

TECHNICAL LEAFLET

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STUDENT PROJECTS AND INTERNSHIPS IN A MUSEUM SETTING

by Mary Ellen Conaway

The purpose of a student project or internship is for the student to gain knowledge and experience in a specific endeavor. The process should benefit the intern, the mentor, and the mentor's museum. It has been argued by some in the museum field that professional standards require payment to an intern because the intern is working for the museum, much like an employee. If the intern is not paid, the argument goes, he or she has been "taken advantage of" by the institution. However, properly designed internship programs involve reciprocal relationships. When the benefits are reciprocal to both parties, the internship does not necessarily have to involve payment for services.

Under a program that is designed to meet a student's interests and a museum's needs, the student should expect to receive course credit and invaluable on-site experience. Students also will benefit by making professional contacts and by receiving instruction in specific skills. After the internship is completed, students should be able to gauge their abilities relative to museum professionals. They also will have concrete evidence of their accomplishments, struggles, and successes.

PLANNING: THE MUSEUM

A museum can expect to commit considerable time, talent, skills, and resources to an intern. A museum must review its resources—such as its available work space, its available staff, the use of volunteers, and its finances—before committing itself to a program of student projects and internships. Successful internship programs are the result of ensuring that the needs of the student and the needs of the museum are congruent. Adequate preparation,

however, often takes several months—sometimes even a year or more. During this time, the museum staff must identify its needs and determine how student projects could be beneficial to the museum.

One method that will help the museum plan for its use of interns is to have each staff member make a list of short- and long-term goals and needs. These lists can be categorized several ways. For instance, a museum may choose to prioritize its objectives according to museum functions, by project length, or by the complexity of the projects. In a small museum, the director or administrator most likely would handle the job of organizing the list of needs; in a larger institution, a curator might be in the best position to do so.

One example of a categorized list is shown in Appendix A. This particular list was compiled by the staff at the Racine County Historical Society and Museum, Racine, Wisconsin, but any museum can come up with a similar list. Completion of the full list, of which Appendix A is one part, took ten hours at Racine County. Many institutions may find they can compile and organize a list in a shorter length of time.

After the needs of the museum have been prioritized and categorized in a succinct list, the stage is set to promote the museum as an available project and internship site. To create awareness that a museum is an inviting site to interns, the museum's staff must promote it on a regular basis. However, recognition won't come overnight and may, in fact, take years to accomplish.

There are some general steps that will begin to pave the way. A museum staff member must periodically contact area schools, colleges, and universities to discuss the

availability of the museum's resource staff and facilities for students. When dealing with a high school, it is helpful to meet with the faculty involved with the school's honor program. In a university setting, discussing the museum's resources with the appropriate department faculty, such as the heads of the anthropology, history, and museum studies departments, is often the best way to share your information. After many months of dialogue between the museum staff and the academic institutions, information about the museum should begin to appear as part of student syllabus literature on course options.

Occasionally students will approach museums with their own project proposals. This is an attractive option for a museum that already has taken steps to set up a program for interns. The appropriate staff member at the museum should be ready to discuss the student's ideas. At this time, the key for the museum is to be prepared with a project list and a staff member who is ready to become a mentor.

Today, many educational institutions are suggesting—and some even are requiring—that students seek and perform on-site, museum volunteer projects as part of a specific curriculum. One museum, for example, was approached by an architectural student who requested to do the entire renovation to the interior design for a Victorian-era home. According to the project description, the specific goals of the student were to become familiar with the literature on historic house furnishings and renovation through the museum's documents, photos, artifacts, tape recordings, and oral interviews and to develop a thorough knowledge of the house, its occupants, and the renovation completed to date.

It is easy to understand why universities consider these types of on-site projects to be invaluable learning tools. Museum staff should view these student projects as seriously as those called "museum studies." By taking these projects seriously, the museum becomes known to university officials as one in which trained professionals fulfill a valuable educational role within the community.

