

## Chapter 6

# Reflecting on Empowering Students in Museum Work Through Federal Work– Study Positions: A USA Case Study

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter serves as a reflective case study, in which ex-colleagues, who held different institutional roles—federal work study student worker and manager—discuss their experiences as part of the visitor engagement team at a university art museum in relation to their transition from academia to their professional fields. These conversations serve as anecdotes other professionals can reference when building student work study positions for universities. The conversation is a unique opportunity to unpack the impact a student work study program had from the perspective of its participants. Specific themes explored are 1) the expectations of participants' regarding their role at the museum, 2) reflections from participants about their lived experiences as museum employees, 3) the transferable skills participants feel they developed as a result of their role, 4) if/how they utilize those transferable skills in their current professional practice, and 5) suggestions for institutions who have or would like to build similar roles.*

### INTRODUCTION

In 2016 I started my first full-time job in my career sector, museums. The primary purpose of my role, which was new to the museum, was to manage a team of front-of-house staff at a university art museum employed through Federal Work Study (FWS). Seven of the eight student workers from the seminal cohort were first-generation, four of the students identified as white, and four identified as Hispanic or

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Latino. I was a 25-year-old Ph.D. candidate who knew she would graduate without accruing debt and had only ever worked part-time or unpaid internships in the museum sector.

My journey from academia to a professional career was such a pivotal experience that it inspired my dissertation research in 2018 (Medill, 2018). The transition from academia to the professional sector, in which students apply what they learned in their degree, is not a clear path nor a sequential experience. Instead, many students begin to weave themselves into their respective professional sectors via required internships for degree programs, volunteering, and part-time and/or full-time positions before they earn their diplomas.

The shift from higher education to ones' respective career sector is a layered process shaped by access to institutional support, socio-economic conditions, individuals' lived experiences, and personal interests (Croteau & Velez, 2006). Understanding these conditions is vital to institutions and businesses that interface with and employ students pursuing degrees in higher education. While some students might easily transition into their desired careers, others face obstacles like unemployment, underemployment, or uncertainty about their career direction (Gore, 2019). It is crucial that those preparing students to transition from academia to the workplace recognize these disparities and work to address them when structuring courses, curricula, internships, and other modes supporting future student career readiness.

Selecting a career path is fundamental to transitioning from higher education to a professional career. Students preparing to enter the workforce navigate many choices, such as selecting a degree program, the industry in which they wish to work, and how to balance school, work, and life. Students might also consider long-term career goals, work values, personal interests, and alignment with their educational experiences (Brown & Lent, 2016). Career interventions, counseling services, and experiential learning opportunities provided by educational institutions play a crucial role in assisting students with these decisions (Krumboltz et al., 1976).

Students' acquisition of and ability to apply skills and competencies unique to their sector and transferable skills, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability (Fugate et al., 2004), are central to a successful transition. These skills enhance graduates' prospects in the job market. Additionally, discipline-specific knowledge and technical expertise acquired in academia contribute significantly to students' ability to meet industry-specific requirements (Rothwell et al., 2008). Preparing students with a holistic skill set is paramount in ensuring a smooth entrance into the workforce.

Educational institutions, career services, faculty mentors, and peer networks are essential support systems for students in transition. Career services departments offer guidance on resume building, job searching, interview preparation, and networking (Hartung et al., 2002). Faculty members can provide mentorship, professional advice, and opportunities for research or internships. Peer networks allow students to exchange experiences, insights, and job leads, facilitating a sense of belonging and mutual assistance (Rivera, 2011). Furthermore, familial and societal expectations can influence students' career choices and transitions (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984). Understanding and addressing these support systems' roles in the transition process is critical for facilitating students' success.

This chapter unpacks a conversation between myself and three of the members of the first cohort of student Federal Work Study workers called Student Ambassadors at the museum—Elise, Al, and Ted. In this work, I utilize the relational lens of discussions with my colleagues to have an open conversation about our experiences—a conversation that, given our respective roles within the institution during our time of employment, would have been difficult to navigate. Readers should approach the data through our subjective lenses; they should not view this document as an objective study that judges the individuals who participated or the institution where the study was conducted.

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