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# The museum education job taxonomy: how our job titles affect our work and our value

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## ABSTRACT

The Museum Educator Job Taxonomy assesses the status of the field of museum education in the United States by collecting and analyzing data on the varied job titles that museum educators hold. Drawing from a field-wide survey disseminated in 2023, this study documents and analyzes the diversity of titles within the museum education sector, identifying consequences on the material practices and experiences of museum educators. Finding suggests little widespread consensus on best practices for job titles, with implications for career advancement and compensation, necessitating a critical reflection on the purposes, consequences, and possibilities of the language used to describe museum education work.

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Museum education;  
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## A professional identity crisis

Museum educators hold a wide variety of job titles – from Learning to Public Engagement to Education to Outreach, Coordinator to Curator to Manager, and occasionally even more poetic titles, there is an abundance of words and categories assigned to our work, with little consistency across institutions. The various permutations and combinations of job titles each communicate something slightly different about our field to our visitors, our boards of directors, and one another, with significant consequences for professionalization, practice, and compensation. This proliferation of titles evidences a general field-wide identity crisis: how do we best describe what we do? Loosely defined, museum education ‘is about communicating messages, creating experiences, and promoting human development for people of all backgrounds, abilities, and circumstances’ (Wood 2023, 2). What are the ramifications of one choice of words versus another for how we describe this work, and our identities in relation to that work? In this study, we assess the status of the field of museum education in the United States by collecting and analyzing data on the varied job titles that museum educators hold to draw attention to this phenomenon and its consequences on the material practices and experiences of museum educators.

The genesis for this study was a conversation between the two authors, who worked together a decade ago in our early careers in museum education, as we reunited at the

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2023 annual Museum Education Pre-Convention of the National Art Education Association Convening in San Antonio, TX. What started as a lighthearted laugh at an absurd predicament evolved into a more pressing investigation, as we each reflected on the impacts – positive and negative – that this absence of standardization has had on our careers. Amanda started her career with a series of unpaid internships in museums in New York City and Boston, subsidized by familial support; after completing a Master's degree, she spent a year cobbling together part-time gig work and a temporary contract position. She finally secured a permanent, full-time position as second-in-command in an education department of three at an art museum in New England. She stayed there for seven years. Her original title, Senior Museum Educator, was meant to communicate seniority over the entry-level Museum Educator position. After two years, she received a promotion to K-12 Education Manager as the department grew and titles attempted to reflect the parameters of each person's duties. While this title maintained internal hierarchies in relation to the (by now two) entry-level positions at the coordinator level, it created confusion across institutional divides: she remembers a colleague's hesitant congratulations over a title change that this person did not read as a promotion. By the time she left the institution to pursue her doctoral work, Amanda held the title of Associate Director of Education, a more general descriptor that allowed for the wide range of her responsibilities, but at a level of seniority that had no direct parallels with other departments in the museum. This paved the way for contested eligibility of her successor in the newly established labor union (we explore these consequences of titles further in the Discussion section).

Marjorie's museum education career has taken place in multiple institutions. Early on, she worked as a freelance art museum educator with the title of Guide, working within a private company specializing in museum tourism while completing her Master's degree in France. She then undertook a full-time education internship at the institution where she met Amanda. At the conclusion of the internship, she began an entry-level Education Assistant position in the Division of Education at a large federal museum. She was one of several employees with similarly named roles, each focused on different activities or audiences. The position was mainly administrative, but included some teaching, and was largely devoted to high school students. She was promoted to the role of Museum Specialist at the same institution after taking part in multiple division-wide initiatives and piloting new programs. With this promotion, she was also able to use the internal title of 'museum educator' amongst colleagues. The use of a more descriptive internal title was a common practice amongst museum employees as a workaround to the vague institutional titles supplied by such a large bureaucratic institution. She then changed organizations, moving to a small art museum at a liberal arts college, and gained the title Museum Educator and Docent Program Supervisor. This dual title encompassed teaching, administrative, and programmatic responsibilities working with a wide range of audiences. She was recently promoted to Education Manager, a title designed to reflect increased leadership and the growth of programming under her supervision. The term *Manager* in the title was selected because of its use throughout the college both within the museum and in other departments.

We share these experiences to provide information about how we approach this topic, as well as to present concrete examples of the variety of pathways, tasks, titles, and moves that one might undertake in pursuing a career in museum education – what museum educator Emily Turner (2019) terms 'the museum education hustle!' (167). Although

museum education scholar Dana Carlisle Kletchka (2007) points out that ‘art museum educators rarely have time to examine their professional status’, we agree with her assertion that ‘developing a critical consciousness is an important step in provoking reconsideration of the prospects and possibilities for the profession’ (78). Developing this Museum Education Job Taxonomy, then, is an offering to our colleagues to note of the state of museum education job titles and reconsider what might be gained and lost in perpetuating this disarray. In this moment of critical reflection, we look to curator and scholar Martina Tanga (2021), who envisions new models of organizational structures based on feminist and abolitionist principles, rather than attempting to reform existing structures. For Tanga, a critical foundation of a feminist organizational model is a radical transparency – a departure from the historical opacity of museum operations. This study seeks to enact and promote this radical transparency and critical consciousness to better understand and thereby advocate for our profession and the individual educators who comprise it.

### From the uncertain profession to a fractured profession

From the birth of the term ‘docent’ at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 1906 (Kai-Kee 2011), the field of museum education has suffered a series of identity crises – so much so that art education scholars Dobbs and Eisner (1984) once (in)famously dubbed it the ‘uncertain profession’, one without clear training, best practices, or academic research behind it. At the time, art museum educators responded by gathering at a summit called the Denver Meeting in 1988, attempting to delineate the contours and define the mechanisms of their work (Mayer 1998). After a series of intensive, facilitated group discussions over the course of four days, the group (Mayer 1988) determined that the art museum educator ‘is a knowledgeable, creative and skilled teacher, visitor advocate, and/or manager who causes meaningful interaction between people and art through a variety of educational endeavors’ (Pitman-Gelles and El-Omami 1988, 22). While an admirably flexible overview of what an art museum educator does, the Denver Meeting’s suggested job title – Master Teacher (Yenawine et al. 1988) – did not become widespread. Indeed, of the three aspirational pathways that participants in the Denver Meeting determined that a museum educator’s career might take – high-level administrator, master teacher, and visionary – only the first is reflected in significant numbers in our survey data of museum education positions today. While many museum education professionals are seen as visionaries within their institutions or in the field at large, even at the time of the Denver Meeting participants acknowledged that it is ‘not a career track, of course, but a phenomenon that becomes apparent in time’ (Pond 1988, 12). Our one respondent who did report having the title of *Master Teacher* offered a critique of the term:

I would align my role with that of ‘Manager of Youth and Families Programs’ at other institutions, and find that ‘Master Teacher’ is vague and does not encompass all that I do. In addition to teach, I design curriculum, and coordinate all details of our pk-12 programming, including hiring and supervising a team of teaching artists.

One fundamental tension that creates uncertainty and frustration within the field, for example, is the relationship (even rivalry) between educators and curators. This is reflected in the Association of Art Museum Directors’ 2023 Salary Survey, which identified

four tiers of educators in museums: *Director of Education / Curator of Education, Associate Educator, Assistant Educator, and Education Assistant* (AAMD 2023). The characterization of the highest museum education leadership position in the study as an ‘either / or’ – *Director of Education / Curator of Education* – reflects the field’s indecision around leadership terminology. Matthai (1974) describes how most educators throughout the twentieth century had historically settled for education roles when unable to secure a curatorial position, leading to a pervasive stereotype that educators are no more than failed curators, rather than professionals in their own right. Meanwhile, Kai-Kee (2011) points to the over-reliance on volunteers within education departments as a factor in the secondary status of education in relation to curating, which eschewed working with volunteers. Kletchka (2007) cites the feminization of museum education, with all its attendant associations with childrearing and care work, as a critical factor in the systemic devaluing of this labor.

In recent decades, however, museum education has become increasingly foregrounded as museums respond to market-based demands to conduct more outreach and visitor engagement (DesRoches 2015). A clear ‘pedagogical turn’ has emerged in museum and curatorial practice in recent years (Cachia 2014; Graham 2010), in which curatorial practice has grown to encompass educational strategies that account for visitor experience alongside object-oriented scholarship. Cachia (2014) notes that ‘what is exciting about the educational turn is that it implies that the curator is no longer the harbinger of knowledge. Their authority is now dispersed and shared with an audience ...’ (52). The American Alliance of Museum’s (1992) *Excellence and Equity* report provided a moral foundation for centering museum visitors (Turner 2019). There has also been a growth in curatorial-educational collaborations and hybrid conceptions such as ‘edu-curation’ (Love and Villeneuve 2017) and a growth in professional roles that straddle educational and curatorial duties (Cachia 2014). One example of this type of collaboration ‘uses a curatorial team comprising representatives from curatorial, education, installation, and other relevant departments along with knowledge-bearing members of the community, valuing disenfranchised perspectives’ (Love and Villeneuve 2017, 17). Brian Hogarth, director of the leadership in museum education program at Bank Street College in New York, emphasizes that

edu-curation offers a compelling vision for a more unified conception of exhibition making, grounded in the assumption that curators and educators *both* generate content and have interests, practices, and standards that are mutually supportive. It assumes that exhibition work is more than the physical manifestation of a single perspective. (Hogarth 2017, 24)

Despite these advances, however, there remains a lack of clarity when it comes to naming and valuing the work that museum educators do, distinct from their (edu-) curator colleagues.

