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Forum

Museum Studies Programs Are Not Prepared for the Ph.D.

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This article represents a response to the Committee on Museum Professional Training's (1995) inquiry about establishing a Ph.D. in museum studies. It is also a partial response to Alan Friedman's call for a Ph.D. program in informal science education in *Curator* volume 38, number 4 and Samuel Taylor's editorial note in the same issue saying that a broader program should be considered covering all public programs. I will address the larger field of museum studies primarily because the problems faced by all of these areas of study are very similar.

First, I will explain the point of view from which I speak. I have spent all of my professional career working in museums. I have worked fifteen years at university-based science museums and ten at a large independent natural history museum. In 1973, I was the junior member of a group including Craig C. Black and Mary Elizabeth King that planned and implemented the Museum Science Program at Texas Tech University. For two years, I taught and directed students in the management of scientific collections. At the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, I spent two years in planning and getting approval, one year in implementing, and five years in serving as chair of the Museum Studies Program. I am in my sixth year of co-teaching a course in Museum Administration and Management.

I believe that there is a museum profession. I believe that museums are among the most complex—if not the most complex—organi-

zations in existence today. Museums must bring together the talents of skilled people, often with highly divergent backgrounds, to produce their products, which are then judged by a professional as well as a broad public audience. Keeping the staff content on one side and keeping the audience well served on the other is a major challenge. I believe members of the museum profession can and should be given academic training in museum studies. Why then do I seem to oppose a Ph.D. in museum studies, which could only assist the development of the discipline? Put as simply as possible, I do not believe that the museum profession is prepared to make the case to the academic community. It must be remembered that the Ph.D. is an academic degree that can only be established with approval of academicians. As best I can, I will try to present these perspectives and point out areas in which I believe we are deficient.

Academic Perspective—Colleges and universities take as their primary academic mission the passing of a body of academic knowledge to the next generation through formal teaching methods—classroom lectures, student presentations, and written work. Part of the educational process at the level of advanced degrees is adding to this body of academic knowledge. This is one of the points that Friedman correctly makes concerning the benefits of a doctoral program in informal science education. This knowledge has tradi-

tionally been recorded in written form, but now may also be found in electronic, video, CD-ROM, or a number of other reproducible formats.

It is because of the weakness of our scholarly base that the museum profession would have difficulty in convincing the academic community that we are prepared to offer a Ph.D. We have not created a body of scholarly knowledge sufficient to support a doctoral program. The question may be raised as to whether we must first have a body of knowledge or a degree program. My experience has shown that academicians are not very impressed with promises of future scholarly work. It has been difficult to get approval of the two master's programs that I have helped to start. The planning committee at the University of Nebraska consisted of twelve people, but only I and one other person had museum experience. Following committee approval, the program had to get approval by nine other committees or administrators on our campus and at the level of the university system and, finally, by the Board of Regents. None of these administrators or committee members had any professional knowledge of museums. Universities tend to be conservative in academic matters and never move quickly on them. Most questions raised during this process revolved around "What are you going to teach?" The emphasis by many museum professionals that most museum skills are learned on the job and through experience strengthens the feeling of many academicians that museum studies students are learning a trade rather than being trained in an academic field of study.

A look through a recent American Association of Museums (AAM) book list reveals a wealth of books and technical reports covering most subjects of interest to the museum field. But a closer look shows that many of them were not produced by the AAM and are not specifically for museums. I have found books dealing with not-for-profit organizations and

not specifically for the museum field to be useful, but not always directly applicable to museum situations. Museum professionals may apply these books directly to museum situations because of their experience, but for the beginning student this is a difficult transfer. We really do not have textbooks for the basic graduate-level courses, and this is a real problem for both instructors and students. For the upper-level graduate courses, this is not a problem because generally textbooks are not used, but scholarly publications are indispensable.

The Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree is probably the highest earned academic degree awarded in this country. It represents a long academic tradition, and that tradition is jealously protected by the departments and colleges that award them. Another reason why new degree programs receive extreme scrutiny from academic committees is that they represent potential future competition for scarce institutional resources. The Ph.D. is almost entirely a research-and-publication degree. Even course work that may be required of students is primarily to extend their research skills and knowledge. This is why many of the creative disciplines, whose products are something other than publications, do not offer doctoral degrees, but have terminal master's degrees such as Master of Fine Arts and Master of Architecture.

