

MuseumsForward

Metropolitan Museum Arts and Heritage Outreach to Rural American Learning Environments

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Abstract

This article examines three case studies of museums with art and/or cultural heritage collections that have established and maintained outreach programs to learning environments in rural parts of the United States. This research attempts to investigate motivations for program creation, methods of operation, methods of engagement, content choices, program goals and objectives, along with barriers and opportunities uncovered through their approach. Data for this research was collected through interviews with participating museum staff who are involved in the operations or creation of the programs selected for the study. Interview data was supplemented through a short questionnaire and document analysis. The results of this study uncovered several patterns and similarities between the case studies, such as initial motivations, departmental oversight, program development strategies, program content themes, and recommendations for initial development and program perpetuation. This study also discovered variations between the case studies such as program structure, goals and objectives, accessibility strategies, approaches to funding, and visions for the future. Overall, this study identifies ways in which museums aspiring to connect with rural youth in their education environments can approach the creation of, or reimagining of, arts and/or cultural heritage outreach programs. It also identifies the challenges and opportunities for museums that do choose to take on this type of endeavor and what to consider in the process.

Keywords

Rural; Museum; Outreach; Arts; Culture

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Introduction

Museums as Trusted Sources of Information

In recent years, conversations on trusted sources of information have uncovered a deep mistrust in various sources of information by many Americans. Museums as sources of information have remained trustworthy to most Americans contrary to this recent trend. According to the American Alliance of Museums, Museums and Trust 2021 report, “the public continues to regard museums as highly trustworthy—ranking second only to friends and family” and significantly higher than government sources, news media, NGOs, social media, and corporations (AAM, 2021, para. 4). In an America riddled with mistrust, is it the museum’s responsibility to use their power of public trust to create interactive spaces for informal learning that reaches all Americans, and not just those who live in areas of concentrated resources such as cities.

Rural-Urban Social Divide

Bridging connections between often underserved rural youth and museums in more metropolitan regions has the potential to foster more than just improved educational environments for rural students. An additional incentive for museums that serve primarily urban youth to expand operations to include rural youth is the increased visibility of rural voices. Building and maintaining relationships through understanding the needs, perspectives, and potential contributions of rural Americans can broaden the tools and ideas available to metropolitan museum content considerations and practices. Additionally, developing communication pathways and networks with rural leaders in education, culture, and community spaces could result in program collaboration to provide urban youth with rural experiences and vice versa through the power of resource networking. Over time, this connection between an institution rooted in a metropolitan region with rural communities may assist in healing the social divide between urban and rural values, ideas, and sense of morality by demonstrating mutual respect and interdependence between the two. Research focused on examining the urban-rural social divide in the U.S. identified that rural Americans, “have seemingly been left behind, waiting to develop, prosper, and share in America’s economic bounty... [moving forward] rural and urban need to be treated as interdependent and

mutually dependent” (Litcher & Ziliak 2017, p. 6). Making informal learning opportunities more commonplace in rural communities through relationships and connections with urban-based museums may be a good place to start healing this social divide.

Urban-Rural Educational Disparities

Rural communities in the United States face significant disparities in educational opportunities outside of the classroom. The primary variables that create this disparity include lack of funding, staff, transportation, facilities, and programming (Fischer, 2019, pp. 1-2). These disparities of access and their causes extend to learning opportunities found in museums. Such challenges are difficult to address but need examination as, “a fifth of US children live in rural areas with limited access to the informal learning opportunities available to their metropolitan counterparts” (Mardis, 2013, p. 387). Most research surrounding informal learning in rural America revolves around science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education. A review on rural access to STEM-based informal learning cited that “distance to services and access to professional development in STEM fields create barriers that often prevent rurally located teachers and students from having equitable access to STEM learning opportunities” (Banilower et al. 2013; Goodpastor et al. 2012; Hartman et al., 2017, p. 33).

