

Putting the Formal in Informal: Doctoral Study and Museum Education

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**Abstract**

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The last few decades marked a period of rapid growth and change in the field of museum education; the position and value of education rose across institutions, coinciding with intensified scrutiny of the qualifications, responsibilities, professional preparation and development of museum educators – all of which connect to professionalization of the field. Some suggestions have been proposed, but a concrete framework or methodology for moving forward is still missing.

Within the midst of these debates, an increasing number of museum educators quietly began to pursue doctorate degrees. Surprisingly, although many practitioners herald the benefits of expanding the knowledge, theory and research base of museum educators, discussion has largely ignored the potential benefits of advanced degrees. However, literature on the

purpose and value of graduate degrees – particularly doctorates – parallels many of the proposals for the advancement of this field. Furthermore, interesting connections exist between the goals and products of graduate study and general theory on the process of professionalization.

Utilizing in-depth interviews, this explorative study attempted to understand the motivations, and professional and educational experiences of museum educators who have pursued doctorates. These scholars confirmed many of the proposed benefits and challenges of graduate study, suggesting that the experience is both personally and professionally rewarding, but also time and labor intensive. For them, the decision to pursue doctoral study was largely self-motivated, and often required a willingness to alter curriculum to meet individual needs and interests – as programs tended to lack focus on informal learning and museum education. However, these discussions also revealed significant implications for the development of a more sustained relationship between the field of museum education and academia; the field of formal education seems to be gaining interest in alternative forms of learning, and beginning to welcome new viewpoints and methodologies.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The field of museum education remains relatively silent on the place of advanced formal education in the professional preparation, practice and development of its practitioners.

Although the literature addresses issues concerning the professionalization process of the field – with heated debates often concentrating on standardization methods and measures – there is little about how, or even if, formal education degrees and programs may benefit museum educators. In a field where primary responsibilities surround issues of learning and teaching, this absence is both compelling and troubling; this study attempted to address this gap in understanding.

Museum education is a diverse and innovative field, and its practitioners represent an array of professional backgrounds and experiences. In fact, it is common to hear practitioners describe their career paths as circuitous, even serendipitous – in essence, many never planned on working in museum education. Arguably, this diversity has benefitted the field by ensuring a creative and versatile workforce; however, it has also created problems related to professional preparation, development, and practice.

Over the course of twenty years, the field developed solid standards of practice, yet practitioners continue to disagree as to the propriety and means of *enforcing* these standards, as well as, whether specific credential or professional preparation criterion for museum educators are necessary. Some view the diversity of museum educators as beneficial – believing it promotes creativity and broader perspectives – others argue it hinders professionalization of the field. As it currently stands, there are certain experiences and

qualifications that are valued – and more commonly found – in the field, yet no concrete, or compulsory standards of professional preparation exist. This fact may make museum education a challenging field to enter *purposefully*, as one may wonder what and how to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to practice.

Another concern for museum educators are the existing tensions between museum professionals of different departments. Current literature suggests that museum departments are becoming more collaborative, and that education has shifted to become the primary focus of museum practice; for example, more and more institutions are inviting museum educators to participate in the curation and exhibition processes. However many institutions – particularly, the individuals working in them – still seem to struggle with these efforts. Many acknowledge the enduring nature of departmental divides – particularly, within more traditional museums – and complaints of disregard lack of respect and understanding of museum educators and their practice are especially common.

If institutions – at least on the surface – understand and advocate collaborative efforts within their staff, why do these divides persist? Perhaps, answers may be found in the sources of divergence – and discord – between museum professionals of various fields. Narrowing in on the relationship between museum educators and curators – to draw from the example above – there is great inequity in the typical education levels of curators and museum educators – with PhDs being a traditional requirement for curators, but not for educators. Given the lack of consensus regarding credentials and formal training/preparation of museum educators, this

is a particularly interesting discrepancy; is educational level a significant factor in these tensions and conflicts, and why do these discrepancies exist in the first place?

While these questions were far too broad to address altogether, this study attempted to probe this topic by investigating the relationship between the professional and educational experiences of museum educators who hold doctorates – or those currently pursuing doctoral study. Positions in museum education do not typically require advanced degrees – particularly, doctorates – and currently there are few museum educators who hold such credentials. However, despite their small numbers, their existence provides an opportunity to explore the place of graduate study – particularly doctoral study – within the context of current museum education practice.

Generally, PhDs are revered, serving as symbols of one's mastery of a particular discipline – or, at least, rigorous dedication to its understanding. Given the level of legitimacy and knowledge inscribed by such a degree/level of study, why has there been no push toward, nor discussion of, advanced formal education – particularly, doctoral programs – in museum education? Perhaps, it is simply that the field has yet to recognize the potential value of such degrees, and can not conceptualize the specific skills and understanding that doctorates might bring to the table. Truthfully, while most people may respect a Ph.D. for the time and energy embodied in its obtainment, few would probably be capable of listing the specific skills and knowledge such a degree teaches/produces. Still, in a field whose practitioners often lament the lack of respect and understanding of their work, perhaps doctoral degrees are a means of legitimizing and advancing the field of practice.

As an evolving field – having witnessed substantial growth and change over the last thirty years – museum education is still undergoing the process of formulating and revising its standards of practice. While there is no way to know if the future of museum education practice will involve the development of a more substantial relationship with academia, it behooves museum educators to, at least, consider the potential rewards and drawbacks of this path. By sharing the stories of individuals who have already lived this experience, this study explores what academia currently has to offer the field, as well as, acknowledges the areas in which improvements can – and perhaps should – be made.

This exploratory, qualitative study was intended to introduce dialogue about doctoral study into discussions surrounding the current state of museum education and possibilities for its future, as well as, mend existing gaps in the literature. It focused especially on the kinds of skills and knowledge these scholars gleaned from their educational and professional experiences, and what value the distribution of this information may offer the field.

This information may prove useful to practitioners working in museum education, as well as, those hoping to enter the field, by laying out the potential drawbacks and benefits of such an educational commitment; this could help individuals make informed decisions regarding their own professional preparation and development. Similarly, it may help institutions acknowledge the educational disparities between museum educators and other museum professionals, perhaps prompting greater attention, support and funding for professional preparation and development opportunities. Finally, it may help guide – or at least inform –

discussions regarding professionalization of the field, and the future of museum education practice.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this exploratory, qualitative study is to examine the motivations, and educational and professional experiences of practitioners with doctoral degrees – or those currently pursuing doctoral study – and prior museum education experience.

## Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Within the last few decades, museum education has undergone rapid growth and change, generating immense interest in the professionalization of the field. Although this has resulted in several studies of current practice – revealing not only the significant impact of its practitioners, but also the deficiencies and challenges facing the field – few have written about concrete methods for implementing proposed improvements. Furthermore, there has been a surprising lack of discussion surrounding the potential role of advanced formal education in this process. This paper explores the current state of museum education and its practitioners, and probes the value of doctoral degrees – particularly, through the lens of professionalization efforts.

### The Current State of Museum Education

As museums increasingly seek to demonstrate their value to the public, education has become a top priority<sup>1</sup> - arguably, underscoring the importance of the work done by those responsible for its implementation. Although a correlation between this intensified focus on education and the simultaneous expansion of the expectations and duties of museum educators makes sense – although the overall effects of the economic downturn and

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Ellen Munley and Randy Roberts, “Are Museum Educators Still Necessary?,” *Journal of Museum Education* (Left Coast Press, Inc) 31, no. 1 (2006): 29-40; T.R. Nolan, “Guest Editor's Introduction: The Museum Educator Crisis,” *Journal of Museum Education* (Left Coast Press, Inc) 34, no. 2 (2009): 117-122; T.R. Nolan, “From the Margins to the Center: Recommendations for Current and Aspiring Educational Leaders,” *Journal of Museum Education* (Left Coast Press, Inc) 34, no. 2 (2009): 171-182; Elsa B. Bailey, “Researching Museum Educators' Perceptions of their Roles, Identity, and Practice,” *Journal of Museum Education* (Left Coast Press, Inc) 31, no. 3 (2006): 175-198; Lynn Uyen Tran and Heather King, “The Professionalization of Museum Educators: The Case in Science Museums,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 22, no. 2 (2007): 131-149; Erin Dragotto, Christine Minerva and Michelle Nichols, “Is Museum Education “Rocket Science”?,” *Journal of Museum Education* (Left Coast Press, Inc) 31, no. 3 (2006): 215-222; Julia Rose, “Shared Journeys: Curriculum Theory and Museum Education,” *Journal of Museum Education* (Left Coast Press, Inc) 31, no. 2 (2006): 81-93.

corresponding lack of funding have also played a part<sup>2</sup> – this has not necessarily implied an elevation in status for the latter. In fact, many working in the field have expressed concern about the burden of growing responsibilities placed upon museum educators, and/or noted frustration over a perceived lack of appreciation and understanding of their positions.<sup>3</sup> All this has resulted in intense scrutiny of the field, causing many to seek a reevaluation of the essential qualifications, responsibilities, training and professional development of museum educators.

The subsequent findings – a culmination of independent research, focus groups, roundtable discussions, surveys, etc. – paint the picture of a field in transition, with its practitioners struggling to attain certainty and accord. However, while varied in focus and conclusions, trends emerge from these studies, revealing some shared expectations, values, and challenges spanning the field. Even some of these studies note the lack of consensus on what the future should hold for museum education, as well as, practical means of reaching these goals;<sup>4</sup> however, they provide an excellent starting point for analysis.

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<sup>2</sup> Munley and Roberts, “Museum Educators Still Necessary?”; Dragotto, Minerva and Nichols, “Museum Education ‘Rocket Science’?”; Christine M. Castle, “Blending Pedagogy and Content: A New Curriculum for Museum Teachers,” *Journal of Museum Education* (Left Coast Press, Inc) 31, no. 2 (2006): 123-132.

<sup>3</sup> Munley and Roberts, “Museum Educators Still Necessary?”; Dragotto, Minerva and Nichols, “Museum Education ‘Rocket Science’?”; Nolan, “Museum Educator Crisis”; Bailey, “Museum Educators’ Perceptions”; Castle, “Blending Pedagogy and Content”; Monica M. Smith, “From the Editor,” *Journal of Museum Education* (Left Coast Press, Inc) 31, no. 3 (2006): 243-244.

<sup>4</sup> Nolan, “Museum Educator Crisis”; Tran and King, “Professionalization of Museum Educators”; Nolan, “From the Margins to the Center”; Lynn Uyen Tran and Heather King, “Shared Professional Knowledge: Implications for Emerging Leaders,” *Journal of Museum Education* 34, no. 2 (2009), 149-162.

One of the most common observations made about current practice is the breadth of specialized skills demanded of its practitioners.<sup>5</sup> The renewed focus on education within the museum world has generated an increase in the number of tasks performed by museum educators. These new responsibilities have, in turn, necessitated an expansion and strengthening of professional abilities; ranging from management to communication skills, knowledge of content and learning theory, as well as, the capacity to evaluate and balance an understanding of community and visitor needs with those of the institution<sup>6</sup> – to name just a few.

