

Exhibition Studies:

A Model Museum Internship Program in New Mexico

by Miriam Roberts

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“Enriching communities through technology one museum at a time.”

—AmeriCorps Cultural Technology Program

Museums today face new challenges, not all financial. They must justify themselves in terms of what they can contribute to their communities. They must maintain relevance in an increasingly competitive marketplace of leisure time activities. And they must respond to demographic shifts and other radical social changes. Many of these changes have technological underpinnings that are raising visitor expectations and transforming how visitors access information.

How can museums with limited resources address these demands as they struggle just to care for collections and keep the doors open? This article describes one answer, New Mexico’s AmeriCorps Cultural Technology Internship Program (ACT).

Collaborative Program Fosters Careers in Cultural Technology

ACT is a partnership between the Department of Media & Technology at New Mexico Highlands University (NMHU), a rural Hispanic-serving institution in the town of Las Vegas, New Mexico, and the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA). The partnership, established in 2005, combines academics and paid internship opportunities in Cultural Technology, the emerging field at the intersection of cultural content, computer networks, and digital media. The mission is to cultivate a home-grown, ethnically diverse, creative

talent pool of multimedia specialists capable of working with cultural content and committed to serving their communities.

The ACT program was established in 2010 with funding administered by the New Mexico Commission on Community Volunteerism from AmeriCorps, the national service program sometimes called the domestic Peace Corps. The AmeriCorps tradition of service in arts and cultural organizations provides museums with a way to address some of their myriad needs while offering rich educational opportunities for interns. Museums, with their long tradition of mentorship, make natural partners for internship and service-learning programs. Through AmeriCorps, ACT has worked closely with partnering organizations to encompass full integration of experiential learning, civic responsibility, and community building.

This is how the ACT program works: The DCA museum liaison recruits host institutions and assists them in developing internship proposals, which are then matched to interns recruited by the internship coordinator. The NMHU internship coordinator develops contracts between interns and mentors. Once the internship begins, supervisory responsibilities are shared between ACT staff and host institutions. Faculty advisors provide technical guidance as needed. Mid-point and final evaluations are built in. ACT interns enroll in a mentorship class that provides essential job skills training, peer-to-peer contact, and opportunities for reflection.

At their worksites, ACT interns bring

new ideas and fresh perspectives and have a positive impact on all aspects of operations—designing exhibition graphics, helping get collections on line, creating exhibit interactives, developing websites and mobile apps, producing videos, and managing social media. Intern Angelo Mitchell sums it up this way: “Young minds though inexperienced in certain aspects can have answers to age-old problems if given the opportunity to create, take action, and come up with the answers.”

At the same time, ACT interns obtain the experience and self-confidence to enter the professional workforce. For those who might on graduation otherwise slip back into minimum wage employment or unemployment, ACT provides a critical bridge to the workplace. One such intern, Michael Jackson, says, “The opportunity to work in a museum setting allows us to use our skills and put our degrees to work while continuing to learn more skills, and get a foot in the door right after graduation.”

Choosing Diversity

An internship on one’s resume can provide a significant edge in the job market. For interns from under-represented minority and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, mentorship provides practical skills and exposure to behavioral norms and social roles, an introduction to professional standards and practices, guidance in organizational culture, and access to a professional network. For Angelo Mitchell, the mentorship relationship enhances the internship experience. He’s not getting coffee or filing paperwork for someone—he’s learning through observing how his



Carlos Mendivil, an intern with graphic designer Natalie Baca at the New Mexico History Museum, gained hands-on experience in exhibit design and installation. Courtesy the New Mexico History Museum, Santa Fe.

mentor works and deals with situations. Angelo sees mentoring as a major building block for fashioning new professionals for the museum field.

The museum field has made great strides in reaching out to broader and more diverse audiences and becoming more “visitor centered.” Museums have worked hard to become less elitist and more deeply engaged with a broader cross-section of their communities. But for the most part this openness to diversity is not yet reflected in professional staffs. Ultimately, however, the ability of museums to connect successfully with broad and diverse communities depends upon having staff members who reflect that diversity.

All ACT internships include stipends, allowing students of any economic level to participate. In our view, the recent explosion of *unpaid* internships has exactly the opposite effect: it discriminates against economically disadvantaged students and hinders efforts to increase diversity in the museum profession. Stipends are essential to preventing internships from becoming a sieve that culls out economically disadvantaged students. In the words of ACT Program Director Miriam Langer:

Volunteerism is essential to museums, but blurring the distinctions between unpaid internships and volunteer work is questionable, ethically and legally.

The mission is to cultivate a home-grown, ethnically diverse, creative talent pool of multimedia specialists capable of working with cultural content and committed to serving their communities.



Jason Valdez brings new skills to the Museum of New Mexico Press, where he is mentored by award-winning Art Director and Production Manager, David Skolkin. Courtesy of the New Mexico History Museum, Santa Fe.

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Volunteers give their time freely to serve the mission of the institution. An intern's role is to learn how the institution works, and to explore the profession as a possible career choice.

