

How to Select a Museum Studies Graduate Program

There are several options for professional training for museum work in the US:

- Short courses, workshops, and certificate programs that are not affiliated with a university (and hence not accredited).
- Undergraduate minors and degree programs in museum studies at accredited institutions.
- Master's degree programs at accredited institutions, with and without thesis options, either residential (on campus) or online.
- Graduate certificates, either independent of, or in conjunction with, a graduate degree in another subject at an accredited institution.

Although each of these options has its advantages and disadvantages, which option is best for you depends on several factors, including your previous educational experience, whether you have worked in a museum before, and how much time you are able to commit to professional training. For example, if you already have a graduate degree in an appropriate subject, then a certificate program may be sufficient training. If you are an established museum professional, you may want to consider short courses and workshops that would strengthen your resumé. However, if you are just starting your museum career, you may find that most of the museum jobs you want require a master's degree in museum studies from an accredited institution.

Why Graduate School?

A good master's program in museum studies will provide a solid theoretical and practical foundation for a museum career, as well as information and opportunities rarely found in undergraduate degree programs. Although some museum studies programs claim to be better than others or claim to have high rankings, the truth is that no comparative ranking of museum studies programs in the US has been published. Such claims are usually based on an overall ranking of the university (and even a top-ranked university can have a few weak programs) or based on the biased opinion of their professors or graduates. But don't despair—there are some criteria you can use to help select the program that will be best for you.

1. Preparation—What to do before considering a museum studies graduate program

- Get an undergraduate degree in a subject you are passionate about, and learn as much about that subject as you can.
- Think long and hard about what you want to do professionally in museums. For example, are you more interested in collections or education, in administration or curation?
- Look for paid or volunteer opportunities in museums or historical sites near you. Working in the museum environment will help you better understand the opportunities for a professional career.
- Visit lots of museums and carefully observe what they do and how they do it, read *Museum* magazine and other museum literature, and follow current news about what is happening in museums.
- Read *Museums in Motion*.

2. Residential vs Online Programs—Which is Best?

- For people who cannot relocate to another city or give up full-time employment for school, an online graduate program may be the best option. There are many fully accredited online

graduate programs in museum studies to choose from that you can take advantage of without having to relocate. Online programs have the advantage of allowing you to work and live wherever you want, and some (but not all) online programs allow you to progress at your own pace. Another advantage is that online programs are often less expensive than traditional residential programs.

- However—and this is a very important consideration—most learning at the university level takes place outside the classroom in interactions with your peers and by taking advantage of opportunities available only in a campus environment.
- Participation in a traditional residential program allows you to fully concentrate on what you are learning, and studying on a university campus allows you to take full advantage of many other learning opportunities, including face-to-face discussions with your professors and fellow students, access to library and campus museum resources, lectures, films, and other cultural activities.

3. Academic Considerations

Museum studies programs vary widely in content, so you must choose wisely. Some programs are highly theoretical, while others offer exclusively practical training; some programs emphasize a particular aspect of museum work (e.g., curatorial, education, collections), some emphasize certain types of museums (e.g., anthropology, art, history). If you want to get the most out of your career, you should look for a program that offers a good balance between the theoretical and the practical (most graduate programs in museum studies require both academic work and an internship).

- Select the graduate program that will best prepare you academically for the sort of job you want (e.g., a program that emphasizes art will not prepare you very well for a job in a natural history museum; a program that emphasizes administration will not prepare you very well to be a registrar).
- Study job ads to see what your dream job requires and select an academic program that will help you build your resume for that job. Pay close attention to the level of education, type of degree, skills, and experiences required.
- Conduct an internet search for the people who teach in the program. What courses do they teach? Do they publish regularly? Are they involved with the museum profession? Have they worked museums before or do they work in museums now?
- Look for lists of where alumni from the program get jobs—do they get the sort of jobs you are interested in?
- How much choice will you have in selecting the classes you take? Which classes are required, how many are elective? Will the available classes prepare you for the sort of jobs you want?
- How many students are in the program? What size are the classes?
- Call or visit the campus and program office, and talk to someone about the classes, the program's focus, and nearby museum-related resources.

4. Physical Location

- Consider where the program is located—is it a place where you can live and work happily for a couple of years? Graduate school is invigorating but requires extreme intensity and focus, so pick a location where you can be comfortable when not in class. In other words, if you

don't like rainy days, avoid the NW coast; if you love fall and winter, avoid the Gulf coast; if you like to mountain bike, avoid really big cities.

- Visit the campus before you commit. If you don't like the campus and the town around it, chose another program. If you are not happy where you live, you can't do your best work.

Other Considerations

- How much debt load are you willing to take on? In all likelihood your first museum job will not pay much.
- Are there museum jobs available for students on campus or nearby? Any museum work will help build your resume so you need to be working part time or volunteering at in a museum or historical society while you are a student.
- Will you have to finance your own internship, or will the program accept paid internships? Some programs accept paid internships, some don't. Supporting yourself during an internship when you are working without pay can get very expensive.
- When you select your internship, find one that will give you experience in the sort of work you want to do professionally (e.g., museum education, curation, collections management, exhibits work). Many graduates find that their internship experience is critical to helping them land that first job.
- If you enroll in a program that requires a thesis or special project, select a research topic related to what you want to do professionally.
- Remember that what you will get out of your graduate program depends almost entirely on what you are willing to put into it.
- Don't expect to be able to find a job just with a museum studies degree (the other applicants will have one of those, too). To land a good museum job you will need a degree, some experience in museums (e.g., from a part-time job, internship, or volunteer work), and a good resume that shows you are a capable and hard-working individual.
- Do not expect a graduate program to find a job for you. The purpose of graduate school is to train you for a profession—it's up to you to find a job. It is very rare to find a graduate program that offers employment assistance.

Lists of Museum Studies Programs

There are more than 130 museum studies programs in the United States, and many more worldwide. These websites can help you find information about specific programs:

<http://aam-us.org/resources/careers/museum-studies>

<http://museumstudies.si.edu/training.html>

<http://www.gradschools.com/programs/museum-studies>

<http://www.globalmuseum.org/>

<http://www.museummarket.com/MStudy.htm>

Resources

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Stevens, Greg, and Wendy Luke (editors). 2013. *A Life in Museums: Managing Your Museum Career*. American Association of Museums.

Museum magazine, <http://www.aam-us.org/about-us/publications/museum-magazine>

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