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A Larger Table: Fostering Inclusion in Museums through Hiring Directors of Community Engagement

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A Larger Table: Fostering Inclusion in Museums through Hiring Directors of
Community Engagement

An Abstract of a Thesis in
Museum Studies

by

Hannah M. Page

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of:

Master of Arts
December 2018

SUNY Buffalo State Department of History and Social Studies Education

Abstract

Museums have undergone a transformation over the course of their existence, shifting from inwardly-focused private collections to organizations working to represent and advocate for the diversity of human existence. While professionals in the field have become increasingly aware of the importance of expanding beyond traditional audiences, there is little consensus about the best methods of achieving this goal. This thesis proposes one potential solution, the creation of a staff position dedicated to engaging members of the museum's surrounding community through relationship-building. After a brief exploration of the history of the museum field, this paper delves into the benefits of developing genuine, trusting relationships between museums and community members and explores how creating this staff position will assist museums in becoming more inclusive.

A Larger Table:
Fostering Inclusion in Museums through Hiring
Directors of Community Engagement

A Thesis in Museum Studies

by

Hannah M. Page

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts
December 2018

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Nearly a century ago, John Cotton Dana, the director of the Newark Public Library and founder of The Newark Museum Association, wrote “a museum is good only insofar as it is of use.”¹ He stated, “through careful study, it should be made something the people...would use and, using, would find pleasure and profit therein.”² It has been many decades since Dana died, yet these words remain as relevant today as when first penned. They resonate with many articles and blog posts written in the past few decades by museum professionals and academics who are concerned by declines in museum visitation and the fact that people currently visiting museums are not representative of the general population.

For example, in 2008, only nine percent of core museum visitors represented a racial or ethnic minority, while these minorities made up over twenty-five percent of the United States’ population. As time continues to pass, the composition of the U.S. will likely become even more ethnically and racially diverse. It’s currently predicted that “sometime between 2040 and 2050...the current U.S. minority groups—African Americans, Latinos (of any race), Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Native Americans and others, including those who identify as multiracial—will collectively become the new majority in the United States. The proportion of non-Hispanic whites will fall below 50 percent for the first time since the country was founded.” The United States will then be a “majority minority” society.³

¹ John Cotton Dana, “A Plan for a New Museum: The Kind of Museum It Will Profit a City to Maintain,” in *The New Museum: Selected Writings by John Cotton Dana*, ed. William A. Peniston (Washington, DC: Newark Museum and The American Association of Museums, 1999), 65.

² Dana, “A Plan for a New Museum,” 24.

³ Betty Farre and Maria Medvedeva, *Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums* (Washington, DC: American Alliance of Museums, 2010), <https://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/sites/culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/files/Demographic-Transformation.pdf> (accessed June 7, 2018), 9.

Colleen Dilenschneider, director of digital engagement at the predictive intelligence company *IMPACTS Research*, has pointed out in a blog post that, “the people who look, act, and think like traditional historic visitors are leaving the U.S. market at a faster rate than they are being replaced, [leading] to a shrinking visitor base, and a poor outlook until we are able to better engage diverse audiences at more representative levels.”⁴ This is a cry for action, which should be heeded by all museum professionals. The clear discrepancy between the country’s demographic composition and the make-up of museum visitors reveals a need for museums to consider why certain populations are disengaged with their institutions and find ways to connect with these individuals. In this paper, I propose taking a monumental step toward this goal by creating and empowering a particular staff position, one that would be full-time, pay a living wage and concentrate almost exclusively on building relationships between the museum and its surrounding community. Throughout this paper, I shall refer to the person in this position as a ‘Director of Community Engagement (DCE),’ although the actual job title could vary among institutions. In this paper, I will explain why museums wishing to remain vital and relevant should create this position and will briefly touch on the skills a successful candidate should possess, while also outlining what the organization must be willing to do to support them.

Museum professionals should never assume their institution’s worth will always be understood. Museums have an incredible capacity to positively affect society, groups, and individuals. However, this is entirely dependent on how members of the field choose to address current problems of disengagement. If attendance figures continue to follow their present trajectory, then museums are likely to face an economic crisis. There will be less earned income

⁴ Colleen Dilenschneider, “Nontraditional Visitors Are Not Low-Income Visitors: A Leadership Assumption Hurting Cultural Organizations,” Know Your Own Bone Blog, entry posted February 28, 2018, <https://www.colleendilen.com/2018/02/28/diverse-visitors-not-low-income-visitors-leadership-assumption-hurting-cultural-organizations/> (accessed March 5, 2018).

from ticket and museum store sales and funding from the government and private sector will likely decrease, as a museum's visitation statistics and reports on its economic impact are often used by government officials to assess its worth to society. It is telling that a report documenting public value, which was developed at the request of the United States congress, begins their segment emphasizing "conditions relevant for assessing the potential impact of alternative funding models" with a section entitled, "Visitation and Use of American Museums."⁵

It is important for the museum field to not become complacent and assume their institutions will always be considered necessary by the public or those in power. Only a year ago, in March 2017, President Trump proposed a budget plan eliminating the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (PBS),⁶ federal agencies that are important funders of many museums and other cultural organizations in the United States. While the plan did not pass through Congress,⁷ its mere introduction stresses the danger of assuming museums will always be perceived as valuable. Professionals need to spend time evaluating their actions to prove that they are not only benefiting a small sub-section of society. If they do not gain awareness and assessment skills, then museums will likely lose the money necessary to support their staff, programs, and collections.

This loss of funding would force museums to make cuts in various areas, such as programming, exhibitions, and staff. Some directors may even feel they have no choice but to

⁵ Institute of Museum and Library Services, *Exhibiting Public Value: Government Funding for Museums in the United States* (Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2008) <https://www.ims.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/MuseumPublicFinance.pdf> (accessed May 25, 2018), 3.

⁶ Philip Kennicott and Peggy McGlone, "Trump wants to cut the NEA and NEH. This is the worst-case scenario for arts groups," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/with-elimination-of-nea-and-neh-trumps-budget-is-worst-case-scenario-for-arts-groups/2017/03/15/5291645a-09bb-11e7-a15f-a58d4a988474_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.31ca0d7a82b9 (accessed June 6, 2018).

⁷ Sopan Deb, "Despite Trump Threat, N.E.A and N.E.H Are Spared in Spending Bill," *New York Times*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/23/arts/nea-and-neh-spared-in-spending-bill.html> (accessed June 7, 2018).

sell or rehome the collections, which the museum was tasked with protecting for future generations. These threats would likely provide the average museum employee with enough incentive to at least consider how they might increasingly attract non-traditional visitors.

However, it is even more important to realize that the lack of diversity in visitation statistics uncovers an unsettling truth: many museums are failing to achieve their missions. The American Association of Museums states that “museums are a vital part of how we tell the stories of who we are, who we’ve been, and how we will live together. They maintain our cultural heritage and teach us about all the ways we are different and the same. Reflecting the diversity of that heritage is a critical part of museums’ work. We cannot claim to be truly essential to society if we are not accessible to all.”⁸ That last sentence is of utmost importance; museums claim to be of value to society—that is why they are considered non-profits—but is this a claim that can be made, truthfully, when visitor statistics show such a disparity between the make-up of society and the people who are actually visiting museums? Not only are ethnic and racial minorities underrepresented in museum galleries, so are members of other traditionally-marginalized communities. For example, people with disabilities make up nearly twelve percent of the adult population in the United States, yet comprise only seven percent of the adults currently visiting art museums and galleries.⁹ One must also consider the differences that are not visible, such as socioeconomic classes, religious affiliations, sexual orientations, neurodiversity, and mental illnesses. Are museums doing enough to attract people who differ in these ways? Is there any way to know for sure?

⁸ “Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion,” American Alliance of Museums, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/diversity-equity-accessibility-and-inclusion/> (accessed March 16, 2018).

⁹ Sally Gifford, “New NEA Research on Arts Participation among People with Disabilities,” National Endowment for the Arts, July 1, 2015, <https://www.arts.gov/news/2015/new-nea-research-arts-participation-among-people-disabilities> (accessed March 16, 2018).

There are many reasons why people from marginalized communities are less likely to visit museums. The cost of admission may be a barrier for some, while others may lack transportation. However, one of the biggest reasons is because these individuals are not seeing themselves represented in museums' collections. In the fall of 2016, students at Guttman College in New York City analyzed the demographics of 1,300 artists represented in the city's top forty-five commercial galleries. "According to the recently published study, 80.5 percent of artists represented by the galleries are white. That number jumps up to a whopping 88.1 percent if the numbers are filtered for US artists."¹⁰ Another report, created by the Velvet Foundation in January 2010, identified all organizations in the United States that explicitly collected lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender objects. They only found eighty-seven, most of which were archives or university libraries and not museums.¹¹ Is it truly surprising that an increasingly colorful and diverse population would fail to find much worth in an institution that so blatantly ignores the history, culture, and contributions of anyone who wasn't a heterosexual, cisgender, white, and wealthy male? If a museum wants to engage the entirety of its community, staff members must first take the time to identify the people who are not currently involved and gain a clear understanding of why this is. While it isn't possible to explore all potential reasons in this paper, I will briefly describe how museums developed into places where certain populations—such as American Indians, African Americans, people with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQ community—often feel disengaged, mistrustful, or unwelcome.

Becoming aware of and educated about this history and other barriers to visitation is only the beginning, however. Inevitably, a museum dedicating itself to becoming inclusive of the

¹⁰ Henri Neuendorf, "It's Official, 80% of the Artists in NYC's Top Galleries are White," *ArtNet News*, June 2, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/new-york-galleries-study-979049> (accessed March 16, 2018).

¹¹ Susan Bednarczyk, *Strategic Plan: Needs Assessment: The National Museum of LGBT History & Culture* (Velvet Foundation, 2010), <http://nationallgbtmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/NEEDS-ASSMENT.pdf> (accessed October 3, 2015).

surrounding community must decide on a plan of action. I believe the earlier-quoted statement from John Dana—'museums must find ways to be *useful* to members of the community'—provides an excellent starting point. To reach members of the community, specifically those who are not current visitors, the staff of the museum must discover what would be most useful to these people. The best and—I would argue—only proper way to do this is by building meaningful relationships with members of the community and asking what they need or desire. After developing these relationships, then the museum could work with groups and individuals to meet actual, defined needs.

Unfortunately, developing true relationships is not a simple process. While many institutions have worked to attend to the wounds left by history, a discouraging number of their attempts have resulted in feelings of dissatisfaction. Sometimes when museums work with marginalized communities, the members of the community end the project feeling like they gave more to the museum than they received. Other times, a project is successful, but the museum never follows up or does anything to sustain the relationship, leaving their supposed 'partners' feeling resentment.¹² For these reasons, many museum outreach attempts fail to lead to lasting change; there may be an increase in visitors from a certain, targeted population during a program or exhibition, but often there is a rapid return to the status quo.

Combating this problem requires a greater, long-term investment from the museum. I believe this investment should include the hiring of a full-time, fairly-paid Director of Community Engagement. This person would be entirely dedicated to the process of building genuine relationships between the museum and its surrounding community, which would help reduce or even eliminate some of the problems previously identified. Some museums, such as the

¹² Kimberly F. Keith, "Moving Beyond the Mainstream: Insight into the Relationship between Community-based Heritage Organizations and the Museum," in *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*, ed. Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale (New York: Routledge, 2012), 52.

Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History (MAH) under the Executive Directorship of Nina Simon, have already established this position. The MAH has actually proceeded further by reorganizing its staff into teams which work together to fuel, engage, and empower the museum and by creating other community-centered positions such as a ‘Brand and Community Experience Manager’ and ‘Intercultural Programs Coordinator.’¹³ Other organizations, including some libraries, have also recognized the value of dedicating staff to the development of community relationships. The Library of Virginia posted a full-time ‘Community Outreach Specialist’ job opportunity on May 18, 2018, which defines the responsibilities of the position as, “identifying and engaging organizations and individuals within the diverse ethnic communities throughout the commonwealth,” as well as working to “develop and maintain community partnerships, identify opportunities for Library participation in local community events, and create innovative programming.”¹⁴ This is exactly the type of position that could bring significant benefits to a museum and the general public.

Regrettably, this is not common practice in most museums, particularly small- to medium-sized organizations. While no one has, of yet, surveyed the field and recorded the number of institutions with community engagement professionals on staff, my own observations and conversations with members of the field have revealed that most museums consider it the role of the museum educator to develop relationships with under-served communities. To informally test this, I conducted an internet search on ‘community relations and museums’ and found most of the results to be for positions in museums with titles such as, ‘Museum Education and Outreach Coordinators’ or ‘Director of Learning and Community Outreach’. While museum

¹³ Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, Staff Page, <https://santacruzmah.org/about/contact-us/> (accessed November 30, 2018).

¹⁴ Virginia Government, Community Outreach Specialist job posting, https://virginiajobs.peopleadmin.com/postings/112260?job_application_id=3524209 (accessed May 28, 2018).

education, outreach, and community engagement are areas with significant overlap, I do not believe combining these roles into a single position is the most effective way of making the institution more relevant to diverse audiences. The development of genuine and long-term relationships can only occur if a member of the staff leaves the museum and creates authentic connections with the community, a process requiring a significant investment of time, mental, and physical resources. When considering the job of a museum educator—to develop programs, train and manage volunteers, lead tours, and assist with the creation of exhibits—it becomes clear there is simply not enough time in a 40-hour work week for a person to successfully perform both roles. Instead, museums working to become more inclusive should create a unique position entirely centered on engaging the community through relationship-building.

They cannot just create this position, however. They must also empower it. While many museums mention a desire for increased diversity in their mission statement or declare their dedication to inclusion on their websites, not all museums are presently places where revolutionary changes can occur. All members of staff—from the top down—must be willing to stand behind the person who is hired to engage with individuals in the community; if this support is not there, then the person will be doomed to failure. People in leadership positions must also be open to experimentation with innovative ideas. For example, they may need to consider different methods of fundraising, attitudes toward staffing, and ways to allocate funds. This is likely to involve a variety of challenges. However, museum professionals cannot let these complications paralyze them into inaction.

Museums are important. I firmly believe they have the potential to positively affect individuals, families, groups, and society in ways that extend beyond the collective imagination. This belief is the reason why I wish to work in this field and why I chose to write this paper. It is

imperative that museums adapt to our changing culture and become spaces that are representative, useful, and beneficial to all people. It's not too late to do so; there are already examples of museums opening themselves up to change and seeing how this willingness to take risks can impact lives. There are also many places where one can see the impact of doing the opposite and ignoring the signs of change.

While researching this paper, one particular story assured me these types of changes actually can improve lives in amazing and often unexpected ways. During the 1990s, the head of the Taylor Community Science Resource Center at the St. Louis Science Center, Diane Miller, began running community partnerships at the Science Center. She decided to approach her job in a nontraditional way; instead of beginning with programs meant to encourage more economically-disadvantaged families to visit the museum, she went out to “local neighborhoods with low-income families and lousy schools and asked parents how they felt about their kids’ science education.” The parents informed her that they weren’t concerned about what their children were learning; they were, however, worried about their future job prospects. Miller asked them, “What if I hire your kids and pay them to learn science, teach it to other people, and gain professional skills?” Thus, the Youth Exploring Science (YES) program was born. It was a magnificent success; YES participants were graduating from high school in record numbers and most were continuing on to college. Miller told several stories about “teens who came in thinking of themselves as dumb but changed their perspective as their confidence grew in two areas they associated with intelligence—knowing science and being able to teach.”¹⁵ All of this is heartening information, but the part of this story that really caught my attention was what happened next.

¹⁵ Nina Simon, “What Does it Really Mean to Serve ‘Underserved’ Audiences?” Museum 2.0 Blog, entry posted July 29, 2010, <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2010/07/what-does-it-really-mean-to-serve.html> (accessed June 15, 2018).

During an open discussion about the program, an audience member asked if “non-traditional audiences really need a different kind of mediation than other museum visitors. The questioner noted that visitors have been using museums for their own diverse purposes since the beginning of time. Why can't new visitors do the same?” Miller’s response was to tell a story. After the program had been in place for a while, some of the YES teens approached her and said they thought more people from their communities would enjoy the Science Center and other museums in St. Louis’ Forest Park, which were free. In their words, “if there’s one thing poor families are looking for, it’s free things to do on the weekends.” The teens then worked with the YES staff to create a grant proposal that would allow them to partner with families at St. Louis homeless shelters and introduce them to the local museums.

