

*This month's Muse-ing comes to us from Ken Hickman, Director of the Penn State All-Sports Museum and Chair of the Penn State University Museum Consortium. Ken writes about the unique opportunities and challenges of working at university museums – a category of workplaces that often flies under the radar even for those who worked in or used one on their campus while a student.*

When contemplating the museum field in the United States most tend to think of institutions that are either private non-profits or government-run. Frequently lost in this landscape are the multitude of museums that inhabit the campuses of our nation's colleges and universities. While the traditional idea of the college museum is often centered around art or natural history, the actual scope of these organizations is as varied as the field at large. For example, here at Penn State, in addition to institutions focused on art and natural history, we have museums that address topics as diverse as athletics, anthropology, science history, and agriculture.

Employment with a college or university museum offers several advantages, many of which are common with government-run sites. As part of a larger organization, employment security and benefits are often superior to the private sector. Additionally, as a director or administrator, many of the day-to-day costs and concerns are eliminated. There is no electric bill to be paid, contractors to be sought for building maintenance, or procedural human resources issues to process. These are provided by the college or university, along with support in development and fundraising.

Of course, with these perks comes many of the disadvantages that are inherent with being part of a large organization. There are processes and procedures to be followed as well as approvals that need to be sought. These bureaucratic challenges can make maintaining organizational nimbleness a challenge, and opportunities may pass because the system does not move quickly enough. Also, while there are advantages to having access to shared services such as marketing, development, and strategic communications, there is also competition among units for these services. Changes in departmental or college/university administration may threaten a museum if a new administration does not see its value or is pressed to reallocate resources elsewhere. In my time at Penn State, I have helped successfully defend another campus site from a drastic downsizing by a dean as well as have seen the esteem in which my museum is held fluctuate with changes in athletics directors.

The ability to survive and thrive in these circumstances requires skills in identifying strategic partners on campus as well as building connections across departments and disciplines. These partners are often vital in aiding the museum to both navigate the bureaucratic and political waters of campus operations and advance the larger institution's goals. As part of this process, the museum's staff should, with faculty and student partners, always be advocating for itself as well as communicating the tangible impact it makes to the college/university's mission. Effective action on these fronts will help sustain the museum during those periods when it may be threatened by tension with administrators --often around issues of space allocation or access, and maintaining or increasing funding levels. As space and funding are increasingly finite resources on most campuses, these situations require delicate negotiations and the alliances you build can be instrumental to attaining either a positive outcome or a livable compromise.

If these kinds of settings interest you, it's worth noting that because many college/university museum positions are not posted by those familiar with the field, traditional job listings with [AAM](#) or here on MuseWeekly are not always complete. In addition, you should consult higher education job sites such as *HigherEdJobs* or *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, as well as the job pages for individual schools. Within these listings, museum positions may be listed under a variety of titles such as "arts management" and "information resources." For those seeking to work at museums that offer many of the benefits of government employment but with the dynamic, collaborative environment of campus, seeking a position at a college/university museum is a path worth pursuing.