

ETHICS AND MUSEUM SALARIES

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Introduction

This article focuses primarily on entry-level salaries but its conclusions are true for museum salaries in general.

Entry Level Salaries

A recent informal survey has shown that the full-time salaries that are offered to our graduates, upon leaving the University with a MA degree in Museum Studies in hand, often **do not represent a living wage**. Many of our graduates work in the larger New York metropolitan area, often in major museums, but their compensation, which generally ranges from 25,000 to 35,000 before taxes (app. 21,000 to 30,000 net), is insufficient to meet their basic needs. Indeed, many graduates are forced to rely on their parents for help (e.g., by living at home) or to take a second job (bartending, waitressing, etc.). As the average apartment rental in the metro area ranges from \$ 1,000 to \$ 1,500 for a studio or one-bedroom apartment per month, shelter expenses alone will amount to \$ 12,000 -18,000. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the cost of shelter, on average, represents a little more than 32 % of total living expenses (see <http://www.bls.gov/cex/csxann05.pdf>, table B). Our graduates often need more than half of their salary to pay for shelter. This means that they do not make enough money to cover the 68 % that represents other vital expenses, such as car, food, utilities, clothing, and pay-back on educational loans. Fringe benefits, on the whole, are meager. Health insurance is rarely entirely covered; employees either contribute to the plan or do not receive coverage such as dental, eyes, etc.

Consequences

Many of our best students, upon completing their degree, opt for careers outside the museum. They realize that with their skills they can make one-and-a-half times or sometimes twice as much in other non-profit environments or in the for-profit world and they feel they have no other choice than to forego a career to which they genuinely aspire but on which they are unable to enter for financial reasons. Those who do decide to embark on a museum career, frequently relying on family support, tend to become disgruntled, unless they are able to quickly advance. This is possible in some areas, like development, where salaries rise steeply as one advances to the next level, it is less likely to happen in areas like museum education and collections care, where the raises from one level to another are less dramatic.

Causes

There are many causes for the low salaries in museums, particularly at the entry level.

- Supply and demand
- Tradition of volunteerism
- Boards' priorities (museum boards **do not** think of their employees as their most important asset)
- A **general unwillingness to consider the ethical dimensions of offering sub-standard salaries**

- Lack of serious and comprehensive salary studies, incl. comparisons between museums and other non-profits as well as studies of salaries vs. cost of living.
- No collective bargaining strength

Remedies

There is not a single remedy to solve the salary conundrum, which probably needs to be attacked from several different directions. But here are three measures that, in my opinion, may begin to make a difference:

- More and better salary studies. The AAM has not done any salary studies but has left this up to the regional and local associations. The NEAM has done the best job, thus far, and though it is difficult to tell, in the absence of nationwide salary studies, my informal salary survey tells me that it has a positive impact on the salaries paid in that region.
- Educate the trustees. Impress upon the trustees that their employees are their foremost asset and that *not* to prioritize their salaries in budget decisions is not only short-sighted but also unethical. Educate the trustees about the need for professionalization in museums and the necessity of paying higher wages to museum professionals. Impress upon the trustees that the salary differentials that often exist between museum directors and employees may be allowed in the corporate world but should not be considered morally acceptable in the not-for-profit world of museums.
- Last resort: collective bargaining. Wages and benefits are negotiated, for the most part, by the director or the HR director and not by the employees. This has proven to be good for directors, who, for the most part, earn decent, and in some cases, exorbitant, salaries, but not good for entry level employees. Museum personnel should think seriously about forming unions or joining strong existing unions, such as state-wide teachers unions, which would be a good fit in view of the educational role of museums. Even if attempts at unionization fail, they bring issues of salary and job security to the forefront, which may have a positive effect.