PLANNING: THE STUDENT

A large part of the success of an internship rests on the amount of initiative demonstrated by the student—even before the project begins. Students have the responsibility to provide certain pertinent information to museums at the outset of their internships. Guidelines, such as the number of required hours per credit, the student's expectations for professional training, time lines, and faculty supervision, should be clearly stated by the student.

The student should draft a time line for the project. Then, working with museum staff, the student should identify what he or she is expected to produce during the internship period. For example, students should understand that producing a small exhibit will take several weeks longer than researching the documentation on an artifact in the museum's collection.

The time allotted to an internship is limited; therefore, it is important that the student's expectations be reasonable. It is critical for the student to complete a finished product during the internship—one that can be viewed with pride and one that meets a particular need on the part of the

museum. The greater the congruence between the student's perceived needs and the museum's resources, the greater the likelihood for success. It has been the experience for the staff at the Racine County Historical Society and Museum that roughing out a plan should take a student two to four hours over the course of several meetings. A final internship agreement may take anywhere from two to eight hours to complete, depending on the length and sophistication of the project.

Clearly, the process described here requires a commitment of time and expertise on the part of museum staff. Museums should be prepared, however, that the return—that is, the product and results of the internship—may not pay off in terms of saved staff time or additional human resources for the museum. The reason a museum should engage in a program of instruction and apprenticeship is primarily to promote its professionalism through its capacity to train students and serve as a mentoring facility. Only secondarily, should a museum expect to accomplish its own goals through the use of an intern. Bringing in new ideas, enthusiasm, and a sense of curiosity will be one of the greatest rewards a museum can receive.

HIRING AN INTERN

Once the museum is ready to receive intern candidates, there are certain steps that the staff should follow to begin the relationship on good footing. At the outset, of course, all students interested in participating in the museum's program must be interviewed. During this first meeting, the student should be given the museum's list of potential projects, its annual program calendar, a sample of a project or internship agreement, and, if applicable, a job description. The museum project list, such as the one shown in Appendix A, will give the student guidance as to what projects are of high priority to the museum; however, museums should be ready to accommodate the special talents and individual interests that a student may have as well.

During the interview, it is a good idea to establish the terms of the relationship through an internship agreement. An internship agreement is a formal document that spells out the objectives of the internship, the location and duration of the work, and the supervisory aspects of the relationship (see Figure 1).

The intern candidate should expect to take an active role in the development of the agreement and should work with museum staff to define reasonable project goals. In addition, the student should clearly state what specific training he or she expects to receive. These are the objectives upon which the intern's performance will be evaluated; so it is critical that the student and the supervisor clearly understand what these goals are and how they will be achieved during the work period.

Because museums traditionally have limited time, resources, energies, and space, a part of the screening process should test the candidate's skills in planning, organizing, and prioritizing. Any student who cannot cooperate with museum staff to produce a coherent internship agreement likely cannot organize and produce a worthwhile project. Agreeing to work with a student who

LIST OF POTENTIAL STUDENT PROJECTS AND INTERNSHIPS

*Education Field***Nineteenth-century schoolhouse:**

- (a) Review all aspects of the schoolhouse living history program (building, yard environment, volunteer school teachers, instructional materials, etc.);
- (b) Evaluate the program as an outside specialist, use interviews and questionnaires with volunteers, students, teachers, and parents;
- (c) Recommend changes to the program, including its philosophical underpinnings;
- (d) Suggest procedures for implementation and evaluation.

Exhibit guide development:

- (a) Become familiar with the history of the county and the museum's exhibits;
- (b) Become conversant with museum and educational literature about how people learn and interact in museums;
- (c) Given the nature and structure of the museum's exhibits, develop a guide for ages eight through fifteen that will enhance visitors' knowledge and make a museum visit a learning experience;
- (d) Test guide and evaluate it; revise as needed.

