

# The Troublesome Matter of the Changing Role of the Curator

By: Elizabeth A. Chambers  
December 2001

## INTRODUCTION

As a Museum Studies student, I have been frustrated by discussions about the evolution of the curator. Such discussions—about how the role of the curator has changed or will change over time—assume a sound definition of today’s curator by which to compare alternative definitions from the past or future. My frustration stems from the method (or lack thereof) used to define today’s curator.

Invariably the role of the curator is defined in terms of other, more specific roles played by museum professionals, including:

- Subject Specialist (e.g. scientist, historian)
- Collections Manager (e.g. Registrar, Conservator)
- Exhibit Developer
- Educator
- Public Spokesperson / Liaison
- Fund Raiser
- Administrator

These roles are defined in terms of specific functions and titles that are exclusively associated with them. For example, titles such as *Collections Manager* or *Exhibit Developer* could stand alone as descriptions of the roles played by the individuals in those positions. In contrast the term *Curator* has become entangled with numerous designations of the professional nomenclature. Curatorial positions are more often than not defined in terms of multiple functions and titles. Thus, I have never been satisfied with the profession’s own definition of the *Curator*, and I believe this has prevented me from participating fully in the discussion of the changing role of the *Curator* in museums today.

This paper offers a more scientific approach to the definition of the term *curator* with the hope that by better understanding what curators actually do, and the knowledge and skills they bring into the workplace, we can better understand their role in museums now and over the course of time. For this purpose, data pertaining to job descriptions and job qualifications have been compiled from the institutional records and personal statements of more than 200 museum professionals who are called Curators throughout the United States. This paper will discuss the methods used to organize these data and the results of my analysis.

## METHODOLOGY

### Identification of Data Sources

My primary objective in developing this research project was to devise a systematic method for defining the term *Curator*. Upon conducting several informal interviews with curators, I discovered that it was impossible for them to discuss the scope of their jobs objectively. More importantly, I felt that by discussing job descriptions with curatorial personnel rather than (or without additional input from) their employers, I was limiting my perspective. The role of the curator, after all, is determined by the institution in which he or she works. And that's when the proverbial light bulb went on over my head; if I could just get my hands on the job descriptions that were drafted when these curators applied for their current positions, I would have a much clearer picture of what was expected of them in their respective institutions. For this purpose, I sent letters to curators in museums of every variety across the country requesting a copy of their job descriptions and resumes.

Of course, as several of the people who responded to my request for job descriptions so vehemently pointed out, job descriptions are not always (alright, alright...not usually) an accurate representation of what curators actually do. The document an institution circulates to advertise a vacant curatorial position nevertheless speaks to the role that the governing authorities in that institution envision for the curator. The published job description seemed a logical first step to a more scientific definition of the curator. Moreover, I received so many personal statements from people who felt the need to explicate the disparity between their official job descriptions and their daily functions that I feel confident my analysis reflects the discrepancies.

As a graduate student on the verge of entering the job market, significantly less thought was required to hone in on institutionally recorded statements of curatorial training—resumes. Truthfully, resumes may not be any more accurate a representation of an individual's professional skill than job descriptions are of his or her professional responsibilities. Still, it is the document an individual presents to an institution as persuasion for hire, and it is the document by which the institution compares the qualifications of that individual to those of others. Resumes therefore offer insight into curatorial training, and they operate as a sort of currency in terms of which we can measure the curator's and employer's expectations. Every curator crafts his resume to make himself the most

attractive candidate, and the simple fact that only one resume ended up in the personnel file makes it useful for understanding the institution's standards for qualification, and thereby the role of the curator. Other institutional records—such as performance evaluations and review statements—might also contribute to a definition of the term *curator*. None of them was as common as the resume and the job description, however, and I was fairly certain that museums would be reluctant to share them, even in the name of research. Moreover, the lack of uniformity in the job descriptions and resumes I requested posed a serious threat to scientific value of my study, and would surely only have been compounded by additional documents.

