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AN OASIS ON CAMPUS

EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY, TRUST, AND EMPLOYMENT
AMONG STUDENTS WHO WORK AT THE SMART MUSEUM OF ART

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INTRODUCTION

The historian of museums Steven Conn described how, with the rise of universities at the beginning of the 20th century, museums were no longer seen as places for the creation of new academic knowledge (Conn 2000, 2011). It can be imagined that this left museums on university campuses in an awkward position. With one tenuous foot in academic research and the other in the local community, they would be unable to serve either audience effectively (Rorschach 2004). But as Gumprecht (2007) has argued, university museums have instead become part of the ‘public space’ of a campus, and, particularly in rural college towns, they are a vital cultural and social resource. Far from being at a disadvantage, campus museums that are able to draw faculty or advanced students into public education programs have the best of both worlds, and can create “produce powerful education programs with the potential to alter attitudes and values” (Simpson, 2003: 103).

Given their unusual dual role, it is not surprising that debate about the role or purpose of campus museums has focused on their relative ability to educate the general public (via school children: e.g., Stone 1993) and/or be used to educate students (via the utilization of collections in formal classroom teaching and academic research: e.g., Barnes and Lynch 2012; Simpson 2010). This split between formal and informal education, however, has meant that less attention has been paid to how college students experience and think about the museums on their campuses, beyond their use in classroom instruction.

Above all, working at the Smart allowed them to temporarily step out of their primary role as ‘students’

A recent conversation about the role of campus art museums entitled “Campus Art Museums in the 21st Century” brought together 13 museum leaders, who discussed (among other topics) the diverse academic, social, and cultural needs of university students (Shapiro et al. 2012). This conversation acknowledged that while campus art museums frequently desire to be student-centered, in practice the reality is often faculty-centered. An investigation of the significance of campus museums to undergraduates that takes as its starting point formal classroom education would probably end up reproducing this faculty (or at least, formal pedagogy) centered approach. Therefore this paper builds on the “Campus Art Museums in the 21st Century” conversation, by exploring a slightly different kind of student engagement with campus museums, namely through employment. Specifically, this paper will discuss a set of interviews conducted with undergraduates who were employed at the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago in 2013–14.

Student employment might perhaps seem a rather more prosaic and less pedagogically engaging way of interacting with a museum, in comparison to teaching with collections. It might be assumed that students simply work for additional income or to build their resumes. But when the student employees

discussed their experiences at the Smart in their own words, it was clear that while income and resumes are very important, their work meant much more than this alone. It gave them confidence and life-skills, and opened up previously unknown careers; it provided a sense of community and belonging, that they had struggled to find elsewhere on campus; it enabled new ways of knowing art and particularly its materiality, that had not been possible in their formal classes; and above all, working at the Smart allowed them to temporarily step out of their primary role as ‘students’—a role they had occupied continuously and perhaps exclusively since kindergarten—and instead imagine themselves as young but responsible adults.

The average cost of a year at college is now around \$23,000, but only 58% of students complete their BAs (U.S. Department of Education 2014a, U.S. Department of Education 2014b). This has led many commentators to call for an abandonment of the traditional campus model altogether as outmoded and expensive, and its replacement by cheaper and more streamlined on-line courses. Solutions of this kind assume a college or university is primarily a place where students go to gain formal education that will result in qualifications, and through the accumulation of these qualifications, a high-paying job. Understanding what students gain from being directly involved in campus museums, particularly through being part-time employees, enables us to describe and discuss one small part of what makes college valuable and important beyond the classroom—the ‘intangibles’ that only a campus-based education can offer.

1. STUDENT EMPLOYEES AT THE SMART

College, for many students, is a first experience of living away from home and also the first time they take on paid employment. Nationally, studies have shown that the majority of students (70–80%) engage in some form of paid employment while enrolled, and that working 15 hours or less while in college has a positive impact on student engagement and persistence (King 2006). Part-time employment is most advantageous when it is on- rather than off-campus and relates to academic programs (ibid).

Undergraduates employed at the Smart Museum work in a variety of roles: as front desk attendants, gallery attendants, café attendants, docents leading tours of visitors around the galleries, or as interns, with internships available in both the business and curatorial sides of the museum. These positions involve various levels of commitment and responsibility. Internships are year-long, while docenting works on a sign-up basis, with students choosing whether or not to take tours as they become available. The attendant positions tend to be more transient, with the café in particular having a relatively high turnover of staff. But it is common for students to work in two or three different positions at the same time—for instance, to be trained as a docent and do occasional tours, while also working regularly as a front desk and gallery attendant. Crucially, all the positions are paid rather than voluntary, including the internships.

Work at the museum meant more than the paycheck alone

There are a variety of reasons students choose to work at the Smart. The first and most obvious is the need for part-time work during college to supplement their income. The University of Chicago is a private university—total expenses per year including fees and living costs currently come to \$64,988—but this does not mean that every undergraduate on campus comes from a high-income background. In 2013, 61% of enrolled undergraduates received financial aid or scholarships and 14% were Pell eligible (indicating an income of \$40,000 or less for a family of four). Several of the students interviewed worked regularly throughout all four years of college, starting the first week they arrived on campus and continuing till the week of graduation. Others worked more intermittently or only began working regularly in their second or third year, but were equally interested in having an income.

It was clear, however, that while many student employees undoubtedly needed to be paid, their work at the museum meant more than the paycheck alone. There were specific reasons why students chose to work for the Smart over other student-employers on campus, such as the libraries, other coffee shops, or in one of the other museums. In some cases, as I will describe below, this was because they were specifically seeking out experiences or skills that only the Smart museum could provide. But even among students who were not pursuing a museum or art career, or actively interested in visiting the galleries, the Smart was still a desirable campus employer: because the work

was perhaps more interesting, the building itself is aesthetically very pleasant to spend time in, or because they felt they were treated well as employees. As one student described it:

“It’s a nice place. I mean honestly, people will say it’s not that glorious and glamorous of a job. But at the same time, look where you are, look what you’re doing. There are far worse jobs that you could have. I mean, if you think your job at the Smart Museum is bad, go down to like 57th and Ellis and look at the construction project there. You know? This is a pretty building. At the very least you are in a pretty place. It is good looking. You can’t ask for much more than that, even if you are the gallery attendant.”

In the following sections I will describe some of the specific reasons undergraduate students chose to work at the Smart, what they gained from their employment, why they thought it was important, and their sense of investment in the museum. Because of the qualitative nature of this research and the voluntary nature of the students’ participation, it would not be appropriate to draw statistical conclusions—for instance to say that X% of students believe Y. But I hope this does not make the students’ self-reported descriptions and reflections on their own experiences any less valid, as a means of obtaining a more nuanced perspective on this topic.

