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## **For Love or Money**

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Confronting the State of Museum Salaries

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Edited by Dawn E Salerno, Mark S Gold  
and Kristina L Durocher

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**FOR LOVE OR MONEY  
CONFRONTING THE STATE OF MUSEUM SALARIES**

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHY MUSEUMS  
MUST STOP USING  
VOLUNTEER DOCENTS  
AND START PAYING  
THEIR EDUCATORS

Tara Young

**IN THE LAST FEW DECADES**, museums have evolved from repositories of objects to community catalysts. More recently, museums are increasingly considering their role in promoting equity, taking stands on issues related to the inclusion of multiple voices and the representation of previously underrepresented groups, and are even making difficult decisions about whether to accept funds from sources that are incompatible with their values. Given museums' awareness of responding to societal and political issues that affect them and their constituencies, it is completely nonsensical that they still rely so heavily on volunteers to deliver their primary educational offerings. Not only does this practice shortchange audiences, it also creates a less diverse front line, depresses salaries, and degrades the professionalism of our field.

If museums want to invest in an excellent visitor experience, honor high standards of professionalism, and acknowledge the training and skill of their education staff – which is on the whole underpaid and underappreciated – they must stop using volunteers to conduct the educational experiences that are the primary mission-critical activity of the museum's daily operations. Before I go further, a disclaimer: I have nothing but admiration for the volunteers who currently do this work. The problem is structural within the field, not personal with the volunteers. In my twenty-plus years in the museum field, I have worked with hundreds of volunteers, and have relied on them to give tours and carry out other essential duties. Overwhelmingly, I have found them to be smart, generous, selfless individuals who have pride in their institutions and who want to share that pride with visitors. Given the strong feelings I have about the ways that museums should and should not

use volunteers – and what I believe are compelling arguments to support those feelings – volunteers who read this essay may take offense. I acknowledge that, but I will still make the case for the imperative to pay educators rather than use volunteers, an imperative that is long overdue and that I believe is crucial to the health of the museum field.

For clarity, I want to define some terms that I'll use; some of these are imprecise, but because they're widely employed, they serve as useful shorthand. First, to describe facilitated educational experiences in which visitors explore the museum with a guide, I'll use the word *tour*. Here, *tour* suggests a sustained activity for a significant amount of time (typically around an hour) rather than a casual encounter. To describe the role of the facilitator of such experiences, I'll use the term *docent* for an unpaid individual, and *educator* to indicate a paid staff person. In some settings these terms are interchangeable, or are replaced with other terms entirely (for example, *interpreter*), but I'll use these definitions going forward.

Clearly, the *tour* as defined above is only one method of delivering educational experiences to visitors, and in the context of a busy education department that offers many other programs, dwelling on the tour may seem to give it disproportionate attention. As museum professionals, we see our education programs holistically. Remember, though, that for many visitors – especially first-time visitors – the tour may be the only sustained encounter they have with a museum representative. For these visitors, the breadth of the other educational offerings is unimportant because they'll never experience them. Also, it's safe to assume that casual visitors don't distinguish between volunteer and paid educators. Any nuances

that museum professionals may appreciate, or, to state it more frankly, the different standards to which we may hold docents and educators, are likely not apparent to visitors.

There are five main arguments for why I believe museums should – indeed must – stop using volunteer docents to facilitate tours: first, the reliance on volunteers devalues the work of educators, literally and figuratively; second, this devaluation of the educator role perpetuates a lack of diversity in the field; third, volunteers are not – and cannot be – held to the same standards as paid staff; fourth, visitors’ experiences with paid educators are likely to be more successful than those with docents; and fifth, though volunteers may be seen as “free” labor, the resources museums devote to their oversight are significant.

The benefits of shifting from docents to paid educators are many: educators are paid a wage that reflects the importance of their work; as a group, educators are likely to be more diverse than docents (who are overwhelmingly white women over the age of 40, especially at large art museums);<sup>1</sup> training and evaluation of paid staff can be more rigorous; the visitor experience with more highly trained educators is more positive; and resources currently used to manage docents can be redeployed elsewhere.

Historically, many museum education departments, or even entire museums (such as children’s museums) were founded on a grass-roots basis by volunteers. We owe volunteers a huge debt of gratitude for their essential role in creating the museum education field. When education initiatives were volunteer-led, the museum field was firmly rooted in a belief that museums should serve primarily as depositories for objects, and that

therefore, curators should be at the apex of the museum field. Clearly, the field as a whole has moved so far away from that paradigm that it now seems old-fashioned. Today's museums are continuing on a trajectory towards being community- and visitor-centered, with education at the heart of their missions and functions. Indeed, the majority of museum mission statements mention education as central to what they do.