This ambiguity in job functions coincides with the persistent hierarchy that continues to celebrate curatorial work and denigrate educational work, as evidenced in pervasive salary discrepancies (Turner 2019; Südkamp and Dempsey 2021) and the widespread institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, which sacrificed educators while preserving curatorial roles (Antar et al. 2020; Chevalier 2022; Krantz and Downey 2021; Mitchell 2023; Moon 2020). Such hierarchies derive from the traditional priority given to objects over people. Cachia (2014) further notes that within this paradigm, ‘We

might think of the curator as the one who focuses on aesthetic outcomes rather than educational goals, and the person who focuses on scholarship rather than on service' (52). In practice, then, educators are relegated to a secondary position, acting in response to their curatorial peers rather than coordinating efforts in tandem. Yet as Cachia continues, education is 'not merely in the service department' (62). Educators are increasingly recognized as the leaders in enforcing museums' missions to the public good, helping them 'overcome insulated and isolated roles in communities to become resources for a spectrum of social issues and contemporary challenges' (Wood 2023, 3). Many museum educators have embraced or been assigned a variety of titles that reflect attempts to acknowledge, validate, and elevate this vital role within the art museum field. The tendency of some museum educator jobs to include the word *Curator* in their title is often an attempt to rectify this hierarchy, insisting on the centrality of education work to the intellectual leadership of the institution. Likewise, a refusal to align museum educator roles with curatorial positions may indicate a desire to be valued on educators' own terms.

The decades since the Denver Meeting have seen a deeper professionalization of museum education – which has mostly contributed to a pluralization of museum education rather than narrow definition. There is a growing body of research and theory around visitor experience, pedagogy, and the educational role and functions of the museum, as evidenced in professional journals such as the *Journal of Museum Education*; increasing opportunities for professional development through official networks such as the International Committee for Education and Cultural Action (CECA) of the International Council on Museums (ICOM), the Museum Education Division of the National Art Education Association (NAEA), the (now-defunct) Education Committee (EdCom) of the American Alliance of Museums, and the Museum Education Roundtable (Kai-Ke 2012); and a growing number of advanced degrees and certificates specifically dedicated to museum education for emerging professionals. Yet there remains a persistent nebulousness around museum education. Museum educator Ashley Mask (2023) describes the absence of clear career pathways for museum educators, arguing that they, unlike classroom teachers, must undertake a more fluid and personal process of 'wayfinding' in building their careers; museum professional Amber N. Mitchell (2023) describes how these challenges are compounded for museum educators of color within a field that remains overwhelmingly white (Kletchka 2021). In her introduction to *A New Role for Museum Educators*, a contemporary response to Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's (1994) foundational *The Educational Role of the Museum*, editor Elizabeth Wood (2023) describes the importance of maintaining a 'museum educator mindset' in constructing a museum educator identity (5). This mindset is 'centered on the visitor and focused on relevance', and is the connecting throughline among the expanding list of activities and duties of the museum educator, from exhibition planning to curriculum development to volunteer management to digital learning efforts (5). Although the introduction, together with the volume as a whole, makes a strong case for the importance of this museum educator mindset and how it drives democracy and social justice, there is a greater emphasis on what museum educators *do*, than on what we are *called* – and why that might matter. We, too, celebrate the many, vital, and expanding purposes of the museum educator, yet we maintain that there is power in a name. We must identify and understand what each of the many names attached to museum education connotes, and how these titles affect both practitioners as workers and our audiences as recipients of and

participants in this work. The Museum Educator Job Taxonomy is a contribution towards this end.

## Building the museum education job taxonomy: methodology

The study consists of a brief, fourteen-question online survey distributed via Qualtrics. The questions (see Appendix A) asked participants to share various information about their employment and included a final open-ended question that invited participants to share additional information. The first question, which asked whether participants currently work in museum education, was required as a means of weeding out irrelevant responses; the fifth question, 'What is your current job title(s)?' was also required as it is the primary focus of the study; all other questions in the survey were optional.

After obtaining exemption from the Internal Review Board at The Ohio State University, researchers disseminated the survey via personal and professional networks, sharing information about the study on listservs from the National Art Education Association and the talk@museum-ed digest and via social media sites LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter (now X). The authors also emailed direct requests for participation to colleagues. In self-selecting from these open calls, participants thereby self-identified as museum educators; we did not impose external constraints on how to define or limit participation. Participants indicated their informed consent to participate by proceeding from a landing page with information about the study to the next page with the survey questions. The survey was live from September 15, 2023 to December 15, 2023, and yielded a total of 260 responses. 49 responses were excluded from analysis because either the participant was located outside of the U.S. or because they did not currently have a museum education job, leaving a total of 211 responses for analysis. While there are no official counts of the total number of active museum educators in the country, we follow Kletchka's (2021) example to compare the rate of responses to the number of museum educators who are members of the NAEA Museum Education Division – about 620 members as of 2022 (NAEA Museum Education Division 2022), making for a potential sample size of 34%. Because we asked participants to include colleagues' job titles, it is possible that multiple people within a department might have filled out the survey, yielding potential duplicate responses to this question; we could not control for that within the confidentiality agreements and therefore limited our analysis to participants' current job titles only.

To analyze the data, we imported the raw data into an Excel spreadsheet and first assigned an 'Internal Response ID' number to each participant to track individual responses. We then divided job titles into different columns according to the following categories: Internal Response ID, Level, Role, Audience, Activity, Dual, Endowed. In the 'Level' column, we added the hierarchical qualifying terms from the job title (e.g., *Assistant*, *Associate*, or *Interim*), or left blank if none was specified. In the 'Role' column, we added the primary function of the job title (e.g., *Manager*, *Coordinator*, or *Curator*). In the 'Audience' column, we input the audience(s) that were explicitly mentioned in a job title (e.g., *Families*, *Schools and Teachers*, and so on), or left blank if none was identified. The 'Activity' column included information about the main application or focus of the position (e.g., *Programs*, *Education*, *Learning*). In this way, *School Programs Manager* and *Manager of School Programs* are counted as the same title. The 'Dual' column was marked 'Yes' or left blank to reflect whether someone had multiple titles combined

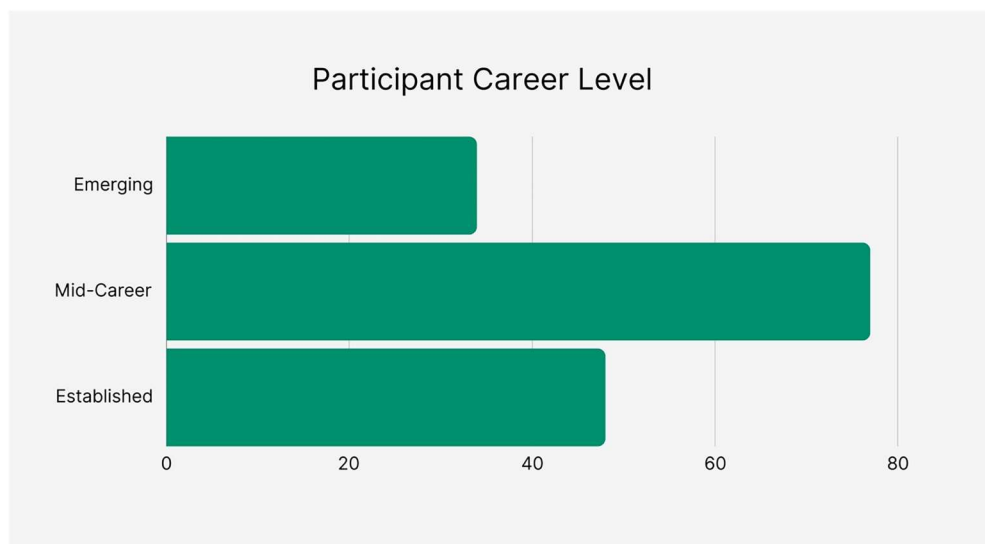
into one (e.g., *Coordinator of College and Pre-Professional Programs and Museum Educator* or *VP of Public Programs & Director of Education*); in these situations, the two titles were separated into two rows, connected to one another via the Internal Response ID number but able to be verbally analyzed individually. Finally, we took note of endowed titles in the final column; some participants listed the full name of the endowment, while others redacted that information for privacy concerns; it is possible that other respondents simply omitted that information completely. Further research would be needed to determine the proportion of endowed museum education positions.