The discussion in this paper are based on semi-formal interviews with 25 undergraduate employees during the 2013–14 academic year, in conjunction with observations in the Smart café, during student social events, and participation in two Student Advisory Committee meetings during the same academic year. I also held informal conversations with staff who supervise students in the Smart and interviewed two graduate student employees, but my focus in this paper is on undergraduate employees.

2. SKILLS AND EXPERIENCES

When talking about why they had chosen to work at the Smart, students described specific skills they hoped to acquire or experiences that they wanted to add to their resume, suggesting they were thinking strategically about their future careers as they sought out work on campus. Even among those who explained that their primary motivation was additional income, it was considered important to gain experience that would help them in the future:

“If I’m going to have a job, I just want to make sure I’m getting some kind of skill out of it. Like, so it feels like I’m working towards something. Like a lot of third years, I was just sort of wondering, well what kind of career would I actually want to pursue? So I wasn’t quite sure, but I wanted to just do things [in my campus job] that I knew would give me good skills. I think presentation skills and interaction with kids can be super helpful, in a lot of different jobs. So I was like, ok, the docent work would be a really good opportunity, for whatever I want to do [in the future] I think.”

“I was definitely just looking for a job. But also like, good experience. And I honestly don’t remember why exactly I wanted this internship. I mean, it was convenient because it was here. But at the same time it ended up actually determining my career path!”

The sense of satisfaction that comes from being able to do a job well and being trusted by others to do it, was something these young adults discussed in explicit comparison to their role on campus as students

The docent positions provide solid work experience for students who intend to pursue a career in education or with children, but docenting was also attractive to young adults who felt they needed to work on their ‘presentation skills’ or to overcome shyness. For example, a student whose first museum experience arose because she had to fulfill a high-school community service requirement, decided to extend that position and then apply to the Smart so she could overcome her natural shyness. Working with the public at a museum, she said, “forces me to talk to people who I don’t know. And that’s a skill I know I need to work on.”

Another docent, describing himself as a particularly shy teenager, agreed:

“I was extremely shy when I came here. So it’s been really cool to build my confidence speaking to people, for one thing. And, er, we were trained a lot. It was like, two months of training, I think? For several hours every week. So we got a lot of training. And I gradually built up comfort. It took a while, even after the training, of actually tours. But by-- at this point a few weeks ago, maybe a month ago, I was asked to just give a tour on the spot because the docent didn’t show up. And I was just working up at the office. And I felt comfortable doing that. So that, would have been very hard for me the first year. (So it’s not just the knowledge of the museum, it’s also the forcing you

to go out in public?)
Yeah.”

He later elaborated, when describing the skills he had acquired from his job:

“Definitely the public speaking skills that I’ve developed. Experience with kids is also useful. And I think that’s good. Yeah. Just learning how to structure your thoughts, and also how to direct a conversation is very useful. ... Kids can get off topic pretty quickly. So, try to lead a conversation where you want it to go without dominating it, is something I learned.”

Working at the Smart was an obvious career choice for students who arrived at UChicago knowing they wanted a career in the arts or in museums, or who later switched into a visual arts or art history major. Non-arts majors tended to hear about the Smart through the university’s Career Advancement webpage or by word-of-mouth. But freshmen hoping to major in the arts looked for employment opportunities through the Smart website before they arrived, or came to a Smart event in Orientation Week to pick up an application form. They also tended to think more strategically about the order in which they applied for jobs, recognizing that internships were more likely to be given former docents or attendants:

“Well [the docent training program] was a lot of education stuff which I’m not so interested in. I more wanted to be a docent here to become more familiar with the collection. And I, I did want to use it as a way to get an internship. Just to, like, become more familiar with the museum.”

This trajectory was one that all student employees recognized approvingly. One described working one’s way up from an attendant or docent position to an internship as “the premise of sweeping floors essentially. If you want to start somewhere, you sweep floors first.”

Run through the UChicago Metcalf Internship Program, the internships are paid, year-long positions in both curatorial and business departments. They are particularly valuable for students who want to work in museums or in art galleries in the future.

“I think the Metcalf internship is really interesting because it is paid, they are all paid. And, so, there are ways to find other paid internships, but the fact that the university is providing these connections for internships, that we wouldn’t find otherwise... And it’s easy for these organizations to come in and say, we need an intern. And then, they just kind of give them one. But yeah, I think it’s a great internship

program.”

Students search for internships through the Career Advancement center database, and in several cases this meant students without an arts background found and applied for Smart positions they would not have otherwise have even heard of. The student above, for instance, who claimed that she couldn't remember why she'd originally applied for the internship, was a public policy major without any clear idea of what she wanted to do in the future. As a direct result of working as the Smart's development intern, she discovered a passion for arts administration and non-profit fundraising and now intends to pursue this as a career. The internship was a solid addition to her resume, but it also gave her a very realistic picture of what such a career involves, and time over the course of the year to consider whether she would enjoy doing this day-to-day.

The fact that the internships are both paid and organized through the university cannot be underestimated. It has the effect of opening up potential career paths to students who would not otherwise be able to get a foothold in the arts because they either could not afford to work for free or lacked the resources to find internships through personal connections. There is growing concern about the growth in unpaid internships, with an awareness that they discriminate against minority students and students from low-income families (Holmes 2006, Davies 2007, Lipka 2008, Yagoda 2008, Greenhouse 2010). The interns (and in some cases docents) working at the Smart certainly recognized that their ability to gain future internships and experience elsewhere rested on the fact they had been able to work at the Smart first. Several students attributed their ability to take on a year-long internship to the fact that it was paid, and at the same time reported that they had gained other internships elsewhere on the basis of their previous experience at the Smart.

“This was my first museum I worked in. And then I got an internship at the Mathaf which is a contemporary art museum in Doha Qatar in the summer after my first year. Then the summer after my second year I worked at the Saatchi gallery as a gallery attendant. Then this part year doing this [internship at the Smart].

(So you've had quite a bit of experience. Do you think it helped having the docent experience here on your CV?)

Yes. I'm sure. Otherwise—if I didn't have the docent experience it would have basically been just blank. So, I'm sure it was a major, major, major first step.”

Paid internships allowed all students, not just those who could afford to work for free, the same opportunities (see also Roberts 2012). But the students described an additional layer of significance to being paid to work at the

Smart as interns, attendants, or docents. This related to their sense that the museum, in paying them, took them seriously and respected their time.

“Most museum docents are volunteers, so it’s like, wow they really are seriously training us for this many hours, paying us—you know what I mean?”

“When I was in docent training, I remember feeling, they treat us so well here. They paid us for all the hours that we were being trained. They fed us dinner every night. And its just like, ‘why are you doing this? It’s so nice!’

