

# **Graduate Training in Museum Studies: A Path for the Recruitment, Education, and Advancement of Museum Professionals**

by

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As the director of the largest graduate program in museum studies in the United States, you might expect that my remarks will be from the perspective of university faculty on the subject of recruiting, educating, and advancing museum professionals. However, before joining the museums studies faculty at the George Washington University about six years ago, I enjoyed a long museum career (the number of years I'll leave to your imagination)—suffice it to say that I started as an intern when Nixon was still in the White House. Subsequently I worked in collections management as a contract registrar. However, most of my years at the Smithsonian were spent as legal counsel to its sixteen museums and zoological park. By no means am I unique among our faculty as our entire full-time faculty came to teach museum studies in the classroom after long careers in museums. In fact all of our part-time faculty are still working in museums and come to teach for us in the evenings. This experience-based faculty structure keeps the faculty grounded and permits the curriculum:

- to strike a balance between theory and practice, and
- to build on close contacts with museums which assist in monitoring trends and in responding to changing training needs.

My discussion will be in three parts. First, I will talk about challenges in recruitment; second I will discuss educating students in graduate schools in museum studies; and third, I will briefly address continuing education and the role universities may play in advancing training for the mid-career professionals.

## I. The Recruitment Challenge

Recently I was asked to speak at a national conference of army museum curators. Looking out at the audience what I saw was a sea of silver hair. This was clearly an aging population. Indeed they tell me that approximately 75% percent of army museum professional staff is expected retire in the next five years. The army system is now scrambling to ensure that a new generation of curators will be ready and available to run the approximately 96 army museums and historical holdings around the country and overseas. Their goal, which is an admirable one, is to ensure that the new work force will be diverse and include all the segments of our society served by that system. I see this need for a diverse future work force as the primary recruitment challenge for the profession generally.

At GW we have more qualified student applicants than we can admit. Our entering class of graduate students this September was 60. Clearly, I do not think we lack interest among the younger generation in careers in museums. However, by and large the student body seeking admission to our program is white with middle class or working class backgrounds. So what can be done to interest students of color? There are many proposals and projects underway. Some note that the cost of graduate training is a barrier and therefore seeking grant funding to support minority students will help. Although I agree that lack of outside funding for graduate fellowships for museum studies is a big problem – a topic I will get back to shortly-- I believe that funding alone will not solve it. Rather, programs such as the one introduced in the army museum system recently may be more effective. The army museums established a partnership with a consortium of minority-serving undergraduate colleges headed by South Carolina State University, called the Army Museum System's Staff Development and Mentorship Program.<sup>i</sup> The seven minority-serving colleges in the consortium offer paid summer internship programs in the army museums all over the country to promising students with the view of interesting them in museum careers. In the future, a pre-internship distance-learning

course also will be offered to the selected students to introduce them to the general operation of museums. It will be up to university programs in museum studies, such as ours, to enter this pipeline and to encourage education at a graduate level.

As noted earlier, few would dispute that successful recruitment for graduate school and offering financial support go hand-in-hand. Undoubtedly, one of our biggest challenges at GW is the rising cost of graduate education. The sad reality is that there are no sufficient sources of fellowship money for students seeking an advanced degree in museum studies. Universities offer some help for their own programs, but not enough. Students often have to rely on now easily available federal loans. This solution has a major pitfall. If the students take out sufficient loans to pay for a two-year graduate degree, often they are hard pressed to afford to pay the loans back after they graduate on the meager entry-level salaries offered by museums. In effect they could have trained for a career they cannot afford to enter. This I fear is the most significant challenge facing museum studies programs and the museum profession in the future. So, what are we doing at the university to help our students avoid this financial trap? At GW we encourage students to work while they are studying to lessen the reliance on loans. We post part-time and temporary museum job listings on our student listserv and we encourage our contacts in local museums to list such opportunities with us. In essence we have become a job placement center. We also help students find jobs at the university, both in work-study positions and career slots. A not well-known fact is that most universities will offer free tuition for their administrative staff. The result of this for us is that museum studies students are employed in university departments and elsewhere as administrative assistants and rely on tuition credits alone to earn their degrees. This route might take them an additional semester, but it also means that they graduate loan free. The downside of this route is that students cannot concentrate fully on their studies as they juggle demanding job commitments with graduate school. Remarkably, however, most of them do both extremely well as they are a committed hard-working group. We have also established a museum studies endowment at the university for which we fundraise annually. Our hope is that eventually we will be able to offer fellowship support from our endowment. As you might suspect our alumni are not wealthy, but they

are loyal and many contribute to our annual direct mail campaign. We hope that in about ten or more years we might have sufficient money to being offering some fellowships from this fund in addition to the few fellowships we receive from the university annually. The struggle to find outside sources for graduate support will continue.

