

MUSEUMS

OVERVIEW

Museums and education-centered cultural institutions are enjoying a kind of renaissance—and are seeing more visitors than ever. Museums are offering more venues for engagement and more educational opportunities; and as a result, they are generating increasingly interesting and creative career opportunities, especially for graduate students and postdocs with advanced research training. As educational institutions with a public mission, museums and cultural foundations offer scholars the opportunity to translate their interests and expertise to suit a venue that serves a broad audience.

“The most fundamental change that has affected museums during the past half-century is the now almost universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public.” --- Kenneth Hudson, *Museums of Influence* (1987, Cambridge University Press)

Career Areas	Sample Roles
Educational Programs	Docent Coordinator/Educator, Education and Outreach Coordinator, Student and Youth Programs Specialist, Digital Learning and Engagement Specialist
Media and Communications	Interaction Designer, Publications, Digital Media, Social Media and Marketing,
Development (Fundraising)	Grants Writer, Donor Relations Officer, Philanthropic Coordinator, Director of Acquisitions
Exhibitions	Curator, Researcher, Preparator, Designer, User/Visitor Experience Developer,
Administration	Registrar, Guest Services Director, Data Management

HOW GRADUATE SKILLS MATTER

As an advanced degree holder, your highly developed research and analytical skills, as well as pedagogical training, and communication and language skills, are in great demand at museums. Advanced-degree holding humanists and social scientists are well-trained regarding theories of ontology and epistemology, the semiotics of display, naming and captioning, and operations of contests and subtexts. Scientists, meantime, have research skills and knowledge that can be applicable in many contexts and different kinds of institutions. Remember that museums are often sponsors of large research labs.

Such training makes you highly desirable in the world of educational institutions, broadly speaking. When looking to enter the museum professions, you may be in competition with scholars holding degrees in Museum Studies specifically; but this particular disciplinary training is not necessary in every context and every role. Not every role in a museum is curatorial or research-driven (this can be easy to forget)—but many roles outside of these are intellectually engaging and *central* to the life and well-being of the communities of learning that museums foster.



UCHICAGO GRADUATE/POSTDOC CAREER GUIDES

Of course, it will still be very useful to learn about practices specific to the museum world, particularly regarding changes and innovations in both exhibition and modes of reception. It will certainly be a benefit to gain, where possible, some relevant experience on the ground. Experience may come in the form of [part-time work, internships, or volunteering](#). Museums always welcome volunteers as docents, educators, and administrative staff.

The important thing is to get in the door! It is much easier to navigate hiring processes at museums if you are “on the ground” and have the ability to meet staff (you’ll find that this is true across a range of mid-sized and large nonprofits).

RESUME BEST PRACTICES

Employers may or may not be attached to the specifics of your academic research – depending on the kind of job and the type of institution to which you are applying – but they will value your skills and experience as a researcher.

Remember, also, that the museum world is a world of concrete objects. Employers will want to know what tangible skills and “deliverables” you are able to document. They want to know you can make things, meet deadlines, and produce documents that are written in language meant for general audiences. Museums must communicate their value to diverse audiences: the media, the general public, donors, granting organizations, and many more. Your ability to discuss (and demonstrate) experience communicating as a graduate students and postdoc can be invaluable here. This includes conferences, blogging activities, workshops, poster presentations, and more.

And they want to know that you can speak to a public audience. Teaching is essential here. As an instructor, you know how to command the attention of an audience that wants to learn—but which perhaps needs a charismatic presence to provide the necessary activation energy. Whatever your area of specialized research, you will need to document that you are able to articulate knowledge in a mode accessible to a broad, diverse, unspecialized public. Experience tutoring, teaching in K-12 or undergraduate contexts, leading public seminars, and even mentoring your peers is all great experience to emphasize in this regard.

COVER LETTER BEST PRACTICES

Unless the job is a research position that is specifically structured around a candidate’s scholarship (in which case you will likely submit a CV), an effective cover letter will emphasize the skills that you can bring to the institution *over* your areas of scholarly expertise.

Your letter needs to strike a careful balance between what you know and what you can do with the skills you’ve developed as a graduate student and/or postdoc. A letter directed to a cultural institution should demonstrate a heightened level of enthusiasm and excitement for what *they* do, which, in most cases, means expressing enthusiasm for addressing and serving a wider swath of the public than one generally addresses in academia. Crucially: it demands that you demonstrate an understanding



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of the specific mission of the institution. You should have a **very clear sense** of how the museum itself articulates its value to its public.

Especially regarding educational positions within these institutions, sustained articulation of your excitement about diverse opportunities for public engagement will be key to a successful letter!

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

- Start a topic focused blog that shows evidence of your visual acumen (in terms of both content and format --- tumblr is a great place to start), while also documenting your writing skills and intellectual interests
- Build a simple digital archive ([Omeka](#) is one possible platform)
- Volunteer as a docent, educator, or administrative staff.
- Put together an art, science, or cultural program with youth at your local Chicago Public Library branch. Keep it specific limited in scope. The Neighborhood Schools Program, University Community Service Center, and Office of Civic Engagement are great places to start when it comes to thinking about how to engage with groups that serve the Chicagoland area (and, if you are farther afield, can connect you with individuals in other cities)
- Seek out programming opportunities on campus that will afford experience in grant writing and budgeting management.
- Stay alert to innovative (even “disruptive”) changes in the landscape of institutional operations, for example, this fun resource: [Museum Hack](#).
- Regularly research job listings to understand the skills that will best position you for a certain type of position. You might discover you can familiarize yourself with specific software, design, or database platforms, for example.

WHERE TO LOOK FOR JOB LISTINGS

- [American Alliance of Museums](#)
- [Idealist](#)
- [Global Museum](#)
- [Museums Culture](#)
- [Museum Employment Resource Center](#)
- [Museums on the Web](#)
- [Museum Jobs](#): Careers in the Cultural Sector (mostly UK; including galleries, libraries and archives)
- [Museum Jobs online](#)
- [LumityNPO.net](#)