## Unpacking the museum education job taxonomy: findings

### Participant background information

Of the 211 responses analyzed, 34 participants (21%) identified as emerging museum educators; 77 (48%) as mid-career professionals; and 48 (30%) shared that they are established professionals (Figure 1). Most participants work in art museums (33.63%), with 18.78% at encyclopedic art museums and 14.85% at contemporary art museums. 19.21% of respondents work at history museums and 15.75% chose 'Other', clarifying that their institutions were dedicated to an individual founder, agricultural or living history sites, specific to a region (e.g., American art) or medium (e.g., glass), or comprised multiple genres, among other specific responses (Figure 2). Participants work at institutions from across the United States, with Washington, DC, Texas, New York, and Massachusetts as the four most common states of employment (Figure 3). Most respondents self-identified their institutions as in an urban area (72.15%), with 22.78% in suburban areas and only 5.06% in rural areas (Figure 4).

Survey results indicated that 88.75% of respondents work full-time, while 5.63% work part-time; another 5.63% responded 'Other', clarifying that they work full-time at one site



**Figure 1.** Participant career level.

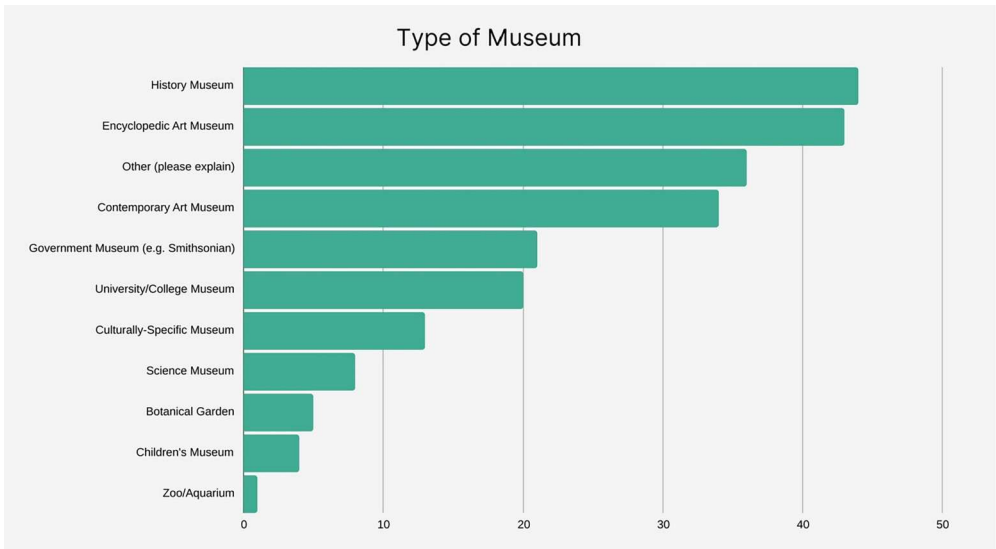


Figure 2. Type of museum.

and part-time at another, are volunteers, freelance, or in the words of one respondent, '[Full time] and then some' (Figure 5). Broken down by experience level, more emerging museum education professionals report working part-time (18% of emerging professionals), with 5% of mid-career professionals holding part-time jobs and 0% of established professionals holding part-time jobs. The response rate for 'Other' increased with seniority however (from 5% of emerging and mid-career professionals to 8% of established professionals), which many explained in the comment section is a result of

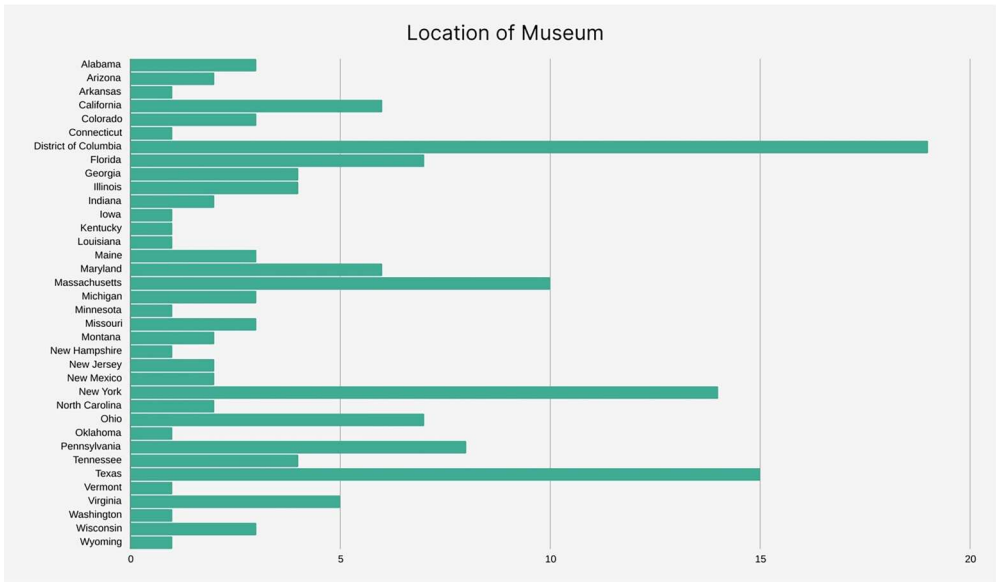
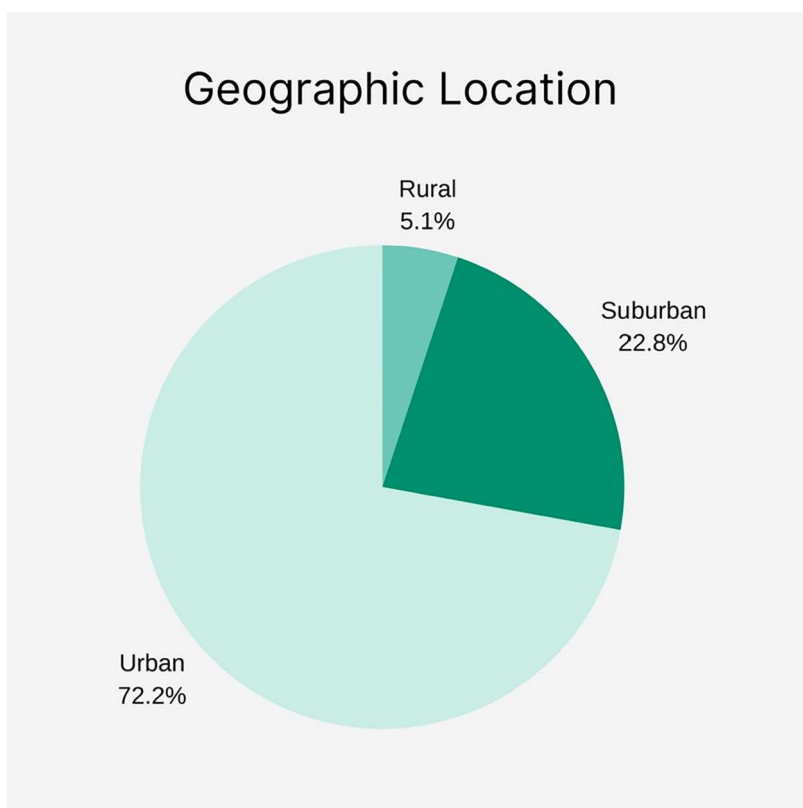


Figure 3. State in which museum is located.



**Figure 4.** Geographical areas.

working as a freelancer or adjunct professor in addition to their full-time roles (Figure 6). Most respondents hold a single museum education job at one institution (90.57%), while 5.66% report working more than one museum education job at their institution and 3.7% hold more than one museum education job at multiple institutions (Figure 7). The survey did not ask whether participants hold additional jobs outside the field of museum education.

