



How Do We Prove the Value of Museums?

Friday, May 1, 2009, 2:15-3:30pm

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- Jane Legget, Associate Director, New Zealand Tourism Research Institute, Auckland University of Technology
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IMLS, the nation's largest federal cultural agency, supports its mission to build the capacity of museums and libraries to serve their communities with a focus on three strategic areas of activity: sustaining heritage, knowledge, and culture; enhancing learning and innovation; and supporting professional development.

Since FY 2005, IMLS's Office of Museum Services has funded both research and demonstration projects under the auspices of the National Leadership Grant program. These grants support projects that "raise the bar" in museum and library practice. Funded projects have national impact and generate results, including research findings, which can be widely adapted and disseminated to move the field forward.

Research grants support both basic and applied research. Competitive proposals pose a question and explain through the plan of work how the question will be investigated, how data will be gathered and analyzed, and how results will be evaluated and disseminated. Proposals should ground the project in the context of current research and employ replicable methodologies that generate valid results.

Demonstration grants support projects that use available knowledge to address key challenges facing museums and transform that knowledge into formal practice. IMLS encourages proposals that demonstrate how museums serve their communities; foster public value; establish standards and tools for professional practice; and innovative learning.

The first museum-focused National Leadership Research and Demonstration Grants were awarded in FY 2005. Beginning in 2008, all research projects are now funded through NLG (Conservation Project Support had funded research since the program's inception in 1984). Search our archive of awarded grants at <http://www.imls.gov/search.asp>.

Other Research Initiatives

The Institute is engaged in a range of research, evaluation, and data collection efforts to inform the development and implementation of policy and program initiatives at the national and local levels. The following are highlights of some of our current projects.

Museums and Libraries and 21st Century Skills

In summer of 2009, IMLS will release *Museums and Libraries and 21st Century Skills*, a policy report and assessment tool to advance the role of libraries and museums in the development of such 21st century skills as information, communications, and technology literacy; creativity and problem solving; civic literacy; and global awareness. The report establishes the essential role libraries and museums play in creating an engaged citizenry and competitive workforce.

Exhibiting Public Value: Government Funding for Museums in the United States

Exhibiting Public Value: Government Funding for Museums in the United States, released in December 2008, provides the first major review of public finance for the museum sector. It explores public support from federal, state, and local government sources, focusing particular attention on levels of financial support and types of delivery mechanisms. The study documents the variety of methods through which the museum sector receives government support, and also exposes gaps in the network of support at the local, state, and national levels.

InterConnections: A National Study of Users and Potential Users of Online Information

In March 2008, the Institute released results of the InterConnections study, which offers insight into the ways people search for information in the online age, and how this impacts the ways they interact with public libraries and museums, both online and in person. The Institute sponsored this national study through a cooperative agreement with a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill research team led by José-Marie Griffiths and Donald W. King, recognized leaders in information research. The InterConnections report provides evidence that public libraries and museums are thriving in the Internet Age as trusted providers of information to people of all ages. *InterConnections* is available in its entirety, with summary presentations and publications, at www.interconnectionsreport.org.

To view additional IMLS studies and other publications, visit <http://www.imls.gov/resources/resources.shtml>.

Carol Scott, Renaissance London Programme Manager for 2012, Museum of London

Exploring the Evidence Base for Museum Value

Project Overview

As the museum sector argues its case for sustainable funding in an increasingly challenging economic climate, the requirement to prove value will be more rigorous than ever. As a sector, our capacity to prove value is hampered by the lack of a common descriptive language, yet-to-be-agreed consensus around a shared set of values indicators and a dispersed evidence base. Related to these issues is an Australian study which explored two research questions:

1. Based on an analysis of emerging literature and primary research with professionals and the public, is it possible to develop a typology that describes the value of museums?
2. Is it further possible to use this typology to develop a model for values- based assessment supported by a set of defensible indicators?

Findings

The study conducted primary research with museum professionals and the public to identify what values they attributed to museums. The findings were categorized to develop a values typology. A further dimension of the primary research examined whether the values typology could be translated into a set of indicators and substantiated with evidence. Finally a set of defensible, values-based indicators was proposed for the purpose of establishing a new evaluation paradigm for museums. The study found that:

Values typology: The value of museums can be described across and within four dimensions. These dimensions are instrumental, intrinsic, institutional and use value. The typology can be used to develop a common language to describe the value of museums.

Values indicators: Three of these value dimensions (instrumental, intrinsic, institutional) lend themselves to the development of a set of measurable indicators. A more nuanced approach is required for acquiring evidence to support the intrinsic value dimension.

Evidence: There is an increasing amount of evidence to support all four dimensions of value but the evidence is dispersed and there are few examples where a central system has been established to collate the data for the advocacy purposes of the sector.

Implications for Museums

This study demonstrated that professional and community perspectives on the value of museums exceed the instrumental and utilitarian outcomes which have predominated over the last two decades. A more holistic picture emerges in which intrinsic, institutional and use values are included in a values typology. Importantly, for the purposes of on-going advocacy, it is possible to develop a coherent set of measurable values indicators to support at least three of the four value dimensions. Though much substantiating evidence exists, a dispersed evidence base, the absence of a co-coordinated approach to data collection and the lack of a sector-wide programme of research within a values paradigm present challenges to be addressed.

