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Bees, trees and clean water

The FDA Is Revoking 52 Food Standards of Identity

From the Trenches: Advice from an Emerging Museum Professional

*I ask this question first in every job interview. It's transformed how I hire.
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Reinventing Museum Careers

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No amount of money,
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From the Trenches: Advice from an Emerging Museum Professional



The author, seen fourth from the right in the back row, was one of four emerging professionals recognized with a Nancy Hanks Award for Rising Stars at the 2025 AAM Annual Meeting.

I didn't always see myself working in museums.

For most of my life, I was immersed in archaeology and the ancient world—focused on digs, research, and physical culture. At the time, I thought museums were places to visit, not places to build a career. What I knew about them came from headlines about provenance scandals and repatriation disputes. I didn't think they had anything to do with me, until they did.

Everything changed when I left my Egyptology track in graduate school. I realized I didn't just want to study history. I wanted to help shape how others experience it. Exhibitions and public programs felt more impactful than academic papers oversaturated in complicated jargon.

Letting go of a lifelong dream wasn't easy. But I knew passion alone couldn't build the future I

That pivot led me to museums. I've now stayed for almost five years, through uncertainty, difficult leadership, and a field that often struggles to support emerging museum professionals (EMP). But I've stayed because I still believe in this work. Like many EMPs, I've grappled with

what it means to love a field that doesn't always love us back. Over time, I found myself drawn into advocacy—both within and beyond institutions—because we can't claim to uplift marginalized voices while silencing those who work to amplify them.

That's why I'm choosing not only to share my story in this post but to amplify the voices of fellow EMPs I've met along the way.

One of those colleagues is Chandler Tait, Registrar at the [Huntsville Museum of Art](#), who describes her own motivations for staying in the field this way:

"I often think back to a moment early in my career, when I was able to reframe an artwork by a female, Early Modern artist I greatly admired. I know that specific work has passed through the hands of the artist, the patrons, and a series of registrars before me, all working to keep it safe for future generations. There is always great value in keeping objects safe for those who come after us and playing a role ... in the life of an artwork gives me great satisfaction."

Her words are a powerful reminder that even in the face of uncertainty, there is meaning and legacy in the work we do. Holding space for both passion and frustration has helped me find my footing. Surviving, and thriving, means knowing your limits, speaking up, and remembering that sometimes it's okay to walk away.

While not a roadmap to success, here are some of the things I've learned so far about establishing a museum career.

1. Your Career Path Doesn't Need to be Linear

I thought I knew how my life would play out, but somehow, I have gone from studying Middle Egyptian hieroglyphs to working in museum administration as a director.

One of the biggest myths in museum work, and the working world in general, is that there's a single, straight path to success: get the degree, land the entry-level job, climb the ladder. The truth is, most of us take winding routes to get where we are. That's not a weakness, it's a strength—and most of the time it has everything to do with the field and little to do with the EMPs within it. [The value of formal education is evolving, college programs are reorienting from "book smarts" toward hands-on experience, and employers are signaling that they prefer that.](#) The roadmap that guided generations before us no longer leads to the same destination.

Even if your journey isn't linear, it helps to have a sense of direction. Ask yourself what kind of work lights you up. Is it education? Collections? Administration? You don't have to have it all figured out, but defining your interests and values will help you make more intentional decisions about where to spend your energy.

It also makes it easier to explain your choices to potential employers or mentors, especially when your résumé doesn't follow a traditional path. Clarity doesn't mean rigidity. It just means you're steering the ship to safety, no matter the threats on the course.

2. Passion Is the Spark, Not the Strategy

Let's start this with honesty: We don't get into museum work because it's easy. Most of us arrive here fueled by something deeply personal—curiosity, connection, justice, legacy. That kind of passion is powerful; it is the coal in the furnace. It's the reason we stay late, say yes to unpaid opportunities, and try to improve the field.

As I've gotten to know other EMPs across the field, I've learned how much joy many of us take in the work, despite the difficult realities of navigating the field. Mackenzie Gardner, Outreach and Education Coordinator at the [C.H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa](#) in Memphis, Tennessee, remembers the moment of clarity she felt when she realized she was exactly where she needed to be:

“When I was working in a public library a couple years ago, I started to understand just how many people do not have access to information, let alone higher education. Learning opportunities must be made available to the public, and I knew I needed to help on the ground rather than in a classroom. After I chose to pivot from academia to museum work, I finally felt at home and fulfilled in my career.”