Similar barriers apply when discussing access to art and heritage programs (Mardis, 2013 pp. 400-403). A working paper focused on increasing access to arts education in rural areas found that barriers include: unfavorable economic climates, far distances between resources, small pools of teachers and administrators for recruitment with low retention, little or no funding for art-based education, governmental policies that create barriers in establishing arts opportunities, lack of supplemental data and analysis, limited examples of “creative economy initiatives” (Brown & Donovan, 2017, pp. 18-33). These barriers are complex and intertwined making art programming outreach challenging to implement. However, museums in metropolitan regions accumulate more resources than their rural counterparts. While there are over 35,000 museums spread across America, museums in rural counties face a significantly higher amount of challenges. A survey study by the National Endowment for the Arts found that rural cultural and arts establishments face issues more often than their urban counterparts such as access to broadband internet, availability of cellular service, issues of visitor access due to

infrastructure problems on roads and bridges, and barriers from environmental regulations. Rural museums face more challenges when it comes to funding as studies show that federal funding for museums is most often going to large museums in urban areas (Kaplan, 2016, para. 3-7). Studies also show that philanthropic and foundation-based donations are few and far between for rural museums (Cohen, 2013, para. 4). With an aggregation of challenges and little financial support, rural museums in America are struggling to maintain collections and programming. Therefore, it is currently the resourced urban museum's responsibility to invest time and interest in rural education to help alleviate or provide resources or advocacy for solutions to some of the barriers.

Impact of Art and Culture on Learning and Development

Art and cultural expression have been present since the beginning of human civilization and are often the first modes of learning we encounter (Sousa, 2019, para. 1-3). Human aptitude and interest in art and expression are physiological, our brains have in turn evolved to dedicate sections of the brain to use for artistic creation and interpretation (Zaidel, 2014, para. 1-4). Arts-based school subjects are often left in the background and undervalued by school district administrative bodies. This is caused by the growing emphasis placed on subjects included in standardized testing, pressuring administrative bodies to report high numbers of passing students (Greene et. al, 2014, para 2-5). High schools in the United States typically sustain some type of formal art education program such as visual and/or performing arts but this is not usually the case for elementary-age school programs. Art-based curriculums are increasingly cut out of elementary-age school programs as budgets tighten and emphasis on producing high standardized testing scores intensify (Sousa, 2019, para. 5). Contrary to the current educational trend, studies show that interacting with and learning about and through the arts help “develop essential thinking tools — pattern recognition and development; mental representations of what is observed or imagined; symbolic, allegorical and metaphorical representations; careful observation of the world; and abstraction from complexity” (Sousa, 2019, para. 8). Developing these cognitive functions is essential in empowering children to excel in other topics such as math and science. For example, learning about music from an early age creates the same “neural networks” needed to solve numerical and mathematical challenges (Sousa, 2019 para. 22). By broadening art-based learning opportunities such as those offered by some museums, schools are investing in a well-rounded education and creating

experiences that students can call upon to better understand core subjects such as math, science, and English language arts.

Building Empathy Through Informal Learning

Similar to art, experiences with historical heritage help solidify the existence of history and foster historical empathy (Bowen et al., 2014, para 11-12). A research study from 2014 “designed to measure what students learn from school tours of an art museum” found that children who were on these tours showed “significantly higher historical empathy and tolerance measures” after participation (Bowen et al., 2014, para. 5-17). Along with touring art museums, visits to history museums and historical heritage sites bridge connections between the past and the present. These experiences also often provide memorable and sensory experiences with the potential to result in strong responses about social topics and spark empathy for people with different life experiences (Bruijn & Geerte, 2017, p. 833). Providing students with exposure to various life experiences through informal learning opportunities can empower students to reflect on their own life experiences and can even foster a willingness to be open-minded about their futures and the lifestyles of others. For rural students attending school may be the only opportunity they have to build empathy from exposure to diverse ways of thinking and being. Since visiting an art museum exposes students to a diversity of ideas, peoples, places, and time periods (Bowen et al., 2014, para 18-26), greater access to and participation in these types of learning opportunities for rural youth are essential to the overall development of a well-rounded education.

Cultural heritage and arts programs (and museum experiences in general) typically allow children to explore new interests and talents, fostering curiosity; exploring these subjects helps build historical empathy and provides modes of self-expression and identity (Bowen et al., 2014, para 18-29). In a rural setting, these experiences can often be hard to come by simply due to the lack of resources and manpower needed to organize informal learning environments. This scarcity leaves children in rural regions without the same opportunities for self-expression, cultural exposure, and discovery as they might have received in an area of concentrated resources such as a city.

For most public-school children in the United States, especially low-income students, the primary source of art and heritage exposure takes place on field trips to museums and other cultural institutions such as theaters (Bowen et al., 2014, para 27-29). Public schools in the US are decreasing or eliminating field trips to places of cultural

significance because of limited access to financial resources and prioritization of what has been deemed essential subjects (Bowen et al., 2014, para 3-6). For rural public schools that have even fewer resources available and further distances to travel, cultural and historical exposure is even more challenging. This underscores the importance of museums in areas of concentrated resources in identifying and prioritizing pockets of rural students in their wider region who are experiencing little to no outside artistic or cultural exposure from experiences such as field trips.