### ***Participants' current job titles***

Of participants' individual job titles, reflecting a current snapshot of the field in autumn 2023 during data collection, there were 186 responses that reflected 26 different types of roles, referring to the primary function of the job (e.g., *Assistant, Manager*). The five most frequently occurring roles in respondents' current titles were *Manager* (23.2%), *Director* (20.5%), *Educator* (12.7%), *Coordinator* (12.2%), and *Curator* (7.9%) (Figure 8). The most frequent audiences referred to in participants' current job titles were *Public* (9.1%), *School and Teacher* (8.2%), *Youth and Family* (7.3%), *School and Family* (4.6%), and *Community* (1.8%) (Figure 9). The most frequent activities were *Education* (29.1%), *Programs* (17.7%), *Museum* (8.1%), *Learning and Engagement* (7%), and *Engagement* (1.9%) (Figure 10). 18.2% of respondents held dual job titles. While many titles specified an audience or an activity, the data shows that some of the reported job

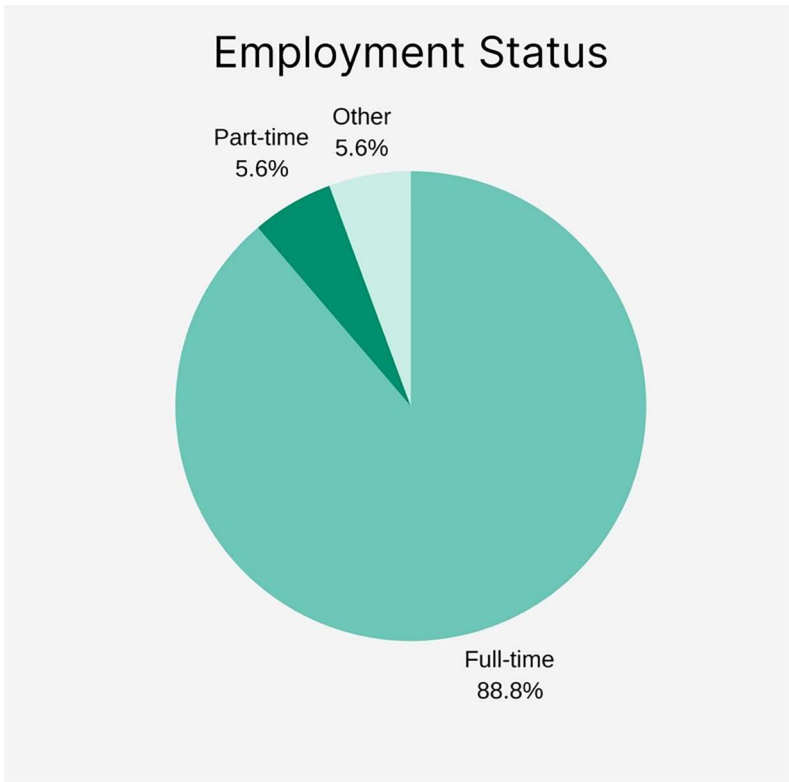


Figure 5. Employment status.

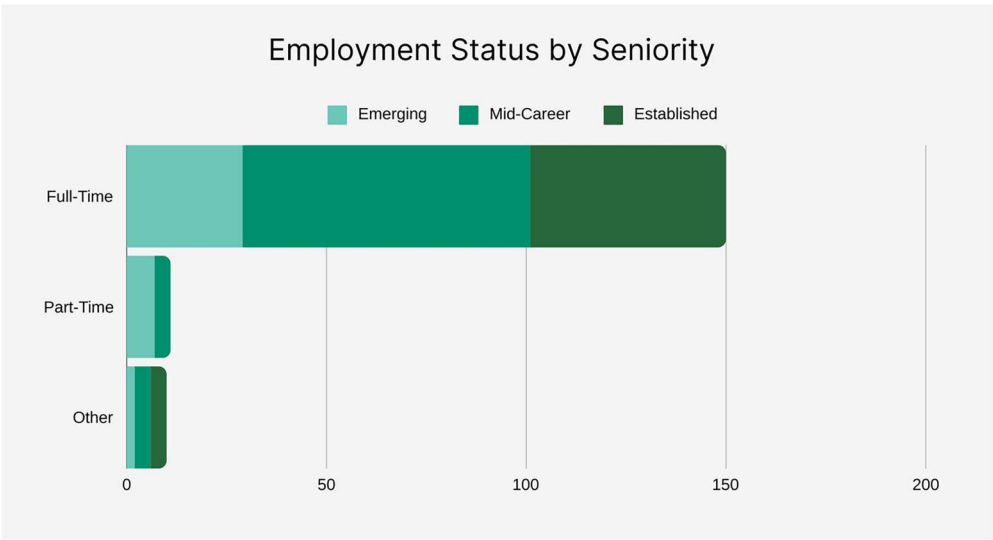
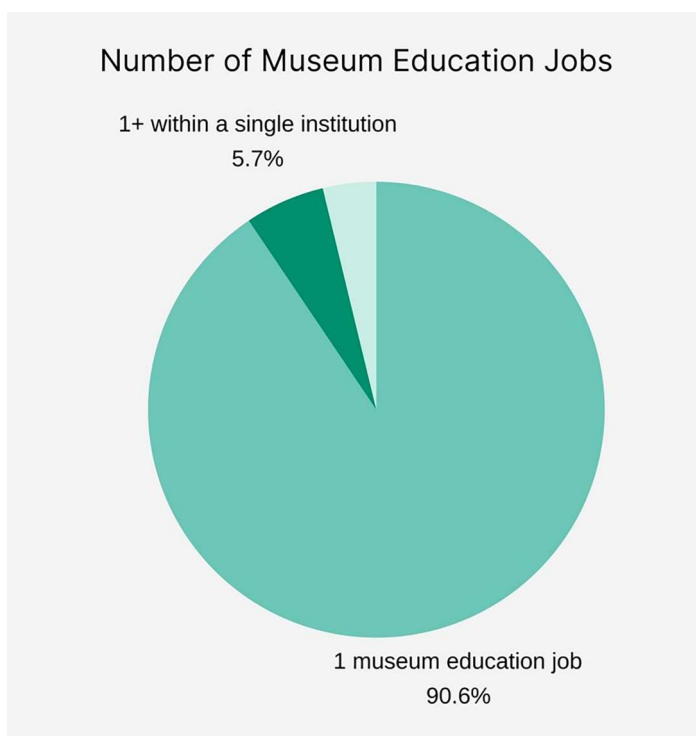
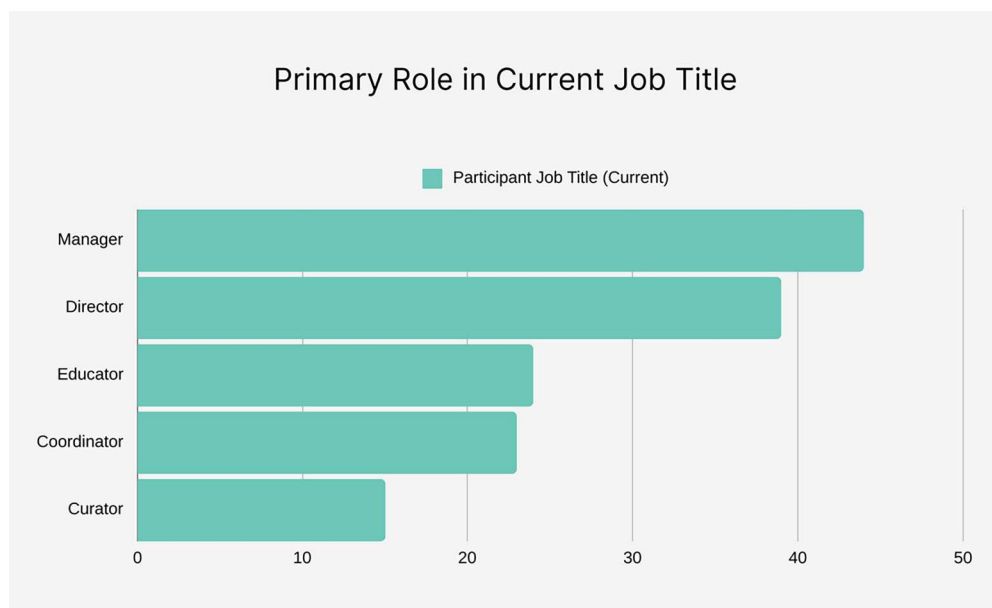


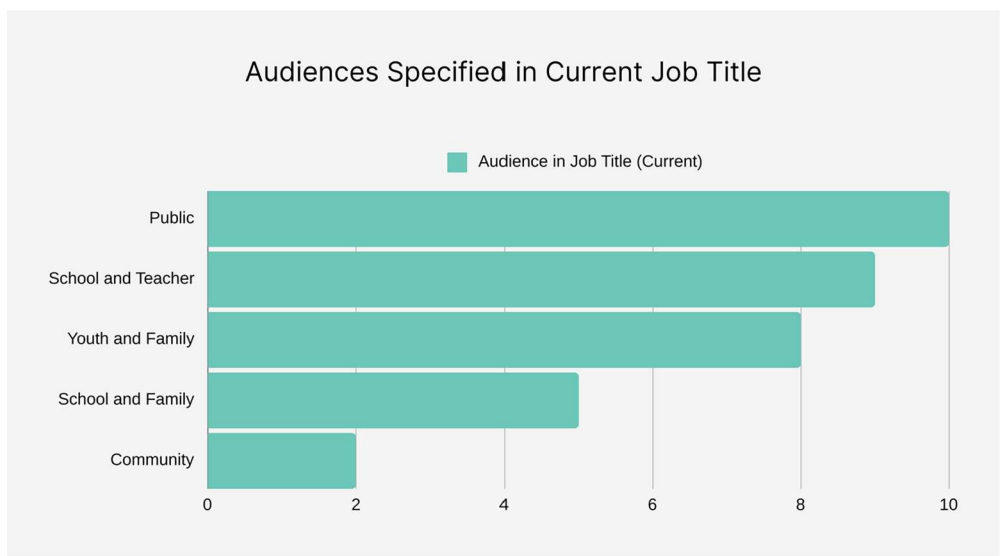
Figure 6. Employment status by seniority.



