

Collaborate and Listen: How Small Museums Define and Pursue Community Engagement

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Abstract

Collaborate and Listen: How Small Museums Define and Pursue Community Engagement

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Museology

It is becoming common for museums to feel the need to justify their existence to society beyond just what is in their collection. This research identifies and describes how small museums pursue community engagement in order to find their purpose in society. Many small museums find themselves stagnant, so making sure that they are relevant to their communities will help to ensure survival. A small body of literature discusses community engagement in small museums; however, this research bridges the gap between community engagement theory and practice by interviewing three small museums in the area surrounding Seattle, Washington. The findings from the three case studies indicate that small museums embrace community engagement as an important strategy to becoming an integral part of a community. The research suggests that small museums believe that community engagement revolves around collaborating and listening to their own communities.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Problem Statement

Introduction:

The author Gail Anderson, who edited the book *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, stated that museums have the ability to evolve and change in order to thrive.¹ This study will look at how small museums define and pursue community engagement. Four hundred fifty-five small museums across the country answered a survey sent out by the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) to come up with a self-selecting definition. Small museums are loosely defined as an institution with a budget of \$250,000 or less and have a small staff that all perform multiple duties within the museum.² As for community engagement, it can be defined as social media feeds or the museum telling a story about a portion of their community. It can also be giving the community a decision making power in the museum. The purpose of this research is to identify how small museums would define community engagement and how they would carry it out.

The parameters given to the participating museums during the research for this study was for them to describe what they do *with* their communities instead of just doing things *for* their communities. Some examples of small museums doing things

¹ Gail Anderson, "A Framework" *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson, 2nd ed. (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 8.

² Small Museums Committee and Affinity Group, *Small Museum Survey Results*, American Association for State and Local History, (2007). Retrieved May 3, 2013, from <http://aaslh.org/documents/SmallMuseumsurveyresults.pdf>

with their communities are using their facility as a meeting place for the rotary club, being a voting site, and collaborating with partners to meet a community need outside the museum's general mission. The distinction of *with* instead of *for* comes from Robert Putnam's definition of how social capital is built in his book *Bowling Alone*.³

Four questions guided this research:

- How do small museums define community engagement for their own institution?
- How do small museums carry out their community engagement efforts?
- How and to what extent do small museums incorporate the needs of the community into their planning for both community engagement and institutional planning?
- What are the biggest challenges and benefits to community engagement?

Current status:

The current status of small museums and community engagement is one of constant conversation and growth. Anderson identified community and public

³ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 13.

engagement as one of the core actions that museums must take in the twenty-first century in order to keep museums and their communities healthy.⁴ Putnam described the power in the networks that an institution could have by being connected with their community.⁵ Anderson and Putnam stated the benefits of being involved in with your community, and urged museums to meet the needs of their communities for the well-being of society.

The small museum field is one that has its roots in almost every community in America.⁶ Bob Beatty, the Vice President of the American Association for State and Local History, believes that small museums are able to engage with their communities in deep and meaningful ways that the rest of the museum field could learn from the smaller institutions.⁷ Beatty stated “larger museums can learn from smaller institutions about how to serve as effective stewards of their resources and to engage their communities in a deep, meaningful way.”⁸ The AASLH sponsored the writing of the *Small Museum Toolkit* which was edited by Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler. Catlin-Legutko and Klingler are the founding and current chairs of the Small Museums Committee whose compilation of thirty-plus authors successfully detailed

⁴ Gail Anderson, “A Framework” *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson, 2nd ed. (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 9.

⁵ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 288.

⁶ Bob Beatty, preface in *Small Museum Toolkit, book 1: Leadership, Mission, and Governance*, ed. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), xi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁸ *Ibid.*

how small museums can be effective institutions in society.⁹ Small museums, above all, are always suffering from a lack of time and are in the search for the most effective way to spend their resources.¹⁰

The AASLH also has introduced a program called StEPs, which stands for Standards and Excellence Program for History Organizations. The StEPs program was designed to be flexible in guiding “even the smallest museums and sites in assessing policies and practices and pointing the way toward a much stronger and vibrant community anchor.”¹¹ The program was created to give smaller institutions a way to reach national museum standards.¹² It was made possible by a grant from the Institution of Museum and Library Services and was in response to the inability of some small museum to complete American Alliance of Museums accreditation. In the Audience standard 2, self-assessment questions C. and D., the StEPs program asks the museums to rate their performance on a basic, good, better scale for the following questions.

C. Does the institution work with other groups in the community?

⁹ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁰ Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler, preface to *Small Museum Toolkit*, ed. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), vii.

¹¹ American Association for State and Local History, *Overview of StEPs Program*, 2014, <http://tools.aaslh.org/steps/>

¹² Ibid.

D. Does the institution allocate resources to serve the community and enhance quality of life?¹³

In the 'better' rating on the scale, institutions take leadership roles in working with its neighborhoods and communities.¹⁴ The institution is also a catalyst for community forums as well as serving as an example to its neighbors.¹⁵ The StEPs program is written specifically with the small museum in mind and it urges them to be involved *with* their communities and take leadership roles in addressing the needs of the community. The above section is the most relevant to this research because it gives a scale for small museums to see how well they are doing community engagement. The StEPs program asks for museums to work with their community, but the program does not say how to actually pursue community engagement.

What is not well known is how small museums as a collective are being involved in community engagement. As mentioned above and in the literature review chapter of this study, community engagement can be defined many ways. However, most important for this study, it does not provide a definition of community engagement for small museums. In the *Small Museum Toolkit*, most of the articles gave some guidelines for community engagement. An example is Matelic's chapter in the *Small Museum Toolkit* where the author points out that "finding out what your community cares about

¹³ American Association for State and Local History, *StEPs Program: Audience Section*, (2009). 86.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

is critical to shaping a more relevant role for your museum.”¹⁶ Matelic indicated the importance of community engagement, but no specific way for small museums to pursue it. There is also a lack of research that details how small museums are defining their own community engagement efforts.

Research Goals:

My research will identify and describe how small museums define and pursue community engagement. With this study, the museum field may gain insight on how to value not what they do *for* their communities, but rather what they do *with* them. This is not to suggest that what museums do *for* their community is unimportant, but for this study, how small museums do things *with* their community is a better gauge of community engagement. Other museums will also have knowledge of how three small museums in the Seattle area defined and pursued community engagement and could adapt the results of the study in their own pursuits of social relevance. Lastly, this research will describe how museums are an integral part of our communities, by collaborating with the community to meet communal needs.

¹⁶ Candace Tangorra Matelic, “New Roles for Small Museums,” in *Small Museum Toolkit*, ed. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler (Lanham: AltaMira Press 2012), 155.