## Assembly of the Sample

The method I used to build the mailing list for this project also constitutes the structure of the database that was generated from the responses to my request, and thereby the foundation of my analysis. There were 1250 individuals on the mailing list from 650 institutions. Each individual was entered into a separate record with an individual code, and associated with his institution by an institutional code. Each individual was listed as a curator in *The Official Museum Directory, 2000*, and these titles were included in my database, along with any other information required to execute the mailing. If an e-mail address was listed, it was recorded as well, and a follow-up message was sent. In the spirit of science, I devised a rigid selection process to form the list.

In order to ensure that my mailing list comprised a balanced sampling of curators from various types of institutions across the country, it was necessary to establish fixed criteria by which they could be classified. This was no simple task. Among the 650 institutions that finally were incorporated into my mailing list, there were more than 200 distinct classifications. That is to say, *The Official Museum Directory* lists a myriad of types of museums (e.g. historic house, university gallery, science center, history museum, etc.) with no apparent concern for consistency or clarification. In fact, I learned that these classifications are written by the museums themselves when they submit their forms for inclusion in *The Museum Directory*. *The Museum Directory* also lists the number of full-time and part-time paid staff at each Museum, and the names and titles of key personnel. Using the published disciplinary classifications and number of paid staff, I was able to group the countless types of museums into manageable categories, according to subject and size. The subjects include history, art, and science.

The sizes include small, medium, and large—small museums being those with ten or fewer paid staff, medium-sized museums being those with between 10 and 100 paid staff, and large museum being those with 100 paid staff or more. My mailing list included equal numbers of individuals from each of these types of museums from every state. This is not to imply that the same number of letters was sent to each state, but rather that within each state, the number of history, art, and science... small, medium, and large museum professionals contacted were proportionate.

The third criterion for my mailing was the job titles of the individuals who were to receive the mailing at each type of museum. Because this information is submitted to *The Official Museum Directory* by the museums themselves, and there is seemingly no limit to the variations in curatorial job titles, I was forced to set my own parameters. Obviously I only sent the request to individuals with the term *curator* in their titles. Among them, I was able to identify five general types:

- Curator
- Curator (+ qualifier)
- Curator (of some subject) / (+ qualifier)
- (additional title) and Curator / (of some subject / discipline) / (+ qualifier)
- Curator (of some discipline) / (+ qualifier)

The first type needs no explanation. Hereafter this type will be referred to as *plain* curator. The others build on the first type with qualifiers (e.g. assistant, associate, chief), subjects (e.g. Modern Art, Botany, Textiles), and functions (e.g. education, collections, exhibits). Curators of a subject or function might also carry a qualifier in their titles. Additional titles (e.g. Director, Museum Shop Manager) can precede or follow the curatorial title and may also carry a qualifier. While it would have been impractical to attempt to include every variation in title in my mailing list, it was fairly easy to be certain that proportionate numbers of these types of curators were contacted.

Altogether slightly more than 15% of the recipients had responded to my request as of December 1, 2001. Among the 206 responses included in my analysis, small, medium, and large museums are included, and history, art, and science-focused museums are represented by no fewer than 42 job descriptions and resumes each; the final sampling comprised 96 history, 59 art, and 42 science-focused institutions. Large museums, regardless of disciplinary focus, are the least prevalent museum type in my sampling—only 17 of the 206 replies came from individuals who work for institutions that employ 100 or more full-time or part-time paid staff. The number of responses from

small and medium-sized museum were 104 and 85 respectively. The responses to my request are more balanced with regard to curatorial job titles. Forty-five of the resumes and job descriptions I received were designated for plain curators, 25 for curators with some sort of qualifier included in their titles, 38 for curators of a some subject relating to the disciplinary focus of the institution, 52 for curators of some specific function, and 40 for curators who carried a title in addition to curator. Keep in mind, however, that several of these individuals were included in the statistical analyses for more than one title type, if for example, their titles contain qualifiers and functions or subjects.

