

Tips for Recruiting and Training Research Assistants (RA's) for a Museum Environment

Interview RA's carefully. Make sure they understand the time commitment and the museum's educational mission. Museums generally will require researchers to take a shift regularly for a term or a school year, so it is important that the research assistants helping with the study are able to adhere to museum policies, including making educating visitors a priority. Consistent RA's will also help with high quality and efficient data collection.

Find the RA qualities that will fit best with the museum. It is a big responsibility to run studies with parents and children off-campus, and to represent the lab and university in the community. Generally, it is helpful to have RA's who are: a) interested in and/or have experience working with children; b) personable; c) mature; and d) comfortable interacting with strangers.

Study specifics matter. It is important that the RA's understand the background, research question, methods and hypothesis of the study they will be running at the museum in a jargon-free and accessible way. They should also be ready to talk about the implications of the research so that visitors understand why this is important to them. Meet with RA's prior to going to the museum, and walk them through how the study will be conducted there as well as how to answer the questions they are likely to get from visitors.

RA's should know how to explain the study to visitors. Be sure they have a prepared short explanation (no more than a minute long) summarizing the experiment in lay-person terms. They should also be prepared to answer questions the adults might have about the study. Finally, they should feel empowered to admit they do not know the answer to a question and point visitors in a direction that can help them get the answer (e.g., you as their advisor, the PI of the lab, pediatrician).

Ease new RA's into the museum environment. Giving new RA's the opportunity to observe you interact with museum staff, recruit participants and run your study in the first few weeks of the semester is a great way to ensure that your study will run smoothly when the RA's are on their own. New RA's can practice running the study with non-participants outside of the museum (e.g., a seasoned RA, a lab manager, a friend) and think about how conversation might be different here than with guardians of actual participants. Museum educators can also provide helpful feedback on how best to explain the study to the public.

It may be helpful to have new RA's recruit participants first, while you or a more experienced RA runs the study. Once the RA is comfortable explaining the study to parents and interacting with the children at the museum during recruitment, they will be better prepared to run the study themselves.

Continue checking in with all RA's throughout the term, so that any issues with working in the museum can be addressed immediately. Observing their recruitment, running and debriefing at the museum monthly will ensure high quality data collection and education.