These teens had grown up in economically-impooverished homes and had an innate understanding of how it felt to be a new museum visitor, so they crafted the program based on this knowledge. “The teens paired up one-on-one with families, so that they could blend in easily and *look* like individual families instead of like a conspicuous tour group. They helped the families understand what's in the museums, how to approach exhibits, how to figure out when you can use an interactive element—all the cultural secrets that are easy for frequent museum-goers to take for granted. The YES teens were able to make a connection and design a program in a way that was more culturally appropriate and likely to succeed than traditional museum staff members likely could.”¹⁶ This success story is the reason why museums should be willing to take risks, make changes, and engage with the people in their communities who aren’t the ‘average visitor.’

¹⁶ Nina Simon, “What Does it Really Mean.”

Creating the proposed position is only the first step toward becoming an institution that is open and welcoming to all people. My ultimate desire is for this proposal to open the doors for communication between museums and the diverse world outside their walls, as well as bring the talent and passion of people—like these teenagers—into the museum field. While it is true that museums need to become more diverse and inclusive if they wish to survive and be relevant in the future, these concerns shouldn't overshadow the real reasons why museums need to become places where anyone can walk in without feeling uncomfortable or like they don't belong. There are people everywhere with wonderful ideas, talent, and a yearning to help others; people who could change the world in unimaginable ways, but are currently unable to reach their potential due to situations outside of their control. Museums can benefit these individuals. More exciting, though, is the fact that when people with diverse perspectives and experiences become involved and feel connected with the museum, both the institution and its surrounding community bloom.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The question of how museums can become more useful and attractive to presently-disengaged audiences has become a popular topic of conversation in the field. Truthfully, it would be impossible for any one person to provide a comprehensive review of all the papers, conversations, and reports on the subject, even if they limited their scope to writings solely from the past five years. I began this essay with the words of John Cotton Dana, as his ideas surrounding the necessity of museums to be ‘useful’ to their communities helped pioneer this ongoing conversation in both the museum and library fields. His works had a profound influence on everything that came after, although it took numerous decades for the field, as a whole, to catch up to this visionary’s ideas.

Stephen E. Weil was one influential museum philosopher whose writing echoed and then built upon Dana’s works. In his essay, “From Being *About* Something to Being *For* Somebody,” Weil outlined the state of museums at the end of the 20th century. They were beginning to shift from inwardly-focused institutions to organizations concentrated outward. In Chapter Three of this paper, I follow this progression. *Museums: A History* by John E. Simmons is one book that shows how our contemporary idea of a ‘museum’ developed; Simmons demonstrates how our present institutions grew out of the basic human need to collect objects. By combining Simmons’ book with the works of Geoffrey D. Lewis and Kenneth Hudson, one can clearly follow the gradual shift from private collections to institutions focused on edification, then education, and now to a state focusing more on inclusive representation and social progress.

Today, one finds general consensus among museum professionals and academics regarding the need for more inclusive institutions. The *Incluseum* blog is an excellent place to

find numerous articles on this subject, written by a number of museum professionals and activists. A study of these articles, however, soon leads one to recognize the complexity of the debates surrounding inclusion. Some museum professionals believe inclusion can best be attained through targeted programming; one can find numerous examples of museums which have developed programs for various marginalized people groups. In this paper, I mention a few, including the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, which developed the ‘Out West’ series or programming to reach out to the local LGBTQ population. Other authors emphasize the need to work directly with members of the community or, to use different words, ‘let communities inside.’ The Smith Leadership Symposium speaker, Mike Murawski, is an outspoken proponent of this, as are the authors Eithne Nightingale and Chandan Mahal. After analyzing their work, as well as that of many other authors and community leaders, I conclude that they are correct in this belief and that museums should be doing more to develop relationships with the people in their communities.

Chapter Four of this paper focuses on my proposal that museums create a ‘Director of Community Engagement’ position. The person in this position would be responsible for facilitating the creation and maintenance of relationships between museums and the communities they serve. While I have not come across another museum writer who has recommended this exact solution, many have commented on the necessity of developing genuine and trusting relationships with community members. Amy Lonetree and Raney Bench are two such authors. Each have many years of experience working with museums and American Indian nations and—while their books focus on how museums can work with Native people—their advice could be used by institutions working to build relationships with members of any community. Their explorations of how relationships are built between museums and American Indians—combined

with the writings of people like Fari Nzinga, Porchia Moore, and Rose Cuomo—assist in developing a basic outline of a Director of Community Engagement’s responsibilities and reveal many problems present in current museum practices.

In order to ascertain the feasibility of creating this type of position, I read a number of books by experts in non-profit fundraising and grant-writing. Kim Klein’s book *Fundraising in Times of Crisis* was particularly informative and would be an excellent addition to any museum professional’s shelf, as she provides many ideas for how non-profit organizations can raise money during difficult periods and clearly expresses the benefits of monetarily relying upon a large number of people who have been personally impacted by the non-profit. She mentions that this large base can be difficult for non-profits to find, however, as they often struggle to build and maintain relationships. My proposal could help solve this problem, not only for museums, but also for other non-profits.

Chapter 3 Origins of the Challenge

When asked why it is important to study history, many people are likely to respond with the famous quote, “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it,” a quote usually attributed to Winston Churchill, but which most likely evolved from George Santayana’s words, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”¹⁷ It’s a useful quote, easily memorized and holding some general truth about why we care about the actions of those who are long-dead. However, one cannot stop there when expressing the importance of studying the past. In the words of the American Historical Association, we study history because, “the past causes the present, and so the future...Only through studying history can we grasp how things change; only through history can we begin to comprehend the factors that cause change; and only through history can we understand what elements of an institution or a society persist despite change.”¹⁸

The purpose of this paper is to present a possible solution to one of the most pressing issues currently facing the field: how museums can become more inclusive. I believe institutions can do so by employing and empowering Directors of Community Engagement. However, before exploring the benefits of this solution, I will clarify how museums developed into places largely perceived by people—particularly members of marginalized communities—as boring, unwelcoming or having little connection to their lives. To do so, one must begin by investigating

¹⁷ George Santayana, “Flux and Constancy in Human Nature” in *Reason in Common Sense*, vol. 1 of *The Life of Reason* (1905; Project Gutenberg, 2005) http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15000/15000-h/15000-h.htm#vol1CHAPTER_XII_FLUX_AND_CONSTANCY_IN_HUMAN_NATURE (accessed June 15, 2018).

¹⁸ Peter N. Stearns, “Why Study History? (1998),” American Historical Association, [https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-\(1998\)](https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-(1998)) (accessed July 15, 2018).

the general history of how museums changed over time and use this history as the foundation on which to develop the proposed transformational idea.

Museums arose out of collections, so it is important to first explore the motivation behind the act of collecting objects. Then, we will proceed through the history of museums and examine five of the most significant shifts in thinking, each of which affected our present understanding of who museums are for and what should be done to make these institutions welcoming and useful to as many people as possible. The early ancestors of the western museum emerged in Europe, where collections of rare and costly objects were acquired to convey wealth and power. The first identified shift occurred when this way of thinking was challenged by scientific inquiry and some people began to view collections as a way to learn about the world and create order out of the chaos of existence. The second change occurred when collections were first opened to the public. These ‘museums’ were, theoretically, meant to benefit the average person. Unfortunately, the widely-held, elitist ideas of the time limited their impact to small portions of the population, as visitation was only awarded to those that society deemed worthy. This eventually changed, however, as the spread of Enlightenment ideals throughout western Europe and the United States led to a third shift in thinking. Individuals began to promote the idea that people intrinsically possessed the right to educate and better themselves; therefore, all members of the public should be able to access museums. This required a fourth shift in thinking, specifically among museum staff members. No longer could they focus solely on protecting and preserving the objects in their collection; instead, they must begin to think about the visitors and consider how to display and interpret objects, so members of the general public could understand what they were viewing. Some museums still struggle with this change in philosophy, although most staff

members will at least acknowledge that museums cannot exist as mere repositories of objects and are only valuable if they are accessible to visitors.

We are currently experiencing a fifth shift, focused upon the issue of inclusion. The American Alliance of Museums has defined inclusion as, “the intentional, ongoing effort to ensure that diverse individuals fully participate in all aspects of organizational work, including decision-making processes [and] refers to the ways that diverse participants are valued as respected members of an organization and/or community.”¹⁹ Due to the increasing societal focus on social justice issues in recent decades, as well as the writing of early visionaries such as John Cotton Dana, many museum professionals have begun examining their institutions’ complicity in problems of inequity and injustice. In the process, many have become concerned by the present lack of representation and diversity in museums and are working to better represent and attract non-traditional audiences. Significant progress has been made. However, museums still face considerable challenges. It is challenging to develop an inclusive environment when museums have historically been on the side of the oppressor. Centuries of pain and mistrust stand like a wall between these institutions and many of the populations they most wish to engage. Even if museum employees have noble intentions, that history will never disappear. Therefore, if museum professionals wish to create environments where all people feel listened to, supported, and encouraged they must be willing to examine and learn the past, and then implement institutional changes in the present.

¹⁹ “Definitions of Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion,” American Alliance of Museums, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/diversity-equity-accessibility-and-inclusion/facing-change-definitions/> (accessed July 23, 2018).

The Instinct to Collect

In this section, I will explore the history of museum development and answer the question of how they became institutions presently viewed by many as unwelcoming, boring, or irrelevant to their lives. Before proceeding through the five shifts in thinking, however, it is essential to develop some basic insight into the relationship between humans and collections, as collections of objects are the foundations of almost all museums. John E. Simmons, an author whose work outlines the historical progression of the museum field, believes the field's evolution, "has been driven by people trying to understand the world they live in...[and make] sense of the chaos around them by assembling collections," which he then refers to as "microcosms that mirror the macrocosm, abstractions from the real world."²⁰ Archaeological evidence shows that collecting is a deeply-ingrained human trait; the earliest 'collection' found dates back to the fifth century B.C.E. and consists of eleven hundred seal impressions on lumps of clay. This was found in a Persian tomb in Ur, present-day Iraq.²¹

Simmons spends time clarifying what he means by 'collecting,' as it differs from the simple action of gathering objects together. A collection is a group of items accumulated on purpose, where some sort of relationship is recognized—although sometimes these relationships are only understood by the collection's creator.²² Randy O. Frost—a researcher of hoarding, the pathologic form of collecting—agrees with this definition. He states, "a collection must be a set of objects, meaning more than one, and that the items must be related in some way—they must have some kind of cohesive theme. They also must be actively acquired, meaning there must be some kind of passion or fire to seek out and obtain them." He documents the earliest evidence of

²⁰ John E. Simmons, *Museums: A History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), xii.

²¹ Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 51-52.

²² Simmons, *Museums*, 1-6.

the collecting urge in humans, the instinct that would eventually lead to the institutions we now call museums

There is an incredible complexity behind humans' connections with objects and collections. Frost summarizes the research of Lita Furby, a pioneer in the study of ownership and possessions, who identified three reasons why people acquire objects. The first is because the object allows the person to accomplish something, the second is because they provide a sense of security, and the third is because the objects become part of an individual's sense of self. This is, perhaps, the most interesting of the three explanations, as these attachments can be incredibly powerful. "Objects can increase one's sense of status or power and expand one's potential," Frost comments. They help people maintain and clarify their identities by preserving personal history; mementos of their past "become repositories for the sensations, thoughts, and emotions present during earlier experiences, promoting sensations such as the rush of nostalgia that can accompany hearing a song or smelling a scent from the past." People's possessions can feel like an extension of themselves; Frost says that most victims of burglary feel they've been violated, "and many women liken it to being raped."²³

The museologist and former director of the Brooklyn Museum, Duncan F. Cameron, comments on this universal collecting behavior, saying the best evidence of its existence and importance "is not just the fact that collections and the arranging of collections are recorded throughout history and are evidenced by archaeological findings, but, more important, that this same behavior continues today on an intimate and individual basis." He uses multiple examples—of a child bringing objects like pebbles and shells into the home during vacation, of teenagers arranging and rearranging their rooms while searching for their identity, and of senior

²³ Frost and Steketee, *Stuff*, 50-55.

citizens collecting objects they used in the past—to show how people acquire objects to shape their view of reality.²⁴ Humans do not create collections out of a simple desire to possess physical objects. Physical possessions help people form and express their own identities and assist them in interpreting and existing within a chaotic world.

While approaching the history of museums as an outgrowth of this natural human urge, Simmons reveals how museums developed out of a fundamental human necessity; specifically, the need to feel safe and secure. This is a requirement so essential that Abraham Maslow placed it directly above biological and physical needs—like air, food, and water—in his famous hierarchy of needs. According to his theory, people must develop an understanding of the world as a safe place and feel secure about their place within it to be happy. Maslow’s observations of children—chosen because they had not yet been taught to suppress their emotional responses—led to the realization that people firmly desire a “predictable, orderly world.” Maslow said, “injustice, unfairness, or inconsistency in the parents seem to make a child feel anxious and unsafe,” as these actions made the world appear unreliable and unpredictable. “Young children seem to thrive better under a system which has at least a skeletal outline of rigidity, in which there is a schedule of a kind, some sort of routine, something that can be counted upon, not only for the present but also far into the future.”²⁵ This remains true during adulthood. Dan Gilbert, a happiness researcher, speaks about how intensely humans desire this knowledge about the future. Americans spend millions of dollars every year on, “psychics, investment advisors, spiritual leaders, weather forecasters, and other assorted hucksters who claim they can predict the future.” He points out that this craving is so intense because our brains want control over the experiences

²⁴ Duncan F. Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012) 51.

²⁵ A. H. Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943), doi:10.1037/h0054346, 367-377.

we're going to have. He states, "human beings come into the world with a passion for control, they go out of the world the same way, and research suggests that if they lose their ability to control things at any point between their entrance and their exit, they become unhappy, helpless, hopeless, and depressed."²⁶

One reason why humans possess the instinctual desire collect objects, then, is because it provides feelings of certainty and makes people feel like they have more control over their world. There are patterns and connections one can identify when looking at objects; it is also possible to create order out of chaos. Additionally, objects increase feelings of security by affirming one's sense of identity. A collection of postcards bought in other countries, for example, could support a woman's image of herself as well-traveled. Importantly, these functions do not only apply when talking about personal collections.

Museums possess a similar potential; they can help people develop ideas about the nature of the world around them and assist in confirming or developing their understanding of identity. Stephen E. Weil, a museum scholar long affiliated with the Smithsonian Institutions in Washington, D.C., wrote extensively on why museums matter and said: "Museums are quintessentially places that have the potency to change what people may know or think or feel, to affect what attitudes they may adopt or display, to influence what values they form."²⁷ Understanding the roles objects play in the lives of people is essential to understanding how museums developed and provides an important reason to continue working toward inclusion; for if one truly believes museum objects can benefit humanity, then it becomes morally necessary to work toward making them accessible to anyone.

²⁶ Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006) 20-21.

²⁷ Stephen E. Weil, "From Being *About* Something to Being *For* Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum," in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012) 179.

From Prestige to Inquiry

The history of museums has been characterized by a process of slow, gradual change. As Simmons states in his book: “Museums did not suddenly appear as institutions similar to those we know today—they developed slowly from private collections to public collections, from treasure troves to objects preserved for the public good.”²⁸ It is useful here to provide the contemporary definition of a museum; the International Council of Museum defines a museum as a “non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible history of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”²⁹ As we follow the development of museums, it is useful to keep this definition in mind as our end goal. Over the course of my research, I have identified five major shifts in thinking one can use to follow this change over time. The first is from collections established to display the wealth and prestige of their owners, to those gathered to promote inquiry into the world around them.

The word ‘museum’ has classical origins; it is the Latin derivative of the Greek word *mouseion*, which meant “seat of the Muses.” Originally, the term was used to designate philosophical institutions or places of discussion and contemplation. These differed from present museums, as they did not typically collect or display objects. However, they did establish the image of the museum as a place of inspiration and consideration in the public imagination.³⁰ As was mentioned by Simmons in the earlier quote, treasure houses can be viewed as early precursors to museums. These were places where rare and expensive artifacts—often spoils of

²⁸ Simmons, *Museums*, 9-10.

²⁹ “Museum Definition,” The World Museum Community, <http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/> (accessed July 13, 2018).