Given the range of skills required, it is perhaps understandable that those working in the field represent a variety of professional and educational backgrounds, and tend to follow rather circuitous paths into museum education positions.<sup>7</sup> There are even those that propose these seemingly incidental characteristics of museum educators are, in fact, extremely beneficial in

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<sup>5</sup> Tran and King, "Shared Professional Knowledge"; Dragotto, Minerva and Nichols, "Museum Education "Rocket Science"?" ; Smith, "From the Editor"; Bailey, "Museum Educators' Perceptions"; Lynn Uyen Tran, "Teaching Science in Museums: The Pedagogy and Goals of Museum Educators," *Science Education* 91, no. 2 (2007), 278-297.

<sup>6</sup> Castle, "Blending Pedagogy and Content"; Tran and King, "Shared Professional Knowledge"; Dragotto, Minerva and Nichols, "Museum Education "Rocket Science"?" ; Museum Education Roundtable, *Patterns in Practice: Selections from the Journal of Museum Education*. (Washington, D.C.: Museum Education Roundtable, 1992); R. S. Grenier, "The Role of Learning in the Development of Expertise in Museum Docents," *Adult Education Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (2009), 142-157; Susan Bass Marcus, "Connectors," *Journal of Museum Education* 31, no. 3 (2006), 199-206; Graeme K. Talboys, *Museum Educator's Handbook* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Co., 2005). Elsa B. Bailey, "From the Guest Editor: The Professional Relevance of Museum Educators : Perspectives Form the Field." *Journal of Museum Education* 31, no. 3 (2006), 155-160.

<sup>7</sup> Tran and King, "Shared Professional Knowledge"; Bailey, "Museum Educators' Perceptions"; Smith, "From the Editor,"; Marcus, "Connectors,"; Tran and King, "Professionalization of Museum Educators"; Lisa C. Roberts, "Educators on Exhibit Teams: A New Role, a New Era," in *Transforming Practice: Selections from the Journal of Museum Education, 1992-1999*, eds. Joanne S. Hirsch, Lois H. Silverman and Museum Education Roundtable (Washington D.C.: Museum Education Roundtable, 2000); Bronwyn Bevan and Maria Xanthoudaki, "Professional Development for Museum Educators: Unpinning the Underpinnings," *Journal of Museum Education* 33, no. 2 (2008), 107-119.

performance of their job duties, encouraging the kind of diversity, creativity and flexibility necessary to tackle their monumental array of tasks.<sup>8</sup>

Curiously, while most museum educators express positivity about the effects of such diversity, few consider the potential harms. For example, could this kind of diversity create problems when it comes to collaboration; does the staff of a museum education department that lacks common ground, in turn, have trouble with communication, consensus, and implementation? In studies – which focused on science museum educators - conducted by Lynn Tran and Heather King, the answer seems to be yes: “their varied science and teaching backgrounds, and in many cases limited training, meant that they did not share a common understanding of their role to support learning.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, do the variety of backgrounds imply versatility, actually encouraging the assigning of expanding job duties that is so common in the field today? Bailey notes that museum educators are “drawn into supporting other organizational concerns [besides their primary responsibilities],” but describes it as more of a self-imposed sense of obligation to their institution and coworkers.<sup>10</sup> However, could it also be that the line between job expectations and obligations for museum educators is purposefully blurred, making it convenient to view and utilize museum educators as jacks-of-all-trades for a variety of non-delineated museum tasks?

Elsa Bailey proposes that what actually serves to connect the disparate career paths of museum educators is a shared sense of “purpose” – in essence, that their work serves as a

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<sup>8</sup> Bailey, “Museum Educators’ Perceptions”; Dragotto, Minerva and Nichols, “Is Museum Education “Rocket Science”?”; Smith, “From the Editor.”

<sup>9</sup> Tran and King, “Professionalization of Museum Educators,” 134-5.

<sup>10</sup> Bailey, “Museum Educators’ Perceptions,” 183.

kind of identity: “for many of these individuals being an educator and a science educator is ‘who they are.’”<sup>11</sup> Their internal motivation and drive help propel them forward, enabling them to face some of the more challenging aspects of their work with a positive attitude and a strong belief in the positive impact of their efforts; as Susan Marcus suggests:

...Museum education continues to attract the hopeful, the dedicated, the adventurous, and the innovative among us...some of us have called [museum education] The Best Job in the World. It is the best because we make it so. Our rewards may be less tangible than those of other professionals or executives. Nevertheless, we persevere in exploring every opportunity to make meaningful connections with people every day we walk through the museum doors.<sup>12</sup>

Bailey’s observation may explain why collaboration within and across the field is so heavily emphasized. In fact, several researchers have noted how valuable the shared professional experience is for museum educators, suggesting that an important part of the development of expertise comes from observing and learning from others, and, in turn, through the sharing of personal experience.<sup>13</sup> This could be viewed as a form of collaborative evaluation; as museum educators observe one another, they are able to analyze and modify their own practice from a different perspective. In fact, Leslie Bedford states that most museum educators “depend on conferences and other *ad hoc* methods for keeping abreast of new ideas,” suggesting that practitioners are dependent upon collegial exchange, as there are few

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<sup>11</sup> Bailey, “Museum Educators’ Perceptions,” 194.

<sup>12</sup> Marcus, “Connectors,” 204-5.

<sup>13</sup> Bailey, “Museum Educators’ Perceptions”; Talboys, *Museum Educator’s Handbook*; Dragotto, Minerva and Nichols, “Museum Education “Rocket Science”?”; Tran, “Teaching Science in Museums”; Marcus, “Connectors”; Castle, “Blending Pedagogy and Content”; Grenier, “Role of Learning”; Lisa Mary McIntosh, “Museum Educators Teaching Others to Teach” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia – Vancouver, 2011); Elsa B. Bailey, “How Museum Educators Build and Carry Out Their Profession: An Examination of Situated Learning Within Practice” (PhD diss., Lesley University, 2003).

institutionally supported, systematic methods/opportunities for evolving practice.<sup>14</sup> Museum education may be viewed as an ever-evolving practice, which demands its practitioners continually seek out new opportunities for professional development through evaluation, examination of new research, and engagement with professional organizations.<sup>15</sup>

Despite this celebrated utilization of collaborative techniques, some within the field suggest still more needs to be done – criticizing the lack of common language, shared set of practices, and established credentials or training requirements.<sup>16</sup> In essence, while museum educators may embrace and encourage the concept of shared information, they have yet to successfully translate this into concrete, universal standards with which to operate – a problem that many argue hinders professionalization of the field. Tina Nolan’s research on the subject suggests that there may be a link between a dearth of agreed upon criterion for the field and successful leadership, invoking the concept of an “identity crisis” among museum educators.<sup>17</sup> In turn, her findings were influenced by the work of Lynn Tran, Heather King, and Christine Castle, who collectively argue that the lack of standardization may: negatively affect professional perceptions of the field and its practitioners; limit exchange between museum education and other disciplines; waste valuable resources by underutilizing important pedagogical research;

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<sup>14</sup> Leslie Bedford, “A Conversation about Educational Leadership in Museums,” *Journal of Museum Education* (Left Coast Press, Inc) 34, no. 2 (2009): 145.

<sup>15</sup> MER, Patterns in Practice; Bailey, “Museum Educators’ Perceptions”; Talboys, *Museum Educator’s Handbook*; Dragotto, Minerva and Nichols, “Museum Education “Rocket Science”?”; Tran, “Teaching Science in Museums”; Marcus, “Connectors”; Castle, “Blending Pedagogy and Content”; Grenier, “Role of Learning”; Smith, “From the Editor”; Bailey, “Professional Relevance”; Bevan and Xanthoudake, “Professional Development.”

<sup>16</sup> Nolan, “Professional Learning Communities”; Tran and King, “Professionalization of Museum Educators”; Roberts, “Educators on Exhibit Teams”; Tran and King, “Shared Professional Knowledge”; Bevan and Xanthoudake, “Professional Development.”

<sup>17</sup> Nolan, “Professional Learning Communities”; Nolan, “From the Margins to the Center.”

restrict the professional growth of its practitioners, as well as, hinder their ability to communicate the value of their work.<sup>18</sup>

There is further evidence in the literature to support these assertions. Consider, for instance, recurring claims that museum educators, and their efforts, are unappreciated or misunderstood by both fellow museum professionals, as well as, those operating outside the museum world – suggesting that at least some negative perceptions of this field exist.<sup>19</sup> As written in a blog post from AAM’s *Center for the Future of Museums*, “...the field has traditionally been relegated to a minor role in the educational landscape. Ghettoized as “informal learning,” the vital, experiential, multi-modal educational opportunities afforded by museums are too often regarded as expendable accessories.”<sup>20</sup> While this post addresses museums as a whole, as those expressly responsible for implementation of museums’ educational goals, museum educators may bear the brunt of this external disregard.

There is also fiscal evidence that museum education may be valued less than other departments. As Ron Kley notes in his article on recessionary layoffs: “I was struck by the fact that education staff... seem to have taken a disproportionately heavy hit from the budgetary hammers.”<sup>21</sup> Tina Nolan noted anecdotal evidence of a similar nature: “The message in this museum was clear. In tough economic times, nonessential expenses are the

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<sup>18</sup> Tran and King, “Professionalization of Museum Educators”; Tran and King, “Shared Professional Knowledge”; Tran, “Teaching Science in Museums”; Margaret Christine Castle, “Interpreters, Docents and Educators: Ways of Knowing, Ways of Teaching in a History museum, an Art Gallery, and a Nature Centre” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Smith, “From the Editor”; Nolan, “Museum Educator Crisis”; Tran, “Teaching Science in Museums”; Marcus, “Connectors.”

<sup>20</sup> AAM, “Forecasting the Next Educational Era,” *Center for the Future of Museums Blog*, Tuesday, January 11, 2011, <http://futureofmuseums.blogspot.com/search?q=ghettoized>.

<sup>21</sup> Ron Kley, “Recessionary Layoffs in Museum Education: Survey Results and Implications,” *Journal of Museum Education* (Left Coast Press, Inc) 34, no. 2 (2009): 125-6.

first to go, and the education department had become a nonessential expense.’<sup>22</sup> Even prior to the economic downturn, complaints of low wages and insufficient funding – ironically, even for professional development – provide further proof of an ongoing devaluation of this field and its practitioners.<sup>23</sup> As Janna Bailey – a museum educator – summarizes: ‘Until society values what we as museum educators do, our salaries will remain low. People either have no idea what museum educators do or they think it’s something that requires a love for history or art or (insert museum type here) but not any specialized knowledge. Or, they equate us with child daycare work (another field with its own challenges and low pay) and think we just play with kids all day.’<sup>24</sup>

Yet, there may be even deeper issues than that of perceived value inhibiting the field; Christine Castle suggests there are large gaps – particularly, in communication – between museum education and other disciplines, preventing the true exchange and application of ideas. As anyone in the field can affirm, there are significant differences in teaching within an informal environment versus a formal one; for example, in her survey of museum educators, Elsa Bailey documented that many respondents specifically noted the contrasts between school and museum education.<sup>25</sup> Yet, there is evidence of practitioners applying the same principles developed for classrooms directly to museum education programs.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, this fact may be taken as verification that these fields do not operate in mutually exclusive realms; however, it also suggests that museum educators may not be effectively

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<sup>22</sup> Nolan, “From the Margins to the Center,” 172.

<sup>23</sup> Bailey, “Museum Educators’ Perceptions”; Marcus, “Connectors”; Castle, “Interpreters, Docents and Educators”; Castle, “Blending Pedagogy and Content”; Bedford, “Conversation about Educational Leadership,” 139-147.

