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Types of Jobs in Museums

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Chapter 2: Types of Jobs in Museums

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WHEN I WORKED FOR THE SMITHSONIAN Institution, I joked with my coworkers, “If I’m not in your department now, just wait. I will be soon.” During my five years of service I worked in three different departments (exhibition scheduling, public relations, and exhibition development) and was considering a fourth (registrar) until a job I realized that I truly wanted (curatorial) opened up at a liberal arts university in Richmond, Virginia. I should confess that prior to the Smithsonian, I gained experience as a fundraiser at a contemporary art museum in Houston.

This type of career zigzagging within the museum profession is common for four reasons: (a) museum jobs are extremely competitive and applicants take what they can find, often in the city they can find it; (b) some applicants, especially those just beginning their careers, don’t know what role they will like and excel in until they try various ones; (c) no two museums have the same organizational structure; a curator in one museum may also wear the hat of exhibit designer and educator in another; and (d) increasingly, many museums have downsized budget and staff, so that

employees are assuming jobs that may have once resided in another department all together. While this can be frustrating, the changing museum landscape and the experience and knowledge gained at each kind of position have the potential to form a wise and well-connected museum professional.

To keep things simple, I’ll describe some jobs that perform six common functions at museums:

- working with and caring for collections, objects and exhibitions
- education, interpretation, programming, and evaluation
- marketing and communications
- visitor services and visitor experience
- fundraising and development
- administration and operations

Since there is no one standard organizational chart for museums, the size, budget, discipline (e.g. science, history, or art), institutional affiliations, community, and visitorship of each museum determine whether some of these jobs and functions are conflated, if they are re-assigned to other positions, or if they become even

more specialized. Also, jobs that I have described in one function may overlap with other function categories, depending on the same factors mentioned above. And of course, every department or function works in concert with others during phases of a project so that multiple departments touch every program and product of the museum.

Working With and Caring For Collections, Objects, and Exhibitions

In the past, this category was sometimes labeled “curatorial” after the curators who study the history, context, and unique qualities of a museum’s subject specialty in order to improve and increase the museum’s collection, to organize exhibitions, and to publish research. But often (and frequently in smaller museums) this robust group also includes registrars and collections managers who care for the safety and long-term viability of physical objects (e.g. art, artifacts, or species) in storage, in exhibitions, and when transported to other museums. Conservators utilize scholarship in material science and history to repair or restore objects in a collection, usually focusing on specific types of objects such as paintings, textiles, furniture, or even taxidermied animals.

Larger museums have exhibition departments that may feature managers, developers, designers, and fabricators who conceive exhibitions, collaborate with others to interpret objects and scholarship, and create the many components of exhibitions, from simple items such as cases and text panels to displays that rival stage sets, to complex computer interactive stations. Many museums have a preparator or fabrication manager who is the person responsible for

installing and de-installing exhibitions (e.g. painting walls, hanging artworks, cradling dinosaur bones, or mounting antique flags), as well as moving objects within storage or preparing them for shipment by packing them and building crates. Some museums also employ archivists, librarians, and intellectual property rights managers.

Education, Interpretation, Programming, and Evaluation

The role of education and interpretation may vary by institution, but the basic mission is the same: to create meaningful cognitive, affective, or social experiences with and for audiences, based on applied knowledge of educational theory and practice, knowledge of visitor needs and trends, and the mission, collections, scholarship, and themes of the museum.

At some museums the educators drive the exhibition program, considered a facet of the museum’s public dimension, by selecting topics, interpreting objects and concepts, and writing exhibition text panels and labels while consulting on design issues. In large education departments, additional responsibilities can be divided by program type and audience segment. For example, one staff member might organize evening lectures and performances, another person creates short-term classes or activities for preschool-age children, and someone else runs a specially funded tour program for Alzheimer’s patients and their caregivers.

An educator may serve as a museum teacher or gallery interpreter, connecting the public with collections and exhibitions. Management of docents and volunteers often falls within the education department but can also reside in other functions

(see visitor services, below). Educators also may write brochures and exhibition guides and contribute to the museum's membership publications, in consultation with the museum's curators and marketing staff. An educator also often provides extensive content for a museum's website or other technology-based delivery platforms (e.g. gallery interactives, mobile apps, podcasts, video), working in tandem with media and technology specialists.