³⁰ Weil, “From Being About Something,” 179.

war—were prominently displayed to demonstrate the wealth and power of various monarchs and their kingdoms.³¹ One of the more interesting types of collections that fit under this category are ‘menageries,’ or collections of exotic animals. These early menageries differ from our modern zoos, as they were not established to expand scientific knowledge about the animal kingdom. Instead, many aristocrats considered them to be the “ultimate collectibles,” as they were more fascinating and exciting than natural history specimens and were an excellent way to illustrate one’s power and wealth. Living, active creatures are “less common, more difficult to acquire, and more expensive to maintain.”³² It wasn’t until the Renaissance that the reasoning behind collections began to change in a significant way, and people started to acquire objects as a means of educating themselves about the world. Simmons and most other museologists consider these collections to be the most direct ancestors of the modern museum; they were known as ‘cabinets of curiosity.’

These ‘cabinets’—alternatively referred to as ‘wonder rooms’—first arose in Italy due to a reawakening in Italy’s classical heritage and the rise in new merchant and banking families. Initially, there was little to distinguish them from the private treasure houses of royalty throughout Europe, as the precious examples of antiquities and art helped convey the owner’s status.³³ However, this began to change with the rise of Enlightenment ideas. This period—lasting from the end of the 1600s to the beginning of the 1800s—was characterized by a celebration of reason, which was viewed as the tool by which humans could understand the universe and improve their own condition. People from all walks of life-- including members of

³¹ Bob Mondello, “A History of Museums, ‘The Memory of Mankind,’” *NPR*, November 24, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97377145> (accessed June 17, 2018).

³² Vernon N. Kisling, Jr., “Ancient Collections and Menageries,” in *Zoo and Aquarium History: Ancient Animal Collections to Zoological Gardens*, ed. Vernon N. Kisling, Jr. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2001), 1.

³³ Geoffrey D. Lewis, “History of Museums,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-museums-398827> (accessed November 9, 2018).

“royal families, rulers, government officials, physicians, clerics, scholars, lawyers, and apothecaries”³⁴—strove toward increasing their knowledge, freedom, and happiness. A spirit of scientific enquiry spread throughout the western world; people were curious about ‘why’ and ‘how’ things happened and wanted to understand the entirety of the world around them. They were fascinated by new developments and craved new knowledge.³⁵ These desires led to an increase in collecting amongst members of both the upper and middle class, as well as an increase in specialized collecting. Two hundred and fifty natural history collections were documented in Italy during the sixteenth century, “including the fine herbarium of Luca Ghini at Padua.”³⁶

The British Library defines cabinets of curiosity as, “small collections of extraordinary objects which...attempted to categorize and tell stories about the wonders and oddities of the natural world.”³⁷ Similarly, the Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World at Brown University describes their purpose as, helping to “summarize the world to the very corners of the earth.”³⁸ As time passed, collectors began to invent new methods of classifying and interpreting their objects, now perceiving their pastime as a path toward systematically classifying all material in the universe.³⁹ As Patrick Mauriès notes in his book, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, “one of the true *raisons d’être* behind the growth of cabinets of curiosities was a restless desire to establish a continuity between art and nature [and] demonstrate the existence of a supreme unifying principle.”⁴⁰ One can see how this shift fits into earlier points about the

³⁴ Simmons, *Museums*, 72.

³⁵ Brian Duignan, “Enlightenment,” Encyclopædia Britannica, March 28, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history> (accessed July 13, 2018).

³⁶ Lewis, “History of Museums.”

³⁷ British Library, “Cabinet of Curiosities: 1710,” Timelines: Sources from History, <http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item107648.html> (accessed June 16, 2018).

³⁸ Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology & the Ancient World, “What is a Cabinet of Curiosities?” Contemporary Issues in Archaeological Theory, https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/courses/archaeologicaltheory/5146.html (accessed June 17, 2018).

³⁹ Lewis, “History of Museums.”

⁴⁰ Patrick Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002) 35-43.

psychology behind the collecting urge. Classifying natural and cultural materials into categories makes it easier to see the world as something stable and potentially-comprehensible, which helps people feel more safe and secure. Consider, for example, how humans classify animals into different kingdoms, phyla, classes, and so on. This process is useful because it helps us distinguish between ourselves and other species.⁴¹ The role change of collections—from symbols of wealth and prestige to tools used for scientific inquiry—was the first major step taken toward our modern understanding of the museum.

For a ‘Worthy’ Public

The second major change one sees in museum history is the opening of collections to a ‘worthy’ public. Collections were now perceived as potentially educational; therefore, some individuals saw value in opening them to members of the populace who could benefit from the information contained within. The process of introducing these collections to the public occurred over a very long period of time, however. At first, owners only displayed their collections to others “with the same tastes and level of knowledge as themselves,” as these collectors were products of their aristocratic and hierarchical societies and possessed a general contempt for the masses. “The public may admire in a general way,” their attitudes clearly stated, “but it should realize its permanent and unchangeable inferiority and keep its distance.”⁴² The Enlightenment, a European intellectual period during the 17th and 18th centuries which celebrated the use of reason, was the main impetus to change.

As previously mentioned, collectors were gaining awareness about the potential of their collections to contribute to human knowledge around this time. Soon afterwards, the spirit of

⁴¹ Kisling, “Ancient Collections and Menageries,” 5.

⁴² Kenneth Hudson, *A Social History of Museums: What the Visitors Thought* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975), 3-4.

enlightenment “produced an enthusiasm for equality of opportunity in learning” and led some members of the public to assert their right to see these educational treasures.⁴³ These developments influenced some owners of cabinets of curiosities to donate their collections for the betterment of the public.⁴⁴ One example was Luigi Ferdinando Marsigli, a scientist who lived in Bologna at the end of the seventeenth century and amassed a large collection of minerals, plants, animal specimens, examples of ancient art, and artifacts. His collecting journey is typical, as he initially appears to have accumulated these objects because they personally interested him. However, as time passed, he grew more interested in what he could learn from the objects he gathered under his roof and, ultimately, decided to completely remodel his home to hold his entire collection, plus a laboratory and research library. In 1712, he decided to donate his collection, and this renovated home to Bologna University, where it eventually became known as the Istituto delle Scienze.⁴⁵ Other examples of institutions founded around this period were the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Smithsonian.

These institutions were, at least in theory, founded to educate and interest the public in the sciences, art, technology, and history. When the British Museum was created, its goal was defined as preserving and maintaining collections, “not only for the inspection and entertainment of the learned and curious, but for the general use and benefit of the public.”⁴⁶ Unfortunately, this democratic ideal was not achieved during this period and museums could only be accessed by ‘worthy’ members of the public. Kenneth Hudson, writing on the social history of museums, describes this as a time when admission to museums was presented as a privilege and a favor, not

⁴³ Hudson, *A Social History*, 6.

⁴⁴ The motivation behind these donations could differ extensively, some wished to contribute to scholarship, some were interested in leaving behind something that would help them achieve ‘immortality,’ while other donations were made by disinterested family members after the owners’ death.

⁴⁵ Simmons, *Museums*, 120.

⁴⁶ Lewis, “History of Museums.”

a right.⁴⁷ Simmons mentions in his history that, “many early modern museums were open only to a narrow sector of the populace until well into the nineteenth century.” For example, the first museum in the United States—founded in Charleston, South Carolina in 1773—was only open to members of the library society until 1824.⁴⁸

In 1785, the German historian, Gebhard Friedrich August Wendeborn, complained about the complicated vetting process a person had to undergo before visiting the British Museum. They were required to submit credentials to the museum and then wait, sometimes for months, to receive an admission ticket. “Some applicants were turned down entirely.” If a person was lucky enough to receive an admission ticket, it “only entitled the visitor to participate in a guided group tour.” There were few object labels, limiting one’s ability to learn from the objects and the British Museum guides didn’t provide information on the tours, which were notoriously rushed.⁴⁹ This was common because many of the wealthy, educated men who founded or were otherwise involved with museums at the time held the belief that only certain people were truly worthy of visiting these institutions. Paula Findlen, an author who uses Italy as a case study of museum development, quoted a contemporaneous scholar, Marcello Malpighi, whose judgement represented the normative view at the time. He said, “the ideal museum-goer was a man capable of understanding the experience of seeing a museum. ‘Judicious curiosity,’ rather than an unbridled appetite for wonder, defined him.”⁵⁰

Duncan F. Cameron, writer of “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” makes an interesting observation about these early ‘public’ museums and their development. He begins by pointing out how private collections, including the cabinets of curiosities, provided observers

⁴⁷ Hudson, *A Social History*, 10.

⁴⁸ Simmons, *Museums*, 132-135.

⁴⁹ Simmons, *Museums*, 132.

⁵⁰ Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 29.

with, “an individual, private reflection of [the collector’s] reality and self-image.” He says, “If you or I were invited to view one of these collections, it presented no serious problem. We weren’t being told this was our collection nor that we had to accept the collector’s view of the world or of himself. We simply saw his collection and through it, perhaps, saw him more clearly.” He, then, applies this idea to the early public museums, stating that, “in large part, these public museums were private collections opened to the public, and, as long as that was made quite clear, there was, as mentioned earlier, no real problem.” Cameron’s summation is useful as we proceed to the third shift in mentality regarding the role of the museum, which he identifies when he says: “the trouble began with the introduction of a new idea: the democratic museum.”⁵¹

The Democratic Museum

The basic premise behind a ‘democratic museum’ is that it should exist to benefit the entire community. It is an idea that—perhaps unsurprisingly—is particularly apparent when looking at the history of museums in the United States. The United States of America is much younger than the nations of Europe, with a foundation based on Enlightenment principles. Because of this, museums in this country developed differently than in Europe. “In Germany, Austria, France, England and the other European countries, the private collections came first and public museums developed from them. In America, public museums were in being many years before the great private collections began to be formed.”⁵² Duncan Cameron provides a definition of the ‘democratic museum,’ stating, “the idea was simple enough. It was to assemble collections of many different kinds and interpret them to the general public for the furtherance of

⁵¹ Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” 52.

⁵² Hudson, *A Social History*, 31.

its education, for its enlightenment, and for its recreation.”⁵³ An example of this general mentality was expressed by George Brown Goode, Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, during a lecture in 1889. He said, “the museums of the future in this democratic land should be adapted to the needs of the mechanic, the factory operator, the day-laborer, the salesman, and the clerk, as much as to those of the professional man and the man of leisure.”⁵⁴ Visiting and benefiting from museums was beginning to be viewed as a right, instead of a privilege.

This was, predictably, not a smooth transition. Again, Cameron talks about one of the prominent challenges. “In declaring these collections to be public in the sense of being publicly owned...it was no longer being said that this was someone else’s collection that you, the visitor, could look at. Rather, it was being said that this was your collection and therefore it should be meaningful to you, the visitor.”⁵⁵ A still-relevant debate developed over who the museum was truly for and what its role in the community should be; a conversation that soon turned to issues such as accountability.

As early as 1925, the American Association of Museums adopted a code of ethics, which affirmed the museum’s responsibility to the public.⁵⁶ William L. Boyd is a Professor of Law at the University of Iowa, who wrote on the laws and ethics behind museum practices. He says, “museums are accountable for the acquisition, conservation, management, and deaccession of collections. Museums are also accountable for the content, nature, and quality of their scholarship, exhibits, and programs.” They must also accept responsibility for their endowments

⁵³ Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” 52.

⁵⁴ Bruno Gebhard, “Man in a Science Museum of the Future,” *Museum International* 66, no. 1-4 (November 26, 2015) <https://doi.org/10.1111/muse.12045> (accessed July 25, 2018).

⁵⁵ Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” 52-53.

⁵⁶ Willard L. Boyd, “Museum Accountability: Laws, Rules, Ethics, and Accreditation,” in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012) 61.

and budget deficits, ensure everything done inside the museum is related to the institution's mission, and comply with legal and ethical requirements for paid and volunteer staff. Boyd says that "year by year, museums, their boards, and staff members are being subjected to greater accountability" from three sources: the public law, the museum's own regulations, and the peer community's standards.⁵⁷ Many museum personnel have been challenged by these sometimes seemingly-contradictory demands. Kenneth Hudson, writing in 1975, documents a conversation he had with the Director of one of the most famous art museums in Vienna. The man said, "it would be no bad thing if the doors of the museum were kept permanently closed, so that prospective visitors would have to produce satisfactory evidence of their fitness to be admitted."⁵⁸ It's difficult to imagine a museum staff member stating such an extreme opinion in our present climate. However, I have no doubt that there are still people working in the field who would agree—if only within their own minds—with this Director's words.

Stephen E. Weil, one of the greatest museum philosophers, produced many articles and books about the transformation of the American Museum during the twentieth century. He claimed that, at the end of World War II, "the American museum—notwithstanding the ringing educational rhetoric with which it was originally established and occasionally maintained—had become primarily engaged in...the 'salvage and warehouse' business." Museum professionals believed their primary task was to gather, preserve, and study the objects that represented the record of human history. If there was any further benefit to the public, "that was simply a plus."⁵⁹ This philosophy fits well inside the worldview of Hudson's Viennese Director. However, it is dangerous to resist change; the American museum faced a period of intense reshaping within

⁵⁷ Boyd, "Museum Accountability," 62-63.

⁵⁸ Hudson, *A Social History*, 2.

⁵⁹ Weil, "From Being *About* Something," 170.

fifty years. Weil says, “in place of an establishment-like institution focused primarily inward on the growth, care, and study of its collection, what is emerging instead is a more entrepreneurial institution,” which he predicted would shift its focus outward and concentrate on providing the public with educational services. The museum’s success would be measured “by the overarching criterion of whether it is actually able to provide those services in a demonstrably effective way.”⁶⁰ It was an astute assessment, as museums continue to move in that direction and professionals become more cognizant of their responsibility to benefit all types of individuals.

The Rise of the Educator

During the early 1900’s, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts experimented with the idea of hiring “intermediaries between Curators and the many who would be glad to avail themselves of trained instruction in our galleries” and proposed to call these individuals ‘docents.’⁶¹ This is one of the earliest examples of a museum acknowledging the importance of educating visitors; assisting visitors in understanding the collection was so important that the position became permanent and standards were set into place regarding the staff member’s education level. Over the past few decades, the idea spread throughout the field and eventually evolved into the position often referred to as the ‘museum educator.’ This employee ensures and enhances learning opportunities in the institution by working to “develop, coordinate, and implement programs for school groups, families, teachers, and the general public, and engage with a wide range of ages and expertise. They contribute to designing and developing exhibits and exhibitions. They also create and nurture relationships with community groups in order to attract

⁶⁰ Weil, “From Being *About* Something,” 170.

⁶¹ Charles Lowell, “The Educational Work of the Museum. Retrospect and Prospect,” *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin*, June 1, 1906, https://archive.org/stream/jstor-4423283/4423283_djvu.txt (accessed July 25, 2018).

visitors and make their museums accessible, relevant, and inclusive of the people they serve.”⁶²

Today, a large amount of job postings for this position require a master’s degree and three to five years of experience working in museums or another teaching environment. This is despite the fact that, “limited attention has been paid to the role and practice of museum educators” in academic circles and, unfortunately, significant confusion exists among museum professionals when it comes to the exact role of a museum educator. Lynn Uyen Tran and Heather King researched the professionalization of museum educators and discovered, “the field of museum education still lacks an agreed and accepted knowledge base as a foundation for professional preparation and consistent practice across informal contexts.”⁶³

As someone who has worked in multiple museums as an education intern, I agree with their assessment. Every institution—sometimes every individual in an institution—has their own idea of the museum educator’s function. An easy way to observe this lack of agreement is simply by observing how many terms are used to refer to museum educators. In a blog post entitled, “What does a Museum Educator Do? (And do we Need Them?),” Rebecca Herz lists some of the terms used to refer to the leadership of education departments in various museums. Her list includes: Director/Chair of Education, Director of Education and Public Programs, Curator of Education, Education and Interpretation Supervisor, Vice President of Learning and Interpretation, and Head of Interpretation and Participatory Experiences.⁶⁴ Each title conveys a slightly different idea of the individual’s role within the institution and reveals a general lack of agreement in the field. Tran and King believe establishing a common foundation for training is essential, as it will not only lead to advances in the field—presently, the lack of consistency leads

⁶² Lynn Uyen Tran and Heather King, “The Professionalization of Museum Educators: The Case in Science Museums,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 22, no. 2 (July 17, 2007), doi:10.1080/09647770701470328 (accessed July 25, 2018).

⁶³ Tran and King, “The Professionalization of Museum Educators.”

