

# Dear Professors: Teaching Archiving in Times of Continued Uncertainty and Unrest

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## ABSTRACT

This opinion piece is written in response to Ricky Punzalan’s “Dear Students: Becoming an Archivist in Times of Uncertainty and Unrest” and in the wake of Trump’s second nomination as the US president in 2024. This piece pushes against the idea that students should inherently be able to know the necessary skills needed to be an ethical and supportive archivist and calls on professors in LIS programs to actively teach these skills to their students. This letter reflects the author’s own experiences in MLIS and PhD programs and conversations with peers, both students and practitioners, as the structures of archives are changed to better align with decolonial and anti-colonial sentiments of young rising archivists.

Dear Professors,

It is now seven years after Ricky Punzalan wrote his response piece to Trump’s election in 2016, “Dear Students: Becoming an Archivist in a Time of Uncertainty and Unrest.” Since then, we’ve seen the steep rise, once again, in anti-immigration beliefs, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, transphobia, anti-women’s rights sentiments, anti-Blackness, and many other harmful ideologies. In the wake of Trump’s second term, these harmful ideologies are expected to be even more present, and their expected impacts on archives are coming to the forefront. As new practitioners are trained in LIS programs, whether at the undergraduate or graduate level, Punzalan’s letter provokes a deeper question for the LIS field: How are professors teaching rising and established LIS practitioners to react and navigate the ever-growing tensions within sociopolitical and public realms?

As someone who entered their MLIS program in 2020 and completed it in 2022, I read Punzalan’s open letter for a course where it sparked conversations about our roles as practitioners in LIS fields. My colleagues were mostly practicing public librarians and a few people switching mid-career into LIS to become practitioners, largely in libraries or archives. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, my courses were entirely online even though I enrolled as an in-person student. Taking courses online meant I never fully integrated with my peers or professors, as we met for short periods via Zoom and rarely met each other face-to-face, greatly reducing the possibility of conversations about coursework outside of class meetings. Courses were focused on how to understand literature and theory, how to be a manager in

libraries, and how to serve patrons ethically. What we rarely, if ever, talked about was how to navigate the tensions now common in LIS workplaces. We learned that libraries are meant to be neutral but not what to do if our state decided that certain perspectives, lifestyles, and viewpoints were illegal to teach, share, and learn about. We learned about the pride librarians place on patron privacy but not how to interact with those who want to invade that privacy or protect patrons from the physical presence of police or security while in libraries. In some courses, we learned that libraries and archives are inherently political sites, carrying out the government's will, but we did not learn how to safely push against these constraints to ensure our communities can access the information they need and see themselves reflected in the materials we house.

As I moved into my PhD program in information studies, the disconnection between academic teachings and LIS practices grew more and more apparent to me. How was I, a graduate of an MLIS program focused on teaching practitioners and scholars alike and now a PhD student with the goal of becoming a practicing archivist, supposed to take up the call to action laid out by Punzalan if my professors are unable or unwilling to teach how such actions can be taken? Surely, there is some way for professors to go beyond the goals of fostering critical thinking in students and begin to create curricula showcasing examples of how to push against a system that inherently violates LIS norms and ethics. While libraries, archives, and other institutions were created under colonial and racist systems and are expected to uphold them, upcoming practitioners and scholars are increasingly working to change these systems but need to learn skills from established, experienced LIS professionals.

I'm not calling for professors to risk their careers and prestige by becoming radicals, but I do believe more can and should be done by professors to show students how they can protect the rights of their patrons and communities in their work in the face of budget cuts, discriminatory laws, and pushes for information restriction in the forms of book bans and surveillance. Courses like crisis management, which would teach students how to engage with their communities after a human-caused crisis occurs (see Gibson et al.'s 2017 article "Libraries on the frontlines: neutrality and social justice" in which the authors call for courses on how to respond to crises and keep patrons safe); social justice storytelling (see McDowell and Cooke's 2022 article "Social Justice Storytelling: A Pedagogical Imperative"); and courses on ethical leadership and community outreach so LIS professionals can work with their staff and patrons to ensure their institutions are positive, integrated parts of their communities would go a long way in improving LIS training. These are subjects I have heard peers in MLIS programs call for, especially as we recognize the need to physically safeguard materials from climate-change-driven disasters and people who strive to control us through information restrictions. While many of my peers are doing what they can within their communities, it is difficult to apply the goals of creating a better, more inclusive, and more ethical archives to the current reality of archives as an arm of the colonial state and under fire for having made some progress toward reparative archiving work. One of the main ways we can work toward these goals is through improved curricula in LIS programs to match the needs and interests of students. In doing so, professors are not only training archivists to be more resilient and better at their jobs but also acting as role models.

As of the writing of this piece in November 2024, the recent election results have weighed heavily on the minds of people worldwide. In my circles, there are questions of personal and community safety under Trump's second term as well as questions of job security, or even availability, among those of us hoping to be archivists. Instructors who know how to navigate the system and teach students the skills necessary to do so will be invaluable

moving forward. To echo Punzalan's words in his open letter to students, we should not fall into despair, although conditions are ripe for losing hope. Professors, take notice of the causes your students are interested in, find ways to connect with them on these issues, and encourage them to apply their skills, both learned and experienced, to their archival careers. Show students they can uphold their morals in their archival careers, even under oppressive regimes, and give them hope for when times change to be more favorable, even if not in the near future. Now is the time to build solidarity if you haven't already. Now is the time to show upcoming professionals that their work is important and can be done in a plethora of ways, and even though we don't know what the future holds, we are responsible for helping shape it in whatever small ways we can.

## References

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