FOR LOVE OR MONEY
CONFRONTING THE STATE OF MUSEUM SALARIES

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MAKING SALARIES A PRIORITY FOR MUSEUM BOARDS

Dawn Salerno and Mark Gold
MANY MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS feel underappreciated and underpaid by their employers, some to the point of leaving for positions outside of museums. The employers, led ultimately by museum boards, are faced with the challenge of balancing a budget, and as is often a solution, do not prioritize staff salaries and salary increases. The result is a field where salaries for highly qualified people remain low, staff size is as lean as it can be to sustain basic services or meet out-sized goals, and employees are asked to do more for less. Yet the prioritization of investment in the museum visitor, by way of quality museum programs, is rarely questioned. But what if, in this environment of low salaries and high staff turnover, that very quality was at risk, causing a downward spiral in attendance and revenue? The benefits of employee longevity, loyalty, and productivity are lost, and the goals of achieving diversity and addressing pay inequities become harder to achieve.

The solution to this dilemma lies in a paradigm shift so that governing boards perceive museum professionals as an asset, and therefore, a resource worthy of investment. So that they view them as a means of improving the quality of exhibitions, programming, and visitor experience, all of which result in increased revenue and support. So that they appreciate both the costs of under-compensation and the benefits of offering more generous salaries. A new paradigm for museum compensation might look like this:

Compensation policies are designed to attract and retain the best employees in a competitive environment, and as being most likely to yield the best mission-fulfilling programming and visitor experience, while at
the same time meeting revenue goals. Equitable pay is, therefore, a mission-critical investment in, and ultimately the path towards, the museum’s success.

Improving the compensation of museum professionals will attract and retain high quality employees who will develop and deliver the best programming and visitor experience, resulting in an increase in reputation, programs – and revenue to support the important goals of achieving diversity and eliminating pay inequities. Furthermore, an investment in museum professionals is as powerful a move toward economic sustainability as any investment that can be made. The challenge is to convince those in charge of budget design and approval of the validity of this argument.

The power to make these changes lies with the museum’s board of directors. Progress at a board level can be made in several ways – some of which are internal to the organization and some of which may be imposed or influenced by external sources.

Are museum professionals underpaid?

BLS also identifies Similar Occupations for each category. For this category, three of the four occupations identified generally require master’s degrees as well: Anthropologists and Archeologists, Historians, and Librarians. The Median
Pay for those categories, as of May, 2017, was $62,280, $59,120, and $58,520 respectively – 23% to 31% higher than museum professionals.

BLS breaks down the median pay for Archivists, Curators, and Museum Workers by the industries in which they work. For those employed by museums, historical sites and similar institutions, the median pay was $43,710:

- Educational services, state, local, and private: $52,960
- Government: $49,430
- Museums, historical sites and similar institutions: $43,710

It is difficult not to conclude that something is out of alignment when the BLS reports the average salary for Food Service Managers as $52,030 per year, and for Postal Service Workers as $57,260 – over $13,500 more than Curators and Museum Workers.

**Why are museum professionals underpaid?**

There are simply too many professionals vying for the same jobs, and too few jobs available for professionals looking for full-time employment. This is basic Economics 101. Price is determined by supply and demand. The greater the supply of a product or service, the lower the price will be.

In a response to the post Museums and the Salary Conundrum in the *Leadership Matters* blog (Baldwin, 2016), one respondent related the following experience, not all that uncommon:

When I post an entry level job for our historic site, I tend to get between 60-90 qualified applicants for the
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position. That means that I can choose from a wide selection of folks, most with similar degrees and experience. We have a set salary for the position so there is no opportunity for applicants to negotiate but even if they did, I could probably just move down the list until I found someone who would take the job at the salary offered.

Imbalance between supply and demand

The following four factors contribute to an imbalance in supply and demand.

Unpaid interns and volunteers: Volunteers play a crucial – and appropriate – role in the operation of most museums. They engage elements of the community and make valuable connections between the community and the institution. The 2009 Museum Financial Information published by American Alliance of Museums (AAM) included information on the ratio of volunteers to paid full-time staff. For museums overall, it was about six volunteers for each paid employee. For museums with budgets of less than $250,000, the ratio was 18:1. Often, the work performed by volunteers is work that would otherwise be performed by museum professionals.