(So it’s like, treating you... as if they value you time.)

Yeah! And I feel very valued there. Like, I’m one of how many docents? I mean now it’s different because I’m an intern. So I’m like, more in it. But even as a docent I felt like... um, I’m one of many, many [people] and I still felt like, quite valued. Which you know, was really nice. For a student job.

(Can you compare it-- do you have other student jobs on campus?)

I didn’t but my roommate worked at the Reg [the main campus library]. And... very different. If you know what I mean.

(What was her experience?)

Her boss was like, sometimes he didn’t know her name. You know what I mean? And it’s like-- also fine, that’s one kind of job... But like... it’s nice to be known. And cared about and stuff like that.”

The sense of being treated well and having one’s time valued arose in many of the interviews, particularly combined with a sense of satisfaction that came from being given substantial responsibility.

“I do a bunch of different things. I get to handle the objects, which is really fun!

(That must be cool!)

Yeah! And that’s another—I feel like there is a lot of responsibility that comes with it. Because you can go into storage spaces and move stuff around. So you have to be responsible.”

Interns are embedded in both curatorial and business departments and are given substantial work to do. They described how rewarding it was to be taken seriously and given something “real” and “useful” to do, in comparison to their other leisure or study activities on campus. In fact, this was a common reaction among all the employees. A café attendant, for instance, described how working 15 hours a week making coffee was a welcome relief from her classes. Her job gave her palpable sense of achievement, because her professionalism and cheerfulness in managing the café and providing

a high level of customer service were recognized and valued by both her customers and her boss.

“But the cafe, it’s like, for me it’s a perfect job. Because UChicago is so theory focused. But ... the cafe job has gotten me through because it’s like, you’re working-- you’re doing all these ridiculous readings and stuff. Especially when you are doing core classes and I was reading all this stuff with Plato and Aristotle. I was like, eeerr. I don’t know, that’s not really what I’m interested in! Even though-- I know it’s super important to the history of philosophy but... So I would like, go into work and be doing something concrete. And I also just have the personality-- I love making people happy. So when people come, and they are like... you know, you can tell they need caffeine! And you are the person giving that to them. And then they are like ‘oh this is a beautiful latte!’ or ‘oh this is so good!’ and that just makes my day. It’s so much more rewarding.”

For several gallery attendants, spending time each week doing something completely unrelated to their studies was calming. One described how she looked forward to her shifts in the gallery because it put her in a physical and conceptual space that was completely separate from her studies.

The sense of satisfaction that comes from being able to do a job well and being trusted by others to do it, was something these young adults discussed in explicit comparison to their role on campus as students. For instance, an intern explained her reaction to being trusted to handle art as a completely different experience to working in the controlled space of a lab class, where students were usually only put to work on simulations. Being able to work with real art works—and as a result, doing work that contributed to the running of the museum—gave her a sense of achievement but also a genuine learning experience.

“And it’s nice because, I feel like I’m doing real work. The things I am working with are real works of art. Like, there isn’t room for error. And like, it’s not just, a little plastic model, you know? [In comparison to] what you do in classrooms. So it’s nice to have like, actually hands on experience. Literal hands on experience! Um. And the fact that they allow you to do that, sometimes [I think] ‘Are you sure?! I’m...’ I mean, I’m only in college, but I am in college! I’m old enough to do this. I’m hopefully responsible enough to do this! So. Yes. It’s definitely a nice feeling. Trust also goes with that. So yeah.”

The student employees recognized and appreciate that were being trusted to perform functions that are necessary for the functioning of the museum—

tasks as varied as taking care of visitors, acting as spokespeople on tours, checking art works for damage, soliciting potential funders, or writing text for exhibits, but all equally necessary to keep the museum going. It also reflected their sense that the work undertaken by the museum was important, something I will turn to next.

3. THE MUSEUM COMMUNITY IN RELATION TO THE UNIVERSITY AND TO THE SOUTH SIDE OF CHICAGO

Historically, the University of Chicago has had a troubled relationship with its neighboring community (Pattillo 2008, Hirsch 2009). As has been noted elsewhere, campus museums occupy an interesting position because they serve both the academic community of faculty, staff, and students, and the surrounding community (Shapiro 2012). This can potentially lead to friction or conflict, as museums find themselves torn in different directions. But campus museums can also serve as a productive conduit, easing relationships and helping fulfill the university's mission of public education in the broadest sense.

The students working at the Smart Museum strongly believed that they served the wider community, particularly children who came on tours given by the docents. Underlying the general feeling that educating children about art was a good thing, there was an awareness that many of these school groups came from Chicago Public Schools and more specifically schools on the South Side that are often under-resourced and situated in low-income neighborhoods. Some students were aware that the University of Chicago has had an at times troubled history with its neighbors, but saw the museum and its outreach efforts as a way to ease these tensions. Tours to school children from CPS, and the café in the museum lobby, were described as means of inviting or encouraging local people to come onto the campus and to enjoy art.

By working in the museum, they felt they were able to enact the museum's—and the university's—responsibility to the local community, rather than simply espousing it as an abstract principle.

“I think the community connection is really nice. And that is what I like about being a docent. Like local kids, and like... you know teaching them that the museum is a place they can come.”

“I really, really like doing tours because the kids are really awesome. And I think the program itself is, like, such a good way to connect the community to this museum. It's a really good way because the kids will like, come in here and get really interested in the art, and then they take what they learned back to their classrooms. Do activities. And they will bring their families back too, actually.”

“And then like, having visitors who are not affiliated with the university, come to the museum. You know. Things like that. And then, um, also just like the fact that it's situated in the South Side of Chicago. You know. The tours we give are mostly for CPS students. So it's not just like-- I think, a lot of times museums can kind of ward off people. Because they are like ‘oh it's just artsy’ and like, ‘who's interested in that? It's for older people, or whatever.’ I think the fact that they do, like, reach out to a wider audience. Um, I think that's especially important at a university. Because I think a lot of things on a university's campus try to do the same thing... So it's like you don't just want to be a campus doing an insular-- you know, like you want to be helping...”

(People who are in the wider community?)
 ...Yeah, yeah. You want to be like part of the community.”

This last student explained how she felt the museum tours were a great way to introduce young children to art and to the university, but as a result docents carried a lot of responsibility. If they students didn't have a good first experience, they might be put off for life.

“You know, these students... might never, like, come to the university otherwise or might never come to a museum. So I feel like that's a good way of, sort of kind of like starting when you are young. So it's like, if they come to a museum, they can think 'oh this is a fun place, I can come back here.' And it's not like a scary thing that I should stay away from. From the university or museums in general.”