Chapter Two: Literature Reviewed

The goal of this study is to identify and describe how small museums define and pursue community engagement. In order to define the universe in which this study is situated, the review of literature provides an overview of the relevant areas. The four main bodies of literature that inform the research goal are: museum philosophy, small museums, social capital and community engagement.

Museum Philosophy:

John Cotton Dana was a large proponent of opening up the museum to a larger audience during the early part of the 20th century.¹⁷ Dana was the director of The Newark Museum in the begin of the 1900s and he noted in *The Gloom of the Museum* that museums had previously done a good job of creating opportunities for “select few...to pursue their study of fashion in taste, in ornament, and in technique.”¹⁸ The author touches on many aspects of museums in this article including type of objects, where the museum is located and how museums interact with society.¹⁹ Dana asks the important question “Do we need museums at all?” of which he answers “of course”.²⁰ The reason

¹⁷ John Cotton Dana, *The Gloom of the Museum* (Woodstock, VT: The Elm Tree Press, 1917), 28-30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16-28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

he stated that museums are needed is an urge for museums to serve a broader public, “now it seems to come the demand that the museum serve its people”.²¹

The next step in the overview of literature about museum philosophy is looking at Theodore Low’s *What is a Museum?* written in 1942 at the bequest of the then American Association of Museums. Low was an educator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He did not think that museums are active enough with their education efforts in order to stay relevant in society.²² Low stressed the fact that the “purpose and the only purpose of museums is education in all its varied aspects from the most scholarly research to the simple arousing of curiosity.”²³ He stated “Therefore it seems only logical that museums should turn from passive institutions used only by the scholars and the initiated into active institutions serving the total population of their respective communities.”²⁴ Low, in 1942, is urging the museum field to expand a passive, preserve and collect, mentality into a broad popular education mindset.²⁵

The literature about museum philosophy that is relevant to community engagement in small museums, moves from Dana and Low who urged the museum field to open up to a larger section of the public and put education as the main purpose

²¹ Ibid., 30.

²² Theodore Low, “What is a Museum?,” in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson, 2nd ed. (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 35.

²³ Ibid., 39.

²⁴ Ibid., 46.

²⁵ Ibid., 44.

of the museum, to George E. Hein. In Hein's "The Constructivist Museum", an article originally published in the *Journal of Education in Museums* in 1995, he reviews the predominant educational theory of constructivism and how it could be applied in museums. Hein states that "Constructivist educational theory argues that in any discussion of teaching and learning the focus needs to be on the learner, not on the subject to be learned."²⁶ This is translated by Hein as dictum that museums need to focus on the visitors, not the content of the museum.²⁷ So far, this literature review has traced the focus of museums from expanding their audience, to putting education at the forefront, and then Hein urging that all education efforts are focused on the visitors and how they create learning individually, socially, and from their own experiences.²⁸

The next step in this literature review will examine some writings from Stephen E. Weil who posed many questions to the museum field. In his article *Creampuffs and Hardballs: Are You Really Worth What You Cost or Just Merely Worthwhile?*, Weil challenged museum to actually answer hard questions instead of shy away from them.²⁹ Weil stated in 1994 that museums may have to start answering hardball questions, including the following:

²⁶ George E. Hein, "The Constructivist Museum," in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson, 2nd ed. (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 128.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁹ Stephen E. Weil, "Creampuffs and Hardballs: Are You Really Worth What You Cost or Just Merely Worthwhile?," in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson, 2nd ed. (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 130.

Are you really worth what you cost or just merely worthwhile? Could somebody else do as much or more than you do for less? Are you truly able to accomplish anything that makes a difference, or are you simply an old habit, or possibly even a kind of indulgence?³⁰

Weil posed these questions in order that museums become more prepared to make a better case for support for themselves in the future.³¹ He believed that the museum field may come to the point where they need to demonstrate its worthiness to the people that they serve because the non-profit sector is growing more rapidly than the resources being spent on the sector.³² In his article “From Being *About* Something to Being *For* Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum”, Weil continued his questioning of the museum field and the direction of its evolution. He had a “vision of an emerging new museum model – a transformed and redirected institution that can, through its public service orientation, use its very special competencies in dealing with objects to contribute positively to the quality of individual human lives and to enhance the well-being of human communities.”³³ If museums are

³⁰ Ibid., 134.

³¹ Ibid., 133.

³² Ibid., 130.

³³ Stephen E. Weil, “From Being *About* Something to Being *For* Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum,” in *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (1999): 231. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027573>

meant to ask for support from their community, then museums better offer something of worth to their constituents, otherwise what is the point in existing?³⁴

The museum field is shifting to new focus area, one that puts the needs of public, those they serve in the forefront of their purpose.³⁵ “The emerging public service oriented museum must see itself not as a cause but as an instrument” because “the community is legitimately entitled to have some choice - not the only choice, but *some* choice – in determining just how that instrument is to be used.”³⁶ Weil challenged the museum field to make an effort to reach out to the public they serve and do good for them; do good with them.³⁷

Following Weil’s challenge to the museum field, is David Carr, and his exploration of museums as cultural institutions. Carr’s book *The Promise of Cultural Institutions* explained how museums are an amazing place for visitors to create experiences.³⁸ He also stated that since museums are cultural institutions and create these awesome experiences, they have a responsibility to speak to, for, and with their communities.³⁹ Carr continued to develop his explanation of cultural institutions and

³⁴ Ibid., 232.

³⁵ Ibid., 254.

³⁶ Ibid., 255.

³⁷ Ibid., 254.

³⁸ David Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altimira Press, 2003), 14.

³⁹ Ibid., 55-67.

their commitment to serve the citizens of the community. The following passage addresses Carr's belief of what museums should be doing as cultural museums:

We must learn to think for the life of the community, to scan its horizons, and to act fearlessly for the lives of its learners... The mindful cultural institution needs understand and participate fully in the worlds of citizens, including the lives of the least informed of the community, those with the smallest amount of power, the least access to tools, the most silent of citizens.⁴⁰

The editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship*, Robert R. Janes, asked museums to be open to what is happening the community around the museum. His article "The Mindful Museum", in *Curator: The Museum Journal*, asked a very insightful question; "Are museums mindful of what is going on around them?"⁴¹ Janes contended that the museum field is too preoccupied "with the marketplace, quantitative measures of performance, and internally driven agendas devoted to collecting, exhibiting, ancillary education, and entertainment."⁴² Museums need to be more aware of what is going on around them and not be so tied to what it used to mean to be a museum.⁴³ "Rethinking the role of museums as social institutions will require no less than reinvented museum - a mindful organization that incorporates the best of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 67.