<sup>24</sup> Marcus, “Connectors,” 203-4.

<sup>25</sup> Bailey, “Museum Educators’ Perceptions,” 184.

<sup>26</sup> Tran, “Teaching Science in Museums”; Bevan and Xanthoudake, “Professional Development”; Tran and King, “Professionalization of Museum Educators.”

evaluating, understanding and, most especially, articulating the subtleties of their work to those working outside of informal education.<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that the field of museum education has nothing to learn from formal education, but rather, that there should be greater *dialogue*, versus a mere mimicking of practice. Unfortunately, the tendency to revert to traditional forms of practice may be very difficult to shake for all types of educators: “The extensive literature on teacher professional development details how difficult it is for educators to move beyond the ways in which they themselves were taught. It is thus not surprising that traditional (more school-like, transmission model) approaches to knowledge and learning underpin many interactions between museum floor staff and museum visitors.”<sup>28</sup>

What is particularly challenging about the above scenario is that it inscribes issues with both practice and communication. The research clearly shows that some museum educators struggle with adapting formal education techniques to informal settings, but the lack of a shared language may also come into play. If educators have no means of *translating* their work – particularly goals and challenges – into terms understandable to one another, as well as, to those residing outside their department, they will likely struggle with collaboration, and almost certainly, impede the overall success of their programs. Consider this insight, gleaned from a Museum Education Roundtable forum: “better communication is needed within cross-departmental exhibition and program teams...Finding a shared language for communication not only helps bridge different backgrounds on museum teams but also conveys...that the educator plays an equal role with other professionals...” As museums and formal education are undergoing momentous shifts in structure, and funding sources are scarce, collaboration

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<sup>27</sup> Tran and King, “Shared Professional Knowledge”; Tran, “Teaching Science in Museums”; Castle, “Blending Pedagogy and Content”; McIntosh, “Teaching Others to Teach.”

<sup>28</sup> Bevan and Xanthoudake, “Professional Development,” 109.

within and between institutions is becoming more and more common; as such, it is highly probable that these communication concerns will continue to surface.

On the other hand, some propose it is less a problem of communication and reflection than perspective. They argue museum educators actually excel at evaluation,<sup>29</sup> but the focus of this process may simply be too narrow. In other words, museum educators need to conceptualize and frame their position within a larger structure of museum/institutional practice.<sup>30</sup> This is not a particularly new concept; from the late 80s through the early 90s, the responsibilities and competencies required of museum educators were described in similar terms, calling for integration and collaboration between education and other departments/institutions.<sup>31</sup> Still, years later, Leslie Bedford writes of ongoing hiccups in this process – as recorded from a conversation amongst five museum educators: “The group agreed that too often educators...do not look outside their own role or department. They may not understand how their work meshes with that of the institution as a whole. Uninformed about the big picture, they cannot think strategically or argue convincingly for an idea or a program.”<sup>32</sup>

Most of the above assumes that museum education operates fairly well within the confines of its own practice, and that the real problems spring from (mis)perceptions of, and (mis)communication with, those interacting with the field. However, there are those who

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<sup>29</sup> Dragotto, Minerva and Nichols, “Museum Education 'Rocket Science'?”; Munley and Roberts, “Museum Educators Still Necessary?”; Nolan, “Professional Learning Communities.”

<sup>30</sup> Bedford, “Conversation about Educational Leadership”; Nolan, “Museum Educator Crisis”; Kley, “Recessionary Layoffs”; Smith, “From the Editor”; Munley and Roberts, “Museum Educators Still Necessary?”; Nolan, “From the Margins to the Center.”

<sup>31</sup> MER, “Patterns in Practice”; American Association of Museums and Ellen Cochran Hirzy, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (Washington D.C.: The Association, 1992).

<sup>32</sup> Bedford, “Conversation about Educational Leadership,” 142.

highlight *internal* deficiencies, maintaining that museum educators need to ground more of their practice in theory – particularly pedagogy<sup>33</sup>: “In my opinion there is nothing more useful than a good theory; it helps you shape your practice intentionally, clarify goals, provide benchmarks for success, and convince others you know what you are doing.”<sup>34</sup>

Underutilization of theory may explain Castle’s concern that many museum educators fall back on experience – although she does emphasize the overall importance of experience in developing proficiency in practice – and become stuck “in a kind of groove or rut.”<sup>35</sup> She frames it as an issue of educators learning how better to adapt theory to practice, to create what she terms, “elegant moments of museum teaching;”<sup>36</sup> however, it seems just as likely that it is an issue of – at least – a portion of museum education practitioners lacking a solid foundation in theory. As Lisa Roberts notes, “At present, museum educators can enter the field with a range of backgrounds and expertise. Until professional training requirements are established, this trend will likely continue.”<sup>37</sup> She does concede that this diversity can be advantageous, but notes that it negatively affects professionalization of the field and should be compensated for with professional development opportunities.

Robert’s recommendations are not uncommon; several authors urge not only an intensification of the theoretical basis of museum educators, but also on-going, self-reflexive learning – in essence, underlining the imperative of professional development in the practice

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<sup>33</sup> Bevan and Xanthoudake, “Professional Development”; Tran and King, “Professionalization of Museum Educators”; Castle, “Interpreters, Docents and Educators”; Annie V.F. Storr, “Professionalism and Research in Museum Education,” in *Transforming practice : selections from the Journal of Museum Education, 1992-1999*, ed. Joanne S. Hirsch, Lois H. Silverman and Museum Education Roundtable (Washington D.C.: Museum Education Roundtable, 2000).

<sup>34</sup> Bedford, “Conversation about Educational Leadership,” 140.

<sup>35</sup> Castle, “Blending Pedagogy and Content,” 126.

<sup>36</sup> Castle, “Blending Pedagogy and Content,” 127.

<sup>37</sup> Roberts, “Educators on Exhibit Teams,” 96.

of museum education.<sup>38</sup> Conversely, it seems few are inclined to impose specific credential or training requirements for museum educators. Lynn Tran and Heather King broach the issue in, “Shared Professional Knowledge: Implications for Emerging Leaders,” urging museums to pay careful attention to the “professional preparation” of their educators; however, they also raise questions about the potentially negative consequences of such actions: “... Would the requirement to undertake appropriate education based on a consensually agreed body of knowledge restrict the diversity of backgrounds and experiences that currently characterizes the museum education field? Moreover, can museums afford the higher levels of remuneration likely to be demanded by practitioners who have attained this education?”<sup>39</sup>

Interestingly, this fear of constricting the field of museum education seems to parallel ongoing debates about the value of museum studies degrees and other standardization efforts. Whereas those working in museum education seem hesitant to even discuss the place of advanced formal education in the professionalization process, the negative reaction of opponents to more general museum standardization efforts may provide some explanation as to why this may be. Some have criticized – or questioned – these degree programs, etc. as being, at best, unnecessary, and at worst, detrimental to the diversity and innovation of the museum world.<sup>40</sup> It is possible that those already working in the field fear credential and

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<sup>38</sup> Bevan and Xanthoudake, “Professional Development”; Storr, “Professionalism and Research”; Grenier, “Role of Learning”; Tran and King, “Shared Professional Knowledge”; MER, “Patterns in Practice”; Bedford, “Conversation about Educational Leadership”; Dragotto, Minerva and Nichols, “Museum Education “Rocket Science?””; AAM and Cochran, *Excellence and Equity*.

<sup>39</sup> Tran and King, “Shared Professional Knowledge,” 150.

<sup>40</sup> Nina Simon, “Warning: Museum Graduate Programs Spawn Legions of Zombies!”, *Museum 2.0 Blog*, Monday, April 23, 2007, <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2007/04/warning-museum-graduate-programs-spawn.html>; AAM, “More on the Future of Museum Studies,” *Center for the Future of Museums Blog*, Friday, August 7, 2009, <http://futureofmuseums.blogspot.com/2009/08/more-on-future-of-museum-studies.html>;

training standardization may render them obsolete, favoring demanding – perhaps superfluous – academic qualifications above practical experience: “...someone needs to raise the red flag before it takes an MA to work the register at the admissions desk.”<sup>41</sup>

Alternatively, it may be a concern that such requirements would be no more effective at equipping applicants with the necessary tools and knowledge and, in the process, severely restrict the field: “Standardizing the field limits the potential for radical change...by presenting the ‘right way’ to do things, graduate school defines and judges other options as sub-optimal...But no one can list the tangible skills these programs impart.”<sup>42</sup> These last points may be of particular concern to museum educators, as there are few graduate programs specifically geared toward educating in informal environments and, more problematically, little consensus on standards of practice and how best to teach them.

Returning to the issue of professional development, although most in the field of museum education recognize its value, they are also quick to point out hindrances to its implementation. While certain institutions are vigilant about providing time, resources, and support for ongoing professional development and training, this does not seem to be consistent across the field.<sup>43</sup> Joy Davis examined professional development across institutions – not limiting herself to museum education – and found most lacking: “while

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Colleen Dilenschneider, “Where are Museum Studies Graduate Programs Going Wrong?,” *Know Your Own Bone...Blog*, August 12, 2009, <http://colleendilen.com/2009/08/12/where-are-museum-studies-graduate-programs-going-wrong/>. “We Don’t Need No Education: The Struggle for Museum Training,” MSU Home Page for Eugene Dillenberg, accessed April 1, 2012, [https://www.msu.edu/~dillenbu/articles/education\\_article.pdf](https://www.msu.edu/~dillenbu/articles/education_article.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> Simon, “Warning.”

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Dragotto, Minerva and Nichols, “Museum Education “Rocket Science”?”; Bevan and Xanthoudake, “Professional Development”; Castle, “Blending Pedagogy and Content”; Bailey, “Professional Relevance”; Joy Davis, “Responding to Change: Challenges for Professional Education in the Museum Sector,” *Curator* 48, no. 4 (2005): 427-438.

many museums indicate that...they support professional development in principle, few utilize the full range of human resource performance planning and management programs needed...’<sup>44</sup> Even where professional development is supported, research conducted by Tina Nolan in 2009 suggests it may not be entirely effective, documenting uncertainty among museum educators regarding mentoring, collegial exchange and self-assessment policies.<sup>45</sup> The lack of consensus surrounding standards of practice resurfaces in this report, suggesting that it may be difficult to offset training/credential requirements with professional development opportunities if the field, as a whole, lacks clarity.

### **Professionalization of Museum Education**

In discussing the future of museum education, many bandy about such terms as: “professionalization,” “professionalism” and “professional development”; yet, few clarify what they truly mean, taking for granted the fact that museum education should be understood as a true “profession.” For example, in tracing the history of the field, Elsa Bailey jumps from the Belmont Report of 1969 – in which museum educators are described as showing “an increasing professionalism” – to the *Excellence and Equity* report of 1992 – by which time museum education is being described as a “profession” – with no explanation of how this transformation occurred.<sup>46</sup> How then did museum education become a profession, and by what standards does one measure this transition?

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<sup>44</sup> Davis, “Responding to Change,” pp. 433.

<sup>45</sup> Nolan, “Professional Learning Communities.”

<sup>46</sup> Bailey, “Professional Relevance,” 156.