STEM-Based Partnerships for Rural Access

Formal partnerships between museums and schools can be a viable solution in establishing pathways for students to experience informal learning. Currently, studies have been mostly limited to STEM learning with science museums in metropolitan regions participating in partnerships with rural communities and their formal education system. These studies show that in STEM-based museum-school, “successful partnerships can enhance and expand student learning, improve relationships between the museum, schools, teachers, and community, and can contribute to the success of the museum’s programs and mission” (Bobick and Hornby, 2013, p. 88). An ongoing study on the efficacy of a co-designed STEM learning ecosystem model for children in rural communities is exploring how a network of museums and other informal education settings can work together to bring more informal STEM education to rural children (Byrd et. al., 2021, para. 1-2). Studies also show that fostering partnerships to increase informal STEM learning in rural areas by collaborating with teachers and other members of the community is essential in breaking barriers frequent in rural regions such as mistrust of outsiders (Avery, 2013, p. 34). While some art and culture museums in metropolitan regions have similarly engaged with rural communities, comparable studies that examine the opportunities, challenges, and impacts of these partnerships have not been undertaken.

Adapting to the Global Pandemic

Understanding these issues becomes even more urgent and layered, given that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced a shift in the number of virtual and online museum experiences available for children to interact with. In contrast to previous experiences, this has resulted in an expansion of the audience to include children from further away

and in more rural settings (Kafalidis, 2021, para. 3). Virtual programming is becoming more essential and is a practical medium for audience expansion and engagement. However, it is also critical to explore how these institutions are expanding their programming to go beyond the virtual experience, for example through tactile supplemental learning activities in well-rounded programming that engages students in multiple ways (Kafalidis, 2021, para. 3). There are countless approaches to student engagement through museum programming but the underlying motivation, to educate or reach the student in some way, is the same. By exploring existing program-based relationships, a set of recommendations for other museums to establish their connections with youth in rural areas will be possible.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to explore the ways that art and culture museums in metropolitan regions work with public schools/education-based institutions in rural communities.

How are metropolitan art and culture museums initiating and sustaining a relationship with rural schools?

What types of learning opportunities are offered by metropolitan museums for rural schools?

What have the museums learned/ what are the impacts of these programs?

What challenges and opportunities have arisen for metropolitan museums because of these relationships?

Methodology

Sampling

The design of this study is based on three museum case studies that are in a metropolitan region of the United States, have art or culture-based collections, and have established a relationship with an education-based institution serving a rural population. Data collection was based on interviews conducted with museum staff members (s) who are currently running an essential part of the program. This qualitative data will identify similarities and differences in motivation, methods of engagement, and program impact and barriers. Interviews were supplemented with document analysis and a short questionnaire. Museums were identified by searching the internet for museum education or outreach programs that mention the term “rural” and are located in a city. A selection of the identified museums was contacted

via email addresses provided on their websites. The recruitment email introduced the research topic, purpose, reasoning behind study selection, expectations, and interview date ranges. A list of twelve museums was identified for case study selection. Seven museums were contacted in total, three were selected and available to participate.

Data Collection

The primary mode of data collection for this collective case study was a semi-structured 45–75-minute interview conducted through zoom. Questions were provided ahead of time and interviews were conducted between March 2 and March 11, 2022 and included verbal consent to participate and be recorded. Additional data included interviewee responses to a short survey that solicited factual details about the program itself, including evaluation reports. Additional information was culled from the museums’ websites and publicly available articles and reports.

Rural Outreach Programs- Study Site Information

Participating Museum (Acronym)	Idaho State Museum (ISM)	Missoula Art Museum (MSM)	North Dakota Museum of Art (NDMA)
Location (City, State)	Boise, Idaho	Missoula, Montana	Grand Forks, North Dakota
State Population (based on 2020 census)	1,839,106	1,084,225	779,094
City Population	235,684	73,489	59,166
Geographic Reach	Across the state- from Coeur d'Alene to Rexburg to Boise	70-mile radius surrounding Missoula County	Entire states of North Dakota