The lower response rate from large museums is a reflection, at least in part, of the mailing list. As previously stated, the number of recipients from small, medium, and large museums was proportionate in every state. The number of small and medium institutions included in the mailing, however, was consistently greater than the number of large institutions, as there were more individuals at each of the large institutions. Among the 17 large institutions that did respond to my request, several of them sent their replies via a central administrative office, and none of them sent replies for all of the individuals included in my mailing list. Three human resources employees from large institutions sent e-mail responses explaining that it would take some time to find all of the requested materials and seek approval for their release. A few of the responses to my request apparently were passed on to other personnel in small and medium-sized museums as well, but my impression is that in such cases there was a delegation of authority by the individual I had contacted, rather than a rerouting of the request. The moral of the story is to be aware of the bureaucratic handicap of larger institutions when submitting research requests.

Although the analysis offered in this paper is based on a smaller sampling of curators than I would have liked, I believe it to be a significant indicator of the value of a more controlled method of evaluating the role of the curator. As the following pages will illustrate, there are recognizable patterns in the resumes and job descriptions of curators in various types of museums and among various title types. The systematic interpretation of these patterns facilitates a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the use of the term *curator*, and thereby helps us to better understand the role of the curator in museums today and over the course of time.

## ANALYSIS

Initially, upon receiving each response to my request for resumes and job descriptions, I filed it according to the type of institution it came from. I started a file for each of the three disciplinary focuses, and, within those files, a subdivision for each size. As I reviewed these files, I was struck more so by the differences in the documents than by their similarities. I became increasingly frustrated as I tried to compile notes for each of the nine files, and found myself dissecting each document in each file in a vain attempt to find a common denominator. I could plainly see that many of the resumes and job descriptions shared similar elements, but I couldn't decipher their meaning. It was like putting a puzzle together—I could tell that the pieces fit, but I couldn't see how. Eventually, I decided to do away with my files and start from scratch. Rather than sort the pieces of my puzzle by shape, I sorted them by color. I created files for each of the five curatorial title types, and suddenly all of the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. Thus the title types constitute the framework of my analysis, and the institutional sizes and types are discussed within the context of each title type. The first title type, the plain curator, without any inclusion of disciplinary or functional qualifiers, serves as the basis of comparison for the other four title types.

### Plain Curators

Below, I have outlined 72 distinct responsibilities that are common to many, if not all, of the job descriptions that were returned to me under the simple heading of Curator. The duties are arranged in no particular order, but they are grouped according to the more general terms most often used to define the role of the curator. Having compiled this list of *curatorial* duties it is no wonder to me that there is so much confusion about the role of the curator in museums today. Clearly, these documents reflect the numerous roles that curators play to varying degrees depending on the composition of the rest of the staff and their respective workloads at any given moment. Several of the cover letters that accompanied the resumes and job descriptions I received, for example, made reference to the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and the need to re-appropriate staff time and other resources. Before I discuss these curatorial activities in greater detail, however, I wish to mention a

few of the activities that do not appear on this list, but were prevalent in the job descriptions nonetheless.

Almost all of the curatorial job descriptions included language pertaining to special projects and other duties as assigned by the director. Special projects included plans for restoration of historic buildings and sites, transfer of collections to new storage facilities, design of storage facilities, development of a computerized cataloguing system, and gallery attendance evaluations. One individual, who wished to remain anonymous, wrote a personal statement explaining that her job description was finally being re-written to reflect her current projects and responsibilities, which centered around “research, planning, and reconstruction of a mid-Nineteenth Century water-powered sawmill...and later its maintenance, repair, and daily operation and interpretation.” Several of the descriptions also included clauses about continued professional training by attendance at conferences and enrollment in courses and training sessions. A significant number of the descriptions designated the curator as the chief administrator of the museum in the director’s absence.