Since the time of volunteer-run education departments, museum education has become a distinct professional field. Beginning in the 1970s, museum studies programs were established and began to offer specialized degrees in museum education. By continuing to use volunteers as docents, museums are essentially refusing to acknowledge that facilitating tours is a skill that requires specialized training, rigorous practice, an understanding of pedagogy and andragogy, and customer service, to name only some of the areas one must master. The absurdity of thinking that a volunteer, even one with teaching experience, is interchangeable with a trained professional comes into relief when we look at an analogy in another field. Imagine, for instance, that there were two candidates for a position as a dental hygienist. One has completed two years of a training program and has had experience in an apprenticeship or internship model. The other has not had specialized training, but is smart, passionate, and willing to learn (how hard could it be, really?), and – the best part – is willing to work for free. Which person would you want to clean your teeth?

### **Depressing salaries and limiting diversity**

Though the assumption that facilitating educational experiences is not a specialized skill worth paying for is problematic enough, the effect that that assumption has on salaries within

the museum education profession is truly lamentable. In the simplest terms, if docents – per our definition – earn no money, than the value of the task they perform is literally \$0. In situations where educators are paid to give tours exclusively – as distinct from other education staff who do this work as only one part of a larger set of responsibilities – these educators are likely to work part-time, without benefits or any job security, at a pay rate that may be equal to, or just above, minimum wage. Essentially, the role of educator is treated as an entry-level, unskilled role, paid at the same rate or even less than what one might earn at Starbucks, where even part-time staff are eligible for some benefits. If museums are paying so-called “entry level” employees unconscionably low hourly rates, then that’s the floor upon which the entire compensation structure in the department is based. Therefore, a program manager who makes \$18 an hour (less than \$33,000 for a 35-hour workweek) is perceived as being paid a reasonable salary. Though it’s barely a livable wage in a major city, especially if one has student loans, the program manager may accept this salary uncomplainingly because she knows she’s so much better off than her fellow educators making \$11 per hour.

Not only does the reliance on unpaid docents for a crucial visitor-facing role depress education department salaries, it also contributes to a lack of diversity in the museum profession. Over the last few years, the field has increasingly questioned the ethics of unpaid internships, partly because they present a barrier to entering the field.<sup>2</sup> However, the same conversations have not been happening about how the reliance on volunteer docents does the same. The schedule requirements of many docent programs reflect the fact that they have been built

around retirees or people who otherwise don't hold a full-time job; it's not uncommon for docent training to occur during weekdays and for programs to require hundreds of hours of volunteer service per year. These terms make the docent role at many museums untenable for people with full-time jobs or demanding school schedules; explicit or implicit membership or donation requirements may further deter lower-income individuals from pursuing a role as a docent. These factors contribute to a lack of diversity among educators in two ways: first, if the docent corps is not diverse, then many of our visitors do not see themselves reflected in the role, which could stifle their future interest in the field. Second, because, as discussed above, the reliance on docents keeps entry-level salaries low, anyone who can't afford to live on an educator's salary is effectively shut out, especially given that many front line educator positions are part-time or seasonal.

### **Passion is not a substitute for skill and accountability**

Regardless of how dedicated and passionate a group of volunteers may be, there is simply no way to hold them to the same standards as paid staff. These lower standards are evident before docents even apply, evidenced by position descriptions that emphasize the fact that no experience is required. Imagine how ridiculous it would seem for a job listing for a paid educator to promote a lack of experience or specialized training as a selling point. While the docent role may be competitive in large museums, or in ones considered to have especially prestigious docent corps, in many smaller museums the process of becoming a docent is not competitive, because of the simple need for personnel.



The difference in standards between volunteers and staff continues after the onboarding process. By definition, volunteers are engaged in their work for personal enrichment; they're giving a great deal to the institution, but they're also getting a lot: learning and social opportunities, skill development, and even enhanced social status. A major perk of volunteering is flexibility; not only is it inevitable that volunteers take advantage of this flexibility, but it's assumed to be part of the unwritten agreement between the individual and the institution. Simply put, volunteers usually do not prioritize their work to the same extent that paid employees prioritize their jobs. This is understandable, but it still means that on the whole docents are less reliable than paid educators. In my many years of working with volunteers, I've had them call out for any number of completely valid reasons: family obligations with children, grandchildren, or elderly parents; travel; medical appointments; inclement weather; having visitors in town; the list goes on and on. These are all things that a paid educator would have to do on his own time or take paid time off to do.

