



ROUTLEDGE GUIDES TO PRACTICE IN MUSEUMS, GALLERIES AND HERITAGE

APPLYING FOR JOBS AND INTERNSHIPS IN MUSEUMS

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

MARTHA M. SCHLOETZER



Applying for Jobs and Internships in Museums

Applying for Jobs and Internships in Museums offers a straightforward approach to applying for positions within a museum. Martha M. Schloetzer provides practical advice about the application and interview process that will prepare emerging museum professionals as they approach the profession.

From reviewing job and internship postings to developing a solid resume and writing distinctive cover letters, this guide provides practical, sound advice for museum job seekers. Schloetzer integrates the stories of successful and unsuccessful interns and job applicants throughout the book's narrative, and recognizing the additional challenges faced by non-US nationals, the book also offers information specifically for international students seeking work experience in US museums.

The insider information included in *Applying for Jobs and Internships in Museums* makes it a key resource for both a US and international audience interested in gaining museum experience in the US. It will be of particular interest to college-level and graduate school students, as well as recent graduates. The guide can also serve as a reference in the classroom, helping professors and instructors prepare students for the job search ahead.

Martha M. Schloetzer is Program Administrator for Internships and Fellowships at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC.

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Applying for Jobs and Internships in Museums

A Practical Guide

Martha M. Schloetzer

First published 2021
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Schloetzer, Martha, author.

Title: Applying for jobs and internships in museums : a practical guide / Martha Schloetzer.

Description: London ; New York, NY : Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2021. |

Series: Routledge guides to practice in libraries, archives and information science | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Contents: Preface: Why intern – Introduction: How to use this book – An internship is not a job – Write a great resume – Cover letter writing – Preparing for an interview – Internships for international students and recent graduates – Future-proofing your career.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020049073 (print) | LCCN 2020049074 (ebook) | ISBN 9780367202163 (hardback) | ISBN 9780367202156 (paperback) | ISBN 9780429260223 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Museums–Vocational guidance. | Museums–Employees. | Internship programs.

Classification: LCC AM7 .S274 2021 (print) |

LCC AM7 (ebook) | DDC 069.023–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020049073>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020049074>

ISBN: 978-0-367-20216-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-20215-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-26022-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Newgen Publishing UK

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Preface

Why intern?

This book is the result of presentations I have given over the course of my career to college and graduate students. I met Routledge editor Heidi Lowther at the Los Angeles Convention Center during the 2018 College Art Association Annual Conference. I was there to present a professional development workshop about resume and cover letter writing when Heidi asked me to consider writing this book. Helping demystify the application and interview process is a highlight of my work as a museum professional. I know applying to internships and first jobs is a scary moment because of all the unknowns, but at the same time, it is exciting because of all the possibilities. I speak from the experience of taking the first paying museum job I could find after graduate school. Nothing had directly prepared me to work in the architectural center of a museum. The idea of exhibiting architectural elements and explaining concepts to visitors was intimidating. This was not the position I planned for, but it offered incredible experience and training in the care and handling of art and exhibition displays. I continue to draw upon these skills in my work and as a freelance curator.

In *Eleven Museums, Eleven Directors: Conversations on Art & Leadership*, Michael E. Shapiro, Director Emeritus of the High Museum of Art, interviews ten influential art museum directors. A constant throughout the interviews is that the contributors each had a unique career trajectory, navigating the unwritten rules of the museum world to achieve their leadership positions.¹ It is inspiring to read about professionals who succeed in museum work. What can be learned from their stories? How does an aspiring museum professional gain experience? In the 21st century, the path to a museum career is not straightforward. Going to the “right schools” and earning the “right degrees” may not be enough to secure your dream job. The biggest challenge is breaking into the profession. As the administrator of an internship and fellowship program in a large national museum, I recognize that professional practice is not effectively covered in art history, art, and museum studies courses. Professors are not as well-prepared to advise students curious about museum work because many professors lack the direct experience of working in museums. I believe internships are one of the best ways to prepare for a museum career. How else can you begin to learn about the many types of museums? For the purposes of this book,

museums will be defined according to the International Council of Museums (ICOM); a museum is “a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. The term includes live museums.”² When learning about museum work, try a science museum, an historic house, an art museum on a college campus. By branching out, you will learn how these institutions are similar and different, from the way education programs are presented to how exhibitions are designed and installed. Hands-on learning and an opportunity to test out concepts studied in school, along with networking, are some of the reasons why internships are so worthwhile. It is noteworthy that in 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many internships were canceled or transitioned to a virtual experience. Although virtual internships cannot provide the amount of learning that happens in a face-to-face environment, they offer meaningful work and a chance to gain new skills, such as workplace communication and digital literacy. For this reason, virtual internships do not replace more traditional internships, but rather complement them.