Outreach kits:

- (a) Read literature about "suitcase" and "traveling kit" programs and about learning with museum objects;
- (b) Select a subject related to the museum's mission, exhibits, and collection that can be developed into a kit;
- (c) Define age or grade level, purpose, goals, objectives, and resources needed;
- (e) Provide a final plan for kit production, including costs, components, and a distribution plan.

*Exhibit and Collection Fields***Cameras and photographic images:**

- (a) Research and document every camera and piece of photographic equipment in the museum's collections;
- (b) Match photo images from the archive collection to camera type, and describe methods of image production;
- (c) Research current methods of image conservation and preservation;
- (d) Develop an exhibit format using this information, including a preliminary budget and educational components, for either children or adults;
- (e) Work with museum staff to develop and install the exhibit and to test the educational program.

Musical instruments:

- (a) Research, document and verify or adjust catalog data on all musical instruments in the museum's collection;
- (b) Relate instruments to the county's ethnic and social groups;
- (c) Develop an exhibit format based on step (b); Include a preliminary budget, exhibit layout, musical instrument conservation needs, and ideas for associated educational program;
- (d) Produce the exhibit and test the educational program, evaluate, adjust, and produce finished products.

*Collections Care and Documentation Field***Fabrics collection:**

- (a) Review literature on care of clothing and other fabrics in museum collections including storage and conservation;
- (b) Become familiar with the museum's collection and define a specific part of that collection for focused research;
- (c) Research and fully document all items in the focus area;
- (d) Recommend procedures for upgrading care and conservation needs, and develop a preliminary budget necessary to address these needs;
- (e) Based on an evaluation of available resources, implement the recommendations.

Archive:

- (a) Become familiar with literature on archive operations, policies, procedures, philosophies, and conservation;
- (b) Review all procedures and policies currently used in the museum and their implications for archive operations;
- (c) Become familiar with all archive contents and the museum's mission;
- (d) Produce recommended changes in archive procedures that relate to the museum's collections policy and specify how these changes will affect archive content, organization, and use;
- (e) Implement the recommended changes;
- (f) Evaluate changes and make adjustments to plan.

shows signs of inadequate organizational skills from the outset could later result in a major headache for museum staff. Finally, as with the case of any volunteer, it is prudent to have the student sign a volunteer's agreement that includes standard liability clauses for the museum's protection.

WORKING WITH INTERNS

Honesty, dependability, and initiative are vital characteristics for the student to possess if he or she wants to break into history or museum work. The importance of working well with others and the ethics of the profession should be discussed fully during the interview. The student must understand that written proposals must contain accurate information. They also must be neat and written with clarity, consistency, and completeness.

The key to successful museum work is cooperation. Prior to an internship, a student may have experienced a sense of personal achievement and pride after working alone on research and documentation in an academic setting. When applying their research within the museum environment, however, some students may feel as though their personal achievements have been lost in a sea of daily operational concerns. The needs of museum exhibit staff, custodians, and security personnel, among others, may seem as though they are constraining the student's project goals.

Practical use of academic research within the scope of a museum requires that students take part in a dialogue among staff and be ready to consider different interpretations. Students must learn that a compromise between the views of the pure scholar and the views of museum operations personnel sometimes must be made. In his or her role as a museum apprentice, the student must be willing to communicate and cooperate on all levels.

Examples of this process of applying scholastic knowledge to museum operations should be discussed with potential project personnel. It is often useful to set up role playing models that include various museum staff. In museum studies, applied history, and similar courses that include museum work for credit, students should be given projects that consist of "what if" proposals. The following proposals, for example, might be useful for the student to analyze:

- What if a museum department, such as the research archive, was operated by volunteers, and they consistently failed to assist with your request for documentation and photocopies for your internship project? What steps would you take to resolve this problem?
- What if you developed a concept to explain a cultural practice, but you had no idea how to translate the concept into an exhibit setting? Who on the museum staff would be the best person to help you?
- What if you're a student of design and the museum's exhibit preparator, with thirty-five years of experience, thinks your exhibit design is unstable and too exotic? She refuses to help implement it. What do you do to address the impasse and seek solutions?

