

HISTORICAL MUSEUM AT FORT MISSOULA

Educational Policy

In May 1991, the Board of Directors of the American Association of Museums issued "Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums," as a policy statement. The Historical Museum at Fort Missoula adopts this document as its guidelines for this educational policy, and the following is excerpted extensively from that document.

The report was based on three key ideas:

1. The commitment to education as central to museum's public service must be clearly expressed in every museum's mission and pivotal to every museum's activities.
2. Museums must become more inclusive places that welcome diverse audiences, but first they should reflect our society's pluralism in every aspect of their operations and programs.
3. Dynamic, forceful leadership from individuals, institutions, and organizations within and outside in the museum community is the key to fulfilling museums' potential for public service in the coming century.

This policy of the American Association of Museums speaks to a new definition of museums as institutions of public service and education, a term that includes exploration, study, observation, critical thinking, contemplation, and dialogue. Museums perform their most fruitful public service by providing an educational experience in the broadest sense: by fostering the ability to live productively in a pluralistic society and to contribute to the resolution of the challenges we face as global citizens.

To this end, "Excellence and Equity" presents a plan for action that centers on the following ten principles with accompanying recommendations:

1. Mission - Assert that museums place education, in the broadest sense of the word, at the center of their public service role.
 - a. Ensure that the museum's mission statement expresses a primary commitment to education and public service for diverse audiences.
 - b. Ensure that the museum's strategic plan acknowledges the institution-wide nature of public service and states clear goals and objectives for expanding and improving the museum's public dimension.
 - c. Ensure that all staff members and volunteers understand the implications of their decisions and actions for the educational and public service dimension of the museum's work.
 - d. Place new emphasis on public information and public awareness programs to promote an expanded public dimension for the museum.
 - e. Allocate sufficient resources to ensure that the museum's commitment to education and public service is carried out.
2. Audience - Reflect the diversity of our society by establishing and maintaining the broadest possible public dimension for the museum.
 - a. Require that trustees and staff achieve an active understanding of the political, social, economic, and demographic characteristics of the museum's current and potential communities.
 - b. Conduct audience research to determine who does and does not visit the museum for the purpose of expanding the museum's service to its public.
 - c. Identify audiences with special needs, develop ongoing working relationships with them, and make the museum's programs, exhibitions, services, and information more accessible to them.
 - d. Identify specific segments of the community that the museum would like to serve more fully, develop working relationships with them, and initiate programs to involve them in substantive ways.
 - e. Assemble staff and volunteers with the knowledge and skills necessary to fulfill these mandates.

3. Learning - Understand, develop, expand, and use the learning opportunities that museums offer their audiences, as places of informal, self-directed learning.

a. Develop and expand audience research methods that will test and document how people learn in the museum environment. Apply the findings to exhibition and program development.

b. Develop educational experiences for schoolchildren, families, and adults that reflect a knowledge of the different learning styles visitors bring to museums.

c. Experiment with exhibition and program strategies and innovative technologies to enhance the capacity of museums to reach a wider audience through exhibitions and programs.

d. Assess the effectiveness of exhibitions and programs in an ongoing evaluation process that encourages revision and experimentation to improve the visitor's experience of learning from objects and exhibits.

e. Utilize the growing potential for extending the educational role of museums beyond their walls through electronic media, and conduct systematic studies to assess the effectiveness of these resources.

f. Establish "learning laboratories" in selected museums for research, experimentation, and dissemination of information about exhibition and program development, implementation, and evaluation as well as about the special nature of museum learning and museum audiences.

4. Scholarship - Enrich our knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of our collections and of the variety of cultures and ideas they represent and evoke.

a. Apply rigorous standards of scholarship to the development and presentation of exhibitions and programs.

b. Make information about collections more accessible to academic and nontraditional scholars, museum professionals, and the public.

c. Increase opportunities for research in relevant academic disciplines by both curatorial and program staff.

d. Initiate scholarly research in conjunction with colleges and universities and with other museums.

e. Develop and refine scholarly methods and techniques that permit sophisticated analysis of the context of objects.

f. Explain the important role of research in museums to the public through exhibitions, programs, publications, and electronic media.

5. Interpretation - Assure that the interpretive process manifests a variety in cultural and intellectual perspectives and reflects an appreciation for the diversity of museums' public.

a. Involve representatives of various communities and diverse cultural groups in the research and documentation process relative to their cultural experience in order to broaden the range of perspectives and deepen the understanding of museums' holdings.

b. Enrich the intellectual debate in the earliest stages of exhibition and program development by supporting staff research and encouraging the introduction of new ideas and new approaches.

c. Introduce visitors to differing perspectives by including statements by those who have developed the exhibition and by making full use of interpretive programs, exhibit labels, publications, and electronic media.

d. Expand the scope of interpretation to assure that the products of research are accessible and understandable to visitors with a range of expertise.

6. Collaboration - Engage in active, ongoing collaborative efforts with a wide spectrum of organizations and individuals who can contribute to the expansion of the museum's public dimension.

a. Develop collaborative efforts with individuals, organizations, corporations, and other museums that extend the museum's public dimension and enhance its ability to fulfill its educational mission.

b. Recognize museums' responsibility to share in the education of children by strengthening services for pre-service and in-service classroom teachers.

c. Develop undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education courses for teachers that help them understand the value of learning with objects and in the museum environment.

d. Strengthen relationships with administrators, school boards, and other educators to develop better museum-school partnerships beginning at the state and local policy-making levels.

e. Encourage museum staff to represent the museum in community activities.