Over the course of writing this book, it has been exciting to see a shift in museum culture from unpaid to paid internships. Paid internships professionalize the field and help ensure internships are accessible to all students and emerging professionals, not only those who can afford to work for free. “Pay your interns” is not a neutral statement. It is a call to diversify museums to ensure they remain a relevant part of American cultural life.

Helping early career professionals find their way into museum careers is incredibly gratifying. My work is most meaningful when a former intern becomes a colleague. It feels good to have contributed in a small way to another person’s success. I wrote this book to provide guidance and tips for students and emerging professionals, as well as those who advise and teach them. I hope the book makes the bumpy process of applying for museum internships and jobs a little more straightforward.

I have learned a great deal from interns over the years. As a result, it was important to me to include some testimonials and advice from former interns in this book. A big thank you to all the former interns for their contributions. My work has benefited from the generosity of colleagues. Thank you to the staff at the National Gallery of Art and my friends and colleagues at other museums, especially the Smithsonian Institution. Over the years, conversations with Eric Woodard, Director of Fellowships and Internships at the Smithsonian, and Hilary Walter, Manager of Academic Programs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, have broadened my mind. I thank them both for their friendship and wisdom. Finally, I thank my family for indulging my love of museums and supporting me as I applied for museum internships and jobs.

Notes

- 1 Michael E. Shapiro, *11 Museums, 11 Directors; Conversations on Art & Leadership*, edited by Heather Medlock, Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 2015.
- 2 International Council of Museums (ICOM), Article 3, Statutes, 2007.

Introduction

How to use this book

In May of 1999, I graduated from college and headed to my first full-time museum internship in Washington, DC. The morning of my first day, I made sure to get up early. My commute was smooth; I even had time to stop for coffee on my way to the museum. More than twenty years later, I will never forget the greeting I received from the internship coordinator. Before I got through the door, she told me to throw away my coffee cup. Clearly, it was unprofessional for me to show up with coffee on my first day. The experience was embarrassing, but it jolted me into the realization that the internship was an important learning opportunity. As the weeks unfolded, I learned more lessons about how to succeed in the workplace. One of the goals of this book is to help emerging professionals prepare for the transition from school to the workplace. As the coffee example shows, much of what emerging professionals need to know is not taught in a class. Many of the best lessons are learned on the job, or in my case, internship.

Applying for jobs and internships is an art, not a science. What worked for me in the late 1990s is probably not going to work for a recent graduate in 2021. I wrote this book to present specific suggestions and guidance for emerging professionals interested in museum work. The book includes resources, such as writing exercises, sample interview questions and responses, and online resources, to help you learn more about your own interests and market your strengths. Throughout the book, there is also practical advice from former interns about difficult interview questions, toxic workplaces, and the process international interns go through to intern in the United States. Chapter 1 provides an overview of on-site guided learning opportunities and distinguishes between paid and unpaid internships and volunteer positions. By defining the different types of opportunities, applicants will be better prepared to apply and compete for positions. The chapter also includes information about how to make the most of an internship and legal concerns interns should be aware of. The subsequent three chapters are deep dives into resume and cover letter writing and interview preparation. These chapters are specifically intended for early career professionals and address special considerations that people from underrepresented backgrounds and people with disabilities may have. Chapter 5 is dedicated to international students and recent graduates planning

to intern in the United States. Foreign nationals face more challenges applying to internships. This chapter provides step-by-step advice to make the process easier. The final chapter was inspired by the pandemic crisis, which has affected all workers, particularly new graduates and emerging professionals. The old adage “last hired, first fired” is true. However, in the wake of COVID-19, there are lessons to be learned. The chapter considers the future of work and offers advice about the skills required for the jobs of tomorrow.

