So you want to work in a museum?
Guiding the Careers of Future Museum Information Professionals

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An Interesting Question

“How do I become an Information Professional in a Museum?”

Images courtesy of the Spurlock Museum
http://www.spurlock.uiuc.edu
How?
quickly becomes
What?

○ What is a museum information professional anyway?
○ What does one actually do?
○ What skills would one need if one wanted to become such a thing?

Images courtesy of the Spurlock Museum
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A New Role is Emerging

“Perhaps there is a new role in museums for an ‘information manager’ who is charged with caring for the museum’s information. [...] Few, if any, museums have a staff position with this title now, but the function will become increasingly important as we integrate information systems into our daily work.” (Hermann, 1997, p.75)

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Grappling with the Concept

- “Responsible for facilitating the flow of information within an institution and between the institution and the public.” (Glaser and Zenetou, 1996, p.103)

- “Seeking an experienced, energetic, and innovative manager who can lead the dynamic development of the museum’s information infrastructure.” (Natural History Museum, London, 2001)

- “Responsible for defining the museum’s strategic approach to information storage.” (The Field Museum, Chicago, 2003)
Problems for Students...

- Seeking a position that is poorly defined and constantly changing, yet requires a range of skills and entails a variety of responsibilities.

- Coping with all the inherent difficulties of preparing for a museum career while at the same time trying to define the very position they seek.

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How can we help?

- **Study the evolving role of museum information professionals...**

- **Explore what they are doing, where they came from, how they got their jobs, and how they keep them...**

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Current Research Study

- Interviewed 21 information professionals working in 17 different museums...

- Asked about their career paths, educational backgrounds, and on-the-job experiences...

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Participants Sharing Diversity

- Almost all stumbled into their careers accidentally
- Few could predict what skills would be useful to them in advance
- All emphasized the importance of having diverse educational backgrounds
- Each believed in the importance of information resources to museums and their mission
“I have a bachelor’s degree with a double major in management of information systems and museum studies. [...] I saw the beginnings of computing in museums and in the humanities in general as an opportunity that I wanted to pursue.”

“It was a combination of having a master’s in art history, so knowing the formal art history background, [and] having the corporate website experience, bringing those two things together, I think really has helped me feel prepared for the job.”
Career Paths

- Prior museum experience (11 of 21)
- Intentionality of career choice (1 of 21)

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“To put that content on the web, you’re supposed to understand it, and understand the difference between one artist and another [...] You can’t look at it in isolation, you have to understand the subject matter and not just be, ‘oh, we’re going to put stuff on the website’ without thinking about what it is we’re putting up.”

“I feel like I’ve learned a lot about the museum environment, definitely [...] but I still feel like a computer scientist working in a museum.”
Educational Backgrounds

- Subject domain background (9 of 21)
- Museum Studies background (3 of 21)
- Information Science or Technology background (6 of 21)

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On-the-job Experiences

“It was more experience that prepared me for [my job] rather than formal education.”

“I can view today’s work, and [...] the me of five years ago could not do today’s job, and so I’ve kind of always got one eye out for what’s the next new thing, or what’s a better way to do whatever I’m doing.”
On-the-job Experiences

- Experiential or project-based learning (21 of 21)

- Formal training sessions or continuing education courses (10 of 21)

- Informal methods of keeping current (21 of 21)

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Advising our Students

- The skills of the LIS student are extremely important to museums now, and should only increase in the future...

- But museums are relatively poor, generally conservative, and unlikely to risk their money on anything but a sure bet...

- Not being 100% convinced that LIS skills will pay off in the future, museums often want to hedge their bets...
Keys to a Successful Career

- Expertise in background domain or discipline relevant to museum
- Expertise in LIS
- Expertise in Museum Studies
- Prior Experience working in Museums
- Ability to adapt to changing job requirements
Can we really expect anyone to pursue all five of these factors just to work in a museum?

Especially for less than $40,000 per year?

Especially when most museum administrators would rather spend that money on another curator than someone from LIS?
So what can we do?

- Solving these problems will require a joint effort between LIS programs, museum studies programs, and museums.
- Enhancing existing programs and streamlining the process of fulfilling the spirit of the factors discussed above
Challenges for LIS Programs...

- Too few located in universities that also have museum studies programs...
- Too few offer courses focusing on the unique information needs of museums...
- Too few have relationships with museums suitable for providing internship experience...