## II. The Education Challenge

This discussion needs to begin with a little history to set the context. The history of the development of museum studies as an academic discipline in our colleges and university reveals that museum studies programs are of recent vintage – most have been founded since the 1970's. Apart from one or two early exceptions, the training of museum professionals prior to the 1970s was done through the apprenticeship model -- a person with a disciplinary subject-matter expertise (such as history, anthropology or art history) was hired by a museum and learned museum work on the job under the tutelage of a more experienced colleague.<sup>ii</sup> This model served the profession well in a time when museums were much simpler institutions – institutions that were essentially curatorial-controlled and managed. By contrast, the situation today is quite different. The survey conducted by the American Association of Museums (AAM) in 1998 found over 180 college or university programs offering some type of museum studies training.<sup>iii</sup> Museum Studies is defined today as academic programs in colleges and universities designed to prepare students for professional positions in museums. The Guide published by the AAM lists over 50 graduate degree-granting academic programs in the United States that require an undergraduate degree in some academic discipline such as history, anthropology, or art history for admission.<sup>iv</sup> These programs offer graduate Master of Arts and Master of Sciences degrees. In addition, there are a handful of colleges that offer some undergraduate programs and a much greater number that offer no degree but only a few museum studies courses as a part of a degree in a subject-matter discipline. In addition to a master's degree, another option in the United States is the certificate in Museum Studies, which typically is a shorter program usually taken in conjunction with another graduate degree. For example you may receive a Master of Arts in Anthropology

and a concurrent Certificate in Museum Studies. There are no doctoral programs in museums studies in United States. Museum staff wishing to pursue a doctoral degree may do so in a subject-matter discipline.

In our experience at the George Washington University, a graduate degree in museum studies is developing into a recognized and necessary step in the path to a museum career. The Museum Studies degree is more frequently listed as recommended for many entry-level museum positions. Whereas our students 20 years ago were for the most part older and already working in museums and completing the degree for advancement, the vast majority of our current students are young recent university graduates with bachelor degrees looking to be prepared by the university at the graduate level for a museum career. We boast a job placement rate of over 90% of our museum studies graduates in such positions as collections managers, exhibition developers, assistant curators, and various administrative positions, including, public programming and fundraising. We also have several museum directors among our recent alumni.

What happened in the 1970's and beyond to account for this remarkable change in the way we train our museum professionals? Here I am relying on work of my colleague, Marie Malaro.<sup>v</sup> Her answer to this lies in a change in audience that affected all facets of museum work. She notes that starting in the 1970's the general public took a growing interest in museums due in part to the celebrations of the 1976 bicentennial and the additional funding museums enjoyed for telling the story of our first 200 years of existence. Many communities established museums or historical societies that recorded local history if they had no such resource. Existing museums took a fresh look at their exhibits, and planning for major new exhibits was underway. Museums also created new public programs of a celebratory nature.

In addition, by the 1970's many more American families were enjoying comfortable incomes; they were better educated due to post WWII veterans' benefits, and had more leisure time. Museums offered new ways of spending this leisure time and the crowds came. An additional factor explaining this growing popularity of museums was the recognition by educators that individuals learn in different ways. One such way was

learning by studying objects and their contexts - what museums are about. As a result, museums were becoming important partners to schools.

Professor Malaro explains that as museums began to enjoy their growing audiences there were soon indications that the spotlight of success can bring problems.

“New museum audiences were beginning to ask questions about how museums are run. There were questions about the quality of museum collections; about access to those collections; about access to collection records; questions about the accuracy or effectiveness of museum exhibits, and about whether museums were doing enough to reach wider audiences? And, were museums sensitive to the ethnic backgrounds found within those new audiences? Did they recognize the needs of their disabled visitors?”<sup>vi</sup>

To meet these demands museum staff specialization became necessary. Museum staff needed skills not met by the academic subject-matter training and skills that were not necessarily held by older professionals already on staff, skills in education, collections care, and management, for example.

Colleges and universities responded. In offering special concentrations in museum studies the challenge was to find faculty with a balance of theoretical training and museum experience and to craft a curriculum that offered both. Let me take the example of my colleague Martha Morris. She is the former deputy director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. She retired two years ago from that position to come to teach museum management at our university full-time. She has over 35 years of museum management experience and holds a Master of Business Administration degree that she earned while she advanced in the museum. She pursued her MBA because she recognized that the management skills taught in a graduate business school would be very helpful to run a complex museum operation. She now teaches those management skills to museum studies students in the classroom. Her seminar, “Managing People and Managing Projects” uses real life examples of museum projects and requires the students to analyze how the projects worked and how they could

have been improved from a management standpoint. She also teaches another seminar, “Leading Change in Museums.” Through a case study method, this course helps to prepare students for leadership roles in institutions that are in transition.

