

maybe she just has to sing for the sake of the song

Rosemary K. J. Davis, Accessioning Archivist
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University
Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting → August 14, 2019

Hello hello.

Thank you to all of you for being here with us today.

Thank you to all my fellow presenters for the words you're sharing here today. I feel fortunate to share the stage with you.

So:

this is my number.

\$158,264.18

I owe almost \$160,000 in student loans. This number is terrifying to me. I hate to say it out loud. The very fact of it, the way it feels so inevitable yet so completely avoidable. It's both, truly. There is not a lot of comfort in knowing that I am not alone in having this complex, conflicted element in my life. It's an undercurrent for so many of us, a constant little...catch that is triggered by looking at your bank account, by searching for a new job, for paying *some* bills but not **others**, by taking on extra work, by **NOT** doing things like: having kids, buying a house, traveling, having adequate health insurance.

To be clear, today's session is about low pay. But it's also, for me, and maybe for some of you, about debt, about the weight we carry as we try to make space for ourselves in this profession.

I took out my first student loan when I was eighteen because my divorced mom made just enough money that Northwestern assumed she magically had thousands and thousands of dollars in reserve to pay for my tuition and housing. The university assumed that those imaginary funds, along with non-existent child support from my dad, would certainly be enough to keep me afloat and pay the bills--I can assure you this was not the case.

I took out student loans every semester because the choice between staying in Chicago and going back to East Texas didn't feel like a choice at that point in my life.

I had to make my first student loan payment six months after I dropped *out* of Northwestern halfway through my third year. There have been deferments and tearful calls to loan servicers begging for adjustments, but always, eventually, payments. Relentless. I know I am not alone in feeling the fear of this weird emotional and financial low-hanging cloud that dulls joy and takes away possibilities.

When I decided to go to library school, the fatalism of already being six figures deep in unrepayable debt was almost liberating. Because, you know, at that point: **fuck it**.

I worked full-time and took classes at Pratt during the evening. At one point, I did a practicum at the Fales Library at NYU and while the experience I gained there was invaluable both practically and in the form of a resume line, it was also unpaid. Well, **I** wasn't paid. But I *did* use student loan money to **pay** for tuition in order to get *credit* for my unpaid internship.

That's certainly a song that many of us know how to sing. Hello, to the choir of my colleagues. I can hear you.

I don't really have a concrete number for how much debt I took on in order to get through my MSLIS degree, but it was most likely about \$36,000, which is essentially the entire bill for grad school. Salary from my full-time office job paid for my rent, for my food. I'm aware of the privilege it takes in order to just...decide I'm taking on this additional debt. The way that I just got to assume "I'll figure it out somehow"--it's particular brand of carelessness that so many people cannot emotionally, professionally, or financially afford to exercise. But when you are sunken so deep into the unreality of a number this big, a few more thousand can feel like pocket change. It can feel like both a salvation *and* like a curse you cast upon yourself.

And obviously, the cost of dealing with this debt isn't just financial. It's depression. Guilt. Fear. Disenfranchisement. These are not uncommon states of being for many people in our profession. My friend and amazing colleague Rose will tell you about the contingent employment survey done by the New England Archivists recently, which shows that a majority of us are taking on significant amounts of debt in order to finance a career in a profession that is chronically underfunded across the board and is, in many cases, still under the impression that unpaid internships that provide "good experience" are good enough, that job postings without salary information are just "an institutional prerogative" instead of an antiquated, bullshit form of gatekeeping that keeps applicant pools remarkably undiverse. The Issues and Advocacy Section of SAA recently completed a temporary labor survey that reveals some pretty unsurprising information: precarious, underpaid, unsupported labor not only actively drives people away from this profession, but it also creates a cross-section of archivists who are constantly searching for work, endlessly balancing multiple jobs in order to stay afloat, and who feel like they've taken on a mountain of debt for a shot at doing work they care about in conditions that deny them stability, progress, and joy.

After five years of jobs with expiration dates and less than stellar salaries, I am now paid well and in a permanent position. I'm thankful for that, certainly, but also: about 14% of the money I make every year goes directly to student loan payments. I am now almost two decades into making payments on my student loans and the principal amount has absolutely never decreased once. I doubt it ever will. Every year, my monthly payment amount goes up, instead of down--it's pegged to my income (and to the income of my partner, who has zero debt but

has become responsible for mine because we are in love and legally bound). I got word a couple of days ago that my promotion portfolio was accepted. Salary increases, like the one I will get with this promotion, are lovely, but usually feel a bit more grayscale than technicolor. I know that the increased amount siphoned away toward loan payments will absorb most of the small gains I make.

I am so lucky right now. I can pay my bills. I have financial and emotional support from a wonderful partner. I don't have dependents who require assistance. I did, finally, buy a house. I have debt beyond my student loans, but I can usually handle it.

Still.

Uncertainty and anxiety don't slip away so easily. They become hardwired in a way that can feel impossible to dismantle. And when you're surrounded by waves of professionals doing awesome work but who are struggling with a heaviness I can so well recognize, who are coming up against the same walls over and over again, who are facing limitations I can't begin to imagine shouldering, you have to realize that reaching back to give a hand up is good but it's certainly not enough.

There has to be a systemic examination of how our profession values the labor being done. This examination must necessarily be linked to an acknowledgement of the *full spectrum* of experiences carried by the individuals who perform it. That includes debt, family obligations, health, and a raft of other needs that shape who we are and how we work.

This is not news, but it is maybe my own little personal call to action.

Let's find some new songs to sing together.

I'm grateful for the chance to talk to you all today.

Thank you.