There are a few individuals who imply that the field has not, as yet, proved itself as a profession.<sup>47</sup> Consider, for example, Lynn Tran and Heather King's article, "The Professionalization of Museum Educators," in which the authors affirm that museum education is showing signs of professionalization: having carved out a distinct sphere from formal education and curatorial work; through the formation of professional associations and networks; and by the existence of educational programs specifically geared toward museum education – predominately, outside the US.<sup>48</sup> However, they also emphasize where gaps exist in this process, such as: the field lacking a solid body of knowledge and skills; no certification or qualification requirements; and inconsistency in the preparation mechanisms of practitioners.

Tran and King utilize a number of theorists' definitions of profession to critique museum education, but ultimately settle on Lee Shulman's analysis of the professionalism of schoolteachers as a model for their own professionalization framework. In his article, "Theory, Practice, and the Education of Professionals," Shulman defines a "profession" through the following attributes: higher learning, encompassing specific skills and knowledge, and grounded in theory, by which practitioners may exercise judgment in practice; complex practice, legitimized by theory and research, yet learned through participation and collegiality – i.e. requiring membership in a community – ethical conduct regulated by said community, with an understood obligation to serve others, and requiring

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<sup>47</sup> Roberts, "Educators on Exhibit Teams"; Tran and King, "Professionalization of Museum Educators"; Tran and King, "Shared Professional Knowledge."

<sup>48</sup> Tran and King, "Professionalization of Museum Educators."

trust and recognition from those outside/served by the community.<sup>49</sup> By shifting through Shulman's characteristics of a profession, one by one, it is clear – as argued by Tran and King – the ways in which the field of museum education can be viewed as a profession, and where it may still falter.

Starting first with the concept of a set of specialized skills and knowledge; a solid argument could be made that museum education does in fact require specific expertise. In fact, above, it is argued that not only can, and should, museum education be viewed as a very distinct field from formal education, but that the kinds of specialized skills and understanding required of its practitioners continues to expand. Although Tran and King agree with the idea of museum education as having carved out a distinct niche from other professions, they feel that the field has not “clearly demarcated the body of knowledge and skills for its professional work,” nor grounded all this in research and theory.<sup>50</sup> This is not to say that museum educators do not utilize any research and theory to inform their practice, but, for some writing on the subject, it may be more an issue of quantity and uniformity.

Furthermore, according to Shulman, these “bodies of knowledge” must be “created, tested, elaborated, refuted, transformed, and reconstituted in colleges, universities, laboratories, and libraries.”<sup>51</sup> Although more and more museum education departments are utilizing evaluative techniques to analyze, critique and refine their practice, there are many who argue there

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<sup>49</sup> Lee S. Shulman, “Theory, Practice, and the Education of Professionals,” *Elementary School Journal* 98, no. 5 (1998): 511-526.

<sup>50</sup> Tran and King, “Professionalization of Museum Educators,” 137.

<sup>51</sup> Shulman, “Theory, Practice and Education,” 516-7.

should be *more* research and evaluation being conducted.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, there seems to be a large disconnect between the field of museum education and academia; few academic programs exist – particularly, in the US – specifically geared toward museum education, and the relationship between the practice of museum education and more generalized museum studies programs seems tenuous, at best. As discussed earlier, specific preparation/credential requirements have yet to be established, practitioners come from a myriad of professional and academic backgrounds, and the field seems hesitant to even discuss the place of advanced formal education in relation to practice. If then, as Shulman asserts, “We prepare professionals in universities because we make the strong claim that these are *learned* professions and that academic knowledge is absolutely essential to their performance,” museum education may not truly qualify. Individual practitioners may be knowledgeable in related fields, but museum education does not maintain a sustained relationship with academia. Therefore, Shulman may be inclined to describe museum educators as having on-the-job vocational training, rather than as holding *professional* knowledge and credentials.

Where museum education shows the clearest proof of professionalization is in practice and community. Shulman is careful to note that, while academic learning is crucial to the formation, legitimization and growth of a profession, these skills and knowledge cannot be defined as “*professional* knowledge unless and until [they are] enacted in the crucible of the ‘field.’”<sup>53</sup> He goes on to discuss the difficulties of adapting theory into practice, and how true

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<sup>52</sup> Dragotto, Minerva and Nichols, “Museum Education “Rocket Science”?”; Storr, “Professionalism and Research”; Tran and King, “Professionalization of Museum Educators”; Tran and King, “Shared Professional Knowledge”; Tran, “Teaching Science in Museums”; Nolan, “Professional Learning Communities”; Bevan and Xanthoudake, “Professional Development”; Bedford, “Conversation about Educational Leadership”; Castle, “Blending Pedagogy and Content”; Grenier, “Role of Learning.”

<sup>53</sup> Shulman, “Theory, Practice and Education,” 518.

professionals manage the challenges posed in real-life by learning from their experiences. In this process, he stresses the importance of collegial exchange and the development of a community of practice, by which practitioners may share and evolve together. As many surveys and reports have affirmed, museum education is a highly collaborative field; its practitioners tend to be extremely flexible in their practice, and develop much of their expertise by observing and learning from one another.

While many studies and surveys demonstrate that museum educators work collaboratively within their own institutions, the number of museum education associations, networks, periodicals, etc – the Journal of Museum Education, Museum Education Roundtable, Museum-ED, to name a few – that currently exist confirm that professional identification is occurring on a regional, national, and even international level. Shulman argues this kind of communality is important because it is where professional knowledge is truly stored: “[the community of professionals] not only know collectively more than any individual member of the community but also maintain certain public responsibilities and accountabilities with respect to individual practice.”<sup>54</sup> In essence, they ensure that not only are standards of practice being met, but also allow for the distribution of ideas across the field. Unfortunately, as Tran and King lament, in the case of museum education, their powers are limited: “although professional associations have existed for decades, they do not formally regulate the quality of work performed by museum educators.”<sup>55</sup> Although some these organizations offer *suggestions* for standards of best practice, none of them offer certifications, or established criterion for credentials, training, and professional development.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 520.

<sup>55</sup> Tran and King, “Professionalization of Museum Educators,” 138.

Unfortunately, the inability of these associations to regulate the field may hinder the extent to which museum education may be declared a profession. Shulman emphasizes that professionals understand their “obligations of service to others, as in a ‘calling,’” and that any authority they wield, as such, derives from the earned trust and respect of those they serve.<sup>56</sup> While it is probable that many museum educators would consider their practice a “calling” – as Elsa Bailey’s argument suggests – the extent to which the public truly trusts and respects the field is still in question. Consider, for instance, that many museum educators have complained of a lack of understanding and appreciation for their field; this may be a clear sign that, lacking regulation and standardization, museum education is not read as a true profession by those outside the field.

### **The Purpose and Value of Graduate Study**

Some practitioners and researchers discuss the need for specific training and qualifications for museum educators, and/or greater utilization of theory in practice – issues Shulman directly relates to academia – but there is little specific discussion about the role of advanced formal education in these processes. A few practitioners even assert that credential expectations – including academic training – are actually quite high for the field – and, incidentally, incommensurate with pay<sup>57</sup> – as one educator states: ‘They’ll list job descriptions that make it sound like you have to have all of this – you know, we want you to have a master’s and preferably a doctorate. We want you to walk on water; salary \$18,000 a

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<sup>56</sup> Shulman, “Theory, Practice and Education,” 516.

<sup>57</sup> Dragotto, Minerva and Nichols, “Museum Education “Rocket Science”?”; Bailey, “Museum Educators’ Perceptions”; Marcus, “Connectors.”

year.’<sup>58</sup> However, although some employers may prefer educators with advanced degrees, there remains no specific academic degree or certification that constitutes a norm for the field. Furthermore, there are – at present – only a few academic programs expressly dedicated to preparing students for museum education practice.

Returning briefly to the debate surrounding degree requirements for the museum world at large (i.e. museum studies degrees, certifications, etc), some of the criticisms centered on concerns about the actual utility of said programs. In essence, it is a question of the practical value of such degrees; do they really equip graduates with the essential skills and knowledge demanded in the field? As Eugene Dillenberg recorded in an article originally published in, *The Exhibitionist*: “While not exactly dismissive of museum studies, the professionals I spoke to placed far greater value on experience... ‘If it’s a choice between a candidate with experience and one with a degree, you go with experience’... ‘A degree isn’t a shortcut.’”<sup>59</sup> Essentially, these kinds of comments imply that museum professionals believe there is an insurmountable gap between the kind of theory stressed in academic settings and the reality of practice. Although Dillenburg’s article focused on exhibit designers, his findings may be extrapolated to include museum education, as the two share a lack of standardization when it comes to the professional preparation and backgrounds of their practitioners. Indeed, similar complaints and concerns about museum studies programs span departments, suggesting that it is not museum education alone that questions the value of such degrees.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Bailey, “Museum Educators’ Perceptions,” 185.

<sup>59</sup> “We Don’t Need No Education.”

<sup>60</sup> See Nina Simone’s blog post, “Warning: Museum Graduate Programs Spawn Legions of Zombies!”

Interestingly, even Shulman acknowledges this inherent tension, stating: “The recurrent challenge of all professional learning is negotiating the inescapable tension between theory and practice.”<sup>61</sup> He goes on to state that part of the problem with theories is that they tend to narrow or simplify issues, and that the research behind them is often carried out in artificially controlled environments. This then begins to sound like the second major concern with museum training standardization, that it stands to severely narrow the diversity and creativity of the field. However, Shulman acknowledges that while academic training may not *seem* necessarily essential in any way other than as an entitlement (to practice), interaction with academia is truly vital to the healthy growth of practice: “...counterintuitively, the ostensibly conservative academy is the source of radical ideas. The field is where you encounter the elastic cord that pulls matters back to the conservation of extant habits of practice. This kind of tension is endemic in all forms of professional education.”<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps a more obvious purpose of advanced formal education is to instigate some sort of change in the individuals pursuing this kind of study – to forge *scholars*; but what does this term truly denote, and what do these individuals then offer the world outside of academia? In “Preparing Stewards of the Discipline,” Chris M. Golde suggests that a scholar is: “someone who will creatively generate new knowledge, critically conserve valuable and useful ideas, and responsibly transform those understandings through writing, teaching, and application”; in other words, a scholar is a “steward of the discipline.”<sup>63</sup> This idea of creating individuals who not only sustain, but also grow, a field is similar to Shulman’s discussion of the

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<sup>61</sup> Shulman, “Theory, Practice and Education,” 517.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 518.

<sup>63</sup> Chris M. Golde, “Preparing Stewards of the Discipline,” in *Envisioning the future of doctoral education : preparing stewards of the discipline, Carnegie essays on the doctorate*, ed. Chris M. Golde and George E. Walker, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 5.

relationship between academia and a profession. Both Golde and Shulman posit that scholars, and the communities they represent, have certain roles or responsibilities to carry out; in a cyclical fashion, the very products of graduate programs are simultaneously ensuring its advancement and care.

