

**“But the people that have been here for a while, will always guide you, will always answer your questions” (3/21/2013).**



# Reciprocity of Informal Education in a Museum Setting

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**“And when we have a lab that we really like to have a volunteer with and we don’t have one, we really realize how important they are to us” (3/21/2013).**

## Introduction

Research on education in museums has focused almost entirely on museum patrons (Taylor 2008). It is important, however, to see if and how a museum can provide educational benefits to people in the community other than patrons. In this research, the question is asked, are volunteers and educators contributing to the museum’s mission, and what benefits are they receiving as a result of working at the museum? By answering the question, we can evaluate the benefits a museum provides to a community beyond its patrons, and understand how volunteers and educators are essential to the museum’s mission.

## Methodology

In Spring 2013, I conducted a non-probability purposive sampling of volunteers and part-time educators in a Georgia science museum. I chose the museum because it has over 150 volunteers and more than 20 educators. Also, I have been a volunteer at the museum since June 2012, and so I have personal insight as a volunteer and have built rapport with the volunteers.

I used participant and direct observation of weekend and weekday activities in the museum. This included observing volunteer interactions with field trips and families, workshops, and a volunteer orientation. I also attended special events, an important part of the museum’s activities, and used spot sampling during these observations.

I conducted five semi-structured interviews. I interviewed two educators; one who had been working there since the museum’s inception and would soon be transitioning into a volunteer role, and one who began about two years ago and could attest to more recent training processes. I also interviewed one new volunteer, one expert, and one volunteer who had been working there since before the museum officially opened. I chose these people to interview because of their variety of roles and experiences that I thought would well represent the museum population.

**“And the mineral gallery has really taught me a lot about, you know a rock is not necessarily just a rock. To me its just very interesting. And since I’ve been here, instead of watching things like QVC on television, I watch Science Channel, and History, and H2, and get as much science in me as possible” (3/21/2013).**

**Museum Official Mission Statement: “Because science matters, we engage, educate, and inspire visitors to make scientific connections through dynamic exhibits and enriching experiences.”**

**Educator: Part-time employee of the museum who teaches programs to school groups and has a variety of other responsibilities.**

**Volunteer: Active volunteers serve eight hours a month with minimal training mostly serving the museum public, but also working “behind the scenes.”**

**Explainer/Expert: Volunteer who has received special training in conjunction with the Educators to help in school programs and other educational events in the museum.**

**“I love teaching science to kids. I love it when they get fired up about something and really excited about some area that they’re interested in” (3/23/2013).**

**“And its not just the science, but its the teaching of the science [as a reason I volunteer]” (4/1/2013).**

**“It’s more internal satisfaction of interacting with the people, teaching the science ... I think the museum puts quite a bit of faith in letting me do things ... that they normally don’t let volunteers do” (4/1/2013).**

Benefits of Volunteering as posted on museum website	Mentioned in interviews as a benefit	Mentioned as actually utilized
Museum Library Privileges	0%	0%
Receive quarterly newsletters	0%	0%
20% off discount in Café and Museum Store	40%	20%
Unlimited free admission to the museum for immediate family members	100%	80%
Regular free admissions to two sister museums	60%	20%
Invitation to special recognition events	100%	80%
Member pricing on ticketed events	20%	20%
Special Travel Opportunities	80%	60%

Table 1: (N=5) Information gathered from interviews with volunteers and educators about benefits they receive from working at the museum.

## FINDINGS

Several themes emerged through my study of the museum: (1) Love of teaching; (2) Love of learning; (3) People learn from each other; (4) Training is stratified; and (5) The museum has created a learning outlet.

Volunteers and educators talked about the benefits of being in a learning environment where they could keep learning, the joys of teaching kids about science and inspiring them to learn, and the enjoyment of having others (patrons and staff) to discuss their personal scientific interests with.

The museum administration listens to suggestions made by volunteers and educators, even if they cannot necessarily be implemented.

The museum helps create a sense of community by having recognition events and travel opportunities for volunteers, and special training and travel opportunities for educators and explainers.

Volunteer training is minimal at the beginning of a volunteers experience, and more training could help volunteers become comfortable with their new roles and interacting with patrons.

Many newer volunteers are not aware of the variety of positions they can serve in at the museum, but the museum is trying to change this by having a volunteer orientation incorporating full time staff who discuss areas where they need help.

## DISCUSSION

This study finds the museum does offer benefits to its volunteers and educators, but these may not be aligned with what the museum advertises (see Table 1). They are more intangible and educational in nature. The museum creates a community benefit beyond the patrons.

The museum could increase the sense of community by offering more opportunities for all volunteers and educators to work together and meet each other. It would benefit the museum to promote this sense of community because the volunteers could learn from the educators and explainers how to better interact with museum patrons. This research confirms the conclusions by Grenier (2009) that volunteers learn from each other. While the volunteers and educators currently succeed in promoting the educational mission, the volunteers would be able to contribute more consistently to the mission and do a more quality job through more training, by specifying expectations, and by involving new volunteers with educators and more experienced volunteers.