The performance review – and remediation of any problems – is also completely different with docents and with paid educators. In my experience, evaluation of docents has to be approached delicately. I've had docents outright refuse to be evaluated; one memorable response to a request for a docent to allow a staff observer on her tour was, "This is supposed to be fun, not work." While large museums with a deep pool of docents may have more flexibility, the truth is that often sub-par performance is tolerated because there is a perceived need for the volunteer's labor. The logic may be that it's better to have a mediocre tour than no tour at all. Other complicating

factors may be that the docent is also a donor, has prominent standing in the community, or is a personal friend of the director or a board member. Though certainly docents are “fired,” the tolerance for less-than-ideal performance is much higher for docents than for paid staff.

Volunteer docents often do not get the same level of training as paid staff. There are many examples of museums where docents continue to be trained primarily in content, while educators who deliver other types of programs in those same institutions receive training in pedagogy and educational strategy. Reasons for this discrepancy are unclear: in some cases, the docent corps is an independent nonprofit organization that does not report to education staff. Docents may individually or collectively be major donors to the museum and thus receive special treatment. In other cases, the issue may be that it’s simply easier to teach and learn content than pedagogy: content can be learned on one’s own time, while teaching pedagogy is time-consuming and not a good investment if there is a risk that the docent won’t stay at the institution long enough to make that investment worthwhile. Docents who are trained primarily in content are likely to give a tour in a lecture-based style rather than a dialogic style, even though our field as a whole has moved toward a dialogue-based model paid educators in an institution may use. Many of our institutions seem to be comfortable with docents continuing to use a model that the museum education profession has long considered to be outdated. Consider for a moment this description of the docent role at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art:

Docents act as tour guides for children and adults

visiting the Museum. They give curriculum-based slide talks at schools and follow-up classes in the Museum's galleries, and give gallery talks to adult visitors. Docents attend twice monthly meetings that include slide lectures and workshops as part of the program of ongoing professional development.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the Benton Museum at the University of Connecticut presents the following under the *What Do Docents Do?* heading of their website:

**Touring:** Docents serve as tour guides to visitors, including school children, students, the university and local community. **Art lectures:** Docents may present talks at the museum to schools, community groups, and senior centers in the region. **Research:** Docents prepare background information on museum exhibitions and acquisitions for the use of docents who tour and give lectures.<sup>4</sup>

I'm using these two examples as representative of the field, not singling out these institutions. But clearly, neither of these statements – just two samples of many – exemplifies the best practices in the field of museum education, or what these same institutions are actively practicing elsewhere. Rather, these descriptions feel stuck in time, reminiscent of an era now long past when museum collections, rather than visitors, were an institution's *raison d'être*. Not only are these representative statements not in sync with current best practices, but they also stand in contrast to the American Alliance of Museum's

Core Standards for Education and Interpretation, the first point of which is, “The museum clearly states its overall educational goals, philosophy and messages, and demonstrates that its activities are in alignment with them.”<sup>5</sup> I am confident that my colleagues in museum education would not define the activities excerpted above as being “in alignment” with their institutions’ educational philosophy. Museums who perpetuate this disconnect are doing the field a disservice.

### **Is there really a difference in skill level?**

To emphasize why this discrepancy in style and in adherence to best practices between docents and educators is important, remember that for many visitors, the experience they have on a tour is the only extended encounter with a museum representative. While we, as administrators, may think that overlooking less than perfect docent performance is not a big deal in the scheme of things, for individual visitors it is a big deal. In preparation for this chapter, on a recent visit to New York, I conducted a completely unscientific but illustrative test of the qualitative difference between volunteer and paid educators. I went on tours at two Manhattan museums that are nationally recognized for their excellent education departments, both of which are on the forefront of the field-wide conversation about visitor-centered learning. One, an art museum, uses volunteers to give general tours; the other, a history museum, uses paid staff. Both individuals whose tours I experienced were highly skilled at what they had been trained to do. It was clear, though, that they had trained to do two different things, and that the paid educator reflected the educational mission of his institution, while the volunteer docent did not.