Many museum educators have experience in evaluation methodology, and some museums have in-house staff to conduct audience research and evaluation. Other museums hire outside individuals or firms to conduct front-end, formative, and summative evaluation of exhibitions, programs, visitor experience, audience development, and other related activities. While usually in the education department, these functions may also be based in exhibition development, marketing, or administration/operations.

Marketing and Communications

A museum's marketing department is focused on the overall brand and promotion of the museum. These professionals consistently monitor and shape how a museum presents itself to the public, in terms of advertising, press, product development, wayfinding and promotional signage, and more, while also trying to maintain and attract more visitors, members, and prospective funders. This department often hires designers who unify the museum's graphic design on everything from outdoor signs and advertisements to stationery and publications, to various items such as mugs and napkins in the

museum store and food service facilities.

Staff writers ensure that the press releases, exhibition brochures, and ad copy all use the same voice appropriate to the material as well as to the reader. The public relations team promotes the museum and its activities, such as a blockbuster exhibition, a weekend family program, community-related events, and a related series of Friday night movies to press outlets like television and radio programs, newspapers, bloggers, and internet media, including Facebook, Twitter, and other social media.

The PR team may work closely with the director and education department to extend the museum's image and connection with the community. The marketing department might also manage visitor services (see below) and the admissions or ticketing functions of a museum as part of their focus on the public and the overall museum experience, as well as a means of gauging how successful their efforts are towards building awareness of the institution.

Visitor Services and Visitor Experience

A staff member or volunteer performing this function is often the first person a museum visitor encounters, and as such provides a critical opportunity for a museum to ensure that visitors have a positive educational and social experience. A visitor services or, increasingly, a visitor experience manager may supervise the workers responsible for admissions, parking, audio tours or other interactive guides, gallery guides, visitor information desks, wayfinding and orientation, and any other service or product that affects a visitor's experience.

A volunteer and docent manager trains and coordinates the people who generously give their time to offer tours to the public, assist with events such as public workshops, increasingly work behind-the-scenes with collections and in some cases run the museum's front desk and store. These workers may also work collaboratively with audience research and evaluation staff or contractors to gather feedback, demographics, and other data about visitors, which is used by this department, as well as by operations, marketing, education, and exhibitions where specialists in audience research, learning theory, and statistics create questionnaires and survey methodology.

With the increasing role technology plays in museum operations, visitor services staff may also serve as or work with technology professionals to manage the increasing complexity of ticketing, tour group management, and other information gathering and analysis systems related to visitor services.

Fundraising and Development

Sometimes termed "development" or "advancement," the fundraising department is tasked with a range of revenue-generating activities. The fundraising department may be responsible for garnering income for the museum outside of earned revenue (e.g. admissions fees or purchases from stores and food service facilities). For example, fundraising staff may collaborate with the marketing department on membership drives tied to a specific event or exhibition. The development department sometimes oversees upper-level membership groups, such as a director's council, young members group, and travel programs,

as well as coordinating special events like ticketed galas or benefit auctions.

Working closely with the museum's director and board of trustees, fundraising staff are involved in donor cultivation, meaning they help establish relationships with individuals and families who care greatly about the museum and have the resources to offer significant support to its growth and operations. This might mean a major contribution of funds towards a capital campaign (gifts to aid the museum's physical structure or an expansion), towards the endowment (a large amount of invested money that generates interest income for the museum), or a large gift of art or artifacts for the collection or towards a special project or exhibition (this latter function usually in close collaboration with collections staff).

Development departments also have staff who secure sponsorship from corporations for special projects or exhibitions, or who focus on applying for grant applications from foundations, corporations, and government agencies.

Administration and Operations

Although administration and operations might seem like a catch-all for everything that doesn't fit into the categories above, the responsibilities that fall under this group are the backbone of the day-to-day running of a museum, as well as key to its long-term success. The security and facility management personnel, for example, ensure that the collections and exhibitions remain secure and that the museum provides a safe and attractive environment for visitors and workers, caring for everything from lighting to air-conditioning and

heating systems to plumbing.

The IT staff's responsibilities have become increasingly critical with advances in hardware and software, as well as the infiltration of technology in all museum functions, such as accounting and admission systems, collections management software, and interactive exhibition components. Also within this category are income-generating services like museum stores, food service facilities, and facility rentals, such as renting out the museum's atrium for a wedding or a corporate holiday reception.

