

# MuseumsForward

## “You can’t eat prestige:”: The impact of unionization on art museum workers’ well-being

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Sara Bell

### Abstract

The museum field is facing a crisis of worker satisfaction and well-being that is in large part born from leadership and administration found wanting. As positions become more competitive and wages stagnate, museum workers are feeling frustrated and disinterested in the sector, with many choosing to unionize to address some of these issues. The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which unionization can impact workplace well-being among art museum workers. Using an adapted version of the PERMA profiler, interviews were conducted with 11 art museum professionals in unions. Results identify three ways in which unionization can impact worker well-being: increasing job resources and decreasing job demands, fostering community, and making room to dream. Workers felt more at ease in their positions as they were provided more resources through the union. They also felt more connected to their fellow coworkers because they were able to foster solidarity and community. In turn, this led workers to feel that they had the ability to connect more deeply to their work and explore both personal and professional interests. These results suggest that unionization can positively impact worker well-being in art museums and can be used by practitioners who hope to facilitate community-building and better their own well-being within the workplace. Because of this, unionization can be seen as a positive activity for researchers interested in the intersection of unionization and workplace well-being.

### Keywords

Art museums; well-being; unionization; museum workers

### Committee Chair

Jessica Luke, PhD

### Committee Members

Michelle Millar Fisher, MPhil; Mary Kay Gugerty, PhD; Daniel Jacoby, PhD

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## Introduction

While the economic state of the museum field is currently in disarray, the ensuing effects (e.g., furloughs and layoffs) are not inherent to the SARS COVID-19 pandemic. Museum workers have felt unheard and disillusioned with the sector for several years, with many choosing to unionize to address these issues, like the staff of the Guggenheim, the New Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts-Boston, and several others (Wagley, 2019). However, little is known about how unionization has impacted workers' well-being in these spaces. Utilizing a phenomenological approach, this study provided workers the space to share their experiences of unionization to examine the ways in which they feel that unionization has impacted their workplace well-being.

### Museum workers

A growing body of literature suggests that those who work in the nonprofit sector struggle with the demands of their jobs because of issues like long working hours and low pay (Kosny & Eakin, 2008). As nonprofit workers, museum professionals face similar issues. Museum professionals can be grouped into two categories: workers and administration. Workers are those situated lower in the institutional hierarchy, like those in education, programs, and visitor services. Administration professionals are those situated higher in the institutional hierarchy, like managers or directors. Groups and social media platforms like *Museum Workers Speak*, *Art and Museum Transparency*, and *Change the Museum* are giving museum workers a platform to air their grievances and express their concerns about workplace issues. For example, in a *Change the Museum* Instagram post from December 10, 2020, a worker anonymously wrote,

“OMSI [Oregon Museum of Science and Industry] is the worst place I have ever worked. I came onto the staff as a Visitor Services Representative, taking the job to get my foot in the door, hoping to move to a different department. I arrived with years of experience and a master's degree and was paid Portland Metro Area minimum wage. Many of my coworkers also had master's degrees or other relevant and significant higher education and were getting paid the same. We were allowed no weekend days off, often worked long

shifts (sometimes 10-12 hours) and return to work at 8 a.m. Much of the other staff treated Visitor Service Representatives as their personal assistants, piling more work on their already short staffed customer facing coworkers. . . . Myself and my coworkers were largely BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+, and very few of us experienced the promised 'upward mobility' and 'room for growth in the museum' that we were promised."

*Change the Museum's* page has over 700 posts like this one, each of them documenting similar experiences of staff working in museums.

In addition to working long hours for low pay, museum professionals also act as emotional laborers. As a concept, emotional labor was first introduced and described by Hochschild in her 1983 book, *The Managed Heart*. Hochschild describes emotional labor as "inducing or suppressing feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (p. 20). When engaging in this work, the emotional laborer is forced to focus not only on the primary tasks of their job, like delivering programs and services, they are also forced to add a secondary goal: managing others' emotions (Zapf, 2002).

