicians: The Feminization of Public Librarianship, 1876–1905,” *Journal of Social History* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1972–1973): 131–159. More recently, the topic was addressed in Shana Higgins, “Embracing the Feminization of Librarianship,” in *Feminists Among Us: Resistance and Advocacy in Library Leadership*, ed. Shirley Lew and Baharak Yousefi, Gender and Sexuality in Information Studies (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017), 67–89.

¹³ Data based on undergraduates at colleges and universities in the United States between September and December 2009. See Phil Gardner, “The Debate Over Unpaid College Internships” (Intern Bridge, Inc., 2010), <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.372.1710>.

¹⁴ “This work has demonstrated both significant positive and significant selection into unpaid graduate internships, according to different dimensions of individual characteristics. Those from socially privileged backgrounds or graduating with high degree classes or from elite institutions are more likely to select into these positions, but so are several disadvantaged groups including those from ethnic minority groups, with disabilities, or who entered university via a vocational track. This suggests that unpaid graduate internships are segmented into ‘desirable’ positions, high-up in individuals’ preference orderings but competitive to access; and less desirable or potentially exploitative positions, taken either to gain necessary experience or learn about an industry or because no other positions were available.” See Angus Holford, “Access to and Returns from Unpaid Graduate Internships” (working paper, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, June 2017), 28.

¹⁵ Angela Galvan, “Soliciting Performance, Hiding Bias: Whiteness and Librarianship,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, June 3, 2015,

dimensions of unpaid internships further emphasize the urgent need for quantitative investigations into LIS internships in order to better understand how unpaid labor disproportionately impacts different identities within the already skewed demographic profile of information work, where, in the United States, women account for 84.3% of archivists and 83% of librarians; and only 12.3% of archivists and 15% of librarians identify as non-white.¹⁶ Coupled with the socioeconomic, racialized, and gendered disparities in information work and how certain forms of labor are distributed and undervalued, unpaid internships only perpetuate existing inequities by serving as—what a Brookings report calls—“support beams for the glass floor.”¹⁷

In the case of archives and library internships, the labor that gets delegated to unpaid interns within the framework of experiential learning often includes a range of activities that might be characterized as maintenance—everything from data entry, data clean-up, scanning, shelving, cataloging, circulation, reference desk duties, weeding, rehousing, foldering, writing descriptive notes, IT support, and removing paper clips. On this tendency for maintenance work to be jettisoned onto unpaid interns in archives, archivist Hillel Arnold refers to the “complicity [of archivists] in erasing others” by “filling ongoing operational maintenance work with unpaid internships, or part-time and temporary labor.” Instead of trying to save money by not paying interns “[w]hen neoliberal austerity regimes”—the economic policies that reduce funding for public goods and services—“ask us to ‘do more with less,’” Arnold argues that archivists would instead be better served by pushing back on the austerity itself.¹⁸

HISTORY AND LEGALITY OF UNPAID INTERNSHIPS

Internships have their etymological and historical origin far from how we have come to recognize them today. Their name is derived from the late nineteenth-century practice of

<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/soliciting-performance-hiding-bias-whiteness-and-librarianship>.

¹⁶ Robin H. Israel and Jodi Reeves Eyre, “The 2017 WArS/SAA Salary Survey: Initial Results and Analysis” (SAA Women Archivists Section, 2017), https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/WArS_Salary_Survey_Report.pdf; and DPE Research Department, “Library Workers: Facts & Figures” (Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO, 2016), <http://dpeaflcio.org/programs-publications/issue-fact-sheets/library-workers-facts-figures>.

¹⁷ Joanna Venator and Richard V. Reeves, “Unpaid Internships: Support Beams for the Glass Floor,” *Brookings* (blog), July 7, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2015/07/07/unpaid-internships-support-beams-for-the-glass-floor>.

