

Archivists of the U.S. Senate: Preserving the Legacy

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Statement of Research

What do archivists in the U.S. Senate do? And how is the role of a committee archivist different from one in a Senator's personal office? Jan Zastrow, Congressional Papers Archivist at the University of Hawaii, was given the opportunity to investigate these questions when she was granted a professional leave of absence to work as archivist in the office of the U.S. Senate Majority Leader.

Initially, the plan was to serve as a consultant to set up systems, policies and procedures, and then hire a local archivist to run the operation. Upon arrival, she realized she needed a "menu" of duties to develop her own work plan and to formulate a job description. Finding out what other Senate archivists did seemed the logical starting point.

Enlisting the help of Republican Leader archivist Nan Wood Mosher, the two researchers queried other archivists in the Senate about their job duties, titles, education and experience. Thirty-five different activities were parsed out and the results were then collated to quantify how many archivists were engaged in similar tasks, and what different types of duties were performed by committee archivists as versus archivists in a Senator's personal office. The four most typical activities included records management, developing policies, training/advising staff, and preparing inventories. Some interesting "outlier" responsibilities—those engaged in by only one or two archivists—illustrate the variety and range of activities among Senate archivists, and perhaps point to future trends.

In addition to its intended purpose, this applied research is useful as a training tool for new Senate archivists; to help congressional papers archivists in repositories understand the role of in-office archivists and how best to work with them; and to encourage archivists to evolve into new territory, such as electronic records management and email appraisal. This poster presentation shows that beyond the routine, the responsibilities of the Senate archivists reflect the individual careers of the lawmakers they serve.

Conclusions

Although this research came about for the very practical purposes of preparing a plan of work and composing a precise and explanatory job description for a specific position in the U.S. Senate, there are several broader implications for archivists in other settings.

First, the survey speaks to our changing role as archivists/records managers—and more specifically as electronic records managers. Although this is especially true when an archivist works side-by-side with staff in an office setting, the prevalence of digital files has made all archivists cognizant of their role in managing, migrating, and preserving this fragile format for future use.

Another awareness is the trend toward a less formal, more fluid definition of what an archivist is, how one enters the field, and what the job entails. The phrase "citizen archivist" may make some cringe, but more involvement by non-professionals in "our" field is a reality of the 21st century. This may be especially meaningful for academic archivists who come to the profession almost exclusively through acquisition of a master's degree and professional credential.

Of note, too, is the value in writing, reviewing and updating one's position description on a regular basis, not an extraordinary suggestion, but to take the further step of comparing it with those of other colleagues in similar positions. When following up with the participants after the survey, all were extremely interested to learn of the breadth of duties being undertaken by archivists in other Senate offices and committees, and were anxious to fulfill their position's potential by adding these newly realized responsibilities to their archival repertoire. Future surveys may also document the activities of other Legislative archivists—those of the House of Representatives, the Architect of the Capitol, and the Library of Congress—as a comparative analysis would likely provide useful insights, comparison and possible collaboration.

Learning what others are doing in the field might also help archivists, particularly "lone arrangers," make a case for their moving into new territory—such as electronic records management, web content/context management or indexing of email records—not only for professional growth but to increase job security as budgets shrink and institutional belt-tightening occurs.

If in fact the making of legislation is akin to making sausages, the archivists of the U.S. Senate have found a niche in shaping, preserving and rendering palatable the documentation of Congress.

Look for the full findings of our survey in an upcoming edition of *Archival Issues*—Jan & Nan