Munro (2015) relates this directly to museum workers participating in community engagement work at the Glasgow Museums. Through a series of observations, Munro concluded that museum workers face high levels of burnout and an overall decline in well-being because they are expected to practice emotional labor to elicit emotions from visitors all while suppressing their own emotions. Munro's sample consisted only of those engaged in community work at museums, but one could appropriately expand those findings to the entire field due to the transferable nature of museum work. Based on a recent report from the Mellon Foundation, the majority of museum workers are personal care and service workers, like visitor services and interpreters. This group of workers (74,400) make up approximately twenty percent of the 372,000 workers in the field, making them the largest majority of workers (Mellon Foundation, 2017). If most museum workers are front-line staff and interpreters, this indicates that a large majority of museum workers practice the emotional labor Munro describes in his research.

For many of the people working in museums, they view their work as an extension of their own being, with many volunteering to work unpaid hours in service to their institution's mission (Thistle, 2011). Despite this relatively noble view of their labor, museum workers

recognize that the nature of emotional labor combined with low salaries and an increase in competition across the sector is causing them to burn out faster (Michelbach, 2013).

### **Unionization**

Part of the way labor problems are addressed in the museum field is through unionization. Museum workers have been unionizing since the early 1970s, with the establishment of PASTA (Professional and Staff Association) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) (Resnick, 2019). Despite being the first organized professional museum union, PASTA members still felt the need to distance themselves from working class unions. In a 1973 interview by Artforum, one PASTA member stated, “We do not want the Association [PASTA] to become another blue-collar labor organization which is continually struggling over wages and fringe benefits. We are a group of dedicated professionals who are concerned about the institution” (Alloway and Caplans, 1973, p. 44). While tackling issues of wages and benefits were important, the purpose of PASTA was to further the work of MoMA. As described by Weil (1999) the goal of museum work is “to contribute positively to the quality of individual human lives and to enhance the well-being of human communities” (p. 1). For both Weil and the workers in PASTA, the purpose of the work is making a difference in communities; and while research on how unionization affects museum workers is sparse, research in related sectors shows that unionization can be a positive extension of an institution’s mission (Peters and Masaoka, 2003).

A closely related field where the research does exist is education. Multiple studies conclude that unionized school districts show as much as a 5% increase in average educator salaries compared to nonunionized districts (Baugh & Stone, 1982; Brunner & Squires, 2013; Zigarelli, 1996). Because unionized teachers have higher salaries than non-unionized teachers, their work lives are substantially better and have higher outcomes (Han, 2019). Further, in districts with strong union contracts, teachers were more likely to report issues in the workplace and file for workman’s compensation (Han, 2019). Union membership also enhances workers’ knowledge of benefits and how to access them (Podgursky, 2003). It is evident that unionization can greatly increase teachers’ overall workplace well-being because they are secure and well- compensated.

### **Professional well-being**

As a concept, workplace wellbeing “relates to all aspects of working life, from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how workers feel about their work, their working environment, the climate at work and work organization” (International Labour Organization, 2009, p. 1). The origins of studying workplace well-being were mostly grounded in ensuring a healthy *physical* work environment, like following proper safety codes and eliminating hazardous environmental conditions (poor air quality, asbestos exposure, etc.). Environmental factors like these are still taken into consideration, but the field of research has shifted to deepen our understanding of how the *psychosocial* aspects of the workplace, like interpersonal relationships, workload, and employee satisfaction, affect the well-being of the workplace and those in it (Day, Kelloway & Hurrell, 2014). A key component of professional well-being research is its focus on both positive and negative work experiences rather than just negative work experiences that have previously guided employee satisfaction research (Katwyk et. al, 2000).

Professional well-being research hinges on positive organizational behavior, which examines how the combination of stressful and motivating job characteristics can impact professional well-being (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). Job characteristics can be further organized into two categories: job demands and job resources. Bakker and (2008) Schaufeli write, “Job demands require effort and are therefore related with physiological and psychological costs, such as fatigue, whereas job resources foster personal growth, learning, and development, and have motivational qualities” (p. 150). If job resources outweigh the demands, then professional well-being is relatively positive. Counter to that, if job demands are far higher than job resources, then professional well-being trends towards the negative.