¹⁸ Hillel Arnold, “Critical Work: Archivists as Maintainers,” *hillelarnold.com* (blog), August 2, 2016, <http://hillelarnold.com/blog/2016/08/critical-work>.

medical students being interned or confined within a hospital during one or two year probationary learning periods. The internship as a phenomenon gained popularity in public administration (1930s) and socially-oriented fields such as social work, psychology, and journalism (1960s)—eventually receiving widespread adoption in areas such as publishing, finance, and technology as recent as the 1980s–1990s.¹⁹ According to Ross Perlin, the unpaid internship is a “recent, chaotic phenomenon” that is more “vague expectations, for which no one is held accountable” than “any rules of the road, any standards or codes of conduct.”²⁰

Without the formal recognition of being paid employees, unpaid interns have little legal standing on the federal level in the United States, and thus they do not qualify for sick time, workers’ compensation, or federally-granted worker protection against discrimination and harassment, including sexual harassment.²¹ Should it qualify according to the rules set by the U.S. Department of Labor, an unpaid internship is exempt from protection by the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) that mandates compensation. Without compensation, unpaid workers do not qualify for protection under the Civil Rights Act as it is enforced by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).²² Furthermore, in the absence of wages, unpaid interns do not receive health insurance, unemployment benefits, or contributions to pensions or social security for periods when their unpaid internship is their only employment given that, in the United States, these benefits are provided through payroll.

In the United States, the determination of the legality of an unpaid internship is based on Fact Sheet #71 from the Wage and Hour Division of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). In 2010, the DOL set forth a six-part test through Fact Sheet #71 that identified factors that could be considered by the court: that the internship was “similar to training which would be given in an educational environment;” was “for the benefit of the intern;” did “not displace regular employees;” the employer “derive[d] no immediate advantage;” the intern was “not necessarily entitled to a job;” and both the “employer and the intern [understood] that the intern [was] not entitled to wages.” These rules

¹⁹ Perlin, 30, 32–35.

²⁰ Perlin, xi. Furthermore, Perlin situates internships in the context of two workforce trends in the twentieth century: 1) the increasing prevalence of contingent labor in post-industrial capitalism; and 2) the rise of human resources as a force internal to organizations that seeks cost-effectiveness in staffing and thus is incentivized to institutionalize and justify unpaid labor. Audrey Freedman coined the term “contingent labor” in 1985, defined as “conditional and transitory employment relationships as initiated by a need for labor.” See Perlin, 36–41.

²¹ Blair Hickman and Christie Thompson, “How Unpaid Interns Aren’t Protected Against Sexual Harassment,” *ProPublica* (blog), August 9, 2013, <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-unpaid-interns-arent-protected-against-sexual-harassment>.

²² Blair Hickman, “What We Learned Investigating Unpaid Internships,” *ProPublica* (blog), August 9, 2013, <https://www.propublica.org/article/what-we-learned-investigating-unpaid-internships>.

prompted a number of lawsuits, most notably *Glatt v. Fox Searchlight* (known as the “Black Swan” case), where the court for the Second Circuit rejected the six-part test for what it deemed the “primary beneficiary test.”²³ Consequently, all pre-2018 literature and case law was effectively rendered outdated with the quiet publication of an updated Fact Sheet #71 in January 2018. In its newest version, the six-part test was replaced with a new primary beneficiary test, which merely “considers:”²⁴

The extent to which the intern and the employer clearly understand that there is no expectation of compensation. Any promise of compensation, express or implied, suggests that the intern is an employee—and vice versa.

The extent to which the internship provides training that would be similar to that which would be given in an educational environment, including the clinical and other hands-on training provided by educational institutions.

The extent to which the internship is tied to the intern’s formal education program by integrated coursework or the receipt of academic credit.

The extent to which the internship accommodates the intern’s academic commitments by corresponding to the academic calendar.

The extent to which the internship’s duration is limited to the period in which the internship provides the intern with beneficial learning.

The extent to which the intern’s work complements, rather than displaces, the work of paid employees while providing significant educational benefits to the intern.

The extent to which the intern and the employer understand that the internship is conducted without entitlement to a paid job at the conclusion of the internship.

An additional exemption is detailed in a footnote that “Unpaid internships for public sector and non-profit charitable organizations, where the intern volunteers without expectation of compensation, are generally permissible,” however no case law exists

²³ Edward J. Easterly, “New Guidelines for Internships: The New Unpaid Intern Test,” *NACE* (blog), January 23, 2018, <http://www.naceweb.org/public-policy-and-legal/legislation-and-regulations/new-guidelines-for-internships-the-new-unpaid-intern-test>.