Museum work is more than a job. It is a calling to serve, educate, and expand access. But passion alone won't pay the bills or protect your peace. To build sustainable careers and stronger institutions, we need more than love for the work: we need strategy.

- *Start by knowing your value.* Learn about salary benchmarks and show how your skills support the institution's or the field's mission. Advocating for fair pay isn't ungrateful; it's professional. The “passion tax” is real, especially in smaller museums. Set boundaries, clarify expectations, and push back when roles expand without support or compensation.
- *Next, build a peer network.* Whether through associations or group chats, connect with others who understand the field from various viewpoints. Mentorship does not have to come from the top. Often, peers a step behind or ahead of you can offer the most practical insight. They know what you're going through and finding out how they handled similar situations may be of immense help to you.
- *Finally, stay strategic.* Keep your résumé current, pursue growth opportunities, and track your wins. Know when to grow in place and when to move on. Ask yourself what *you'll* need—mentally, financially, and professionally—to stay or leave. That is not pessimism. That is preparation. Passion matters but pairing it with a sustainable plan is what keeps you thriving in this field.

3. Fighting for Museums Means Holding Them Accountable

The field needs you to challenge the status quo. Museums are in a period of reckoning and reinvention, and EMPs play a critical role in that evolution.

Whether it's rethinking how to tell stories, pushing for more inclusive hiring practices, or questioning outdated policies, your perspective matters. You don't have to wait until you're in leadership to speak up. In fact, some of the most important changes come from those who are

newer to the field: people who see the gaps, ask bold questions, and aren't afraid to imagine a better way forward.

Despite being in the museum field for under five years, I have managed to move from entry-level positions to top-level administrative roles. Being newer to the field can offer a distinct advantage: a fresh perspective unshaped by longstanding routines. Emerging professionals often bring curiosity, flexibility, and a willingness to question assumptions, qualities essential for innovation and relevance. While experience brings depth, newer voices can spark necessary change. Rather than seeing limited tenure as a disadvantage, it can be viewed as a strength that allows for clarity and bold thinking. Today's early-career professionals aren't just observing the field, we're preparing to inherit it, and we're committed to shaping it with purpose, inclusion, and creativity.

So, don't be silent. Use your voice to advocate for more equitable, accessible, and community-centered museum practices. The museum field will only grow stronger if we make space for new ideas and challenge systems that no longer serve our institutions or our audiences.

Conclusion

Museum work is rarely easy—and it's even harder when you're still figuring out where you fit. But if there's one thing I've learned, it's that our voices, our questions, and our perspectives are not just valid, they're necessary. The future of museums isn't just being built in boardrooms or corner offices. It's being shaped by those of us navigating winding paths, asking hard questions, and refusing to accept "that's how it's always been" as a final answer.

Whether you're just starting out or standing at the crossroads, know this: your nontraditional path is not a liability; it's your strength. Your passion doesn't have to come at the expense of your well-being. And your presence in this field is a form of advocacy in itself.

Keep going. Keep asking. Keep building the kind of museums that future professionals and visitors deserve.

Neecole A. Gregory

Neecole A. Gregory is Museum Director, Morton Museum of Collierville History and Adjunct Instructor of Art and Art History at the University of Memphis and Jackson State Community College. With a background in classical studies, archaeology, and museum studies, Neecole is passionate about preserving and interpreting history for diverse audiences while advocating for her fellow emerging museum professionals. She champions inclusivity, equitable compensation, and professional development with a variety of organizations and is committed to making museums more accessible and reflective of the communities they serve.

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**I ask this question first in every job interview. It's transformed how I hire.**

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## **Reinventing Museum Careers     Martha Morris     Posted on Nov 18, 2019**

Facing challenges with employee satisfaction and retention, the museum field could learn from the alternative career paths some are taking. Photo credit: Brendan Church on Unsplash.