⁴¹ Robert R. Janes, "The Mindful Museum," in *Curator: The Museum Journal* 53. No.3 (2010): 325.

⁴² Ibid., 326.

⁴³ Ibid., 335.

enduring museum values and business methodology, with a sense of social responsibility heretofore unrecognized.”⁴⁴

To finish the museum philosophy section of this literature review is the author Gail Anderson, the editor of *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*. Anderson pulls many diverse authors to contribute to the conversation of the paradigm shift.⁴⁵ Her thesis is that, museums, in order to remain relevant in the 21st century, must assess “what defines relevancy for each museum in their unique setting?”⁴⁶ The shift that Anderson mentions in the title of the book is the shift in attitude, purpose, alignment, and execution all with a focus on public engagement. She stated now is the time for museums to be publicly engaged, to be on the forefront of the shift in focus and relevancy because, “for too many it takes a financial crisis and the threat of going out of business to spur a call to action.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid., 326.

⁴⁵ Gail Anderson, preface in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson, 2nd ed. (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), xiii.

⁴⁶ Gail Anderson, “A Framework” *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson, 2nd ed. (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 1.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 9.

Small Museums

What is a small museum? The definition of the small museum can be found in many places: a good one to use, and the commonly accepted one comes from a survey done by the American Association of State and Local History (AASLH).⁴⁸ The top category self-selected for how small museums would classify themselves was budget size at 41%.⁴⁹ The budgets ranged with 50% of respondents indicating \$100,000 or less and 80% of respondents indicated \$250,000 or less as the definition of a small museum.⁵⁰ The Small Museums Committee of the AASLH also describe small museums as having a “small staff with multiple responsibilities” and “other characteristics such as the physical size of the museum, collections size and scope, etc. may further classify a museum as small”.⁵¹

Steven Friesen, a contributor to the *Small Museum Toolkit book 1: Leadership, Mission, and Governance*, and the director of the Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave, stated that many qualitative characteristics can be applied to museums as well to define “small”.⁵² “Yes, for reporting purposes, we will probably still need to define small museums by such statistics as budget and staff size. But those are just statistics and do

⁴⁸ Small Museums Committee and Affinity Group, *Small Museum Survey Results*, American Association for State and Local History, (2007). Retrieved May 3, 2013, from <http://aaslh.org/documents/SmallMuseumsurveyresults.pdf>

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid,

⁵² Steven Friesen, “Making a Case for Small Museums” in *Small Museum Toolkit, book 1: Leadership, Mission, and Governance*, ed. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 42.

not tell the whole story... a small museum is resilient, quick and innovative."⁵³ Friesen stated there are many qualities small museums possess that larger institutions do not always have.⁵⁴ Small museums are often more connected to the communities and are able to utilize their connections with quick and responsive community collaborations.⁵⁵ Friesen indicates that the decision making process is much quicker when dealing with five opinions in staff decisions versus twenty-five or more.⁵⁶

Barbara Walden, another contributor to the *Small Museum Toolkit, book 4: Reaching and Responding to the Audience*, stated "It is important that small museum staffs and boards recognize that community service and advocacy are much larger and more important than the small museum alone".⁵⁷ Walden described people that work and support small museums continual state that the community around the museum is the most important aspect of the institution.⁵⁸

There are also associations that are dedicated to the small museum field and addressing the specific issues of smaller institutions. The AASLH has two such ways of staying connected to the world of small museums. The Small Museum Community page on the AASLH website holds resources for those that work in the small museum

⁵³ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 49-55.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁷ Barbara Walden, "Like a Good Neighbor: Community Advocacy for Small Museums," in *Small Museum Toolkit, book 4: Reaching and Responding to the Audience*, ed. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 80.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 75.

field. On the website, there are not only the StEPs program, Small Museum Survey, Special Events, Scholarships, but even a blog called *Big Ideas for Small Museums*. The blog features articles from working professionals that are addressing a particular aspect that may be challenging other museums and ideas of how to tackle the issue. It also acts as a national forum for discussion to take place.

Harold and Susan Skramstad are museum consultants that specialize in museum governance and planning. They wrote an article for the *Small Museum Toolkit, book 1: Leadership, Mission, and Governance* called "Mission and Vision Again? What's the Big Deal?". Though the Skramstad's article deals with mission and vision, they are talking about how and what makes a small museum unique in its position in the community.⁵⁹ Since small museums are a reflection of their community, the museum needs to be fluid and changing.⁶⁰ Museums used to be able to justify their existence with a mission of "collect, preserve, and interpret" but no longer is that the situation.⁶¹ Harold and Susan Skramstad wrote that small museum should make a case for their institution through the mission and vision statement by incorporating the needs of the community.⁶²

⁵⁹ Harold and Susan Skramstad, "Mission and Vision Again? What's the Big Deal?" in *Small Museum Toolkit, book 1: Leadership, Mission, and Governance*, ed. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 60.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Social Capital

The review of the literature in the area of social capital demonstrated what museums are building when they engage their communities. Robert Putnam defines social capital as “the collective value of all ‘social networks’ and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other”.⁶³ Putnam’s thesis is that a well-functioning and politically involved society is a result of the region’s successful effort in accumulating social capital.⁶⁴ He continues to say that “the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value.”⁶⁵ Putnam did extensive interviews and research in order to find the extent to which the American people in the 1990’s were voluntarily associated with many different kinds of social clubs.⁶⁶ When a community is full of social networks, it will be a better place for having them, “research suggests that civic connections help make us healthy, wealthy, and wise.”⁶⁷

Social capital literature is relevant to community engagement in museums because the social connections that museum make while being involved in the community are the exact type of networks that Putnam says have value. He states that social capital is built upon the *norm of specific reciprocity* which can be explained as such:

⁶³ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 14.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 287.

doing something for another without expecting anything specific in return but having confidence that someone will do good for me down the road.⁶⁸ Museums are included in the type of institutions that can build social capital in communities that will overtime pay dividends by making the entire community stronger and more successful.⁶⁹

Paul Born is an author, community builder and the President of Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement based out of Ontario Canada. In his article *Community Collaborations: A New Conversation*, Born describes that he only recently included museums in his practice of community building.⁷⁰ Community building, as described by Born, is a way of addressing social issues at their core instead of just symptoms.⁷¹ An example of this is the issue of poverty. Instead of just handing out food stamps, the community building concept would address the following issues: strengthening institutional capacity at the community level, enhancing social capital and personal networks, and developing leadership.⁷² Museums are included in this community building because the community on a whole is trying to leverage their

⁶⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 289-301.