By working in the museum, they felt they were able to enact the museum's—and the university's—responsibility to the local community, rather than simply espousing it as an abstract principle. In the case of the docents this was immediately tangible, because they were teaching local school children. But other student workers also described their role as important public outreach, because it involved welcoming people and helping them feel comfortable in the museum. The following two comments were from students who both had grown up in regions of the US that had few or no museums. On arriving in Chicago for college, they had themselves overcome an initial sense that art museums were intimidating places. This personal experience colored their commitment to welcoming and encouraging other visitors.

“Actually a lot of regulars, a lot of people don't realize that it's free! Like a lot of people have come and gotten coffee from me, and sometimes—like there's construction workers, or like people who work in more blue collar jobs you know? And they'll come in and get coffee and like, sometimes you can tell that it's their first time in a museum. Or like, the first time in a museum in a long time. I don't know... because people can be really awkward around museums. So, they'll be like, oh.. and they'll ask me about the museum, 'Oh how much does it cost?' Oh it's free! And they're like, 'Oh it's free, I should bring my kids here!'”

“(So what do your duties involve at the front desk?)
 Yeah, a lot of it is orientation, right? Like guests will walk in here and they will be immediately intimidated. Like I was. By this large glass facade. And like, cool looking beautiful people sitting at tables... All these young, all these folks around. They're like, Hyde Park residents, or they're people who have never been in a museum before. And they are people who are intimidated by these college students, all these grad

students. And they don't know what to do. And so my job is essentially to say 'Hi there! Welcome to the Smart Museum!' Talk to them through the policies, pull a few publications off the side and put them in front of them. Point out locations in the museum. ... But it's primarily just saying hello to people, making eye contact with people."

This second student elaborated on the museum's relationship to the wider community in more detail later in the interview, describing both his belief in the importance of the museum as a space of cohabitation, and the potentially paternalistic flavor of this argument.

"I feel like that [the outreach the museum does is] good. That there needs to be more of this. And ... being someone who comes from a part of the country that has very few museums, and who has never been in an art museum regularly. And I've just suddenly taken a crash course in museum education. And I've become very knowledgeable. If we are able to break down the divide between students, employees, and members of the community, that is good. We are transmitting information across boundaries that we didn't used to transmit. People are getting knowledge that they didn't think they could have. ... They didn't believe they could have. And like, if you bring a person who like, [comes] from 67th and State or something, to the Smart Museum, and if they can be comfortable with the same space that someone [who comes] from New England and like a, you know, some sort of preppy high school... You know if they can inhabit that same space together and can benefit from one another, that is a very good thing. [Sighs loudly.] Like, I do feel sometimes... it's a messy thing. Because, even though I'm here on scholarship, right, I'm still a college student. And I'm privileged in that respect. And some of this rhetoric is really messy. You know, I'm teaching kids from the South Side, I'm making a positive contribution. At the same time, these are dangerous things to be saying, they are loaded things to be saying. And there is an odd interventionist aspect? Which is tough to walk. ... I'm sympathetic, but I'm in a position where it's, it's tough to be... Because my sympathy could be, and rightly could be, construed as condescension."

He had previously talked about the weekly community work that he had undertaken throughout high school, and his disappointment that the community service programs for UChicago undergraduates involved little more than a day or two volunteering—what he described as tokenism. In contrast, for this student and many others, working as a docent was meaningful work that had a substantial impact.

Location and community within the campus

In addition to serving as a bridge between the local community and the university, the students also felt that the museum played multiple roles within the university. A campus art museum can be a formal educational space, a place to socialize through structured and organized events like undergraduate parties, or a place for informal personal relaxation and socialization in the café and galleries. For student employees it is also a work space. The fact that there are a variety of different ways to interact with or appreciate the museum, each reflecting a different degree of investment, was seen as a positive thing. As one person described it, “The Smart museum can be radically different things for radically different people!”

The sense of the museum as its own kind of unique space was directly related to its physical location on campus and architecture.

“For some reason, the Smart museum seems to be like another planet, even though it’s smack bang in the middle of campus. It’s weird. People forget it’s here. I didn’t go here my whole first year! I just didn’t even think about it!

(Why do you think that is? Do you think it’s because it’s not visible in the sense of not being a prominent building, or more conceptual?)
It actually might be a little bit of both I think. Yeah. Because it has this weird side entrance, behind Max [a dorm building] huge looming ugly-- Max is just here right. And like, the Reg of course. And then also... Yeah I think it’s also like, conceptually, a different world. It’s like this different atmosphere. You can almost forget that it’s like... here. ... I think, like... it’s like a museum is just like a very different kind of place, than the rest of the campus. Which is just a bunch of, just a bunch of like study spaces. And coffee shops, and classrooms... Yeah. I don’t know. It’s... It’s almost like a relief, like an oasis on campus. Or something.

(So it’s not necessarily a bad thing?)

Oh no! I think it’s a really good thing. But it’s also, um, if you’re not hooked in, hooked up to this community? I think it’s actually something you might just, like, skirt past. You might just forget about.”

The Smart museum is located on South Greenwood Avenue between 56th and 57th Street, next to the main university library, across the street from the university gym, and within a few minutes’ walk of several dorms. But underlining, perhaps, the sense that geography is relative, many of the students surprised me by describing the Smart Museum as being off or on the far edge of campus. From the perspective of undergraduates, they explained, its location is peripheral because (with the closing of the nearby Pierce dorm building in 2013) it no longer lies on a direct path between a living space and the main quad where classes take place. Moreover, the

architecture of the museum adds to the sense that it is hidden. The building is low and built around a courtyard that has a high windowless wall, making it less likely that someone walking past would be able to see into the museum at all. For this reason it can appear to be hidden or secluded—something that was seen as both problematic (because it discouraged students) and oddly attractive (because it made it into a unique, alternative space on campus).

Indeed, most students described not knowing where the museum was or being put-off by its appearance when they first arrived—the exception being students who came to UChicago with the intention of doing art history or visual arts, who actively sought out the Smart Museum immediately after arriving on campus.

“Actually it’s horrible because I didn’t come here at all my first year ... because I didn’t know exactly where it was. And I was living in BJ [another dorm] which is south of the midway. And everything further north of the Reg seemed really far away? So I knew it was on 56th Street but that seemed like a whole other world! And I was like, worried to like, poke around! I didn’t really know! I saw the outside of the building when going to the gym I guess, I saw... I, I don’t know. I was kind of like a timid first year!

(This seems to be quite a common thing!)

