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Summer at the Museum

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Not many people are greeted by a 65 million-year-old Tyrannosaurus Rex or a 2,500-pound Titanoboa each morning at work, but for Illinois Wesleyan University anthropology majors, Sarah Carlson and Kate Scott, it was just another day on the job. As summer museum interns, they were able to apply their skills obtained from anthropology coursework to a practical museum setting. Through their internships they experienced first-hand how museums try to go beyond the glass cases to bring the exhibits to life.



"Museum internships give students an inside look into how museums operate, what the work of collections managers and curators entails, and better prepares them for graduate training in museum studies and employment in museums after graduation," said Rebecca Gearhart, department chair of anthropology at IWU.

Both seniors at IWU, Carlson interned at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago and Scott worked at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.

"Working in a museum is something I have thought about since I was younger. After I took the museum studies May Term course, I knew I could see myself working in a museum setting," said Scott.

The May Term anthropology course "Museums, Representation, and Cultural Property" exposes students to how museums have acquired, displayed, and interpreted cultural objects and represented cultures, peoples, and heritage, in the past and present. Some of the topics covered include the artifact trade, representational and ethical issues and effective exhibit presentation.

According to Gearhart, courses like this prepare students for careers in a variety of fields, including museum studies. "Anthropology, like other disciplines in the social sciences, provides students with the foundational skill-set necessary to go on in any field: critical thinking, clear and thoughtful writing, ability to communicate orally, and for anthropology students in particular, the ability to sensitively and comfortably interact with people from different cultural backgrounds."



Sarah Carlson '13 spent her summer interning at the Field Museum in Chicago.

Carlson utilized these skills as a Regenstein Collections Intern in the Anthropology Department at the Field Museum. During the summer she re-housed artifacts using updated methods and updated the digitized records of The Philippine Collection.

"In the past, artifacts were stored in ways that seemed unsafe or detrimental to their condition," said Carlson. "Today, the Field Museum works hard to ensure that every artifact is stored in the safest way feasible, and with millions of artifacts under one roof, this is an ongoing process. I housed several hundred artifacts, mostly ceramics, jewelry and musical instruments."

Carlson also spent time photographing the collection, entering digital records and updating the database as part of the Field

Museum's effort to stay in the forefront of collections management.

"The Philippine Collection consists of over 10,000 objects, most of which have not been seen by the public since they were taken off display in the 1980s," said Carlson. "The number of objects and amount of information contained in that building boggles the mind."

Walking through the Field Museum you may be impressed by the pristine galleries filled with colorful displays and intriguing artifacts, but according to Carlson, the true treasure trove lies beneath the surface.

"Only one percent of the museum's collections are on display. The non-public areas are huge and very confusing. I would get lost every day for a while."

Carlson is no stranger to the marbled hallways of the Field Museum.

"I grew up a few hours from Chicago, so The Field Museum has been one of my favorite museums for years, and I have always dreamed of working there. This summer, I got my dream job."

It didn't take long for Carlson to realize that there is no "typical" day when it comes to working in a museum. One day, she was holding million-year-old stone tools and another, examining tribal Philippine jewelry.

She even played the role of detective. When visiting researchers brought in a recently discovered, thousand-year-old cloak, Carlson assisted them in comparing feathers in the cloak to feathers on model birds in the Ornithology Department.

"We figured out which bird feathers were used, and from there, we were able to determine a lot about the people that made the cloak," said Carlson.

While Carlson delved into the stores of artifacts, Scott spent her summer with much more lively subjects. She worked at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage as a Campus and Community Intern.

Scott's primary responsibility was to help plan and run the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which celebrates cultures from across the country.

"The purpose of the Folklife Festival is to strengthen and sustain different cultural traditions by presenting them to the public on the National Mall," said Scott. "The festival allows people to connect and share with each other so that they can learn about each other's culture and appreciate and understand the similarities and the differences between them."

The festival attracts over a million people each year and Scott had the opportunity to get a behind the scenes look at how museums interact with the community.

"It takes so much more time and work than I imagined. They usually start planning festival programs at least a few years in advance if they can," said Scott.



Kate Scott '12 interned at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.

As part of community outreach, Scott wrote a blog post about one of the cultural groups attending the festival. For the post she interviewed two *curanderas*, Native American traditional healers, who practice laugh therapy.

"The *curanderas* were so open to talking with me and as an anthropology major getting the chance to practice my interviewing skills was great," Scott said.

For her, it was an eye-opening experience into how museums operate and what goes into creating exhibits and programming.

"Now, every museum I walk into I think about what goes into running it," Scott said. "When I go into an exhibit I think about how much research and work went into creating it. How did they choose the artifacts? What made them decide to do an exhibit on that particular topic? What was it like working on it?"

Their summer internships only strengthened Carlson and Scott's desire to pursue a museum career.

"I'm still trying to decide if I want to focus on the curatorial aspect of museums or if I'm more interested in educational programming. No matter where I end up I hope that it is in a museum in some way," said Scott, who is currently an intern at the McLean Museum of History in Bloomington.

Carlson has her eyes set on her dream job and hopes to return to the Field Museum one day.

"I'm currently looking for work at smaller institutions in either collections management or exhibition development. I hope to work for a few years, then earn a graduate degree in anthropology with a concentration or certification in museum studies, and then try my luck at the Field Museum."

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