Museum studies programs: Many programs require internships, reducing the need to pay entry level professionals to do that work. The irony is that the unpaid intern is paying for the privilege of an unpaid internship, in the form of tuition. The professional “promise” that these proliferating programs offer – and that the credentials bestowed by them imply – contribute to the supply of museum professionals as well.

Part-time positions: Employers often hire part-time
employees to avoid paying for full-time benefits. The downside is that part-time employees often mirror the institution’s lack of commitment to them. Because they work less, they generally build fewer helpful relationships with other employees, visitors, donors, and partners. They know less about programs and services and give the appearance of a less-than-stable professional staff.

*Outsourced and contracted services:* This phenomenon can be seen in non-museum professional services like custodial, food service, and security, in entry level positions, and even in the most critical mission-related jobs. The same upside and downside that informs decisions on the use of part-time employees pertains here.

Beyond supply and demand imbalance
The reasons for systemic under-compensation beyond simple supply and demand include the following.

*Sacrifice measure:* There is value in the feeling of self-worth and prestige that comes from working in any organization that contributes positively to the betterment of society or the individual, and in a field that enjoys the respect and trust of the population at large. These intangible rewards increase the willingness of some individuals to work for less.

*Preponderance of females:* According to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, the ratio of women’s and men’s median annual earnings was 80.5% for full-time, year-round workers in 2017, resulting in a gender wage gap of 19.5%. In a field of mostly women, the causes of the inequities in the compensation of women are aligned with the causes of depression in the compensation of the field generally.
Salary surveys: Museum salary surveys are typically simply compilations of field-wide raw data and are not benchmarked against comparable external areas of work. If the museum field as a whole is underpaid, a salary survey will not demonstrate that. Unfortunately, salary surveys may even be used to justify low compensation: “We’re going to pay you an average wage for your job and our budget.” In which case under-compensation is perpetuated.

Museum hyperactivity syndrome: Many museums are quite ambitious about the reach of their collections, exhibitions, and programs. Many aim to do a lot and to make a significant impact in the community in order to attract, secure, or satisfy grant funding. Grantors want to see growth, innovation, and impact. These metrics can spur museums into taking on too much and cutting corners by freezing salaries, hiring part-time employees and contractors, and engaging volunteers. Museums do not want to seem stagnant or disinterested in reaching out to and engaging diverse audiences. The hyperactivity of simply taking on too much can sideline salary discussions and divert resources from full-time staff to part-time and temporary employees.

Reliance on individual earning history: Systemic undercompensation and salary inequities can be perpetuated, on an individual basis, by setting the salary of a candidate or employee based on what they are currently earning. Making this information unavailable is seen as a strategy to break the cycle. Laws prohibiting employers from asking for candidate salary information have been enacted in several states, including California, Oregon, Connecticut, Vermont, and Massachusetts.
What are the effects of under-compensation on museum professionals?
In a 2016 survey conducted by Sarah Erdman, Claudia Ocello, Dawn Salerno and Marieke Van Damme, 63% of the respondents who had left the museum field identified their reason for doing so as the pay being too low (Erdman, 2017). Further analysis provided the following results:

- A majority left the field within their first one to five years, 85% within ten years of entering it. The field is losing its youngest members and, likely, its most diverse.
- The average salary of these individuals increased by $10,000, or approximately 27%, when they left the museum and got their first job outside the field.

The effect of under-compensation is documented by innumerable personal stories, often posted as comments on blogs, about the struggles of museum professionals to make ends meet (including the repayment of educational debt) and the stress and frustration that result. Beyond the financial challenges, many museum professionals suffer from low morale and a sense of being overworked and exploited. The burden of financial obligations and the desire to achieve an improved lifestyle take their toll, and many leave the field they love in frustration.

What are the effects of more generous compensation on museums?
An increased level of compensation can have powerful effects across the museum, including a higher quality and more engaged workforce with positive effects on “production”
(including the quality of exhibitions and programing), and “sales” (including admissions, programs, events, and other points of engagement and sources of revenue). There will be less turnover, resulting in a staff that is more knowledgeable, familiar with the institution, and accustomed to working toward common goals as a team, with less money expended on hiring and training. A higher level of compensation will attract more qualified and capable employees.