⁷⁰ Paul Born, "Community Collaboration: A New Conversation," *Journal of Museum Education* 31, no.1 (2006), 8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40283902>.

⁷¹ Ibid., 9.

⁷² Ibid.

assets together.⁷³ They can “act as catalysts for community conversations” which creates many social connections and networks between individuals and organizations.⁷⁴

Social capital, as described by Putnam,⁷⁵ plays a large role in the community building that Born talks about and both authors include the museum as an organization that is well situated to be very involved in the community at large.⁷⁶ The review of literature about social capital reveals research that indicates there is real value in creating social networks with individuals and organizations within the community. The literature reflects that museums are able to play a large role in community building and the ability to address the needs of the people who live in the community. The more socially connected a community is, the better off they will be in their health, wealth, and wisdom.⁷⁷

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁵ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 10.

⁷⁶ Paul Born, “Community Collaboration: A New Conversation,” *Journal of Museum Education* 31, no.1 (2006), 11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40283902>.

⁷⁷ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 287.

Community Engagement

The community engagement section of this literature review will begin with the then American Association of Museums (AAM) report in 2002 called *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*. The goal of this report is to encourage and challenge museums across the country to increase their involvement in their communities as well as allowing the communities to increase their ownership of the direction of the museum.⁷⁸ AAM had been working on a Museums and Community Initiative since the 1990's and Robert Archibald, the President and CEO of the Missouri Historical Society, chaired that initiative.⁷⁹ Archibald described that the challenge to museums is to increase their community engagement and to allow the communities to be more involved in the decisions of the museums.⁸⁰ The AAM report calls museums to take the next step of being social involved and engaged with their community.

Ellen Hirzy was a consulting writer for the AAM report and she laid out the recommendations for museums to start their journey as a more civically minded institution.⁸¹ She wrote that the context of the report is a society after the September 11th 2001, attacks on the country and the tremendous power of community in the country

⁷⁸ Robert R. Archibald, Introduction to *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, (Washington DC: AAM, 2002), 4.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 1.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁸¹ Ellen Hirzy, "Mastering Civic Engagement: A Report from the American Association of Museums," *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, (Washington DC: AAM, 2002), 11.

brought hope, comfort, and compassion as well as a healthier society.⁸² Hirzy states that there can be an argument made that civic engagement and public-spiritedness may be on the rise or decline. However, she surmises that social capital is critical to health of communities⁸³ It is best for all communities if organizations bind together and collaboratively address needs of the community because they “are not well served when their needs and issues are carved into segments and assigned to particular institutions.”⁸⁴

Literature revolving around community engagement is written from the major museum association in the country, AAM, but also from other museums associations such as, the American Association for State and Local History. The AASLH sponsored a book series called the Small Museum Toolkit which contains six books and within these books there are chapters written by experienced practitioners within the museum field.⁸⁵ One of the authors from the fourth book in the series is Candace Tangorra Matelic who uses her museum consulting experiences to come up with steps for small museums to become more engaged with their communities.⁸⁶ Matelic states that the museum field has entered an era in which it is more important to “do the right things”

⁸² Ibid., 14.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler, preface to *Small Museum Toolkit*, ed. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), vii.

⁸⁶ Candace Tangorra Matelic, “New Roles for Small Museums,” in *Small Museum Toolkit, book 4: Reaching and Responding to the Audience*, ed. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 141.

by demonstrating that museums matter to their communities.⁸⁷ She also declares that “finding out what your community cares about is critical to shaping a more relevant role for your museum, historic site, or cultural organization.”⁸⁸ Matelic addresses how small museums can be very involved in community engagement efforts:

Small museums, historic sites, and cultural organizations are transforming to address what matters in their communities and becoming more relevant and sustainable organizations. Within the context of some broad paradigm shifts that are occurring in the field, the challenge remains for museums to address what communities deeply care about. One could argue that small museums have a unique opportunity to undergo this type of transformation because they can draw on their existing community connections to deepen their relationships, find new friends, and use the input from the community to articulate an inspiring vision and shape a more meaningful future of public service.⁸⁹

The call for museums to shift their role in the society to a more community minded institution is sponsored by many professional in the museum field. Robert R. Archibald, has stated that we “need to think differently about ourselves and encourage our communities to calculate competitive assets on a new scale of priority. Prosperity of one museum or cultural organization must not be the objective but rather we must

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 155.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 161.

consider the health of the whole group. Our value as community assets is not enhanced if my own institution prospers but the symphony fails.”⁹⁰ Jennifer Barrett, an Associate Professor at the University of Sydney, described in her book *Museums and the Public Sphere* that museums need to truly understand who the “public” is and what they desire out of the museum.⁹¹ Barrett stated that “communities are identified as a new audience, or alternatively as producers of culture with the potential to renew the role of museums.”⁹² These two professionals assert that the community’s wellbeing is what museums should be identifying in order to secure their new role in society.

A professional from the United Kingdom, Bernadette Lynch, is a researcher, consultant, and lecturer that writes about community collaboration and the roles that museums play in those collaborations.⁹³ Lynch described that in many situations when museums are involved in community collaborations the rushed decisions fall on the side of the museum and its agenda and strategic plan.⁹⁴ She warns the museum field of

⁹⁰ Robert R. Archibald, “Community Choices, Museum Concerns” in *Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Hugh H. Genoways (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), 270.

⁹¹ Jennifer Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 140.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹³ Janet Marstine, introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First-Century Museum*, ed. Janet Marstine (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2-3.

⁹⁴ Bernadette T. Lynch, “Collaboration, Contestation, and Creative Conflict: On the Efficacy of Museum/Community Partnerships,” in *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First-Century Museum*, ed. Janet Marstine (New York: Routledge, 2011), 146.

the power dynamics involved in collaboration. However, when there is partnership, there is the ability to address the difficult and urgent issues facing civil society.⁹⁵

There is much to gain, for, if museums assume the role of providing (or becoming) such participatory spheres, they may begin to discover their relevance at the heart of civil society. Furthermore, it is becoming clear that museums cannot learn to change without the help of their community partners.⁹⁶

Community engagement is detailed by the literature thus far as a meaningful effort that museums should strive to achieve. In the *Small Museum Toolkit, book 4: Reaching and Responding to the Audience*, Barbara B. Walden wrote a chapter titled “Like a Good Neighbor: Community Advocacy for Small Museums”. The chapter detailed multiple cases where museums have identified a need in the community that was a little outside their normal activities, yet the museums went forth and collaborated with a range of organizations to resolve a pressing need.⁹⁷ To figure out the needs of the community, Walden highlighted some specific ways such as having all the staff of the museum participate in other community associations and opening the doors of the museum to voters on Election Day.⁹⁸ The chapter warns that the museum must be

⁹⁵ Ibid., 159.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 159-160.