Program Type	History-based traveling trunks	Interactive art-based field trip to MAM	Traveling pop-up art exhibitions with associated lesson plans
Program Description (Sourced from questionnaire provided to interviewee before interviews)	“The Traveling Trunks Program at the Idaho State Museum provides an extension of the Museum and its programming across the state of Idaho, increasing access to objects, documents, photographs, and other primary sources.”	“The ARTreach summer program extends MAM’s Radical Welcome to open access for kids who might not be familiar with the museum. MAM invites you to bring your campers to the museum for a one-hour interactive tour on a summer afternoon. After the tour, we will provide a Project Box for you to take with you. The box will contain art supplies and step-by-step instructions for a hands-on artmaking experience you can lead yourself!”	“The Rural Arts Initiative, an educational outreach program, works to encourage and empower rural school students and their teachers to actively participate in learning through the arts. The Rural Art Initiative came about in direct response to feedback from educators and families working in rural areas. Major challenges such as inadequate funding for art education, few museums, and great distances have not allowed the visual arts to flourish in rural areas as much

			as other forms of art.”
Interviewee(s) Job Title	Education Specialists	Curator of Education	Director of Education

(Population data pulled from 2020 Census of the United States)

Data Analysis

All qualitative data were recorded through the Zoom interview and then the audio was imported to Otter A.I. (artificial intelligence) software. The transcription was then manually corrected by listening to the interview and comparing the rough transcription for an accurate analysis. A mixed coding method was then used to identify themes and trends within the data by sorting responses into categories within a rubric identified through keywords, phrases, and insights. Document analysis was utilized to provide further context not included within the interviews, especially concerning the interview question on evaluations to RQ3.

Limitations

Challenges and barriers seen throughout this research vary. The first major challenge was identifying institutions with the requirements for case study selection. It was difficult to identify museums that met all of the requirements for study selection as many programs that reached a rural audience did not do so through an educational institution. Many museums with rural arts and heritage outreach were already in a rural setting themselves. Like the literature available, many of the existing partnerships between museums and educational institutions are STEM-based. Another limitation to this research is the extreme diversity of rural culture, customs, and social issues in the US. Every rural region of the US faces specific challenges that make its community's circumstances unique. By chance, all of the museums selected for the case study are concentrated in a similar geographic region. These states include Idaho, Montana, and North Dakota, all of which feature similar geography and population density.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the primary cause for museums declining to participate in this research study. Challenges that faced these museums and their rural outreach program include staff turnover, changing needs of rural communities, and termination of rural outreach programs. The museums that did participate also

Results

detailed challenges caused by COVID -19 that were mitigated by adapting the programs virtually.

RQ 1: Initiating and Sustaining Programs

Different Motivations, Similar Goals

The consensus with each museum on their end goal was to increase geographical reach to further fulfill their mission and demonstrate to people and communities across the state that their resources are available and to provide learning opportunities. However, the catalyst or the impetus for originating these programs was different across all sites.

When speaking with the Education Specialists at the Idaho State Museum (ISM), it was revealed that their traveling trunks program started in the late 1950s to early 1960s well before the interviewees' employment. Based on their knowledge of the history of the program, the motivation to start the program was their association with the Idaho Historical Society which mandates that museums reach students across the State. An additional motivation for ISM was "to get the museum out into rural parts of the state and to get this history into more kid's hands" (E. Chivers & P. McCoy, personal communication, March 1, 2022). Since the inception of the program, the materials and content within the traveling trunks have changed over time with the current educational staff who were interviewed in this study having reimaged the latest edition of the program.

The Curator of Education at the Missoula Art Museum (MAM) explained that the ARTreach program was created as a result of conversations convened by the museum with community groups around the Missoula area to better understand how they could serve their communities. MAM learned that:

Community organizations were holding... camps for kids [and] providing arts and crafts as part of their curriculum. But we thought about how if we do the arts, and they take a field trip to the Missoula Art Museum during these camps, then we can reach a broad spectrum of kids throughout Missoula County, and even beyond (K. Grissom-Kiely, personal communication, March 8, 2022).

According to the Curator of Education, this approach allows them to “serve a lot of individuals from diverse backgrounds, but also kids that come from low-income families, as well” (K. Grissom-Kiely, personal communication, March 8, 2022). In this case, MAM’s strategy was to reach rural youth during their summer breaks while attending summer camps in school affiliate groups and community partners such as Boy’s and Girls Clubs.

The Director of Education described the Rural Arts Initiative at the North Dakota Museum of Art (NDMA) as connected with the Executive Director’s personal motivation to give back to rural parts of North Dakota in 2004 having grown up on a rural reservation. According to the Director of Education:

I think her experiences are growing up with limited exposure to [art],...being Director of the State Art Museum in North Dakota, she thought of home and wanted to give back to the vast rural population that is the state of North Dakota (M.B. Anderson, personal communication, March 10, 2022)

Since the program began in 2004, it has shifted in size and reach but the goal to supply rural communities and provide schools the opportunity to tour these art exhibits has remained the same.