There will be a sense of loyalty and improved morale, resulting in a staff with greater “buy-in” and a willingness to extend themselves. A higher level of compensation will allow groups with fewer resources to take these jobs rather than seek higher-paying positions in other fields, resulting in a more diverse workforce. And, finally, a staff that is not stressed about personal financial issues will be less distracted and able to focus more completely on their work.

In their chapter in this volume, Micah Styles and Ian Duckworth observe:

With the concept of staff value at its heart, an institution can potentially set up a virtuous circle, attracting, engaging and retaining “better” staff which in turn leverages employee value and job satisfaction. Happier employees with rewards, recognition and career pathways are perfectly positioned to take advantage of the new skills and ways of working required in a museum of today.

An institution which invests in their employees in this way is better equipped to get the most out of the way
museum staff structures have changed, are changing and will change further to create inclusiveness, accessibility, social networking, partnerships and community benefit...

Maybe the ultimate added value for museums comes from the recognition that all the staff within the institution add value. With this buy-in, the larger added value that only museums are equipped to deliver is revealed – to put a set of experiences into a visitor’s head they didn’t know were possible – and then get them to come back for more of something completely different. (Styles and Duckworth, 2019)

A fairer level of compensation is consistent with the values of the typical museum and of the museum community. Museums present themselves as repositories of trust and of the values of diversity, equity and inclusion. To exploit staff by paying, in many cases, less than a living wage is inconsistent with those values.

**How do we get from talk to action?**

As with any call to action, the essential starting point is to identify where the power to effect change resides. Whether in the context of adopting a budget or in setting institutional policies on salaries, the vortex of power resides with the Board of Trustees or equivalent governing body of the museum.

Changes in board perspective and policy can come as a result of influences internal to the museum as well those that are imposed on boards by external conditions and forces. Such
influences, conditions, and forces may not be a complete anti-
dote to the problem but can contribute in a positive way to a solution. Internal sources of change include:

- educating the board about the benefits of adopting a new paradigm on museum compensation and/or the benefits of specific practices toward achieving that end, and effecting the adoption of specific policies or practices;
- achieving changes in board composition to make it more likely that any effort to adopt a new paradigm or make specific policy changes will be successful.

**Internal sources of change**

Adoption of institutional policies and practices

When Lawrence Yerdon arrived at Strawbery Banke Museum in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, as its President and CEO in 2004, the museum had challenges with deficits, building maintenance, programming, and underpaid staff. A series of major changes resolved most of those issues and, starting in 2016, two years prior to the launch of a capital campaign, Yerdon, the finance director, and the board chair used every opportunity in board meetings to mention the staff salary issue. The message was, “We can’t get and keep good people unless we pay reasonable salaries.” They saw it both as a business argument and as a moral issue. Yerdon presented the board with a formal analysis based on salary surveys, inflation calculations, and other data and offered recommendations. In 2018, the board included a line item in its endowment campaign sufficient to generate enough revenue on an annual basis to bring salaries in line with the recommendations.
Effecting change at a board level from within the museum generally starts with the executive director and/or one or more board members willing to take up the cause. It’s not a cause likely to be embraced as a priority by a newly-appointed executive director. Financial sustainability, compelling programming, capital needs, and constituency satisfaction will get more attention and will consume less political capital than advocating for staff. But with a reservoir of trust and relationship built over time, as was possessed by Yerdon, the cause can be championed.

Changes at the board level can take at least two forms: first, the adoption of policies that will inform budget, recruiting, and compensation decisions; and, second, the implementation of specific practices.

An example of the former might be something as simple as a policy that the museum has a goal that its employees be paid in the top half, quartile, or tenth of field-wide salaries as reported in relevant salary surveys. If all museums committed to being in even the top half, the law of averaging will result in a field-wide increase in salaries.

Likewise, boards could voluntarily adopt specific practices such as including salary ranges in job listings, reconsideration of the role of volunteers, part-time employees, and contractors, and changes in recruiting and hiring practices.

