

Shaping the Future of the Museum Field through Mentoring

Each one can reach one.
Each me can reach three.

“The greatest good you can do for another is not just share your riches, but to reveal to him his own.”

—BENJAMIN DISRAELI

The vast majority of us in the public history field did not arrive at our professional positions because of sheer impressive credentials or good fortune alone. Somewhere along the way someone likely encouraged us, gave wise words of wisdom that refined us, shared transformative insights that better prepared us, and/or inspired us with motivation that positioned us for the next level. Someone helped widen the door of opportunity a bit further for us. It is this *gift of mentoring* that has the promise to proliferate growth in our museum field.

Mentoring simultaneously strengthens the mentee, the mentor, and the profession in immeasurable ways.

For those desiring to grow in museum knowledge and practice, securing a mentor is a wise decision that accelerates learning. Finding an established professional from whom to learn either specific pointers in the field or general knowledge has tangible benefits. Having a mentor allows one to learn without always making the mistakes common during the learning process. Gleaning insight from the missteps made by a mentor will forecast avoidable pitfalls, surface detours, and spotlight preventable brick walls. Through transparent conversation and honest dialogue, the pitfalls of a mentor's past can strengthen the learning curve of the mentee.

Moreover, one can grow within a supportive and safe space through a mentoring relationship. Climbing the professional ladder can be an intimidating, risky process. The mentoring

relationship gives professionals an opportunity to ask questions without concern of sounding naive, the confidence to exchange insights with a seasoned professional, and the space to present drafts of concepts and creative thoughts to an informed listening ear. It is within the context of mentoring that a professional can refine one's best ideas for work. The listening mentor can respond from a place of experience and informed practice.

Furthermore, those who take advantage of mentoring are better positioned to launch into their next level of operations with a wider breadth of awareness. Spending time with a mentor, whether infrequently or on a scheduled routine, inevitably expands one's level of exposure and insight. Not only is one more keenly aware of the mentor's seasoned views, but one is often introduced to the peers of one's mentors as well, thus expanding access to various opinions and viewpoints. This can sharpen the mentee's practice.

You get as much as you give as a mentor.

True mentoring is never a one-way street. In a well-matched mentorship, the mentor gains as many rewards as the mentee. Anyone with experience behind them and a heart for helping someone else has the capacity to be a mentor. Beyond that, little more is required to mentor. There is a plethora of promising professionals who need the wisdom of a willing mentor to help them contour their budding growth in the field.

Being a mentor also validates one's professional expertise. It has been said that you cannot lead where you have not been and you cannot teach what you do not know. Mentoring allows one to share insights and lessons from one's professional journey, making one's own mistakes medicine for the next generation.

Choosing to mentor is to extend opportunities for someone else to use your insights to steer them down a path

of success. Everyone who has been in the field for a considerable amount of time has insights and experiences that are instructive and valuable when shared. Mentoring then becomes a laboratory for growth.

Mentoring naturally expands one's own reach and influence. Anytime you are investing your time, insights, and reflections in the next generation of practitioners, your influence will be seen and felt in their work. AASLH Vice Chair John Fleming, for instance, is the mentor to one of my mentors, Juanita Moore. Through my mentor's words and actions, I hear and see the influence of her mentor. On a larger scale, media mogul Oprah Winfrey is known to repeatedly share with her worldwide viewing audience the insights and wisdom of her mentor, the late poet Maya Angelou. As a mentor, your reach proliferates beyond the measure of your own work and sphere of daily contact, and oftentimes even beyond your own lifetime.

The 360-degree rewards of mentoring enrich the mentor's professional life. Quite simply, it feels good to make an investment in others. Taking the time to dialogue with, respond to, and engage a mentee yields mutual benefits for both parties. While the mentee flourishes from gaining insight and support, the mentor gains a sense of satisfaction from the exchange, both immediately and further down the road as the mentee develops. Through the mentoring relationship, mentors sharpen their leadership skills and learn how to be even more effective mentors.

To mentor is to shape the field forever.

Any field of professional practice benefits from the custom of mentoring. Particularly in the museum field—a profession in which diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and measurable impact are essential to our future—mentoring can keep our field progressing in a desirable direction. A continual investment in the

The Whole is Greater >

next generation of leaders and practitioners through formal and informal mentoring strengthens the industry. Maximizing the talent, creativity, and energy of emerging practitioners through mentoring is a win-win arrangement for the entire field.

Mentoring is essential to continually diversifying our field. Kyle Parsons, Manager of Inclusion and Community Engagement at the Minnesota Historical Society, notes, "I am one of those oft-discussed millennials who are known for

job-hopping and leaving organizations quickly. However, I state as often as I can that I have stayed with my museum for nearly eight years now because my boss and mentor has actively looked for ways to develop me. He is more than a supervisor; he has stated that he views himself as my mentor, and I work hard to ensure his time and effort is well-invested. The fact that he is another male of color in a predominantly white industry has also allowed me to trust that he understands some of the unique challenges that I encounter."

In addition to enhancing diversity, mentoring is often an exchange of trust and support. Parsons goes on to state, "The mentor-mentee relationship has been the most important part of my professional development to this point because it means I am not the only person actively thinking about my career and growth."

For Parsons and for the entire field, mentoring fosters industry-wide collegiality and connectedness. The lines drawn from one professional to another are multiplied through mentorships. Relationships are deeper and more meaningful in a field that encourages mentoring. Cultivating a mentoring culture in the museum field can take place at the micro level, within museums that encourage staff members to mentor and be mentored, and at the macro level, with professional associations offering formal mentorship programs. Peer-to-peer and horizontal mentoring is another option that fortifies linkages in the field.

Aaron Berger, Campaign Director for Coxe Curry & Associates in Atlanta, who led art museums for fifteen years as a high-performing executive director, reflects on the role of mentoring upon the success of his museum. "For me, gathering a diverse group of mentors was critical. As a museum director, I met regularly with the directors from nine other area museums/attractions: the history museum was represented, as was the zoo, the art museum, the historic house, the cultural center. Some had budgets of \$1 million, while others were \$18 million operations. Each of these organizations was vastly different from my own but there were commonalities that helped shape my perspectives on marketing, attendance, donor development, membership, financial management, and so on.

We met quarterly and ensured our conversations were kept confidential. This built not only trust between the organizations but also facilitated some tremendous partnership opportunities."

Mentoring generates creativity within the field. The very nature of exchange in a mentoring arrangement elicits heightened, open-minded dialogue, as Berger's experience affirms. Innovative ideas surface. Tim Barber, Executive Director of the Black Archives in Miami, Florida, pushes his mentees to strive for the most creative, thoughtful solutions in every instance. Through mentoring, outcomes are more creative.

Additionally, long-term sustainability in the field is more viable through mentoring. Good work is made better when practitioners are mentored. Mentoring strengthens the field from one generation to another and improves the outlook of the field. It supports the growth and development of the mentee, enriches the professional experience of the mentor, and is an essential practice that sustains the museum field.

Take time for a mentorship.

Mentoring is an intentional choice. Sometimes, you fall into a mentorship unexpectedly. Sometimes you strategically arrange it. But by all means, *choose mentoring*. The investment of time produces enriching rewards. Make your mark on the future of our field by engaging in mentoring. ●

"I tell my students,

'When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free,

you need to free somebody else.

If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else."

—TONI MORRISON



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