Although this idea of job demands vs. job resources can be applied to various sectors, it is especially relevant for workers in the cultural and public sector because job demands far outweigh the resources provided to workers (Munro, 2014). In the museum field, most organizations are public, nonprofits that do not have a large expendable income. Due to their nonprofit status, many institutions cannot provide the adequate resources to make up for demands of the job, as Munro describes in his survey of community engagement workers in museums. Munro’s sample reports high levels of burnout caused by long working hours, inadequate training, and feeling underappreciated by administrations.

The first two reasons could be clearly defined as job resources, but the third is different. While employee appreciation and support are not

colloquially seen as job resources, Bakker and Schaufeli (2008) point to non-monetary appreciation as a key resource for workers. In a study of Finnish teachers, they found that “supervisor support, an innovation culture, appreciation by colleagues, and a positive organizational climate were important job resources for teachers that helped them cope with demanding interactions with pupils” (p. 150). Based on Bakker and Schaufeli’s research, it is evident employees are happier when the resources their job provides them outweigh the demands of the work. In museums, demands are increasing, but the resources have remained unchanged, and workers are tired (Horowitz, 2020).

### **Study Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the ways in which workers feel that unionization has impacted their professional well-being.

### **Methodology**

This study utilized a phenomenological design, which aims to explore the common meaning for multiple individuals and their lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with unionized museum workers at art museums (see Appendix A for interview guide). Interview questions were based on the PERMA workplace profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016), which identifies six key domains of professional well-being, including positive and negative emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment, and general health. The PERMA profiler is typically used by human resources departments to assess workplace well-being in their institutions in order to properly address issues that might arise as a result of low well-being.

### **Sampling**

Participants were recruited through a mix of online professional groups and snowball sampling. The researcher posted recruitment information in several museum professional groups, such as the Emerging Museum Professionals Network, an LGBTQ+ Museum Staff and Student Facebook group, and the Learning in Museums and Galleries Facebook group. Each of these groups include members from across North America. The researcher chose to use a continental recruitment

strategy to get a more diverse sample. Additionally, research materials were shared through the researcher's personal connections.

## **Participants**

To engage in this study, participants had to be current or recently furloughed members of a professional union at an art museum. A total of 11 participants were interviewed. All but one participant was born after 1970 and before 1995. Nine participants identified as women, one identified as a man, and one chose to not say. Racially, nine participants identified themselves as white, one identified as Filipinx, and one chose not to disclose. Ten participants identified as not having a disability, and one identified as having a disability. Of the participants included in the study, all but two had been present at their institution while it underwent the unionization process.

With their involvement in museum work, four participants identified having worked in a large encyclopedic institution; three worked in a large contemporary institution; three others worked in a mid-size contemporary museum; and one participant worked in a mid-size university museum. There were variations in the kind of work participants do in their institution. Three participants worked in curatorial, three in exhibitions, two in collections management, two in education/programs, and one in external affairs. Seven participants had been at their institution for two to five years; two had been there for six to ten years, and two others had been there for sixteen to twenty-five years. Most participants (eight) had been working in museums between two and ten years, while three participants had been working in the museum field for eleven to twenty-five years.

## **Data Collection & Analysis**

Interviews were conducted via Zoom videoconferencing software and recorded for transcription. The questions were intended to explore how participants' membership in a professional union has impacted their workplace well-being within art museums. After each interview, the researcher loaded the audio to a secure hard drive for safekeeping. The data were analyzed using qualitative, emergent coding.

## **Positionality & Land Acknowledgment**

### *Positionality Statement*

This research is grounded in qualitative pursuits. Because of this, the researcher's identity and position have an impact on the stories shared and those not shared. As a white, straight-passing, cisgender woman, I acknowledge that my position affects not only how the respondents and I participate in this research, but it also affects how the audience receives the research. I am intimately familiar with labor issues and unionization efforts due to my father's involvement in the International Brotherhood of Electric Workers (IBEW) and my own upbringing in the Southern region of Appalachia. Having grown up in a region where labor history is colorful, the pursuit of an equitable workplace is central to my being, and I understand how that interest can impact the ways in which I present my research.