Work in museums requires interactive, cooperative

behavior within the museum as well as within the community. There are no isolated directors or curators. Students should be given tasks that require them to apply information and skills learned in the classroom toward practical needs. For example, students could be asked to develop short programs that could be presented to school children of varying grade levels. Other ideas might be to prepare writing labels or to organize a time line for completion of an exhibit.

Finally, it is not trite to emphasize that limitations are an inevitable part of life. In light of the inherent limits placed upon time and staffing during an internship, it is important for the student periodically to harken back to the objectives laid out in the internship agreement. Training that helps develop good judgment on how to approach projects and on how to judge the amount of time needed to complete a project is crucial. It is at least as important as the intellectual and creative growth that is cultivated during an internship.

DOCUMENTATION

A museum project of any length, an internship, or a volunteer program should result in a documented, evaluated report. Few museums can pay stipends to students they are teaching and supervising, but they can make certain that every project contributes to the intellectual and programmatic advancement of the student. Keeping documentation also records the number of the interns who have worked in the museum and tracks the kinds of contributions they have made to overall operations.

DEVELOPING AND ADMINISTERING STUDENT INTERNSHIPS

The following points are guidelines and suggestions for developing internship programs within a museum or historical society.

(1) The parties responsible for the project—volunteers, students, interns, museum site supervisors, faculty supervisors and counselors, and others—must agree on the overall nature of the project or internship, including its major components, prior to the beginning date of the project.

(2) The responsible parties must develop a draft of the complete project using an approved format that has been established by the school or by the museum. When an agreement has been reached, the draft should be typed and approved, and the final copy should be typed and signed. A copy should be given to each party. The agreement must have specific objectives that include the following:

- The agreement must be consistent with the purpose of projects or internships at the student's educational institution.
- The agreement should be, ethically and professionally, a sound application of the intern's time and energies at the museum.
- The agreement should have reasonable expectations and goals that can be achieved during the time allotted for the project. The agreement should specify what is due on these deadlines.

SAMPLE INTERNSHIP AGREEMENT

Internship in Museology

Student: John Smith

Address: 100 Main St.

Phone: 414-555-1000

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. M. E. Conaway

Address: Racine County Historical Society and Museum

Institution: Racine County Historical Society and Museum

Internship Dates: May 20–August 23, 1985

Credits and total work hours: 6; 20/week; 280 total hours

Site Supervisor: Dr. M. E. Conaway

Address: Racine County Historical Society and Museum

Phone: 414-555-2000

Objectives of the Internship:

- To develop curatorial skills of collections research, documentation, and evaluation.
- To apply academic knowledge, theory, and the data gathered on a collection to the development of an exhibit and accompanying education packet.
- Using museum artifacts, records, and other research materials, survey and evaluate a collection of artifacts used primarily in a kitchen setting.
- Document items in the collection; recommend with appropriate justification the acquisition of artifacts to round out, complement, or replace artifacts in the collection.
- Develop an exhibit concept, and with that concept, design an exhibit and a compatible educational packet.

Intern

Faculty Supervisor

Site Supervisor

Internship Guidelines

Record keeping: The intern will maintain a timely journal and develop a portfolio on the project. These materials will be reviewed and evaluated by the site supervisor and the faculty supervisor.

Work Schedule: The internship requires a minimum of 160 hours (3 credits), although 320 hours (6 credits) are encouraged. A work schedule will be outlined and agreed upon by the intern and the site supervisor.

Evaluations: Periodic evaluation dates are outlined. A final evaluation will be made by the site supervisor at the end of the internship. The work will be evaluated on its precision, order, accuracy, thoroughness, neatness, and creativity. The intern will be evaluated on his or her ability to synthesize, follow directions, use initiative, and complete tasks on time. A written evaluation by the site supervisor will accompany the intern's journal, summary statement, and portfolio. These materials will be evaluated by the faculty supervisor, who will assign a grade.