⁶⁴ Rebecca Herz, “What Does a Museum Educator Do? (And do we Need Them?),” Museum Questions Blog, entry posted July 23, 2014, <https://museumquestions.com/2014/07/23/what-does-a-museum-educator-do-and-do-we-need-them/> (accessed July 25, 2018).

to constant rereading of the same ground when it comes to research and exploration of ‘new’ ideas—but will also help others understand the work done by their co-workers and help museum educators secure professional respect.⁶⁵

The spread of this position throughout the field is one of the most significant effects of this shift to focus on visitors. Another is the perceived importance of creating ‘experiences,’ which can be defined as memorable events that, “engage individuals in an inherently personal way.”⁶⁶ Museum personnel could no longer place a jumble of objects in a case with little explanatory text; they were now encouraged to consider design and how the collection and exhibitions would appeal to visitors and create effective learning experiences.

Stephen Weil entitled his article about the shift, “From Being *About* Something to Being *For* Somebody,” which concisely sums up this period of development in museum history. Weil speaks in his article about how attitudes in the museum must continue to evolve. “The emerging public service oriented museum must see itself not as a cause but as an instrument,” he says, before pointing out that the community is, in considerable measure, paying for the institution. One can make the argument that this is reason enough for the organization to focus on benefiting the public, although in truth, the main reason why museums should concentrate their attention on the public is because they can use their “competencies in collecting, preserving, studying, and interpreting objects to enrich the quality of individual lives and to enhance their community’s well-being.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Tran and King, “The Professionalization of Museum Educators.”

⁶⁶ B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, “The Experience Economy,” in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 164.

⁶⁷ Weil, “From Being *About* Something,” 170.

Toward Inclusion

The assertion that museums have a duty to benefit the public changed the field forever. Now, it is a generally-accepted truth and the conversation has advanced to question whether museums are actually succeeding in this goal. Specifically, many academics and museum professionals are concerned about whether museums are truly benefiting *all* members of their community. Like most public institutions, public museums have a complex and mostly tempestuous history surrounding their interactions with marginalized communities. Since most museums developed from the cabinets of curiosity collected by successful, white, men, they have traditionally promoted and protected the dominant white, patriarchal history, culture, and social norms. This has been to the detriment of other people, including the working class, American Indians, women, people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, people with disabilities, and others.

Many have criticized museums for this and state that museums serve as instruments of propaganda, creating a “collective identity by confining it to a set of seemingly eternal traits, thus neutralizing conflicting or errant tendencies.” One such person is Didier Maleuvre, an Associate Professor at the University of California in Santa Barbara, who refers to it as the ‘paradox’ of traditional museums; they reveal the diversity of human experience, but do so “from the standpoint of a suprahistorical, transcendental notion of what this history is—from a principle of rigid identity above and beyond diversity.” He says they have rightly been censured for their tendency to pigeonhole individuals and curb their “nomadic tendency.”⁶⁸ Duncan Cameron expresses a similar opinion when he refers to many museums as being temple-like. They are places, “within which [museum professionals] enshrined those things they held to be significant

⁶⁸ Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 10-11.

and valuable.” He continues, “the public generally accepted the idea that if it was in a museum, it was not only real but represented a standard of excellence. If the museum said that this and that was so, then that was a statement of truth. The museum, at least for a time, was the place where you could go to compare your own private perceptions of reality with the soi-disant objective view of reality that was accepted and approved in your society.”⁶⁹

This is a genuinely concerning criticism. As I have already mentioned, a major reason why people of color and other members of marginalized communities do not visit museums is because they do not see themselves represented within the institution. African-American artwork wasn’t featured in a permanent exhibition on the National Mall until the 1960s, and it wasn’t until the 1980s that other museums followed suit.⁷⁰ Work by women artists make up only 3–5% of major permanent collections in the United States and Europe, and they are paid eighty-one cents for every dollar made by a male artist.⁷¹ It is difficult to even find information about the presence of LGBTQ interpretation in museums; I must primarily rely on my personal experience, as someone who frequently visits museums and identifies as part of the queer community. While some exhibitions have existed that interpreted LGBTQ experiences, the vast majority of these have been temporary. I have only found mention of a few museums in the United States that include queer stories in permanent exhibits, including the GLBT History Museum in San Francisco, the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York City, and the Leather Archives & Museum in Chicago.⁷² It is rather telling that all of these institutions

⁶⁹ Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” 53.

⁷⁰ “Was the Mall Ever Segregated?” Histories of the National Mall, <http://mallhistory.org/explorations/show/wasthemallsegregated> (accessed July 28, 2018).

⁷¹ “Get the Facts,” National Museum of Women in the Arts, <https://nmwa.org/advocate/get-facts> (accessed June 7, 2018).

⁷² Cassie Sheets, “10 Incredible LGBT Museums and Archives That Are Preserving Our History,” *Pride*, <https://www.pride.com/lgbt/2016/3/17/10-incredible-lgbt-museums-and-archives-are-preserving-our-history> (accessed September 16, 2018).

specialize in queer history or culture and are not museums about the history of a place or more generalized history or culture.

Let's return to the question that began this chapter, 'How did museums develop into institutions perceived as boring, irrelevant, or unwelcoming by a number of people?' One of the primary explanations was just expressed; museums developed from the collections of a certain type of person and were not created to reflect the experiences of all individuals or help those people make personal connections with objects. Collectors in the nineteenth century didn't acquire American Indian artifacts, for example, to create institutions where Native people could visit and connect with their history and culture in new ways. Amy Lonetree, an enrolled citizen of the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin and Associate Professor of History at the University of California in Santa Cruz, writes on the complex relationships between museums and Native America. She talks about how individuals and museums collected American Indian artifacts to reflect their own belief system. Non-Natives believed American Indian culture would soon disappear and it was their job to preserve the last remnants of this culture. In the process, they actually contributed to a devastating cultural loss, as these collectors separated tribal people from their cultural objects and pushed them toward assimilation. Their actions clearly demonstrated a belief that "there was no place for them as tribal people in contemporary society." Despite this, the material culture identifying their uniqueness was highly valued."⁷³ Is it truly surprising, then, that Native people rarely visit institutions that were complicit in the destruction of their culture and radiate a belief in the inferiority of their beliefs and culture? One can understand how the lack of representation and diverse viewpoints seen in many museums could lead members of already marginalized communities to view museums as spaces not intended for them.

⁷³ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (North Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 11.

The Present State

Fortunately, there are many individuals and groups working toward a more inclusive museum field. The *Incluseum* is one project working to “advance new ways of being a museum through dialogue, community building and collaborative practice related to inclusion in museums.” They do this through running a blog, supporting and developing “practice-based projects that explore what it means to be an inclusive museum,” and developing workshops, conference presentations, trainings, exhibits, advisory positions, and publications.⁷⁴ The American Alliance of Museums has also engaged in a vast amount of research on issues related to diversity and inclusion. One of the most recent studies involved the Working Group on Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI). Beginning in the spring of 2017, the members of this group spent six months examining the characteristics of effective museum inclusion practices and considering steps the field could take to become more diverse, inclusive, accessible, and equitable.⁷⁵

There are so many other websites, blogs, articles, studies, groups, and books dedicated to this problem that it would be impossible to outline all of the proposed solutions: some institutions have collaborated on special exhibits, others have developed programs targeting specific marginalized groups. While this is excellent news, there is still reason to be disquieted. Dr. Lonnie G. Bunch III, the director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, once expressed concern about the fact that he was still hearing the same debates and conversations after twenty years in the field.⁷⁶ When one realizes he said this nearly twenty years ago and it *still* rings true, it becomes increasingly apparent that the

⁷⁴ The Incluseum, About page, <https://incluseum.com/about/> (accessed July 31, 2018).

⁷⁵ *Facing Change: Insights from the American Alliance of Museums’ Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Working Group* (Washington, DC: American Alliance of Museums, 2018), <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AAM-DEAI-Working-Group-Full-Report-2018.pdf> (accessed July 31, 2018), 2.

⁷⁶ Lonnie Bunch, “Flies in the Buttermilk: Museums, Diversity, & the Will to Change,” *Museum News* 79, no. 4 (July/August 2000), 33.

museum field is not yet on the right track. Progress has been made, but our world is changing so rapidly that museums are at risk of being left behind.

The AAM's working group summarized its findings in a list of things that need to occur if museums are to become more inclusive. All museum employees must engage in personal, internal work to face their unconscious biases; those in leadership must accept and prioritize inclusion, as it is "central to the effectiveness and sustainability of museums." Systemic change must be the goal, instead of surface-level fixes. Additionally, there must be "empowered, inclusive leadership...at all levels of the organization."⁷⁷ This note about leadership is of particular importance, as inclusivity can only happen if it is prioritized within every facet of the museum's policy and practices. This decision—to give precedence to inclusive practices throughout the organization—can only be made by the museum's Board and Executive Director and will only succeed if there are strong, patient leaders equally dedicated to this goal at every level of the institution.

In an article entitled, "The Museum and the Public," Stephen E. Weil says it would be entirely fair for a person to ask why so much work should be done in museums if their original purpose—to morally uplift the common man—no longer appears valid. His response is that, "all the effort required for their readaption might be based on what is a relatively new concept for museums: They have a vital role to play in building what a Baltimore-based consulting organization, the Museum Group, calls 'healthy human communities.'"⁷⁸ A museum's unique ability to benefit its community justifies continued efforts to increase accessibility and make museums more welcoming and useful to all types of people.

⁷⁷ *Facing Change*, 4.

⁷⁸ Stephen E. Weil, "The Museum and the Public," in *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 207.

I have used this chapter to outline the history of museums and show how the past has led many people to presently feel unwelcome in our institutions, as it is vital to understand how problems developed before attempting to propose a solution. In the following chapter, I will outline my own potential answer to this problem: hiring ‘Directors of Community Engagement,’ who will be wholly dedicated to building and maintaining relationships between museums and their surrounding communities. In addition, I will explain how this solution will assist museums in becoming more inclusive and show why current museum practices are not sufficient.

Chapter 4

The Director of Community Engagement

Most people in the United States consider museums to be a community asset. In February 2018, this heartening statement was quantified by the American Alliance of Museums, which polled Americans nation-wide to evaluate their general opinions regarding museums. This survey found that 97 percent of Americans consider museums to be educational assets to their communities and 89 percent believe they provide economic benefit. Ninety-six percent of respondents also stated they “would think positively of their elected officials taking legislative action to support museums” and said they want federal funding for museums to either be maintained or increased.⁷⁹ These are encouraging statistics, particularly to members of the museum field who face an uncertain future and the reality that change is an absolute necessity in a rapidly-developing world. Our exploration of museum development revealed a history characterized by shifts in thinking; museums began as the curated collections of individuals, then developed over time into modern-day organizations now focused on educating and engaging diverse audiences. While transformations are always challenging—and often feel insurmountable—it can help to remember the numbers reported by the AAM. An overwhelming majority of Americans already believe museums have the potential to benefit communities; the challenge is helping them see how museums can benefit *them* and *their* communities on a more personal level.

Museums have the power to affect their communities in meaningful ways and engage non-traditional audiences, but it requires an institution-wide openness to change and a

⁷⁹ *Museums & Public Opinion: Summary of Findings from National Public Opinion Polling* (Arlington, VA: American Alliance of Museums, 2018), <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Museums-Public-Opinion-FINAL.pdf> (accessed September 23, 2018), 4.

willingness to engage in experimentation. Hiring a Director of Community Engagement is one action that will help museums reach this goal. In the following sections, I will define community engagement and reveal how it can revolutionize the museum's ability to welcome previously disengaged members of its community. Then, I will provide a more specific outline of the actual position. The primary role of the Director of Community Engagement is to develop genuine and meaningful relationships with members of the community. I will explain why it is not sufficient for a person already on staff—such as an educator or marketing expert—to be in charge of this task. Instead, it would be best for the museum to create a new position. Finally, I will outline how the DEC will build genuine relationships with community members and touch on the responsibilities of museum leadership, as the Director of Community Engagement's success is dependent on all levels of the institution standing behind them.

Defining Community Engagement

The first step in understanding how hiring a Director of Community Engagement could help a museum become more inclusive, welcoming, and relevant is clarifying the meaning of the term *community engagement*. To do so, I will first examine each word separately. *Community* is a broad term, used simply to refer to a group of people who have something in common; this may be their geographic location, similar interests, affiliation, or identity.⁸⁰ In the context of this paper, I am generally using it to refer to people who have a geographic location in common. This is not an exclusive meaning, as a museum's community often includes people outside its area who have specific interests or identities in common. In choosing to focus my own definition on

⁸⁰ "What is Community Engagement?" Center for Economic and Community Development (Pennsylvania State University, 2018), <https://aese.psu.edu/research/centers/cecd/engagement-toolbox/engagement/what-is-community-engagement> (accessed September 23, 2018).

the people one would consider ‘locals,’ I am concentrating on those who have a long-term connection and interest in the town, city, or region surrounding the museum. These are the people upon whom the museum could have the greatest, long-term impact and could have the most significant effect on the organization in return. They might become returning visitors or members, repeatedly utilize programming, volunteer, and perhaps financially or emotionally invest in the institution.

The dictionary defines *engagement* as “emotional involvement or commitment.”⁸¹ Community engagement, therefore, would refer to the entire community feeling emotionally involved or committed to an institution. This is a serviceable starting point, although it does not explain how people become emotionally involved or committed to organizations. Here, it is useful to turn to the Center for Economic and Community Development, located at Pennsylvania State University, which says, “engagement is not generally driven by a ‘model’ so much as by a framework of guiding principles, strategies, and approaches. This framework is based on principles that respect the right of all community members to be informed, consulted, involved and empowered.”⁸²

Every museum is likely to approach the challenge of engaging their community members in a unique way, as there is an incredible range of variance between institutions and communities. However, the Center’s framework should serve as a foundation for any proposed strategy; a museum should aim for making sure that community members are always informed, involved, and empowered. The CDC provides some ideas for how organizations can do this: by working to “build trust, enlist new resources and allies, create better communication, ...help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as

⁸¹ Merriam-Webster, s.v. “engagement,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/engagement> (accessed September 23, 2018).

⁸² “What is Community Engagement?”

catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices.”⁸³ One might then ask how an institution can do all of these things. One of the most effective ways is by collaborating with community members and organizations.

The *Financial Times Lexicon* actually defines community engagement as requiring collaboration. Their exact definition is, “the process of working collaboratively with community groups to address issues that impact the well-being of those groups.”⁸⁴ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also refer to this engagement as, “working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the wellbeing of those people.”⁸⁵ At its most basic, collaborations are the processes by which two or more individuals or organizations work together toward a common goal.

Nina Simon, Executive Director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, has written about how and why museums engage in collaborations. According to Simon, there are four primary reasons why museums do so: “to consult with experts of community representatives to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of new exhibitions, programs, or publications; to test and develop new programs in partnership with intended users to improve the likelihood of their success; to provide educational opportunities for participants to design, create, and produce their own content or research; and to help visitors feel like partners and co-owners of the content and programs of the institution.”⁸⁶ This last reason is of particular importance when speaking of community engagement, as people are more likely to invest themselves in something when they

⁸³ “What is Community Engagement?”

⁸⁴ “Definition of Community Engagement,” *Financial Times Lexicon*, <http://lexicon.ft.com/Term?term=community-engagement> (accessed September 23, 2018).

⁸⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Principles of Community Engagement*, 2nd ed. (CDC/ATSDR Committee on Community Engagement, 2011), https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/communityengagement/pdf/PCE_Report_508_FINAL.pdf (accessed September 23, 2018) 3-7.

⁸⁶ Nina Simon, “Chapter 7: Collaborating with Visitors,” in *The Participatory Museum*, <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/chapter7/> (accessed September 30, 2018).

feel a sense of ownership over it. The Smithsonian published an article in 2001 talking about how museums often find it challenging to make these types of changes, as any successes require establishing “a long-term, well-staffed, and imaginative program within the museum” that initially brings local groups into the museum “for reasons that seem unrelated to the institution’s purpose, such as, to have regularly scheduled meetings in a safe, convenient environment.” However, the reason why these ‘unrelated’ meetings work is because the groups begin to feel a sense of ownership and belonging in the environment. Once this feeling is present, then the museum “can also help them to find ways to use the experience of the art to meet their needs.”⁸⁷

I witnessed a perfect example of how this sense of ownership increases engagement during a recent internship at the Corning Museum of Glass. My first day of work happened to coincide with the last day of an after-school program for at-risk children. During this program, twelve or so children worked together to create a marble machine—a device that releases marbles down a twisting, turning track—with each child building a section of the track that would connect together to create one long path. The decision to make this machine was actually made by the children. They toured the museum on the first day of the program and were so fascinated by the museum’s large marble machine that they decided they wanted to make their own. Allowing them to make this decision led to greater excitement about the project; it also allowed the science educator to teach them about gravity, velocity, and the scientific method without it feeling like schoolwork. On the last day of the program, the children’s families were invited to attend a reception where the kids would show off their machine, as well as their skills in putting together a rather unique reception menu. Pride showed in each child’s face as they presented their machine to the crowd gathered around it all night and as the children worked with

⁸⁷ *Art Museums and the Public* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, October 2001), <https://www.si.edu/Content/opanda/docs/Rpts2001/01.10.ArtPublic.Final.pdf> (accessed October 18, 2018), 13-14.

their friends and family members to try to make the device work even better. It was clear to me that the program wasn't only benefiting the kids, but also their families. Every child had at least one family member present, something which likely wouldn't happen if the children weren't so invested and excited by their project. This was particularly encouraging, as many of these individuals were community members who had never attended the museum before and likely never would if this program didn't exist.