Program Development and Operations

One constant between all three study sites are the ways programs are run and overseen by the education departments, two of which were originally developed by members of the educational department. At the NDMA, the Executive Director was the initial project developer but handed off the project to the education department. Similar to many museum programs, a collaboration between multiple departments is essential in the development and operations of the programs even if all the programs are spearheaded by members of the education team.

At two of the programs, there have been changes since inception that are connected to challenges the organizations faced, specifically funding and transportation. The Education Specialists at ISM described a clear distinction between the original traveling trunks program and the reimagined version that has been in operation within the last five years. The only constant between the previous version and the current version of the program appears to be motivated to fulfill the mission and mandate and the format of the program involves traveling trunks. According to the Education Specialists, it took approximately two and

half years from halting operations on the old version of the program to inaugurating the reimagined version because of staffing issues. The halt resulted in an inability to manage the grant but was resolved when a position was created to primarily oversee the operations, organization, and continued development of the program. As a result, the education staff was able to focus their attention once again on other projects and programs while still providing some supplemental support to the trunk program and budget management.

For the Missoula Art Museum, developing the ARTreach program took approximately “six months to a year”. Their main challenge and barrier when developing the program were program awareness and recruitment. Like ISM, the program format was established before receiving grant funding for the program operations. Based on the Educational Directors' recollection, there were not many challenges when it came to developing the program and once community organizations such as Boy's and Girl's club “sign[ed] on and realize[d] that this would be very advantageous to their camp program, once we got that buy-in, it was smooth sailing” (K. Grissom-Kiely, personal communication, March 8, 2022).

Similar to MAM, the biggest challenge in program development faced at the North Dakota Museum of Arts was community buy-in and location recruitment for the Rural Arts Initiative. According to the Director of Education, his predecessor would “drive to the schools in the area, let them know what's going on and...it was a lot of legwork, but it wasn't that difficult to establish that program right away” (M.B. Anderson, personal communication, March 10, 2022). The program was such a success that “the biggest challenge is trying to deal with potential growth”. The solution to this challenge, like at ISM, was to establish a position within the education department that primarily focuses on running the Rural Arts Initiative. Funding has not been an issue for NDMA either, as the executive director managed to source a grant from a state legislator who has been funding the program since its inception. Staffing issues over the years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic have been the main challenge for NDMA when it comes to the operation and development of the program. When the position dedicated to running Rural Arts Initiative operations was furloughed in 2020, the museum was forced to reduce the scope of the program to compensate for a lack of staffing.

RQ2: Learning Opportunities Through Relationships

Common Regional Focus, Differing Tactics

While the overarching goal for each program is education, each program has its educational objectives and goals such as matching content to state curriculum requirements or resource exposure. When it comes to content determination a theme of local and regional topics and relatable content appears to be a constant theme across the case studies. Another constant is the involvement of community stakeholders during the initial development of the programs.

At the ISM, the program development team uses the traveling trunks program as an “extension of the museum experience” (E. Chivers & P. McCoy, personal communication, March 1, 2022) by correlating it to an exhibition within the museum. According to one of the Education Specialists:

These trunks are great access points for people in classrooms who may never come to the museum or have the chance to come to the museum. So although we call them traveling trunks, we prefer the term Museum in a box...facilitating hands-on learning, hands-on connections, artifacts, and each lesson, each trunk, we can include a lesson plan that we call artifact investigations (E. Chivers & P. McCoy, personal communication, March 1, 2022).

Since most of the trunks are requested by schools, the education team also made “sure that [they] were aligning with Idaho State Standards” making it easier for teachers to blend the trunks into their lesson plans. One of the ways ISM involves stakeholders in the planning phase is by asking teachers from various schools, some rural and some urban, to review the boxes and provide feedback.

Since MAM’s ARTreach program takes place within the museum, the only preparation needed for the program is lesson planning around the exhibit that is up for the summer. The primary objective of the program is to show kids who participate that “the museum is welcoming to everyone, free of charge and everyone in the public is allowed to come into the museum and enjoy engaging with the contemporary artworks” (K. Grissom-Kiely, personal communication, March 8, 2022). When developing the interpretive strategy lesson plan the education department at MAM:

Tries to focus on one exhibition that... we can find a theme that might be relatable to this audience, and this group of kids so that we can make a kind of a fluid discussion happen, and so that is something that they can access a little bit easier (K. Grissom-Kiely, personal communication, March 8, 2022).