It is, yeah. I think, I feel like because it’s the courtyard thing. And it seems like kind of blocked off? So I think I didn’t actually come in here, until my first art history class. And we had these discussion meetings in the ESR. And so that was like a really cool way to like, see some of the collections. So that was really cool. And then I like, started coming here – I mean, I come here a lot for classes. But after the first visit I came to visit the galleries. And like, saw what they had on display and that kind of thing.”

“When I first arrived, my first encounter with the Smart was when they were holding ... the Hyde Park Jazz festival. And they were holding performances out ... in the courtyard and everyone was gathered out on that burr. And I saw the Smart Museum of course, in front of the performers. And I thought it was this incredibly intimidating hipstertish front of a building. And I only saw these cool looking folks with the, like leather shoes, and the odd little hats, ducking in there in their plaid. And I’m like, that place is too cool for me. I can’t go in there.

(Awh! So when did you actually get to come in?)

I actually came in two quarters later, in spring quarter of that year. After my resident assistant, she was a docent at the Smart Museum. And she was leaving. And she was saying, the Smart Museum has a great program. You ought to go do this.”

The hidden nature of the location was not necessarily seen as problematic by everyone. The sense that one has to ‘discover’ the space lends it a certain level of exclusivity and security—the feeling that it becomes an ‘oasis’ that is within the campus but also apart from the usual undergraduate world. This relates to the point made above, that student employees appreciate having a space where they can temporarily step away from their identity as students.

This is also reinforced by the fact the museum’s café, situated in the large entrance lobby, is not a space that caters only or even primarily to undergraduates. Students discussed how the Smart café differed from other cafes or social spaces on campus. It is used by graduate students, faculty and museum staff, and by non-university visitors to the museum, to the extent that it is relatively rare to see undergraduates there other than Smart employees or art history majors. This makes it a contrast to other cafes and coffee shops on campus, particularly those that cater primarily to undergraduates and are staffed and managed by undergrad workers (e.g., Cobb café, Harper Café, and Hallowed Grounds). These spaces are characterized by the volume of the employees’ music, the informal service, and the loud and lively conversation. Other cafes attract a more mixed crowd of faculty, graduate students, and some undergraduates (e.g., Classics café, the Business School café, and Pick café), but are managed by external catering companies and staffed by non-student workers (primarily women of color). These tend to have a more professional and impersonal feel.

The Smart café is unique on campus, therefore, because the atmosphere is quieter while also being aesthetically striking. In addition, it has very few electricity outlets and a limited number of tables, discouraging people from staying long to study. The café attendants noted that many of the café regulars were staff and faculty from surrounding offices, the art history department, or the museum itself, or graduate students and faculty from the science buildings on the other side of the street. (While the primary focus of this study is on undergraduates, I conducted a few interviews with graduate students who used the Smart café regularly, and they agreed that the relative lack of undergraduates in the café and the sense that the museum was a little less typical of the rest of campus, was part of their attraction to the space.) Undergraduates who choose to hang out in the Smart café, therefore, are actively seeking a less undergraduate-centric, or even campus-like, space.

“[The limited seating and small size of the café is actually] one of the good things about it. Like, the students who have found it, love it because it’s quiet and tranquil.”

While one café attendant advocated making the space more undergraduate friendly (primarily by allowing staff to play their own music and getting rid

of the uniforms) he was definitely in the minority. Other student employees, whether or not they liked to spend time in the café themselves outside of their work hours, advocated for keeping the Smart café as a unique, less-undergraduate focused space.

Where the museum does become focused on undergraduates, is through its student programming and the Student Advisory Committee (SAC). Student programming includes a variety of events including ‘Study at the Smart’, ‘Party at the Smart’, and specific events such as the Orientation Week activities. These events are popular and lively, structured along similar lines to other organized undergraduate social events on campus that cater to underage students who are unable to socialize in off-campus bars. Nearly everyone commented that the free food provided at events is a big draw. But they equally believed that food just serves as the “hook” to get people in.

“People seem to really like the parties a lot. I think... for the parties, the Smart Museum becomes what I wish it was for students most of the time. ... Meaning that it either becomes an alternate space to study during the sessions, or it becomes a place of relaxation and a space where students really interact with the art and they can actually see it. So it’s a really good opportunity I think.”

“You know, I was very surprised the first evening event that we had. ... I was like, shocked by how many people showed up. The whole lobby was totally full. And you know, many went for the free food – maybe! But it still gets people in there. And even if they only walk into the lobby and not into the galleries, then it’s still like, maybe one day, when they have an hour to spare, they’ll go... you know, to check it out. So, or at least they’ll come back to the next event.”

The student employees themselves were split between those who attend the organized events and were also active in the SCA, and those who preferred not to—either because they avoided organized student social events entirely or because they felt they spent ‘too much time’ at the Smart each week already through their work and classes.

The Smart as a Community

Beyond the formal uses of the space (classes held in the galleries or SCA events), many student employees felt the Smart Museum had become their primary space on campus and their most significant ‘community.’ This wasn’t the case for everyone, of course: besides the fact that those students volunteered to take part in this study were more likely to be those with very positive experiences to share, there were certainly also students I interviewed who saw the Smart only as a pleasant place to work. For many, however, the museum had become their home-from-home and the place they chose to

spend the majority of their time.

“Yeah I would definitely say, in a sense like I feel, that this is a homey place now, because I’m so familiar with it. Like all the other buildings on campus, are just like-- But yeah! I go here! So yeah, I would say, its more like a more of a comfortable feeling.”

This was particularly the case for students who had made this their primary social space as well as their work space, or who were majoring in art history as well as working in the museum. These students seemed to spend most of their time each week in or around the building. But the sense of community and belonging was also related to the sense of being a trusted member of the Smart team—again connecting to the degree to which student employees are given ‘real work’ and paid for their time, and thus are treated as junior but valued contributors to the running of the institution. For instance, those who had worked at other larger institutions, or who had previous internships that were voluntary and involved working on less ‘real’ or significant tasks, attributed their sense of investment and involvement in the Smart community to the fact that this was a much smaller museum, enabling them to get to know the permanent faculty and staff. As one attendant put it, although he was initially intimidated by his boss and the senior staff, eventually he even felt more comfortable with even the director:

“By now I’ve said hi to him so many times, and I have looked in his briefcase so many times to make sure he’s not stealing art work! ... He’s still like, you know, a very important person. But he’s not intimidating. ... And being a front desk attendant and being the face of the museum, after a while, they are going to see you and they are going to eventually feel embarrassed for not knowing who you are!”