This sense of ownership is one reason why collaborations, when done well, can have far-reaching and long-lasting benefits. During the MuseumNext conference in Indianapolis in September 2015, two staff members from the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art talked about one of their museum's ongoing collaborative programs, called 'Out West.' The mission of the program was defined as highlighting, "the contributions of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and two spirit communities to the history and culture of the American West" through public films, lectures, plays, exhibitions, and scholarship. The program initially began after the Eiteljorg adopted a broad diversity statement in 2004, which they determined would direct everything they did at the museum. When the movie *Brokeback Mountain* premiered in December of 2005, they decided to use it to open a dialogue between the museum and the LGBTQ community.

In February 2006, the museum "hosted a panel discussion and dialogue with a historian, film studies expert, representatives from the LGBT film festival...in Indianapolis, and the film critic from the local alternative weekly publication, *Nouveau*," which explored the stereotype of the white, male, straight cowboy in the American West. While the institution did not go into the event with the plan of developing it into a long-running program, they were open to the idea and leapt at the chance of collaborating with Greg Hinton, an independent curator who expressed

interest in expansion. Hinton was a gay man who left his home in Cody, Wyoming years before, as he'd been unable to find other LGBTQ individuals and develop a sense of shared community. It was only through his later research and work with the Autry, the Buffalo Bill Historical Centre, and other western institutions that he finally returned to his childhood home and felt "welcomed for the man that he is." The museum saw the opportunity to collaborate with Hinton as a natural step for them to take in providing LGBTQ programming at the Eiteljorg.⁸⁸

The primary reason why 'Out West' succeeded was because the museum collaborated closely with the LGBTQ community on all exhibitions and programming; they understood the importance of accepting the community members' ownership over their own stories. One specific example involved an exhibition of Blake Little's photographs from the 'Gay Rodeo,' an amateur competitive rodeo circuit open to all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Johanna M. Blume, Assistant Curator of Western Art, History, and Culture at the museum, said they first collaborated with Blake Little, the photographer. "It's pretty easy, I think, for curators and for institutions, particularly art institutions, to kind of take that baby step of curator-artist collaboration," she explained in her speech at MuseumNext. "But, I think we can extend that sense of collaboration to apply to representatives of the communities whose art, histories and cultures we're presenting in our exhibit spaces."⁸⁹

After connecting with Blake, the Eiteljorg worked to develop relationships with members of the Gay Rodeo community. Blume began this process by leaving the museum and attending the Rodeo's annual meeting in 2013. There, she was able to interact with the community in a safe space and meet people who were actually present in Blake's photographs. Eventually, this

⁸⁸ "How Museums Can Build Collaborations with LGBTQ Communities," MuseumNext, <https://www.museumnext.com/insight/how-museums-can-build-collaborations-with-lgbtq-communities/> (accessed October 2, 2018).

⁸⁹ "How Museums Can Build Collaborations with LGBTQ Communities."

led to the incorporation of their own voices and stories in the exhibit text and labels.⁹⁰ This exhibition was successful, because the Eiteljorg's staff understood the multiplicity of narratives present in these photographs. They collaborated with the photographer, which is a natural step for museums to take, but then also understood that the subjects in these pictures also had their own story to tell. This exhibition illustrates one of the most essential factors of a successful collaboration: the acceptance that community members are experts in their own experiences and museums must share authority when creating exhibits or programming.

This basic idea is presented by authors Eithne Nightingale and Chandan Mahal, who assert that, “relationships need to be developed as genuine collaborations where the museums draw on the richness and diversity of expertise of different stakeholders, whether they be funders, sponsors, visitors and non-visitors, academics, or communities.”⁹¹ The Building Movement Project, which supports non-profits as being sites for social change, states in their guide on community engagement that organizations interested in helping their constituents must start “by learning from the insights of those who ‘live the experience.’” They point out how many organizations in the early stages of working toward social change see their constituents as, “‘clients’ or people who come to access services and are provided with referrals and resources to receive help for their current situation.” Instead, organizations should be striving to engage their constituents beyond this “service delivery process,” and use their knowledge to learn about the common barriers they face.⁹² In simpler terms, this simply means that museums need to ask disengaged community members why they are not finding the institution useful to them, as they are the experts in their own life experiences.

⁹⁰ “How Museums Can Build Collaborations with LGBTQ Communities.”

⁹¹ Eithne Nightingale and Chandan Mahal, “The Heart of the Matter: Integrating Equality and Diversity into the Policy and Practice of Museums and Galleries,” in *Museums, Equality, and Social Justice*, ed. Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale (New York: Routledge, 2012), 36.

⁹² *Nonprofits Integrating Community Engagement Guide* (Alliance for Nonprofit Management, 2015), <http://www.buildingmovement.org/pdf/NICE.pdf> (accessed October 4, 2018), 6.

Then, the museum should work with them to address these barriers. One reason why it's important to do this is because it's well-documented in the field of community development that, "the strongest and most lasting changes in community life are generated from within the community and not by outsiders who may not have lasting investment in the welfare of the community."⁹³ Another reason lies in the old adage, 'two heads are better than one.' In a book on grant-writing, Ellen Karsh and Arlen Sue Fox point out how the "more people with expertise and diverse points of view who are sincerely committed to developing a solution to a pressing problem, the more likely it is that the solution—the program—will be well developed and of high quality." It also means more people are likely to support the program and share it by word of mouth.⁹⁴ This brings us back to the aforementioned feelings of ownership created when people are involved in the development process. Community engagement also is important, because it lessens the likelihood of a museum wasting time and money on a program people aren't truly interested in or becoming involved in an expensive, potentially reputation-damaging scandal. Unfortunately, there are numerous examples of controversies developing after museums create programs, exhibitions, or install artwork about the history or culture of a group of people without members of that community being involved in the decision-making process.

One occurrence took place at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, when it developed a series of programs, 'Kimono Wednesdays,' designed to accompany the display of Claude Monet's *La Japonaise*. This painting portrays Monet's wife, Camille, wearing a kimono and holding a fan, so the museum decided to encourage visitors to "channel [their] inner Camille" by trying on a replica kimono like the one in the painting. Once transformed into Monet's muse,

⁹³ Julie A. Baldwin, Jeannette L. Johnson, and Christine C. Benally, "Building Partnerships Between Indigenous Communities and Universities: Lessons Learned in HIV/AIDS and Substance Abuse Prevention Research," *American Journal of Public Health* 99, S1 (April 2009), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2724951/> (accessed October 13, 2017).

⁹⁴ Ellen Karsh and Arlen Sue Fox, *The Only Grant-Writing Book You'll Ever Need*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 183.

visitors were encouraged to take a picture of themselves standing in front of the painting and post it on social media using the #mfaBoston hashtag. Additionally, the museum hosted a series of gallery talks entitled *Claude Monet: Flirting with the Exotic*. They believed these talks and the experience of trying on a kimono would educate visitors about the influence of Japanese art and culture on Monet and other Impressionists, as well as provide them with an opportunity to directly encounter the artwork. However, they had not involved the Japanese-American community in their planning and the program, instead, led to protests. Groups—mostly composed of Asian-American women in their twenties and thirties—appeared at gallery talks to voice their concerns, mainly centered on the failure of the museum to provide context and foster dialogue about Orientalism and the exoticization of Asian aesthetics. As Lisa Gilbert states in her article about the controversy, “nowhere did the MFA seem to consider the influence of racism in the history of exoticizing and fetishizing the bodies of Asian women, of demeaning non-Western dress as costuming, or of imperialist consumption.” They also handled the backlash poorly, refusing to engage with the protestors’ concerns and only responding when the controversy exploded online. The MFA eventually cancelled the program, wasting massive amounts of money and time.⁹⁵ More importantly, however, they damaged their relationship with many Japanese-Americans and failed to see this as an opportunity to learn from an often-misrepresented group.

Museums wishing to engage their community and become inclusive, welcoming spaces must look at their visitors and non-visitors in a new light. There is a tendency among many in the museum world to see themselves as separate from the rest of their community; as if they are the teachers and visitors are the students. Mike Murawski, museum educator and present Director of

⁹⁵ Lisa Gilbert, “‘Loving, Knowing Ignorance’: A Problem for the Educational Mission of Museums,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 59, no. 2 (April 6, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12153> (accessed December 9, 2018).

Education & Public Programs for the Portland Art Museum, has written about how this is an improper way to think about the relationship between a museum and its community. “We often use language that externalizes those outside of our walls, setting up a false ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy,” he says. However, in truth “all museum staff, volunteers, members, donors, trustees, and partners are members of the community.”⁹⁶ Engaging the community will require a restructuring of how museums think about themselves; it will require humility and the relinquishing of control. However, in doing so, museums can create a more natural and beneficial relationship where everyone is encouraged to learn from each other and feel ownership over the objects and stories held within the institution.

Community Engagement and Marginalized Communities

Community engagement can be particularly powerful when working with traditionally marginalized communities, as museum history is filled with examples of these voices being excluded, ignored, or misrepresented by museums. The cultures and histories of American Indian nations, for example, have been distorted by museums since the development of anthropology as an academic discipline in the late-nineteenth century. Most anthropologists and museum workers at the time believed Native cultures would soon die off and considered it their duty to preserve the ‘last vestiges’ of their cultures, even if this meant stealing sacred objects and human remains from their true owners. These collecting practices influenced the exhibitions developed by curators, which then shaped the public perception of Native culture.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Mike Murawski, “Changing the Things We Cannot Accept – Museum Edition,” Art Museum Teaching, February 18, 2018, <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2017/10/11/changing-the-things-we-cannot-accept/> (accessed October 5, 2018).

⁹⁷ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), under “Native Americans on Display: Early Collecting and Exhibitions,” <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/buffalostate/detail.action?docID=1076066> (accessed October 19, 2018).

Museums, along with the media, have contributed to many of the most pervasive stereotypes about Native people. Dioramas—still present in many museums—have been particularly influential, as they portray Native people as if frozen in time and, therefore, have inadvertently contributed to the myth that Native culture is stagnant and unchanging. In an article written after the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian, Elizabeth Archuleta talks about the many preconceived ideas non-Natives have about “Indianness.” She relates the surprise expressed by journalists who saw American Indian people attending the opening, dressed in regalia and carrying cell phones.⁹⁸

Indians of the Midwest, a website highlighting scholarship related to Native tribes, astutely points out the ridiculousness of this propensity. “Americans did not feel less American after they abandoned 19th century hair styles, horse and buggy transport, and gas lights,” the author comments. “Yet, they [view] ‘real’ Indians only as people from the past, who are not interested in making money and not capable of managing their own affairs.”⁹⁹ Besides contributing to stereotypes and being complicit in the theft of objects during the late-nineteenth century, there are also many institutions whose history contains bitter fights against repatriation. Whenever attempting to engage a marginalized community, it is imperative to look into the museum’s history and consider how they have treated these people in the past. A museum whose interactions with Native people have always been negative, for example, will have to address this past before a relationship can even begin to develop.

Any museum striving to engage marginalized communities must also recognize the importance of bringing them to the table as equals, perceived as experts of their own

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Archuleta, “Gym Shoes, Maps, and Passports, Oh My!: Creating Community or Creating Chaos at the National Museum of the American Indian?” in *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations*, ed. Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 183.

⁹⁹ “Stereotypes,” *Indians of the Midwest*, <http://publications.newberry.org/indiansofthemidwest/indian-imagery/stereotypes/> (accessed October 24, 2018).

experiences. I have already mentioned the importance of this for successful collaborations, yet it is of particular consequence when speaking about marginalized communities, as their voices are rarely present in the museum unless brought intentionally inside. This is because museums' staff are not diverse, particularly at high, decision-making levels. I previously mentioned the 2015 Mellon Foundation's findings; more than a quarter of staff in museums—specifically 28 percent—represent an ethnic or racial minority, but most are working in security, facilities, finances, or human resources. Meanwhile, 84 percent of museum curators, conservators, educators, and directors are white.¹⁰⁰

While the field appears to be doing better when it comes to representing women, this is only true when looking at the percentages. In a survey on the gender gap in art museum directorships, women represented 48 percent of art museum directorships in 2016. However, “there are clear disparities in gender representation depending on operating budget size: the majority of museums with budgets less than \$15 million are run by a female rather than a male director. The reverse is true for museums with budgets of over \$15 million, where female representation decreases as budget size increases.” Not only this, but female directors are earning less than male directors; on average they earn seventy-three cents for every dollar a man earns.¹⁰¹ I was unable to locate reports on the employment of other minority groups in museums—such as people with disabilities—but when one considers that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics recently reported only 18.7 percent of people with a disability were employed in 2017, it seems highly likely that the museum field is failing here as well.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ “Racial, Ethnic Diversity Limited in Art Museum Staffs, Survey Finds,” *Philanthropy News Digest*, August 3, 2015, <https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/news/racial-ethnic-diversity-limited-in-art-museum-staffs-survey-finds> (accessed October 24, 2018).

¹⁰¹ Veronica Treviño, Zannie Giraud Voss, Christine Anagnos, and Alison D. Wade, *The Ongoing Gender Gap in Art Museum Directorships* (Association of Art Museums Directors, 2017) <https://aamd.org/sites/default/files/document/AAMD%20NCAR%20Gender%20Gap%202017.pdf> (accessed October 24, 2018).

¹⁰² U.S. Department of Labor, “Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics – 2017,” *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, June 21, 2018, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/disabl.pdf> (accessed October 20, 2018).

It is important to note these deficiencies as, in the words of Eithne Nightingale and Chandan Mahal, you can't become more representative or inclusive "if you don't have the people you are representing as part of your team."¹⁰³ The reason why this is true is because—no matter how well-intentioned museum staff may be—all exhibits and programs inevitably draw on the cultural assumptions of the people who make them. While museums have traditionally been viewed as 'objective' knowledge sources, this is not an accurate perception. As stated in an article in *Smithsonian* magazine by Jack Ashby, Manager of the Grant Museum of Zoology, "the parts of museums that are open to the public are spaces made for people, by people... Museums are a product of their own history, and that of the societies they are embedded in. They are not apolitical, and they are not entirely scientific. As such, they don't really represent reality."¹⁰⁴ Bias is an inescapable part of human nature; a person's prior knowledge and expectations will forever affect how they perceive the world. This is an inescapable fact.

David W. Penney, Associate Director of Museum Scholarship at the National Museum of the American Indian, who has observed the changes in how museums organize exhibitions with American Indian topics over time, wrote an article talking about these 'frames of reference.' He particularly noted how a person's internal narrative can sometimes be so rooted in their own cultural assumptions that they are not only unaware of these conventions, but communication with others becomes almost impossible. In one situation, Penney was acting as a consultant for the *Museum of the Americas* exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Art in 1993 and noticed that museum staff members and the American Indian officials brought in to act as advisors were coming from such different backgrounds that it was almost as if they were speaking different

¹⁰³ Nightingale and Mahal, "The Heart of the Matter," 22.