²⁴ Wage and Hour Division, “Fact Sheet #71: Internship Programs Under The Fair Labor Standards Act” (U.S. Department of Labor, January 2018), <https://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.htm>.

either under the new or previous rules that would establish to what extent an archive or library in itself qualifies as public sector and/or charitable. There is also little clarity about what qualifies as training or which party gets to decide whether an internship provides “significant educational benefits,” especially when, as Perlin asks “the more philosophical question lurking in the legal legerdemain:” “How clearly can the law differentiate between training and work, especially in an ever-more intangible service economy?”²⁵ At the time of this writing, there have not been any new legal rulings that might shed light on what this means for the future legal basis for unpaid internships in the United States, but lawyers have thus far interpreted the update as benefiting employers rather than interns by making it easier for them to legally justify unpaid positions and decreasing the likelihood that a court would hear a class or collective action lawsuit by interns.²⁶ In an article for *Jacobin* titled “Let Them Eat Experience,” Bradley Babendir contextualizes the new primary beneficiary test within the broader regulatory rollbacks of the Trump administration and calls it “open season for employers who want free labor.”²⁷ The cumulative effect of these factors is that there is a significant gray area around the legality of unpaid internships in information work, which is unlikely to be resolved under the current administration.

INTERNSHIPS ON THE LADDER OF PRECARITY

Unpaid internships may be technically legal and lead to jobs in individual cases, but the emphasis on individual benefit at the potential cost of devaluing information work as a whole is a phenomenon familiar in the neoliberal economy. In their aforementioned essay “Towards an Archival Critique,” Cifor and Lee argue that neoliberalism “as economic doctrine, as political practice, and even as a ‘governing rationality’ of contemporary life and work, has been encroaching on the library and information studies (LIS) field for decades.”²⁸ Within this context, the authors directly address unpaid internships:

It is not just the archives themselves that are undervalued with the rise of neoliberalism, but also archival laborers. Without sufficient funding for adequate and well-qualified staff many archives turn to unpaid internships and other volunteer laborers for their survival. While there is much to be gained for

²⁵ Perlin, 67.

²⁶ Ellen Kearns, “DOL Adopts More Employer-Friendly Position on Unpaid Interns,” *Wage Hour Report* (Constangy, Brooks, Smith & Prophete, LLP, January 9, 2018), http://www.constangy.net/nr_images/wh010918.pdf.

²⁷ Bradley Babendir, “Let Them Eat Experience,” *Jacobin* (blog), February 22, 2018, <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/02/trump-unpaid-internships-labor-department>.

²⁸ Cifor and Lee, 13.

students and new professionals through such opportunities, there are also high costs to consider. For archives, establishing an unstable, often short-term workforce and the perception thereby that archives' needs have been met and at a low cost means that such conditions of deprivation can easily become the new status quo. This puts the long-term survival of archives at risk, which challenges the archival paradigm of long-term preservation and historical importance.

In the same paragraph, the authors go on to also point out that these same forces are also used to justify the use of labor of incarcerated individuals by archives in digitization projects—contributing to the prison industrial complex—and detract from the emotional well-being of information workers as a whole.²⁹

Assumptions regarding potential benefits and outcomes of unpaid internships abound, despite inconsistent empirical research that can attest to the veracity of these claims.³⁰ In fact, while some studies point towards positive outcomes from internships both paid and unpaid, there is also evidence that complicates these benefits, especially for unpaid interns. For instance, it has been shown if the primary goal of taking an internship are job prospects and future earnings, potential interns will see better results from a paid internship as opposed to an unpaid one. Based on survey data from 2015, National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) found that paid interns working in the nonprofit sector were 10.2% more likely to receive a job offer than unpaid interns, and they received a median starting salary offer of \$10,433 higher than offers received by unpaid interns.³¹ In a 2011 survey, NACE found that unpaid internships provided—in the words of Economic Policy Institute post—“no advantage in terms of full-time job offer rates or starting salary,” and based on data from for-profit sectors, unpaid interns actually earned \$3,700 less in their starting salary than a student who had never done an internship at all.³² Based on this data, Ross Eisenbrey of the Economic Policy Institute argues that unpaid internships serve as an “obstacle to social and economic mobility” that

²⁹ Cifor and Lee, 14.

³⁰ Matthew T. Hora, Matthew Wolfram, and Samantha Thompson, “What Do We Know About the Impact of Internships on Student Outcomes?” *Center for Research on College to Workforce Transitions* (Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, September 2017), <http://ccwt.wceruw.org/documents/CCWT-report-Designing-Internship-Programs.pdf>, 7.