First was the art museum, with a docent we'll call Vivian. She was friendly, poised, articulate, and welcoming. The tour was a thematic tour across time and culture, and she started by saying that the experience was going to be dialogue based. However, I did not see her actually implement a dialogue-based approach. At the second stop she asked the group for adjectives that described the object we were looking at, and while she seemed receptive to the terms people shared, the next part of her talk did not incorporate any of the provided adjectives, and she instead continued with ones that she told us "most people say" and which better served her concept for the tour. As someone with an art history background, I found the content she shared interesting, but it was not accessible to the large, diverse group of visitors, including a few young children, that made up the tour group. My notes include these examples of her language, none of which she defined or contextualized: "blending of abstraction and naturalism," "compositional element," "Cubism," "reinstallation," "fractured forms" and "Western tradition." She appeared to have nearly memorized the content and didn't create space for true dialogue or for visitors to make their own meaning.

At the history museum, the tour experience with an educator we'll call Sam was markedly different. The tour was rather traditional in that it followed a prescribed sequence, and it was not fully inquiry-based; quite a bit of the content was provided as a one-way conveyance of information. Unlike Vivian, however, Sam left room for discussion, and invited us to make personal connections with the content. As one example, he had asked us at the very beginning where we were all from; one young adult visiting with her parents shared that they had

come to New York to help her move. Later, when Sam was discussing a room in the historic building we were in, he asked the young woman how the size of the space compared to her new apartment. Those kinds of connections occurred throughout, and by the end of the tour we were all chatting as a group and, I think, feeling like we had experienced the tour together, a vibe that was not at all present in the tour with Vivian.

What I saw in these two examples was that while both educators said that the tour would be a discussion, only Sam, the paid educator, actually delivered on that promise. It seemed that Vivian, the volunteer docent, had perhaps had some training on dialogue-based tours but had not internalized it, either based on her own preference or on the fact that the staff educators didn't require its use. Volunteer docents may be allowed to choose an approach (that is, to decide whether or not they want to use it), whereas paid staff need to follow the strategy that the leadership has selected as a best practice.

### **It's about living our institutional values - not money**

While we can perhaps understand the reasoning behind the discrepancies of training docents versus paid educators, when we flip the lens and look at the training issue from the point of view of the visitor rather than as administrators, it makes no sense at all. At many museums, we are peopling our front lines with volunteers whose training is less rigorous than we would require of paid staff. The visitors don't have different standards depending on the pay status of the facilitator; they expect a level of excellence that frankly they are not always getting from volunteer docents. If I were a novice museum visitor, Vivian's tour would not have helped me make a connection to the museum.

I probably would have been a little lost in the terminology, and I would likely not have felt that there was room for my input in the experience. Sam's tour, though, did make that personal connection – I could see it in people's faces – and I would bet that the people on that tour now look at that museum in a new way and feel a deeper relationship with it. If I were recommending one experience over the other, it would without question be Sam's tour at the history museum. Given the importance of word-of-mouth marketing in museums, a mediocre tour can have real repercussions as visitors share their experiences with friends and family and in online reviews.

Even if museum administrators support the idea that educators should all be paid, two major objections come up. First, what about all of our loyal volunteers, who are wonderful ambassadors for the museum, and who, in many cases, support the institution financially; and second, how do we afford to pay the educators?

The answers to both of these questions have more to do with institutional values than with practical concerns. But let's consider them at face value first. There are many ways that loyal volunteers can appropriately be redeployed across the museum: as greeters, program assistants taking tickets at an event, office assistants, researchers, community outreach volunteers, and so on. While there may be some hurt feelings or departures among a few volunteers during the transition of a volunteer docent program to a paid staff model, those problems – if they occur – will be short-lived and are outweighed by the benefits of the change for all parties involved: the visitors, who get a better experience; the educators who are adequately compensated; and the volunteers who are no longer given a

huge responsibility with inadequate resources. Stellar volunteer educators can apply for paid positions, if there are openings, so they can continue in that role. Making a parallel to a non-museum setting helps to illustrate the point: many parents and community members volunteer in public schools and find satisfaction in doing so. They may participate in the PTO, help in the library, or as a “mystery reader” in a classroom. My kids’ school has a lobby greeter role that is filled by volunteers from the senior center. We would all be outraged, though, if volunteers assumed the role of classroom teachers. We acknowledge that teachers have a certain set of professional skills, and we clearly delineate between volunteer and educator roles in schools. The same should be true in museums.