Several other scholars writing on the subject explore similar ideas,<sup>64</sup> suggesting that graduate study not only advances knowledge, but also allows for its dispersal: “Since World War II, graduate schools have engineered windmills of thought that have generated ideas, discoveries, technologies, and applied knowledge.”<sup>65</sup> The latter concept is significant because it suggests that academia does not – or at least shouldn’t – work in isolation, but is, in fact, heavily involved with the exchange and communication of ideas. As such, the image of the “ivory tower,” in which academics have no true connection to, or understanding of – and, therefore, nothing to offer – everyday practice begins to fade. In another piece, Lee Shulman suggests that doctoral education is really all about learning skills that can help safeguard the field of practice: “The holders of Ph.D.’s are not only responsible for serving others through their disciplines; they are stewards of their disciplines or interdisciplinary domains, charged with the responsibility to protect their fields from misrepresentation and corruption, to expand them through original research and synthesis, and to enlighten future practitioners and ordinary citizens through teaching and intellection seduction.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> George E. Walker, et al., “The Importance of Intellectual Community,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, no. 16 (2007); Catharine R. Stimpson, “Reclaiming the Mission of Graduate Education,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 50, no. 41 (2004); Lucy Russell, *Dr. Dr., I Feel Like -- Doing a PhD* (New York: Continuum, 2008); Denise K. Magner, “Critics Urge Overhaul of Ph.D. Training, But Disagree Sharply on How To Do So,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 46, no. 34 (2000).

<sup>65</sup> Stimpson, “Reclaiming Graduate Education.”

<sup>66</sup> Lee S. Shulman, “Doctoral Education Shouldn’t Be a Marathon,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 56, no. 30 (2010).

Other researchers have proposed further skills that doctoral study begets. For example, according to Audrey Williams June, those holding doctorates have project management skills, perseverance, the ability to problem solve and work independently – all gleaned through the dissertation process.<sup>67</sup> Lucy Russell seems to agree, arguing that doctors are viewed as desirable job candidates due to their “self-motivation, and research and analytical skills...”<sup>68</sup> Additionally, Chris Golde – and others – triumphs the interdisciplinary nature of graduate study, asserting that scholars have a broad perspective, understanding where and how their work fits into a larger sphere of practice.<sup>69</sup>

Interestingly, many of these skills align with the job responsibilities of a museum educator, or fill in a perceived gap in the field. For instance, museum education has been described as a demanding job that requires dedication, flexibility, and the ability to juggle multiple projects; expertise that a Ph.D. might reasonably be expected to acquire through the dissertation process. Similarly, some critics of current museum education practice have suggested that its practitioners need to bring a broader perspective to their work, to better understand and clarify how it fits within the larger scope of the institution and field, at large; thus, Golde and Magner’s argument that scholars develop an ability to work within, and between, disciplines to see the bigger picture may be a potential boon to a field described as overly myopic.

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<sup>67</sup> Audrey Williams June, "More Universities Break the Taboo and Talk to Ph.D.'s About Jobs Outside Academe," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 58, no. 12 (2011).

<sup>68</sup> Russell, "Dr. Dr.," 15.

<sup>69</sup> Golde, "Preparing Stewards"; Magner, "Critics Urge Overhaul."

Another issue to address is that of perceived respect and authority. According to Russell, those holding doctorates are respected for their accomplishments: “Having a PhD is also seen as signifying that someone is an authority on a subject, and that they have made a contribution to the current knowledge in that area.”<sup>70</sup> Golde suggests something similar, stating that, “The doctorate should signal a high level of accomplishment...”<sup>71</sup> These assertions are not exactly radical, most people would probably describe Ph.D.s in similar terms, even if unfamiliar with their field of study or specific accomplishments. Therefore, for a field like museum education where complaints over lack of appreciation and respect are common, the kind of assumed authority inscribed by such degrees may be useful.

However, despite the benefits, graduate study also has potential drawbacks. One of the most controversial issues being whether or not academia is responsive enough to outside practice; particularly, as regards the issue of training Ph.D.s for working outside of academic institutions. Recently, many have highlighted concerns about the growing number of doctoral students, and the lack of professorial or research positions available in universities, suggesting that programs should encourage more experimentation with regard to career aspirations.<sup>72</sup> The former could be an indication that Ph.D.’s are rigidly trained, and therefore, may struggle outside of academia; however, alternatively, it could signify the inevitable changes that academia will have to make to make it sustainable. If the latter is true, than many disciplines stand to benefit from a more open and engaged academia, that is willing and able to respond directly to practice, rather than focus exclusively on theory.

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<sup>70</sup> Russell, “Dr.Dr.,” 15.

<sup>71</sup> Golde, “Preparing Stewards,” 10.

<sup>72</sup> Magner, “Critics Urge Overhaul”; Williams June, “Universities Break the Taboo”; Shulman, “Doctoral Education”; Stimpson, “Reclaiming the Mission.”

Another big problem is the demanding nature of graduate study – particularly, doctoral degrees – ‘intellectual demands will be high, and its psychic ones higher, and it will require long years of study.’<sup>73</sup> Audrey Williams June describes the intense perseverance and focus required of doctoral study, noting that it is very difficult to take any time off.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, graduate study is not only costly in terms of mental and intellectual energy, but also financially: “Graduate education began to bother people for a variety of reasons. That it was important, expensive, and not well understood...”<sup>75</sup> All of these conditions taken together may make graduate study impractical, if not impossible, for many to pursue. Therefore, for those working in an already demanding field like museum education, graduate study may not seem like an option, even if the potential benefits understood and valued.

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<sup>73</sup> Shulman, “Doctoral Education.”

<sup>74</sup> Williams June, “Universities Break the Taboo.”

<sup>75</sup> Stimpson, “Reclaiming the Mission.”

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This research study sought to examine the experiences of practitioners with doctorates – or those currently pursuing doctoral degrees – and previous experience working in the field of museum education. Principally, it focused on motivations for pursuing advanced formal education, the types of degree programs chosen, and the work experiences of these individuals pre and post-degree. The objective was to explore how such degrees are – could or should be – utilized in the field of museum education, as well as, to better understand the overall challenges and rewards of doctoral study.

### **Study Parameters**

This study focused on recent graduates of doctoral programs – or those currently pursuing doctoral study – with prior museum education experience. To help maintain focus on *current* practice, recent was defined as having graduated within the last ten years. Additionally, so as not to rule out individuals who are no longer working in the field, or who may not define themselves solely/primarily as museum educators, it included those with any prior museum education experience. In general, this study defined museum educator fairly broadly, as many institutions utilize a variety of titles and departmental delineations that may, or may not, include the exact wording of education and/or educator.

### **Locating and Selecting Informants**

While master's degrees are becoming a more common credential of museum educators, doctoral degrees are still somewhat of a rarity in the field. Additionally, there are currently

no museum education doctoral programs within the United States,<sup>76</sup> and a fair amount of diversity in the types of doctoral degree programs pursued by museum educators. As a result, the search for potential informants was somewhat challenging, requiring an innovative combination of research methods.

Initially, the search began word of mouth; utilizing contacts with other museum professionals and Museology students to connect with known museum educators with doctorates.

Unfortunately, this technique was extremely limited, and yielded only a few contacts.

Although some of these names did eventually – through common associates – lead to informants, none of these individuals directly served as informants for this study.

By investigating the backgrounds of practitioners and researchers writing within and about the field, as well as, those mentioned in certain studies and roundtable discussions, sixteen potential informants were identified. Although the education level and career experience of some of these individuals were included within the writings, many more required additional research to ascertain whether they fit within the parameters of this study – namely, those with doctorates – or doctoral students – and prior museum education experiences.

LinkedIn, an online professional network, proved an invaluable resource in determining the educational and professional backgrounds of potential informants. This social networking tool allows individuals to publically post career-related information – serving as a kind of

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<sup>76</sup> While a few of my informants are Canadian, my literature review was principally focused on the state of practice within the United States. While there are interesting contrasts to draw between practice within and outside of the US, and academic programs geared towards museum education are more common in some other countries, these issues largely fall outside the scope of my study.

expanded résumé – and to connect professionally with friends, acquaintances, employers, etc. LinkedIn was utilized to double-check the credentials of individuals suspected of fitting with the parameters of this study. This saved time – and the potential awkwardness – of personally questioning potential informants about their career and educational backgrounds.<sup>77</sup> However, limitations regarding contacting members often necessitated further online searches.

This study strove to accurately represent the museum education field as a whole, but given its nature, the pool of potential informants was narrow and largely self-selecting. For example, although a balance of genders was desired, this study included only one interview with a male museum educator; however, as museum education is female-dominated, this imbalance may simply reflect the realities of the field. Similar difficulties arose in representing ethnic and racial minorities, and while it is important to note the disparity, it is doubtful it impacted the findings.

Although four of the informants are Canadian professionals, much of the literature review focused on museum education practice as grounded within the American context. While it became clear that major differences exist between practice within and without the United States – as discussed in the findings – utilizing these “external” voices contributed value by broadening the scope and perspective of this study.

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<sup>77</sup> For example, a private profile may only list current employment or the names of universities attended; however, I could then use this to find additional sources of information online, such as: organizational websites, dissertations published online, etc.

## **Interviews**

As little research or literature exists on the place of advanced formal education in the professional preparation, practice and continuing development of museum educators – particularly, within the United States – this study is exploratory in nature. It was intended to document the experiences and perspectives of museum educators who chose to pursue doctoral study, which – at this point – is still uncommon in the field. Thus, in-depth interviews were used to glean as much useful information from the experiences and perspectives of informants as possible – so as to serve as a kind of testing ground for one possible path for the future of museum education practice.

All potential informants – sixteen total – were contacted via email. Introductory emails were sent with a brief explanation of the thesis project, a copy of the consent form, and contact information. A signed copy of the consent form and potential interview dates and times were requested of those that expressed interest. Eleven initially agreed to participate, but ultimately three in-person interviews, and five phone interviews were scheduled – as not all were able to schedule an interview within the limited timeframe. Seven informants either hold doctoral degrees, or are current doctoral students, and have prior museum education experience – although, not all of the informants currently work directly in the field. One informant has a PhD, and has written extensively on the professionalization process within the museum field. While she does not have direct experience working in museum education, her extensive knowledge of the subject proved useful for this study.

Interviews were conducted over the span of two months, from early March through late April 2012. They were all audio-recorded, with signed permission. The three in-person interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder, and the five phone interviews were recorded using the Apple program, QuickTime Player. The Google Voice program – which acts like a direct phone line for your computer – was utilized to conduct the phone interviews.

The interviews lasted between forty minutes and two hours, and were semi-structured. Discussion flowed naturally, but the following interview guide was utilized – as needed – to help prompt and guide conversation:

1. What were your motivations in pursuing a doctorate?
2. How did you decide upon your field of study - i.e. what factors influenced your decision?
3. What field was your doctoral degree in, and what was the program like?
4. Looking back on your previous museum education experience, were there things you learned earning your doctorate that would have been useful in performing your job(s)?
5. Please compare your experiences working in museum education before and after earning your doctorate (if applicable).

Although interviews were recorded, written notes served as a reference guide for later analysis. Important points or quotations were noted, which created rough time/reference markers for final analysis, and helped with recognition of themes that carried across interviews. Consent forms were sent and verbal consent affirmed prior to interviews;

however, given the fact that many interviews took place over the phone, some of the signed consent forms were received after the interviews.

## **Analysis**

Analysis began with listening to audio recordings of the interviews, using the written notes as a guide. Then more detailed notes were taken, documenting the themes of conversation throughout the interview. At this juncture, coding information was assigned to use in review with the thesis committee and to report findings. Additionally, informants were contacted whose direct quotes were utilized – via email – so as to request permission – as per, the stipulations of the IRB application.

