# Research Agenda: Valuing Labor in Digital Libraries

*August 2018*

A collaborative project of the **DLF Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries**

## CONTENTS

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# Acknowledgements

# Introduction

Recognizing labor as being undervalued, unacknowledged, and erased has long been framed as an individual concern in the field of digital libraries, archives, and museums (LAM); but organized and collective action is required to address labor conditions at structural and organizational scales. Such action requires information, from empirical evidence to testimonies to guidance and best practices. One symptom of the need for expansive research on labor in digital libraries is the fragmented way in which digital library workers come into contact with and participate in existing research on labor in adjacent domains like information studies; science, technology & society; sociology; anthropology; social work; and more (Buchanan, *et al.*, 2017).

This document lays out a research agenda for valuing labor, collaboratively developed by members of the [Digital Library Federation Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries, Archives, and Museums (Labor WG)](). We intend for research building upon this agenda to also be collaborative: by and for the DLF community.

These agenda items came together through conversations and input from members of the Labor WG and other interested participants in the field:

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| January – May 2017 | Members of the working group briefly described their interest in the topic upon joining. | Working group facilitators synthesized these interests to identify major umbrella topics for initial subgroups. |
| May 2017 – February 2018 | Participants in meetings of the Valuing Labor subgroup described and discussed their interests and concerns in greater depth. | Subgroup facilitator synthesized these interests and concerns into a list of major topics and urgent research questions, which this document reflects |
| October 2017 | Participants in a panel discussion and working breakfast at the 2017 DLF Forum expressed additional interests and concerns, both in person and in [community notes](). | These concerns are incorporated into the major topics through additional research questions and project ideas. |
| February 2018 – June 2018 | Members of the working group collaboratively reviewed and edited topics, research questions, and projects. | |
| June 2018 – July 2018 | Members of the DLF community reviewed and submitted feedback on the draft research agenda during a four-week public comment period. | |
| July 2018 – August 2018 | Working group facilitators incorporated public comments to produce a final research agenda and bibliography. | |

Launched in February 2017, the Labor WG is a volunteer working group formed to address a need in the field for discussion and guidance on ethical issues related to labor. These issues include the widely acknowledged (in)visibility of labor in libraries (Williams, 2016; Kendrick, 2017) and the multiplicity of labor models used to build, maintain, and execute projects within digital libraries (Dean, 2018; Gregory & Higgins, 2018). Subgroups are Valuing Labor, leading the development of this research agenda, and Contingency & Precarity, which currently focuses on advocating for more humane grant-supported positions.

Each section below identifies a major topic of interest, research questions of pressing need within that topic, and possible projects that contribute to answering these research questions.

# Organized Labor

Numerous digital library collections document the history and present of organized labor in North America and beyond (Blake, 2007), and organized labor is one of the most powerful tools available for valuing labor in digital libraries (McCook, 2010; Department for Professional Employees [DPE], AFL-CIO, 2016; Drabinski, 2018). Yet many library workers remain ineligible for union representation, unaware of how to learn about organized labor, or both (McCook, 2010). This research area aims to answer fundamental questions about digital library workers' participation in and awareness of labor organizing, and to map the landscape of potential opportunities and resources.

## Research questions

- To what extent and how are digital library workers organized?
- What opportunities and obstacles exist for digital library workers interested in organizing?
- How do digital library workers relate to one another and to other library workers through organizing?

## Projects

- Survey members of the field on participation in, awareness of, and attitudes about organized labor.
- Develop a list of unions that represent digital library workers.
- Interview digital library workers who participate in organized labor to better understand how they are introduced to organized labor, their motivations for participation, benefits and challenges of participation, obstacles to participation, and other aspects of their experiences.
- Compile resources for digital library workers interested in organized labor to inform themselves and participate.
- Study similarities and differences in experiences of valuing labor between digital library workers who participate and do not participate in organized labor.