Changing the composition of the board
Survey data reported in the AAM’s Museum Board Leadership 2017: A National Report reveals that 89.3% of museum board members are Caucasian and an astounding 46% of museum boards are all white (BoardSource, 2017: 8). Females constitute 45% of board
members, but only 38% of board chairs (ibid).

The likelihood of a board embracing changes in policies around salaries may well depend on who is seated at the table where those decisions are made. Since systemic under-compensation may arise in part from the preponderance of females in the field and may impede progress to achieve diversity and pay equity, one could infer that by increasing diversity (including gender diversity) on museum boards, initiatives to improve compensation and address inequities would be more warmly received and more likely to succeed.

The presence of a museum professional (beyond the museum’s executive director) on the board would offer a diversity of experience and perspective and benefit the museum not just on the salary issue, but also on policies relating to exhibition or education. While it might be problematic if those seats were occupied by professionals within the museum itself, real value could be added by professionals from other museums or even those retired from service, especially for small or mid-sized museums. Regional and state associations could consider creating an online clearing house to connect museums interested in such expertise at a board level and professionals willing to contribute their time as a board member.

**External sources of change**

While one way to raise salaries across the field is for boards to embrace better practices one museum at a time, there are external sources of change that can have the same result, but field-wide. External sources of change include legislative mandates, actions by professional associations, unionization, and social media.
Legislative mandates
There is a disinclination on the part of governments and legislatures to insert themselves into board-level decision making in the absence of strong public policy rationales. Prohibiting discrimination is perhaps the most obvious example where public policy overrides board prerogative. But there are examples of legislatures imposing requirements designed to achieve results consistent with public policy goals on the issues of under-compensation and inequity:

- The Act to Establish Pay Equity (G. L. c.149, s.105A) became effective in Massachusetts in 2018. The law makes it illegal for a potential employer to ask a candidate about their present salary and gives employees the legal right to disclose information about their own compensation to others. It provides a defense from claims of discrimination to those companies that undertake a good-faith evaluation of their pay practices and demonstrate reasonable progress to eliminate gender-based pay differentials.
- In 2007, Denmark required companies with over 35 employees to disclose pay data by gender. In a study reported by Rebecca Greenfield of Bloomfield News on December 5, 2018, researchers looked at salaries between 2003 and 2008 (before and after the law) and pay at companies that didn’t have to comply. Women received bigger wage increases at firms that had to report their pay data, reducing the gender gap by 7%.

There is a role for legislation in the spectrum of strategies to address under-compensation and pay inequities. A possible
strategy for the field, including its individual stakeholders and professional associations that purport to speak for the field, is to advocate for legislation that can affect salaries and disparities, to include, perhaps, even an increase in minimum wage.

Actions by professional associations
There are several strategies that professional museum associations can deploy to influence the conduct of museums. They include: legislative advocacy as mentioned above; conditioning access to association resources on compliance with certain requirements; the establishment of professional standards and articulation of best practices; and setting requirements for accreditation.

In taking such actions, professional associations are faced with the dilemma of having two constituencies whose interests might conflict with each other. National, regional, and state museum associations (in contrast to profession-specific associations) generally have both institutional members and individual members. Whereas individual members may push for increased transparency, institutional members view the salaries as a critical component of their financial sustainability and wish to control their own hiring practices and compensation policies.

A current flashpoint for that dilemma is the issue of whether websites that post jobs (many of which are hosted by museum associations) should require that job listings include a salary range. The rationale for requiring salary information is that the listed salary will be one reflecting the fair value of the work involved and preclude employers from offering the position to a qualified candidate who might be willing or desperate
enough to accept less. The disclosure alone speaks to a value of transparent hiring practices.

On October 4, 2018, a blog post by Laura Lott, President and CEO of AAM, titled, _Leading by Example, Not by Mandate_, explained the decision by AAM not to require salary information on job listings as follows:

> It is not our practice to institute strict, national, one-size-fits-all requirements. The beauty and strength of our Alliance is the range of people and museums we represent. Even the core standards for museums are not prescriptive – they are broad, adaptable, outcome-oriented statements fulfilled by each museum in different ways based on its discipline, type, budget, governance structure, and other unique circumstances.