³¹ NACE Staff, “Paid Interns/Co-Ops See Greater Offer Rates and Salary Offers Than Their Unpaid Classmates,” *NACE* (blog), March 23, 2016, <http://www.naceweb.org/jobmarket/internships/paid-interns-co-ops-see-greater-offer-rates-and-salary-offers-than-their-unpaid-classmates>.

³² Ross Eisenbrey, “Unpaid Internships: A Scourge on the Labor Market,” *Working Economics Blog* (blog), February 7, 2012, <https://www.epi.org/blog/unpaid-internships-scourge-labor-market>.

depress overall wages and undermine systems of meritocracy.³³ In a preliminary report based on literature reviews, the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison concluded that “scholars have found that important benefits of internships such as career development and student satisfaction are lower for unpaid than for paid interns, and that low-income students [and first-generation students] who struggle to afford unpaid work are less likely to receive the benefits often associated with worksite placements.”³⁴

Unpaid internships are not the only symptom of neoliberalism and precarity in information work, where precarity refers to an overall tendency towards less secure and more temporary jobs and the subsequent increase in exploitation and alienation of workers. Positions within information work tend to fall into classifications that relate to one another in what begins to function as a ladder of precarity, where relative transience, security, and power is determined by the contractual structure of a given worker’s position, and there is continual pressure on employers to move essential work within archives and libraries down the ladder through strategies such as deprofessionalization and limiting workers’ hours in order to reduce the overhead of labor costs and employee benefits. A list of these classifications sequenced along an axis from least precarious/most secure to most precarious/least secure might include:

(↑ *most secure*)

tenured or continuous appointment positions;

non-tenured but permanent/indefinite positions;

long-term (>1 year) or renewable contract positions;

short-term (<1 year) or nonrenewable contract positions;³⁵

part-time/at will positions;

paid internships, paraprofessionals, apprenticeships;

unpaid internships;

work compensated on a per-task basis (such as through Mechanical Turk, crowdsourcing);

labor performed by incarcerated individuals

(↓ *most precarious*)

Unpaid internships cannot be extracted from this hierarchy without recognizing the extent to which all of these positions are related to and intertwined with one another.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Hora, Wolfgram, and Thompson, 9.

³⁵ Also referred to by the adjectives “‘on-call,’ ‘auxiliary,’ ‘term,’ ‘contract,’ ‘temporary,’ ‘adjunct,’ or the truly loathsome ‘casual.’” See Myron Groover, “Why Library Precarity Is a Problem—A 30-Second Rundown,” *Bibliocracy* (blog), January 4, 2014, <http://bibliocracy-now.tumblr.com/post/72506786815/on-precariety>.

The effects of precarity are not only economic but also emotional as has recently been explored by LIS scholars including Kaetrena Davis Kendrick and Fobazi Ettarh in articles that reference the ways in which workplace dynamics, expectations of affective labor, and undercompensation have contributed to a state of low morale, burnout, and lack of diversity within information work.³⁶ Just in the case of unpaid internships, guilt, anxiety, and shame can exist for workers navigating the economic pressures placed on them by working without compensation, which can be related to the broader scarcity mentality and funding pressures that pervade archives and libraries as institutions existing under neoliberal conditions. By recognizing the connection between unpaid internships and other forms of contingent and precarious labor, denormalizing the practice becomes all the more urgent. Rather than accept this tendency towards precarity, information workers can recognize how advocating for the abolition of exploitive positions can help to bolster their own positions as they too resist the effects of neoliberalism.

STRATEGIES

Although rendering unpaid internships obsolete is beyond the power of any one entity, the following paragraphs will identify strategies for different actors within information work and MLIS graduate education to denormalize unpaid internships. In doing so, we can work together to advance economic justice and the dignity of all work that occurs in our respective fields.

³⁶ See Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, "The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study," *Journal of Library Administration* 57 (2017): 856–878; and Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 10, 2018, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe>.