⁹⁷ Barbara Walden, “Like a Good Neighbor: Community Advocacy for Small Museums,” in *Small Museum Toolkit, book 4: Reaching and Responding to the Audience*, ed. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 75-90.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 81, 83.

genuine in its efforts to reach outside its walls and specifies that the secret to collaboration is being flexible and patient, even if it “involves a new interpretation of their mission.”⁹⁹ Walden concludes her chapter by stating that community engagement is about going the extra mile to listen and address the needs of the community.¹⁰⁰

This literature review has covered relevant areas of discourse surrounding the topic of community engagement in small museums. The review first covered the development of museum philosophy over the last century which the authors identified as being an evolving institution that has ever searched for better ways to serve the people who visit museums. Next was the definition of small museum, which is not wholly agreed upon, yet a general acceptance that a budget size of two-hundred fifty thousand dollars can be a working definition.¹⁰¹ The review of literature moved to the category of social capital and found that it can be a vehicle with which to explore community engagement. The literature described how social networks have value and museums can add to the health of a community by creating social connections with their community members and addressing the needs of their neighbors.

The last section of the literature review focused on the area of community engagement and how many in the museum field have identified community

⁹⁹ Ibid., 86.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 95.

¹⁰¹ Small Museums Committee, *Small Museums Survey Result*, American Association for State and Local History, 2007. <http://community.aaslh.org/small-museum-what-is-a-small-museum/>

engagement as a very important effort to pursue.¹⁰² The literature, relevant to this study about community engagement revolves around the idea of museums being more relevant to their communities by addressing the unique needs that make up the community. The authors of the literature indicate that museums should open up their museum to include the community in the decisions being made about what the museum does with its community. This literature review has covered the relevant areas to inform the research of community engagement in small museums.

¹⁰² Robert R. Archibald, Introduction to *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, (Washington DC: AAM, 2002), 5.

Chapter Three: Methods

Research goals and questions:

The research goal of this study is to identify and describe how small museums define and pursue community engagement. Four questions guided this research:

- How do small museums define community engagement for their own institution?
- How do small museum carry out their community engagement efforts?
- How and to what extent do small museums incorporate the needs of the community into their planning for both community engagement and institutional planning?
- What are the biggest challenges and benefits to community engagement?

Method

The methodology used to gather data for this study was semi-structured interviews. This methodology enabled the respondents to respond naturally and give as much detail as they could. The nature of this data is highly qualitative and very descriptive. The reason this methodology was chosen is that the nature of the data

received may not have been received in such a detailed fashion with another kind of methodology. Data about the way a small museums goes about community engagement was summarized and retrieved through a loosely structured interview process like a conversation.

Sample

The sample for this research was chosen by applying the following criteria in order to select the small museums and interview subjects:

- 1) An institution with an annual operating budget under \$250,000.
- 2) A staff under 10 employees or a very small physical location.
- 3) The museums chosen will also be within a 50 mile round trip travel time from the University of Washington campus.
- 4) The museums chosen will be history museums or historical societies for consistency.
- 5) The staff member to be interviewed should have adequate knowledge of all the ways the museum is pursuing community engagement, so the director of the museum is strongly preferred.
- 6) The museum must be involved in community engagement (such as using their facility as a meeting place for the rotary club, opening up the museum grounds for

a community group to use, or being a voting site). The involvement was be gauged by online presence and from professional recommendations. An example of their online presence is having one of their public programs advertised on their website.

7) The recommendations and online presence should overlap to give the sample size.

Along with the above criteria, there were time constraints and availability that factored into the sample selection process. The sample was applied the above criteria to narrow down the list of small museums, starting with the first and ending with professional recommendations to select the three small museums and the directors to be interviewed. Three professionals that work in the field of small museums were asked for their recommendations of who among their peers are the most successful in community engagement. There were three small museums that were on this researchers list that matched the professional recommendations. For this study, the museums selected to be interviewed will not be named for there is not a necessary benefit to naming the institutions. They will be referred to as Museum A, Museum B, and Museum C.

Data Collection

The data collection process took place on-site at the Museums A, B, and C, on the dates of May 15 and 16, 2014. The participants were invited to participate in this study

by the author of the research via email. During the semi-structured interview, the author of this research took notes as well as recording the interview using a Sony digital voice recorder. At the conclusion of the interview, the digital recordings were stored on a back-up thumb drive as well as the researcher's laptop. The data were destroyed at the end of this study.

The interviews took approximately 30-45 minutes and before they commenced, the directors of the museums were given a consent form. The consent form (see Appendix B, pg. 55) gave the interviewees the goal of the research and let them know that they were voluntary participants and could opt out of the interview at any time. The consent form also encouraged follow up questions or information and gave the contact information of the researcher as well as requiring a signature.

Data Analysis

All data recording, transcribing, coding and analysis were done by the author of this research. The notes from the interview and transcription were first coded by the questions in the interview. An emergent approach was used then to find the patterns and main themes in the data for each question and topic in the interview guide. In the results section, the data results were discussed in order of the questions on the guide.

Chapter 4: Data Presentation, Analysis, Results and Limitations

Results

This study investigated four research questions. How do small museums define community engagement for their own institution? How do small museum carry out their community engagement efforts? How and to what extent do small museums incorporate the needs of the community into their planning for both community engagement and institutional planning? What are the biggest challenges and benefits to community engagement? The research goal was to be able to identify and describe how small museums pursue community engagement.

The table below is an example of how the data was coded.

Code	Museum A	Museum B	Museum C
Question #1	(director response)	(director response)	(director response)
Partnering and Collaborating	<i>Pretty broadly, for us it is all the ways we engage our public, events we are asked to be apart of.</i>	<i>Mostly I think our community engagement efforts are done through partnering with other organizations.</i>	<i>A lot of what we do that could be defined as community engagement is collaborating with other organizations in the community.</i>

Question #1 : How do small museums define community engagement for their own institution?

1.1 Data presentation:

Museum A stated “well we define it rather broadly I guess,”¹⁰³ then continued “there are many ways that we engage our public.”¹⁰⁴ The director surmised that the definition of community engagement “for us it is all the ways we engage our public, events we are asked to be a part of.”¹⁰⁵ Another small museum director stated “Mostly I think our community engagement efforts are done through partnering with other organizations.”¹⁰⁶ The third director stated that “community engagement was about creating connections between people and institutions in the community that were mutually beneficial because it was a two way street.”¹⁰⁷ One comment from the director of Museum C replied to the question that “A lot of what we do that could be defined as community engagement is collaborating with other organizations in the community.”¹⁰⁸

1.2 Data Analysis:

The small museum directors who were interviewed defined community engagement in a range of ways, but one main theme rose to the forefront that all three

¹⁰³ Museum A, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum A, May 15, 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Museum A, interview.