Analysis concentrated on common themes spanning the interviews; therefore, after initial review of all the interviews, focus was narrowed by prompt or subject area. In this way, the perspectives of various informants could be compared and contrasted, looking particularly at the potential reasons for differences of experience and viewpoint, as well as, speculating as to the cause and significance of any commonalities. Finally, the interview findings were compared with current literature on related subjects, to demonstrate how the experiences of informants relate to ongoing debates, as well as, potentially benefit the field of museum education.

## Chapter Four: Results

This qualitative study examined the motivations and experiences of museum educators – defined as those with prior museum education experience – with doctoral degrees, and those pursuing doctoral degrees. Exploratory in nature, it sought to reveal some of the potential rewards and challenges of doctoral study, as well as, draw comparisons to discussions surrounding professionalization of the field and the professional preparation, practice and development of museum educators.

Based upon analysis of eight in-depth interviews, the following is divided into thematic sections, addressing: motivations of informants; their experiences in doctoral programs; the perceived value and benefits of their degree; potential drawbacks or challenges of doctoral study; and finally, the relationship to existing literature and implications for the field.

### Motivations

The greatest similarity between the informants was their rationale for pursuing doctoral study. While many mentioned other contributing factors, all of the informants – eight out of eight – stated that their major motivation in pursuing higher education came from within; alluding to some sort of internal drive or desire to learn more. As one informant stated: “I was looking for broader perspectives, new ideas, ways to challenge myself...[it was an] entirely selfish decision to do it.”<sup>78</sup> Similarly, another informant described it as, “a personal decision, and a personal mission, and something [she] felt really strongly about...”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Informant 5, in-person interview with author, March 22, 2012.

<sup>79</sup> Informant 6, phone interview with author, March 27, 2012.

Many of the informants suggested that this personal motivation derived, in part, from a sense they were stagnating in their jobs, and/or something was missing in their practice. For example, one informant – who had previous experience as a classroom teacher, and went on to pursue a degree in adult education – said: “I knew I wanted to learn more...I knew how to design a lesson plan and develop curriculum, but I didn’t know what that would look like for adults. So my position in the museum was telling me I didn’t know everything I needed to know.”<sup>80</sup> More commonly, informants stated they could not directly identify where those gaps lay and what exactly they were looking for – sometimes only reaching this understanding upon completion of their degrees. One informant confirmed this uncertainty, describing his search for a degree program after securing an elevated position in his institution: “I was looking for an additional type of educational experience, and I didn’t know what I wanted to do.”<sup>81</sup> Similarly, another informant suggested that she had a “hit a wall” in her career, and that while she knew she “needed some foundational stuff, and a new lens to do [her] own work...[she] didn’t know what that would look like.”<sup>82</sup> In many cases, doctoral study was viewed as a chance to explore new ideas – particularly, theory – it served as a kind of intellectual “adventure,” but the desired outcome was not always clear at the onset.<sup>83</sup>

Despite the fact that many informants felt their practice was lacking in some way – with at least four informants alluding to this fact – few viewed their motivations as directly connected to career advancement. In fact, only one informant mentioned reflecting on how a doctoral degree might *directly* benefit her professionally, noting that she was ineligible for

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<sup>80</sup> Informant 7, phone interview with author, April 3, 2012.

<sup>81</sup> Informant 2, phone interview with author, March 14, 2012.

<sup>82</sup> Informant 1, phone interview with author, March 12, 2012.

<sup>83</sup> Informant 5.

certain grants at the university where she worked because she was not faculty.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, another informant compared her decision to pursue doctoral study with a directorship, believing both could “enhance my profile”; however, she did not imply it was a career move, per say, and actually left her job to start the program.<sup>85</sup> This is not to say that informants did not view their degrees as beneficial to their careers, but rather that they did not necessarily pursue doctoral study with this specific aim. Informants were more likely to describe advancement in general terms, discussing a desire to enhance their institution or the field, rather than their personal careers: “I was interested in maybe pushing the field a bit, or pushing my colleagues a bit.”<sup>86</sup>

Surprisingly, while many of the informants felt they were lacking certain skills or knowledge, they did not necessarily receive pressure or support from their superiors or peers to pursue advanced education. In fact, several of the informants suggested that they were already advancing in their careers, and in some cases, highly respected in their institutions and communities of practice. A few went on to point out that as a doctorate is not a requirement to work in museum education, not everyone they worked with saw the value in pursuing one. One informant described her relationship with her “traditional” boss in these terms: “I’m not encouraged to do any of those things [write and publish], and it’s all very extraneous, and the PhD was not necessary. I would say that I didn’t have a whole lot of support in terms of I don’t think it really mattered to my boss whether or not I did it.”<sup>87</sup> On

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<sup>84</sup> This informant worked for a university art museum, and through she taught a collegiate course, she was not considered faculty without a PhD. Informant 6.

<sup>85</sup> Informant 4.

<sup>86</sup> Informant 5.

<sup>87</sup> Informant 6.

the other hand, five of the informants stated that they did receive some sort of encouragement from friends or colleagues, with a few even expressing a desire to do something similar.

On a related note, some informants mentioned that some form of graduate study was not necessarily a rarity in their field, and that many of their colleagues had content-based degrees – for example, a degree in a hard science or art history. This came up most often with informants who had worked in science or art museums, where educational standards or norms seem to be more frequently mandated. In fact, one informant described her decision to pursue art education rather than art history, as a “political decision,” feeling that she wanted to focus on people rather than objects.<sup>88</sup> This divide between art, science, and the rest of museums based on educational criterion is intriguing, with potential implications for the ability of museum education to gain cohesion as a profession.

Another major factor in the decision process was money. Interestingly, seven of the eight informants were either working for the university where they received their doctorate – thereby, receiving substantial tuition discounts – or received considerable fellowships or scholarships. Many pointed out that without financial assistance, money would have been a major deterrent, with one going so far as to suggest that paying for graduate study it is just not worth the cost: “I think it comes in handy, people take you seriously, but I don’t think it’s worth the sixty thousand dollars.”<sup>89</sup> This relates to many on-going discussions in the museum world about the financial burdens of graduate study – particularly, museum studies programs

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<sup>88</sup> Informant 6.

<sup>89</sup> Informant 1.

– being incommensurate with its professional value; this topic will also be explored at greater length in a later section.

Similarly, where they were in their personal lives – particularly, regarding family – played a large part in the timing of doctoral study. Several informants stated that they would not have been able to take the opportunity had it not aligned with their familial demands. In fact, five of the informants mentioned the age of their children – or not having children – as influencing their decision. Three also mentioned that they had been inspired and/or supported by their spouses to undertake doctoral study; one informant stated that her husband’s decision to pursue a PhD encouraged her, as she knew, “our household would be aligned with the demands.”<sup>90</sup> Informant 8 also felt that her age factored into her decision, believing that as she was older and more established in her career, she was better equipped to deal with the demands of doctoral study.

Finally, several of the informants stated that their decision to pursue doctoral study partially reflected a desire to focus in on a particular subject: “I wanted to have a moment where I would spend a little more depth, go a bit deeper, spend a little more time on something that I get in my daily life.”<sup>91</sup> A few mentioned the hectic schedules of museum educators, suggesting that there was little time for the reflection and professional development they wanted: “I think for a lot of people, museum work is a busy job... we are not encouraged to publish, and we’re not encouraged to write, and our work is not encouraged...”<sup>92</sup> Another informant noted the extreme differences between the pace of work in museums and

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<sup>90</sup> Informant 3, in-person interview with author, March 20, 2012.

<sup>91</sup> Informant 8, phone interview with author, April 24, 2012.

<sup>92</sup> Informant 6.

universities: “I remember laughing about it when I came [to the university] from the museum. In a museum you are busy every day, all day. There are nine million things to do, and they are always things that are very visible, very public...”<sup>93</sup> In this sense, the quick tempo and multitude of job responsibilities often demanded of museum educators – an issue often alluded to in the literature – made the focused intensity of doctoral study appealing for some.

### **Academic Experiences**

Although the specific focus of doctoral programs varied substantially, all eight programs were in some way related to the education field.<sup>94</sup> This was somewhat surprising given the oft-noted frequency with which art and science educators choose content-based degrees; in fact, four of my informants were working in environments where content-based degrees were more common, and specifically mentioned the underlying tensions between content-based and educational backgrounds.

Similarly, I was taken aback by the lack of variation in the type of degree pursued – PhDs vs. EdDs. EdDs are regarded as professional degrees, with a strong emphasis on practice, while PhDs are generally described as theoretical degrees. Although several informants mentioned the importance of grounding one’s practice in theory: “...you need to have a theory because it gives you a base to understand what’s going on...”<sup>95</sup>; there were also those who addressed the importance of maintaining a balance between theory and practice. In fact, this same informant lamented the lack of practical experience he saw coming out of some museum

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<sup>93</sup> Informant 1.

<sup>94</sup> Appendix A charts the professional backgrounds and degree types pursued by the informants.

<sup>95</sup> Informant 2.

studies programs, suggesting that some of their students might be better off pursuing an EdD. Given the amount of recognition informants paid to the need for a balance between the two, I was surprised to find such an unequal distribution of PhDs and EdDs.

Another commonality was the adjustments informants made to their programs' curriculum. Seven of the eight informants discussed supplementing reading and adjusting assignments to better align with their professional context: "I added my own literature on top of my school literature. So I was doubling my workload, but I wanted to. I adapted every assignment...to a non-school setting."<sup>96</sup> Of course, to some extent all college students negotiate their interests by enrolling in particular courses or utilizing free choice on certain assignments – especially with doctoral study, which allows/demands individual study in the form of a dissertation. However, the extent to which this was necessary for these informants suggests that museum educators face a particular dilemma in choosing programs that reflect their specific interests and professional context. No doctoral programs in museum education currently exist in the US or Canada – where all my informants practice – and they all chose educational programs that place a stronger emphasis on formal education. As one informant stated: "One of the challenges for museum education, and possibly stretching out to other informal learning environments, is that you don't have the wealth of scholarship in universities that you have in other areas."<sup>97</sup>

Perhaps for this reason, many also mentioned that their academic advisors and professors lacked expertise in museum education, and museums as places of learning. Although most

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<sup>96</sup> Informant 1.

<sup>97</sup> Informant 8.

described professors and advisors as being open to their unique perspective and interests, they often felt they could offer only limited support: “I got very little guidance on the actual academic side of it...it wasn’t that people weren’t challenging the ideas, but weren’t doing it from a place of expertise”<sup>98</sup> Another informant lamented the fact that she often had to depend upon luck to find relevant museum literature – she came from a formal education background before pursuing work in museums – because she didn’t know where to look; she gave the example of discovering an identical dissertation project to her own, three weeks before she was set to present her proposal.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, two of the informants mentioned that had they the opportunity to pursue a degree more focused on museum studies/education, they would have jumped at the chance.

On the other hand, not all viewed the lack of experience with their field negatively; one informant stated that she went into doctoral study expecting to work alone<sup>100</sup> – although, she also stated she was excited to work with a particular professor who shared her interests in cultural studies – and others expressed appreciation for the opportunity to view their work from different perspectives. In fact, one informant described the lack of focus on museums as “nice,” feeling that she was still able to incorporate new information into her practice: “everything that I was writing and thinking about would bring together these ideas that they were talking about from a broader educational perspective into what I was doing as a museum education, so it was really flexible.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Informant 3.

