

Transforming Museums—To What End?

By Randi Korn

All organizations are challenged to respond to the constantly-changing world. For museums, sometimes internal challenges are just as difficult to negotiate as external demands. Internal and external worlds will collide for museums when funders start requesting evidence that museums are achieving their missions. Determining the extent to which a museum is achieving its mission is easy, compared to the internal work that must take place before a museum would be ready to realistically assess its impact. To begin the arduous task of measuring mission, the museum community faces its most significant challenge: changing how it thinks about its work and changing how it does its work.

Accountability

Many are talking about museums and accountability, including government officials and board members of private foundations. In the early 1990s, American museums and government funding agencies that support museums found Congress questioning appropriations to the National Science Foundation (NSF), Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Congress was requesting that these government entities provide evidence that their dollars were achieving impact, and soon it adopted the Government Performance and Results Act, which required agencies to develop measures of performance, among other strategic actions. A similar line of questioning started taking place in foundations. Foundation boards started asking accountability-like questions of their foundation leadership, and as a result, some foundations have restructured how they think about and do their work, which has affected how their grantees think about and do their work¹.

Accountability conversations are also prevalent in the recent press. For example, “Hunger vs. the Arts,” an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, October 14, 2006, suggested that museums are now in public view; it revealed the challenge museums face in demonstrating their impact to win philanthropic support, as new donors (and sometimes longstanding ones) often choose results-orientated humanitarian causes. Another *Wall Street Journal* article, December 10, 2007, about charitable giving quotes Brian Gallagher, chief executive of United Way of America and chairman of Independent Sector, a coalition of charity and philanthropy leaders, “. . . we get irrational pushback from nonprofits [that] say, ‘You can’t measure mission-centered work.’ You most certainly can. The question is, ‘Are you committed to do it?’ And then, ‘Are you committed to report on it?’” Both articles focus on a high level of accountability.

The museum community thinks it is talking about accountability, too, but they are usually discussing outputs rather than outcomes or impact. Outputs are how many, how much, and how big,—whether one is discussing programs, attendance, or collections. Historically, museums have always focused their energies on producing outputs, often citing their attendance, how many school children visit, how many objects were accessioned, and how many dollars were raised. The value of museums, however, extends well beyond outputs. Why, then, are practitioners still output-driven in how they think about and do their work? Some might say their

¹See <http://www.irvine.org> and <http://www.wallacefoundation.org>.

boards of directors are primarily interested in outputs, as they mostly work in bottom-line driven businesses unfamiliar with other ways to describe success. Continuing to focus on creating more and more outputs misses the mark in describing the true value of museums.

Shifting Focus from Outputs to Impact

Several years ago the Wallace Foundation commissioned the RAND Corporation to examine evidence of arts' private and public benefits. In *Gifts of the Muse*, authors distinguish between instrumental benefits and intrinsic benefits of the arts. Instrumental benefits include increased economic activity and cognitive learning, both of which are often associated with broader social and economic goals and have nothing to do with art (McCarthy et. al. 2004). RAND found considerable research on the instrumental benefits of the arts. The authors explain that when policy makers demanded that arts advocates articulate the benefits of the arts in the 1970s, arts advocates delivered the instrumental benefits because they were easier to measure and report; they were quantitative and focused on outputs. RAND found little research on the intrinsic benefits of the arts and contend: "People are drawn to the arts not for their instrumental effects, but because the arts can provide them with meaning and with a distinctive type of pleasure and emotional stimulation" (McCarthy, et. al. 2004, xv). Intrinsic benefits of the arts are the experiences that people have when in the presence of art, most of which create deeply personal meanings that are not as easily quantified.

While the RAND study focused on the arts, there is a correlation between a lack of research on the intrinsic value of the arts and a lack of research on the intrinsic value of museums. The intrinsic value of museums is often overlooked, not only by those who know little about museums (e.g., school administrators, government officials, non-museum visitors), but also by boards of directors, museum directors, and museum staff. There is also a correlation between the instrumental value of museums and museum's relentless focus on outputs; both overlook the public value of museums. If museums work to achieve outcomes and public impact (in addition to outputs), they may be in a better position to study the intrinsic benefits of museums, which would allow them to respond to accountability questions.

