Volunteer Experience at the Museum of Peoples and Cultures

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Volunteer Experience at the Museum of Peoples and Cultures

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INTRODUCTION

As BYU’s “teaching” museum, the MPC provides a setting where BYU students can gain real museum experience. Under the mentorship of professional staff, museum class students and student employees are responsible for researching, developing, and installing exhibitions, processing and cataloging incoming and current collections, and organizing and cataloging excavation notes and other collection records. Beyond classes and employment, the MPC also provides an oft-overlooked educational experience for student volunteers. Under the supervision of student employees, volunteers provide assistance in creating and distributing educational materials, cataloging collections, organizing records, and other tasks necessary for the daily maintenance of museum operations. I hypothesize that this involved approach provides a unique learning experience that can help student volunteers develop useful skills and discover educational and professional opportunities within their areas of interest.

SIGNIFICANCE

BYU heavily encourages exposure to mentored, real-life work experience for students. As a result, many courses require students to volunteer as part of the coursework. The MPC is uniquely suited for giving students real experience in a professional setting outside the classroom when they are involved with the actual museum work under the mentorship of trained employees. In addition, volunteers receive information about museum classes and related careers. Internally for the MPC, it’s important to ensure the volunteer program provides a fulfilling experience for students because volunteering is the primary exposure to the museum for 69% of respondents. Volunteers who have a positive experience serving often go on to take museum classes and apply for paid museum positions.

METHODS

I administered a survey via email to students who volunteered at the MPC from fall semester 2008 through fall semester 2009. These students consist of people who volunteered for a specified amount of time for a class requirement, those who received an academic scholarship from the university (which requests students provide a certain amount of service in return), and students who volunteered out of personal interest.

I sent surveys to 122 students and received 29 completed surveys, a response rate of 24%. The survey asked 30 questions collecting anonymous demographic information and qualitative data about their volunteer experience. Multiple choice and short answer questions asked reasons for volunteering, how the experience contributed to academic choices, suggestions for program improvement, and likelihood of returning to the MPC to volunteer again.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

72% of respondents who volunteered for a class assignment reported that the service only somewhat related or didn’t relate at all to the class that required service-learning.

If teachers are going to require their students to volunteer, they should specify the learning objectives, especially if the class topic isn’t related to museum work or archaeology.

A small minority of respondents expressed disappointment in the educational outcomes. Responses were related to a lack of diversity of work and feelings that work was not valuable. This relates to the most common recommendation from volunteers: provide volunteers with a range of projects to work on.

Volunteer projects are dependent on current museum projects and the schedules of the supervising employees. The MPC volunteer program coordinator should explain to new volunteers how scheduling may restrict the projects available to them to work on. If they want to work on different projects, they may need to work during different timeframes and for a longer period of time (at least 20 total hours).

The most satisfied volunteers reported their supervisors explained projects well, and the volunteers understood the importance of their project within the scope of the museum’s purpose.

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Two thirds of the respondents who volunteered for a class requirement reported they are more likely to work in a museum in the future regardless of whether the volunteering related to their class that required service-learning.

The MPC employees should continue to emphasize explaining how the volunteer’s work contributes to a project, and how that project benefits the museum.

Summary: Students learn most from their experience if they volunteer regularly, understand the purpose of their work, and work with a variety of projects. Students most often expressed appreciation for exposure to real and diverse academic and career options.

EXPERIENCE WITH THE MPC BEFORE VOLUNTEERING (N=29)

Experience with the MPC before volunteering included:

- Never been to the MPC before, and never heard of it.
- Heard of the MPC, or its events, but never attended.
- Attended at least one event (date night, FHE, tour, etc.)
- Attended more than one event (date night, FHE, tour, etc.)
- Attended as a class assignment.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH:

- How has volunteering been helpful for students in obtaining non-museum related work?
- What restrictions do students have that prevent them from volunteering more if they wanted to?
- How much choice did students have in determining where they would work, and how does that affect their learning experience?

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“Volunteering at the Museum opened my eyes to the career possibilities of curatorial work which was something I had never considered before.”

“Volunteering allowed me to explore a different area of work than I would have thought of previously. It taught me to stay flexible in the work area. One day I was reading children’s books and the next I was designing brochures.”

“The information I’ve learned at the MPC has tied into several of my classes. Learning about different past beliefs of modern cultures in a new light. I think the MPC has helped broaden my mind.”

MUSEUM of PEOPLES and CULTURES