

Internships

What Does an Internship Do For You?

I can't repeat this enough. Internships are key components to any entry-level museum resume. Doing an internship provides you an opportunity to see what exactly goes into running a museum, what a museum professional's daily tasks are, and whether you fit well into the museum environment. A completed internship on a resume tells your prospective employer that you have learned the basics of working in a museum setting, and that you have taken the first step in learning how to put your classroom knowledge to practical use. A successfully completed internship also gives you two benefits that will help in any job search:

1. A new network of colleagues from the museum in which you did your internship
2. A professional reference you can hand to a potential employer

How do you find an internship?

If you are a current student, your professors should have listings of local museum internships; you can also check with your local museum association or call individual sites if there are some you are particularly interested in. Some are paid positions, but most are not. You can find internships that offer credit, and run during the school year, or you can search for a summer internship.

If you are not currently in school, but are thinking about entering the field, it is still possible to find internships at museums. You will need to do more legwork, and explain to your potential internship supervisor why you want an internship instead of a volunteer position.

Are All Internships Created Equal?

No way. As an intern, you need to be willing to work at the tasks assigned, be a team player within your museum, and follow the guidelines set forth by your supervisor. However, you do have some power in this equation. While a good internship will help prepare you for your future career, a bad one can hurt your chances, or even sour you on museums in general.

You have the right to talk to your supervisor at the beginning of an internship and make sure that your experience will be rewarding for both sides. Ask up front what tasks you will be assigned, and how those tasks are contributing to the success of the organization. Invite your supervisor to give you critiques, and to train you in different techniques that she has found helpful over the years. During your internship, if you feel you are not getting the feedback or experience you need, let your supervisor know—it may be she only needs a nudge to remind her why you are there. If that doesn't help, talk to your professor. Don't wait until the end of the internship to voice your concerns. Getting a bad review because you were bored, underused or too quiet will not help you.

This is not to say the museum should never ask you to do a menial task—most museum professionals make copies, clean the galleries, or set up coffee service for a visiting group on a daily basis. Balance is the key word to keep in mind. If you are asked to clean the galleries as a part of your job, but are also able to help with labels or tours, or work with kids, you are well on your way to understanding exactly what museum professionals do.

For guidance on ensuring that your internship will be a positive experience, try using the checklist for internships on our website.