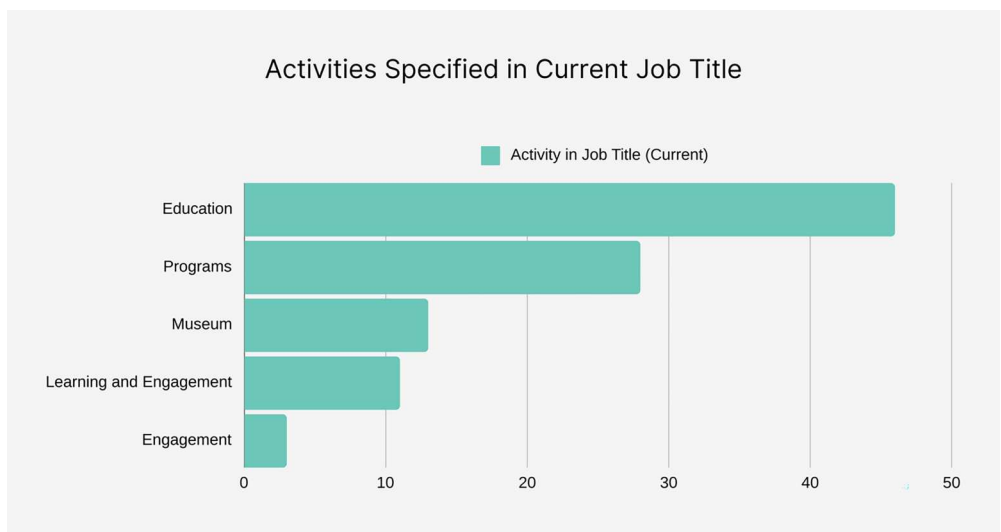
**Figure 7.** Number of museum education jobs.



**Figure 8.** Primary role in current job title.



**Figure 9.** Audiences specified in current job title.



**Figure 10.** Activities specified in current job title.

titles do not accurately reflect the individual’s duties. One person shared, for example, that ‘my job title does not reflect that I am also in charge of school programs’, and someone else echoed that sentiment, saying ‘in my position I am also the Internship Coordinator, which is not reflected in my job title’.

When considering participants’ full job titles, not broken down by roles, audiences, or activities, the most common designations were *Museum Educator* (4%), *Educator* (3.9%), *Director of Education* (3.4%), *Education Coordinator* (2.7%), *Education Curator* (2.4%), and *Education Assistant* (2.2%). Although these titles are the most frequently used, the rates

of occurrence are relatively low compared to the rates of specific roles, audiences, and activities. This discrepancy reflects how many variations of similar titles are in use and how creative the vocabulary around certain jobs has become. Of the titles indicating a leadership status, *Manager* was used most frequently (23.2%). *Director* (20.5%) was used more frequently than *Curator* (7.9%) or *Head* (4.2%) to indicate a leadership position. *Vice President* appeared 3 times (1.6%). As one respondent explained, the term *Director* connotes leadership more clearly in their context than *Curator*: ‘I requested a change from Curatoe [*sic*] (as the lead in the department) to Director. It fits my peers better’.

Department titles

The field’s identity crisis applies not only to individual job titles but to departmental categorizations as well (see Westover 2024 for a recent shift). We therefore asked participants to share the name of the department in which they work. A total of 173 respondents shared their department titles, which we analyzed according to functions and audiences. *Education* was the primary function, appearing in 105 (61%) of responses (Figure 11). *Engagement* followed, appearing in 39 (22.5%) responses, followed by *Learning* (32 responses or 18.5%), *Programs* (26 responses or 15%), *Interpretation* (9 responses or 5%), *Outreach* (5 responses or 3%), and *Experience* (4 responses or 2%). There were twelve additional individual functions shared, such as *Practice*, *Design*, and *Informal Learning*, though with only one or two responses per function. Of these 173 total department titles, 64 (37%) included dual functions (e.g., *Education and Interpretation*), and 8 (4.6%) of titles included three functions. As such, we also analyzed which functions were presented first, and therefore connoting greater importance, and which in the second or third position. *Education* was still the most common function, coming first in 99 departmental titles

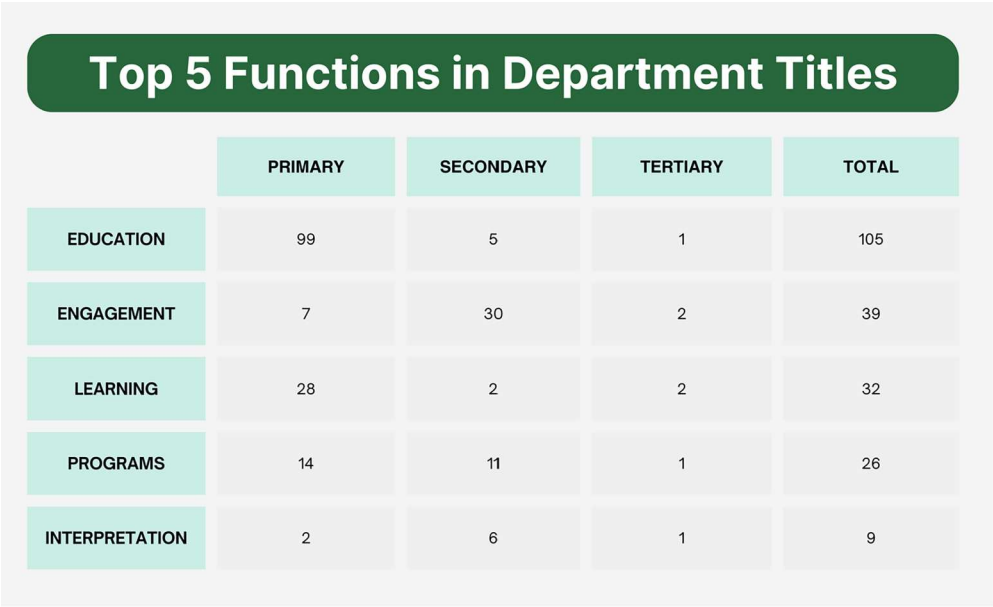


Figure 11. Primary functions in department titles.

(57%), followed by *Learning* (28 responses or 16%), *Programs* (14 responses or 8%), and *Engagement* (7 responses or 4%). Secondary functions included *Engagement* (30 responses or 47% of dual function titles), *Programs* (11 responses or 17%), *Interpretation* (6 responses or 9%), and *Education* (5 responses or 7.8%). Tertiary functions in departmental titles include: *Learning* and *Engagement* (2 responses or 25% of triple-function titles each), followed by *Education*, *Interpretation*, *Programs*, and *Science* (1 response or 12.5% each).

Most department titles (134 responses or 77.5%) did not explicitly name any specified audience. The most common audience specified was *Public*, at 22 responses or 12.7%. *Visitor* and *Community* were the second-most common audiences specified, with 4 responses (2.3%) each, followed by *Audience* (3 responses, or 1.7%) (Figure 12). There were six individual unique responses, including *Children and Family*, *Gallery and Studio*, and *Guest*, for example. 6 respondents (3.5%) shared that they did not have a department title, usually citing the small size of their institution as the reason; one respondent shared that they ‘Don’t have a department. It’s chaos’.