Museum workers tend to have a high sense of ethics, strong workplace values, and genuine pride in their organizations, relative to many other professions. But in recent times, the field has experienced a variety of challenges with employee satisfaction and retention, stemming from stresses like long hours and low pay, lack of advancement, and other challenges associated with poor management practices. Today there is a growing feeling among museum workers of unfair treatment and dismay about long-term commitment to museum employment. Employees are

speaking out, joining unions, and in some cases abandoning museum work altogether. Understanding why this exodus is happening is important if we are to nurture a productive and satisfied workforce. Looking at the alternatives to traditional career paths, and what features make them more attractive, can provide examples to emulate.

Since the mid-twentieth century, there has been explosive growth in museum professionalization, and higher education has responded by providing training in museum studies. Currently there are at least 184 degree programs in the US (per the American Alliance of Museums [website](#)) and a substantial number abroad. At the same time, we see many new museums opening around the world, all of which seek professionally trained staff, presumably opening new opportunities for employment. Still, despite increasing emphasis in the field on workforce diversity and salary transparency, museum jobs are frequently not attractive. Even in a strengthening economy, museums do not consistently offer competitive salaries, or add positions for aspiring workers. In a time of recession, many museum jobs disappear, and salaries are stagnant. The emerging museum professional thus faces the reality that they will likely have to accept a meager salary and take second or third jobs to manage the cost of living while saddled with student loan burdens.

### **The reality of alternative career paths**

In my experience, most museum studies graduates are highly motivated and skilled individuals who have a strong desire to improve the quality of life in their communities and educate the public about critical issues in society like diversity, fairness, poverty, and climate change. Still, even after investing considerable time and money to study best practices, graduates may face hurdles when they gain employment in museums, including low salaries, dysfunctional organizations, and a lack of career advancement and challenging work. This can dash their aspirations, and may lead them to abandon the field for new frontiers that are more satisfying and provide avenues to employ their creativity and enthusiasm for change.

Not every unhappy museum employee actually takes this leap, but those who do are often risk-takers with excellent timing and strong personal values. In using their museum training to forge careers in nontraditional ways, it is possible in the long run they will infuse the museum profession with new skills and approaches. But will they return? What does their example mean for the future of museum work?

As a long-term museum employee, museum manager, and professor of museum studies, I have taken a keen interest in the success of the museum workforce, which led me to conduct surveys on the career paths of graduates from the George Washington University Museum Studies program. In these surveys, I found that while the majority work in traditional museum roles—including collections, education, administration, and leadership positions—a small but notable minority do not. Looking at these cases, I had questions about their motivation for taking these alternative paths, and the responsibility museums have in issues of workforce satisfaction.

Those who have opted out of museum work are variously employed. Some work in higher education, including roles in alumni relations, fundraising, and student counseling, while others work in K-12 as educators or administrators. A few have formed their own nonprofits or businesses, such as one that services homeless children; one person is a professional musician and DJ; and yet another is a lifestyle journalist! Some work in development and fundraising, both

in museums and in other fields like healthcare, universities, and environmental organizations. Several have gone on to work in the museum service industry in project management, exhibition design and development, or collections care; while others work as managers in museum associations and granting agencies. And some work in the growing field of technology and social media, both in museums and for-profits. These new career paths are fascinating and reflect a willingness to take risks, to develop ways to share expertise more widely while leaving behind the reality of low pay, limited advancement, or organizational dysfunction.

Who are these pioneers? To find out, I reached out to a number of people who graduated from the GW Museum Studies program between 1994 and 2017. During this period, the U.S. experienced two recessions, while the museum field saw explosive growth in new building and new museums and worked to reinvent its community engagement, diversity, and leadership practices. Despite this growth, the recessionary periods led to noticeable reductions in staffing, which made seeking museum work more competitive.

In response to a series of questions about their career development, all interviewees expressed a commitment to supporting museums and a recognition of museums' value to society. Why, then, they chose to move outside the museum workforce reveals a set of lessons we need to examine more closely. Of the individuals interviewed, all were employed in museums before deciding to move into another field. Their reasons for opting out of museum employment varied, but the majority responded that low salaries, a lack of full-time positions, and a lack of opportunities for advancement or challenging work projects motivated their exits. Another reason was dysfunctional culture within organizations. Finally, a few noted they sought better work-life balance and benefits.