A few government agencies and museum-focused foundations are trying to help practitioners focus on outcomes. For example, IMLS adopted Outcome-based Evaluation in 2000, later changed to Outcome-based Planning and Evaluation (OBPE). Weil wrote an eloquent article that appeared in an IMLS publication unveiling the initiative², inspiring museum practitioners to begin thinking about how their programs impact people's lives. He notes, "[there] is a growing expectation that . . . every not-for-profit organization will . . . achieve an outcome that . . . will demonstrably enhance the quality of individual lives and/or the well-being of some particular community" (2002, 82). As long as evaluators have been conducting evaluations in museums, they have called on practitioners to more clearly articulate what they want to achieve. Weil's article revitalized the discussion, taking the conversation a step higher, as he was calling for museums to demonstrate that they are effective and meaningful organizations. How each museum defines effectiveness and meaningfulness will vary, but in the end, museums will need

² See <http://www.imls.gov/pdf/pubobe.pdf> (retrieved 3/8/08) or "Transformed from a Cemetery of Bric-a-Brac" in *Making Museums Matter* (2002).

to change how they approach and do their work. Continuing to focus exclusively on outputs—without connecting outputs to outcomes—will be ineffectual moving forward.

Using the OBPE initiative as leverage, IMLS tried to help its grantees plan for outcomes by inviting them to a workshop in Washington where they were introduced to the logic model. The logic model helps program planners realize the relationships among resources needed to operate a program, activities required to do the program, and outcomes achieved as a result of the program (W. K. Kellogg Foundation 1998). To some museum practitioners, however, the logic model is counterintuitive and cumbersome. As such, OBPE started to undermine IMLS's intent, which was to motivate practitioners to focus on outcomes as the endpoint—not outputs. IMLS was ahead of the curve in its idea to push for outcomes, but the method by which it tried to achieve that end did not address the museum community's most significant challenge: changing how they think about their work and changing how they do their work.

Another government agency recently entered the conversation. Informal Science Education division (ISE) of NSF is a longtime proponent of all phases of evaluation. It now asks its grantees to identify their intended impacts upfront, with the expectation that doing so will motivate practitioners to create “innovative deliverables and strategies designed to achieve those impacts . . .” (Ucko 2008, 8). NSF has just launched this initiative in a publication that summarizes new guidelines for measuring impact and explains the importance of articulating impacts from the outset, planning for them, and then measuring and reporting their achievement. NSF identifies five categories of impact: awareness, knowledge, or understanding; engagement or interest; attitude; behavior; and skills. It is still too early to determine if this new NSF initiative will help museums focus on, plan for, and measure impact, but at the very least, NSF is trying to instill good practices among its grantees.

As indicated above, talk about outcomes, impact, and making a difference in people's lives is not new. Soon museums will have no choice but to begin moving beyond defining success as achieving outputs to defining success as achieving results in the form of impact. Historically, the field has never excelled at clearly describing the value of museums, in part because there have been few efforts that explore and identify such values, as the RAND study reported³. What impact *are* museums trying to achieve? This seemingly simple question is so very difficult to answer. Weil wrote of the “in-your-face, bottom-line . . . questions that the museum community has . . . struggled mightily to keep safely locked in the closet” (2002, 55). These questions are out in the open and must be addressed because some people are asking, “What impact do you want to achieve? Who are the beneficiaries of such impact? What evidence do you have to demonstrate that you have achieved such impact?”

³ For two discussions about value, museums, and culture, see “Museums: Impact and Value” by Carol Scott in *Cultural Trends* Vol. 15(1), No. 57, March 2006, pp. 45-75; and “An Architecture of Value” by Alan Brown in *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader* retrieved March 15, 2008 http://www.giarts.org/usr_doc/brown.pdf.

Planning for and Working towards Impact

To achieve results one has to plan for results, as they do not happen magically. How can an entire community move from being output-driven to being impact-driven? How does one begin to think differently *about* their work, and how does one change the way they *do* their work? Changing individual, collaborative, and organizational behavior is extraordinarily complicated and difficult, and authors have filled many volumes on these subjects, as museums are not the only organizations that are challenged to change.

While change is difficult to achieve, all staff in an organization can take small steps together. There are a few core ideas that can galvanize staff to begin the difficult task of addressing public impact and organizational change. To respond to the question, “To what end?,” practitioners will need to work together to reexamine the essence of their museum, realign practices and resources in the context of their museum’s unique public value, and engage in reflective practice to learn how their museum can make a difference.

Reexamine the essence of your museum together

A new awareness is emerging about museums’ responsibilities and public value, and museums are revitalizing their mission statements to include contemporary thinking. In the past, typical mission statements would describe actions like collecting, preserving, and educating. It was easy to replace one museum’s mission statement with another museum’s, and few would notice any difference between the two. Today, a mission statement that does not describe a museum’s unique value and how it will impact the public does not address the vital question, “To what end?” For a museum to collect, preserve, and educate is fine, but only if it does so to achieve public impact. With funders posing accountability questions, museums need to start reexamining their missions as a first step towards planning for impact.