Interestingly, several young women described the Smart Museum as a welcoming space because it provides a respite from the gender dynamics found elsewhere on campus. For instance, when I commented on the fact that most of the SAC were women, a female student linked this directly to her own strong sense of community within the museum:

“Yeah. Well actually, you know, I think the reason is because this museum -- I think the reason a lot of women do apply, is because this place has a very hospitable environment. And, um, it’s back to what I said about this being somewhat of an oasis on campus. Like... I personally think that this campus can be sometimes a little bit overbearing-- I mean in some of my classes, it’s been, like, dominated by a lot of guys. Um. And... I would have to kind of, actively teach myself to, like, just like really go for it when-- tell myself, they do not

know any more than you do. You know what I mean? It's like, it's hard sometimes I think, like... women have this, [hesitancy] and this could be me stereotyping but, it's just my observation. But like, guys will just, like-- men will just go ahead and say what they want. But like, women will think about it and think, 'oh no. This is not relevant' or, 'I don't know enough about it.' Um, and so... there's sort of like a hesitance? Um. For women. Um. I think, in certain, like, environments on this campus, um. And I think like here, it's so open... and ahh... yeah, it's a very like, warm atmosphere. And um, I think... like women feel maybe more... comfortable working here? Um. But also I think, you know. Art is something that women are like, typically interested in. As far as like, majors and stuff."

Her response was somewhat stilted and hesitant, suggesting that she was uncertain whether I would agree with her. But she later reiterated her point, emphasizing that she believed the Smart was "an empowering space. It's amazing how different I think, I can feel in this environment. Versus I think... yeah. Other environments on campus." Another female student described similar reactions, and went on to explain how she had always felt drawn to arts communities because they were inherently collaborative and more "nurturing"—qualities she had begun to actively seek out and value while at UChicago, following repeated negative experiences with male classmates in her core courses. For this student, the Smart was a place she would be less likely to be "shouted down" by male colleagues, and thus she was much more comfortable speaking her mind and being assertive without fear of the kind of retaliation she had experienced in her classes.

Not everyone (female or male) agreed that there was anything special or different about the Smart that could be directly attributed to the relatively high number of women. Many noticed that there were more women than men in their art classes or working at the museum, but did not attach any significance to it or see it as personally meaningful.

Neither, however, did they feel that this was a reason to engage in an effort to 'balance' the gender ratio by encouraging more men to get involved in the museum.

All were aware that art history and museums careers in general tend to attract more women than men, with several also being aware that the ratio becomes less skewed towards women in more senior roles. Moreover, everyone recognized and commented on the fact that there were plenty of male faculty and staff in the Smart—including those who actively claimed to value the Smart precisely because it was a contrast to their male-dominated classrooms. Coupled with the following response from a male student employee, this

suggests we can think in terms of individuals valuing a differently gendered space, rather than simply it being more ‘feminine.’

We had just been discussing why more women applied for docent positions but there was a relatively even split in the attendant positions, and he had thought that it probably wasn’t that important an issue. But when I asked instead “Do you think it contributes to something you like about the environment?” he replied in more length:

“Possibly. I mean, because arts-- I mean-- So, I look at like football players, I look at track team players, I look at teams, right? And I will lean over to my housemates as I see them colonize another house’s table improperly and indecorously at the dining hall, and I will say ‘They are mannish thugs’. You know? They are a bunch of-- I mean-- I definitely am averse to large packs of men. And working among them. So it is good that there is something of a gender mix here. And if there’s a gender imbalance here, so much the better. Because I kind of-- I might have even a slight antipathy to my own sex. I’m not sure how I feel about that entirely. But.

(I think I get what you mean. In comparison to other spaces on campus, this is a little bit different and maybe a little more comfortable. I’ve heard that from a couple of people. But also some people strongly disagree, so there is quite a variety of responses.)

I mean, I also feel like I made a contribution by being a guy in this field. Like, pretty much I’m sure-- I mean, this is different actually. But I was about to say, just as a female moving into the sciences or math will feel like she is making-- if she is an outlier I feel like I too am an outlier. But for her, it’s far more hostile. And then in, like in math-- I mean if we are talking about clash, I mean they are walking around with like, clubs and tiger pelts.

(It’s not the jocks...)

Right, but it’s still a clash. And here, none of those pressures are here. I mean, nobody is calling me out for working in this space, as like, you know. Going the opposite route. Leaving a male field, moving into a female dominated field, there is nothing overtly stated. And I don’t think even like, there is any like danger subtext.”

This student agreed with the young woman quoted above—he felt more comfortable at the Smart in part because it was not a stereotypically male environment, and he was equally hesitant in working out how to articulate this feeling. He also thought through the significance of being male in a profession that tends to be perceived as more feminine—recognizing that this made him an ‘outlier’, but that this move was far less difficult or significant than that of a woman moving into a male-dominated field like math.

4. STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON ART AND MUSEUMS

Museums have been described as spaces of 'informal education' in contrast to the 'formal education' that takes place in seminars and lectures in schools and colleges (e.g., Griffin 2004, Hooper-Greenhill 1999, Leinhardt et al. 2002). Even when school groups come to a museum to take part in specially designed programming (such as the tours that Smart docents give, which are aligned with Illinois State Standards for arts education), this has tended to be characterized as 'informal' education. In the literature describing campus museums in particular, a line is drawn between formal and informal education based on the type of student being served. K-12 school children are referred to as receiving informal education and/or 'public outreach', while undergraduate and graduate students are assumed to be served through the ability of the museum to provide collections that faculty can utilize in formal educational settings.

The experiences of the student-employees at the Smart suggest, however, that undergraduates also receive and value informal education in campus museums. Moreover, they appreciate the latter precisely because it creates a space to think and talk about art without the pressure of writing papers or performing a particular type of academic rhetoric. As one docent described it, when you are in the museum for work or your own enjoyment, you don't have to break out a string of well argued "thesis statements" to justify your experience. A museum enables students to engage in more personalized kinds of learning, or to emphasize the kind of tactile or emotional engagement that is less valued in formal educational settings.

Undergraduates also receive and value informal education in campus museums

"Yeah like, I guess some people are very interested in the historical aspect of art. Just like, I guess this is more like art history majors. They like, you know, finding the historical significance of art works. Some people are very visual people, or very tactile people. Like, I'm a very tactile person and I love when there is a painting with like, blobs of paint on it or something. I just really like that."

All students at UChicago are required to take an arts class as part of the Core, and the Art 101 class partly taught in the Smart is an often oversubscribed choice. Therefore although many student employees at the Smart are not art history or visual arts majors, all student employees had the experience of at least one formal arts class. This gave them a point of comparison between the formal classroom knowledge, and the knowledge about art they acquired through their Smart work.

The student quoted below, for instance, wanted to work in art education and had originally intended to minor in art history. But after taking a fairly advanced class she lost confidence in her ability to master the academic material:

“So really, like, it was quite foreign to me. It was very interesting, like, but also... Those readings for class were very complex.