Some of the responsibilities listed below appear under more than one heading, and the placement of each of the bulleted duties, and the headings themselves, are discretionary. Still, their repetition cannot be denied, whatever their arrangement. There were more than 60 common elements to the curatorial job descriptions, common elements being defined as those appearing in more than a quarter of the relevant documents. More than a third of the duties listed below are listed under the general heading of administration. The headings of Subject Specialization and Collections Management comprise another third of the common elements of these documents. The final third includes the Exhibit Development, Education, Fund Raising, and Publicity and Public Relations headings. Clearly, according to these documents, the plain title of Curator denotes considerable administrative responsibilities in addition to the more traditional connotations of collections sentinel or connoisseur. The administrative element of these job descriptions in several areas of museum operations also indicates a high level of authority in conjunction with curatorial job titles.

### Subject Specialization

- Escort visitors through the museum
- Recommend additions to the collections / items for removal from collections
- Answer research requests / inquiries
- Assist/Supervise researchers who wish to access the collection
- Research exhibit / publications topics

- Offer public lectures (classes, workshops, etc.) on the museum's collections and related topics
- Answer media inquiries
- Develop educational materials for visitors and staff
- Publish articles (in newsletters, exhibit catalogues, or academic publications)

### Collections Management

- Inventory collections
- Recommend additions to the collections / items for removal from collections
- Registration of collections
- Monitor collections storage facilities / exhibit spaces
- Maintain the condition of the collection however possible.
- Assess conservation needs of collections / perform conservation treatments
- Keep informed about current innovations and professional guidelines for collections management
- Prepare, update, and implement safety and emergency preparedness procedures
- Prepare, update, and implement short and long-term collection plans
- Maintain statistics on research requests
- Establish research policies and procedures
- Maintain insurance for the collections

### Exhibit Development

- Research exhibit / publications topics
- Design / coordinate exhibits
- Fabricate exhibits
- Prepare, update, and implement short and long-term exhibit plans

### Education

- Escort visitors through the museum
- Recruit / train / supervise volunteer staff
- Develop educational materials for visitors and staff
- Design and teach classes, workshops, and other educational programs
- Schedule tours and events

### Publicity and Public Relations

- Escort visitors through the museum
- Answer research requests / inquiries

- Assist/Supervise researchers who wish to access the collection
- Offer public lectures on the museum's collections and related topics
- Answer media inquiries
- Publicize exhibits / programs / the institution in general
- Design brochures and other promotional materials
- Staff special events
- Prepares press releases
- Promote and facilitate collaborative efforts with other institutions

### Fund Raising

- Design / prepare membership / donor solicitations
- Maintain correspondence with donors / prospective donors
- Coordinate special events
- Research sources of funding
- Prepare grant applications

### Administration

- Recruit / train / supervise volunteer staff
- Develop / balance budgets
- Building maintenance
- Purchase supplies
- Answer phone
- Open and distribute mail
- Pay bills
- Schedule tours and events
- Process payroll
- Design / prepare membership / donor solicitations
- Dust (clean)
- Computer maintenance (negotiate service contracts and put in service calls for all office equipment, maintain back-up systems, etc.)
- Update administrative procedural manual
- Take out the garbage
- Prepare, update, and implement safety and emergency preparedness procedures
- Maintain first aid kits
- Staff special events
- Coordinate special events

- Ensure the museum’s compliance with relevant legislative requirements, particularly those pertaining to its non-profit status
- Manage the museum’s gift shop
- Receive / register visitors (especially when office assistant or a volunteer is not available)
- Oversee daily museum operations and staff
- Orient new employees with curatorial staff function, defining situations in which a curator should be contacted
- Ensure that the museum is open to the public at designated times
- Attend committee meetings and general board meetings as requested (i.e. liaison to the Board of Directors)

I ranked the prioritization of these responsibilities according to what percentage of each job description was devoted to tasks that fell into each general category. The prioritization of the plain curator’s job description strongly favors the Collections Management, Exhibition Development, and Subject Specialization categories (in that order), but many of the personal statements I received intimated that in actuality more time is devoted to the areas of Administration, Fund Raising, and Public Relations. There was no need for me to postulate as to the cause of this disparity. Numerous respondents took it upon themselves to explain it to me in their personal statements. Administration and infrastructure, public awareness and support, and of course, the almighty dollar, are essential for collections management, exhibit development, and subject specialization initiatives. If no one else has been assigned these responsibilities, as is often the case in smaller museums, they fall upon the curator.