¹⁰⁴ Jack Ashby, "The Hidden Biases that Shape Natural History Museums," *Smithsonian.com*, December 20, 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/hidden-biases-shape-natural-history-museums-180967590/> (accessed October 13, 2018).

languages. The museum staff members were looking at the exhibit from the narrative of “art history,” where objects were ordered by geography and chronology and there was a focus on the idea of an objective “masterpiece.” The advisors, on the other hand, possessed a narrative “relevant only to a cultural present, a here-and-now of meaningfulness where objects were evaluated with criteria tied to personal and community experience.”¹⁰⁵

When one considers these two approaches objectively, it becomes clear that both meanings are valid, and each has a role to play when objects are interpreted in museums. The problem lies in the fact that museums throughout history haven’t valued perspectives outside of the traditional, western narrative. Mike Murawski, a speaker at the Smith Leadership Symposium in San Diego in 2017, said he’s often heard people argue that involving community members in museum programming or the creation of exhibitions will “lower the quality of content and decrease trust in a museum’s authority.” This is something he says he refuses to accept and instead argues that it’s imperative that museums let their communities in, because “our communities know more than we do, and we need to recognize and embrace the knowledge, creativity, and lived experiences of these communities.”¹⁰⁶ It is impossible for anyone to fully understand another person—or group of people—from the outside, no matter how much research one does. “Only someone from within a culture can truly know it, and even then, maybe only aspects of it.”¹⁰⁷ Museums must understand this, relinquish control, and respect people as experts in their own stories; something which can be particularly important when speaking of marginalized people, as they have spent so much time shut out of museums. This will increase

¹⁰⁵ David W. Penney, “The Poetics of Museum Representations: Tropes of Recent American Indian Art Exhibitions,” in *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2000), 47-48.

¹⁰⁶ Murawski, “Changing the Things We Cannot Accept.”

¹⁰⁷ Raney Bench, preface to *Interpreting Native American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), VII.

the accuracy of exhibits and help museums avoid controversy; more importantly, it will help them become more socially just.

Steven D. Lavine, the former president of the California Institute of the Arts, has pointed out that the decisions we make about, “how cultures are presented reflect deeper judgements of power and authority.”¹⁰⁸ The author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, beautifully echoes this in a TED Talk she gave in 2009 on what she calls ‘the single story.’ She talks about the importance of stories and how they define people. Stories, she says, are always affected by the principles of *Nkali*, a word which refers to the ability to be greater than another. How stories are told, who tells them, when, and how many exist is all dependent on who has power. “Power is the ability, not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person,” she says, illustrating her point through a story about a former roommate. “My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my ‘tribal music,’ and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.”

Adichie was struck by the fact that her roommate felt pity for her before they even met, because she had only ever been exposed to the idea that Africans were poor and destitute. “In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.”¹⁰⁹ By opening themselves to the community—particularly those who have been marginalized—museums can provide opportunities for people to share their own, diverse stories

¹⁰⁸ Steven D. Lavine and Ivan Karp, “Introduction: Museums and Multiculturalism,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1991), 2.

¹⁰⁹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” filmed July 2009 in Oxford, UK, TED video, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/up-next?language=en (accessed October 10, 2018).

and expose others to the reality that they are complex human beings. As Adichie later says in her talk, “the single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”¹¹⁰

The Role of the Director of Community Engagement

Creating a ‘Director of Community Engagement’ position can assist museums through the process of opening themselves to their communities’ diverse perspectives. By asking questions about community members’ challenges and desires, and then collaborating with these individuals and organizations on programs or exhibitions that meet these needs, the DEC would be a vital part of making long-lasting, beneficial changes both inside and outside the institution. A book published by the AARP on making communities more responsive to older relatives states that, “most carefully crafted visions—those that stand the test of time—begin simply. They take on character only as they are shared with and shaped by other people.”¹¹¹ One organization or individual cannot change a community alone. Organizations must collaborate and work with the people in their community who are experts on their own situations to make lasting change.

Of course, this is easier said than done. “Most of us examine warily the proposition that we can and should make an imprint on the community in a forceful and lasting way,” the AARP’s book continues. “What can we do that has not been tried before? Too often, accepting the status quo is a powerful deterrent even to thinking about what might be made different and better.”¹¹² Hiring a Director of Community Engagement can help museums fight against this very human tendency, as this position bucks against the status quo. Instead of remaining insular,

¹¹⁰ Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story.”

¹¹¹ Valerie Parker, Sherry Edmond, and Virginia Robinson, *A Change for the Better: How to Make Communities More Responsive to Older Residents* (American Association of Retired Persons, 1991), 27.

¹¹² Parker et al., *A Change for the Better*, 27.

allowing the institution to continue ‘the way it always has,’ the Director will bring community members into the institution, infusing the museum with new ideas, wants, needs, and challenges and assisting in the development of long-lasting, equitable relationships.

At this point, it would be useful to clarify the duties of a Director of Community Engagement and explain how they would build these relationships. A job posting for a ‘Manager of Community Engagement’ at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History provides a starting point for our definition, as it summarizes the position by saying the manager would be “responsible for developing and executing a strategy that establishes meaningful relationships and partnerships on behalf of the Museum to diversify the Museum’s reach, ensure accessibility for all, and achieve community participation in the development of new programming.”¹¹³ The listing continues by giving examples of how the Manager of Community Engagement would achieve these goals. They would, “increase awareness of the Museum through identification and participation of appropriate community-based, external opportunities by creating outreach initiatives centered on the museum’s mission, exhibitions and educational programs” and “evaluate programmatic opportunities for greater diversity of community participation and work collaboratively with development on funding where necessary.”¹¹⁴ While the specific tasks of a Director of Community Engagement would vary between institutions, their overall responsibilities tally well with these examples. Although, I would also add the responsibility to assist other staff members in engaging with the community, as this helps guarantee against community groups developing relationships dependent on the presence of that specific individual, which would immediately fall apart if the person left the institution.

¹¹³ Colleen Sutherland, Manager of Community Engagement [Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Cleveland, OH], May 9, 2016, <http://sites.tufts.edu/museumstudents/2016/05/09/manager-of-community-engagement-cleveland-museum-of-natural-history-cleveland-oh/> (accessed October 8, 2018).

¹¹⁴ Sutherland, Manager of Community Engagement.

In simplest terms, one can define the job of a Director of Community Engagement as building relationships between the museum, as a whole, and members of its community. One can also add that there should be a special focus on establishing or mending relationships that have historically been neglected. Like personal relationships—the ones built by all human beings over the course of their lives—these connections require knowledge, understanding, respect, trust, compromise, and continued attention if they are to flourish and remain healthy. Also like personal relationships, they are endeavors which partners enter “with their own goals and motivations, working together but toward different purposes” and where diversities of opinion can lead to misunderstandings, tension, negotiations, and conflict.¹¹⁵

It is a challenge to build relationships and work with others toward a common goal. Karsh and Fox observe that collaborating with others, “goes against everything we have learned and believe as a culture.” They explain that, “Americans tend toward the ‘pulling yourself up by your bootstraps’ mentality and respect rugged individualism, often viewing people who believe in working together as wimpy idealists or non-self-starters who don’t have an original bone in their dreary, bureaucratic bodies.”¹¹⁶ This subconscious cultural belief is simply one of the challenges a Director of Community Engagement must fight against if they are to successfully develop relationships between their institution and disengaged members of their community. They must also confront the scars left by history, internal bias, bureaucracy, differences in culture, and conflicting opinions between and among various constituents.

How is it possible to develop a relationship while fighting against these challenges? The key is that the relationship *must* be founded on trust. Dr. Fari Nzinga—a museum professional

¹¹⁵ Lainie Schultz, “Collaborative Museology and the Visitor,” *Museum Anthropology* 34, no. 1 (March 17, 2011), doi:10.1111/j.1548-1379.2010.01103.x (accessed October 10, 2018), 2.

¹¹⁶ Karsh and Fox, *The Only Grant-Writing Book You’ll Ever Need*, 182.

with a particular interest in diversity, inclusion, and equity—presented on public trust at an MCN conference in 2016 and defined it as, “the intuitive confidence and sense of comfort that comes from the belief that we can rely on an individual, organization or institution to perform competently, responsibly, ethically, and in a manner considerate of our interests.” She described it as something dynamic, fragile, and vulnerable; “difficult to define and quantify; easier to understand than to measure, easier to lose than to earn, but an essential and critical component in the relationship museums have with the communities they serve.”¹¹⁷ Trust is vital for any relationship to succeed, whether speaking of a friendship between two individuals or a collaborative partnership between a group of people and an organization. Without trust, it is entirely impossible for a museum to engage the members of its surrounding community in a meaningful way.

This makes the Director of Community Engagement’s job more challenging, as many marginalized or disengaged communities have reasons to instinctively mistrust museums. Porchia Moore, a regular contributor to the *Incluseum* blog, wrote in a post from 2014 that she’d spent the past year interviewing people of color to assess their “museum-going habits and attitudes about cultural heritage institutions.” Her interviews clarified, “that a mistrust of the museum is one of many barriers to participation. On the one hand, my interviewees viewed museums as fun, innovative, and valuable institutions. On the other hand, the individuals I spoke with also shared that they do not trust that the museum sees them.”¹¹⁸ An example of how this mistrust can effect collaborations is visible in the early stages of a collaboration between the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) and members of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. Nina

¹¹⁷ Fari Nzinga, “Public Trust and Art Museums,” *The Incluseum Blog*, entry posted November 26, 2016, <https://incluseum.com/2016/11/29/public-trust-and-art-museums/> (accessed October 13, 2018).

¹¹⁸ Porchia Moore, “The Museum as Kaleidoscope,” *The Incluseum Blog*, entry posted April 2, 2014, <https://incluseum.com/2014/04/02/the-museum-as-kaleidoscope/> (accessed October 13, 2018).

Archabal, deputy director at the MHS at the time, recollected one particular incident when the museum attempted to reach out to members of the Mille Lacs Band by hosting an open house and giving away food. Archabal said, “To my very great shock, no one came. And I think that was a measure of just how distrustful people were. I have to believe that, at that point, with the community having over 80 percent unemployment, free food under any situation other than the most strained social relations would have been something that would have drawn people out, and it didn’t.”¹¹⁹ After this experience, she changed her strategy and met with the Mille Lacs Band in their own space.

Meeting people outside of the museum is almost always the best idea when reaching out to wary or mistrustful community groups. First, it shows a consideration for the community members’ time and comfort, as people feel most comfortable in a familiar space; it also eliminates any difficulties that may arise from transportation. It is also recommended because it allows one to gain a better understanding of the community’s challenges, culture, and physical environment and because it allows one to meet more people and interact in a more natural way than could happen inside a museum. A Director of Community Engagement would spend many working hours outside of the confines of their museum in order to meet people and build relationships in spaces where they feel most comfortable.

Rose Cuomo, the Community Outreach and Special Programs Coordinator at Kidzu Children’s Museum in Chapel Hill, North Carolina published a report on how her museum partnered with two undergraduate students to develop ways to better engage the community. In her report, she mentions how the first thing the students did was work at community events, such as a family fun day, block party, and teddy bear clinic. She said they did this to, “begin to gain an

¹¹⁹ Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 41.

understanding of the specific needs of Chapel Hill and Orange County and how we could make a difference.” The students said that they believed building trust should be their main area of focus, as it’s difficult to build long-lasting relationships with the community without this foundation. They decided to focus on building trust with families living in a low-income housing unit and began the process by attending an already-established ‘Community Parent Support Group’ at the community center. There, they were transparent about their limited success in increasing participation from residents and parents in their neighborhood and asked about the parents’ needs and concerns.¹²⁰ This is an excellent example of how a Director of Community Engagement should begin the process of building trust. An *Incluseum* article about working with homeless populations emphasizes the importance of learning through asking questions and actively listening to the answers. The author of the entry says one must, “identify what they care about and how you could serve them. Ask questions and listen.”¹²¹

However, there is an important step the Director of Community Engagement must take before meeting with community members: researching the community. One can see evidence of this research in the Kidzu Children’s Museum article, as they had learned enough about the community to know about the local parenting group. The DEC should explore the area’s history, local demographics, the resources available to residents (such as counseling centers, hospitals, or food banks), and also examine any developments which have occurred or are presently affecting the community.

For example, many areas around the United States are currently seeing an increase in the number of refugees and immigrants settling due to conflicts in the Middle East. I used to live in

¹²⁰ Rose Cuomo, “Cultivating Community Trust: Kidzu Children’s Museum’s Partnership for Outreach,” Community Engagement Learning Exchange Blog, entry posted April 6, 2017, <https://www.sog.unc.edu/blogs/community-engagement-learning-exchange/cultivating-community-trust-kidzu-children-s-museum-s-partnership-outreach> (accessed October 19, 2018).

¹²¹ “Engaging with Homeless Adults,” The Incluseum Blog, entry posted May 4, 2016, <https://incluseum.com/2016/05/04/engaging-with-homeless-adults/> (accessed October 14, 2018).

Buffalo, New York and during that time (between 2010 and 2014) more than 12,000 people from other countries settled in the county. Most of these were refugees from Burma, Bhutan, and Iraq.¹²² While attending graduate school, I worked with my classmates on an exhibit for the Buffalo History Museum that focused on the food culture of these immigrant groups. To learn about this topic, I tried establishing connections with people from organizations in the city that assisted refugees by educating them about nutrition and helping them start their own businesses, which included many restaurants. I found that after developing these relationships, I was quickly introduced to some of their clients and was able to learn from their personal experiences. This is similar to the work a Director of Community Engagement would do, but on a much smaller scale.

The AARP's guide to making communities more accessible to elderly residents spends time outlining the importance of finding people in your community who also desire change, are willing to work toward it, and are in positions to make it happen.¹²³ The DEC would discover the identity of these community leaders and work with them to benefit the community as a whole. These people are not only excellent allies; they can also facilitate introductions, which is particularly necessary when entering an unfamiliar culture or a situation where there may be a history of mistrust. Raney Bench, specifically talking about Native tribes, recommends that anyone wishing to collaborate begin the process by contacting the curator or director at the tribe's cultural center or museum—if one exists—or speaking with elected officials.¹²⁴ Business owners, religious leaders, and heads of charities may also prove to be essential allies.

¹²² Jason Gruenauer, "Refugees lead to Erie County Population Growth, *WKBW Buffalo*, March 27, 2015, <https://www.wkbw.com/news/refugees-lead-to-erie-county-population-growth> (accessed October 14, 2018).

¹²³ Parker et al., *A Change for the Better*, 29.

¹²⁴ Bench, *Interpreting Native American History and Culture*, 18-19.

So far, then, I have explained how the Director’s job will require research and the development of trusting relationships between the museum and community members. Another part of developing this trust is to *not* come into the relationship with a project already in mind. The *Incluseum* specifically says in an article on building community for lasting change to “focus on building relationships first” and to not get caught up in thinking about future actions or developments you’d like for the community, as nothing can happen until trusting relationships have been built. They say, “people want to meet people they have things in common with, and people want to build relationships with others.”¹²⁵ After the relationship—and trust develops-- then it may be possible to collaborate on a project. It’s important to remember, however, that this often takes a significant amount of time. Lonetree sums it up well when she states, “I think, unfortunately, just as casino gambling doesn’t take away hundreds of years of social deprivation and suffering, I would say that ten or fifteen years of good work on the part of the staff members here and good heart does not take away years and years and decades and decades of distrust.”¹²⁶

Many museums have made progress in the past few decades; it is now a matter of course in most museums for members of marginalized communities to act as consultants or members of focus groups whenever the institution develops exhibitions about their particular culture or history. However, this is not enough to solve the problem. As mentioned before, museum staff members need to relinquish some of their control over the development of exhibits and programs if true, meaningful relationships are to develop. Presently, most museums only approach minority communities when they already have a project planned which is, “presumed to represent that community.”¹²⁷ This practice does not lead to the development of genuine

¹²⁵ “Building Community for Lasting Change,” The Incluseum Blog, entry posted September 9, 2015, <https://incluseum.com/2015/09/09/building-community-for-lasting-change/> (accessed October 25, 2018).

¹²⁶ Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 69.

¹²⁷ Keith, “Moving Beyond the Mainstream,” 49.

relationships; instead, one could liken it to a friendship where one individual only approaches the other when they need something. If the community even agrees to this type of ‘collaboration,’ they are often left with feelings of resentment, as they do not feel like equal partners.

Again, it is important to remember that community members are experts on their own experiences; they know which stories are most important to tell. For example, tribal communities often wish to emphasize the message that they are not relics of the past when collaborating with museums. Bench says, “museums will have greater success partnering with tribes if they start a project working with tribal consultants to create ideas and themes together and share ownership from the beginning.”¹²⁸ This applies to any group. Museum personnel may not understand what the community truly needs because they are relying on stereotypes. The artist and LGBT activist, Ajamu, has written about how initiatives to reach black and minority ethnicity LGBTQ communities mostly come from organizations primarily run by and serving white people. “Initiatives to reach the so-called ‘hard to reach’ arise quite often from within institutions where Black communities are simply not understood, or are perceived in stereotypical ways.”¹²⁹

This lack of understanding or reliance on stereotypes often leads museums to put large amounts of money or work into programs or exhibits that completely fail to meet the community’s actual needs. “For example, a ‘Free Thursday’ event, which allows free museum visitation on the first Thursday of every month...is a poor solution for the problem of low-income museum accessibility. The social benefits are implemented unilaterally, meaning visitors who can already afford the cost of admission enjoy a free museum visit that day, while those

¹²⁸ Bench, *Interpreting Native American History and Culture*, 33.

