

Learning Combined with Research

Professor Elee Wood captivates museum-goers' minds and imaginations, and educates at the same time.

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Transcript

A lot of the work I am doing is related to The Children's Museum's Family Learning Initiative, helping them understand how families interact together when they come to the museum, what experiences we can create, how we can help their learning move forward in terms of places that they're interested in. It's part of an idea of "free choice learning", where you are in charge and in control of what you want to learn. So, that's one area that I'm working on - helping the museum really understand what that looks like, and how it works, and where we can strategize around it. I also do a lot of work with supporting the exhibit development programs, in terms of thinking about how to instill strong educational concepts and strategies in that fun experience that people have when they come, looking at programs, how we do evaluations of programs, how to think about those kinds of things.

And, that's really an interesting in-between kind of research. It's not necessarily the strict, you know "these are the theories that come out of museum practice", but really looking at the down and dirty aspects of what's really happening in a day-to-day world, and how people can really use that as part of what's happening. One of the things that's really important about having a community resource like The Children's Museum is that it becomes a classroom space for all of my students, whether they're in Museum Studies or teacher education. I use this as a place to do case studies, do real-life scenarios, examples of things that help students make connections to the real world and the real application process, which is important.

The Museum Studies Master's Degree program started in 2005 and already, in that time, we have 45 students from around the country. It is a really fantastic program that has taken on the IUPUI campus flavor, if you will, of civic engagement and really looking at how to help Museum Studies students who want to give back to their community, who want to have a community-based focus, a civic engagement focus, to put that into their Museum Studies work.

So, all of our program components integrate different subject matter, we have a very strong emphasis on how community is involved, and in the ways in which we think about community, and what that means in terms of museum practice, whether it's in the way that we develop exhibits, how we design exhibits, the educational aspects, how we deal with collections, how we deal with things ethically. Those are all real important aspects of museum work. Those are things you get elsewhere, in other programs, but not exactly in the same way that we have. All of our faculty are joint appointments with other departments, so we can model that interdisciplinarity. We have people like the public scholars who are located in community museum settings as a way of really building that practice. So, what we are doing is essentially putting into play what we want our students to be doing on a regular basis. And, I think, in the long run, that's going to make a stronger museum field.

One of the things that we have to remember is that the university cannot exist on its own. We don't exist without other people to help us. We don't exist without a community to support us. And, we have a responsibility as part of being a higher-education institution, of being able to make a difference and bring that back to the people who are supporting us. And, we need to be active members in that. What I see as translational research is understanding what the needs of the community are, using my own knowledge and expertise, and then bringing that together and looking at how that actually makes a difference in terms of the kind of impact we can make, and the way we can build experiences of the community and the strength of the community and to revitalize that civic life.

There's obviously lots of opportunities to go to places on your own in the city. But when you have a faculty person who has a little more experience, you have community practitioners who are coming together, you have a real strong power there that helps students make a connection to their own life and what they what to do and how they can do it differently.