Overall, there seems to be a disconnect between the role envisioned for curators and the role they actually play, but their job descriptions clearly reflect both. Education was the category with the fewest number of explicit responsibilities, and it was the category least often mentioned in personal statements. In this case the desired and extant role of the plain curator appear to be in harmony. Most often in cases where responsibilities under the Education category were not assigned to the curator, I was able to determine that another staff position was devoted to the development of educational programs and materials, particularly beyond the scope of exhibits.

The patterns of prioritization were consistent among the various types of museums as defined by disciplinary focus with one exception; in art museums the order of prioritization of the first three categories was Exhibition Development, Subject Specialization, and then Collections Management. The various types of museums were not, however, proportionately represented among the group of job descriptions for plain curators. Overwhelmingly the title of plain curator belongs to individuals employed by small history museums—23 out of 40 of the respondents. While the rest of the plain

curator titles were distributed evenly among art and science focused museums, they were also almost exclusively small institutions.

Whereas job descriptions offer a glimpse into the responsibilities of the curator as defined in the workplace, resumes document the skills and training a curator brings to his or her job. Among the 45 plain curators included in this analysis, half (22) either applied for their present positions already having obtained a graduate degree, or are currently pursuing one in a related field. The majority of those degrees (13) are Museum Studies degrees. A couple of them graduated from G.W.U. , and it did occur to me that fellow museum studies students and/or graduates may have felt more compelled to respond to my request for a resume and a job description than their counterparts without the same background. Regardless of program loyalty, however, these data attest to a high level of professional training in all aspects of curatorial work, and an advanced level of education of plain curators in general. Three of the 45 respondents had post graduate degrees in unrelated fields, five had undergraduate degrees in either related or unrelated fields, and three had Ph.D.s, though only one of them was in a related field (the other two were retired academics).

Even among those individuals who did not have advanced degrees, several were trained in administration, or more specifically, non-profit administration. Others had experience in education or fund raising, and a few resumes eluded to special skills in conservation and collections management. Ironically, the largest contingent of resumes after those from individuals with graduate degrees in a related field was from a group of people (12) who had little or no formal training in any of the fields reflected in their job descriptions. These untrained curators nonetheless demonstrated a thorough cognizance of the same areas of responsibility that were outlined above, and their personal statements described the same frustrations as those of their more formally educated counterparts. Moreover, the resumes and personal statements of these individuals demonstrated unique and considerable subject specialization. In summary, plain curators are extremely well trained for their positions.

It has been suggested to me that an analysis of plain curators would be sufficient for this project, but I believe that would be like waving the red cape and expecting the bull not to charge. The complexity of the definition of the term *curator* can only be overcome if the same empiricism we have applied to the plain curator is used to analyze other titles into which it is incorporated. The simplest way to expand on the definition of the plain curator is to introduce a qualifier to his title, such as chief or assistant. Now we see how one of the characteristics we have established for the plain curator—that of authority—is manipulated to suit a particular workplace.

## Qualified Curators

It is somewhat misleading to suggest that only 25 of the 206 respondents to my research request fell into the category of curators with a qualifier. More accurately, they were the only respondents who fell solely into that category—i.e. they were not also curators of a particular subject or function, or curator who also have another title. In fact, more than half of all of the respondents had qualifiers in their titles (hereafter referred to as *qualified* curators). These data speak to the pervasive delineation of authority among curators. The preponderance of qualified curators is found in medium sized and large institutions, though a few of them popped up in the same small institutions that also employed plain curators. Qualified curators are ubiquitous in museums of every disciplinary type.