Individual control over job titles

The survey also included an open-ended question asking participants to describe the degree of control they have over their job titles. 52% of respondents reported having no control over their titles, while 34% had influence over their titles. 8.4% of respondents had some control, such as changing the subtitle or the order of words, but not the position designation. Those who did shared that they often wanted to accurately reflect their job duties (audiences, range of responsibilities, level of responsibility) and looked to peers

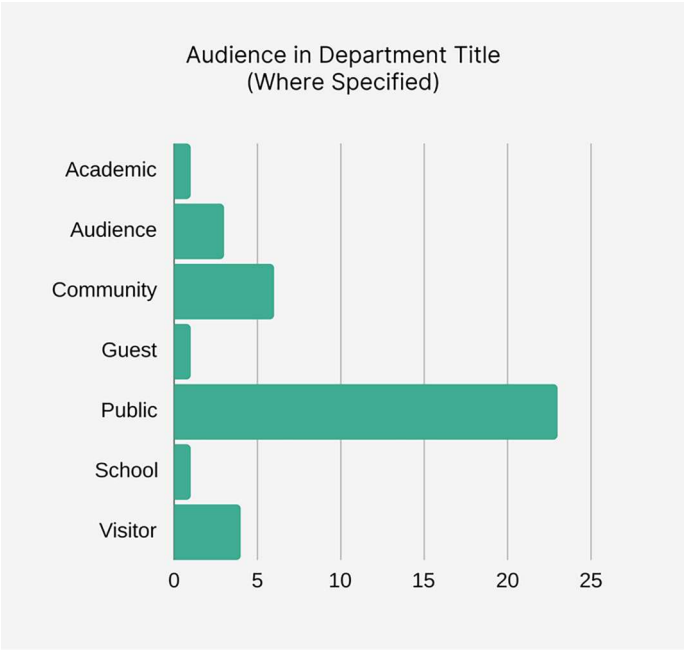


Figure 12. Most frequent audiences in department titles.

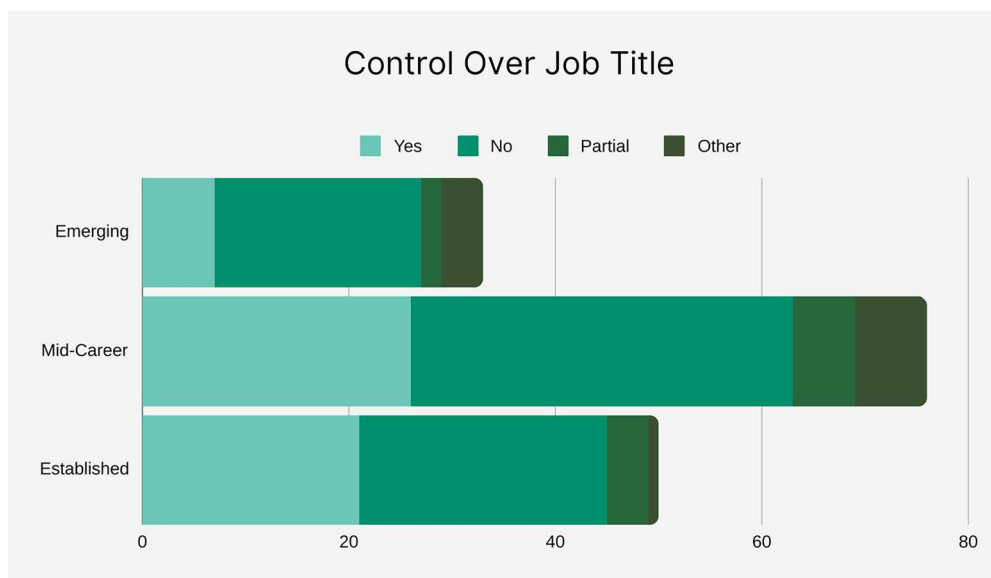
on LinkedIn or personal networks for what might be ‘standard’. The ability to influence one’s job title varies by institution. Conversations around changing one’s title are most likely to take place at the time of hiring or shortly after, during a promotion, or during a departmental or institutional reorganization, a trend that is demonstrated in the increase in control as educators gain seniority (Figure 13). Large institutions, particularly museums that are part of a government or university system, have the least flexibility, but sometimes offer an external ‘operational title’ that more accurately reflects the day-to-day duties of the position, in addition to an official title used internally with Human Resources. One participant explained this situation in more detail:

As a government funded museum, we have titles that are used on our hiring forms that often differ from our ‘operational’ job titles. The operational (or day-to-day) titles are the ones everyone shares, that are included on business cards or email signatures. They tend to be more specific and descriptive of what one’s actual job duties are. The official title that is used on hiring forms tends to be more generic and bland.

Another respondent shared the following anecdote detailing the complexities inherent to a title negotiation:

About a year before I stepped into this role, the existing educators had been named ‘Associate Director of Education’ and ‘Assistant Director of Education’. I learned that the lack of clarity in their departmental specialties – and especially the lack of pay increase – caused confusion and frustration. After these educators moved on, I pushed to institute an ‘Assistant/Associate/Educator for \_\_\_\_\_’ model (in order to leave clear room for advancement) but thus was rejected ... The ‘Manager’ title above was a compromise in the hope of engendering the respect of docents, but I wonder if it will cause confusion.

This participant’s experience reflects the fraught trajectories of title negotiations, and the competing interests (docent respect, clarity, opportunity for advancement) at play. Their



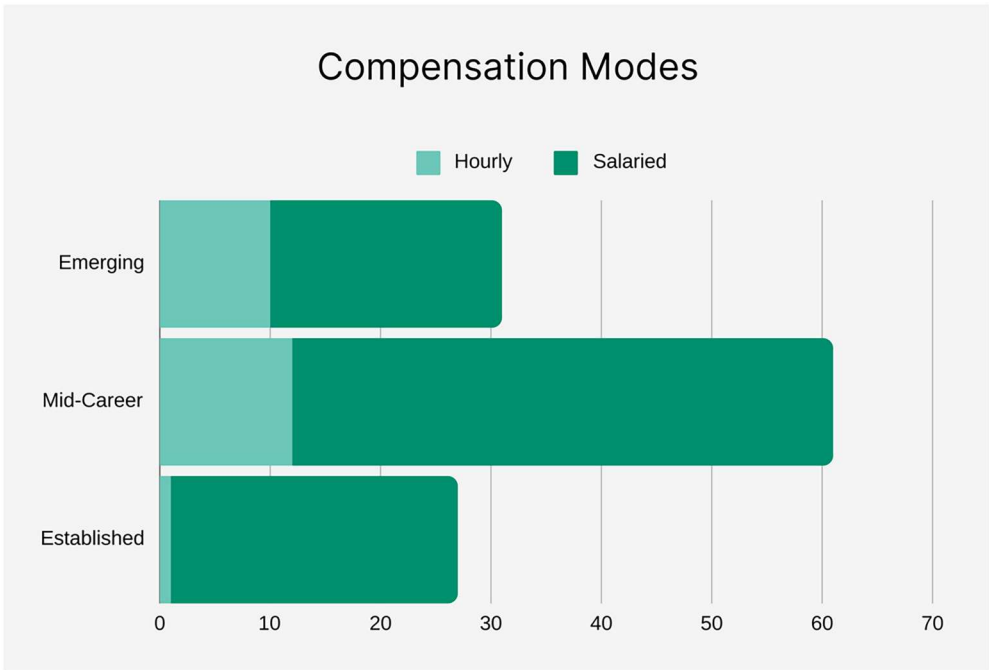
**Figure 13.** Control over job title.

concluding statement – ‘I wonder if it will cause confusion’ – demonstrates how unsettled this question remains. Ultimately, control over one’s title seems to be idiosyncratic, an active subject of negotiation for many participants with varying degrees of success and satisfaction.

*Job titles and compensation*

Our data reveal that there is little consistency around compensation rates within museum education. Because the survey question was open-response, rather than multiple choice, participants shared a diverse range of information in their responses. Some included their salary histories; others the range of salaries in their departments; some were specific while others shared a range. As a result, the data we are presenting here was drawn from responses which indicated the participant’s current individual salary only, though we also share some of their commentary. We grouped salaries into \$5,000/year increments (though after \$100,000, we grouped salaries in \$10,000/year increments) or \$5/hour increments. Given the broad range of compensation rates in the field, this is an area in which more specific and nuanced future research is needed, particularly to assess the degree to which educational attainment impacts salary rates, which we did not account for in this study.