One example is Natalia Febo (MA 2014), who sought work as a museum educator upon graduating. After a few years working part-time jobs in museums, she found a full-time position with benefits in a DC public charter school with a focus on the arts, where she is building her skills in project management and contracting while working with adult English language learners and developing educational programs.

Adaheid Mestad (MA 2007) worked in museums for a few years upon graduating, before moving to Rochester, Minnesota. No museum work was readily available there, so she took positions with the Mayo Clinic and later the Downtown Alliance. These positions exposed her to new aspects of community engagement, which eventually led to a position as Director of the Children's Museum in Rochester. Although this would be a plum job for many museum employees, Mestad ultimately chose to move in a new direction. She saw her museum training as a great opportunity to bring "exhibit design and experiential learning to urban revitalization/placemaking," and recently took a position as a Design Anthropologist with the architecture firm HGA. This job builds on her experiences in community service, museums, and public education.

One thing that unites many of these individuals is an openness to bold moves. In 2011, for instance, Abigail Swetz (MA 2003) left her federal government job at IMLS to work in the Middle East, as a project manager in the field of international cultural development in the growing economy in Dubai. Her consulting work "focused on social impact where I advised regional and global grantmaking and development foundations, NGOs, and multilaterals on strategy and partnerships." More recently she took a position as Senior Manager, Partnerships



and Co-Creation, at Expo 2020 in Dubai, where she works to “develop partnerships and programs that further the sustainable development goals (SDGs) at a pavilion that will host both a curated exhibition and program spaces. The role coalesces my experience with social impact strategy and international development with my museum expertise in an unanticipated, fun, and fulfilling way.” She feels that working abroad has benefitted her work by giving it a broad multicultural view. She notes that adaptability, strategic thinking, data analysis, and strong and clear writing are invaluable skills she has learned.

Equally bold is the track taken by Thomas Hardy (MA 2013) who worked in nonprofit and museum fundraising positions before seeking to immerse himself in strategic planning and large-scale organizational reinvention as he assisted the efforts of new leadership at the United Service Organizations. Hardy notes that museum work did not afford him either an adequate salary or opportunities to impact organizational change. His work at the USO, in contrast, was transformative, as he had an opportunity to work under inspiring leaders and exercise new skills including planning, strategy, process improvement, and change management. That experience convinced him to launch into a management consulting career, and he now works at an international startup with a myriad of clients.

After serving for many years in curatorial and administrative positions at the Smithsonian and elsewhere, Odette Diaz Schuler (MA 1994) moved into the field of public education. She then left the workforce to raise her family for a number of years. Since 2011, she has worked her way up the ladder and now serves as the Deputy Executive Director at CASIE, The Center for the Advancement and Study of International Education, located in Atlanta. She explains that “CASIE’s work involves direct training of teachers and administrators in U.S. K-12 schools through workshops and consulting visits. CASIE also engages in system-focused advocacy and research, presents global conferences, and serves as an education resource for parents.” Schuler notes that she has gained extensive knowledge of the educational field and of budgets in her current work. Importantly she was able to transfer skills from her museum work: “Being detail-oriented, a perfectionist, compelled to set things in order. Being able to organize events and manage people effectively as well as schmooze potential donors and project partners has served me well in this new career.”

Considering the prospects for the newest generation of museum professionals, the experience of Kelsey Johnston (MA 2016) is an interesting example. After working at the National Aquarium in social media, Johnston chose to move to a position as Digital Content Manager with Baltimore’s McCormick Corporation, the spice company. Her motivation for taking this position was that of salary and professional growth opportunity. Johnston notes she has “learned a lot about different cultures and regions around the world. Additionally, in a for-profit company, I’ve learned a lot about how profits, earnings, and margins affect every aspect of the business.” Her experience has also broadened her web design and social media skills. At the same time, she understands that her perspective and focus on the customer/audience, derived from her background in museums, is unique in an organization that is focused on the bottom line. “I know that what I’m learning about management, the technical skills I’m gaining, and the resilience I’ve developed will only help me continue to excel in the next museum I work in,” she says.