### *Land Acknowledgment*

This research study was designed and implemented on the ancestral lands of the Duwamish people in the Puget Sound who have served as stewards of this land since time immemorial. To learn more about how to support the Duwamish people in their pursuit of federal recognition, please visit <https://www.realrentduwamish.org/>.

## Results

The results of this study are reported according to their proximity to the four aspects of the PERMA profiler described previously: a) positive emotions and negative emotions, b) relationships with colleagues, c) engagement in work, d) fulfillment and meaning in work.

### **Positive and negative emotions**

Most participants expressed positive emotions related to the impacts of unionization. One participant said, "The joy comes in whether my coworkers realize it or not, that they are a lot safer. And that's joy." Another participant noted how their joy was impacted by forming real relationships and finding true joy:

"It's kind of like the more energy you put into this very positive, uplifting, collective thing, the more it gives you back. And so, I think it has been just, especially over this past year, hugely important, not just to mine, but to all of our mental health and well-being."

A different participant shared a similar sentiment in regards to feeling more secure by simply stating that they felt “joyful in that I feel protected.” They further explained,

“Once I get hired, the union is there to protect me behind the scenes so I don’t have to focus on, well, being fired at any given notice. There is a course and a process for me to be laid off or fired or anything like that, so I can focus on the job at hand rather than constantly thinking, ‘Where’s my paycheck going to come from?’”

This participant felt like they were able to find joy and meaning in their work because they did not have to concern themselves with the anxiety-inducing particularities of the workplace.

For a few participants, however, they felt no change in their feelings of joy after being involved in a union. These participants felt that labor in and of itself cannot necessarily be joyful. One participant described,

“Oh, my God. I’ve now really come to terms with what that joy and work are in congress. I’m like ‘Why am I working?’ You know? So maybe I have different opinions about work and labor in general. . . I was still happy to continue doing the work. I just wanted to do it under fair conditions for all.”

For this participant, they felt happy to do the work, but could not necessarily feel joy *in* the work. Another participant agreed stating simply, “No, no, no. Me being joyful at work is separate [from being in a union].” While this sentiment was shared by two participants, a sizable majority did feel as though their involvement in the union did impact their feelings of joy within the workplace.

This general feeling of joy through protection and solidarity was not singular to the participants’ experiences described above. It was a pervasive theme throughout the responses, particularly in reference to community, solidarity, and protection.

When reflecting on the impact of unionization on their negative emotions at work, participants typically referred to one of two themes: administration and productive frustration and anxiety.

### *Administration*

The biggest source of frustration in being involved with a union was the administration's actions before, during, and after unionization. One participant noted how they discovered the museum had been participating in some nefarious labor practices leading up to the unionization campaign, describing,

“I realized that [there were] things that were illegal that the museum had been doing to me, specifically, for years. In the handbook, it says if you work over thirty five hours, you're eligible for benefits, but no one ever showed me the handbook. . . I was working 40 hours a week, and also if you work 40 hours a week, under federal law, you are eligible for benefits. That really pissed me off when I learned that. . . There was a part of me, more than anger, [where] there was this sense of disbelief that there was a bureaucratic system for workers to take control of the terms of their labor and actually have a democratic say in their workplace. . . I had no idea that I had any power agency.”

Another participant reflected on how the museum's retaliation against them during and after unionization impacted their mental health:

“Oh, my god. Yes. It was just such a hostile environment to be in. . . I was like the most visible organizer, most visible member of the union. . . I just didn't feel safe in that place because I knew management hated me for my role in the union. I knew that they talked about me.”

Similarly, one participant explained the lack of accountability they saw from administration and how that impacted their frustration levels:

“There's this thing that happens within institutions like [REDACTED]. When management, sort of, becomes aware that there are feelings of anger and frustration boiling over among workers in the institution, they will make these gestures that, from what I can tell—I don't want to generalize—but, in my experience are kind of superficial gestures. . . There's no accountability that comes with the gesture. It's only meant to be, sort of, soothing, and, then, they hope that the frustration and the anger will simmer down and go away. . . It's very disempowering.”

