Collective Responsibility: National Forum on Labor Practices for Grant-Funded Digital Positions
Penn State University (PSU) and University of Missouri—Kansas City (UMKC)

1. Statement of National Need. A team led by the Penn State University Libraries, in collaboration with the University of Missouri—Kansas City University Libraries, requests $91,667 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Forum Grants program to host two meetings to explore labor issues centered on the experiences of grant-funded digital laborers in the libraries, archives, and museums (LAM) community; and subsequently, informing the development of ethical labor practices for granting agencies to adopt in the evaluation process for proposals. In 2017, the Digital Library Federation (DLF) Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries, Archives, and Museums began to draft a set of guidelines for more ethical development of contingent positions. The aim was to influence grant-funding agencies and institutional administrators to recognize and create reciprocal benefits for institutions and contingent employees, and to set expectations accordingly. The 2017 project revealed the need to bring stakeholders from LAM communities to a community-wide discussion: workers representing their experiences and requirements working together with agency representatives and administrators, to create guidelines and best practices for grant-funded positions. The co-PIs are the leaders of the DLF working group's effort, although these forums will not require involvement in the working group. This project seeks to address the specific problems of precarity created and reproduced (Rodriguez, Wickner, & Tillman, 2018) by grant-funded positions, how those impact the lives and professions of the workers, particularly workers from minority populations (Vinopal, 2016; Galvan, 2015), and how they affect investments made in national digital library, archival, and museum infrastructures and services. As the nature and understanding of digital work continues to evolve, there is little to no systematic understanding of these experiences as a collective concern within LAM. This grant seeks to foreground conversations which often occur in backchannels in order to create productive understandings, guidelines, and outcomes. The forum aims to spark a national discourse into broader visions for worker equity and inclusion, which ask who is performing digital production and maintenance work, and frame contingency in digital libraries, archives, and museums as a collective, not individual, concern.

2. Project Design. We will plan and host two 1.5 day meetings of up to forty participants each in different regions over the course of one year. The second meeting will be held preceding or following the Digital Library Federation Annual Forum in order to provide subsidized participants the opportunity to participate in the Forum at a lower cost and lower costs for those already attending. The forums will iterate through the process of information gathering (as guided by work already done through the working group) into the creation of guidelines and re-evaluation of practices Grant funds will subsidize attendance for 20 participants, including workers who have held or currently hold grant-funded positions, workers who have written or managed those who have held grant-funded positions, and workers wishing to consider the nature of grant-funded labor and how these positions may be improved. They will be recruited through the applicants' existing DLF-sponsored working group on Labor in Libraries, Archives, and Museums, contact with similar groups including Museum Workers Speak, and an open application process in order to ensure diverse representation, particularly of those who hold precarious, grant-funded positions. In order to broaden the representation of perspectives beyond those who can attend and because of anticipated broad interest in the subject, we will also conduct a survey of experiences on grant-funded projects and synthesize as preparatory material for the first meeting. Representatives from national funders such as IMLS, NHPRC, NEH, Mellon Foundation, CLIR, NEA, and the J. Paul Getty Trust will be invited to participate. Additional participants from LAM institutions, particularly administrators, will be invited to attend. The core team staff of Investigators and an advisory board consist of managers, unionized workers, and contingent workers representing complementary labor experiences. Meeting schedules will accommodate closed meetings for current and formerly precarious laborers to engage with funders and each other in a space with less potential for risk or repercussion.

Meeting 1: Experience: What are the lived realities of grant-funded laborers?

Attendees will prepare for the meeting by reading a selection of materials documenting positions in digital LAM created through grant-funding and the experiences of grant-funded laborers working on digital projects as gathered by through the project survey. The meeting, modeled in part on the 2017 NDSR Symposium[1], will include context for trends in contingency, shared experiences of attendees, perspectives on issues which arise from term positions (such as knowledge management), and opportunities for small group discussion of topics which arise. Session time will also be dedicated to developing collective understanding of these experiences toward a white paper, authored by PIs and engaged participants, reflecting themes which surface during the meeting and inform guidelines for practice.

Meeting 2: Practices: How can funders and LAM partners mitigate harm in necessarily-precarious positions?

Attendees will prepare with reading scholarly, union, and community-driven literature on the structural aspects of labor and contributed funder and institutional priorities (in order to assist these groups in aligning labor practices to existing goals). The meeting will provide interactive opportunities for organizations to develop strategies for their existing and aspirational goals and abstract into broader best practices for the development of grant-funded positions. Actionable and concrete guidelines for individual funders and institutions will be direct outcomes.

3. Relevance to the National Digital Platform. This forum set addresses the significant challenges faced by libraries, archives, and museums as they develop new understandings of employment models in a digital context. Working directly with those impacted from underrepresented communities, we intend to examine impacts of funder and institutional investments on equity and inclusion in the digital laborer community of practice—from digitization workers to software developers. Through the dissemination of a white paper, guidelines and presentations, we will shape the field's best practices for contingent labor. We will also collaborate directly with funders and LAM institutions on guidelines to support the individuals often most directly involved in developing the digital platform of the future.

4. Potential Impacts.
1. Change labor practices of funding institutions in the areas of requirements, trainings, recommendations, reviewer guidance through providing better information for policies.
2. Start a national conversation and agenda around contingent and temporary positions in digital LAM.
3. Institutions approach the creation of contingent positions using a framework to evaluate the holistic effect on employees and institutional outcomes.

5. Performance Goals and Outcomes.
1. A white paper documenting and systematizing the experiences of workers in grant-funded positions.
2. A set of best practices guidelines for funders and grant writers which address concerned raised and synthesize outcomes of the second meeting.
3. Present outcomes at LAM conferences including Code4Lib, DLF, Museums and the Web, and SAA.

6. Estimated Budget. We request from the IMLS a total budget of $91,667 over a 12-month period (December 1, 2018-November 1, 2019). For the event planning, this includes: $36,640 for participant travel ($18,320 per event, with participants receiving $916 each), $16,200 for event costs ($8,100 per event, including meals for 40 attendees and $1500 per event for childcare), and $3,832 speaker honoraria and travel ($1000 honoraria, $916 travel). For meeting planning, coordination, and creation of deliverables, funding the PI and co-PI 5% effort and fringe $9,228 and indirect costs of $25,767.

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[1] https://ndsr-program.org/symposium-schedule/