7. Decision Making - Assess the decision-making processes in museums and develop new models that enable an

expanded public dimension and a renewed commitment to excellence.

a. Establish decision-making structures for the development of exhibitions and programs involving formal interaction among staff who are knowledgeable about content, audience needs and interests, and the ways people perceive and process information.

b. Experiment with museum organizational structures that accommodate broad staff participation in decision making, and document and publicize effective models of these structures.

c. Ensure that decision making about exhibitions and interpretive programs involves all staff members who administer programs related to the museum's public service.

d. Involve community advisory groups in decision making about ways the museum can serve the public in different aspects of its programs and operations.

e. Develop ways for volunteers to contribute their knowledge and experiences to improve the museum's service to the public.

8. Boards, Staff, and Volunteers - Achieve diversity among trustees, staff, and volunteers to assure a breadth of perspective throughout the museum.

a. Recruit trustees who are representative of and involved in all segments of the museum's community.

b. Recruit and hire staff to reflect diversity at all levels in the museum.

c. Recruit a volunteer corps that is representative of the museum's entire community.

d. Establish paid internships and scholarships for young professionals designed to increase the cultural diversity of the museum work force.

e. Provide professional development opportunities to ensure the retention and promotion of the staff that is recruited and to support staff in expanding their own professional knowledge and expertise.

9. Professional Development - Provide professional development and training for new and established professionals, trustees, and volunteers that meets the needs of the museum profession so that museums may carry out their responsibility to their diverse public.

a. Ensure that the principles of this report are reflected in the missions, policies, management practices, and curriculums of all professional development and training programs.

b. Initiate and identify model training programs that focus on the public dimension of museums and make these programs known in the museum field.

c. Expand recruiting efforts by creating opportunities for professional development and training programs in order to enhance diversity in the staffs of museums.

d. Provide programs for all staff that raise awareness of the value of cultural diversity and inspire the development of a truly diverse museum.

e. Require that volunteers who carry out educational services perform at a professional level.

f. Develop active collaborative efforts among museums, professional associations, and universities aimed at expanding the content of training and professional development to include the public dimension of museums.

g. Expand the content and availability of training opportunities for both experienced and beginning museum trustees, staff, and volunteers.

h. Provide on-the-job training, sabbaticals, flexible work schedules, and other avenues for the professional growth and development of museum staff.

10. Leadership - Commit leadership and financial resources - in individual museums, professional organizations, and training organizations and universities - to strengthen the public dimension of museums.

a. State the museum's primary commitment to its public responsibility in the financial priorities included in the institution's strategic plan and budget.

b. Hold museums accountable for their public responsibility in statements of professional ethics and standards, accreditation criteria, and museum assessment program guidelines.

c. Diversify sources of long-term support, such as endowments and earned income, for the museum's public dimension.

d. Increase support from foundations, corporations, and government agencies for the goals expressed in this report.

e. Use the media to promote awareness of the museum's commitment to public service.

- f. form resource-sharing partnerships with community organizations that advance the museum's educational mission.
- g. Be aggressive in pursuit of financial support traditionally designated for formal educational institutions.
- h. Identify and commit resources to provide the leadership to implement the recommendations of this report.
- i. Encourage museums of all types and sizes to work together to implement these recommendations by sharing staff, programs, ideas, and resources at local, state, regional, and national levels.

Philosophy:

History is the foundation of culture and, as historians, we must be guided in our duty to humanity by Cicero's admonition, that "to know nothing of what happened before you were born is to remain forever a child."

Education at historical museums is labeled "interpretation," because the mission of any museum includes the interpretation of its artifacts to the public as one of its primary goals. Museums have an advantage over other, more formal institutions of learning since they offer real objects - tangible examples of ideas, processes, natural environments and history - to be seen and experienced. The educational mission of any museum is of vital importance, not only from a museum perspective, but from the broader perspective of the value of history for humanity.

"Interpretation is both a program and an activity. The program establishes a set of objectives for the things we want our visitors to understand, the activity has to do with the skills and techniques by which that understanding is created." (Alderson and Low, Interpretation of Historic Sites)

The American Association of Museums has defined interpretation as "a planned effort to create for the visitor an understanding of the history and significance of events, people, and objects with which the site is associated." Freeman J. Tildon, author of Interpreting Our Heritage, talks about interpretation as "an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information."

Both the planned effort, on one hand, and the activity, on the other are necessary for true interpretation to take place - both the program and the process.

HMFM Strategic Plan

From 201-2004 the Museum went through a series of Museum Assessment and Strategic Planning Processes that identified certain priority needs. One of those needs was Programming/Education, and a committee of staff, Trustees, Friends Board members and volunteers was established.

Programming Committee

Mission: *To assist in bringing aspects of Missoula history to the community and to the student through many and varied pathways.*

Statement of Purpose: *To make these aspects applicable, innovative, fun, exciting, interactive, inspiring, and educational. To teach our history through the most creative methods available: educational history trunks, traveling programs and exhibits, old-fashioned skills workshops, and living history lectures. To involve the community as an audience or as a volunteer.*

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