Selected references

Scott, C.A. 2009 (in progress) 'Exploring the evidence base for museum value' in *Museum Management and Curatorship*, September.

Scott, C.A. 2008 'Using Values to Position and Promote Museums' in the *International Journal of Arts Management*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Fall, pp. 28-41.

Scott, C.A. 2008, 'Public value of museums' in *Current Trends*, Committee for Audience Research and Evaluation of the American Association of Museums CARE/AAM monograph series, pp. 3- 9.

Barbara Soren, University of Toronto Museum Studies/Independent Consultant

Museum Experiences That Change Visitors

Project Overview

Transform, transforming, and transformative are common terms for describing museum spaces, creation of objects on display, and experiences for visitors. But is there evidence that museums profoundly change visitors through their objects, collections, exhibitions, public programs, and websites?

The nature of transformational museum experiences

- Provide new opportunities to invent knowledge and explore new ideas
- Create challenges to discover the interconnectedness of ideas
- Transform experiences into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs, and senses
- Change individuals by giving 'cognitive hooks to the hookless'
- Become more inclusive, discriminating, emotionally capable of change, and reflective.

Potential 'triggers for transformation'

Attitudinal	A shift in perspective
Authentic	Awe with the authentic object
Behavioural	Over time, coming to know
Being witness	Stories of survivors' personal objects
Cultural	New insight into cultural changes
Emotional	Powerfully emotive to the point of tears
Motivational	'Crystallizing' experience
Sublime	Imagination, reason, and sense of vastness
Traumatic	Physical response to horrors in history
Unexpected	Shocking and unexpected surprise

Case studies

1. Intense two-week summer institutes at the Royal Ontario Museum, an interdisciplinary museum
2. A travelling exhibition highlighting the role Canada plays in international development.

Methods for exploring triggers for transformation experiences

1. Participant observation, photo and video documentation, individual and focus group interviews, pre- and post-program written questionnaires, participants' process-folios, reflective journals
2. Observation through tracking and timing, exit visitor survey, 'Continuing the Conversation' comment cards, visitor questions, volunteer guide feedback, Web traffic reports.

Some Findings

Evidence of personal change: Case study 1	Evidence of personal change: Case study 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shifts in attitudes about feeling of community and taking personal risks ▪ Changes in awareness of the value of arts and culture, enhanced images of artists ▪ Emotional involvement with authentic objects, performance, and 'lived' experiences ▪ Motivation for behavioural change - sustained pursuit of new art forms, increased participation in community cultural events and on-site/online museum visits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shifts in attitudes about international development work today ▪ Changes in awareness of the impact of grass roots development work on diverse cultural communities ▪ Emotional responses to stories of people living in developing countries and interns working in communities abroad ▪ Motivation to continue the conversation and contribute to a more pluralistic, tolerant and equitable world

Selected references

- Soren, B.J. 2009 (in progress). "Museum experiences that change visitors." *Museum Management and Curatorship*, Special Issue 24, no. 3, September.
- Soren, B.J. 2007. "Audience-based measures of success: Evaluating museum learning." In *Manual of Museum Learning*, ed. B. Lord, 221-251. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Soren, B.J. 1998. "Can the arts be transformational?" In *Crossroads: The challenge of lifelong learning*, co-eds. D. Fitzner and M. Rugh, 141-154. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.

Jane Legget, New Zealand Tourism Research Institute, Auckland University of Technology
Measuring and Treasuring – Evidence from Community Stakeholders

Project Overview

Museums within the not-for-profit and public sectors are increasingly required to report on their performance, but what is reported on is generally determined by museum governance, external funders and museum management. This case study from Aotearoa New Zealand investigated stakeholder perspectives, to identify approaches to museum performance assessment factors which made sense to a range of community stakeholders in the context of public accountability.

Findings

A participatory mixed method approach was used for the data gathering, involving focus groups, quantitative analysis of qualitative data, concept mapping and pattern matching. From analysis of these data, seven key dimensions of museum performance emerged as commonly conceived areas of museum performance that appeared to matter to community stakeholders and indicate where they locate the value within the museum.

- **Collections:** The integrity of the collections (quality of the objects and the associated research which increases their utility), their management and their active use in exhibition, education programmes etc.
- **Staffing:** The calibre of the staff and their effective management
- **Participation:** Visitation, both statistics and demographics, and visit patterns and visitor response, and active use of the museum resources by individuals and organisations, e.g. for research, as a venue.
- **Concerns of Maori - the indigenous people of New Zealand:** Integration of Maori values in the everyday work of the museum, and Maori participation as visitors, staff, volunteers, and board members.
- **Education:** Both a strong schools focus but also active engagement in community education at all levels
- **Community relationships:** Effective partnerships in collaborative projects both inside and beyond the museum, and community perceptions of the museum

Implications for the museum sector

To be meaningful to the widest array of stakeholders, museum performance reporting needs to address these seven community-determined aspects, beyond the more common areas of financial accounting and visitation. While these seven dimensions may usefully form part of the formal accountability reporting, museums which are fully engaged with their communities of interest should consider other user-friendly and tailored means to report in a focussed way on those areas which matter most to specific categories of community stakeholder.

Further reading:

Legget, J. 2009 (in progress) 'Measuring what we treasure or treasuring what we measure? Investigating where community stakeholders locate the value in their museums.' In *Museum Management and Curatorship*, September (Special Issue)