(It was beyond what you’d already done?)

Yeah. And I hadn’t had a whole lot of background in art history before that. So. Um. Yeah. I felt a little bit behind in that sense. So I think that’s why I decided that I wouldn’t do the minor. But I still like to have an interest in it... So I think I would definitely like to pursue it personally. Yeah.

(So in a sense working here seems perfect because it allows you to continue having that interest,)

It does.

(rather than having an academic minor.)

Exactly. Exactly. And I think that’s something, um, that I really believe in. I really believe in the accessibility of art. And um, even like... I don’t know, ideas too. Because I think we have a tendency at the University of Chicago to make scholarship very inaccessible. I think the things that I read, like-- I’ve gone here for four years and I still can’t figure this argument out! And I think this person is trying to make this argument really really elusive, in order to stop anyone-- to make it harder for people to respond in a critical way. Or something. You know, it’s kind of like building a wall for yourself, I guess!”

Her struggle to master the academic texts hadn’t diminished her personal enjoyment of art history—on the contrary, it had made her more determined to work in art education to make art more accessible to people like herself. But this was something she considered she could do, despite the discouraging class, only after her positive and empowering experiences as a docent.

The docents in particular made a strong comparative contrast between the way they had been taught to see, analyze, and discuss art through their docent training and experience giving tours to the public, and what they had learned in their own classes. I had assumed that they would take more of their new expertise into their formal education, but this turned out to be something the students did not necessarily agree with, in part because they saw the rhetoric of the classroom as being less engaging or important than the way they interacted with art during tours.

“(And how does your experience working here in the museum affect the way you think about some of your classes?)

No cross over yet. Some interesting things have happened where, like having had my 19th century survey, I knew of some topics that allowed me to write a better thematic tour. For our single visit tours. But I have not been able to take anything into the classroom yet. Because honestly, the way that we teach here, we are not concerned with minutia, we

are not concerned about knowledge. If we have the specifics and the particulars, we will give them if we are asked. Because it's good for people to know that and I will gladly [talk] like an encyclopedia. We are more concerned about, what do you see in the painting that makes you say that? What else can we find in the painting? Enquiry based learning. Anybody can read it, anybody can come up with meaning. They produce their own glosses. And that's vastly different. Like, when I'm in a classroom, although we are definitely using that critical skill, we are also in all sorts of jargony rhetoric and we are concerned about facts, specifics, trends and whatnot.

"I would say... I mean, I always intuitively felt, that anybody off of the street, should be able to come into a museum, look at a work, and say that this art is cool. That this is exciting, I'm glad to be here. But. ... I think like having... You see, there's no way for me to leverage, like visual thinking strategies, to leverage what I do with third graders, in an art history class. You know?"

Their experience working at the Smart did not, therefore, directly translate into better grades in their college education. But there was still much to appreciate about the informal education they received: particularly their knowledge of and comfort with museums, and their new perspective on art objects themselves.

Cultivating a habit of going to museums

One of the aims of informal education in museums is cultivating an appreciation for, and comfort in, museum environments. Several of the students quoted above echoed this perspective, describing the role of the docent or attendant as making people from the local community and CPS school children feel like the museum was a place they belong.

The same process occurred for undergraduates themselves. After all, not all the student employees came from families where museum-going was a regular activity. While there were of course those who had gone to museums or galleries regularly with their family or high-school, there were several students who had very rarely or never been inside a museum or art gallery before coming to college.

"(And so had you previously had much experience in museums before that? Had you been a regular museum goer?)

No. I come from mid-central Florida. We have something of a poverty of museums there. I think the one museum within any distance of my household, I think it's a Salvador Dali museum? ... I mean for the entire state, that's rather terrible. I was living in something of a concrete suburban wasteland. So there wasn't a whole lot going on and I had

never really been to a major museum before, before I came to the University of Chicago. And then of course it was one of the first things I did. It was like, Ok. I now have the UoC ID. I can go to the AIC [Art Institute of Chicago] free. And I took advantage of that immensely. (So what was it like when you first went, when you first arrived here in Chicago?)

Er, massive. And I have been there now [many] times and I still have maybe two or three galleries that I haven't gone through."

Another student described a high school trip to Spain as the moment she really became interested in art museums:

"I spent my senior year of high school in Spain. And so, that was kind of like... I mean, in Western Mass, which is where I've lived my whole life, there is a couple of colleges that have museums. But there are no big museums. So like, I've been to the MFA in Boston, and the ICA in Boston. And then... but then in Spain, it was like, going to all these museums, and all the time. It was really great. That was when I really started loving looking at art, and it became more of a thing that I would, like, do for fun. I would be like, 'oh, I have a couple of hours. Why don't I just go to the popular art museum, and like, look at sculptures.'"

For students who hadn't grown up going to museums regularly, working in the Smart and gaining a way to think and talk about art—particularly through the docent program—enabled them to feel comfortable and confident visiting other museums for personal pleasure.

"I guess I'd been to some museums, but like, not like a ton. I always want to see more than I have! And I'm around all these art history majors and I'm like, wow there's so much I haven't seen! But, yeah, I think I've gotten more into the museum environment. And like, visiting museums, as I've got into the Smart museum. Because as I talk to other people around, and like it's interesting to see what they notice, about art work. And how they absorb it."

New ways of seeing objects

More subtle changes occurred in the way student employees began to see and think about art objects themselves—as a result of taking classes in the Smart that allowed them to look at objects from the collection up close; from docent training and giving tours to children who reacted to art very differently; and from involvement in curatorial work. Those who worked with children as docents often described the children's less inhibited reactions to art as a form of inspiration, encouraging them (in tandem with their docent training, which emphasized experiential learning) to see and talk about art

more freely.

“Because the thing is, the kids will like state the obvious. And they won’t feel bad about that. Whereas, adults are very... they are very hesitant. They are very reticent, in what they want to say. Because they don’t want to say something too obvious. If they do say something they want it to be something very insightful.”

There were more also subtle changes that arose from seeing objects outside of their ‘normal’ setting on the wall of a gallery.

“...when I started here, there’s a registration handbook. So I read some stuff from that and it had advice on how to do condition reports and things like that. But it’s more practice. And kind of training your eye to see, instead of-- which was a weird shift, actually, when I started. Instead of looking at it as an art historian and looking at the content, you’re looking at the damages! Scratches! Like, what, you know, where is the paint cracking? Where is there loss and that kind of stuff. So it was weird-- in the beginning it was kind of hard to do. Um. Because you know, you have to stop looking at the work itself. You have to look at the physical reality of it.”

“Hm. It’s... it’s interesting to know how it’s stored. I think that’s really... We have way more stuff than I thought we could possibly have in the space! It’s interesting how much it changes when it’s on the walls, than when it’s in a draw or even just hanging up in the storage racks. It’s really different.