● = associated strategy

● = potentially relevant strategy

	Organizations			Individuals		
	Academic	Employers	Professional Orgs	Early Career/ Students	Mid-Career	Late Career/ Management
Seek more data.	●		●		●	●
For employers— pay your interns.		●			●	●
Develop an “Intern Bill of Rights” for your organization(s).	●	●	●		●	●
Create alternative funding models or infrastructures when necessary.	●	●	●			●
MLIS programs can lead the charge, and stakeholders can push them to do so.	●			●	●	●
Professional organizations should pursue this issue within their advocacy for the profession.			●			
Create and maintain lists of paid internships.	●		●			

Join others in work towards policy change at the government level.			●	●	●	●
Seek allies by joining organizations and partnering with individuals already undertaking labor advocacy in information work.				●	●	●
Find the connections with other issues affecting information workers.	●	●	●	●	●	●
For interns—refuse to work for free.				●		

- **Seek more data.** The lack of data on the prevalence of unpaid internships in archives and libraries serves only to support, in the words of Ross Perlin, “a form of mass exploitation hidden in plain sight.”³⁷ It is imperative that as a field, we generate and advocate for research that can capture quantitative data related to unpaid internships in order to understand the extent that unpaid internships structure access to careers in information work and shape the experiences of information workers.
- **For employers—pay your interns.** If you are in a position where you can make or influence a decision about paying interns within your organization—even from non-management positions—seek to do so, even if just to denormalize the rhetoric that internships are de facto unpaid. Positions should be paid at the very least at the minimum wage, or even better, employers should pay a living wage

³⁷ Perlin, xiv.

that is based on local cost of living,³⁸ and lump sum or stipend payments should be reflective of the actual number of hours that the position entails. Employers may also want to consider how to establish and communicate more elevated official job titles to reflect paid status, such as “Paid Intern,” “Grant-Funded Intern,” or considering how entry-level positions could be reclassified as “Fellows,” “Research Assistants,” “Project Managers,” or some other title more reflective of work performed.

- **Develop an “Intern Bill of Rights” for your organization(s).** Whether you are an employer or part of a professional organization or educational institution, you can work to clearly define what the expectations for internships should be when your organization is involved. As an example, see “A Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights” from the UCLA Digital Humanities program, which puts forth “best practices for collaborations with students on digital humanities projects,” such as providing a high level of mentorship and substantial face-to-face time with student interns.³⁹
- **Create alternative funding models or infrastructures when necessary.** When legitimately under-resourced organizations such as community archives lack funding to pay interns, schools and professional organizations can fill in these gaps through scholarships, fee remissions, work-study, and grant funding. For instance, the New York Times recently reported on the trend of colleges and universities subsidizing internships by paying students local minimum wage or higher to work in socially-oriented fields and for nonprofit organizations.⁴⁰ Ideally, in addition to funding, organizations providing these funds can also provide information sessions for potential employers of grant-funded interns around what the expectations are for internships so as to increase the likelihood that they offer meaningful learning experiences.
- **MLIS programs can lead the charge, and stakeholders can push them to do so.** MLIS programs have perhaps one of the most direct roles in enabling the perpetuation of unpaid internships by supplying employers with students who are sometimes even be required by their degree to work without wages. Some important next steps for MLIS programs are to reevaluate and potentially restructure internship resources and requirements to ensure that they do their

³⁸ See the MIT Living Wage Calculator for locations in the United States, <http://livingwage.mit.edu>, or WageIndicator.org for non-U.S. locations, <https://wageindicator.org/main/salary/living-wage>.

³⁹ Haley Di Pressi et al., “A Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights,” *The CDH Blog* (blog), June 8, 2015, <http://cdh.ucla.edu/news/a-student-collaborators-bill-of-rights>.

⁴⁰ Anemona Hartocollis, “When Internships Don’t Pay, Some Colleges Will,” *New York Times*, November 2, 2017, November 5, 2017 edition, sec. Education Life.

best to support students seeking paid internships, or shape experiential learning through other models such as practicums, apprenticeships, and co-operative education that involve greater instructional oversight.⁴¹ In addition to assessing internal internship resources and requirements,⁴² MLIS programs should shift language around internships so as to denormalize unpaid labor, provide support for pay negotiation and legal protection, act as outward facing advocate for paying intern to employers, and restrict or ban unpaid positions on institutional listservs and job boards. Doing so not only protects students but can signal the program's leadership in the field and could be incorporated in its recruitment strategies, especially around diversity, equity, and inclusion. Educators, students, and alumni can also push their respective MLIS programs to take these steps.