¹⁰⁵ Museum A, interview.

¹⁰⁶ Museum B, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum B, May 16, 2014.

¹⁰⁷ Museum C, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum C, May 16, 2014.

¹⁰⁸ Museum C, interview.

identified as being a key component to community engagement. The main theme that emerged was having partners and collaborators in the community. The directors did not immediately have answer for the question. For two of the directors, it took a couple minutes of talking through what they that might be considered community engagement before they in turn came up with a definition for their institution.

1.3 Results and Discussion:

Small museums define community engagement through their partnerships and collaborations. The three museum directors that were interviewed for this research all indicated that being involved in their community was important if not necessary for their perspective museums. It is important to note that the museums interviewed all stated working with partners in their definition of the term community engagement. The director from Museum C believed that “it kind of defines itself; you go to where the community is and share with them.”¹⁰⁹ The museums also had to come up with their definitions, it was not something they already knew the precise definition. In the literature review of this study, author Steve Friesen is making the case for small museums and describes them as institutions that should embrace their uniqueness.¹¹⁰ As Friesen suggested, the directors whom were interviewed for this study did not turn

¹⁰⁹ Museum C, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum C, May 15, 2014.

¹¹⁰ Steven Friesen, “Making a Case for Small Museums” in *Small Museum Toolkit, book 1: Leadership, Mission, and Governance*, ed. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler (Lanham MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 55.

to some other definition of community engagement, but instead defined it in their own terms and how it pertained to their own small museum.

Question #2 : How do small museum carry out their community engagement efforts and how do they determine if their efforts were successful?

2.1 Data presentation:

The director of Museum A stated “Every summer we put on a summer market. It draws a very large crowd and gives us a huge presence in the community.”¹¹¹ The director stated “there is an undefinable buzz in the community from our public programs.”¹¹² The director also mentioned that “we receive numerous positive comments from community members.”¹¹³

The small museum director of Museum B stated that their museum enjoys collaborating with people who are really excited about a subject and “they provide the content and the museum is just a vehicle for them to deliver a program.”¹¹⁴ Museum B described more community engagement efforts such as “The walking tour was something the community wanted so we helped a volunteer out on their own program.”¹¹⁵ The director also commented on the successfulness of their efforts by

¹¹¹ Museum A, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum A, May 15, 2014.

¹¹² Museum A, interview.

¹¹³ Museum A, interview.

¹¹⁴ Museum B, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum B, May 16, 2014.

¹¹⁵ Museum B, interview.

stating “We count everything. We also pay a lot of attention to enthusiasm from community members.”¹¹⁶ This allowed Museum B to track how some of their community engagement efforts have doubled attendance over the last couple years.¹¹⁷

Museum C described their community engagement efforts as public programming out where the community resides.¹¹⁸ “We do a lot of public programming, you know going out to other organizations. A good example is the exhibits we put up in public spaces like shopping malls.”¹¹⁹ The director of Museum C stated “We get a lot of feedback while out in the community. We do take attendance but that is different from the feedback.”¹²⁰

Just getting their name out in the community was also considered by all the directors as having success in their community engagement efforts, creating a buzz is what one of the directors called it.¹²¹ They all said they paid attention to the comment, feedback, and enthusiasm from the community. One director mentioned that it was important for them to receive feedback from their partner organizations.¹²² The feedback that the museums receive from their community is valuable way of getting a “feeling” about whether their community efforts have been successful.

¹¹⁶ Museum B, interview.

¹¹⁷ Museum B, interview.

¹¹⁸ Museum C, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum C, May 16, 2014.

¹¹⁹ Museum C, interview.

¹²⁰ Museum C, interview.

¹²¹ Museum A, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum A, May 15, 2014.

¹²² Museum C, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum C, May 16, 2014.

2.2 Data Analysis:

The range of ways that the museums were engaged with community entities all merged into this idea of public programming. It took shape differently with all the interviewed museums, however, the pattern developed as the directors of the museums all described their efforts. The majority of what was talked about during this section of the interview was coded as public programming outside of the museum because the programs described all took place at a venue away from the museum.

The descriptions of the public programs varied from an outdoor market that thousands visit on the weekends to an exhibit put up in a shopping mall. While the type of program varied from museum to museum, there were definitely similarities across the three institutions that were interviewed. They all detailed public programs that took place outside of the museums grounds. The directors all mentioned the importance of listening to excited community members and then using the resources of the museum to carry out the interests of their collaborators.

The three museums all measured the success of their community engagement efforts in some way, however, all the directors also stated that not too much was done to measure success. The directors of the museums all expressed a keen interest in working on ways that they could measure the success of their programs. Despite not having any formal procedures to evaluate their community engagement, the directors

did say they counted attendants to their programs. They liked to have the numbers of the people that came to their programs so they could roughly gauge interest. All three directors talked about receiving feedback from their communities in one form or the other.

2.3 Results and Discussion:

Every single one of the programs mentioned were put on in conjunction with another institution or community member. The leading theme that emerged during the descriptions of the museum's community engagement efforts was that of public programming. Three sub-themes also emerged from the interviews when the directors of the small museums were describing their community engagement issues. The first sub-theme was to make sure the museums were "a vehicle" for their collaborators. Next sub-theme was making sure whatever is being done lines up with the unique needs of the community, which often means listening to the volunteers of the museum. The last sub-theme in this section was utilizing the archive of the museum to interact with those that want to use the resources of the museum. All these sub-themes were often used to describe the public programs which constituted the discussion about the museums description of their community engagement efforts.

As with the definition of community engagement, the three directors also demonstrated a common theme in the description of their pursuit of community

engagement. The main theme this research found was the majority of what was described was classified as public programming. The three museums all worked with partners and collaborators in the efforts described during the interviews. This demonstrates that the museums not only defined community engagement as working with others in their communities but actually put that definition into practice. The data showed that the directors stated their pursuit of specific community engagement endeavors were spurred by ideas from their communities.

Beyond their own efforts, Museums A, B, and C, all described efforts where they were the vehicle for another institution or person to carry out a project or program of their own. The museums, in these examples, were simply open to being involved with another community entity and allow them the use of the museums resources. This type of community connectivity and social capital building hearkens to the literature review where Putnam described that social capital is based on the *norm of specific reciprocity* where one entity is doing good for another without expecting anything in return, but with the belief that something good will come for them later.¹²³ Even though the small museum directors talked about being connected to the community, they did not mention that what they were doing for the community was completely devoid of something good for the museum.

