

Issues and Ideas

by Tisha Carper Long and Darcie Fohrman

A new feature about museum studies with an emphasis on exhibition education—a forum for student and faculty issues and ideas.

Exhibition development crosses all the boundaries of museum life, from collections management and conservation to education and administration. As the most public face of the institution, exhibitions reflect the dramatic transformation of the museum as an actor—even as a “cause,” in Ford Bell’s words—in 21st-century society. How are professors and students of museum studies/museology handling this broad and changing area of study?

Ava Ferguson, an exhibition developer at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, wonders what exhibition studies consists of nowadays. “What are they teaching students these days, and what should we old-timers be studying to keep up with the times? I’d like someone to create a list of all the university programs in the U.S. and overseas that offer courses and/or degrees in exhibition design. A short synopsis of their offerings would also be helpful. After that, it would be interesting to see what the top five schools offer in terms of their curricula.”

Ava, we hear you! We’ll be looking into these and other issues in upcoming issues of *The Exhibitionist*. We welcome input from all our readers

What can the *Exhibitionist* do for you? Suggestions from Faculty

The multidisciplinary nature of exhibition development creates challenges for museum

studies faculty, who struggle to cover all the bases as they educate their students. Several faculty had very specific practical requests and others raised important and interesting issues like how to encourage flexible thinking and how to have more multidisciplinary perspectives in their courses.

Marjorie Schwarzer, Chair of the JFKU Museum Studies graduate program, suggested polling the profession on what is working best in their exhibition courses. Leslie Bedford, Director of the Leadership in Museum Education Program at Bank Street College of Education, notes that exhibition education programs need to “look at the nature of exhibitions as a medium, criteria for critiquing them, and the process and management of teams.”

Kris Morrissey, Director of the Master’s Program in Museology at the University of Washington, writes that, “...the field increasingly requires skills that cut across the traditional categories of exhibit designer, educator, developer, etc. ...I’d like to [offer] courses that ... integrate ideas relevant to exhibit development, interpretation, etc. [One difficulty] is finding professionals who can teach across functions.”

Benjamin Filene, Director of Public History and Associate Professor of History at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, agrees: “Most university programs have only one or two faculty in [exhibition development], so we don’t have the breadth of professional skills that you would normally find within a museum.” Exhibition faculty expertise seems to focus more on theory with an emphasis on the research/interpretation/writing, and less on design and fabrication.

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The multidisciplinary nature of exhibition development creates challenges for museum studies faculty...



Gathered at the NAME membership booth at AAM 2008 are NAME Fellows (from left) Tisha Carper Long and Sarah Winger, both of the Museum Studies Graduate Program at JFK University, and Ting-Ray Chang from the Department of Design at University of Kansas-Lawrence. For more information on the Fellowship Program, which includes complementary AAM conference registration, go to the NAME website.

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Kris Morrissey

Accordingly, faculty would like the *Exhibitionist* to cover some of the nuts-and-bolts issues that arise in the field, where they may not have an established expertise. Professor Filene continues, “I, for one, would be very grateful to get some practical advice about how to do real design with non-designers. Is Illustrator a good program?... Would InDesign be better?”

Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, Distinguished Professor and Director of the Cooperstown Graduate Program in Museum Studies, also requests more nuts-and-bolts information: “What I need is information on the most up-to-date exhibition materials—technical notes. Knowing what materials are out there and what techniques give you a professional product without harming objects is important as the technology changes.”

Brianna Cutts, Adjunct Professor of Exhibition Development and Design at the Department of Museum Studies at JFKU, says that students are looking for more information on “the nuts and bolts of brainstorming, interpretive development, interpretive writing, and interactive exhibits.”

Many exhibition educators yearn for more interaction with colleagues from other institutions. Dawn Scher Thomae of the Museum Studies Graduate Program at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, writes, “It’s always interesting and helpful to have interviews of those currently in the field... offering their insightful tidbits on what courses

students should be taking and where they can get experience to prepare them for a museum exhibits career.”

One resource that can prove invaluable to exhibition educators is the *ExhibitFiles* website sponsored by the Association of Science and Technology Centers (ASTC). See the “resources” link below. Here, exhibition professionals share development and evaluation techniques in a collegial online environment. *ExhibitFiles* is a good place to find out information such as this request by Professor Sorin of Cooperstown: “As museums work to become more family-friendly, the experiences of colleagues who have developed a plan for easy or inexpensive interactives would be of value... It would be most useful to hear from colleagues about interactive solutions they have discovered that have been tested for various audiences and found to be effective, engaging, and somewhat indestructible.”

Professor Filene also raises the issue of “the continuing tension ...between academic ‘standards’ and the skills involved in doing public exhibition work. How do you evaluate exhibit work in ways that make sense to academic tenure committees, and that also reward work that engages public audiences?”

Developing the Discussion

Polly McKenna-Cress, Chair of the graduate program in Exhibition Planning and Design at University of the Arts in Philadelphia, is looking to their students to move the field forward. She asks, “How can the field find and tap into the deep thinking about ‘What is next?’ One solution may be to look more closely at what Museum Studies Programs are addressing. Most fields utilize their graduate students and

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University settings for research and think tanks, perhaps we should follow suit... One way to begin to understand where the relevance and needs will be is to talk to the emerging generation to see where their values lie. What are their hopes, desires, and dreams for the museum, as both visitors and professionals? How does the move towards advocacy in museums align with what the students are contemplating? So the next question [for educators] is, how can we create mutually beneficial discussions/projects between Museum Studies departments and the field? More specifically, how can NAME, as a professional group, and the *Exhibitionist* facilitate this dialog and create partnerships?”

McKenna Cress' questions pose a challenge for the *Exhibitionist*. Should we start a dialog among multiple constituencies to look at issues for the next generation of the museum field? Can we become a forum for brainstorming ideas on how the field can further tap into partnering with museum studies departments? There are many programs that currently do this; how do we share that information and spread the word and the possibilities? How can the *Exhibitionist*, specifically, become a catalyst for discourse that is more inclusive of multiple generations?

To kick off the discussion, here are some observations and subjects of conversation from the Museum Studies Department of University of the Arts:

- A return to a primacy of the object. With the ubiquitous nature of technology in our lives and the proliferation of interpretive methods, have museums lost

sight of the power of true authenticity?

- Emerging Adults (18-28) as underserved museum audiences. This group may feel disenfranchised by the museum that appears to be for kids and families but not for them.
- We need more sophisticated forms of evaluation to address newer interpretive models. As the exhibitions evolve, the evaluation tools must, too.
- Audience-created content/exhibitions: the re-mix, mash-up, re-invention, homage, montage, and assemblage. How far do we take this?
- Allowing visitors to make their own meaning, not trying to create a preset emotional response.
- As always, new and more sophisticated forms of technology and their implications for museums.

What are your issues? We want to hear from all readers, especially students. Note the reduced student rate on the Membership page in this issue.

Do you feel that you are learning what you need to know? Are you finding jobs? Are you learning collaborative creativity? Do you think exhibition developers need certification (e.g. a degree) to practice? We hope faculty, students, and the next generation of exhibition professionals will respond to these questions and issues. Email your comments to us and get your voices heard. ☀

Links:

Committee for Professional Training, an AAM SPC
<http://www.compt-aam.org/aboutcompt.html>

The Smithsonian Institution site lists Museum Studies Programs
<http://museumstudies.si.edu/TrainDirect.htm>

ExhibitFiles: A community site for exhibit designers and developers
<http://www.exhibitfiles.org/>