According to the job descriptions used in this analysis, qualified curators are engaged in essentially the same activities as plain curators—all of them. As a group, qualified curators are distinguished from plain curators only by their level of authority in the institution. If this were otherwise, there would be no need for a qualifier. For example, assume there are two curators on a museum staff, and one exclusively plans exhibits and educational programs, and the other exclusively handles research requests and cares for the collections. In this scenario, there is no basis for a plain curator / qualified curator relationship between the curators. More likely their titles would reflect their respective functions (e.g. Collections Manager / Curator of Collections and Director / Curator of Exhibitions and Educational Programming). The subordination of qualified curators resonates in their balance of duties with those of plain curators (and even another qualified curator), their level of authority and public visibility. An assistant curator, for example, may devote more of his time to research of collections objects or for exhibits, most likely to be reviewed by another curator, while a plain curator or a chief curator is giving lectures or bidding on new additions to the collection. The notion that qualified curators in subordinate positions necessarily have fewer responsibilities than other qualified curators or plain curators, however, is debunked by the data I have extracted from their job descriptions and their personal statements.

Almost all of the qualified curators in my sample were in subordinate positions with respect to the other curators at their institutions. The education and professional training of qualified curators nevertheless mirror those of plain curators. Although it may seem counterintuitive that employees with less authority would have the same level of education and training as their curatorial superiors,

the resumes I have analyzed indicate precisely this. The only discernable variant is the number of years of field experience. I can only speculate that a number of these subordinate qualified curators are biding their time until they are competitive for a more authoritative curatorial position.

## Functional Curators

Curators of a particular museum function (hereafter referred to as *functional* curators) are, according to this analysis, most often named in the areas of Collections Management, Exhibit Development, Education and Public Relations. Unlike qualified curatorial titles, these functional titles do not appear, in and of themselves, to reflect institutional hierarchies. Rather, the concentration of functional curators' professional responsibilities, according to the broad categories of curatorial work already discussed, appear to define the relationship of one functional curator to another. That said, I should add the disclaimer that there were too few job descriptions from functional curators in any particular area of museum operations in my sampling to thoroughly assess their respective levels of authority within the larger institutional framework. The education and professional training of functional curators appears to mimic that of plain and qualified curators, although in this regard I believe my sampling was too small to draw any direct parallels between the different types. This begs the questions, if not to establish a hierarchy, why delineate the duties of curators with these functional titles? And why are half of the categories of curatorial work identified earlier not reflected in these titles?

When I separated all of the job descriptions and resumes used in this analysis according to title type, the pile for functional curators was noticeably higher than the others. Functional curatorial titles were prevalent among every type of museum as defined by disciplinary type and size, but more so among medium-sized and large museums, and history and science museums. These data suggest that museums—medium and large, history and science oriented institutions in particular—have experimented with the use of categorical demarcations as they have grappled with the changing use of the term *curator*. My analysis of 52 job descriptions, resumes, and personal statements from functional curators, however, leads me to believe that functional titles can only fuel the fire of curatorial confusion because there is no consensus for a basic definition of the term *curator*.

*Webster's New World Dictionary* defines a curator as, “a person in charge of a museum, library, etc.,” or as “a guardian as of a minor.” *The American Heritage Dictionary's* definition offers “one in charge of a collection, as at a museum or library.” My next project will be to send out a request to curators for responses to these definitions and suggestions for improvement. If the museum community were to limit itself to these narrow definitions of the term, then curatorial responsibilities would be limited to collections management and administration. Arguably exhibition development and education functions are implied in these definitions, not to mention subject specialty, which isn't mentioned in the dictionary or in functional curatorial titles. Similarly, the argument could be made that the dictionary implies that public relations and fundraising are just part of the administrative aspect of curatorial work. It seems feasible therefore to expand on the dictionary definition of the term *curator* without inducing controversy about its fundamental meaning.