> After thorough consideration, we continue to believe that AAM should not mandate the specific actions a museum takes to demonstrate its commitment to providing equitable opportunities for all. So at this time, we do not plan to implement a requirement to list pay, which is often governed by myriad federal, state, and local labor laws; umbrella-institution policies; labor union contracts; and more. (Lott, 2018)

There was considerable blowback on social media. In the blog’s comment section (ibid), Paul Orselli noted AAM’s “outlier” status on the issue and accused AAM of “[giving] cover to ‘bad actors’ continuing to exploit museum workers and take advantage of rationalizations like the one AAM has just provided.”
In another blog comment, Paul C. Thistle suggested that AAM’s individual members should “question whether the AAM also champions the interests of its members who happen to be ‘museum workers’ as well as the interests of museums as institutions.” He noted that “…the AAM Code of Ethics for Museums (2000) states in the same sentence that the governing authority of museum institutions commit themselves to protect and enhance not only the museum’s collections, programmes, physical, and financial resources, but their ‘human resources’ as well.” (ibid)

Taking a position contrary to AAM, The American Association for State and Local History, which also has institutional and individual members, states its policy as follows:

Only job and internship postings that provide salary/compensation information are permitted on the AASLH job board. In the case of internships or fellowships, non-monetary compensation must be explained in the body of the posting.

As of this writing, three of the six regional associations in the United States have imposed a requirement for the listing of salary. Two regional associations “encourage” the inclusion of that information, and one has taken no position.

Associations, especially the national associations, possess the ability to establish, articulate, and propagate professional standards and best practices for the field. Even if those standards are not enforceable, they operate as a statement of values that can at least influence boards. The areas covered by existing standards and best practices are broad, but there is little in terms of how a museum can or should value and care for its staff. Museum
associations that set standards can advance the cause by encouraging member museums to embrace specific policies and practices designed to treat employees equitably (both in the hiring process and thereafter), encouraging member museums to undertake the type of gender equity review described in the Massachusetts statute, and articulating a set of value-based principles associated with volunteers and unpaid interns. Even something as basic as a commitment to pay a living wage, as determined on a geographic basis and using several well-respected tools, would at least raise the profile of these important issues.

The Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) did just that by passing a resolution encouraging museums to pay their interns, noting that paid internships are essential to increasing access and equity for the museum profession (Association of Art Museum Directors, 2019). In the statement, Jill Medvedow, Co-Chair of AAMD’s Professional Issues Committee, and Director of the ICA Boston, observed that:

...by failing to pay interns, we ensure that these experiences are only really accessible to those who are already financially secure and, often, people who have established career networks available to them.

The Museum Trustee Association (MTA) occupies a unique position in the US museum community. According to its website, it “supports and advises its members as they set policy [and] allocate resources.” MTA could be positioned as a powerful convener of discussions around this important issue among the only people able to effect change.

Those associations, like AAM, that offer accreditation have
the power to set the criteria for that status. Why not build into the accreditation criteria some commitment – if not actual practice – on the part of museums to payment of a fair wage and the end of pay inequity? They could include a commitment to include wage ranges in job postings, delivery of salary data broken out by gender and race, and compliance with other best practices in hiring and compensation. In this way, employees are afforded the same attention that the accreditation process places on objects in the collection.

There are actions that professional associations can take to improve these conditions in their role of setting and maintaining field-wide standards. Associations can be proactive, setting a standard on their own initiative, or they can be reactive, responding to members advocating for change.

Advocacy by members can be individual or organized. A powerful example of the latter is the initiative by the National Emerging Museums Professional Network (NEMPN). Addressing concerns raised by its own members, NEMPN launched a campaign to encourage museum associations that hosted job postings to require the inclusion of salary information. The campaign, started in 2018, included personal outreach by NEMPN to 60 targeted associations, a Change.org petition, and a letter-writing campaign. According to Michelle Epps, President of NEMPN, of the 35 associations that NEMPN engaged with, fifteen now require salary information, seven strongly encourage it, and it is under consideration by others.