Before launching the program, MAM uses a broad list of organizations expected to participate in ARTreach, and “ask them a series of questions about what they're looking for and how this might serve their population best and things [to] incorporate, or not incorporate” (K. Grissom-Kiely, personal communication, March 8, 2022).

At the NDMA the “primary goal of the program is to reach as many schools as possible under the umbrella of arts education” (M.B. Anderson, personal communication, March 10, 2022). While the executive director curated the exhibits that travel within the program, it is the education department’s responsibility to develop the lesson plans and content. The process of lesson planning and creation flows in the following order:

[We] work with relevant themes, to our population, and we develop that show. [Next] that show typically opens in the museum first and after it opens in the museum, then we pare it down, create lesson plans, and then travel it throughout the state [in the Rural Arts Initiative] (M.B. Anderson, personal communication, March 10, 2022).

Representation and Cultural Exposure

Both ISM and MAM expressed the goal or desire to include diverse perspectives and topics within their programming to achieve representation that reflects the diversity of the youth who participate in the programs. At ISM, a broad range of historical perspectives are included within the content of their trunks. Currently, the Education Specialists are working on the creation of a trunk that covers Hispanic history and heritage within Idaho State. The motivation behind the development of this new trunk and future trunks is:

to make sure we were representing the diversity of Idaho, making sure that we're representing a diverse history and diverse narratives. And so that goes into our decision-making when thinking about what themes

to choose for trunks (E. Chivers & P. McCoy, personal communication, March 1, 2022)

At MAM, they make it a point to represent Contemporary American Indian artists to represent the American Indian cultures within North Dakota. These artworks are featured in the interactive tour and lesson that is part of ARTreach. The curator of art at MAM explained during their interview:

We always have contemporary American Indian artists that we're featuring on display, whether it's a group show, or solo shows, in our contemporary American Indian art gallery, or another gallery. I think that's important too because people come here, maybe their urban Indian, or their indigenous, they live on the reservation. They come here and they see artists and artwork reflected that they can identify with because this is from their community or another, it's an American Indian artist that they can identify with, and so they're seeing [the art], they're relating to it differently and they're seeing [that they can become] an artist themselves (K. Grissom-Kiely, personal communication, March 8, 2022)

While no specific reference was made to representation reflective of state population diversity by the Director of Education, the founder, and executive director who curated the exhibitions until her recent retirement in March 2022 dedicated her life to bringing art from all over the world (including North Dakota) with relevant and relatable themes to as many people as possible. During the case study interview, the Director of Education explained that the exhibitions are curated to, "bring arts, arts education, and exposure [from] different cultures and different ways of thinking into the rural populations" (M.B. Anderson, personal communication, March 10, 2022).

RQ 3: Lessons Learned and Program Impacts

Iteration through Evaluation

The consistent answer provided by each museum on the topic of evaluations is that a survey was developed and sent to the teachers or counselors that participated in the program. For each museum, the survey results demonstrated an overwhelmingly positive response to the programs with some minor recommendations for the future. With

ISM's traveling trunks, the teacher's feedback shows they are happy with the curriculum of the trunk and find that the consumable materials for hands-on learning experiences were popular among the students. They also praised the museum for providing the trunks for free. The constructive feedback for ISM relates to the grade-level appropriateness of all the materials included within the trunk. For example, one of the educational specialists stated:

When a high school teacher fills out the survey, they strongly disagree that the books are appropriate [for the] age level because there are elementary level books so things like that when you're making a trunk that's used by such a wide range of grades, some of the things may or may not be helpful to the teachers (E. Chivers & P. McCoy, personal communication, March 1, 2022).

Similar to ISM, MAM received a lot of positive feedback in their survey results. The only constructive feedback identified was that some of the kids had participated in the activities and tours at a prior visit. Another way the museum is tracking the success of its ARTreach program is through the friends and family passes that return to the museum. After participating in the ARTreach program, the students are given a "Friends and Family Pass" encouraging these children to return to the museum with their loved ones. Although MAM has free admission, the Curator of Education believes based on her experience that students "bring their passes back and...they feel like they can tour their friends and families around because they just got to tour themselves and they feel empowered"(K. Grissom-Kiely, personal communication, March 8, 2022).

Feedback from NDMA's survey on the Rural Art Initiative shows overwhelming positive feedback in similar areas to ISM and MAM, such as positive responses to the content and programming and economic accessibility of the program. One aspect of the program that has changed over time based on feedback is the amount of time the exhibits stay in a community. Exhibits in the Rural Arts Initiative used to run for two weeks at each location, but this proved to be a challenging time window to plan field trips. They then changed the exhibit time to six weeks which did not see as much of a return on visitor increase as they hoped. Now, based on trial and error and feedback, each exhibit stays in a location for four weeks.

