

*Paul Himmelstein presented this paper at the Annual Meeting of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), 2014*

## **Current conservation education and practice: Are they sustainable?**

**Paul Himmelstein and Barbara Appelbaum**

One way to answer this question is to look at how the professional world around us has changed since formal academic training – a major benchmark of “modern” conservation - began, and how we have responded to those changes.

Let’s look at current conservation education: at least six graduate programs in the United States, four in the fine arts (including ethnography and archaeology) and at least two in historic preservation.

The four fine art programs all require a pre-program internship, along with other prerequisites (including in most cases, organic chemistry). Each program receives about eighty well-qualified applicants per year, obviously with much overlap from one program to the other. They are all essentially cost-free to all students, without regard to need. Quite a few applicants not accepted into any of the programs on their first attempt apply again, one or more times, often with the encouragement of a program representative.

In general, curricula focus on examination, technical analysis, and treatment, although there are some courses (and an increasing number) dealing with other issues such as preventive conservation, community involvement (with both the public and allied professionals), and ethics.

The number of students accepted into each program has remained largely the same over many years (although NYU started with four per year and increased it to eight, now reduced to six), while reportedly the number of applicants and especially the percentage of qualified applicants have increased.

One major change in all programs is the ratio of female to male students. Initially there were approximately an equal number of men and women; female students now make up 90% or more of the students.

Currently in AIC, 71% of Professional Associates and 66% of the Fellows, an older group, are female. Conservation is becoming a predominantly female field – except for the heads of major museum

laboratories. Despite some efforts a number of years ago, conservation remains a mostly white, middle class profession.

Why are men not becoming conservators? Part of the answer may be financial – salaries are substantially lower than in other technical fields. But I don't believe this is the only reason. I suspect that spending one or two years (sometimes more) of mostly unpaid pre-program internships in the hope that they will finally be admitted to a program is simply not acceptable to young men, and the families that support them through the process.

Why can't conservation do what every other profession does – select qualified candidates by interviewing and testing, not by indentured servitude? Wannabe doctors and lawyers do not know any more about the professional life of the field they have chosen than conservation applicants do. And rejection letters from graduate schools do not typically encourage students to try again the following year, with suggestions about what would make them more likely to be accepted. Existing procedures for reviewing applicants developed for any number of graduate programs do the job without multiple pre-application internships or recommendations from internship supervisors. One-on-one interviews by professionals in the field is acknowledged to be one of the best methods for predicting future success of applicants.

Another major change over the past few years is the number of graduates who go into private practice immediately after graduation (or after a one year fellowship), presumably because there are not enough museum jobs available. At the moment we may be producing more conservators than is warranted.

Huge growth in the number of American museums during the 1960's and '70's, an increase in the number of museums that hired conservators, and a huge backlog of untreated collections kept graduates employed; the financial downturn of 2008 stopped expansion and even led to layoffs.

When Barbara Appelbaum and I established our private practice 42 years ago we were in a small minority of conservators who did not work full time in an institution. The number of graduates going into private practice, even several years after entering the field, remained quite low. CIPP was not formed until 1986, and even then it had quite a rocky start. Now about 50% of AIC members are in private practice. Ultimately, private practices outside of large cities can provide valuable service to under-served parts of the country, but most new graduates, with little real-world experience, are just not ready to work alone running a business, carrying out treatments, or consulting on collections care.

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What other changes have occurred in conservation practice?

Conservation practice in the mid-twentieth century tended to focus on the treatment of paintings, as the first AIC Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, adopted in 1967, demonstrated. It was not until 1990 that a substantial revision specifically embraced other categories of cultural property, as well as expanding conservators' responsibilities into topics like preventive conservation, public outreach, and assessments. Recognition of the importance of these changes has been slow to spread, especially in the education of new conservators, although there have been noticeable changes recently.

Remember, as we heard on Thursday, that Gary Thomson's book on the Museum Environment had first been published in 1978, and that he had contributed to an ICCROM course on Preventive Conservation in 1976. Almost fifty years later, there is still no associate editor of JAIC dealing with collections care, or anything else other than treatment, technical analysis, and materials. In-depth education in these other very important areas still receive less time and emphasis than they should get. So how does all of this affect the sustainability of our profession?

The very substantial predominance in any profession of one gender over the other is not healthy in the long run. Professions such as nursing struggle with both low salaries and prestige, particularly because as having been seen as traditionally female occupations.

The lack of sufficient full-time permanent jobs in conservation is an ominous condition that may continue for some time. And providing full scholarships for all students is probably not sustainable.

The continued emphasis in training on the object/conservator relationship, as important as it is, leaves graduates without skills in other areas: working with allied professionals in a team setting, and being able to discuss conservation issues in language that is understandable to the other stake-holders involved in decision-making concerning collection preservation. In areas of collections care, many conservators tend to say no-can't do that, a lot, without the knowledge or inclination to solve problems in ways that satisfy the many other equally important requirements within institutions.

Conservation education needs to prepare graduates to deal with the realities of our society and its attitudes toward cultural property. Right now we are not winning the hearts and minds of those whose support we need.

The entry of so many new graduates into private practice is unfortunate. Very few graduates are ready, immediately after they finish their formal education, to start working on their own. Even after an

additional fellowship year, many may not really be ready to work without a more experienced practitioner as a colleague.

### What remedies are there?

The training programs could cooperate to create a curriculum concerning the various issues involved in a private practice, and establish a formal way of linking new practitioners to experienced mentors. If graduates are starting private practices, we have an obligation to get them started on the right foot and provide suitable continuing professional support.

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- Create a category of the Kress Fellowships to commission the writing of textbooks, perhaps with a professional writer working with conservation educators. Having such published material, common to almost all other professions, would help to support teaching activities, reduce the need for informational lectures, and allow for more in depth discussion,. It would also lead to a more widely shared understanding of conservation methods and materials – and a better educated profession. Without published literature that reflects its common, normal practice, conservation will never be a true profession.
  - Work more widely to have an understanding of the role of conservation as an integral part of art history and archaeology included in the education future art historians and archaeologists. We are still too often seen as outsiders who are brought in when some technical information may be needed, but who do not work as essential colleagues with these allied professions.
  - Expand our efforts to provide information to career offices of colleges and universities, and to art history and science departments so that potential applicants get the required information about prerequisite courses, and can complete their course requirements as undergraduates, rather than fulfilling those prerequisites after graduation.
  - Enlarge the possible courses that would fulfill prerequisites, such as those in engineering, biology, and mathematics.
  - Consider changing financial support in the graduate conservation programs to an, at least partially, need-based system.
  - Look at law and medical schools as potential models for some entrance and working procedures. Many graduate schools have

applicants interviewed by experienced alumni who not only understand the requirements of the field, but can answer many detailed applicant questions. Some law schools are not only cutting back on the number of students, but are questioning the need for three years of graduate education for all students.

- Investigate the reason for the low number of male applicants. Today in our society any profession that is not more gender balanced will face substantial difficulties. Medicine, law, even engineering have all faced this issue, and are well on their way to solving it. The nursing profession is working hard to attract more men, and is having some success.
  - Reduce the reliance on unpaid internships, and shorten their duration. This would make it easier for those who are not financially independent to qualify as applicants.
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In summary, in conservation education and practice, we are very likely not on a sustainable track now. But by answering some hard questions, and having an inclusive and productive discussion, I believe we can be.