Confusion prevails, however, when a broader definition is dissected into incommunicable parts. For example, a Curator of Public Programs might be responsible for activities that could be loosely tied to the dictionary definition of the curator. By retaining the term *curator* as part of his or her title, however, one muddles the distinguishing characteristics of a curator and a public program specialist. I believe this is why four of the respondents to my request, who held functional curatorial titles according to *The Official Museum Directory, 2000*, wrote personal statements explaining that the word *curator* had been eliminated from their titles. Two of the four—a former Curator of Collections and a former Curator of Education and Public Programs—made a point of saying that their job descriptions did not change in the least when their titles were “updated.” They are now addressed as Collections Manager and Director of Public Programs respectively. The other two respondents—another former Curator of Education and a former Curator of Exhibits—did not mention any changes to their job descriptions, but I suspect they would have if there were any to speak of. Moreover, the authors of these two dictionaries might be inclined to argue with the adoption of the term *Collections Manager*, as it speaks directly to the role they define as *curatorial*, but I digress. Several respondents to my research request alluded in their personal statements to the use of the term *curator* in conjunction with specialties, such as public programs, as an indication of a certain level of authority. Certainly this analysis has made a case for the catalyst of confusion.

## Additional Title Curators

Curatorial titles are further complicated by their use in conjunction with other curatorial titles or non-curatorial titles. Assuming a Curator is, as the dictionary asserts, “the person in charge of a museum,” it arguably would be redundant to refer him as Director and Curator. Seventeen of the 40 respondents to my research request who hold multiple titles nevertheless identified themselves as Director and Curator. Two of the seventeen individuals were Directors who had assumed the curatorial title in the absence of someone who held the title of Curator exclusively. They each sent me two job descriptions, one for the Director and one for Curator. While these two sets of job descriptions are by themselves inconclusive, it is noteworthy that the most outstanding characteristic of the descriptions for the Directors was administrative authority. The descriptions for the Curators included some administrative responsibilities, but centered around subject specialty, collections management, and exhibit development. Could it be that some museum professionals feel that the term *Curator* does not evoke a sufficient sense of administrative authority unless it is paired with a term such as *Director*? If so, wouldn't that fly in the face of the use of functional curatorial titles to ascribe authority to staff members?

Among the other 23 respondents with multiple titles were titles such as Curator and Assistant Director, Curator and Conservator, Curator and Collections Manager, Associate Curator and Professor, and several variations of curatorial and non-curatorial titles used to augment the title of a curator with a subject specialization (e.g. Curator and Historian). Categorical and authoritative delineation of the same curatorial functions previously discussed are the only common elements of these titles. They are assigned in museums of every size, though predominantly in larger institutions in this sample, and with no apparent prejudice toward a disciplinary focus. The academic and professional training of functional curators and curators with multiple titles is comparable with that of plain and qualified curators with one notable exception; the occurrence of informally trained respondents in this sample was proportionately less frequent among the latter. I cannot attribute this irregularity to any particular cause, but I am rather inclined to interpret it as coincidence of the relatively few number of respondents from functional curators and curators with multiple titles.

## Subject Curators

Patterns of education and professional experience for curators of the last title type—the curator of a particular subject, or *subject* curator—vary considerably from the four title types already discussed. Thirty-eight of the resumes I reviewed for this analysis belonged to curators of a particular academic area of concentration related to the museum’s disciplinary focus. The majority of the subject curators (29) are employed by art and science focused museums, and 13 of them were employed by large institutions. In the art oriented museums, slightly fewer than half of the subject curators hold Ph.D.s in a field related to their museum work. In science oriented museum, the ratio of subject curators with Ph.D.s in relevant fields was just less than two thirds for my sample. All of the subject curators who responded to my research request hold at least one post-graduate degree in a discipline associated with that of their respective museums. This title type does not include a contingent of curators with little or no formal training as each of the others did. Several of the subject curators are affiliated with university galleries in addition to being a member of the faculty.