RQ 4: Challenges and Opportunities

Access to Programs

The most persistent challenge for each museum in working with rural regions was transportation. For ISM transporting the trunks by mail to the schools in rural places that request them costs \$45 on average to ship each box. ISM has resolved this challenge by securing funding to support the program costs. For MAM, transporting groups of campers from rural regions is a challenge. MAM works with these groups to find solutions but cannot offer financial support for transportation at this time. The transportation challenges facing NDMA are distances between the museum and the exhibit sites and bussing students from their school to the exhibit spaces. The NDMA meets this challenge by offering financial reimbursements to schools that cannot afford transportation.

Resource Exposure

Both ISM and MAM have identified that the greatest opportunity presented while working with rural youth is museum resource exposure. Word of mouth by teachers in rural schools where museum marketing for advertising may be less likely to reach has been a great opportunity for program growth for ISM. Similarly, MAM has noticed that ARTreach is often some people's first interaction with MAM and will then seek out other programs the museum has to offer. The Curator of Education explained:

People are returning, people are seeking out other programs that we have to offer, and we're building relationships...camp counselors, for instance, one of them participated in the program with a group of students down here, and then also teaches in the school system, so is then able to connect with our fifth-grade art experience and get the teachers to sign on with the fifth-grade art experience that's during the academic year (K. Grissom-Kiely, personal communication, March 8, 2022).

Channels of Communication

Communication between the museum and the organizing participants was identified as the solution to challenges other than transportation. A

challenge facing ISM is understanding what technology is available in rural schools, which at times can be sparse due to a lack of resources. This challenge is overcome by communicating with teachers, paying attention to feedback, and adjusting based on the technology available in rural schools. At the NDMA, the logistics of planning a school's participation in the program can be challenging. Maintaining communication with enthusiastic school administrators before, during, and after an exhibition opens is what keeps teachers returning and inquiring about the program. Active communication between the museum and the participants helps the program run smoothly and allows the Rural Art Initiative team to plan, provide lesson plans sooner, and increase program efficiency.

Evolving Programs

Both ISM's traveling trunks and NDMA's Rural Arts Initiative have seen many changes over their years of operation. The traveling trunks at ISM have been reimagined from outdated one-sided historical perspectives and cassette tapes to an interactive multi-perspective experience that can cover difficult historical and societal topics. In the future, ISM hopes to expand the reach of schools and students through the trunk program and increase the variety of topics and subjects available through the trunks. At some point, the educational team would like to establish fulfillment hubs throughout the state to lower shipping costs and time and provide additional storage to meet the increasing demand for the trunks.

At MAM, they are hoping to continue expanding the program's reach and providing cultural exposure experiences about contemporary art that kids in rural regions may not have otherwise received. The curator of art explained they are proud to be able to represent American Indian art and artists through the program as well and want to continue that trend as they have been able to understand the positive impact of representation through experiences and feedback from the ARTreach program.

The Rural Arts Initiative has seen the most dramatic changes over the years. Growing from a couple of schools to reaching thousands of students across multiple states, to downsizing the program to stay within North Dakota, the Rural Arts Initiative has continued to adapt to changes and challenges. Two constants for the program that are set to change soon are; consistent funding by the state and leadership by the executive director of NDMA. The legislator who has been allocating state funding for the program may soon leave

the office with little guarantee that the funding will continue with their predecessor. The executive director and founder of the museum retired in March 2022 leaving the curation and leadership of the program up to her predecessor. The Director of Education is confident that regardless of funding the Rural Arts Initiative will continue even if that means downsizing the scope and reach of the program once again to rebuild.

Building and Maintaining Relationships

Each representative stressed how important building and maintaining relationships with educators from rural regions is. The Education Specialists at ISM advise that museums develop committees for educators to join and have a seat at the table to provide ideas, advice, and feedback to the education teams. This way the museum is providing resources tailored to the needs of the target communities. Two of the museums also advise that museum staff reach out to educators in rural communities and share how the museum is a resource for them. By opening these channels of communication, museums better understand what can be provided and how they can best fulfill the needs of rural communities. Many of the representatives interviewed explained it takes time and continuous effort to maintain contacts and relationships with various partners and communities, especially ones outside of the museum's immediate geographical region.