<sup>99</sup> Informant 6.

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<sup>101</sup> Informant 5.

One of the differences that may have affected informant's perspectives on this matter was the sense – or lack thereof – of a community of practice related to their educational experience. Three of the informants<sup>102</sup> were actually pursuing educational degrees in the same department at the same time, and all described the ability to exchange ideas – despite varied interests – and offer support to one another as positive. Alternatively, those who were lacking colleagues in their educational setting were more likely to note gaps in their experience and learning. Still, none of the informants spoke of open hostility or resistance to their professional interests/perspectives – although, one informant did note two associate professors who were completely unfamiliar with museum education and had trouble adapting their curriculum<sup>103</sup> – and felt that although it sometimes took personal initiative to make the curriculum relevant, they always gleaned some value or application. As one informant noted, it is up to the student – particularly, with doctoral study – to find departments that are open to their interests and professors with whom they hope to work, and vice versa.<sup>104</sup>

Another interesting similarity amongst informants was that all continued to work – at least partially – through the course of their doctoral programs – a couple did take study leaves and one only worked during her final year. As discussed earlier, money was no doubt a factor in this decision, and five of the informants were actually working – in some capacity; for example, at a university museum – for the universities from which they received their degree. A few described understanding and supportive employers – for example, allowing for flexibility in work schedules – and a couple of were actually headhunted after beginning their

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<sup>102</sup> Informants 4, 5 and 8. Interestingly, these women all studied and work in Canada. While educational divides in practice between countries largely falls outside the scope of this thesis, I elaborated on this subject in another section.

<sup>103</sup> Informant 1.

<sup>104</sup> Informant 8.

degree: “part of the reason why they were interested in me is because I was doing my PhD.”<sup>105</sup>

However, despite general willingness on the part of employers to make allowances, some warned that this can be a challenging experience; one informant stated that she was not sure she would do it again: “it really enriches what I do from a professional standpoint, but it is also can be a bit crazy making because you’re juggling two distinct entities...”<sup>106</sup> Another informant described her hectic schedule of working all day, spending a few hours with her family, and then having to working through part of the night on her dissertation.<sup>107</sup> Informant 1 felt extremely privileged to have the opportunity to work for the university she received her degree from – she did not have to pay tuition – but knew this kind of arrangement is not available to most: “I’ve said to my colleagues...that if I were working in a museum and trying to get my doctorate at the same time – in the current way that the program is structured – I wouldn’t have been able to do it...it would have taken a lot longer and it would have been really hard to juggle all that.”<sup>108</sup>

### **Value and Benefits of Doctoral Study**

All the informants were generally positive about their doctoral programs; even when challenged, they found the over-all experience rewarding. Specifically, the most commonly cited benefits – six out of eight informants – were shifts in perspective and expanded thinking: “I don’t think I would have this perspective on the field if I weren’t in a college of

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<sup>105</sup> Informant 4, in-person interview with author, March 21, 2012.

<sup>106</sup> Informant 5.

<sup>107</sup> Informant 6.

<sup>108</sup> Informant 1.

education, and if I hadn't gotten my doctorate.”<sup>109</sup> In turn, a lot of them talked about the impact this had on their practice: “it made me rethink the tried and true ways of presenting things, deepened my thinking about what I was doing. Allowed the conversations to go more in depth because I wasn't taking things for granted...”<sup>110</sup> Interestingly, more than one of these informants felt that although they questioned their actions more, this was actually beneficial to their work; one informant described it as gaining “maturity” in her practice.<sup>111</sup>

Similarly, many discussed the value in being exposed to people who came from a variety of contexts and held differing views. As mentioned previously, all the informants were enrolled in programs with a stronger foundation and emphasis on formal education; however, many felt these encounters were vital to their growth as educators. Some related this to the fact that they often engage with educators working outside of museums, and/or are affected by formal education policy and curriculum in their day-to-day practice. One informant suggested that his familiarity with, and ability to navigate the latter offered him a “systems based” understanding of how things operated, and changed, in his profession.<sup>112</sup> Additionally, others felt this made them more flexible, and better able to adapt in a variety of situations: “I am able to transfer my understanding of helping adults learn outside of classrooms to lots of contexts...my understanding of adult education has allowed me to go into any kind of museum...pretty easily.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Informant 1.

<sup>110</sup> Informant 5.

<sup>111</sup> Informant 4.

<sup>112</sup> Informant 2.

<sup>113</sup> Informant 7.

Another frequently referenced benefit was the ability to advocate for their work. Many felt that the knowledge – particularly, theoretical foundations – they gained through doctoral study helped them to better understand, and feel more confident in their practice; “it helped me to advocate...I can say the work we are doing in education is not just fun, it is important...”<sup>114</sup> Especially intriguing were comments which suggested that the nature of their practice did not necessarily change, but rather that they could better interpret and clarify the significance of their efforts. They often related this to the acquisition and utilization of academic terminology, and/or the ability to reference specific theories to strengthen their position institutionally and professionally:

When you are talking about organizations with limited funds, limited money, they want to put money into something that’s going to yield results or has some evidence that it’s valuable...Same thing with grants, so many museums have opportunities to get grants, but they need evidence that what they’re doing is going to be valuable, and useful, and meaningful. I think they appreciate having that scholarship behind it. Sometimes it’s a matter of colleagues at museums saying, ‘what do we call this?’ They know they’re doing good stuff, but they’re not academicians so they don’t have the words, the terms...Before I went back to school, I knew what I was doing was good, or was working, but I didn’t know what it was called, I didn’t know where to look to prove or support what I was doing.<sup>115</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, some described the acquired title – PhD and EdD – as influential in colleagues’ perceptions of their professional capabilities and aptitude. For example, one informant suggested that holding that degree affected people’s view on her capacity to perform at a higher level: “people look at that work with a very particular eye, and the PhD sort of disrupts that. I feel like I am afforded a certain level of respect based on those little

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<sup>114</sup> Informant 2.

<sup>115</sup> Informant 7.

letters...”<sup>116</sup> Likewise, others described how they – and even colleagues – occasionally use their title for effect; for instance, one informant who works in a science-based museum mentioned how her title can be especially useful when dealing with individuals who also hold advanced degrees, explaining, “I use my PhD when I need to...”<sup>117</sup> This same informant also felt that although museum educators already familiar with her were not necessarily awed by her new title, “they are quite appreciative that I’ve gone on and done this work because they see it as raising the bar of the whole community.”

Although career aspirations factored little into decisions to pursue doctoral study, some felt their doctorates were actually advantageous in applying for, or retaining, jobs. As mentioned previously, two informants were actually courted by their current employers while they were enrolled in their degree programs, believing this factored into their institutions’ interest. Similarly, others mentioned that their doctorates either gave them the confidence to apply for elevated positions, and/or offered them an edge professionally: “It is so vital, so many people have...a masters degree, or are in a preparation program for a masters degree...so what’s set me apart...I will have the doctorate as well. It’s almost like a competition of whose academic credentials sort of outweigh each other...”<sup>118</sup>

On a related note, some informants mentioned that the actual process of earning their degree taught them valuable lessons about managing pressure and rising to challenges – situations they were then better equipped to handle in their professional lives. One informant felt that the intensity of doctoral study, and especially the process of writing a dissertation, helped

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<sup>116</sup> Informant 6.

<sup>117</sup> Informant 5.

<sup>118</sup> Informant 2.

him learn how to overcome obstacles: “it feels like I can weather things in my programs, in my department, that I see other people having a hard time weathering.”<sup>119</sup> Another informant suggested that part of the allure of doctoral degrees is the amount and level of intellectual toil it inscribes: “PhD still holds this kind of aura around it. It’s still considered an achievement.”<sup>120</sup>

### **Costs of Doctoral Study**

Informants may have found their doctoral programs extremely valuable, but they did share some challenges and limitations. For example, some warned that earning a doctorate does not automatically correspond to higher wages or better positions: “getting the doctorate ...hasn’t opened a whole bunch of doors. I think people are mistaken if they think having those letters next to your name is going to equal more money or more doors opening.”<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, one informant felt that a doctorate – and more specifically the use of the title – may be off-putting to some; she explained how in her consulting work she is always careful to avoid patronizing those she advises: “people can become defensive. Some care has to be taken. I don’t ever want to go to an organization and say, ‘Hey, I have a PhD, I can fix this, or you’re doing this wrong.’”<sup>122</sup>

This perceived apprehension about the value of a doctorate may spring in part from debates surrounding theory and practice. Many informants cited a deeper theoretical foundation as a major motivating factor; however, there were also those who felt that practical experience

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<sup>119</sup> Informant 2.

<sup>120</sup> Informant 4.

<sup>121</sup> Informant 1.

<sup>122</sup> Informant 7.

was particularly important in the development of expertise in the field of museum education. For instance, Informant 8 was adamant that she did not wish museum educators to become too caught up in academia: “if it moves wholly into the academy...than the reality that we face as museum educators...will be idealized, and not be able to be actualized...I would be frankly disappointed if the museum education community all went into this deep PhD stuff and left the practitioner behind.”

Similarly, informants were also concerned about the financial strain doctoral study can – in some cases – impose. Some felt that the costs of earning a doctorate may not have been worthwhile – or even possible – for them had they been forced to shoulder the burden alone. One informant felt that, despite growing interest in doctoral study within the field, “That may not be meaning that there are line ups at the door for people in museum education to get PhDs because it is really expensive and you don’t need a PhD to get a job.”<sup>123</sup> On a related note, some were concerned that the field of museum education may not currently be equipped to handle an influx of practitioners holding doctorates: “Although I think the field is certainly going to be enriched by people who have exposure to many more ideas and ways of teaching, I don’t know whether the field can support these people coming in. And that’s going to be the challenge.”<sup>124</sup>

Another major obstacle is the amount of time and energy required of a doctorate, particularly when it involves a gap in employment. Many of the informants were lucky to have employers and spouses that were either flexible with their scheduling needs as students, or lent financial

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<sup>123</sup> Informant 8.

<sup>124</sup> Informant 5.

assistance, but not all doctoral candidates may find themselves in this position. As one informant argued, choosing to leave her job to pursue doctoral study was a difficult decision to make, and may not have been possible without the support of her spouse: “If I was a single mom, I don’t think I could have done that.”<sup>125</sup> On the other hand, this same informant was quick to point out that working through a doctoral program presents its own set of challenges; with a year and half left in school she took on a new position: “That was the hardest thing I’ve ever done...it was a lot to juggle at the same time.”

Age and career may also pose limitations to the pursuit of doctoral education. Most informants felt they were well positioned in their professional and personal lives to take on doctoral study, but some warned that younger people may find the demands more challenging: “A lot of how I approached it had to do with my age and experience, both working at a university museum...and choosing to go in as a more mature student...I cherry-picked what I wanted to do, and who I wanted to interact with.”<sup>126</sup> She went on to explain that students who are less advanced in their careers, and with less life experience, may feel obligated to spend more time and energy networking, or have a more difficult time navigating their programs and departments.

Finally, one of the more obvious potential drawbacks is that museum educators lack doctoral programs specifically geared to their needs and context. This is not the position taken by most – as mentioned earlier, the average sentiment was that the diversity of opinions and knowledge they encountered in their doctoral programs was beneficial to their practice –

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<sup>125</sup> Informant 4.