A museum’s mission should be a declaration of the museum’s core purpose. It should describe with utmost clarity the unique value of the museum internally, and it should identify the value of the museum externally—that is, the public value it wishes to deliver. The very act of staff coming together to discuss the core value of their museum is an important step towards changing work behavior. While it is ideal for the museum director to initiate and inspire his/her staff to participate in the process of defining the museum’s internal and external value, staff at all levels can function as leaders within their own departments and inspire their colleagues to fully participate. As part of this work, staff should encourage each other to explore their passions and challenge their colleagues’ thinking as a way of further clarifying what is truly of value. In the spirit of thoughtful inquiry, why not ask a colleague to defend his or her position? Research shows that most people appreciate when others ask them to explain why they think the way they do, as this kind of exploration allows everyone to realize the passion behind their ideas and learn what they really care about (Friedman, Rothman, and Withers 2006; Preskill and Torres 1999). Reexamining the essence of the museum together will reinvigorate the collaborative spirit of staff, enabling staff to undertake the next step in process.

Realign all practices and resources in the context of mission and impact

In one of the last articles that Stephen Weil published, he noted, “The only activities in which the museum can legitimately engage are those intended to further its institutional purpose” (2005, 38). Jim Collins also wrote of this idea when he noted that an organization must “attract and channel resources directed solely” to its purpose and “reject resources that drive [it] away” from its purpose (2005, 3). If museums want to deliver public value and impact, how should their daily work change? Which activities should it do and which should it discontinue? These questions are challenging but they must be addressed if a museum is to acknowledge and live its new purpose. Institutional alignment is a strategy that may help staff determine how the museum should change its course of action to support its new focus and achieve public impact.

Aligning a museum’s work and resources with the mission and intended impact will ensure that staff are spending the time on activities that reflect the museum’s priorities and aspirations. It is much more effective to determine—perhaps through evaluation—which programs yield the highest impact, and to then do those programs. Likewise, it is efficient to improve programs that do not deliver impact or do away with them altogether. The need to continually do more and more is a result of output-driven thinking. Aligning practice—the activities a museum does and how it does them—and resources so they support the mission requires thinking about what the museum should be doing and what it need not continue. Conversations about realignment will deepen staff members’ understanding of the museum’s intent and the ways in which their work supports it.

Realigning practices and resources with mission requires discipline. Referring back to the Weil article referenced above, Weil also noted, “Once a purpose has been established, the museum is still unable to move forward either until (a) all of the necessary resources can be identified and secured, or (b) the purpose has been scaled back to match the available resources” (2005, 36). Aligning practices and resources is important, not only to be able to live within your budget, but aligning practices and resources around the museum’s purpose and intent to deliver public value is an idea that supports sustainable operations over time; it respects two realities: staff’s limited capacity and the museum’s limited resources—in the context of a desired impact.

Engage in reflective practice

Presumably when museums reexamine the essence of their museum, they will begin to clarify the kind of impact they hope to achieve. In turn, focusing on impact will require all staff to reevaluate their work and determine what must be done (because those activities clearly support their museum’s mission) and what they need not do any more (because those activities pull them away from their museum’s core purpose). How can museums explore the public benefits of their work?

Reflective practice, introduced by Donald Schön in 1983, is about examining one’s own experience with the deliberate intent to explore it in depth, and ultimately learn from it. On a very basic level, reflective practice uses inquiry to discuss experiences, perspectives, and meanings (Raelin, 2002). In the case of museums that want to be intentional with their work, a valuable outcome of reflective practice is learning about museum practice in the context of the

question, “To what end?” The ultimate outcome of reflective practice is staff learning about the ways in which their museum is achieving impact. If one believes learning results in change, such as a change in attitude or behavior, then reflective practice can support the process of personal change in practice and begin and continue the process of organizational change.

Because much of museum work is for public benefit, reflective practice in a museum should include not only practitioners’ perspectives, but also information about the public’s experiences and perspectives. Information generated from evaluation and research can offer insight and knowledge as practitioners consider their work. However, if museums’ relentless focus on outputs—doing more and more—is not addressed in the realignment process, practitioners may not have time to have to participate in reflective practice, as there is a relationship between *taking the time to think about* the work you have done and *learning from* the work you have done. That is, learning is not likely to happen if one does not take the time to reflect. To practice reflection, museums must routinely set aside time for staff to reflect on and discuss practice in the context of evaluation findings, the museum’s activities, and the kind of impact the museum wants to achieve.

Conclusion

As professionals who value the educational qualities that museums offer and the life-long learning desires of their visitors, it is somewhat ironic how often we overlook our own need and desire to learn. A relentless focus on outputs deters practitioners from taking time to learn from their work so they can change how they do their work to achieve greater impact. The learning process begins with staff clarifying their museum’s intended impact in the context of answering the question, “To what end?,” realigning practices so they support the museum’s intended impact, and reflecting on practice and evaluation findings to improve practice, thereby moving the museum closer to achieving public value.

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