Unionization
It is beyond the scope of this chapter to analyze the reasons why museums professionals might unionize – or decline to do
so – and beyond the scope to analyze the effectiveness of unionization in achieving it goals. Suffice to say that it is becoming one of the strategies of response to inadequate salaries and, in a social media environment, a response that is getting more attention than a decade ago. Examples include Museum of Modern Art, The Tenement Museum, and the New Museum.

Unionization can result from the failure or refusal of museum management to deal with its employees and salaries as an investment instead of an expense like any other – or perhaps the financial inability to do so. Once in place, however, the process of addressing salaries (and, indeed, all conditions of employment) becomes one of negotiation through collective bargaining, usually with each party seeking to persuade key constituencies of the virtue of their position and seek their support to achieve the desired outcome. When the process breaks down, job actions (including picketing and strikes) may follow.

Social media
Social media can be a powerful tool for change. It serves as a platform for sharing research and opinions, for debate, for advocacy and, in some cases, for shaming.

The Leadership Matters blog of Anne Ackerson and Joan Baldwin has long been a source for thought leadership on workplace issues, among others (Baldwin, 2016). The Gender Equity in Museums Movement is a repository for “raising awareness, affecting change, and championing transparency about gender equity in the museum workplace. Museum Workers Speak described itself as a “collective of activist museum workers interrogating the relationship between museums’ stated commitments to social value and their internal practices.”
These platforms and others like them are invaluable contributors to aggregating the data and leading and facilitating the discussion.

Social media can also serve as a powerful advocacy tool. One need look only to recent negotiations at Museum of Modern Art and unionization efforts at the New Museum to see how effective it is at sharing news and garnering support. When organized and orchestrated, social media messaging can affect policy decisions within an institution, including both individual museums and professional associations. Fair Museum Jobs, located in the UK, defines itself as follows:

Fair Museum Jobs is a grassroots, collective movement. Our objective is to establish a better standard (“The Manifesto”) for museum job recruitment that is based on the principles of fairness, transparency, equity and inclusivity. We believe recruitment based on these principles is fundamental to creating a museum sector that is resilient, relevant and representative of all society.

Fair Museum Jobs will take collective action to urge employers to improve their recruitment practices when they fall short of the established standard. We will also celebrate best practice, and champion examples as models for emulation. (Fair Museum Jobs, n.d.)

Their model is to identify job postings in which individual institutions have deviated from what they consider best practices such as the inclusion of a salary range or the option of
equivalent experience to substitute for a specific degree in appropriate cases. They contact the institution and express their concern. Through their website and Twitter account, they identify the institution, the concern, and the outcome of contact. They are not successful with every encounter, but they are successful in many to get postings changed or, at a minimum, bring the issue to the attention of the employer.

A similar initiative titled Salary Transparency Alerts was started in the US in March of 2019 by the National Emerging Museum Professionals Network. Members are asked to report job postings that do not include salary and fill out an online form. NEMPN then reaches out to the museum. According to Michelle Epps, its President, “We don’t want to compel museums to switch. We want them to come to that conclusion on their own based on a presentation of logic, facts, and discussion.”

Museum professionals can organize advocacy efforts through social media and take advantage of the medium to advocate within an institution, within professional associations, and within the field.

**How do we pay for it?**
A common response to this question is to ask, “What expense line item can we cut to fund an increase in salaries?”

It is rare that any museum budget isn’t already lean. Compensation is likely the largest line item and so much of the rest of the operating budget is fixed in the sense that there is little ability to reduce such items as insurance premiums or utilities, so that there is little ability to shift among those items. In those situations where the operating budget results
in a surplus, there is an opportunity to make the case that some of that surplus can and should be used for this purpose. Increased salaries can also be funded by increased revenue – such as ramping up fund-raising efforts or shop sales goals. It’s probably fair to assume, however, that if a museum could do these things, it already would have.

A budget is an institutional statement of priorities. When staff and salaries are treated as the go-to line item to balance revenue and expenses, they are given the lowest priority of all. In her recent presentation at Museums and the Web, Claire Blechman characterized the issue this way:

I don’t care what your mission statement says. Where you spend your money tells me what your institution really cares about. Do you pay your interns? Does your education department have money for supplies? Does your director live in a rent-free penthouse? Your museum’s budget is a moral document. (Blechman, 2019)

Rather than merely shifting dollars among expense categories, the museum could choose to build a resource to support increased compensation levels through permanent endowments.