(In what kind of way?)

It looks not... It looks more like an object in a room than an art work on a wall, if that makes sense? It’s like, just... some kind of... I mean, we don’t let them get dusty, but there’s—they look kind of like... How do I describe it? They look like it’s something waiting to be hung on a gallery wall, in a just-- it’s on a-- or near other things that clearly don’t really relate to it, or it, it... makes me see how much curation really matters. Just for the experience of being able to look at the thing.”

A shift occurred towards seeing a painting as an object with an immediate and historical materiality. But for some students this meant they were no longer able to ‘unsee’ the physicality of the art or its ‘museum-ness’. In this sense, gaining familiarity with art objects as museum pieces undoes some of the ‘aura’ of art objects and the aura of the museum (Benjamin [1936] 2008, Kopytoff 1986)—as, for instance, when students employed as gallery attendants said they now glanced at attendants in other museums and thought to themselves, “I feel your pain”.

“It’s like, well they-- especially starting doing the condition reports. And there’s like things you can’t unsee about an art work. And even other stuff like, I was making labels for a show. And after going through that process, then you start paying attention to labels in museums. And like, mistakes. And then I was at the Art Institute recently for a class assignment and, like, one of the labels was peeling off the wall. And another one was down and had a footprint on it. And I was like, oh my god! It was all I could see! Or then, in the art works themselves, I’m paying attention to the cracks and the areas of loss, and all of that! So it’s changed the way I see some of the stuff?

(Is that a good thing or a bad thing?)

I don’t know! I mean, well I think it’s a good thing, because I feel like I’m more aware of the art than I would be just from looking at slides. You start to be aware of that. And I’ve gotten better. I mean in the beginning it was all I could see! Kind of got better at that! It’s just another way of looking at the art. But then it’s also like, going to a museum now and I’m thinking about the way it’s displayed, all these other little things going on. So. I feel like its kind of eye-opening. Being on the other side.”

This sense of beginning to see art objects differently occurred in formal teaching settings at the museum as well. The Education Study Room (ESR) is a classroom space inside the museum, where a small selection of objects from the Smart’s collection are made available for a single class. This experience of being able to see a painting, or print, or sculpture up close in a more intimate environment, enables the students to have a very different interaction with art objects.

“It’s been great. It’s definitely one of the things that like-- that was one of my first art history classes here. And it made it really interesting. It made it really different from the art history class where it was just slides. Like, it was really cool to be able to see the stuff. Close up, because there is always so much detail. You know. There was a really cool prints and I remember a Matisse sculpture that she brought out. That kind of stuff. So it was really fun. ... It’s nice to be able to look at the details you want. Also to be able to get a sense of scale, which I also think is something that gets lost in slides, when everything looks like it’s the same size. And a lot of times ... you can say, oh this image is really tiny or this image is actually huge in real life. But it’s kind of hard to get, to just sort of, imagine? So it’s much easier when you are actually looking at the object. And we also get – there is also magnifying glasses in the study room, so you can really look at close details. Yeah. I think, and I think like, especially with prints and drawings. And when you are looking at the object you can definitely see the movements of the artists

hand in the image, and that's really cool."

"I really liked [being able to see objects up close]. Because it was very like... we looked at a lot of different mediums. Um. So, yeah actually now that I think about it, a lot of the class was really focused on the way that materiality affects-- or the way the medium affects the tone or maybe certain message or historical importance of the art work. So you know, so a print, an ink print in a newspaper, will have a very different feel to it, than an oil painting of something.

(Which I guess you can only really do if you have the material there and you can interact with it?)

Totally! Yeah, yeah. Exactly. And it was very useful to be super close up I think. Because we were in the ESR – the educational room. So we were very close to the art works. And I got to see them...

(Had you been that close to a piece of art before? Or maybe I should say, what is different about seeing it there, as opposed to seeing it in a gallery?)

Er, probably, well with the drawings probably with the level of detail.

And like, it was a little weird feeling so entrusted with the works of art!

Yeah, because usually... it's like 'ah, oh no! Careful! You must stay away!'

(To be able to get that close to it...)

Yeah definitely. Because... because some of the, especially, the prints are sooo detailed. And I guess you can get pretty close in a gallery. But, um, but without the glass actually. The glass sort of stops you from seeing certain details sometimes. Yeah, so seeing those without the glass can be helpful I think. Because you can just, see, like an amazing level of detail in these prints. And, yeah. And of course, prints you can't keep out for very long because they will, like, deteriorate."

5. WHAT STUDENT EMPLOYEES LEARN AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

There is more to college than sitting in classes, and more to learn than can be measured by grades. This brief study of the student employees at the Smart museum has revealed a number of ways in which undergraduates learn and benefit from their experiences working in a campus art museum. These have included more tangible skills, such as career experience, public speaking skills, raised confidence, and additional income. But also more subtle benefits, such as a shift in the way they think about and see art, becoming more confident and accustomed to enjoying art for personal pleasure rather than to earn a grade, and the sense of social responsibility that comes from engaging in community service.

A point that came up throughout the interviews, however, was that the student-employees deeply appreciated having a space where they were treated as something other than students, while still having the security and support of being on campus. This was reflected in the sense that they were respected as young adults who had the ability to contribute something necessary and worthwhile to the museum; their time was respected through always being paid; they were trusted with a level of responsibility that they then lived up to; and that they were working for an institution that did not exist solely or entirely for undergraduates alone. Whether making coffee, guarding the galleries, inspecting artwork for damage, or organizing events—the sense of making a necessary contribution to the functioning of the museum, was essential to making student employees feel like members (albeit junior) of a larger team.

The sense of making a necessary contribution to the functioning of the museum was essential to making student employees feel like members (albeit junior) of a larger team.

This relates to the final point in this report, concerning suggestions students had for ways to improve their experience. In general, the current activities specifically designed for student employees (e.g., the intern lunches and occasional team-building events) were considered fine, but were not seen as especially attractive or interesting. A couple of students actively disliked them, while others simply said they only went because they were told to or were paid.

There were many suggestions, however, for events that allowed student employees to learn from other people in the Smart. For instance, regular sessions where interns could describe their jobs and explain the function of their department to other interns. This suggestion was particularly popular because interns working in the business side of the museum felt they knew very little about the curatorial side, and vice versa. The spatial separation due to there being two different office buildings was commonly described as a greater separation than the distinction between interns and other employees (probably also because most interns had previously worked as attendants and/or docents). Similarly, special tours or lectures from curators were a popular suggestion, that would allow any student employee to learn more about specific collections or exhibits from an expert within the museum.

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