Overall, the most negative emotion for participants described in this sample stemmed from the way that the museums' administrations approached the unionization work.

### *Productive Frustration and Anxiety*

Despite their feelings of frustration and anxiety, most participants felt at ease with their involvement in the union because they knew they were doing something productive with their negative feelings. In describing how their anxiety had been affected in the workplace, one participant said, "I would say that the shift in what I'm anxious about has changed, and, perhaps, maybe it's a better set of things to be anxious about because it feels more productive. So my level of anxiety is more productive than it was before." Another participant shared that they felt no anxiety being involved in the union because they knew they were protected and realized that this was a tangible way to better their working conditions:

"I hear that [anxiety] from a lot of people, but I didn't feel that way. I felt like it was a measurable way to really better our circumstance, and that it was logical [and] systematic. . . I think I really latched onto the legal process, and I knew I was doing my job well, and I knew that it was illegal for anyone to retaliate against me for being a union supporter."

In terms of feelings of frustration and productivity, most participants noted feeling comfortable and *less* frustrated because they had found a way to channel their previously negative feelings. One participant shared how they were able to separate their frustration from their involvement by not letting it get "personal." They stated,

"This is really important for anyone even considering unionizing: It can't get personal. The minute it starts to get personal, you've got to back off. . . My job, as I understood it, was to be really bargaining for my department, not me. . . You're writing a contract for your coworkers, and you're writing a contract for the people to come after you as well. You're trying to create a legacy, so you have to put your baggage down."

Another participant mentioned that their level of frustration was in no way tied to the union. However, they also noted that because of their involvement in the union, they had an ability to address potential

frustrations in the workplace: “No, not because of unionization, but I do keep [it] in the back of my mind when I’m at work, ‘This is something that I should write down.’ If I need my union, I have a record of it for them.” For the participants described above, it is evident that though their feelings of frustration may or may not have been impacted by their involvement in the union, they know that the union itself is productive and can mitigate current or potential feelings of frustration.

### **Relationships with colleagues**

Perhaps the most common theme throughout participants’ responses was that being involved in a union allowed them to foster both community and solidarity with other workers at their institution. One participant shared how they felt they were able to foster community in a tense environment through unionizing, stating,

“One of the de facto positives of forming a union is fostering solidarity. It is by design that your colleagues don’t know who you are, that departments are siloed, that curators never interact with visitor services. Because of the union, through the organizing process, you’re having an extreme amount of conversations with people. . . Through very basic conversations, you’re able to really hone in on solidarity. And that’s like one of the things that only a union can do.”

Most other participants shared a similar sentiment. However, one participant who joined their institution after the union had been established explained how important trust can be when fostering community within the union: “You trust them [the union] as you trust your colleagues, and if you trust your colleagues, then it benefits all and increases morale.” Another participant shared a similar sentiment about how unionization allowed them to establish true friendships: “I don’t think it [trust] would have existed before unionizing. The relationships are so real now. They’re very real.”

For most participants, the most gratifying part of being involved in the union was the community that they and their colleagues built. One participant described how they felt like they had both built a stronger community among workers and also changed the culture of the institution itself:

“Art museums like [REDACTED] can be extremely competitive places and individualist places. That is the

sort of patriarchal white supremacy culture manifested in the workplace—very hierarchical, very individualistic, very competitive. . . And, so, I think workers are encouraged to distrust each other and be suspicious of each other. . . Becoming a part of the community of people organizing and then forming the union just completely destroys that sort of cultural aspect of working in the museums, and in order to form this democratic organization within the workplace, we had to trust each other. . . We had to trust each other to carry out these really important tasks and to take constructive criticism from each other and receive feedback and be flexible. And, so, it's a completely different kind of culture from the culture of the institution. . . I think that we've been able to be vulnerable with each other and be trusting with each other in a way that I don't think would have existed before unionizing."

It was evident that for respondents featured in this study, the most rewarding aspect of being involved in a union was the ability to build community and foster solidarity.

