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SIM Program Reflection Essay
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It's been over a month since my internship at the Women and Leadership Archives ended. In that time, I have successfully readjusted to life as a Shimer student, reading my assignments, writing up papers, participating in discussions around octagonal tables. From my current position, I can now look back on my summer "in the real world" at a distance and reflect. So what, I hear you asking, did I take away from my experience?

If you want the short answer, I could tell you that it was positive overall. I now have a clearer understanding of what archives are and how they operate. I learned a lot of "skills", both general and profession-specific, that I will probably be able to use in my life after Shimer. I suppose you could say I "did" networking. But there are more substantial things to be said.

The best way for me to begin answering the question in depth is to think back to where I was and what I was thinking before it began. In my letter of interest written last February, I said that I was "looking forward...to a comprehensive introduction to archival management," which probably seems obvious given the nature of the internship. But that sentence reminds me of how little I really understood about what I was getting myself into at the time and how much I knew I had to learn. My sense then of what an archivist did was fuzzy ("They keep people's papers, right?"), and even though I tried to keep myself from developing naive expectations of what working in an archives would be like, after touring the WLA for the first time earlier that month, I developed some anyway.

My expectations for the internship itself were met and succeeded. From my first day till my last, I was working on projects that differed from the graduate students' only in size. Processing a large collection, for example, can take months or even years, and I obviously wasn't

in a position time-wise or skill-wise (at first) to make that kind of commitment. The only thing that made me an intern in the traditional sense was my temporariness and my absence from the Loyola payroll. While working there, I made contributions every day which improved the health and quality of the entire collection in the very same way that the “real” employees and the Director did and continue to do. And speaking of the Director, Beth’s willingness to teach me a lot of the basics of preservation and archiving from scratch, and her awareness of my needs throughout the internship were key in making my experience a positive one. It was *very* important for me to work in an environment (created by the people and the nature of the tasks) which fostered and supported an entirely hands-on experience because now, I not only have a sense of what archiving is like, but I also know what I like about it and what I don’t.

Last February, I wrote that I was interested in pursuing a career in archives, but I knew I couldn’t take that plan too seriously without having worked in one first. That was why it was “one of my top priorities to get a clearer idea of what archival work is actually like” so I could see if the profession suits me. And from where I stand now, I’ll say that this specific career is not the right one for me. As much as I enjoyed my time spent there and valued all the positives that come with working in a place where everybody knows your name, I’ve learned that I need a little less independent work time and more physical activity in my ideal work environment. Learning this about myself surprised me, but I can’t begin to stress how important it was for me to realize it.

So, contrary to the expectations I had going into the internship, my career ideas have taken a different direction. However, just because I no longer plan to pursue a career as an archivist doesn’t mean that I consider the things I learned useless. Instead, I actually feel reassured about continuing to explore related career options because I now *know* that I want to be

an active part of preserving history and making it accessible to people. I won't lie: at times, the work could get tedious. But every time I completed a project, whether I processed a small collection, reassessed the condition of an existing one, or created an exhibit, the tangibility of the end product made the whole process valuable and important, not only for me, but for any and all the people who will interact with the collections and exhibits I worked on in the future. In particular, the contributions I've made in advancing the study of women's history, however small, mean a lot to me.

I've known for a long time that I enjoy studying history, but after this internship, I now know that I also enjoy the behind-the-scenes work that goes into making historical information available, and not only that I enjoy it, but that I think it would be worth devoting a lifetime of work to. Right now, I'm not sure if that means working in an archives, a museum, a school, or somewhere else, but I plan on seeking out more opportunities like the one I had this summer to give me a better idea of the specific direction I'd like to take in the future.

In the short term, I plan to stay on this side of research for a while. I'd like to study more social history and maybe even pick up some of the threads (women's education, Chicago politics, religious social justice and feminism in the United States etc.) I encountered while working at the WLA. Instead of getting an MLIS after Shimer, I'm interested in beginning serious historical research and thinking about obtaining a degree in public history. And while Shimer has not provided me with the cheat sheet to accomplishing these goals, after I graduate I will take away all that I have learned about the history of thought as a rich, contextualized soil from which to grow my own ideas, and hopefully, share them.