¹²³ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 22.

The directors also indicated during this question of the interview, that it was important for them to be active outside the walls of the museum. This demonstrated more belief from the small museums that doing things with the community is important. While the museums were engaged with their communities, they all received feedback from those that attended and from those with whom they partnered. This was one of the ways that measured the success of their community engagement efforts. Though they all counted attendance at events and programs, the three museums did not have a way to measure the success of their efforts besides the number of people that showed up. They could only gauge their effectiveness by a “feeling” that came from the comments and feedback that they received from the community.

Question #3 : How and to what extent do small museums incorporate the needs of the community into their planning for both community engagement and institutional planning?

3.1 Data presentation:

Museum A held brainstorming sessions with key community members in order to determine needs that could be addresses.¹²⁴ “We often identify community needs by listening to community members. We invite key member of the community to

¹²⁴ Museum A, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum A, May 15, 2014.

brainstorming sessions.”¹²⁵ The director noted that “we do not have a ‘strategic plan’ but do have strategic planning committees, on which key members of the community are invited to be in.”¹²⁶

Museum B wanted to get a better handle on who was their community because it was “hard to know who is the average audience.”¹²⁷ This could be achieved through an audience assessment with “tightly honed information” instead of having to guess about who their audience is and what they want.¹²⁸ The director of Museum B stated that they “Pay attention to the needs of the community and try to plan to see if we can get it done.”¹²⁹ “One example of this was listening to a need that arose when the city canceled a summer program.”¹³⁰

Museum C determined many of their communities needs in a reactionary fashion when one of their board members or staff would be asked if the museum could do something.¹³¹ The director of Museums C explained that they tried to “Be aware of things going on in the community through our connections.”¹³² And “Often how we incorporate the needs of the community is reactionary because of how many other

¹²⁵ Museum A, interview.

¹²⁶ Museum A, interview.

¹²⁷ Museum B, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum B, May 16, 2014.

¹²⁸ Museum B, interview.

¹²⁹ Museum B, interview.

¹³⁰ Museum B, interview.

¹³¹ Museum C, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum C, May 16, 2014.

¹³² Museum C, interview.

people and organization want to work with us.”¹³³ The director stated that “We created a very program heavy five year strategic plan.”¹³⁴

3.2 Data Analysis:

The directors all mentioned that they try to figure out what are the communities' needs. They all stated that it was important to try and plan for those identified needs and try to incorporate as many of them into the museums planning as possible. They all tried to leverage their connections to find out what the community wanted. The three museums identified listening to volunteers, having the board use their connections to listen to the community, paying attention to partner organizations, and other organization in the community to find out the specific needs of their perspective communities. However, there was no consensus at all between the three museums on how to incorporate those needs into planning for the future. One museum had a five year program heavy strategic plan, the other no plan expect planning committees and the last museum did not have a refined way understanding the communities' needs.

3.3 Results and Discussion:

The directors of the small museums responded that they did not have a formal way of determining the needs of the community. They all did not have a set plan in place in order to tell what their community needed. The major theme that tied all of the

¹³³ Museum C, interview.

¹³⁴ Museum C, interview.

responses together was paying attention. Determining the need of their community rested on their ability to listen to what people in their community are saying is important. Small museums describe listening and paying attention as the primary way of identifying community needs

When the three museums in this research responded to the question about incorporating the communities' needs into their planning for the future, there emerged the same theme as determine the needs in the first place, paying attention. The museums did have slightly differing ways of incorporating the needs, but they all stated the importance of paying attention to community members and somehow include that voice into the decision making process for their specific museum. All three museums listened to the feedback they received and community voices and then tried to use that information to plan for the future community engagement efforts of the museum.

The museum all had a slightly different approach to this topic but the theme of listening and paying attention tied all their responses together. Whether Museum C was in a town hall meeting, Museum A was having a brainstorming session with the board and key community members, or Museum B was accessing city data about the average resident in the community, they all listened and paid attention to what people in their community were saying. All three museums mentioned paying attention to

community members and organizations like city council, rotary club and other such networks.

Incorporating the needs of the community was task that the museums did in varying forms. Museum A had specific committees that would incorporate the needs of the community in planning session, yet they had no long term strategic plan that took those identified needs into account. Museum B restated that they listened to the community as much as possible when trying to plan for the future but no set process in which to incorporate the needs of the community. Museum C had a strategic plan that was program heavy in order to become an indispensable community asset and the program committees made a lot of the decisions in which community needs they were going to address in the future. Overall, the three museums definitely pointed out how they listen to volunteers, partners, and general community; however, they did not have a formalized process of incorporating the identified needs of their communities into a game plan for community engagement.

Question #4 : What are the biggest challenges and benefits to community engagement?

4.1 Data presentation:

Museum A stated their biggest challenge was “There is no shortage of good ideas so we have to decide what resources can go to what events.”¹³⁵ The director stated that the greatest benefit of community engagement was that “We have a stronger connection to community members and increased exposure for the museum.”¹³⁶

Museum B voiced that their biggest challenge was “getting an accurate assessment of the communities’ needs.”¹³⁷ The director of Museum B stated that when they are addressing the communities needs then they have created the “opportunity for visitors to make the ‘my museum’ connection.”¹³⁸ This was identified as the greatest benefit to community engagement because it “allows the community to feel some ownership of the museum.”¹³⁹

Museum C identified “Our capacity is the biggest challenge, there is too much demand.”¹⁴⁰ And the director of the museum stated “There are hard times for some smaller institutions, community engagement keeps us current and relevant, plus it is

¹³⁵ Museum A, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum A, May 15, 2014.

¹³⁶ Museum A, interview.

¹³⁷ Museum B, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum B, May 16, 2014.

¹³⁸ Museum B, interview.

¹³⁹ Museum B, interview.

¹⁴⁰ Museum C, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum C, May 16, 2014.

very fulfilling.”¹⁴¹ The benefit of community engagement for Museum C was “staying current and relevant because we are so involved and connected.”¹⁴²

4.2 Data Analysis:

Museum A and C decidedly stated that choosing what to focus their resources was the biggest challenge. Museum B stated it was not always easy to identify what the real needs of their community was because it was difficult know really know who their community is. They all identified the lack of resources, so they had to choose between a plethora of good ideas and community needs of which they could dedicate their limited amount of resources. The responses for benefits mainly focused around being connected and relevant in their communities.