### **Engagement in work**

Like fostering community, professional growth was a positive impact of unionizing on many participants' professional well-being. Many felt that because they were operating under better working conditions, they were able to further their own professional development. When asked if they felt unionization had any impact on their work-related goals, participants noted that it either allowed them to advocate for themselves or it completely changed their career trajectory. For three participants in the study, they had been laid off or furloughed from their institutions but were still under the protection of their union. One participant described this, stating,

"I was totally a careerist person. Like, I really did have big visions of being a superstar curator. And, now, the more that I unpack that, the more that I'm seeing [that] there's an ego that you need to have, which I don't have. . . So I've sort of given up on that as a goal. . . I do still want to curate. I do like it. But yeah, inherently the etymology of the term curating is care. I know it's

brought up so often, but you can't care if the system is oppressive. . . Until we get better systems and ways of working and formulate these best practices, I can't really go back into that."

Conversely, however, some participants felt that their involvement in the union was incredibly impactful on their professional growth *within* museums. A few participants related that growth directly to their leadership experience in the union, with one stating,

"Working on the committees that we've formed. . . will provide more leadership experience for myself and whomever wants to be part of that. And so, yeah, leadership experience is important for everyone, and not everyone will take advantage of that, but I think for those that do, it will be a great experience because we're not really, technically, managers, right? We can't be managers in the union, but if we want to move into that realm, I think that working with the union and doing training with them and being part of these committees gives us the opportunity to get our feet wet in the manager realm."

Another participant mentioned their ability to access additional benefits and trainings through the insistence of the union, saying,

"We have job evaluations that are reviewed every several years at intervals, so as we accumulate tasks throughout the year, we put them in, and, through negotiation, we can actually put that in the job description and we can ask for a higher salary bracket or pay bracket because we are taking on more responsibility... The union is very vocal of telling staff to constantly ask what the institution is offering for us to do [in] professional development."

For these participants and others not quoted, their affiliation to the union had a direct impact on their professional outlook. One participant summarized that notion and its impact on their self-worth by stating,

"I feel great. I don't know why I'm about to get emotional. It's just so fucking different. You know, I used the word dignity earlier. You feel like you're not just somebody turning this little wheel in this big steam

engine, and if you don't turn it fast enough, they're just going to pull somebody else and make them do the same thing. [REDACTED], like every other workplace, likes to talk about being a family, like 'We're all in this together'. . . and, now, it feels like that among those of us who [were] in the bargaining unit. It doesn't have anything to do with them [administration], and they were never able to give that to us. . . I don't want to say its *our* workplace because its not technically, of course, right? But, it's our work, and nobody can take it away from us. . . We have much more ownership over the process and the product and that we're better compensated, and we have far more security because we all deserve that. We just were never getting it."

### **Fulfillment and meaning in work**

Finally, a related theme that emerged across participants' responses was that being involved in the union made them feel more hopeful about their job and the field as a whole, which gave them feelings of fulfillment and meaning in their work. One participant described this by saying, "I think it's [unionization has] given me a lot of hope. . . There's a lot of instances where I think me and staff feel very powerless in the institution, and this is a vehicle to have our voices heard, my voice heard. So, it's a very hopeful avenue to create change." Another described their involvement and how it increased their feeling of purpose and also pride in their work because they are making change across their institution:

"Once I knew how much it [the work] matters, it was like, 'I'm going to fight tenaciously for this thing.' Yeah, and, now it's even more fulfilling because you're fighting for everybody. . . When you have pride in place, it's even more fulfilling."

More broadly, a different participant mentioned how they have a hope that this unionization work can have a larger impact on the field:

"It [unionization] has this, I think, larger purpose of kind of uniting the sector more. And I think that this really can be very powerful since—this is very macro—the United States doesn't have a minister of culture. . . We don't have necessarily, on the macro government kind of setting, we have no advocacy going on. It's not the

same kind of strategic thing that you see with other countries. . . And so, not that I think a lot of unionized museums are going to somehow give us [that] greater macro governmental level. I'm not that naïve, but I do think that there are other ways to have that coordination across institutions and within the larger cultural heritage sector."

