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To Temp or Not to Temp: An Informal Opinion on Temporary Jobs

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Temporary or grant-funded positions are becoming an increasingly common and effective means of obtaining practical work experience for beginning archivists and librarians. For those new professionals considering limited-term jobs, there are several issues to explore before accepting such a position. Interestingly enough, most of the issues addressed below can be viewed as advantages or disadvantages, depending on perspective and approach. The thoughts and opinions expressed in this informal "case study" are based on my experiences in a temporary position and are intended solely as such.

I will use as an example my personal experience as a Project Archivist at Clemson University, so I offer a brief summary of the project. This three-year position was funded by a private bequest from a donor to the Clemson University Libraries in 1995 to reprocess the papers of James F. Byrnes, one of South Carolina's most prominent statesmen of the twentieth century. The large collection, which weighs in at approximately one hundred and thirty cubic feet of manuscript material, was received in several different accessions throughout the 1960's and 1970's. Each new accession was arranged and described differently than the previous one(s). Some of the smaller accessions received no description at all. However, because Byrnes was such an important political figure, the collection has been used heavily by researchers and scholars during the last thirty years, despite the disorder and its illogical organization. While this position involves several different components, including microfilming projects, digitization projects, and the planning and implementation of Encoded Archival Description (EAD), my primary responsibility as Project Archivist has been to reprocess the papers into one cohesive collection, thereby increasing the ease of use and access.

Overall, I would argue that a temporary job is a good way to begin a career and gain some solid "professional" experience. In most cases, the project will have been well planned and thought out by institution staff before the project employee is even hired, so the new hire should know exactly what is expected going into the situation. Theoretically, there should be no surprises, but this is unlikely. Any number of situations may arise that could not have been foreseen or planned. Such situations can be advantageous, as they might provide additional opportunities for experience or even highlight the employee's flexibility and adaptability to handling unexpected obstacles. For example, it was decided before I was hired that the Byrnes papers would serve as the "guinea pig" for the implementation of EAD at Clemson. I received the training necessary to lay the groundwork and establish a system for marking up our finding aids using EAD. But because we wanted to customize our finding aids to fit our needs, I willingly took on the responsibility of learning more about the infrastructure of EAD and its related technologies so that we would have more options available to us. I put forth this extra effort knowing that developing these valuable skills will be beneficial for me in the future.

On the other hand, unforeseen or unplanned circumstances may result in feeling pressured or obligated to take on extra duties that an employee may not be adequately prepared for or trained to complete. A project employee is hired for a specific task or series of tasks, and is only required to fulfill those original obligations. Accepting the challenge of additional responsibilities can be rewarding and beneficial, but only when all parties are in agreement and such tasks can be carried out sufficiently. In the Clemson example, an idea was proposed to write a grant that would provide more time and financial support to undertake a larger digitization project than the original project called for, and also for a two-year extension of my job. Upon reflection, I decided that lengthening my stay was not an option I wanted to pursue. I assisted with the authoring of the grant proposal, but made my intentions clear to my supervisor.

Another topic to consider is that of a terminal appointment. Temporary jobs have a definite ending

point, so project personnel are not usually faced with the “should I stay or should I go” scenario. When a temporary project concludes, it is over. Both parties have fulfilled their respective obligations, and any stress or anxiety that can accompany the tendering of a resignation is eliminated. And because an end date can usually be determined fairly easily, especially as a project starts to wrap up, time and energy can be allotted for the next job search.

The issue of commitment can be one of the stickiest related to temporary jobs. Accepting a terminal appointment implies a certain level of commitment on an employee's part. Project personnel are generally hired to complete a specific job that falls outside the time constraints or expertise of regular staff members. For these reasons, the project employee's service is invaluable for the completion of the project. But what if a better job comes along before the project is complete? Do you look out for your best interests, or do you honor your commitment? It is a tough decision to be faced with, but one that will likely crop up at some point.

In my case, commitment won over in the end. Since I have been at Clemson, I have noted several permanent job opportunities that have become available that I would have liked to explore--positions that I think would have been good moves for me professionally. But the timing was not right. I did not yet feel that the project was far enough along that I could leave without laying a heavy burden on my co-workers or causing any major setbacks. Only now, two years and two months into the project when things are starting to wind down and I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, do I even feel comfortable with the idea of pursuing other professional opportunities. Ideally, I would like to see the project through to its conclusion, but I am anxious to take the next step in my career and am now more willing to consider other opportunities.

Temporary jobs generally offer the chance to gain experience without some of the traditional expectations of permanent employees. Depending on how you look at it, this can be either beneficial or detrimental. Some new employees may welcome the prospect of focusing all their energies into learning the profession without being bogged down by meetings and committee work, while others may find a lack of activity a hindrance to their professional development. Furthermore, because of your “temporary” status, you may be left out of regular faculty or library activities, and possibly even undervalued by some colleagues.

Perhaps my biggest complaint with temporary status relates to this gray area of what is expected of me beyond my primary job responsibilities. I am classified as a “Visiting Assistant Librarian” with faculty status, but I am not on a tenure track. As a result of my unique situation, I am not expected to fulfill tenure criteria, namely research, academic achievement, professional involvement, and service. The conundrum is that I am evaluated based on these criteria, just like the regular members of the Library faculty. Because my evaluation depends on such criteria and because I hope to demonstrate to future employers that I can be successful in a tenure-track position, I chose to approach this job as if it were so. Most supervisors and administrators are supportive of this attitude, but it is a fine line to walk. I have to ensure that these “extra” activities do not interfere with my primary job responsibilities or hinder my professional effectiveness.

Beginning a career in a temporary position can be a very practical and effective way to get some solid experience under one's belt. There are numerous issues to take into consideration when thinking about such a situation – many more than have been addressed in this précis. Faculty or non-faculty, tenure track or non-tenure track, permanent or temporary, every job comes with its own set of pluses and minuses. While there are aspects of my position that I do not like, there are still others that I would not change. What I have learned cannot be quantified and I have obtained invaluable experience that can only help me in my next job as an archivist.

Melissa Finley, a native of New Orleans, Louisiana, holds B.A. and M.A. degrees in History and a Master of Library and Information Science from the University of Southern Mississippi. She has been employed as a Project Archivist at Clemson University in South Carolina since 2000.