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Commentary: Let the Great Experiment Begin! Reforming Visitor Services for the 21st Century

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Abstract Two of the biggest issues in the museum field are the lack of entry-level jobs and the “dead-end” nature of Visitor Services. In the museum of the future, my goal is to change Visitor Services to be a holistic department, focused on providing real, valuable experience to its team members. By creating an environment where Visitor Services team members can work in varying departments within the museum and use that experience to advance within the museum field, rather than relegate them to working the front desk. Rather than settling for the fact that Visitor Services is a high turnover department, we must invest and be creative to retain valuable employees and provide them with experience.

About the Author C. Andrew Coulomb is a museum professional from Norfolk, Virginia. He holds a BA in History from Virginia Commonwealth University and is an MA candidate in Museum Practice and Management at the University of Ulster. He is the co-founder of the Virginia Chapter of National Emerging Museum Professionals Network and serves as the EMP Director on the Governing Council of the Virginia Association of Museums. He was previously the Deputy Director and Interim Executive Director of the Virginia Holocaust Museum and currently serves as the Director of Operations & Facility Management at the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

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There are two large problems in the museum field that may have the ability to solve each other. The first is the lack of true entry-level jobs. Emerging Museum Professionals graduate from master's programs each year in the hundreds with no real entry point into the field. The “entry-level” positions that are available often require three to five years' experience. So, graduates apply to innumerable jobs hoping to get their foot in the door. Those that are able to land a museum job often end up in a Museum's Visitor Services Department.

How these departments currently function is the second problem. Taking a position in Visitor Services is often thought of as a foot in the door, an opportunity to prove yourself when, in fact, it is more than likely a dead end. It is usually a department of high turnover, staff burnout, and exclusion. The inherent problem with this is that staff in Visitor Services are the front line, often the only faces the public sees and without them, the museum could not function. Additionally, there is so much unrecognized talent in these departments. So, why do museums disregard these ambitious, talented and amazing people so often? There are museums that

do a wonderful job hiring from within their Visitor Services department, but it is just not common enough to quench the need for the number of emerging professionals looking for a job. At the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art (Virginia MOCA), we are undertaking a grand experiment to try and fix that.

In college, I worked at a Chick-fil-A, and one of the things I was always impressed with was how they cultivated, trained, and produced their store Operators. Most, if not all, of Chick-fil-A Operators came up within a Chick-fil-A. There are stores that pride themselves on being Operator creators and managers transfer to those stores with the intention of becoming Operators. Why don't museums do that? Why don't museums take pride in being museum professional creators? Why is there a lack of entry-level jobs for museum professionals where they can learn, be trained and be sent out into the world to do amazing things?

With that thought, we created the Museum Associate Program at Virginia MOCA. What we are trying to do is take Visitor Services and transform the positions into a valuable learning experience by trusting, investing, and empowering the Visitor Services team. We started by renaming the Visitor Services Associates to be Museum Associates because this better encompassed what we would like for this team to be, a group of professionals that would experience and assist in every aspect of the museum.

While Museum Associates are still required to work at the Welcome Desk, they are also assigned to a specific department: Marketing, Development, Education, Exhibitions, or Operations & Administration. They work one to two days per week in their assigned department as a member of staff for six months. During their rotation, Museum Associates attend all departmental meetings, work on a substantial project, and observe and learn. Supervisors and the departmental team are to provide guidance, feedback, and advice to the Museum Associates. Associates are not to perform menial tasks such as making copies, getting coffee, etc. Once their six months are up, they will rotate to a new department until they have experienced each department. Once they have experienced all of the departments within the museum, we will do our best to give them a longer rotation in the departments that they are most interested in or want to learn more about.

At Virginia MOCA, we do not require Museum Associates to have a graduate degree or any experience. We want this to be an inclusive experiment that is not only available to those that can afford graduate school. By having these Associates work in various departments throughout the museum, we are providing them with a makeshift entry-level museum job. They will be able to gain experience in exhibition preparation and installation, research and execution of educational programming, grant research and assisting with budget creation and management to name just a few things. They will not be doing these on their own or without supervision at first, but they will be learning valuable and applicable skills that can be put on their resumes. Associates will also provide the extra manpower to departments that are stretched too thin.

Too often, Visitor Services teams feel left out of the loop, alone on an island where no one knows who they are. This experience provides them the opportunity to take ownership of small pieces of the organization and that will create real buy-in to the institution. Why do so many of us love our job? It is because we are knee deep in it every day. With Visitor Services, they

do not often get that chance, so this offers that opportunity. In addition, this program will allow for staff in other departments to get to know the Visitor Services team and see how they work. This will hopefully lead to the Museum Associates being at the top of the hiring pool should an opening arise in one of the departments. The goal is that by creating institutional buy-in, it will reduce the often high turnover rate within Visitor Services. By getting them invested, more than they would by just sitting on the desk, this will make them want to stick around and experience and learn as much as they can.

An additional, and secondary, benefit is that the Museum Associates will be better informed about what is going on in the museum and can better relay that to the visitors. Often communication breaks down between the brainstorming, creation, and implementation of a program, exhibition, etc. By having the Museum Associates experience the process, they can better convey the vision to the museum's visitors.

The vision for the future of this program is to make them full-time positions that are contracted for three years. The Museum Associates divide their time between a department and the Welcome Desk. They will rotate through all five departments at MOCA in their first two and a half years and work in the department of their choice for the last six months of their tenure. In addition, during their tenure, they would attend various workshops and conferences, encouraged to speak when possible. When their three years are up, we would guide them in finding their next role, provide references, and assist in editing their resume and cover letter. They are sent into the world as awesome Museum Professionals. However, what I believe to be the most important part about the future vision for this program is that we will not require a graduate degree or any experience.

One of the most common questions that we have been asked about this program is, "How is this different from an internship?" The simplistic answer is the time frame. A big complaint, at least at our museum, has been that the length of an internship is not enough for an intern to take ownership of a project and see it through from concept to implementation. By the time they are getting comfortable, they are out the door. Now, that is not always the case but the time constraints of an internship can be difficult. By making the Museums Associates' rotations six months, we are giving them more time to take on a project from beginning to end and really take ownership. The more complicated and contested reason is that some people don't trust interns to do certain work. While that is often baseless and disheartening to hear, it can be true. The idea of giving a staff member a project is different from giving an intern a project for a lot of people. And while that is not a productive or encouraging way to think, that is an entirely different article. With the Museum Associate program, they are already staff and that gives them an automatic leg up on interns (however wrong that may be). They are familiar with our policies, procedures, our voice, etc.

This is not a new idea, small museums do this all the time out of necessity. The Poe Museum in Richmond, Virginia is a great example. They have a staff of five including the Executive Director. So, everyone has to do everything and they all take turns manning the front desk and working within different departments. This was another inspiration for the Museum Associate Program at Virginia MOCA. It is just our attempt at solving two of the larger issues in the museum field facing Emerging Museum Professionals. We know that we will not be able to tackle all the issues facing us but I truly believe that we can grow and sustain this program.

We are collecting data along the way including surveys with the Museum Associates when they start the program, start and finish a rotation, and at the end of the program. We are also conducting periodic interviews with the Associates and supervisors throughout the duration of the program. We hope to be able to report back that it is working like a well-oiled machine. Let the great experiment begin!