Other conditions: The intern is expected to comply with all requirements of security and public relations applicable to regular staff.

Outline of Internship Objectives:

RESEARCH AND CURATORIAL COMPONENT

Readings, Documentation, Other Research:

Research kitchen-related items using museum records, library and oral history resources, and the artifacts. Evaluate collection in terms of frontier, rural and town life, and the representativeness of the collection in terms of time, quality, and quantity, and relate these factors to an ability to use it interpretatively.

Skills To Be Acquired: May 20–June 22

Use of a multitude of resources to document artifacts and cultural context; curatorial judgment of a collection.

Due June 22: Written report.

Evaluation: Based on comprehensiveness of the artifact and historical data and skill and creativity used to interpret it.

References:

Schlereth, Thomas. *Artifacts and the American Past*. AASLH: Nashville, 1980.

Quimby, M. B., ed. *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*. Norton & Co., New York, 1978.

Anderson, Jay. *Time Machines. The World of Living History*. AASLH: Nashville, 1984.

References on town history in the museum.

EXHIBIT COMPONENT

Readings, Documentation, Other Research:

Development of an exhibit consistent with 1890–1910 kitchen in town. Design an exhibit with the conceptual theme; include artifact placement, mood, recreational and didactic goals; develop mock-up.

Skills To Be Acquired: June 24–July 20

Concept development based on data at hand, education and experience; scale mock-up production.

Due June 29: Written statement on the theme.

Due July 20: Mock-up and associated written materials.

Evaluation: Based on clarity of presentation and consistency of theme, data, artifacts and interpretative message.

References:

Witteborg, Lothar. *Good Show! A Practical Guide for Temporary Exhibits*. Smithsonian Institution. Washington, D. C., 1981 Neal, Arminta.

Exhibits for the Small Museum. AASLH. 1976 Borun, Minda.

Measuring the Immeasurables. A Pilot Study of Museum Effectiveness. ASTC: Washington, D. C., 1977.

- As a guide to the student, the agreement must include major references and source materials and should reflect basic and timely information in the museum field.
- The agreement should describe a coherent, consistent learning process that involves the application of knowledge, skills, and talents and the acquisition of new information, skills, and techniques. These should be specified as needed.
- There should be specific dates noted for formal discussion among the parties regarding the progress of the project. Evaluations must be built into every step. Supervision, crucial to this form of learning, determines the success of a project as well as the potential for future projects.

(4) The faculty counselor's and museum site supervisor's final evaluations are to be based on the objectives and criteria outlined in the written agreement. The final evaluation should be given to the student, and, in the case of a student working for course credits, the evaluation should be filed with his or her school records. Regular evaluations are very important to the student and the museum staff, which is why taking on student projects and internships is a major commitment, often calling on the staff member's personal time as well.

(5) If, for any reason, the student is unable to carry out one or more of the stated objectives, the museum site and faculty supervisor should discuss with the student acceptable alternatives.

CONCLUSION

The process described in this article does not advocate any specific length for a project or internship. The length of the commitment is dictated by museum studies' course requirements, a school's course requirements, a student's goals, and the project itself. If the project agreement is formulated as described above, then the experience, training, supervision, and results will be evident. A 120-hour project will not be mistaken for a 360-hour internship in content or evaluation.

Reciprocity, the sharing of benefits among all parties, is critical to the teaching and mentoring of students in the museum field. The agreement between the museum and the intern specifies the breadth and depth of the learning experience. It clearly sets out the importance of sharing and professional exchanges. Reciprocity, therefore, keeps the mechanisms of the internship humming.

Having the student develop the terms of the internship agreement is a positive step toward implementing a successful program. A well-thought-out internship agreement requires the parties to address the nature of learning and sharing; giving and taking. The benefits for both parties will be clearly stated at the beginning of the relationship, and the perception that the student was "taken advantage of" will be eliminated.

Mary Ellen Conaway is director of the Racine County Historical Society and Museum, Racine, Wisconsin.