¹²⁹ John Vincent, *LGBT People and the UK Cultural Sector: The Response of Libraries, Museums, Archives and Heritage since 1950* (Routledge, 2016), under Presenting LGBT history, <https://books.google.com/books?id=IDkfDAAQBAJ&pg=PT20&lpg=PT20&dq=museums+how+to+reach+lgbt+people&source=bl&ots=b8Fcx2G2qU&sig=8lqMICyo8KRg7i5l298w3TVo3GE&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjak5Ko-#v=onepage&q=museums%20how%20to%20reach%20lgbt%20people&f=false> (accessed October 25, 2018).

who cannot otherwise afford to visit are allowed the opportunity to visit once a month.

Approaches like this do not combat social problems, they only push them aside.”¹³⁰

Acknowledging the need to be inclusive from the beginning leads us to another role of the Director of Community Engagement. Until now, I have primarily spoken about the work a DCE does outside of the museum. However, this is only part of their job, as the development of trusting relationships also requires an internal examination of the museum. All museums have a legacy, so it is imperative to honestly consider the state and actions of one’s own institution. One should ask questions, such as: who founded the museum and where did their money come from? Were pieces of the collection removed from their source communities? What gaps exist in the collection and did the museum ever practice active exclusion, such as during the period of Jim Crow Laws? Rose Paquet Kinsley and Aletheia Wittman, the *Incluseum*’s founders, wrote an article for AAM’s magazine where they said, “legacies based on systems of power and oppression will not go away simply by ignoring them. Dealing with them allows us to get to the heart of who our museums are for—determining for whom (and by whom) our cultural institutions are designed and, by extension, whose experiences are acknowledged by museums and whose are not.”¹³¹

In June of 2017, I attended the Buffalo History Museum’s LGBT Library Donation Day and, afterwards, conversed with Cynthia Van Ness, the Director of the Library and Archives, and Daniel DiLandro, the Archivist and Special Collections Librarian at SUNY Buffalo State. These conversations helped me see how examination of one’s institution could lead to positive action.

The goal of Donation Day was to collect “wedding memorabilia from legally-wed same-sex

¹³⁰ Zac Stocks, “4 Steps for Successful Museum Social Work,” The Incluseum Blog, entry posted October 20, 2014, <https://incluseum.com/2014/10/20/4-steps-for-successful-museum-social-work/> (accessed October 25, 2018).

¹³¹ Rose Paquet Kinsley and Aletheia Wittman, “Bringing Self-Examination to the Center of Social Justice Work in Museums,” *Museum Magazine*, January/February 2016, <http://ww2.aam-us.org/docs/default-source/resource-library/bringing-self-examination-to-the-center-of-social-justice-work-in-museums.pdf?sfvrsn=0> (accessed October 10, 2018), 41.

couples with a Western NY connection” for the museum’s archives, as well as other LGBTQ archival materials for the Madeline Davis Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Archives of Western New York.¹³²

After the event, I asked Cynthia Van Ness why she decided to focus on collecting LGBTQ objects and she said part of her determination came from the fact that her predecessors had neglected to collect objects from this community. As she states, they “had neglected or refused to acquire a landmark, award-winning book of local lesbian scholarship, *Boots of Leather...* Due to my predecessors’ disinterest, we have only one item on how Buffalo responded to the HIV epidemic.” She also said when equal marriage passed, she realized the importance of collecting LGBT wedding memorabilia, “since New York was an important win for the marriage equality movement.”¹³³ DiLandro responded to the same question by saying that around ten years ago, when the academic institution decided to obtain the Dr. Madeline Davis LGBTQ Collection, “the collection of under-/anti-documented material of this sort was just not being done locally. Other institutions, I came to find, were actively nay-saying the collection of same.”¹³⁴ Van Ness and DiLandro were looking both outwardly at their community and inwardly at their institutions and identifying this massive gap in their collection, leading to this collaboration meant to begin the process of remedying the problem. They also both said they were planning to work to maintain and increase their community presence. I believe Van Ness summed up the attitude of everyone involved when she said, “I hope [this action] communicates to the Buffalo LGBTQ community that their lives matter.”¹³⁵

¹³² The Buffalo History Museum, “LGBT Library Donation Day,” <http://www.buffalohistory.org/Visit/Event-Details.aspx?id=1098&type=events> (accessed June 17, 2017).

¹³³ Cynthia Van Ness, email message to Hannah Page, June 21, 2017.

¹³⁴ Daniel DiLandro, email message to Hannah Page, June 30, 2017.

¹³⁵ Van Ness, email.

The critical nature of this internal introspection leads to another responsibility of the DCE. This is the obligation to maintain and nurture the relationships developed between an organization and its community; something which, unfortunately, is often an area of neglect. Most collaborations between museums and communities—particularly marginalized communities—are short-term, usually leading to temporary exhibits or special programs. It would be a mistake to entirely downplay the influence these partnerships can have on people; community participants often report powerful, personal changes. However, one cannot escape the reality that any short-term program or exhibition is naturally limited in its ability to lead to substantive, long-term change.

In fact, data seems to corroborate this conclusion, as community members often report feeling used or abandoned by museums that ‘parachute’ into their community and then bounce out almost immediately.¹³⁶ Generally, community members enter collaborations with the expectation that they will serve as, “vehicles toward long-term relationships.”¹³⁷ When these relationships fail to develop, the institution appears disingenuous, as if they’re simply using the community to appear more diverse and inclusive without truly caring about helping them. This comes up in a published conversation between four organizational leaders who have a history of collaborating with museums. Kimberly F. Keith, a trustee of Britain’s Black Cultural Archives, said when museums engage in partnerships with organizations, but then are unable to continue the relationship, she sees it as being “tokenistic and instrumentalist.”¹³⁸ Johanna Blume, from the Eiteljorg Museum, reminds museum personnel that, “as institutions, we have to remember that a

¹³⁶ Keith, “Moving Beyond the Mainstream,” 52.

¹³⁷ Cynthia Chavez Lamar, “Collaborative Exhibit Development at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian,” in *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations*, ed. Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 160.

¹³⁸ Keith, “Moving beyond the Mainstream,” 50.

true commitment to inclusiveness extends beyond the life of specific programs or exhibits, It's a commitment we have to live every day."¹³⁹

This frequent failure of museums to maintain relationships is attributed to a variety of factors, including the lack of money or miscommunication. In my opinion, however, the primary culprit is a lack of time. When a person fails to dedicate the proper amount of time to a job, they are more likely to make mistakes. One may, then, ask why the museum personnel presently involved in community engagement do not have enough time to perform their responsibilities effectively. I believe it is because the person responsible for community engagement is generally a museum educator or marketer, someone already responsible for a large number of other tasks in the museum. Consider the responsibilities of the average museum educator. This person produces educational resources, assists in developing programs and exhibitions for all age groups, prepares and distributes publicity materials, organizes and sometimes leads school visits and other tours, generates income by planning fundraising activities, writes and submits grants, attends conferences, keeps up to date with current technology and ideas about museum education, trains docents and volunteers, develops ways of making exhibits more interactive and engaging, and much more.¹⁴⁰ It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a single person to complete all these tasks in addition to the responsibilities I've outlined as belonging to the Director of Community Engagement.

When speaking about a lack of time, I am not only referring to the time required to send an email, meet with an individual, or mail a letter—the activities that help relationships develop and remain viable. Many museums also struggle to maintain relationships with community

¹³⁹ "How Museums Can Build Collaborations with LGBTQ Communities."

¹⁴⁰ "Museum Education Officer: Job Description," TARGETJobs, <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/job-descriptions/276169-museum-education-officer-job-description> (accessed October 8, 2018).

members because the field is very transient. Museum employees are constantly moving from one project to another or leaving to take positions in other institutions. This is a major problem, because it often takes a long time for trusting, genuine relationships to develop between museums and community groups or individuals. Harbinder Singh, a community leader who often collaborates with institutions, has identified the turnover of employees as the largest problem his organization faces when working with museums. “It’s bad enough engaging with curators when they’re not moving—that is a challenge in itself—but when they move on...then we’re sometimes having to re-establish our credentials afresh.”¹⁴¹

The for-profit world has identified the amount of time needed for a relationship to develop between an organization and its audience. The customer engagement company SDL conducted a survey and found, “it takes two years before your customers trust your brand—or, more specifically, two years for a customer to simply view your brand as one it can rely on...It takes more than twice that amount of time,” specifically five years, “to hit the ‘revenue tipping point’—a.k.a., the point when your customers will actually start spending more money on your brand than competing brands.” Catherine Clifford, the Senior Entrepreneurship Writer at CNBC, has responded to this data with the statement, “five years may seem like an eternity to get customers to develop a relationship with you, but think about the people in your life—the friends you’re confident will be in your life for the long haul. You’ve probably known them for five years, if not many more.”¹⁴² Becoming more inclusive and welcoming to presently-disengaged audiences is not something that happens quickly; it requires many years of investment. By creating a new staff position and allowing that individual to focus entirely on creating and

¹⁴¹ Keith, “Moving Beyond the Mainstream,” 50.

¹⁴² Catherine Clifford, “How Long Before Your Customers Trust You? Two Years,” *Entrepreneur*, September 17, 2014, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/237579> (accessed October 25, 2018).

maintaining relationships with community members, a museum will significantly increase their likelihood of succeeding in this long-term goal.

The last responsibility of the DCE I will outline is also integral to long-term success. The goal of a Director of Community Engagement is not to simply build relationships between *themselves* and community members, but between the *museum* and the community. If the DCE is the only person at the museum who is involved with community members and has developed any type of relationship with them, then those relationships are liable to breakdown as soon as the person leaves. Therefore, the Director of Community Engagement must serve as a sort of mediator or facilitator, working to build a strong foundation of trust and understanding between the museum, as a whole, and its community. They are the first point of contact between the two groups; however, they are not to be the *only* point of contact between the two groups. A good Director would find creative means to help the entire staff connect to the rest of the community.

Consider, for example, the newsletters and calendars used by museums to advertise internal events to members of the community. What if the Director created a similar type of calendar for staff members, which alerted them to events and opportunities occurring outside the museum's walls? Nina Simon has created her own list of eight ways to connect with community members. She mentions that many museums require staff members to spend an hour a week working the front desk or on the floor; "an obvious way to help all staff literally 'connect' with visitors." She offers her own idea that staff members could instead spend this time doing "whatever creative activity appeals to them and might help them relate to visitors."¹⁴³ A Director of Community Engagement could work with administrative staff members to put together either type of program and evaluate the ideas' effectiveness. Other potential ideas might include 'field

¹⁴³ Nina Simon, "Eight Other Ways to 'Connect with Community,'" Museum 2.0 Blog, entry posted August 3, 2009, <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2009/08/eight-other-ways-to-connect-with.html> (accessed October 28, 2018).

trips' to important organizations in the community or providing opportunities for employees to leave their desks and volunteer in the community as part of their job.

Importantly, a Director of Community Engagement could also connect members of staff with people in the community with common interests or who might be interested in developing a project or program. Last summer, I visited the Seneca-Iroquois National Museum in Salamanca, New York with the Corning Museum of Glass' Education team. There, we met informally with the Director and front-line staff members and talked about various subjects, including the potential for collaborations. While driving back to the museum after our visit, Kris Wetterlund, the Director of Education and Interpretation, mentioned the potential benefit of bringing the curator of American glass to speak with the Director and other individuals at the Seneca-Iroquois National Museum. She said this, as glass is an important part of the Seneca—and other local tribes'—history, and their history is an intrinsic part of the story of glass in the United States. Yet the collection did not have any examples of American Indian beadwork in its permanent collection.¹⁴⁴ Everyone has agreed this is a good idea. However, it has not yet occurred, as staff members have been busy working on other, time-sensitive projects. This shows one of the biggest benefits to having a dedicated Director of Community Engagement on staff; since their job is centered around these types of relationships, they would be able to leap into action when opportunities like this arose.

The Responsibility of Museum Leadership

Museums can benefit the communities they serve through hiring Directors of Community Engagement. However, it would be negligent to state this without the caveat that this is only true

¹⁴⁴ Personal conversation with Kris Wetterlund, July 2017.

if the environment inside the museum is suitable. Museums considering the addition of this position should only do so after a period of self-examination, as hiring this individual without undergoing this process could waste time and money, as well as damage the museum's reputation. For a Director of Community Engagement to thrive in their position, museum personnel must first examine their institution's internal attitudes; does everyone understand the importance of inclusion and are they willing and able to open themselves to other perspectives and ways of doing things? It is particularly important, when asking these types of questions, to focus on the attitudes of those in leadership positions, as change cannot occur without the support of those with the power to make decisions.

Self-evaluation can be challenging; it is likely that many staff members will require training on issues such as unconscious bias, privilege, and contemporary social justice issues. For some institutions, it may be best to bring outside consultants into the space for this training and to help with the evaluation process, as these individuals will be, "able to bring a degree of objectivity that is valuable in the diagnostic part of the research." Consultants often use in-depth interviews, written surveys, reviews of company documents, focus groups, and direct observations to gather data related to everyone's attitudes toward diversity and inclusion.¹⁴⁵

Another option is to use a discussion guide, such as the one published by the Building Movement Project (BMP), to lead an institution-wide conversation about community engagement. The BMP's guide asks questions that relate both to the individual and the organization as a whole. First, it asks the person to personally define words like 'community engagement' and 'leadership development' before then asking about how their agency is unique in how they perform these activities. The guide asks people to identify currently-present issues,

¹⁴⁵ R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr., *Beyond Race and Gender: Unleashing the Power of Your Total Work Force by Managing Diversity* (New York: American Management Association, 1991), 51.

which their organization may help solve, then leads them to consider what obstacles they might face while acting and identify the resources they already possess or would need to be successful.¹⁴⁶ The BMP has also published an organizational readiness assessment, which can be given to, “leadership, staff, and volunteers within the organization, board members, clients, participants, constituents, staff from partner organizations, and community members familiar with the organization and its operations.” The assessment presents statements such as, ‘the organization has a written vision statement’ and ‘the organization’s vision guides the work of the organization’ and then asks the stakeholders to identify whether the statement is true, in progress, is false, or if they do not know.¹⁴⁷ Each of these resources could help an organization think about how they presently approach community engagement and lead them to consider whether they are ready and how they might change in the future to become more welcoming to their community.

One of the goals of evaluation is to discover any staff attitudes that could hinder attempts to change and become more inclusive. One of these is apathy; members of the staff may not show sufficient investment in attempts to become more inclusive. This is a problem, because people who are invested are those who, “care about seeing the project to fruition and will work hard to make it happen. They feel some degree of ownership for the project and, thus, are motivated to help it succeed.”¹⁴⁸ If someone is not invested, there is no motivation to help the initiatives succeed. If one finds that staff members are apathetic, it is important to identify the reasons why. They may possess insufficient motivation, as they view diversity and inclusion initiatives as legal, moral, or social responsibilities and not understand how important they are if

¹⁴⁶ “Discussion Guide for Exploring Community Engagement,” Building Movement Project, http://www.buildingmovement.org/pdf/Discussion_Guide_for_Exploring_Community_Engagement.pdf (accessed October 31, 2018).

¹⁴⁷ “Organizational Readiness Assessment,” Building Movement Project, http://www.buildingmovement.org/pdf/Organizational_Readiness_Assessment_Tool.pdf (accessed October 31, 2018).

¹⁴⁸ Sara Deming Wason, *Webster's New World Grant Writing Handbook* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2004), 57.

the museum is to remain relevant. “As a result, diversity remains a ‘fair weather’ agenda item—a luxury to be pursued when business results allow it.”¹⁴⁹

Fear may also hold people back; many people wish to avoid risk and “prefer to stay clear of alternatives that have not been proved.”¹⁵⁰ This is because human beings fear the unknown. We often, “try to control the uncertainty factor—try to have less uncertainty by planning.” We, “create plans and then...experience the old saying, ‘Life is what happens while you are making plans.’”¹⁵¹ It may be possible to help anxious staff members by utilizing certain cognitive behavioral tools; for example, one exercise that may prove useful is known as cognitive restructuring, or decatastrophizing. When a person catastrophizes, they exaggerate the importance of their problem and assume the worst possible outcome will inevitably occur. This leads them to make decisions based on this fear, instead of logic. Cognitive restructuring forces the person to confront their anxieties. They are first asked to clearly state what they are worried will happen, then told to change any ‘what if...?’ statements into “clear predictions about what [they] fear will happen.” After putting their fear into words, they must then answer a series of questions, including “how likely is this event to happen?” and “how awful would it be if this did happen?” Then, they are asked, “supposing the worst did happen, what would [you] do to cope?”¹⁵² This tool is useful, as it helps people think more realistically about the potential consequences of certain actions and realize their own capacity in handling challenges.