How you read this book depends on your needs. If you are just starting out, it may be helpful to read the book cover to cover. Be sure to peruse the list of association and job websites in the appendix. If you are in the midst of an active internship and job search, feel free to jump around. Need to revise a cover letter? Concentrate on Chapter 3, paying special attention to the sample letters and cover letter checklist. If you are preparing for a phone interview, review the tips in Chapter 4. Let this book be a resource as you research and prepare for opportunities. I encourage you to get out copies of recent resumes and cover letters when reading the corresponding chapters and make notes. The information imparted in these chapters may not fit each reader, or each job or internship opportunity. The main point is to try out the suggestions and see how they work.

This book presents guidance for applying to museum jobs and internships. There are four main ideas underpinning this book:

1. The idea that research is important at every stage of the job search process. From narrowing down your job prospects, to preparing for an interview, research will help you succeed.
2. The idea that it is not one and done. To secure a position, it is important to tailor your application materials to each position description and institution. Rework your materials for each application to present your best self.
3. The idea that every contact with a prospective employer is an opportunity to promote yourself.
4. The idea to be true to yourself. When filling out applications and interviewing for jobs, be sure to connect in a human way while also remaining professional.

These four points are repeated throughout the book. As you apply to internships and jobs, see how you can benefit from this advice. Keep in mind that some lessons may be easier to incorporate than others. If you are desperate for a position, it may feel counterintuitive to devote time to researching positions and prospective employers. However, a good first step is to thoroughly understand what an internship experience at a museum may entail and how it differs from a volunteer position.

1 An internship is not a job

This chapter is a focused discussion of internships with the purpose of preparing students, recent graduates, and career transitioners to compete for opportunities. The chapter will begin by defining an intern and a volunteer and presenting some of the controversies surrounding unpaid internships. I think it is important to understand the difference because it may very well affect the on-site experience, as well as the lasting value of the internship. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) is a law pertaining to internships that will be discussed. The better applicants understand a potential internship position or job, the better prepared they are to compete for a position.

An internship is like a nine-week, or three-month, job interview. Done well, it's an opportunity for an organization to attract talent. Emerging professionals, with newly minted degrees and fresh perspectives about the working world, have much to contribute. An internship is a great way for them to get on-the-job training and gain a glimpse into an industry without being tied down. In the current economy, the internship experience is much less about filing and photocopying, and more about substantial work contributions. Internships are becoming more professional, and at the same time, no one wants to work for free. And there are good reasons to pay interns.

When recruiting paid interns, organizations tend to hire more selectively. When developing a paid internship opportunity, a need and mentor is identified, funding is secured, and a job description is developed with goals to be met and skills (foreign languages, computer programs) and knowledge (American studies, Native American art history) required to succeed in the position. The job description becomes the basis for the call for applications and is posted online and emailed to networks. When the intern is onboarded, there are projects and goals. The intern and the organization both benefit from this transparent process. The intern receives interesting, meaningful work, and the organization adds a highly motivated person to the team. On the flip side, when unpaid interns are the norm in an organization, there is more likely to be waste. This is because there is no perceived cost to having unpaid interns. When an organization accepts anyone and everyone, there could be some bored interns

without enough to do and little supervision or mentoring. The downside is that bored interns are not great for company morale and may be likely to talk negatively about their experience back at college or at their next job site.

I think about internships almost every day. One thing that strikes me when considering the state of museum internships is how they can reflect the best and the worst of our profession. Internships are a wonderful way to introduce emerging professionals to the museum profession. As a training program, an internship teaches valuable skills for working in museums (introduction to a collections management system, how to write a catalog entry, or how to give a gallery talk) and help educate interns about the museum profession. From the outside, it can be challenging to understand all the different, possible roles within the museum world. Most students know that museums employ curators, educators, and a director. But from the inside, an intern may have contact with an editor, a development officer, and facilities management personnel. Depending on the size of the institution, the list could go on and on. Internships have taken on a negative association because many opportunities are unpaid. Unpaid internships privilege those who can afford to work for free. As a result, they are seen as undemocratic. The profession is losing talented people who cannot afford to work for free. At this moment, when museums are talking more and more about the need to diversify staff, unpaid internships are blamed for being part of the problem.¹