The concentration we offer in exhibition development includes courses on curatorial research and planning, script writing and two courses on exhibition design. The exhibition content courses are taught by Kym Rice who has over 25 years of curatorial experience and the two design courses are taught by exhibition designers from area museums. We also offer a course on museum audiences and evaluation through our sister Museum Education program at GW.

To balance theory with practice, the curriculum also requires an on-the-job component, which is traditionally called internship training. In our program, students are required to spend 520 hours working in at least two museums on pre-approved internship projects that relate to their intended area of concentration (concentrations in our program are either in collections management, exhibition development or museum administration). These internships are a key part of their education. Recognizing this the university pays each museum that sponsors one of our students for an internship a portion of that student’s tuition by way of reimbursement for the resources used by the intern. As a result, the relationship between the museum and the university is contractual thus assuring that the student receives the training and experience expected. Our students work side by side with local museum professionals, but they may also choose to do their internships farther from our home base. This past summer, our students interned in museums in Wyoming, Georgia, Connecticut, Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia. We have had students select internships abroad including museums in London and Osaka, Japan.

In addition to hands-on-practice, some courses are better taught on site in museums. At GW we are fortunate to have a contractual relationship with the Smithsonian Institution by which some of our courses are taught on site at the Smithsonian by Smithsonian staff. For example, we are now teaching a course on collections management of archival collections. This course was taught for the past two

summers on location at the National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian by its professionally- trained archivist. For over two decades we have taught preventive conservation at the Smithsonian's facilities. Three years ago we also introduced a course on Digital Imaging. This course is taught at the National Museum of Natural History by the chief manager of the digitizing project, a PhD anthropologist who uses the digital imaging equipment to allow students hand-on experience in addition to classroom time to discuss developing policies and practices in the field.

In addition to theory and practice of museum operations, we stress the importance of a subject specialty. Each of our Master of Arts students is required to specialize in a subject discipline (typically, history, anthropology or American studies) and five graduate courses in the subject are required in addition to their museum studies coursework. We strongly believe that a solid foundation in an academic subject is essential to their graduate education.

Students studying anthropology are in the same program with students in biology, art history or American Studies. Mixing students with diverse museum interests brings a unique vitality to classroom. I teach a seminar on the international movement of cultural property. You can imagine the interesting discussions between those students who are trained archeologists with those who come from an art history background and are intending to work for an art museum on the ethics of collecting cultural property with incomplete provenience.

As for cross-discipline skills, we strive to teach our students as future leaders to be problem solvers who can analyze a situation and come up with a variety of solutions. We stress good communication, both written and oral. A student must demonstrate the ability to research and write effectively before they are allowed to graduate. Oral presentations of student projects are required in almost all of our courses. Working on group projects is also a key component of the many courses. As you might expect, occasionally we get complaints from the over-achievers in a group about uneven distribution of the workload. We respond that learning about group dynamics and getting the work done are significant goals of assignment. We also stress museum ethics in all of



our main courses and require students to analyze hypothetical situations in light of ethical guidelines of the profession. Our museum studies comprehensive examination is based on a case study and requires problem-solving, issue-based essays.

I would be remiss if I didn't bring to your attention the fact that museum studies programs have their critics. I note that many of these critics are people who never came through the system and thus often do not know what we teach and why. They remember the apprenticeship model and think that museum work can be learned on the job. My response to this is that one definite benefit of museum studies over the apprenticeship model is that the time to learn the basics is greatly reduced by classroom learning. In addition most museum staff members are so busy that often they cannot step back and look at the "big picture" in terms of where the profession is heading. The graduate seminar offers time for reflection and debate. For example in the classroom we can debate the downside of increased commercialism in U.S. museums. What will this mean in the future? How can the professional establish ethical guidelines to assist museums in making decisions in this area? We use reported events in the press, such as the recent problems faced by the Smithsonian with the Reynolds gift, namely donor-imposed demands relating to the content of a proposed exhibition. We ask how the museum can maintain the intellectual integrity of its programs while accepting much needed financial help from individual donors and corporations.

Finally, another benefit of museum studies programs over the apprenticeship model relates to the fact that demands are made on museums to change so rapidly, academic programs can keep abreast of these changes and develop courses to respond to them. Technology provides a good example. As I mentioned, we teach a digital imaging course and also a course that examines the use of technology for public programming purposes. Students look at audio tours, kiosks, websites and other ways museums reach out to their audiences. The skills that students learn in these courses are in great demand and not necessarily skills that are held by existing museum staff.