In another way, participants felt that involvement in a union has allowed them the *option* to feel hopeful in their jobs. One participant described,

"I think it [union membership] allowed me to be more excited, not more interested, but it's allowing me to be more excited because I'm not as anxious. It's allowing me to step back a little bit and remember what are those thing that I really love about the work. What was starting to happen, and this was really sad, was that you start to resent going to your workplace when you don't feel that anyone cares about what you're doing. . . I think it allows me to appreciate it more right now because I'm not resentful of being there in the same kind of way. Yeah, because there was a certain level where it was like 'Why am I doing this anymore? It's so sad because I love the work, but I don't like doing it in these circumstances.' And, now, I have less of that."

In the responses shared above, it is clear that workers feel that their involvement in the union has allowed them to feel hopeful, not just about their jobs but also about the field as a whole.

## Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the ways in which museum workers feel that unionization has impacted their professional well-being. The data point to three key findings.

### **Increasing job resources and decreasing job demands**

As described in the results section above, participants in this study found that, in many ways, their self-worth increased due to their involvement with a union. For many involved in the study, they felt disillusioned with the sector before and, sometimes, during the unionization process. There was an insecurity present prior to their

involvement in the union due to issues with administration, lack of appreciation, and low wages—all of which contribute to poor workplace well-being (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). However, following unionization, workers noted that undergoing the process not only helped them to feel more secure in their immediate role, but also allowed them to feel more appreciated and supported by their colleagues, their union, and in some instances, their institution.

As Bakker and Schaufeli (2008) describe in their work on positive organizational behavior, job resources like feelings of appreciation from supervisors and colleagues can aid in a worker's ability to cope with the demands of an emotionally taxing workplace. For workers who participated in this study, their self-worth within the workplace increased because they were finally receiving the job resources necessary to cope with a stressful work environment, which can better the overall work of the institution. Kalleberg (2011) expands on this further, "creating good jobs and avoiding bad jobs are major priorities because work is central to human welfare and the functioning of organizations and societies" (p. 2). Museum workers being happy in their roles is pivotal to the well-being of the employee, the institution, and the community at large, and the results of this study reflect that. Workers felt more joyful because the resources they needed were finally being offered to them.

### **Fostering community**

Overwhelmingly, the most positively impactful aspect of unionization and involvement in a union was the community it fosters in the workplace. Just as job resources like wages and decreased working hours are important, appreciation rooted deeply within the community of the workplace can also greatly impact an employee's workplace well-being (Day et al., 2014). In the responses shared by participants, it is evident that feeling appreciated and supported by colleagues can greatly increase one's workplace well-being.

When asked to reflect on their relationships with their colleagues, nearly every participant noted feeling both immensely supported and incredibly appreciated because unionizing and being part of a union allowed them to not only make lasting friendships but also produce better work. Many felt that through being involved in a union, they met more of their colleagues in other departments and had a better understanding of what their work entailed and how they can support that work. This institutional awareness not only lends itself to bettering employees' individual work, but it also fosters stronger institutional

work products (Day et al., 2014). Based on the responses shared, unionization can prosper a symbiotic relationship that is missing when an institution insists on separating workflows and people.

### **Making room to dream**

An important point that many respondents stressed was that the union does not necessarily solve all their problems because it is not meant to. Despite that, the union can provide a sense of security that is missing from a non-unionized workplace, allowing workers to explore the deeper aspects of their jobs and find their purpose within the workplace. Museum workers feel that their work is incredibly meaningful because they can “contribute positively to the quality of individual human lives and to enhance the well-being of human communities” (Weil, 1999, p. 1). For the art museum worker, their work is not important just because they have a passion for art, but because it can also directly impact their community’s well-being. However, when put in a position where they are overworked, underpaid and underappreciated—as described by the participants in this study—workers can feel separated from their guiding purpose in the field, and as evidenced by the three workers in this study who no longer work within their institution, it is incredibly disheartening when that separation happens.

A parallel can be drawn between unionized workers in art museums and unionized workers in other nonprofits. Both find inspiration and drive in fulfilling the missions of their institutions, and both can conceptualize that the unionization process could be an extension of that mission (Peters & Masaoka, 2003). For the workers featured in this study, there is a clear connection between their position as unionized employees and their ability to dream beyond their job roles. Ten of the eleven participants noted feeling a reignited sense of purpose and meaning in their work following unionization because they now had the *room* to do so. They no longer feel insecure about losing their job or overt retaliation from supervisors because they know they are protected by something much larger than the museum, which allows them to feel inspired and purposeful again.