Paid or unpaid, internships are a common first work experience for college students. Many schools emphasize or even require students to complete internships to help boost career skills. However, there is not a great deal of data to show that internships have an impact on career outcomes. A 2020 National Bureau of Economic Research working paper, “The Demand for Interns,” is the first to describe the demand for interns and assess what leads to a successful intern market.² The authors find that internships that closely match occupations are more likely to be paid and full-time, which makes sense because these internships look more like jobs. Perhaps most interesting is the authors’ finding that “a strong determinant of success in landing an internship is having previously held an internship ... This suggests that landing a first internship may be a key determinant of future success in both the internship and labor market.” In a highly competitive internship and job market, students who cannot afford unpaid internships may not be able to gain experience in the museum field.

Due to the leadership and financial commitment of foundations, such as the Mellon Foundation, the tide is changing. Since publishing the 2015 *Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey*, the Mellon Foundation has invested in several initiatives to help make museums more welcoming to people of color.³ The foundation expanded an undergraduate summer academy and curatorial fellowship program that is coordinated by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and operates in six cities.⁴ Students across the United States from diverse backgrounds receive specialized training in the curatorial field and other museum functions. It is exciting to see the trend of paid internships grow. The Walton



**ASSOCIATION OF ART MUSEUM DIRECTORS PASSES RESOLUTION
URGING ART MUSEUMS TO PROVIDE PAID INTERNSHIPS**

NEW YORK, NY—June 20, 2019—The Board of Trustees of the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) has approved a resolution calling on art museums to provide paid internships. The adoption of this resolution follows several years of discussions surrounding labor and equity issues at AAMD, and in particular conversations led by Professional Issues committee Co-Chairs Jill Medvedow (ICA Boston) and Mark Bessire (Portland Museum of Art). The text of the resolution says:

WHEREAS, internships provide critical opportunities for students considering careers in art museums, as well as experience necessary for entering the workforce; and

WHEREAS, paid internships are essential to increasing access and equity for the museum profession;

NOW, THEREFORE, the Board of Trustees of the Association of Art Museum Directors:

RECOMMENDS, that art museums should pay interns, except in special circumstances justifying such an arrangement.¹

"Providing paid internships is an important step for the art museum field in creating and sustaining a diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive set of opportunities, said Jill Medvedow, Co-Chair of AAMD's Professional Issues committee and director of the ICA Boston. "Internships are an important gateway for those seeking careers in art museums, providing incredible opportunities for hands-on experience in many aspects of an institution's operations. Yet by failing to pay interns, we ensure that these experiences are only really accessible to those who already financially secure and, often, people who have established career networks available to them."

This resolution builds on AAMD's own paid internship program, which launched last year as a pilot initiative with 10 participating museums. At its Annual Meeting in January, members of the Association also heard from economist Richard Reeves, who provided further insights into how unpaid internships hinder economic mobility and perpetuate inequality. Envisioning an opportunity for wider adoption across the field as a whole, the Professional Issues committee developed this resolution, which was then adopted by the Trustees on behalf of the Association.

¹ Students who are receiving academic credit for their internship may not be eligible to be paid in addition to course credit. This language is intended to allow for these circumstances.

Figure 1.1 Press release, Association of Art Museum Directors passes resolution urging art museums to provide paid internships.

Family Foundation, Ford Foundation, Getty Foundation, and the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) all offer paid internship programs to engage undergraduate students from underrepresented backgrounds and encourage them to explore a career in museums. At the same time, universities are seeing

AAMD recognizes the different capacities of member museums to implement this change in the near future. However, addressing access and opportunity is essential to creating diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive art museums.

About AAMD

The Association of Art Museum Directors—representing 227 art museum directors in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico—promotes the vital role of art museums throughout North America and advances the profession by cultivating leadership and communicating standards of excellence in museum practice. Further information about AAMD's professional practice guidelines and position papers is available at aamd.org.