It should come as no surprise that subject curators—according to their job descriptions—are entrenched in their subject specialties, but their job descriptions clearly illustrate that their responsibilities reach into each of the eight categories of curatorial work outlined at the beginning of this paper. Their academic and professional training seem to conform to a more traditional understanding of the role of the curator. Essentially they are subject specialists, although this is never formally stated in a job description. All of their duties that relate to the other categories of curatorial work can be interpreted as dilations of their disciplinary expertise. Their job descriptions confirm that they are a logical choice for collections management because they are generally more familiar with the collections than anyone else. Likewise they are uniquely qualified to select and arrange objects for presentation, and who better to prepare applications for conservation and collections management grants? As the interpreters of a museum collection, subject curators are often called upon to represent the museum in public forums, foster collaboration with other institutions, and develop educational programming and materials beyond the scope of exhibit space. Naturally, these individuals assume a high level of administrative authority. If it is a new phenomenon to define the term *curator* as a function of subject specialty, then I think we’re on to something. Subject Specialization is notably the only category of curatorial work that cannot be encompassed by any other title. True, subject

specialists might also be known as historians or scientists, but not likely within the context of their management of collections and production of exhibits in a museum setting.

## CONCLUSIONS

My impression is that there are two basic sources of confusion about the proper use of the term *curator* in job titles. The first involves the level of authority associated with the term. In small museums, there is less confusion because the curator takes on most or all of tasks associated with the categories of curatorial work that emerged from the job descriptions and personal statements of the individuals included in this paper. As institutions grow, these responsibilities are divided among employees with varying levels of specialization and authority. The second and more confounding source of confusion is the application of curatorial titles to particular aspects of curatorial work when they are performed independently of one another. If I had a nickel for every time someone asked me just what it means to be a curator of education, I would be free of student loans. It's not that education is outside the realm of curatorial work, but that education is a discernible function in its own right. Education is not curatorial by definition. In this way the word curator is misused and overused by museum professionals even more so than by the public.

While curatorial roles are bound to change, by the decade or by the day, the definition and use of the term *curator* should remain constant—it is our measuring stick. If the definition of the curator as subject specialist is maintained, the matter of his changing role in the museum setting becomes much more manageable. It may be that subject specialists have traditionally been responsible for the development of exhibits. To the degree that their subject specialties help shape the content and design of the exhibit, this is still true. As the exhibit development takes on its own professional identity, however, curators need not be burdened with the aspects of exhibit development that do not require their intellectual expertise. Put less diplomatically, there may be a staff member better qualified than curators to supervise certain aspects of exhibit development—someone trained as an educator, for example, who will be better equipped to anticipate the wants and needs of various audiences. Presumably the curator in this scenario would have more time for other things, such as acquiring new objects for the collection, or giving public lectures about the museum's disciplinary focus and mission. The other side of that coin is that bigger collections and more exhibits require more resources. Hence,

the curator might also be called upon to pick up some of the administrative slack, particularly if there is a staff position devoted to exhibit development but not one devoted to fund raising. A statistical analysis of staff configurations in various types of museums, presupposing the definition of the curator set forth in these pages would offer considerable insight into the changing role of the curator in modern museums.

The data gathered from curatorial job descriptions and resumes for this analysis has indeed provided a more complete and precise definition of today's curator. Represented in these documents are eight categories of curatorial work that appear to be common to all curators, and one—Subject Specialization—that binds them together into a unique and cohesive, curatorial identity. The changing role of the curator over time is best understood in terms of the shifts in emphasis among these various curatorial functions as they pertain to subject specialty within the context of an evolving professional museum culture. Ideally the same sort of empirical analysis touched upon in this paper would compare documents from different moments in time, and incorporate the evolution of other titles and functions unique to museums, so that we could understand the changing role of the curator in this broader context.