### **Limitations**

Like all research studies, this study has limitations that affected the results. A major limitation was the current state of the museum field in the midst of a global pandemic. Because many museums are non-

profits that rely heavily on admissions-based revenue, they have been incredibly impacted by lockdowns and closures, with many museum workers being laid-off or opposite to that, taking on more work as more of their colleagues are laid off. This could have impacted the data in two ways. First, workers may have felt unusually disenchanting with the field and therefore may have spoken more negatively about their experiences in the workplace. Second, individuals who are members of unions in a field where the majority of their labor is one of love could feel more greatly impacted by their union membership and their work environment.

In addition, the pool of participants was greatly diminished due to many museum workers being out of work. As the pandemic raged on, many museums faced massive lay-offs and closures, which meant there were fewer workers present in museums than there were before. Because of these two reasons, the study results are only generalizable to museum workers who have been part of a union during an unprecedented time. Moreover, the small sample size led to a less diverse sample, which impacts the stories and perspectives shared in this research.

Finally, the self-selected nature of participating in this research poses another limitation. Participants were willing to take time to discuss their experiences with the researcher; individuals who do not feel strongly about their union membership would likely not have participated, which could have excluded people with negative experiences in unions from participating. The participants were also people who were comfortable speaking about their experiences in the workplace, often touching on very personal issues, which could preclude people who are not as comfortable speaking with a stranger so candidly about their personal experiences. Finally, the nature of the interview itself means that the data only reflects participants' experiences as they perceived them. The quality of the data collected could vary depending on how reflective the participants were in their interviews.

## Implications

### **For research**

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which art museum workers feel that unionization has impacted their workplace well-being. At its core, museum work is similar across interest subjects, however, there are variations in how hierarchies and subject-matter expertise impact museums that do not focus solely on art. The next

iteration of this research might seek to examine the ways unionization affects workplace well-being in different types of museums, like history or science museums.

Secondly, a major limitation of this study was the lack of BIPOC experiences shared. With only one participant openly identifying as non-white, this study cannot be generalized to all museum workers. Future studies might replicate this one to widen the sample size and collect more stories from BIPOC museum professionals. The museum field is not a monolith, and just as the stories shared in this research are impactful, the stories not shared in this research are important and should be considered in the next iteration.

Finally, because there is a lack of research on the effects of unionization on museum workers in general, more studies could be designed to examine the concrete, tangible benefits of unionization (e.g. wages, benefits, protocols). This study was designed to only examine the psychosocial aspects of workplace well-being, so a complementary study on the tangible benefits of unionization is required for a more holistic view of museum unionization.

### **For practice**

This research is mostly impactful for those in the field itself. Results suggest that workers overwhelmingly feel that unionization has impacted their workplace well-being in different ways. For many participants, the most notable change was the ability to foster a true community of colleagues, to connect more deeply with their colleagues. For museums who hope to emulate a similar solidarity among their workers, it is crucial that they take the care and precaution to encourage community-building activities.

In that same vein, to address issues within the workplace, it is vital that museum administrations create transparency and clear communication from the top down. The biggest source of frustration for workers involved in this study was the administrations' resistance to meet or negotiate the union's demands. In order to foster an environment that welcomes critique and progress, administrators must be more willing to listen and address demands raised by the workforce, including raising wages and bettering working conditions.

Finally, museums can make room for workers to fulfill the purpose of their direct work responsibilities *and* their personal career goals. For the participants featured in this study, unionization was something that reignited their sense of purpose and fulfillment through work. They felt

that because they could focus more on the artistic pursuit of the work and less so on the fear of retaliation or being fired, their love for the work had returned. For this to be a common sentiment across the field, museums must make conscious and progressive efforts to ensure the safety and security of the people who are actually doing the work. It is time that museums recognize this and begin to work towards making it a possibility.

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