# Valuing Maintenance

Digital library work is frequently associated with narratives about future-thinking and innovation (Dudley, 2017; Glassman, 2017), yet the role of maintenance in sustaining digital projects and programs may be relatively undervalued (Arnold, 2016; Firunts, 2017; Nowviskie & Porter, 2018; Russell & Vinsel, 2016). Visibility and rhetoric strongly influence how digital library maintenance is recognized (Almeida, 2017; Chalmers & Edwards, 2017). What's more, current practices in (under)valuing digital library labor have the potential to maintain themselves through vocational awe (Ettarh, 2018), austerity budgeting (Samek, 2016), contingent positions (Brons, Riley, Yin, & Henninger, 2018; Mink, 2016; Rodriguez, Tillman, & Wickner, 2018), and a steady cycle of worker churn in the field (Scott, Klein & Onovakpuri, 2017). This research focus also seeks to understand how the emotional labor, cooperation, and collaboration that maintain digital libraries are valued (Matteson & Miller, 2012; Walters & Skinner, 2010).

## Research questions

- How is maintenance in/of digital libraries accomplished and by whom?
- What are the short- and long-term impacts of maintenance performed through contingent labor?
- How can maintenance be accomplished other than through contingent labor?
- How is maintenance in/of digital libraries valued differently from other kinds of digital library work?
- How do current labor practices support or undermine maintenance of digital libraries?
- How do digital library practices support or undermine maintenance of labor/ers?
- What is the relationship between innovation and maintenance in digital libraries and how they are respectively valued and recognized?

## Projects

- Research and write guidelines and methods for determining costs of sustainable maintenance in/of digital libraries.
- What is the nature of digital library maintainers' everyday work? How is this work valued, or not?
- Analyze institutional discourse: What values does it express with regard to the maintenance of digital libraries and library labor?
- Interview workers who have left digital libraries to understand their motivations for doing so.
- Research and write guidelines for ethical employment models within specific sectors of digital library work, such as digitization.

# Categories of Labor

In order to determine the value of labor within digital libraries, employers categorize workers in various ways. However, neither these categories nor their impacts on library workers are well

understood, even as some categories of workers are more visible than others and are therefore more valued in terms of credit, compensation, and opportunity. Reliance on free labor is literally institutionalized through guidelines for working with volunteers in archives (Society of American Archivists, 2014), required internships as part of graduate education (SAA Standards Committee, 2014), best practices for crowdsourcing in cultural heritage (CrowdConsortium, 2015), and a culture of service work and emotional labor (Shirazi, 2014; Hathcock, 2016). Factors influencing the classification of labor in digital libraries include skilling and deskilling in information work (Barley, 1988; Kim, Warga, & Moen, 2013; Maceli, 2015; Maceli & Burke, 2016), changing relationships between workers and technology (Morrone, 2018; Popowich, 2018), changes in credentialing (Litwin, 2010; Soutter, 2016), funding models that privilege term over programmatic work (Davis, Mattson, McNally, & Reynolds, 2016), and budgeting priorities that imagine digital libraries as doing more with less (Samek, 2016). Digital library workers' classification may be at odds with their identities, abilities, and aspirations, leading to under- or devaluation. Disparities in visibility and value particularly impact the lives and careers of workers from marginalized and underrepresented populations (Vinopal 2016; Israel & Eyre, 2017). Vocational awe, or "the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique" (Ettarh, 2018), underpins outsized expectations for under-resourced and under-valued digital library workers asked to perform for sheer love of the work.

## Research questions

- What categories of workers exist within digital libraries?
- How are divisions made between the labor of intern, paraprofessional, part-time, contingent, non-tenured/short-term contract, tenured/indefinite contract, outsourced, and management positions?
- How does the precarity of workers' positions affect and reflect the stated goals of digital library organizations, such as diversity and sustainability?
- What is expected of different categories of library workers?
- What are the expectations of different categories of library workers?
- How is professional work identified and distinguished from other kinds of work in digital libraries? What is "other" in this context?
- How is digital library labor gendered, racialized, and otherwise divided?
- How does classification of labor interact with other kinds of classification in digital library work?

## Projects

- Interview digital library workers and managers about existing approaches to classifying labor and the impacts of such approaches.
- Analyze policies and practices used to classify labor in digital libraries: What work do these documents and processes do?