Overcoming Obstacles

Responsibility for ACT stipends is split between the host institution and matching AmeriCorps funds. Lack of funding can be a significant obstacle to participation for host institutions. Nonetheless, even small organizations are finding solutions. Mentor Martha McCaffrey, board member of the Las Vegas Citizens' Committee for Historic Preservation, notes that "when I announced this opportunity at a board meeting, I had the match by the end of the evening." Others have come up with their own strategies, including building stipends into grant proposals, tapping foundation funds, finding sponsorships, and moving funds from other line items.

Integrating interns into institutions is a practical and affordable strategy for introducing new technologies and fresh ideas. Intern Eric Maldonado puts it this way:

The problem I see with change in the museum here in Las Vegas is not so much that they don't want it, it's that they don't have the funding or the space to do it. Therefore I believe the solution is to make small changes to bring more visitors into the museum. This could all be done without making huge, significant changes.

Intern Experiences

What is the experience like for ACT interns who may be the youngest, the only Hispanic, the only African-American, or the only tech savvy person in their organization?

Melissa Marquez, a former intern at the Roswell Museum & Art Center, said, "When I found out that I was going to be the only native New Mexican there, I thought, well, that's kind of cool. I'm just going to stay true to the culture and the traditions." She did just that as she created an interactive computer kiosk for the permanent collection exhibit of two of New Mexico's most important artists, Peter Hurd and Henriette Wyeth.

Angelo Mitchell arrived at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque fresh out of school as a young, ambitious person with lots of ideas and the feeling that he could do anything and that nothing was going to stop him. He was comfortable with technology and working at a fast pace. The slower pace of museum work took adjustment, because, as he puts it, "our attention spans travel about as fast as a mouse button can click, and we hear and see everything on the Internet these days." This, he thinks, is a good thing: museums need to adapt to this change in their exhibits and in how they attract visitors.

When Michael Jackson started his first museum internship, he immediately saw the need for change and was confident he was the change they were looking for—a fresh face with lots of new ideas. But amidst all the talk about change, no one was really trying to make it happen. When he made suggestions, some staff members were receptive, but others viewed him as a dreamer. Gradually, he gained their trust and found himself with increasing

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responsibility on a variety of projects—including design research, concept development, exhibition graphics and spatial design, and finally as co-director and website developer for a new exhibition.

Mentor Experiences

The intern experience can be challenging for host institutions and mentors. It takes strong commitment to keep interns busy and establish rapport, communication, and good working relationships across the divides of age, ethnicity, and class. Helping interns adapt their knowledge, skills, and creative talents to museum practice takes time and effort. Written policies are helpful. In the realm of social media, where the distinctions between personal and institutional voice might not be obvious, museums are beginning to adopt guidelines for social media site administrators, who are often selected by virtue of being the youngest people in the workplace, including interns.

Yet being a mentor can be personally gratifying. Intern Jason Valdez is bringing new skills to the Museum of New Mexico Press, from digital illustration to e-publishing. His mentor David Skolkin views mentorship as part of succession planning: “I take great pleasure in offering what I can to his growing knowledge of book design and production. It’s very fulfilling to be able to encourage and hopefully create a better future for a talent such as Jason.”

Other mentors reflect similar feelings: “It was wonderful to work with Veronica and to have the opportunity to learn from her as well. It was very helpful for us to learn about new technology... to engage visitors in the museum experience.” “I was

impressed with the creativity, dedication, and critical thinking that Joshua showed during his AmeriCorps internship. Not only did the project provide him with real life experience, he passed on new ideas and techniques to museum staff.”

The Balboa Park Online Collaborative in San Diego has hosted two interns from this program, the first organization outside of New Mexico to do so. Former director Rich Cherry sees the value of ACT from a national perspective. “This stuff is so new that these jobs don’t even exist yet. ACT places New Mexico at the forefront in developing the whole new field of cultural technology.”

Catalyzing Change

Technology is transforming the relationship of museums and audiences. It also holds the potential to catalyze a more diverse workforce by attracting young people who might not otherwise consider museum careers. As museums meet the challenges of employee caps and budget cutbacks by creating new partnerships and sharing resources, they should also consider incorporating internship programs into their mission-driven activities. ACT is the first AmeriCorps program to focus specifically on the multimedia design needs of museums, but it could be used as a model for programs that address other needs. In the meantime, ACT’s unique cost sharing model, combined with significant commitments of financial and human resources from New Mexico Highlands University, the Department of Cultural Affairs, and a growing network of partnering organizations, is building a cadre of enthusiastic young cultural technologists from diverse backgrounds eager to work in your museums. ✨

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An earlier version of this article entitled “Museum Internships as Catalysts for Change” by Miriam Roberts, Lauren Addario, Michael Jackson, and Angelo Mitchell was published by Museums and the Web 2011 and is available online at http://www.museumsandtheweb.com/mw2011/papers/museum_internships_as_catalysts_for_change. The Editor.