- **Professional organizations should pursue this issue within their advocacy for the profession.** Many professional organizations have within their directives the stated goal of advocating for members of the profession that they represent—for instance, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) “promotes the value and diversity of archives and archivists,” and the ALA Code of Ethics states that they “advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions.”⁴³ Unfortunately, at the moment, many professional organizations facilitate exploitation by distributing unpaid positions through their listservs and posting them on job boards. Speaking on unpaid internships at Libraries in the Context of Capitalism symposium organized by METRO Library Council in February of 2018, Jeanne Swadosh pointed out that

⁴¹ Other work-based learning models such as apprenticeships and co-operative education may also be of interest here. Apprenticeships, common in Europe, can be registered with the United States Department of Labor Office of Apprenticeship according to “certain standards around fair application procedures, supervision, classroom instruction (144 hours annually), on-the-job training (2,000 hours), wage increases, anti-discrimination policies, and so on.” See Perlin, 55. Another model is co-operative education pioneered by Herman Schneider beginning in the early 1900s, where students work and attend classes through a highly integrated exchange between the workplace and classroom, compensation for students is the norm, and faculty themselves directly oversee work of students. See Perlin, 95–98.

⁴² Matthew T. Hora of the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions at UW-Madison points out in the Chronicle of Higher Education that “[r]unning a high-quality program takes a number of experienced employees who can advise students, find appropriate placements, coordinate with employers, and troubleshoot problems,” and a school must be equipped to perform these duties before mandating internships. See Matthew T. Hora, “What’s Wrong With Required Internships? Plenty,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (blog), March 4, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/What-s-Wrong-With-Required/242727>.

⁴³ See “Who We Are,” *Society for American Archivists*, accessed April 30, 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/aboutsaa>; and “Professional Ethics,” *American Library Association*, accessed March 21, 2018, <http://www.ala.org/tools/ethics>.

“professional organizations are not the exploiters, [but] they supply the channels through which exploitation occurs.”⁴⁴ Denormalizing unpaid internships should be seen as part of professional organization’s larger advocacy efforts, as doing so helps to elevate to overall valuation of information work.

- **Create and maintain lists of paid internships.** While unpaid internships in archives and libraries are unlikely to go away without a change in legislation, energy can be focused on resources that list only internship positions that pay minimum wage or higher.⁴⁵
- **Join others in work towards policy change at the government level.** Laws that affect the legality of unpaid internships are often set at the federal level. Different countries may have organizations such as the Washington, DC–based Pay Our Interns,⁴⁶ which advocates for the increase in paid internship opportunities across sectors.
- **Seek allies by joining organizations and partnering with individuals already undertaking labor advocacy in information work.** For years, MLIS students, bloggers, writers, and conference panelists in LIS have shared their reservations about unpaid internships in archives and libraries,⁴⁷ but there have been a

⁴⁴ Swadosh led a group brainstorming session on unpaid internships referring to her efforts with the Archivists Round Table of Metropolitan New York, where she along with Rachel Miller, Susan Woodland, and an anonymous ART member proposed that ART assert greater oversight over opportunities distributed on their listserv by: “1. reject[ing] internship postings that do not meet SAA’s Best Practices, or 2. re-assign[ing] their descriptive status in a subject heading.” Swadosh’s suggestion was unfortunately rejected at the time by the ART Board because it “limited student choice.” See Jeanne Swadosh, “Friction in the (Unpaid Internship) Machine: An Organizing Brainstorm” (Libraries in the Context of Capitalism, METRO Library Council, February 1, 2018); and Rachel Miller, Jeanne Swadosh, and Susan Woodland, “Internship Posting Requirements for ART: Proposal for the ART Board,” February 2017.

⁴⁵ For instance, the website for NYC Paid Creative Internships, <http://payinterns.nyc>, lists only those “companies & studios in New York City that pay their design/creative interns more than the NYC living wage (currently \$13.65/hr without benefits).” Working Artists in the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) maintains a list of arts organizations, <https://wageforwork.com/certification/institutions/certified>, that have been certified by W.A.G.E. according to fee guidelines that it also sets forth for artist’s fees and production costs based on three institutional budget tiers. Through this certification process, W.A.G.E. incentivizes arts organizations to self-regulate, and organizations in archives and libraries could organize similar efforts.

⁴⁶ Pay Our Interns, <http://payourinterns.com>.