- Research alternative approaches to classifying labor, from disciplines outside of digital libraries: How might they be applicable to our field?
- Compile or develop guidance for classifying labor, such as rubrics that match projects, programs, or tasks to roles within digital libraries.
- Compare categorization of labor across digital library contexts: types of organizations, geographical regions, periods of time, etc.
- Research ways in which digital library workers *classify themselves* (rather than necessarily how they *are classified*).
- Research impacts of automation on the classification of digital library workers

# Transitions & Relationships

This research area explores the experiences and relations of digital library workers at key junctures or during transitions in their careers: entry into the field, entry into management, and moving in and out of precarity. Many workers enter the field of digital libraries as student workers, interns, and/or volunteers, a reality that shapes and reproduces demographics within and access to the field (Galvan, 2015). Students, new graduates, and other early-career library workers carry the impacts of these entry-level experiences with them as they continue in or leave the field (Stuchell, 2011). Digital LAM may learn from emerging guidelines for student-professional collaboration in adjacent fields like digital humanities (Di Pressi, *et al.*, 2015). Workers may also move in and out of managerial or supervisory roles; and the perspectives and experiences of new and middle managers, project managers, coordinators, and outsourcers in digital libraries are underexplored when it comes to their relationships to valuing labor (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Matteson & Miller, 2014; Douglas & Gadsby, 2017). Lastly, digital library workers may enter and leave contingent and precarious positions at various points throughout their careers, a pattern that stems from how labor is conceptualized and valued (Kerslake & Goulding, 1997; Groover, 2014; Wilkinson, 2015; Spence, 2017).

## Research questions

- How is workers' labor valued as they enter the field of digital libraries?
- How do digital library hiring practices for entry-level positions value experience?
- How do workers in transition relate to one another?
- What are the impacts of precarious early-career experiences on digital library workers' careers and lives?
- What impact does reliance on and expectation of free labor have on the relations between workers in digital libraries?
- How do workers' perspectives on and experiences with valuing labor shift as they move between precarious and stable employment?
- How do workers' perspectives on valuing labor shift as they enter management?
- How is labor valued by managers who are not prepared to or do not wish to manage?

## Projects

- Review and synthesize research on managers' perspectives on valuing labor.
- Interview new and mid-career managers about their perspectives on valuing labor, including challenges, obstacles, and opportunities stemming from the transition to management.
- Analyze existing guidance for (middle) managers about valuing labor in digital libraries: What discourses are prevalent in writing and research in the field?

# Institutional Self-Assessment

Assessment—benchmark-setting, data collection, and evaluation to understand the impact of activities—has received a great deal of attention in libraries in general (Bourg, 2013; Seale, Higgins, & Gregory, 2013; Bourg, 2014; Drabinski, 2017; Fisher, 2017; Jones & Salo, 2018), and more recently in archives (Cifor & Lee, 2017) and digital libraries in particular (Marsh, et al., 2016). Within the DLF community, the DLF Digital Library Assessment Interest Group (https://www.diglib.org/groups/assessment) has produced a significant number of white papers, guidelines, bibliographies, cost calculators, and other resources for LAM institutions to plan, conduct, and use assessment of their digital collections. By contrast, this research area supports digital library assessment that centers workers rather than collections. It also explores the impacts of institutional assessment practices on the experiences and motivations of digital library workers.

## Research questions

- How do digital library institutions value labor?
- How do they assess their efforts in this area?
- Does an emphasis on quantitative metrics for assessment in neoliberal organizations detract from potentially more meaningful modes of assessment?
- How does digital library assessment contribute to a "prestige economy" (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011) in academic institutions and the LAM professions?

## Projects

- Research and write guidelines for institutional self-assessment of valuing labor.
- Analyze current policies and practices: What work do these documents, discourses, and practices do?
- Research alternative models from within and outside of the digital LAM field, as well as outside of institutions.
- Compile assessment resources related to other aspects of digital libraries (e.g. digitization output or digital collections use) and analyze their applicability to and implications for valuing labor.

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