Discussion

Discussion

By identifying ways in which museums in metropolitan regions are developing relationships with learning institutions in rural regions, a set of suggestions and recommendations on how to connect with a rural learning institution in their region is possible. Identifying challenges provides other museums with examples of where they may consider allocating resources and time, potentially creating more efficacious programming. Based on the results from this study, motivations for a metropolitan museum to set up informal learning opportunities in the art and cultural heritage sector varies from mission-based awareness to state mandate requirements. These programs are often operated and sustained by a museum's education department with cross collaborations from other departments as well. Museum professionals with experience running these programs see value in understanding what rural communities need by asking rural educators and leaders for

feedback and suggestions. Similar findings on the importance of collaboration with rural educators were uncovered in research on STEM-based partnerships for increased rural access (Avery, 2013, p. 34). Program content often includes societal, historical, or cultural topics reflective of their region with an emphasis on cultural representation reflective of the population. Economic access to programming is essential to running a successful rural outreach program by securing government or independent grants to sustain the program costs. Understanding that rurally located arts and cultural organizations are less likely to be awarded federal or independent grants (Brown & Donovan, 2017, pp. 27-30), it is clear that museums in areas of concentrated financial opportunity must consider their responsibility to disperse their financial privilege by investing in rural programming.

All of the museums that participated in this study found that hiring an additional staff member who can focus most of their energy on the program operations is the most sustainable way to operate a rural outreach program. This is a luxury that most rural museums do not have as it is understood from the literature that rural arts and cultural-based organizations are often underfunded and understaffed (Fischer, 2019, pp. 1-2). This demonstrates further that resource disbursement by metropolitan museums to rural education settings is an important starting point in the investment in increasing informal arts and culture-based education. The most consistent obstacle uncovered for every site in this study is the distance between resources and transportation.

Based on other literature focused on increasing informal STEM education in rural educational environments, the distance between resources is an inherent challenge for all rural settings (Banilower et al. 2013; Goodpastor et al. 2012; Hartman et al., 2017, pp. 34-35). Flexibility and adaptation to changing needs, circumstances, and external barriers are also essential in running a long-term successful rural outreach program. As similarly founded in studies relating to partnerships that increase informal STEM-based learning in rural education settings (Avery, 2013, p. 34), open communication and collaboration are the most valuable asset a museum has when running a rural outreach program. The relationships built over time with individuals in rural regions through open channels of communication between metropolitan museums and the rural communities they serve is the best way to solve the challenges and barriers that present themselves in this endeavor.

Implications

Implications

Prior to this work, there was an absence of formal research literature surrounding the motivations and operational strategies by American metropolitan museums to establish arts and cultural heritage outreach to rural youth. Literature on the topic of rural youth informal education opportunities primarily focus on STEM-based learning or presents the challenges facing rural museums, rural schools, and rural communities. Now a small set of recommendations is available for museums seeking to build or grow a rural outreach program in various formats. There are limitations to this study such as variations between the needs, customs, and issues facing other rural geographical regions of the United States such as the Southwest and Southeast. Study site selection methods through Google searches present a limitation as well as there may exist museums with programs that demonstrate qualifying characteristics but do not have an online presence or available information via a museum website.

Based on the responses from each museum on survey and evaluation results, it is crucial to focus on economic accessibility, providing content that is accessible to different types of learners (i.e., hands-on learning, books, visuals, etc.), and writing content that is accessible to the target age and audience that is free of overly complicated or specific jargon terms. Aligning the format with community needs, resources and institutional goals will ensure long-term sustainability. Whether sending the museum materials to the classroom, setting up spaces for accessible art, or finding ways to bring rural youth to the museum, funding, open communication, nourishing and sustaining relationships, and consistent dedication to meeting the evolving needs of a rural community is essential based on the findings of this study.

Future research is needed in this area to grasp a better understanding of how museums can meet the needs of rural communities in various impactful ways. Partnerships between rural and urban museums are a topic that should be explored. Understanding where museums are managing to share resources and create a network of opportunity between urban and rural museums could demonstrate how rural-urban partnerships can be used to create more equity in informal learning. The impact of increasing informal arts and heritage-based learning opportunities for rural youth is another area of study that could be useful for the museum field. Data on how these programs impact the rural youth they serve can be used by museum professionals to secure more grants to expand, start, and/or maintain programs serving rural youth. Understanding the urban-rural relationship and partnership through a museum outreach lens is an

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area that can be explored from many angles. This research, while small in scope, adds to the limited research that is currently available but leaves with the hope that the conversation on informal learning for rural youth will grow stronger and compel more museums to invest in and listen to the needs of our rural communities, without which our urban sectors could not exist and vice versa.

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