The administration department also encompasses the finance, accounting, legal, and human resources staff that, among many responsibilities such as complying with all tax and legal requirements for non-profits and managing the myriad contracts that service the museum functions, take care of the all-important payroll. Working closely with all of the organization's departments, administrators enforce and adjust the museum's budget, forecast financial needs, and oversee the museum's assets (e.g. endowments, physical property, and equipment). Administrative staff members spearhead major construction or renovation projects, work with advisory committees to develop and maintain overall strategic plans and feasibility studies, and manage special projects such as gaining or renewing accreditation from AAM.

A large museum might have a Chief Operating Officer and/or a Chief Financial Officer to manage the administrative arm of the museum or particular aspects such as earned income and facilities. But ultimately the responsibility falls upon the museum's director, who wears hats related to all of the functions mentioned above. *She must be highly knowledgeable about the subject specialty of the museum, as*

well as its exhibitions and collections. As the organization's primary spokesperson, she stays "on message" at all times, communicating the brand and aspirations of the museum to all variety of visitors, from a home schooling conference to a gathering of government officials, to gala patrons who spend tens of thousands of dollars to attend a special event. Meanwhile the budget and financial needs are never far from her mind as she works closely with her fundraisers and the museum's board to secure gifts, grants, and bequests.

Putting It All Together

Knowing how all the functions of a museum's departments complement each other and help fulfill the museum's mission is crucial to any professional intending to stay in the field long-term. For example, a curator who can write a grant and network effectively will find it much easier to fund exhibition projects and to solicit donations for the collection. An educator with an understanding of marketing not only helps publicize events and projects but also assists in locating and encouraging core segments of the community to engage with the museum in meaningful ways. And an administrator who comprehends the priorities of the other departments can identify and allocate the best resources to support those goals in an efficient and effective manner. In smaller museums, many of these responsibilities are conflated to create hybrid positions, such as a manager of public relations and education, a director who is also the chief curator, and a fundraiser who also oversees marketing.

Every kind of museum job demands its own specialized knowledge, experience, and professional standards. No matter

where your path takes you in the museum world, if you respect and learn from the contributions your fellow coworkers bring to their roles and your collective work in support of the museum, the public, and the field, you will find it much easier to succeed in your own position and in your career.

Practically Speaking: The Informational Interview

Wendy Luke

The informational interview can provide you information about an industry, a museum, historic house, zoo, science center, etc., an individual's career path, how to enter a field, and the challenges and satisfactions of a field, among other topics. It can help you choose or eliminate certain career paths. It can help you expand your network, refine your job search strategies, and find out about specific job opportunities. It is not a job interview.

To get an informational interview

Tap your friends, family, faculty members, former employers, colleagues, alumni connections, and associates from clubs you belong to for names of people with whom you should meet. Write, call, or email for an appointment. Be specific that you want an informational interview and ask for 15 to 30 minutes, the typical length of an informational interview. If you get the interview, be sure you honor the time commitment.

Show up on time and only meet with the interviewer for the allotted time frame.

Prepare for the interview

In preparing for the interview, learn something about the person with whom you are meeting, the institution and the specialty in which you are interested. Prepare your list of questions and write them down. Remember, you will have limited time with the interviewer and you want to make the most of it. Don't ask questions about information that is readily available on the Internet or in annual reports.

Set up the interview

Informational interviews are best done in-person. Be sure to show up on time dressed appropriately for the interview. Greet the interviewer warmly, with a firm handshake. Ask crisp questions. Listen. Take notes. Smile, make eye contact, and show you are interested in the information

the interviewer is giving you. An informational interview is about getting information. It is not about asking for a job. Your last question should ask for referrals. “Is there anyone else you can recommend I talk with, or organizations that I should contact?”

At the end of the interview

Follow up after the interview by sending a thank-you note. You might include an article that was pertinent to the conversation. If you meet with someone that the interviewer referred you to, send him or her a thank-you note for having made that introduction. If you keep the interviewer informed with your progress in finding a job, you are likely to build a cordial relationship.

Sample informational interview questions

1. Tell me about your typical workday.
2. What are the specific experience, skills, and knowledge you need to enter your field?
3. What educational programs, certificates, or licenses would be especially helpful to obtain for a job in this field?
4. What are the opportunities for advancement in the field?
5. What jobs and experiences have lead you to your current job?
6. What are the key skills, knowledge, and attributes for someone who is successful in this field?
7. What compensation might I expect at the start of my career and as I move up in this field?
8. What are the most and least satisfying aspects of your job?