In addition to worrying about losing volunteer support, administrators looking at a model of using only paid educators to deliver programs understandably think about cost. Certainly, expenses would increase if a museum stopped using volunteer docents and instead shifted their role to paid staff. But isn’t excellence in education – and its positive effect on the visitor experience – a resource worth investing in? Extending the example above, teachers’ salaries make up the majority of school departments’ budgets, but because they’re the most important resource in a school, districts invest in teachers and make cuts – or raise funds – elsewhere; again, the same should be true in museums. Practically speaking, I believe that museums looking at using paid educators where they have previously used volunteers can find ways to increase revenue and reduce expenses in moving from the old model to the new. In a scenario where paid educators receive more robust training and are more committed to their roles than volunteer educators



would be, it's likely that visitor satisfaction will increase. Increased satisfaction means more repeat visits, more visitors becoming members, and higher levels of support across the board. This isn't a quick fix, but I think the improvement in quality and accountability is one concrete answer to the money question.

The second part of the financial equation in moving from volunteer to paid staff is that as institutions we spend a significant amount of money administering volunteer programs. Assuming that we redeployed volunteers who had been docents into other areas of the museum, there would still be costs involved in administering the program, but they would be reduced. Many museums have at least one staff person who devotes a significant amount of time to overseeing volunteer docents. While paid educators would still need to be supervised and trained, they don't need the same amount of hands-on management. The turnover of fairly paid educators is likely to be less than that of docents, reducing the amount of time that an administrator would have to spend on recruiting, hiring, and orienting. Though restructuring one or more supervisory jobs may also not be an immediate solution, it presents several options in terms of how a coordinator role could be reassigned to better meet strategic initiatives or eliminated to offset the implementation of educator pay.

Some museums have adopted the strategy of having two types of interpreter roles, some that are paid and some that are volunteer. Often the paid educators work with school groups, because of the perception that facilitating experiences with school groups requires a more specialized set of skills, and more consistency across staff, than working with the general

public does. While this strategy may seem like a step in the right direction in terms of professionalizing the interpreter role, it has its own problems. For one, having two categories of interpretive staff limits flexibility and the ability to cross train. It can also create division and territoriality within the department. Such dual categories may even violate the Fair Labor Standards Act, if a volunteer and a paid educator are doing the exact same job.<sup>6</sup> More importantly, the “split” strategy sends a mixed message: education departments who use this model have essentially acknowledged that volunteer educators do not have the training or skill to meet the needs of a school program, but that the quality of their tours is good enough for the general public. The members of the general public are our community, and we should be giving them the same quality of experience that school groups receive. If the volunteer interpreters aren’t able to deliver school programs at a high enough level, the solution is not to create a system that allows two different levels of quality, but to raise the quality of all visitor encounters.

### **Next steps**

I believe that over time a reliance on volunteer docents to facilitate educational experiences in museums will be phased out, due to a lack of people available to fill the role, a growing disconnect between the demographic makeup of docents and visitors, and a moral conundrum similar to that surrounding unpaid interns. However, if museums really want to position themselves as catalysts of change and promoters of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion, then I challenge those who still use volunteers to deliver mission-critical education programming to make a bold change according to their values,

rather than waiting for the tide to change gradually. Educators with demonstrated skill, experience, and training need to be paid at the market rate for professional educators. While most Americans seem to be in agreement that teachers in our public schools are underpaid, few people probably realize that to most museum educators, a public school teacher's salary and benefits seem like an unattainable luxury. Volunteers need to be redeployed to other areas of the museum, where they can be helpful in ancillary roles that do not take the place of paid staff. Visitors – including, but not limited to, schools and teachers – deserve to have the highest quality educational experiences possible at our institutions. Museums need to actively invest in attaining excellence in those experiences rather than cutting corners to save money or overlooking mediocrity to retain donors. Ultimately, museums couldn't exist without talented staff and loyal visitors; investment in these constituencies is the most fundamental, mission-critical obligation of museums. It's time for all museums to fulfil that responsibility by paying all front-line educators as the skilled professionals they are.

## NOTES

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1. Demographic studies of docents are not readily available. However, Halperin's article about the High Museum of Art's goal of diversifying its docent corps cites the group as having only 11% people of color in 2011, in a city that is 52.3% Black or African-American, according to the 2010 census.  
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**COVER IMAGE**

Demonstrators outside New York's Museum of Modern Art on May 31, 2018, call for a fair contract for the museum's union workers.

Photograph: Ilana Novick.



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