We were able to analyze salary information from 119 responses. 96 of those (81%) are salaried, while 23 (19%) are hourly employees (Figure 14). Nearly half (43%) of hourly employees are emerging museum professionals; only one participant who identified as an established professional was compensated on an hourly basis. Hourly rates ranged



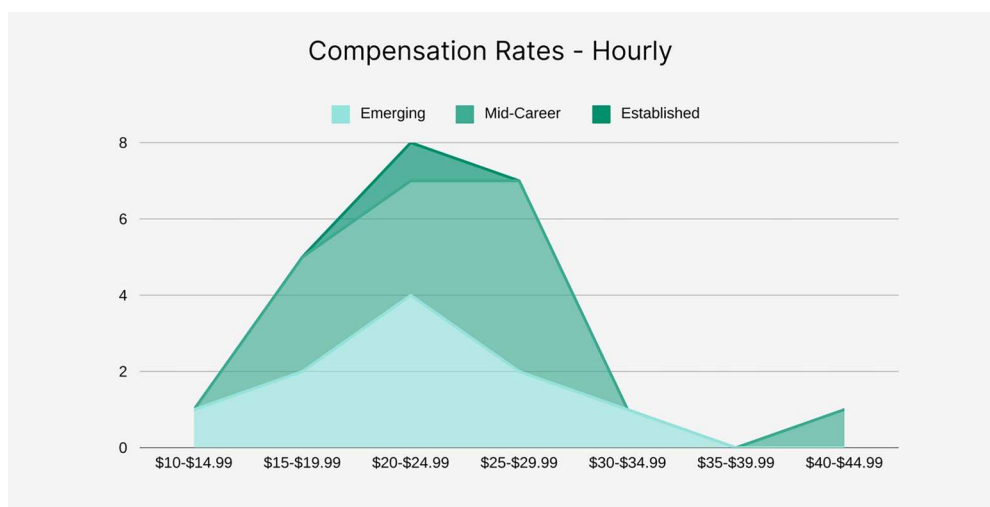
**Figure 14.** Compensation modes.

between \$10-\$14.99/hour (1 response, or 4% of hourly employees) to \$40-\$44.99/hour (also 1 response, or 4% of hourly employees) (Figure 15). The most common hourly rate was between \$20-\$24.99/hour (8 responses, or 35%), followed by \$25-\$29.99/hour (7 responses or 30%). Salaries ranged from \$25,000-\$29,999 annually (2 responses, or 2% of salaried employees) to \$150,000-\$159,999 annually (1 response, or 1% of salaried employees). The most common salary range for emerging career respondents was \$45,000-\$49,999 annually (at 4% of salaried employees); mid-career respondents had an equal number of responses for both \$45,000-\$49,999 and \$50,000-\$54,999 (7% of salaried employees for each salary range); and the most common salary range for established museum educators was \$85,000-\$89,999 annually (4% of salaried employees). Figure 16 shows the wide range of salaries broken down by seniority.

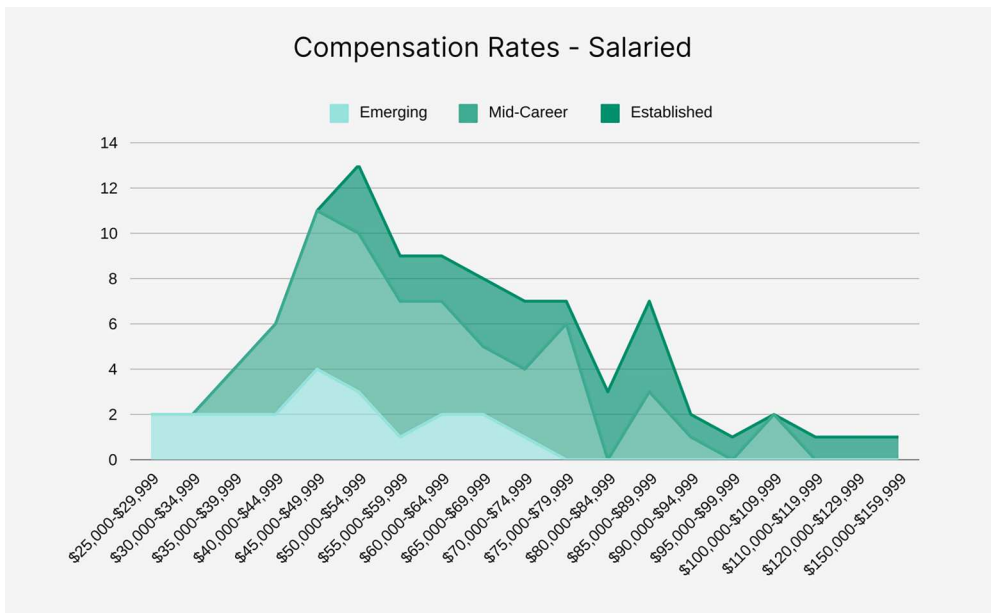
*Curator* titles had the greatest range of compensation. There seems to be standard salary bumps along promotions from *Coordinator* to *Manager* to *Director* (some reporting standard increases of \$10,000 per tier, while others shared a shift from hourly compensation to an annual salary). *Curator*, on the other hand, is used more fluidly and encompasses salaries from \$36,000-\$45,000 (akin to those in the *Manager* realm) as well as the salary ranges above \$61,000 (on par with many *Director* salaries). Many participants described the lack of information available to them and how that opacity contributes to feelings of suspicion, resentment, and a general perception of inequity: one participant shared that 'The Director of Education or Learning and Engagement seems to be the lowest paid member of our leadership team', while another explained that

Our HR person, who sets the salary ranges, uses the AAM salary survey as the guideline. But it is very easy to manipulate the interpretation. In addition, there is the problem that hiring someone from the outside sets their salary at a higher trajectory – an internal candidate cannot reach the same level.

Whether participants have confirmed salary discrepancies among departments or are drawing conclusions from rumors, they expressed a general level of dissatisfaction with what one participant termed 'under poverty wages'. One participant, for example,



**Figure 15.** Compensation rates – hourly.



**Figure 16.** Compensation rates – salaried.

described how their promotion to *Manager* ‘increased my influence but not necessarily [sic] my compensation’. Another shared that they ‘feel very strongly that our institution pays Educ [sic] positions extremely low, because they get away with it. There is no equality between titles (directors are paid wildly differently) and no premium pay for advanced degrees’. Though our data is limited, it is our hope that it contributes towards the trend in greater transparency in compensation rates that has been growing since the launch of the Art + Museum Salary Transparency Campaign in 2019 (see Südkamp and Dempsey 2021) and that readers are able to use this information to advocate for themselves during individual performance reviews and collective bargaining, where available.

### **Making sense of the museum education job taxonomy: discussion**

Several key findings emerge from this data. Firstly, museum educators are frustrated with the absence of standardization in the field, particularly within middle management. There is, however, an emerging clarity about the preference for titles that identify *Education* as its own profession over *Curator* titles. Overall, the ongoing lack of standardization across the field enables greater exploitation, facilitates wage suppression, and impedes career advancement. Finally, there is a clear tension between the tendency to have general, catch-all job titles and the movement towards specificity, with each option offering different advantages and liabilities in considering advocating for the profession.

### **Widespread frustration**

As this study reveals, there is no clear ‘winner’ in museum education job titles. While *Museum Educator* was the most common title, it comprised only 4% of all the titles reported overall – hardly a majority. The absence of a cohesive professional benchmark

correlates with the overwhelming number of participants in the study who reported experiencing confusion and dissatisfaction with their job titles. Often, this dissatisfaction stems from a sense of disconnect between a title and the individual's day-to-day responsibilities, as evidenced in comments such as: 'I think my title does not accurately reflect the higher level of my expertise and responsibilities', and 'I feel that my title gives the impression of a more junior role than my responsibilities entail'. One comment provides a potential explanation for this phenomenon, stating that, 'Technically, creating education programs is not in my job description, but our institution ... is chronically understaffed'. It is therefore likely that because of attrition, many museum educators have taken on responsibilities beyond what they were originally hired to do. While these circumstances are intended to be temporary, the slow pace of hiring procedures and the lingering hiring freezes put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic have extended the duration of temporary work reassignments.

Further, this dissatisfaction seems especially acute within middle management. Says one respondent,

Things get really weird when it comes to titles associated with middle management, where my position is. Whether or not someone has Senior in their title seems pretty idiosyncratic or possibly related to length of tenure at this museum. I've been in the field 30 years with a respectable career and I'm not considered Senior ...

Another describes the range of perceptions within their department and the tensions that discrepancy can surface:

The shift in my title from a 'coordinator' to a 'manager' means little to me and was selected by my Executive Director. However, my coworker – who is on an equal footing with me in regard to the hierarchy of the workspace – firmly believes that I am now above her in seniority due to the shift from 'coordinator' to 'manager'. Her title is that of a coordinator, and I see little distinction between the two, especially as we have an extremely small number of staff ...

Such differences in perception of job duties within a single department can lead to resentment and programmatic inefficiency.

The most frequently occurring terms indicating leadership, *Manager* (23.2%) and *Director* (20.5%), also presented fraught issues around perception. Both titles are used for similar positions or are substituted for the other without a change in job duties. Some respondents expressed a preference for the *Director* title, regardless of their control over the terminology. At one participant's institution, for example, 'My role was previously called 'education director' with the person before me but they lowered it to manager, though its [*sic*] the exact same pay and exact same responsibilities'. Someone else, given the choice between the two terms, said that they 'purposefully chose 'Director' over 'Manager' because it sounded more official/formal'. These statements illustrate the importance of language in how we define leaders in our profession and the impact that terminology has on perceptions of leadership. If a *Manager* is perceived as less influential than a *Director*, substituting one for the other may harm morale and cause confusion, inadvertently or not.

