

2019

Review of Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists

Erin Hurley
erhurley@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hurley, Erin (2019) "Review of Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists," *Journal of Western Archives*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives/vol10/iss2/9>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Western Archives by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



Journal of Western Archives

Manuscript 1115

Review of Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists

Erin Hurley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Western Archives by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact rebecca.nelson@usu.edu.



Review of *Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists*

By Kathleen D. Roe. Archival Fundamentals Series III, Volume 3.
Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2019. 160 pp. Softcover.
\$69.00. ISBN: 978-1-945246-16-6

Although advocacy is an enduring concern for archivists, it feels especially necessary right now. In a political moment that is particularly hostile to the free and open sharing of information, archivists have found themselves banding together, circulating petitions and sharing emails in support of adequate federal funding for the National Historical Public Records Commission (NHPRC) and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Important documents mysteriously disappear from government web servers and must be conjured via other means (I'm fond of the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine). However, as Kathleen D. Roe points out in *Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists*, advocacy can be as small or as large as we like. It can mean advocating for our own worth to our own colleagues—a position many archivists have, unfortunately, found themselves in at one time or another. Or it can mean scheduling meetings with legislators, workshopping an elevator speech, and making a very specific request for funding for a particular project. Roe, in her introduction, defines "advocacy" as "giving a focused, purposeful message to a targeted audience in order to effect a positive change"—words that inspire me by their mere existence (6). Who couldn't use some positive change?

Roe is just the person to guide us, and this slim, practical book outlines concrete steps that can be taken towards advocacy, with chapters devoted to outlining goals, understanding audiences, and developing a compelling message. The book has eight chapters and five appendices, and she begins with definitions of terms like "advocacy" and "awareness," walks the reader through examples of successful advocacy campaigns and purposeful step-by-step planning, and then takes it all the way to the top in Chapter 7: Advocating with Government Officials. Roe is an experienced archivist recently retired from a position as Director of Archives and Management Operations at the New York State, and she holds degrees in history from Michigan State University and in library science and archival administration from Wayne State University. She is a former Society of American Archivists president (2014-2015), and the book was published by SAA's publishing imprint as a part of its "Archival Fundamentals" series, so a certain amount of SAA propaganda is to be expected. Nevertheless, I appreciated a reminder of the organization's foundational role in archival advocacy and, indeed, the history of the profession. One of the book's many useful appendices (Appendix C) outlines SAA Issue Briefs and Position and Policy Statements since 1976, including issue briefs on subjects like net neutrality, the declassification of federal records, and the Freedom of Information Act (124-125).

Roe's tone is generous and understanding, but she is careful to emphasize how important advocacy is. It is not optional, and it is something every archivist must engage in, in whatever way they are able. To this end, she offers advice on "Finding Your Own Voice" in Chapter 8: Advocacy and Awareness: Taking the Next Steps. Each archivist should play to their own strengths, she writes, from public speaking to writing to building and maintaining relationships. She urges collaboration, and points out that skills honed through archival work, like research and description, can also be helpful with advocacy. For example, these skills can help with establishing an audience's context so as to better understand and communicate with them, or with contextualizing the role of an archives within a larger institution, be it a university, a business, or a museum. Advocacy, it should also be noted, shares many of the same techniques as workplace organizing, including the ability to identify supporters and define goals.

One of Roe's strongest arguments concerns the need for elucidating the concrete, even life-changing, impact that archives can have. She urges archivists away from the always-tempting "curiosities" approach, and towards an approach that demonstrates their real world utility. For example, she writes of research geologist Bruce Molnia's use of historic data and images from the National Snow and Ice Data Center's Barry Archives to illustrate the effects of climate change and to drive public policy and awareness. She gives another great example of archives' utility when discussing a military widow in Pennsylvania who found her husband's World War II compensation application in the Pennsylvania State Archives, which she needed in order to obtain veteran's burial benefits (66). Anyone with an interest in government accountability or what goes on behind the scenes at the FBI can understand the significance and importance of original documents. And every archivist can benefit from reflecting on these significant reminders of why archives matter.

Another strength of the book is the link that it makes between advocacy efforts and the status and pay of archivists—issues that are currently widely discussed in the archives community. Roe writes that the "undervaluing of archivists also has a direct economic impact on individual members and the status of the profession" and points out that "salaries are not comparable to those in other professions requiring less education" (3). This is an issue that recent developments, like the Archivist Salary Transparency Open Spreadsheet, which began circulating after discussions about labor and transparency at SAA Austin in 2019, are attempting to address. While efforts like this are an important first step, they could benefit from the focused, methodical approach that Roe outlines in this book. Recent efforts by archivists to call out practices such as temporary labor, low pay, and lack of diversity in the field could undoubtedly be called advocacy, but the complexity of this work is often underestimated. A 1978 quote from archival luminary Elsie Freeman Frievoegel asks, of archival work: "Why do these programs more often than not appear to be episodes or events rather than programs in the ongoing sense?" Another, from Philip P. Mason in 1967, names "the acute problem of maintaining competitive salaries" for archivists (3). That either of these quotes could have come from a modern archivist in 2019 is proof enough of the need for archivists at every level to double down on advocacy.

I might have appreciated a more frank or explicit naming of power (acquiring power, negotiating with those who have power) as an essential ingredient of advocacy efforts, and, though that may be distasteful to some readers, it is the driving force behind most advocacy. Becoming conscious of the ways in which one holds power and choose to distribute or share this power is an essential first step towards advocacy.

Roe makes frequent mention of the importance of working with communities that have historically been underrepresented in archives, and is attentive to the importance of sensitivity and relationship-building in this arena. “Many groups,” she writes, wisely, “have good reason not to trust the requests from people who have not developed a relationship with them in the past” (108). She writes of successful outreach in 2009 by the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture to the black gay and lesbian community in New York City by a staff member who belonged to this community, and who could assure members that the Schomburg Center would be “respectful and trustworthy.” This staff member, Steven Fullwood, understood that “personal outreach and direct communication were essential” to raising awareness and building trust (20).

However, the most meaningful takeaway, for me, from *Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists* is the amount of patience and persistence required for advocacy work. Successful advocacy can take years, even decades, to produce the desired change. As someone who has recently begun to engage in advocacy on behalf of myself and other contingent workers, I found this reminder galvanizing. One can get impatient agitating for a long-overdue change, but the work is necessary and sometimes difficult. Advocacy can be iterative, and steps for assessing the successes or failures of a particular initiative should be built into the process. It is important to reflect on and celebrate successes, but also to push on. Roe also writes: “...the archival literature on advocacy and awareness is not extensive” (32). *Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists* is something of a call to arms, albeit a very gentle one. It is up to us, as archivists, to enrich this literature with our own studies, and to share our stories with each other as inspiration, and to speak up for both our own worth and the worth of our colleagues. The future of the profession depends on it.

Erin Hurley
Teaching California Project
Archivist
California Historical Society
San Francisco, California