##

Figure 1.1 Cont.

a broader range of students taking museum studies courses and completing museum studies certificate programs. These programs teach students from adjacent majors, such as library and information sciences, media studies, history, and anthropology, about the history and theory of museums. They also introduce practical concepts like developing education programs, caring for a museum's collection, interpreting historic objects, or organizing an exhibition. As a result, a diverse range of students is being introduced to the profession.⁵

Lessons learned from bad internships

Internships can be a mixed bag, and some experiences are better than others. As I see it, even negative internship experiences can offer important learning moments. Try to see an internship, or first professional position, as an opportunity to learn how to work with a supervisor and be a team player. What you learn can help set you on a path for success.

One of my most memorable internship experiences was an unpaid internship at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. My internship was in the museum's archival department, and my work assignment consisted of helping organize the recently donated papers of Warhol's business manager, Fred Hughes. Hughes was the executor of Warhol's estate following his death in 1987 after gallbladder surgery. I worked independently, carefully examining and rehousing Mr. Hughes' papers in archival folders and boxes and removing paper clips, etc. The culmination of my work was a finding aid for the papers. Without a doubt, my time in the archives was one of fascinating discoveries. I spent afternoons reading condolence cards sent at the time of Warhol's death, leafing through the wrongful death claim that was filed on his behalf, and learning about the history of Interview Magazine. Hughes was the publisher of Interview, the magazine founded by Warhol. There were fun surprises in the boxes too. Every so often, I would come across more intimate artifacts, such

as polaroid photos of Warhol's friends and associates, or notecards to Hughes from his mother. Perhaps the most valuable thing I learned about myself that summer was how much I wanted to share my discoveries with others. Working alone did not suit me. After the Warhol experience, my next internship was in museum education.

Like most museum internships, my summer at the Warhol was unpaid, so I needed a part-time job to provide some pay. I worked early morning hours, which allowed me to leave around lunchtime and intern in the afternoons. I also worked weekends. My summer did not include a lot of socializing; I was early to bed and early to rise.

The part-time job precluded me from fully participating in the internship program. The job demands meant that I could not attend most of the informational sessions and behind-the-scenes tours that the staff organized for summer interns. I was sorry to miss the sessions and the opportunity to engage with other interns.

Below are three real-life examples of challenging internships and the lessons learned. All three people continue to work in the museums.

Hannah

"My individual department placement was not what I was expecting. I barely had any tasks to do, and most days I spent staring at my computer. My department would have employee training sessions and not tell me where they were. In addition, my department would not ever let me leave early or suggest that I go explore the museum's galleries and exhibitions unless I asked (which was bothersome because that would have been a better use of my time)."

Hannah's experience is not that unusual. Prior to her summer internship, she graduated from college. Arriving on the first day of the internship, she was ready to give it her all. Unfortunately, Hannah's internship placement was with a busy department. They were too overwhelmed by training staff to use a new computer software system to properly orient and mentor her. Instead of sitting back and waiting for the situation to improve, Hannah took the initiative and talked with the manager of the internship program. This proactive approach led to alternative opportunities for Hannah. What Hannah did not do was complain. If you are struggling early on, try not go to your manager with a list of complaints. Instead, spend some time problem solving possible solutions. A manager should want interns to raise potential issues early, before things escalate, and will appreciate the difference between an intern raising a valid concern and simply complaining. Coming up with possible solutions is a worthwhile skill and demonstrates accountability on the part of the intern. For instance, instead of complaining that her department was ghosting her, Hannah let the program manager know she did not have enough work and was eager for alternative opportunities to contribute and learn.

Jennifer

What was unsatisfactory: I was an assistant to a gallery director of a large university. It was a situation where I explained to her at the beginning that I didn't have experience in several areas of the assistantship and that she'd need to provide me some guidance so that I could be successful. She proceeded to throw me in the deep end to sink or swim and provided no help at all in navigating my duties. As a result, I predictably flailed around and did mediocre work due to having no idea how to do half of my job. She also had a modus operandi of choosing a favorite every semester, and a "most disliked." Though I was never the favorite, I sure got to be the most disliked one semester. She made it so unpleasant to work there, the most disliked would inevitably find another job by the end of the semester. (The abuse was such that I knew people who had to start on anti-depressants when it was their turn to be the most disliked, and all of the students eventually got their turn.)