Friedman calls for a "faculty with several full-time equivalents" to help start a program in informal science education. This simply is not realistic in academic situations at this time. We are at least ten years into the age of "doing more with less," and we may have reached the age of "doing less with even less." New faculty positions are extremely difficult to establish, and I have not heard of any academic programs getting "several" new faculty positions. Friedman seems to imply that a program could become self-sufficient with outside funding "after a couple of years and incubation funding to launch the

program.” This is not realistic. I know of no academic program in any field that is supported on outside funding. A commitment for a degree program in museum studies or informal science education from an academic institution must be firm and long term even before the planning process has passed out of the original committee. If that is not done, the commitment will become more and more difficult to obtain and faculty will receive increasing pressure to commit time to the program without further compensation.

The Museum Profession—Is there a museum profession? As I stated above, I believe that there is such a profession, but I cannot get an agreement on this point—even with my museum colleagues in Lincoln, Nebraska. However, if we are going to move our profession in an academic direction, we must agree that there is a profession and we must give this profession definition. We must agree upon which positions are part of the museum profession, and a philosophical base must be built for these decisions.

The base of knowledge about museums and the museum profession certainly has improved in the past twenty to twenty-five years. However, we must remember that academic museum studies programs are very young—really having had an impact only since the early 1970s. Our oldest academic program, which is at the University of Iowa, was started in 1910; but most other current programs date from after 1960. A key development in the history of museum studies programs was the publication of “Criteria for Examining Professional Museum Studies Programs” (Professional Practices Committee, 1983). Before the 1970s, almost everyone learned about museums on the job. Most of us became museum employees by accident rather than by planning or some grand design.

The transition to an academic museum profession certainly has not been uniformly

embraced, and graduates of museum studies programs have had mixed success in entering the profession. If museums and related organizations want to move the profession into a more academic direction, they must seek out graduates of museum studies programs when they are hiring, particularly for entry-level positions.

If the museum profession is going to create a body of scholarly knowledge sufficient to support doctoral-level academic programs, we will certainly need to increase the number of outlets available for scholarly publications. There are a few publications that have set the example for what can and should be done, including *Curator: The Museum Journal*, *Museum Studies Journal*, *Museology*, *Collection Forum*, and *Museum Management and Curatorship*. The AAM is by far the most expensive professional organization to which I belong. Our benefits for belonging to this organization include receiving copies of *Museum News*, *Aviso*, announcements of annual meetings, and notices of books for sale. However, neither our largest professional museum organization nor any of its regional affiliates issues scholarly publication series. Clearly, *Museum News* does not fill this need because it is in reality a trade or professional magazine. The articles, although many times of considerable interest, lack the rigor in their research and review that is characteristic of scholarly journals. I also find this to be true of the AAM annual meeting, which I find to be expensive and frustrating. When I do attend, I always try to seek out sessions presented by experts outside the museum profession. If we are going to move the profession in an academic direction, the AAM and its affiliates must be the leaders and present more scholarly publications and annual meetings.

I alluded above to the difficulty some graduates of museum studies programs have had entering the profession. This is a key issue for the survival of the current master's programs and will certainly be an issue for the approval

of any doctoral program. It is a question that will appear in any academic program-planning package. None of us and certainly no academic institution wants to be responsible for training young people for a profession that they cannot enter or where advancement is not possible. Job listings are posted by many professional organizations such as the AAM, ASTC, AASLH, ASC, SPNHC, but in most cases these are not entry-level positions, primarily, I suspect, because these listings are in many cases extremely expensive. Hopefully, one of the museum-related associations will find a less expensive method of notifying job seekers about positions, such as Internet or the World Wide Web.

What Does the Future Hold?—I hope that it holds a doctoral degree in museum studies, informal science education, and museum public programs. However, those of us who want this to happen have considerable work ahead of us for at least the next ten years. We must get our profession to look beyond *Museums for a New Century* (1984) and begin to think about “Museums in a New Millennium.” As part of this new agenda, we must make it our highest priority to move the museum profession in a more scholarly direction.

We must work for the establishment of more scholarly journal outlets concerning museums. The AAM and its regional organizations must take leadership in this area. All other professional organizations to which I belong have their scholarly journals edited by members who volunteer for the opportunity, so such a move should not substantially add to AAM’s Washington bureaucracy.

We must encourage our members to undertake and publish scholarly works concerning museums. We must identify many more people like Edward Alexander, Carolyn Blackmon, Ellis Burcaw, John Cotton Dana, Victor Danilov, Judy Diamond, Alan Friedman, George Browne Goode, Sally Gregory

Kohlstadt, Marie Malaro, Joseph Noble, Frank Oppenheimer, Marilyn Phelan, Peter Raven, S. Dillon Ripley, Carolyn Rose, Arthur Schulz, Harold Skramstad, Michael Spock, Kenneth Starr, Mark St. John, Samuel Taylor, and Stephen Weil, to name a few. We must support the work of these people. We must provide them with opportunities to publish, make presentations at our meetings, and get them into contact with future members of our profession. We must encourage them to draw their work and that of others together into textbooks.