⁴⁷ See, for example, the blog *You Ought to Be Ashamed*, <https://eatingouryoung.wordpress.com/>; Lance Stuchell, “Wanted, Free Labor: The Impact and Ethics of Unpaid Work,” *New Archivist* (blog), November 17, 2011, <https://newarchivist.com/2011/11/17/free-labor/>; Laura Sanders, “Get A Job, Or: The Ethics of Library Internships,” *Hack Library School* (blog), May 18, 2012,

number of recent initiatives formally organizing around labor issues. For instance, in August 2018, the Valuing Labor subgroup of the newly formed DLF Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries, Archives, and Museums published a research agenda to guide future efforts that includes mention of unpaid internships,⁴⁸ and members of the Issues & Advocacy Section of the Society of American Archivists have also recently cited the need for further investigations into the valuation of labor, specifically within archives.⁴⁹ As these groups and initiatives develop, they can serve as useful nodes for consolidating efforts and building solidarity between different communities of information workers.

- **Find the connections with other issues affecting information workers.** There are a number of opportunities to connect unpaid internships to other critical issues that arise throughout information work under the influences of neoliberalism. While scholars and educators in LIS should be candid about the many forces that devalue the labor in archives and libraries, unpaid internships and their effects in reducing equity and access can also be approached from many angles including diversity, inclusion, equity, and social mobility for people of all genders, races, ability, and socioeconomic status.
- **For interns—refuse to work for free.** For those of us that are students or early in career, we must recognize that despite our status, many organizations need our labor. We may be vulnerable, but we are not without power. While it should not exclusively be our burden to change the system, we can elect not to work for free, refuse to pay for academic recognition of unwaged labor, and consider collective actions. In doing so, we can resist the scarcity rhetoric and credential race that pervades LIS and the neoliberal economy at large. Even for those of us that do have the privileged position of being able to work without wages or have done so in the past, we must recognize that this choice is not only a personal one, but one

<https://hacklibraryschool.com/2012/05/18/get-a-job-or-the-ethics-of-library-internships/>; “Unpaid Internships and Archives,” *Archives and the Old Mole* (blog), June 25, 2013, <https://archivesoldmole.wordpress.com/2013/06/25/unpaid-internships-and-archives/>; Melissa Dewitt, “Pay Your Grad Students: Problems with Unpaid Internships,” *Hack Library School* (blog), May 18, 2017, <https://hacklibraryschool.com/2017/05/18/pay-your-grad-students/>.

⁴⁸ DLF Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries, “Research Agenda: Valuing Labor in Digital Libraries,” August 2018, https://wiki.diglib.org/images/d/d0/DLF_ValuingLabor_ResearchAgenda_2018.pdf.

⁴⁹ For example, see Courtney Dean, “Steering Share: Considering Labor Models in Archives Work,” *Issues & Advocacy Section of the Society of American Archivists* (blog), February 7, 2018, <https://issuesandadvocacy.wordpress.com/2018/02/07/steering-share-considering-labor-models-in-archives-work/>; and Steve Duckworth, “Steering Share: Steve Duckworth,” *Issues & Advocacy Section of the Society of American Archivists* (blog), November 6, 2017, <https://issuesandadvocacy.wordpress.com/2017/11/06/steering-share-steve-duckworth/>.

that affects our current and future peers. By refusing to work for free, we can communicate to employers the value of our labor and empower others around us to do the same.

CONCLUSION

Unpaid internships are not unique to information work, and they exist within a continuum of increasingly precarious, contingent, and undervalued positions in libraries and archives that demonstrate the many ways in which our field has not escaped the fallout of neoliberal policies in society as a whole. This essay aims to be a call to action that builds upon a growing critical mass of conversations around the labor of information work that have been taking place at conferences, in classrooms, and on social media for some time, and to which a great amount of the thoughts collected here are owed. There is still extensive and important work to be done in quantifying the extent and effects of unpaid internships, and how the move away from them could employ other forms of supervised experiential learning such as practicums, apprenticeships, or some other model that has yet to exist but that we can collectively shape based on the values of empathy and equity that many agree are core to critical information praxis. As a field, we are at a unique moment where we have the choice as to whether we want unpaid internships to be a part of our working culture, and we can draw strength and inspiration from others who have worked before and alongside us to assert the value of their own respective labor. By calling for wages for intern work in each of our different positions and communities with whatever strategies are available to us, we are making a crucial assertion of the value of information work itself.

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