What I did to address the situation: I tried to talk to the gallery director, tried to find out how to do my job, what I needed to do to meet her expectations. It did not go well, to say the least. I came to the conclusion that trying to have reasonable discussions with her was a lost cause, so I gave up and just did my best to muddle through. Luckily, a professor in my department needed an assistant by the end of my unfortunate semester, so I was able to shift my assistantship over to that individual's office.

Was the experience positive or negative?: It was mostly negative. Putting up with that kind of abuse is a negative experience that subordinates simply shouldn't have to go through. I spent a long time trying to find the silver lining in the situation. It shook me deeply and caused me to question my very usefulness on this planet for months, maybe even years. But the positive thing I took away from it was a solid understanding of how not to treat people. I learned all manner of ways not to treat people. I feel it has helped me to be a more compassionate supervisor. I will never give an intern a project and then not explain how to do it, not explain what the goals are or how to achieve them. I will never leave someone to sink or swim (and much less shrug my shoulders and blame them as they sink). I will always treat subordinates with respect, provide them the tools they need to complete their assignments, and remember every day to be kind. I will remember that when they make mistakes, it likely means that I need to do a better job communicating, that it is the supervisor's responsibility to provide the scaffolding for success.

Jennifer tried to improve her working relationship with the director, but to no avail. Rather than stick it out, her solution was to find another work placement. Jennifer's negative situation has had an important effect on her future because it continues to make her a more compassionate supervisor.

Elizabeth

I had a photography and imaging services internship at a museum. Part of what set me up for trouble right away was that the person in charge of the department when I was hired was not the person who was in charge when I started. I had some photography skills, but really wanted it to be a learning experience. The new person who was there when I started was not exactly on board with the idea of interns in general, to say the

least. He was trying to transition the department to have new standards and practices and personally did not get along with the staff member there that I coordinated my internship with. I could easily tell that he felt burdened by having to coach me where I was at. (For context – I was a second semester junior at the time, and I was hired the previous spring.)

However, I tried to be straightforward about where I was at with my level of skill, and he gave me a few titles to read in my first week. I bought those books and read them as soon as I could, and it did really help. When he was in a good mood, I learned a lot from him. When there was time, he gave me straightforward advice and spoke plainly about why something wasn't exactly perfect, but why it might have also been out of my control. I felt confident that he did or did not like something. When he was in a bad mood, the entire office seemed to fall apart, and I wouldn't feel like I could even check in without tip-toeing around everything. I will never forget when I was finishing up my day, and carrying all of my equipment back down to the basement where the studio was after being on the second floor. However, the offices were elevated above the studio, so I ran back up a flight of stairs so I could check in with him without making either of us stay later than necessary. When I got into his office I started to talk, but he said, "One second. I don't talk to people who are out of breath. Step out of the office and collect yourself before we talk." He didn't say anything until I turned around and left, waited a minute, and then came back in. Then he gave me a short summary about how someone had done that to him in graduate school, and the impression it left on him – all before I could report my progress to him, cutting into time where I was technically unpaid and off the clock.

The most I felt I could do was always try to be prepared, timely, et cetera, and try to basically ignore the interoffice conflict I would witness when I needed to be in the non-studio/cataloging area.

In the end, I'm glad that I had the internship; I absolutely learned a lot about photography and imaging services, and I'm now in a career that's directly related to that position. I also have used it numerous times as an example of a way that supervisors/superiors can be inappropriate with subordinates/interns in unexpected ways, and you should let your college know – and try not to internalize that situation as the entire picture of your personal performance.

Elizabeth's internship experience taught her to do her best and try not to be too sensitive when a supervisor is not a great mentor. She was able to learn and grow, despite having to navigate interoffice conflict. The internship opened her eyes to how supervisors can be inappropriate to subordinates, such as interns.

Defining an intern

Example: A college student interested in learning how to transfer course-work in biology and education to an informal learning environment, such as an aquarium. The student gains experience working with live specimens and learns how to enter information into ZIMS (zoological information management software). Bi-weekly rotations ensure the student is exposed to behind-the-scenes operations and management of a large, national aquarium. The student works a full-time schedule for ten weeks of the summer.