Johnston intends to return to the field, but what about the rest of the people stepping away from it? In my interviews, a majority said returning would be ideal, but they had no specific plans currently. Still, their new career paths are providing engagement and new skills, through challenging projects responding to their desire for creativity and innovation, and these could easily be transferred to a museum in the future.

The message to museums is clear: there are many options for talented and ambitious employees, many of them more attractive than what museums are currently providing. Not only are salaries a significant issue, but a supportive workplace culture is also critical. All those I interviewed, whether they were early- or mid-career, were looking for cultures that promoted the “soft” skills that are vital in workplaces today. These are relational, personal, and communicative in nature; and can be taught through a combination of formal and informal learning, ideally in the context of the workplace where the learning can be immediately applied. Specifically, Mestad, the museum director who left the field to work in architecture, notes that the skills of teamwork, collaboration, respect, comfort with ambiguity, openness to creative thinking, and overall understanding of the strategic position of the organization in serving community are paramount. For many of these risk-taking professionals, the role of mentoring is also critical. They feel a serious obligation to help others develop their best opportunities and seek avenues to share their career paths with colleagues and future generations.

As Schuler—who left the field for public education—notes, the museum field must wake up to the reality of the world around them: “Museums need to pay special attention to developing young staff members and providing opportunities for growth and advancement both in their specific organizations and in the broader field of museums.” Realizing the dream of a diverse workforce will only heighten these needs for empathy, listening, and creative collaboration. At the same time, risk-taking and determination are qualities that will move museum workers and organizations forward. Museums need to encourage these traits, by providing positive working experiences and opportunities for challenge and growth. They also need to recognize that realistic wages, work-life balance, as well as a focus on compelling missions will continue to be driving factors in the future workforce.

Despite the challenges in the field, it is likely that museum employment will still be attractive to many individuals in the future, and museums need to place human resource management among their top priorities if they are going to retain them as satisfied employees. As these case studies show, there are alternative outlets for career development, for talented people who would prefer to work in museums but find it unsustainable. Museum leaders need to explore ways they can bring these alternative thinkers back into the workforce, and benefit from all their new thinking and skills, especially as our field faces a challenging future in regard to sustainability and relevance.

Some areas to consider could be collaborating with staff in designing opportunities for growth, as well as partnering with a variety of other for-profit and nonprofit organizations to open avenues for new types of projects, mutual learning, and strengthening the future workforce. Those responsible for museum training and career development, such as university training programs, may need to consider this reality too as they prepare their students for the workforce, emphasizing skills in innovative thinking, communications, interpersonal relations, data analysis,

and budgeting—and providing ongoing mentorships to help assure success after graduation. Although there are clearly many factors that influence individual career choices, including age, family, lifestyle, and the economy, museum workers may have increasing options for growth going forward. And it's possible that museum work may not be the best option for their skills, interests, and passions, if they are not valued. Museum leaders need to make an investment in staff and focus on ways to encourage personal and professional growth in their workforce, while staff need to remain flexible in their expectations.

#### **About the author:**

Martha Morris is associate professor emerita of museum studies at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Her career began in collections management at the Corcoran Gallery of Art and later at the Smithsonian's Museum of American History, where she eventually served as deputy director. Her work and teaching have focused on management and leadership practices including planning, project management, building programs, and workforce issues. She is author of *Leading Museums Today: Theory and Practice* (2018), *Managing People and Projects in Museums* (2017), and co-author of *Planning Successful Museum Building Projects* (2009). She holds BA and MA degrees in Art History (George Washington University) and a Master's in Business Administration (University of Maryland).

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NEJC Legislative Recap: Reno [**Date: Wednesday July 30th**](#)

Time: Doors 6:00pm, Presentation 6:30pm

Location: Teamsters Local 533
1190 Selmi Dr, Reno, NV 89512

Join the Nevada Environmental Justice Coalition for our 2025 Legislative Recap! Learn about what environmental justice bills became laws during this year's legislative session, which lawmakers were champions for the people & planet, and learn what's on the horizon for our movement in Nevada. Enjoy a free meal and panel discussion as we celebrate our collective victories! Sign up to reserve your seat today.

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Celebration of life



Kacidee Kaye Williams

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Saturday
July 26, 2025
11:00 a.m.
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