Whether apathetic or afraid, inclusivity cannot occur if staff members are not willing to work toward it. It may, however, be possible to change perceptions of the work. I have already mentioned one technique that may help with anxiety or fear. When dealing with apathy, it may

¹⁴⁹ Thomas, *Beyond Race and Gender*, 41.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas, *Beyond Race and Gender*, 44-45.

¹⁵¹ Kim Klein, *Fundraising in Times of Crisis* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 69.

¹⁵² “Decatastrophizing,” PsychologyTools, <http://sites.psu.edu/brk5141/wp-content/uploads/sites/28847/2015/07/Decatastrophizing-Worksheet2.pdf> (accessed November 2, 2018).

help to continually stress the *necessity* of change in museums. As mentioned in the introduction, statistics show the United States undergoing a demographic shift that is leading to an increasingly diverse society, something which could prove disastrous to museums if they do not change, as most continually struggle to attract members of minority groups.¹⁵³

Additionally, one can emphasize that changes are needed if museums are going to appeal to millennials and the next generation. In April of 2015, the president of the Association of Art Museum Directors, Dr. Johnnetta Cole, gave a speech in which she asked, “How are our museums doing in terms of igniting the interest of the folks that I respectfully, yet playfully call the young’uns?” She continued by pointing out how millennials differ from “yesterday’s museumgoers in how they see the world, how they engage with technology and how they pursue their interests. It is not being overly dramatic to say that unless we make changes in our museums that will speak to the patterns and interests of young people, when the middle age to older folks that are now our core visitors go on off to glory, our museum galleries will be places in which there is a dwindling number of visitors.”¹⁵⁴

Appealing to millennials is not only important when thinking of visitation, but also when one considers where funding will come from in the future. Presently, baby boomers—those born between 1946 and 1964—control about 70 percent of the nation’s disposable income, as reported by Nielsen Marketing.¹⁵⁵ Millennials don’t have as much cash on hand and are saddled with more debt than previous generations; when they do donate, they tend to be drawn to social causes, instead of artistic. Dr. Cole points out that, “tax laws are changing, and wealth is becoming increasingly concentrated,” which will “affect the philanthropic habits and the focus

¹⁵³ Farre and Medvedeva, *Demographic Transformation*, 9.

¹⁵⁴ Johnnetta Cole, “Museums, Diversity, & Social Value,” Association of Art Museum Directors, June 10, 2015, <https://aamd.org/our-members/from-the-field/johnnetta-cole-museums-diversity-social-value> (accessed November 2, 2018).

¹⁵⁵ “Baby Boomers will Control 70% of Disposable Income,” Impact Business Partners, February 22, 2016, <https://impactbp.com/baby-boomers> (accessed November 1, 2018).

on giving of the younger generation.” She says, “when we pause to confront the need for far greater diversity in our museums, in many ways, we are at the proverbial fork in the road...We have to decide if we will take the fork that represents continuing to have our museums reflect the histories and herstories, the cultures, art and science of only some of the many people who make up our nation and our world. Or do we take the other fork, that requires inspiring and creating change.”¹⁵⁶ The continued existence of museums clearly requires that museum staff members proceed down the second fork, embracing change and working to becoming more inclusive and welcoming to all members of society.

After proceeding through this period of self-evaluation and identifying any attitudes that may hamper change, the museum’s leadership may move on to more concrete questions. For example, how will this position be funded? A Director of Community Engagement should be hired as a full-time, permanent member of staff, due to the long-term nature of a Director of Community Engagement’s responsibilities. The Executive Director and Board will, therefore, need to find a way to make this a dedicated staff position that is folded into the overall, annual museum budget. For some museums, this may prove to be a challenge initially. However, grants might be used to bolster the position and it is highly likely that community support could be leveraged; as we saw, most Americans are supportive of museums and believe they have the potential to benefit communities.

One might also consider that, in the long-term, this position will be able to pay for itself. One key of sustainable fundraising is to build and sustain relationships with a variety of individuals—the primary responsibility of a Director of Community Engagement. Kim Klein, who has over twenty-five years of fundraising experience, says organizations are most successful

¹⁵⁶ Cole, “Museums, Diversity, & Social Value.”

when they focus on building large, diverse funding bases that are primarily made up of people who are personally impacted by the institution's mission. She explains that many people assume the majority of the money given away by the private sector comes from foundations and corporations. This is not actually true; "the majority of donated funds (on average, 85 percent) are from individuals, both living and through bequests."¹⁵⁷ Depending on many, smaller gifts, instead of a small number of large gifts actually helps to strengthen institutions, since an organization that is entirely dependent upon two or three major sources of funding will slip into an immediate crisis if those sources were depleted for any reason. An institution firmly entrenched into its community and supported by hundreds of people who have personally witnessed the good it has done has many more sources to fall back upon.

The way one builds this large base, Klein says, is to build relationships. This is repeated by members of a roundtable of grant-makers, as well. They say, "relationships do matter enormously. It's about trusting you with their money, [knowing that] you can do quality work and be honest in what you say and do."¹⁵⁸ Klein says relationship-building is often a struggle for non-profits, as "thank-you notes, newsletters, renewal letters, and annual reports go out late or not at all. Letters to donors are not personalized and the donor has no reason to think that the organization even notices his or her gift."¹⁵⁹ However, it is easy how hiring a Director of Community Engagement would assist in this area; they're likely to bring new sources of funding to the institution simply by doing their job. By bridging the divide between the museum and the outside world, they would help show the trustworthiness of the museum and provide the community with information about how their gifts are being used. They could also help other

¹⁵⁷ Klein, *Fundraising in Times of Crisis*, 18.

¹⁵⁸ Ellen Karsh and Arlen Sue Fox, *The Only Grant-Writing Book You'll Ever Need*, 4th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2014), xxvi.

¹⁵⁹ Klein, *Fundraising in Times of Crisis*, 18.

staff members connect with people in the community who could help monetarily or through networking contacts.

While considering how to fund the position, the museum’s leadership will also need to think about other factors, such as how much they will pay the individual, how they will advertise the position, and where they will search for candidates. When doing so, it is important to remember that many individuals from marginalized communities have been historically-excluded from “generational wealth creation” and also suffer from, “inequitable distribution of opportunities, weakly resourced networks, and the other systemic factors we’re in business to combat.”¹⁶⁰ These inequities limit diversity in this—as well as many other—fields.

Many museum professionals and academics have attempted to address this problem, often by trying to ‘fix the pipeline.’ They try to encourage members of marginalized communities to enter the field by introducing children from underrepresented communities to museum careers early in life, offering scholarships to graduate programs, and creating internships targeted toward specific groups. These efforts often result “in a sizable number of minorities and women accepting entry-level positions,” a result some may view as a sign of success. Unfortunately, the benefits of these programs are often limited, as these efforts do not change the system that creates inequities. Leaders, “often recognize the existence of institutionalized discrimination, but they typically focus their interventions on ‘better equipping’ minorities and women to face” the culture that already exists within the museum, instead of asking more challenging questions like: “Why doesn’t the system work naturally for everyone? What has to be done to allow it to do so?” Will our cultural roots allow us to take the necessary

¹⁶⁰ Jon Kauffman, “What Does it Take to Achieve a Living Wage in Seattle?” Rainier Valley Corps, July 26, 2017, <https://rainiervalleycorps.org/2017/07/take-achieve-living-wage-seattle/> (accessed November 3, 2018).

corrective action? “If not, what root changes do we have to make?”¹⁶¹ The Board and Executive Director should look at the people who are presently working at the museum and those who are applying to positions; if these groups are homogeneous, it would be beneficial to ask these questions and consider what changes might open employment to a more diverse group of people.

Hiring a Director of Community Engagement could help museums become more welcoming and useful to the communities of today and increasingly-diverse generations of tomorrow. However, a DCE will only succeed in their job if museum leaders stand behind them and make sure the museum is a place where inclusion can occur. To do so, the museum’s Board and Executive Director should first take the organization through a process of internal evaluation. This will help them identify any attitudes that could doom attempts at becoming more inclusive; this process will also help them prepare themselves for the hard work that goes along with opening oneself to the community. Then, the museum’s leaders can proceed to more concrete questions, like how the position will be funded, and ask themselves whether their attempts to become more inclusive are extending to the hiring process. Are they making the changes necessary to open themselves to a diverse pool of candidates? If certain people are not applying to the position, can they identify the reason why? While creating this position will require a significant amount of initial work, hiring a Director of Community Engagement will strengthen the museum and, ultimately, benefit the surrounding community.

¹⁶¹ Thomas, *Beyond Race and Gender*, 21-26.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Museums have arrived at a fork in the road; one path is well-lit and well-trod. It simply asks museums to continue doing what they have always been doing: collecting and preserving the objects entrusted to them, creating programs and tours for the visitors who happen to walk through the institutions' doors, and attracting donations from corporations and the super-rich. It is a tempting path; requiring no evaluation of oneself or acknowledgement of the future's true uncertainty. When a single employee or institution peers down the other path, alternatively, it appears terrifyingly dim; it twists so it is impossible to see what the future might hold. A single traveler might carry a bright lantern, filled with passion, yet still trip over overturned roots and scratch themselves on unseen obstacles. They may begin their trek with courage, but it is easy for a single light to burn out. Knowing this, many museums turn away from this uncertain path, knowing the well-lit and well-trod path is becoming worn and will soon be washed away, but hoping that day remains far, far in the future.

Museums must change; as much as one may wish to deny it, the old way of 'being a museum' is unsustainable and becomes more so every year. As the country grows more diverse and shifts occur in the distribution of wealth and the social culture, the pressure increases on museums to adapt. The voices of marginalized communities strengthen; they demand their stories be told and ask for accountability from the institutions that silenced them for centuries. People question how an institution can claim to benefit the public when only a portion of that public feels welcome. There are many powerful voices within the field who are calling for change, yet one has to wonder why John Cotton Dana's nearly 100-year-old words read as if they were written yesterday.

In this paper, I have shared my belief that museums should hire Directors of Community Engagement, as a way to step toward change. The Smithsonian Institution has published their own belief that, “if a museum wants to seriously address its public role, it needs to find a way to engage in an extensive, prolonged, multi-faceted dialogue with the public. There needs to be a way for the museum to listen, especially to those who do not believe that the museum has anything to offer them. And there needs to be a way for the museum to respond to what it hears.”¹⁶² A Director of Community Engagement is someone who could facilitate these conversations by building relationships outside the museum, listening to what people say, and helping those inside the institution respond to what they hear. Truthfully, these connections must be built if museums wish to be at all relevant in the future. Consider the earlier image, of a single traveler moving down the dim and winding path; this path, while certainly leading to a better existence, is almost impassable for a single individual or organization with a single light, no matter how brightly passion may shine. They are more likely to fail and slink back to the well-worn trail that will eventually collapse. However, imagine the difference it would make if that single traveler joined with others, each carrying their own light, and proceeded down the path. There may be disagreements and occasionally someone might stumble over another’s foot, but now there are others to help them stand up again and relight their lantern. As they move forward, they widen the path and make it easier for others to follow.

Mike Murawski, a museum educator and presently Director of Education & Public Programs at the Portland Art Museum, wrote a powerful piece sharing his own thoughts on fighting for social change in museums. He begins by quoting the activist, Angela Davis, who once said, “I’m no longer accepting the things I cannot change... I’m changing the things I

¹⁶² *Art Museums and the Public*, 14.

cannot accept.” Murawski says, for him, it’s “not enough to lay out a laundry list of ‘things I cannot accept’ and continue to make the assumption that these are also ‘things that I cannot change.’” He says he often hears museum professionals talking about the ‘way things are’ in museums and dismissing new ideas, because they have an entrenched belief that it’s simply impossible to anything to change. “Many of the entrenched behaviors, policies, and practices in museums are based in a whole set of false stories we tell ourselves — self-sabotaging and oppressive narratives that hold us back, maintain the status quo, and create a fearful and hesitant attitude towards change.”¹⁶³ It’s easy to see why this attitude exists. Change is difficult, and many problems are so large that there seems to be no possible answer.

Murawski’s ultimate message is one of hope, however. Once one identifies the false stories creating barriers to change, he believes it’s possible to create new and powerful stories to replace them. While it may be difficult to change attitudes and find the time, money, and energy to create the position I have outlined, and while it undoubtably will be challenging for the person in this position to create the genuine, trusting relationships needed for our institutions to become more inclusive, it is not impossible. In his book, *Hope: How Triumphant Leaders Create the Future*, Andrew Razeghi quotes the great philosopher, Bertrand Russell, who once said, “a way of life cannot be successful so long as it is mere intellectual conviction. It must be deeply felt, deeply believed, dominant even in dreams.”¹⁶⁴ I have written this paper because I deeply feel and believe museums can benefit people in incredible ways. I also believe these benefits belong to everyone.

¹⁶³ Murawski, “Changing the Things We Cannot Accept.”

¹⁶⁴ Bertrand Russell, *New Hopes for a Changing World*, in Andrew Razeghi, *Hope: How Triumphant Leaders Create the Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 6-7.

Lisa Jo Rudy—a writer, researcher, and consultant with a rich background developing exhibits, games, and books for children with a variety of learning styles—has written about a group she believes museums are specially qualified to engage: Autistic individuals.¹⁶⁵ In her article, she points out how formal learning environments focus almost exclusively on areas of weakness for Autistic people, primarily verbal and non-verbal communication and social skills. “In a museum, however, conversation and social communication can often take a back seat to hands-on, visual, aural or interactive discovery and learning. In other words, children with autism may learn more and better in an informal museum environment than in a school setting.” Rudy says they may experience challenges in school, work, and public interaction, but Autistic individuals, “have a range of passions, talents and aptitudes. Too often, schools focus on remediation at the expense of talents and interests: Children with autism spend their school days learning to be as ‘typical’ as possible. Museums, though, are all about passions and unique abilities. The child whose fascination with outer space sabotages his English grades could thrive and even take a leadership role in a planetarium setting.”¹⁶⁶ Museums are capable of providing Autistic people with something indescribably important: a place where their talents, passions, and differences are celebrated and not suppressed.

Rudy’s words are special to me, as I’ve witnessed their truth in my own life. One of my younger brothers is autistic and has often been treated as if he’s ‘less’ than others. However, he’s always possessed a special interest in creating art. A recent visit to the Corning Museum of Glass provided him with the opportunity to watch numerous demonstrations about glass and how it’s

¹⁶⁵ I have chosen to use ‘identity first’ terminology here, despite the general consensus amongst professionals that ‘person-first language’ would be preferable, as I’ve found that many self-advocates and allies prefer this terminology because they understand autism to be an inherent part of their identity. Most who prefer person-first language seem to be parents or professionals who work with Autistic people. I believe it is important to prioritize the voices of those who experience autism themselves, so have followed this general pattern, while acknowledging that this is not agreed upon by everyone in the autism community and people should be referred to in whatever way they prefer.

¹⁶⁶ Lisa Jo Rudy, “Full Spectrum: Addressing the Needs of Kids with Autism,” New England Museum Association, https://nemanet.org/files/3113/8552/6679/Museums_and_Special_Needs.pdf (accessed November 4, 2018).

made; he spent all his time doing this, instead of proceeding through the historical and contemporary exhibits and looking at objects. In a classroom setting or on a field trip, this exclusivity would likely be frowned upon, but the museum environment allowed him to make choices and engage with objects and exhibits in the way he prefers. In the process, he learned and enjoyed himself much more than if he was forced to go through a ‘typical’ tour.

Hiring a Director of Community Engagement would allow museums to take a step toward becoming more welcoming and inclusive of people like my little brother or my biracial and bisexual best friend. They’d open themselves to people like my Muslim classmate, the homeless patrons who spend their days in the library where I work, and all the other people who fill my life and my community. To do this, however, it is important that we hold onto hope, continue the conversation, and work toward making museums places where everyone feels welcome, worthy, and valued.

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