Many in the profession also note that there are no curriculum standards for museum studies in the United States. The programs vary greatly. While this is true, the

profession has made efforts to develop standards. The Committee of Museum Professional Training (COMPT) of the AAM has been involved in those efforts.<sup>vii</sup> On the international front, members of the International Council of Museums, International Committee on Training of Personnel (ICOM-ICTOP) issued a resolution in December 2002 specifically addressing museum training needs in a globalizing world stressing the need for training programs to “respond to the changing nature of museums as an institution in the service of society, that is audience driven...”<sup>viii</sup> The ICTOP resolution also stressed the importance of international student exchanges citing that one way to respond to the globalization issues and trends is by promoting such exchanges. In our case, GW established the Certificate in Museum Studies Program to meet the training needs of international museum professionals who wished to study American museum practices. The program is one calendar year long and is funded in some cases by Fulbright Fellowships. These students take the same courses offered to museum studies graduate students, including internships at local museums, although we offer one introductory course to international students to acclimate them to the nonprofit organizational structure of museums in the United States. We have had students from Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Netherlands, Spain, Brazil, Austria, South Africa, and the Peoples Republic of China to name a few. Their presence in the program enriches the educational experience of everyone, faculty included. I am sad to report however, that the number of international students has decreased significantly since 9/11 due, in part, to the difficulty in obtaining student visas.

In sum, I agree with the critics that museums studies programs in universities lack consistency in training both in terms of quality and scope. The future may bring guidelines for standardization. However, any such efforts must keep in mind that flexibility in the curriculum offers opportunities to respond quickly to ever-changing needs.

### III. Mid-career Training for Advancement

There is almost universal agreement that more mid-career level training for museum personnel is needed in the profession. Some have never had any formal training aside from on-the-job instruction. Others wish to learn new skills or improve their current practices through additional educational opportunities. There are several well-known programs that are underway.<sup>ix</sup> The problem I see is that we are currently reaching only a small segment of the population needing such training. My strong conviction here is that technology may provide the answer. Specifically, I am referring to distance learning. I see that the university's role in the future training of mid-career professionals is to create distance learning programs on a variety of topics and to offer them in partnership with professional museum associations to their membership at greatly reduced costs. For this to happen, grant support to develop these courses is needed. Indeed pursuing such grant support is exactly what we are doing now at GW. One course is done. This course was developed using faculty and student resources and very little money. But, as we had hoped, this course served as a demonstration of what is possible. We have applied for a large grant to the National Endowment for the Humanities ("NEH") to develop a set of four distance learning courses in collections care. The proposed grant project includes partnerships with two museum associations for distribution of the course to their members. We expect to hear from NEH in January. We already have plans to develop courses in other areas such as museum management. We feel that through distance learning we may contribute to developing and sustaining a corps of effective leaders. Through distance learning we hope to reach wider and more diverse audiences as these online courses may be offered at a reduced cost through many venues, including minority-serving professional associations.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.nmusa-sdmp.com> The members of the consortium are South Carolina State University, Hampton University, Haskell Indian National University, Jackson State University, North Carolina A&T, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, and the University of Texas Pan American.

<sup>ii</sup> Spiess, Philip D. "Museum Studies: Are They Doing Their Job?" *Museum News* 75(6):32-40.

<sup>iii</sup> The 1998 survey was published in *Museum Studies and Training in the United States 1999-2000* (Washington D.C.: American Association of Museums 1999).

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>v</sup> Malaro, Marie C “Lecture: Why Take a Course on Legal and Ethical Issues of Collection Management?” *Collections Management: Legal and Ethical Issues: A Distance Learning Course of the Graduate Program in Museum Studies* (Washington D.C.: Museum Studies Program, The George Washington University 2002).

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Notable efforts to establish curriculum guidelines for museum studies programs have included a report of the Museum Studies Curriculum Committee of the American Association of Museums entitled *Museum Studies: A Curriculum Guide for Universities and Museum* published in 1973. Later efforts shifted to providing guidelines to students in evaluating programs, including the 1995 AAM publication entitled *Guide to Evaluation of Museum Studies Programs*. Most recently the Committee for Museum Professional Training (“COMPT”) of the AAM approved further guiding principles in May 2004 at its annual meeting. On the international front the International Committee of Museums (“ICOM”) issued *ICOM Curricula Guidelines for Museum Professional Development (2000)* published at <http://museumstudies.si.edu/ICOM-ICTOP/index.htm> (accessed November 4, 2004)

<sup>viii</sup> ICOM’s International Committee on the Training of Personnel (“ICTOP”) issued a resolution in 2002, “Museum Training in a Globalizing World,” <http://www.city.ac.uk/ictop/resolutions2002.html> (accessed November 4, 2004)

<sup>ix</sup> For a comprehensive list of workshops, seminars, and lectures, see In-career Museum Training and Educational opportunities Clearing House created by the Smithsonian Center for Education and Museums Studies at <http://museumstudies.si.edu/Listings.htm> (accessed November 4, 2004)