

December 17, 2020 Muse-ings

Intro:

This month's Muse-ing comes from Lina Mann, Historian at the White House Historical Association, who offers some advice for turning internships and entry-level positions into long-term career opportunities. Especially given the field's current circumstances, strategies for moving up rather than moving on may be particularly helpful.

Piece by Lina Mann:

When starting out in the museum field, often the most difficult part is getting your foot in the door. Many entry level positions take the form of short-term internships or part-time jobs, making it challenging to establish yourself. Like almost everyone, I entered the field through a variety of short-term internships at several institutions. Although I enjoyed my work, I quickly realized that short-term positions are the norm, and many supervisors consider interns and seasonal hires to be temporary fixtures who will gather experience and complete a project before moving onto other organizations. However, I observed a few co-workers successfully transition into full time positions and began to note how I could follow in their footsteps. Eventually, I was able to turn a graduate fellowship into my current role as a historian with the White House Historical Association. Despite the transient nature of the field and the tight financial straits many institutions are in right now, there are certain steps you can take to increase your chances of staying on board, by demonstrating your interest, value, and commitment.

1. Ask questions. It is easy to fall into a pattern of not asking questions, especially when you want to demonstrate your ability to perform in a new role. Although it can feel like asking questions makes you seem uninformed, it is actually vital to demonstrating your interest and serving successfully in your initial position.
2. Branch Out. Although you may be assigned to work with one individual department, do not be afraid to make connections with other coworkers and other departments. It will help you become better known and can cement your status as a valued team member. For example, while I was a research fellow for the White House Historical Association, I approached my supervisor in the history department and was able to get involved with a digital photo project run by a separate department, which helped me develop additional skills and led to more fruitful connections between departments.
3. Attend meetings. When you hold an internship or entry-level position, it is easy to find yourself underutilized. Attending meetings and other planning events allows you to be seen while you see how important decisions are made and, what types of issues are the most pressing. Even if you are attending meetings to listen and observe, instead of directly participating, you can learn a lot that you can apply to your own work and developing career.
4. Find a niche. Oftentimes, smaller museum organizations have positions where individuals perform a variety of functions. Is there something you can take off of a co-worker's plate? Is there something you can improve? Is there a developing project or initiative that needs more bandwidth? If you are able to fill a gap, it demonstrates your value to the organization.
5. Be assertive. If you know that you want to build a career within a particular organization, tell your supervisor. By explicitly stating your interest in the institution, you demonstrate your eagerness to grow and be a part of the team. In addition, if you are underutilized in your position, make sure to ask what more you can do. Be ready to show what you can bring to the table. However, make sure you are also assertive in defining your boundaries. As early career employees, it is not uncommon to be overworked and underpaid. By asserting your interest as well as your boundaries, you present yourself as an efficient professional. Although the current COVID-19 pandemic has had wide-ranging effects on the museum field, particularly in terms of visitation and finance, there are still opportunities out there, and organizations are even more inclined to take on, or promote, someone they already know and

trust. That means current conditions make it perhaps more important than ever to demonstrate your interest, value, and commitment in your current organization. It may just turn out to be a promising path forward.