4.3 Results and Discussion:

The main theme that emerged from the benefits of community engagement was relevancy and the largest challenge was dealing with limited resources, so the choices of what community needs to address was tough. One sub-theme was the fact that small museums as a field might be struggling financially and struggling to stay relevant, so being involved in what the community wants instead of just what the museum wants to do might allow for the survival of more museums. Another benefit that was discussed was the idea that when the small museum goes out into the community to address that

¹⁴¹ Museum C, interview.

¹⁴² Museum C, interview.

community's needs, they become aware of what the museum has to offer inside the walls of the institution as well. When community engagement is successful in getting the name of the museum out, then it has the ability to broaden its audience.¹⁴³

The biggest challenge the three museums were almost identical. They all lacked the capacity which includes time, budget, and staff to address all the ideas they were receiving from their communities. The directors discussed with this researcher the tough choices that they had to make with their limited resources. It was their hardest challenge to pursuing community engagement efforts. In the context of this study, the small museums and their directors faced a problem that many small museums face. The small museums have issues regarding resources whether they are dealing with collections, fundraising, or community engagement. The museums in this study identified that it was an issue and want to do the best they can because they value what their community values. The directors stated that they wanted to make sure the best decisions were being made for the community.

The greatest benefit to community engagement was described as being relevant in the eyes of their community. When they made the right decisions and received a lot of really positive feedback, the three museums felt that they had done a great service to their constituents. The directors of the museums believed that those who made up the community could make the museum relevant by having the community think the

¹⁴³ Museum A, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum A, May 15, 2014.

museum was an indispensable institution. The museums did not expand greatly on the challenges or benefits to community engagement like they did on the programs that make up their efforts. This suggests that the museums are growing into community engagement more organically and not very structured with goals in mind.

Limitations

There were three main limitations to this study.

- Sample size was three museums, larger sample size might produce different results.
- All participants in the greater Seattle area, the study might not be generalizable to all small museums.
- Data was received from interviews from directors of the museums, an increase in methods may result in more robust data set. (An example of a more robust study would be including an analysis of the mission of each museum and see how that correlates with the decisions they make to address certain needs of the community.)

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The results from the data of this research demonstrate that small museums do have many things in common when discussing their pursuit of community engagement. The small museums take community engagement seriously because they describe it as being a way of being relevant to their community. “Small institutions are falling on hard times” one director stated and having the community value your institution as an indispensable asset will go a long way in ensuring future prosperity.¹⁴⁴

The small museums are paying attention and listening to their communities in order to better serve them. The museums have ways of gathering data on the needs of the community but they do not have a formal procedure to implement those needs into their planning for the future. Though the directors that were interviewed stressed the importance of listening to the community, they did not have a decent way of making sure those needs were analyzed and incorporated in to the museum.

Small museums can be very effective at being a vehicle for collaborators to carry out their ideas. The director from Museum B described a volunteer who was very excited about a topic and wanted to collaborate with the museum to carry it out. Museum B did not have the expertise or time to take the project on all by themselves, but they knew there was a community need for this idea so they decided to partner up. The museum ended up using some of its resources to enable this program to take shape

¹⁴⁴ Museum C, Director, semi-structured in-person interview by Lucas Sheetz, Museum C, May 16, 2014.

and helped this one volunteer as much as they could. The program was an immense success and all because Museum B was able to collaborate with their community in order to address an identified need.

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe how small museum define and pursue community engagement. The research suggests that small museums believe that community engagement revolves around collaborating and listening to their own communities. Small museums can stay relevant in their communities if they work with them to address the needs of community members. The research also indicates that small museums attack issues with different tools, but the pursuit of community engagement has the same goal, to be an integral asset to the community. A fully relevant small museum will identify needs of the community and strive to address those needs through programs, events, and activities. This research suggests that small museums want to be vibrant, exciting and involved, not stagnant and irrelevant; community engagement is one identified way to be a meaningful institution.

Recommendations:

- Further research that will develop strategies for successful community engagement in small museums.
- Small museum should set community engagement goals, even if it is just counting attendants, so they can start tracking their efforts.
- Small museums should embrace community engagement practices especially if they are struggling to stay relevant in their community.

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Appendix A

Collaborate and Listen: How Small Museums Define and Pursue Community Engagement

University of Washington
Museology Graduate Program

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I am asking you to participate in an interview that is part of my Master's Thesis work at the University of Washington. The purpose of this research is to identify and describe the range of ways small museums engage their communities. Your participation is voluntary, refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits, and you may discontinue participation at any time. You will not be personally identified in my thesis paper and all data collected will be only be seen by myself and my thesis committee. If you have any questions now or in the future, you may contact me through the numbers on the top of this form. Do you have any questions?

Signature

Date

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Collaborate and Listen: How Small Museums Define and Pursue Community Engagement

Lucas Sheetz

University of Washington

1) Introduction:

- a) Hello my name is Lucas Sheetz
- b) Thank them for their participation
- c) Go over Consent Form
- d) Go over the goal of my research
 - i) The goal of my thesis research is to identify and describe the range of ways small museums engage their communities.

2) First Topic: How does the museum define and carry out their community engagement efforts?

- a) Question 1: *How do you define community engagement?*
 - i) Allow the interviewee, as a museum professional, to describe what they believe community engagement means.

- b) Question 2: *Please describe the ways that the museum engages with its community.*
 - i) Do not lead the interviewee, use responses from question 1 to guide any follow up questions or clarification. (All the events, activities and efforts that the museum has done or is doing *with* the community, not just *for* the community)

- c) Question 3: *How do you know if the museum has been successful in its community engagement efforts?*
 - i) Have the interviewee describe their metrics of success. How they do or do not measure their success.

- 3) **Second Topic:** How does the museum incorporate the needs of the community into their planning process for both community engagement and institutional planning?
- a) Question 1: *What efforts do you take, if any, to determine the needs of the community?*

 - b) Question 2: *Could you please describe how the museum incorporates the needs of the community into its community engagement planning?*
 - i) If the answer is: “it does not incorporate the needs of the community into its planning” then ask what was or is the motivation for the previously discussed activities, events, or efforts

 - c) Question 3: *Could you please describe how the museum incorporates the needs of the community into its strategic planning?*
 - i) If the interviewee is uncertain or says they do not incorporate the needs of the community in its strategic planning, ask how they might have planned to do anything *with* the community.
- 4) **Third Topic:** What are the biggest challenges and benefits to community engagement?
- a) Question 1: *What are the challenges to being engaged with the community?*
 - i) Follow up the challenges with why it is difficult and any specific examples.

 - b) Question 3: *What are the benefits to community engagement?*

 - c) Question 2: *What questions have I not asked about community engagement that should be included in this conversation?*
- 5) **Conclusion**
- a) Thank them for their participation and let them know if they have anymore question to not hesitate to ask.