### **Opportunities for exploitation**

The confusion surrounding managerial titles not only causes interpersonal strife, but it is also especially dangerous within the context of widespread unionization in the cultural

sector (Cornfield 2015; Levine and Ripley 2024; Middleton and Hagen 2022; Ross 2022; Seymour 2022; Urban 2021). Ambiguity surrounding the term *Manager* paves the way for exploitative labor practices. The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) (U.S. Congress 1935) stipulates that managers cannot be in the same bargaining unit as workers. This regulation attempts to prevent a conflict of interest between managers and the employees who report to them and depend upon them for performance evaluations. Yet this data shows that *Manager* is often used as a marker of a promotion not necessarily correlated with additional managerial duties; in other words, it is often a means of psychological compensation through rank rather than an indication of supervisory power. Most of the *Manager* titles revealed in this study are managers of programs (e.g., *Manager of Academic Programs* or *Manager of Visitor Experience*), and do not confirm any supervisory functions. Yet museum leadership frequently contests the eligibility of its ‘managers’ for inclusion in the union, a mechanism used to weaken the bargaining power of the nascent union (see Cohen and Peuter 2020 for a discussion of how this tactic was applied to combat labor organizing in the digital media sector). This tactic also results in a broad swathe of workers who cannot reap the benefits and protections of a union contract, even though their labor is just as likely to be undercompensated and overtaxed as those who are not classified as managers.

In their analysis of new labor organizing in the digital media sector, scholars Nicole Cohen and Greig de Peuter (2020) name another fallout of title ambiguity: ‘With no benchmark to reference – not to mention the challenge that the same job title can mean quite different things at different media organizations – new hires have little reliable information to support them in initial salary negotiations’ (3). Thus, even beyond the parameters of union contract negotiations, museum educators are without sufficient comparative information with which to negotiate salaries and benefits during hiring and promotion procedures. This has long-term consequences for both the individual and for future museum educators, as starting salaries tend to circumscribe future earning potential (Bessen, Meng, and Denk 2020; Catenaccio, Rochlin, and Simon 2022; Turner 2019).

### **General vs. specific**

In a blog post from 2014, museum consultant Rebecca Shulman (2014) noted the diversity of job titles within museum education. She attributed the ‘struggle for vocabulary’ in defining museum education to the growth in museum education practices and roles as museums expanded their purview to reach more audiences in novel ways (para. 4). Our data indicates that a decade later, the field is still in the midst of a ‘struggle for vocabulary’, with some titles indicating a clear attempt to delineate the contours of a particular role (such as *Director of In-Person School Programs, PreK-12*; or *Assistant Manager of Gallery Experience and Interpretation*). In the process, some titles have become so long as to be unwieldy – it is hard to imagine squeezing *Coordinator of College and Pre-Professional Programs and Museum Educator* onto a standard business card, for example. Yet only 18% of titles reported in the survey are such ‘dual’ titles. Many titles continue to tend towards vague, all-encompassing terminology, which allows for the expansiveness of what museum educators do. The single most frequent job title in our study is a prime example: *Museum Educator*. Turner (2019), however, describes the downsides of

this flexibility, noting that 'Being seen as a generalist has dire consequences for the perceived value of educational labor, for if work does not require formalized expertise, perhaps anyone can do it' (179). Given participants' frustrations surrounding the inability of their current titles to capture the range of their expertise *and* the systemic under-compensation of museum educators, the findings from this study suggest that adopting more specific and/or dual titles may both better encapsulate the full range of an individual's job responsibilities and help communicate their skills and expertise to outside audiences.

## Final ruminations and open questions

Like other attempts at taxonomizing, this study surfaced more complex and compounding questions for museum educators rather than definitive boundaries and classifications. Overall, this study indicates several areas for future research, managerial experimentation, and labor advocacy. Because our survey did not ask for job descriptions, it remains an open question about how accurately these titles correlate with participants' particular responsibilities. Furthermore, much of this data is in flux; several participants reported actively campaigning for new titles and/or that they were restructuring education departments at the time they filled out the survey. Widespread unionization and advocacy against unpaid internships are also changing the landscape of museum work writ large. We speculate that the rate of response between *Fellow* job titles (13 responses, or 0.9% of total titles) with *Intern* job titles (39 responses, or 2.8%) may change over the coming years in consequence; likewise, the contours of the title *Manager* may expand or constrict over the course of ongoing and future contract negotiations. Additionally, we encountered a handful of militaristic titles such as *Commander*, *Master*, *Officer* and *Chief*; what do these terms communicate about our work, and how does that affect our relationships with our audiences? How are we affirming or denying the role of domination and power as we communicate expertise and authority? Further, to whom should museum education jobs be legible? What is gained and lost when we prioritize legibility among colleagues within museum education (including future hiring managers), versus among colleagues within museums across other departments, among museum audiences, and among teachers and community partners, versus policy makers and fundraisers?

If nothing else, we hope that this study emphasizes the importance of paying critical attention to titles and their connotations because of how they reveal – and conceal – exploitative and inequitable labor practices. To this end, we have highlighted many of the drawbacks to a lack of standardization of job titles within museum education, from the impact on individual career paths to systemic consequences on suppression of wages and widespread precarity, undermining field-wide efforts to diversify museum workforces to better reflect and serve our communities. We encourage readers, however, to also consider the opportunities that the diversity of titles might afford. In what ways might a wide-ranging taxonomy of titles allow for flexibility, creativity, and responsiveness in museum education as a field? We urge readers to consider these questions critically and carefully as we actively build, navigate, and negotiate our roles each day.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix. Survey questions

### Museum Educator Job Taxonomy Survey

#### About this research study

The 'Museum Educator Job Taxonomy' study aims to gather information about the wide ranging job titles that exist in the field. From the point of view of an organizational chart, the array of job titles that a museum utilizes may seem like a sterile artifact. But for the individuals concerned, a job title is a highly personal designation, connected to one's sense of professional value and purpose. The various permutations and combinations of job titles communicate something slightly different about our field to our visitors, our boards of directors, and one another, with consequences for professionalization, practice, and compensation. This proliferation of titles evidences a general field-wide identity crisis: how do we best describe what we do? What are the ramifications of one choice of words versus another for how we describe our work, and our identities in relation to that work?

#### Outcomes

This research will be shared in professional conferences through workshops intended for collective reflection and meaning-making. The amalgamated results will be compiled into a collaborative publication to serve as a resource to the field in determining workplace standards, possibilities of practice, and understanding the nature of museum education work today.

## ***Your Participation***

Participation in this project is voluntary and includes a short, 14-question online survey that will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Proceeding to the next page indicates that you give your permission to the researchers to use your responses for research purposes. No identifying information will be collected. You can opt out of the survey at any time.

We will work to make sure that no one sees your survey responses without approval. But, because we are using the Internet, there is a chance that someone could access your online responses without permission. In some cases, this information could be used to identify you.

Your de-identified survey results may be shared with other researchers without your additional informed consent.

## ***Questions***

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, or feel you have been harmed by participating in the research, you may contact Amanda Tobin Ripley at [tobinripley.1@osu.edu](mailto:tobinripley.1@osu.edu).

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact The Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-614-688-4792 or [hsconcerns@osu.edu](mailto:hsconcerns@osu.edu).

- (1) \*Do you currently hold a museum education job?
  - (a) Yes
  - (b) No
- (2) What kind of museum do you currently work for? (Check all that apply.)
  - (c) Encyclopedic art museum
  - (d) Contemporary art museum
  - (e) Culturally-specific museum
  - (f) Science museum
  - (g) Children's museum
  - (h) History museum
  - (i) Government museum (e.g., Smithsonian)
  - (j) University/college museum
  - (k) Zoo/aquarium
  - (l) Botanical garden
  - (m) Other
- (3) Do you work part-time or full-time?
  - (n) Part-time
  - (o) Full-time
  - (p) Other (please explain)
- (4) Do you hold more than one museum job (whether within the same institution or across multiple sites)?
  - (q) No, I have one museum education job
  - (r) Yes, I have multiple museum education jobs within one institution
  - (s) Yes, I have multiple museum education jobs at different institutions
- (5) \*What is your current job title(s)?
- (6) Please list all previous job titles you have held in the realm of museum education.
- (7) Please share other titles that exist in your department.
- (8) What is the title of your department? (E.g., 'Education Department', 'Learning and Engagement', 'Public Programs', etc.)
- (9) Do you currently or have you ever had any control or influence over the wording in your job title or department? If so, please describe.
- (10) We are also interested in how different job titles do or do not correlate with compensation rates. If you are comfortable, please share the salary associated with each of your titles.

- (11) Would you describe your professional level as:
  - (t) Emerging
  - (u) Mid-career
  - (v) Established
- (12) In which U.S. state or territory is your institution located?
- (13) Is your institution:
  - (w) Rural
  - (x) Suburban
  - (y) Urban
- (14) Is there any other information about your job/job title that you feel is relevant and you wish to share with us?