<sup>126</sup> Informant 8.

however, almost all of them described having to put in a large amount of personal effort to supplement the curriculum of programs based on formal education. Similarly, some lamented the lack of academic guidance and support available to them in their departments. Based on commentary, these particular scholars may be classified as extremely self-motivated and driven, but it is important to note the lack of focus on informal learning – and particularly, the museum context – within many education doctoral programs; as one informant reflected: “[I am] finding that the context is even more important, the more research I do. So I think that if I had to do it over again, I would have been more adamant about having someone with a background in museum education, and learning in museums...”<sup>127</sup>

### **Implications for the Field**

Through analysis it became clear that informants’ conclusions about the value of their doctoral education bore remarkable similarities to proposed benefits described in the literature. Additionally, interesting comparisons can be drawn between their experiences and Shulman’s – and others’ – definition of professionalization. For example, one of the standards by which Shulman judged a profession was its involvement of higher learning – particularly, as defined by a set of specific skills and knowledge grounded in theory.<sup>128</sup> This particular criterion concerned Lynn Uyen Tran and Heather King, who asserted that the field of museum education lacked uniformity and concurrence regarding standards of practice, and did not provide enough of a theoretical foundation.<sup>129</sup> Given their stated motivations for pursuing doctoral education, it would seem many of the informants agreed with Tran and King’s analysis; several stated they were seeking more theory, and/or they felt they were

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<sup>127</sup> Informant 7.

<sup>128</sup> Shulman, “Theory, Practice and Education.”

<sup>129</sup> Tran and King, “Professionalization of Museum Educators.”

lacking certain skills or knowledge. Even those that did not specifically reference this as a motivation felt that the doctorate helped them better understand their practice, often providing them the terminology and theory to better explain and advocate for their work. This last observation is particularly relevant for the field of museum education because it ties into another part of Shulman's argument, regarding the importance of credibility in the making of a profession.

According to Shulman, a defining characteristic of a profession is its service to the public, and as such, requires the trust and recognition of those outside the field.<sup>130</sup> Extrapolating from this assertion, one of the reasons external confusion and disregard may plague museum education is that those outside the field do not automatically trust in the qualifications of its practitioners. This is not necessarily a reflection on the credibility of any single practitioner, but that rather, as a whole, the field may not provide adequate proof of why it should be considered a true profession. As referenced earlier, there is no certification process for education departments – few exist for individual practitioners – and although there are professional associations for museum educators, they do not truly regulate the field.

Shulman contended that universities and labs are the places where professional practice is tested and legitimized<sup>131</sup>; interestingly, the experiences of the informants aligned with this argument. Many found their newly acquired titles earned them respect from their peers and colleagues, and some viewed their work as more significant. This was probably more than just a false inflation of value based upon the aura surrounding doctoral degrees, as informants

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<sup>130</sup> Shulman, "Theory, Practice and Education."

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

reported that doctoral study enhanced their ability to draw upon theory in their practice. Even those that stated the essence of their practice did not change much pre and post degree felt they could better interpret its value for others and themselves. As more than one informant pointed out, even when museum educators know what works in their practice – gleaned from years of experience – they don't always have a basic understanding of why it works, nor the evidence to validate it; fortunately, this is what theory and advanced formal education may provide.

Several of the informants also mentioned their great appreciation for doctoral study because it offered them the possibility to explore their practice in greater *depth* – something their jobs did not usually allow due to demanding work schedules. Although some expressed concern about whether academia maintains a proper balance between theory and practice – a tension even Shulman acknowledged – their experiences seemed to confirm Shulman's argument that academia enhances practice and fosters creativity.<sup>132</sup> For example, many felt their thinking expanded and their practice improved as a direct result of doctoral study. Although the field of museum education has also incorporated some evaluative tools into practice<sup>133</sup>, scholars – being unfettered by the day-to-day demands of the average work environment – may find themselves better equipped to systematically examine and test the principles of practice.

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Bailey, "Museum Educators' Perceptions."

Shulman argued that a community of practice was also vital to the development of a profession, as practitioners learn and grow through participation and collegiality.<sup>134</sup> Some informants seemed to agree, believing it was important not to discount the knowledge and expertise of practitioners. Yet, Shulman emphasized the importance of the relationship between academia and the community of practice for a field to sustain itself, as well as, advance. Unfortunately, the current relationship between advanced formal education and the field of museum education is tenuous, at best; there are few graduate programs – mainly, masters or certification programs – expressly dedicated to museum education, and many of the informants felt the curriculum of their doctoral programs were lacking information about informal learning contexts.

Nevertheless, change may be on the horizon; four of the informants mentioned that they were involved with the development of new academic programs that will better address the needs and interests of museum educators. Additionally, several others suggested that many of their professors and advisors were open to their inclusion of museum perspectives, and that some expressed personal interest in the idea of museums as learning sites. Greater collaboration between academia and museum education is exciting not only because of its implications for the professionalization process, but also because of its potential affects on the relationship between educators working within and outside of museums.

A few of the informants discussed the tensions that can sometimes exist between formal and informal educators, feeling this may result from a lack of understanding and communication about the particularities of their work. For example, one informant explained that she was

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<sup>134</sup> Shulman, “Theory, Practice and Education.”

originally hired by her museum because of her formal education background: “[her museum colleagues] didn’t know how to meet [teachers’] learning needs, especially in the context of a museum, which is very different than a classroom.”<sup>135</sup> Another informant expressed regret over the divides she sometimes sees drawn between museum educators and others:

Museum educators are making a mistake if they try to separate themselves from the rest of the education field. Yes the work they do is different, and yes, the way you teach is different...as a collective you’re not going to have much of a voice in education if you are forever removing yourself... You’re a teacher, you teach, whether you write curriculum, or build exhibits, or teach in a lab...a whole lot of time and energy spent trying to define themselves not as classroom teachers, when their energy could have been spent saying, ‘we are teachers and this is how we teach.’<sup>136</sup>

Alternatively, many informants felt their doctoral experience gave them the opportunity to view their practice from a new perspective, and to better understand and learn from practitioners working in other fields. In this sense, the exposure to additional styles of education did not impair their growth as professionals, but rather improved their personal practice; the opposite could also be said, as one informant described her addition of the museum perspective as a, “breath of fresh air.”<sup>137</sup> Later, she expanded upon this relationship: “There are a lot of other people who think about teaching and learning, they just maybe think about it in a different setting. So I think you can still find that richness that you get from having an extended relationship with a colleague even though its outside a museum perspective...and I think that in some ways that might be a good thing.”

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<sup>135</sup> Informant 7.

<sup>136</sup> Informant 1.

<sup>137</sup> Informant 5.

The fact that all informants expressed overall satisfaction with their doctoral programs – none of which were specifically geared toward museum education – suggests that great options currently exist in advanced formal education to help prepare and further develop museum educators as professionals. In turn, though few in number, these pioneering museum educators are helping – through advocacy and dispersion – to improve the relationship between the field and academia, enhancing the institutional and social value of museum education, and potentially clearing pathways for greater collaboration between all types of educators. While doctoral study may never become a requirement of practice – nor would the field likely be capable of sustaining an influx of doctors – this study has clearly demonstrated that advanced formal education has something valuable to offer the field of museum education.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Conclusions**

This explorative study sought to compare the educational and professional experiences of museum educators who hold – or are currently pursuing – doctoral study. The results are intended to better inform practitioners – and aspiring museum educators – as to the place and value of advanced formal education in their professional preparation and development.

Hopefully, it may also encourage deeper discussion about the (potential) relationship between academia and museum education, as well as, generate greater interest and study of the range of possibilities afforded the field by advanced formal education programs. The following key findings are based upon discussion in the previous sections:

- Informants felt something was missing from their professional practice and some expressed a desire to move the field forward, motivating them to pursue further study – interestingly, few mentioned push factors, like encouragement from supervisors.
- Decisions to pursue graduate study typically self-motivated – informants suggested personal and intellectual growth were major factors, while career aspirations were a minor consideration.
- Degree programs were rewarding, but often required supplemental information to meet individual needs and interests – as programs typically focused on formal education, with little emphasis on informal learning or museum education.
- There is growing interest in informal learning and museum education; the professors, advisors, and peers of many informants expressed interest in their work, and some schools are revising or creating new programs to better represent a broader range of learning methods and environments.

## **Recommendations**

### **One: Outreach and Collaboration with Universities**

The field of museum education needs to engage with academia on a deeper level. As the experiences of informants demonstrated, degree programs do not necessarily need to be geared directly toward museum education to be useful in practice; however, there is plenty of room for growth in terms of understanding and inclusion of museum contexts and informal learning. While these informants were willing to dedicate time and energy to supplementing the curriculum of their doctoral programs to better align with their interests, this may be a challenging and discouraging task for museum educators hoping to follow a similar path.

The positive news is that academia seems open to the incorporation of new educational perspectives. Consider, for instance, the number of informants who reported that their professors and advisors were flexible with and interested in their professional experiences and viewpoints. Furthermore, some programs are already in the process of developing or revising their curriculum and focus to better address these issues. Therefore, this may be an opportune time for museum educators to reach out to, support and advocate for greater collaboration between universities and museums.

### **Two: Standards for Professional Preparation and Development**

Over the last thirty years, the field of museum education has labored arduously to develop solid standards of practice; however, little attention has been allotted to standards or credentials for professional preparation, training and development. Although some in the

field fear the consequences of such efforts, the experiences of these informants confirm that practitioners often feel the effects of such neglect. Most informants suggested they pursued doctorates because they felt stagnant, or that something was missing in their practice. While not always initially understood or supported by their colleagues, they reported that their practice improved as a result of their educational experience. Similarly, many felt better able to advocate for their work – potentially improving their personal standing, as well as, that of their department within their institutions.

At present, museum educators tend to come from a variety of educational and professional experiences. This diversity may infuse the field with creative and flexible workers; however, it may also hinder the professionalization process. If professions require public trust to function properly, those outside the field may not interpret museum education and its practitioners as legitimate. In other words, if there are no set standards or credentials to be met by practitioners working in the field, why should the public trust that they know what they are doing and how to do it? The fact that so many museum educators complain that their work is not generally understood or appreciated by those outside the field may be a symptom of this fact. Alternatively, informants reported that while their doctorate did not always greatly alter their practice, they did become better at explaining it to others, having learned the terminology and theory to legitimize their authority. Similarly, many reported that their degrees/titles garnered respect from others, making it more likely for others to accept and value their work.

This does not mean that the field of museum education should require advanced degrees of all its practitioners; however, the experiences of these informants does suggest that having some sort of publically acknowledged credential improves others' interpretation of their authority and knowledge in practice. Similarly, having standards for professional preparation, training, and development may improve relationships between practitioners of different educational and professional backgrounds. For example, it could offer them a common ground in the form of shared theory, terminology and understanding of best practices; thereby, enhancing their ability to learn from one another and work collaboratively.

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**Appendix A**

Informant #	Type(s) of Museum(s) Worked In	Type of Doctoral Degree
1	Natural History	Educational Leadership
2	Science; Art	Urban Education
3	N/A	Educational Studies
4	History	Education
5	Planetarium; History	Education
6	Art	Art Education
7	History	Adult Education
8	Anthropology	Education