A targeted and designated endowment could support a specific position in the same way in which they have been used to support galleries and facilities. Colleges and universities have long embraced the concept of endowed administrative and faculty positions. Museums have embraced a similar strategy, primarily with named directorships and curatorial positions. If a museum can generate endowed support for a specific position
to which donors may wish to affix their names, it frees money otherwise in the compensation expense line item to be applied to other positions.

An endowment could also support staff compensation more generally. Many capital campaigns have multiple purposes. Why not include an appropriately worded and justified component of the larger capital campaign to support equitable pay for staff – with the goal of supporting the museum’s mission with the best possible human resources?

Of its recently launched $13 million capital campaign Building Community: The Campaign for Strawbery Banke, $4.5 million was designated for general endowment, with three purposes: support of a program to preserve buildings with both exhibit and income-generating space, a program to provide access to economically disadvantaged children, and a fund to “offer more competitive salaries to attract and retain the most talented staff.”

Ethical guidelines established by AAM prohibit the use of the proceeds of deaccessioning for anything other than acquisition or the direct care of collections. But some recent discussions have asked the field to consider if or when a loosening of those standards might be appropriate. Some, including Glenn Lowry, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, have proposed that the proceeds from a deaccessioning that complies with the standards of the field could be used to fund an endowment restricted to purposes other than collections – public programs, exhibitions, and publications. Presumably any expansion on the use of proceeds to activities of the museum would also include the compensation of those museum professionals engaged in those activities.
In his essay, Museums Can Change – Will They?, Michael O’Hare notes that, “Big museums have long refused to recognize their unhanded collections of duplicates and minor works as a financial resource.” (O’Hare, 2015) Taking the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) as an example, O’Hare posits that selling just 1% of its collection:

...would endow $17 million a year of operating budget, a fifth of the institute’s current “instructional and academic” staff costs, which would enable it hire to something on the order of 200 more full-time researchers, educators, designers, and people studying the audience to understand what really goes on when people get up close to art... In business language, we could say that the AIC has drastically misallocated its... resources between production (the staff) and capital (the collection). (ibid)

The museum field easily accepts the practice of using endowments to fund at least key staff positions. Funded by traditional capital campaigns or otherwise, here lies one path to funding a more equitable level of compensation for all museum employees.

**Summary**
The issue of systemic under-compensation makes for an interesting and passionate discussion among museum professionals. But, like so many topics, it has remained just that – interesting and passionate, but with little effect. And as with so many topics, there will be no effect until the field identifies where
the power to make change resides and embraces strategies to provide a presence where and when those decisions are made.

The common thread is advocacy. At the individual museum level, this can take the form of an executive director and/or board leader making the case for why a well-paid work force is in the best interest of the institution. It can take the form of professional associations advocating within their membership by establishing best practices, accreditation standards, or job posting requirements. It can also take the form of social media campaigns and unionization.

Professional associations are perhaps the most powerful arrow in the advocacy quiver. One need only look at the role they have played on the issue of diversity. The extent to which they are willing to play that role on this issue will depend on how they resolve the tension between the legitimate interests of their individual members and their institutional members. The resolution may well depend on the extent to which their individual members, either individually or through formal or informal groups, advocate for – or demand – change.

The power to adopt a new paradigm for compensation of museum professionals and to adopt policies in support of that paradigm resides with the board – led, influenced, or supported by their executive directors. Boards are vested with the legal and fiduciary duty to make decisions in the best interest of the institution they serve, and of its mission. Many trustees come from the business world and embrace (sometimes to a fault) the principles and priorities that drive business organizations. The decision to address systemic under-compensation and inequities and to carry out financial responses to support that effort is both founded in sound business thinking and is consistent with
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the shared values of the museum community. The challenge is to get the board to focus on those benefits to their own institutions. That challenge can be met by the education of the board, along with a host of strategies to advocate for equitable salaries.

NOTE


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