We must expand our vision of what constitutes scholarly work in museum studies. We must move beyond many of the mechanical issues of how our profession and museums work but without ignoring them. We need more writing concerning the philosophy of museum work; history of our profession and institutions (our European colleagues have done a far better job than we; see, for example, Impey and MacGregor, 1985); how learning occurs in informal situations whether they be science, history, or art; whether museum exhibits educate or only entertain; and many more topics far beyond my expertise even to mention.

From the above, it should sound as if in ten years, I believe that we can be in a position to offer doctoral degrees in any of the three subject areas mentioned. However, I do not believe that this doctoral degree will be a Ph.D., but another doctoral-level degree either from among those already existing or one that our profession works to establish. Many professions have worked and established their own doctoral degrees such as Doctor of Education (Ed.D.), Doctor of Musical Arts (D.M.A.), Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (D.V.M.), Doctor of Medicine (M.D.), and Doctor of Jurisprudence (J.D.). Certainly, our profession could consider this route. The work done previously by the AAM in setting guidelines for the establishment of master’s programs would serve as

a model. The museum profession could set out what we believe to be the important academic issues that should be included in the degree and even a model set of degree requirements. At that point, it would be the responsibility of the faculty at individual institutions to move such an academic program through the approval process with whatever modification were required to establish a Doctor of Museum Studies (D.M.S.). The profession would need to support graduates, primarily by finding them appropriate employment.

I personally would favor the other route. I believe that we should give consideration to one of the established degrees, in particular to the Doctor of Arts (D.A.) degree. It is an established degree, so we would not be breaking any new academic ground, which always makes things easier. This degree was established about twenty-five years ago, so it is clearly not going away; but its history is short as compared with the Ph.D., so it lacks most of the academic baggage of that degree. The D.A. requires research, but the emphasis is less than for a Ph.D. At Idaho State University, where I first heard of this degree, a D.A. is offered in biological sciences, English, mathematics, and political science. The general requirements for the degree are (1) 48 hours of course work beyond a master's degree, (2) a scholarly activity that is more than would be expected for a master's program but less than for a Ph.D., and (3) two semesters of internship. The latter is usually supervised college-level teaching, but could easily be made into more advanced-level museum work, teaching in informal settings, or participating as a member of an exhibits planning and implementation team.

An issue that must be addressed as we look at a doctoral-level degree is its relationship to the existing master's degree programs in museum studies. Would the doctoral program be willing to admit students with master's degrees in museum studies? Or would they

want the students to enter the program with a M.A./M.S. in a particular discipline? Would the doctoral-level programs replace the master's programs? Or would some students or some areas of the museum profession wish to remain with terminal master's degrees? Clearly, the establishment of a doctoral program in museum studies (or in informal science education) is going to disturb the academic status quo in the profession.

Ten Years Hence—It is 2006. Through the efforts of a number of dedicated people, the scholarly output concerning museums and the profession is fivefold what it was in 1996, the museum profession has committed itself to academic training as the preferred route for entering professionals, and it is agreed that the D.A. will be the degree route that we will follow, at least in the beginning. Where will we look for academic institutions to encourage to start offering this degree?

I believe that we should look to those institutions and programs that have a history of providing appropriate financial support to master's programs in museum studies and those master's programs that have successfully trained students in the past. The additional financial support to begin offering a doctoral degree will not be as difficult to obtain when some financial resources, personnel, and facilities already exist. Among the institutions that I would encourage at this time would be the broad-based programs at George Washington University, John F. Kennedy University, Baylor University, and Texas Tech University. In those programs specializing in training in art, I would look to Syracuse University, University of Southern California, University of Denver, and University of Delaware; in history, to Eastern Illinois University, University of Kansas, and SUNY-Buffalo; in anthropology, to University of Washington, University of Arizona, Arizona State University, and Case-Western Reserve University; and in natural science, to the Uni-

versity of Iowa and Texas A&M University. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but it shows the rich diversity of institutions that will be available to work with us as we advance our profession academically. This is an exciting time in the academic development of museum studies, informal learning, and museum public programming. I look forward to working with anyone who wants to move these academic agendas forward.

NOTE

1. American Association of Museums, Association of Science-Technology Centers, American Association of State and Local History, Association of Systematic Collections, Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections.

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