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# Accommodating Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Museums

William S. Tyler  
wtyler3181@gmail.com

### **Advisor**

Cynthia A. Conides, Ph.D., Associate Professor of History and Museum Studies

### **First Reader**

Cynthia A. Conides, Ph.D., Associate Professor of History and Museum Studies

### **Second Reader**

Jill Gradwell, Ph.D., Professor of History and Social Studies Education

### **Department Chair**

Andrew D. Nicholls, Ph.D. Professor of History

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Accommodating Individuals with  
Autism Spectrum Disorder in Museums

An Abstract of a Thesis in History  
with Concentration in Museum Studies

by

William Tyler

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

May 2015

State University of New York  
College at Buffalo  
Department of History and Social Studies Education

## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### Accommodating Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Museums

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the question of how current museum access programs meet the needs of individuals with Autism Spectrum disorder (ASD). ASD is an umbrella classification that presents many challenges for individuals in terms of social development and academic growth. It is important that all individuals are given the opportunity to experience the museum setting to their full ability. With this population of individuals at the forefront, an analysis will be done to examine what needs are present and how museum programming serves them. There are a variety of strategies and accommodations that museums can adopt that serve to enhance the museum experience for those visitors with ASD. This paper presents suggestions on how current strategies and practices can be enhanced for accommodating individuals with ASD in museums. Some museums that have exemplary programming to accommodate individuals with ASD can serve as models for other museums that wish to increase efforts for accommodating individuals with ASD. This work makes recommendations regarding the direction for further research and program implementation to help museum professionals and promote programs that increase access for ASD visitors.

William Tyler

May 15, 2015

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Approved by:

Cynthia Conides, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of History and Museum Studies  
Thesis Adviser

Andrew D. Nicholls, Ph.D.  
Chair and Professor of History and Social Studies Education

Kevin Railey, Ph.D.  
Associate Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

THESIS COMMITTEE

Cynthia Conides, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of History and Museum Studies  
Thesis Adviser

Jill M. Gradwell, Ph.D.  
Professor of History and Social Studies Education

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

To many people, a museum is a place to view various displays, collections, and exhibits. To others it is a place of learning, intrigue and discovery—a place to uncover new information about the world around them. Regardless of what reasons may attract them, visitors typically do not need to think of how they will view the displays, hear the sounds, and experience each exhibit. A typical museum visitor may not necessarily have limitations or restrictions that impede their ability to comprehend information that is visually or verbally presented. Another factor that may differentiate one's museum experience is their personal background. Each visitor, whether he or she has a disability or not, brings with them a personal history that enhances his or her visit in different ways. This is another factor that may cause limitations or inhibitions for the individual that will influence their museum experience. These factors are often overlooked; however, they drastically affect the visitor's experience at the museum.

One group in particular that has a higher tendency of experiencing limitations during their visit is individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In this thesis, the following question will be examined: how are current museum access programs meeting the needs of individuals with ASD? With Autism Spectrum Disorder encompassing such a wide range of disabilities, it is important that all individuals are given the opportunity to experience the museum setting to their full ability. As defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), autism is:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges...people with ASD may communicate, interact, behave, and learn in ways that are different from most other people. The



learning, thinking, and problem-solving abilities of people with ASD can range from gifted to severely challenged.<sup>1</sup>

The National Institute on Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) expands this definition to include “a range of complex neurodevelopment disorders, characterized by social impairments, communication difficulties, and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior.”<sup>2</sup> These definitions touch only the tip of the iceberg as far as general classification of those with ASD. Because the characteristics of autism spectrum disorder are so varied, individuals under this classification need multiple supports to accommodate their accompanying needs.

Within the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)*, published by the American Psychiatric Association, there are five subtypes of ASD. Those subtypes are autistic disorder, Asperger syndrome, Rett syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder— otherwise specified as (PDD-NOS).<sup>3</sup> All five subtypes differ by severity and range of classifications, and can be summed up by their most prominent characteristics. Autistic disorder’s defining characteristics can be broken into the qualitative impairment of social interaction, the qualitative impairment of communication, and repetitive patterns of behavior. Asperger syndrome can vary in its characteristics, but impairments in social interaction is its distinct feature. Rett syndrome is a neurological condition in which use of the hands is replaced with stereotypic hand movements

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<sup>1</sup> “Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Facts About ASD,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed May 15, 2014, <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/facts.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Lenore Adler, “Learning from Autism,” *The New Museum Community: Audiences, Challenges, Benefits* (2010): p.35

<sup>3</sup> William L. Heward, *Exceptional children: An Introduction to Special Education*. (New Jersey: Merrill, 2009), p.258.

and the ability to communicate is severely inhibited. While differences between these five subtypes exist, each presents similar needs under the all-encompassing umbrella that is ASD.

The identified learning challenges and needs of individuals with autism vary depending on the diagnosis, but they all share commonalities. These needs ultimately stem from behaviors that remain consistent across the five subtypes under the ASD umbrella. Some of these behaviors include avoidance of physical contact, self-stimulating, inappropriate communication skills, inability to maintain eye contact, inability to follow multi-step directions, and negative attention seeking. These common undertones that are present between the five subtypes of ASD lead to generalization of needs into three categories: development of communication skills, development of social skills, and the need for a comfortable learning environment.

It is critically important that museum professionals establish effective communication strategies for individuals with ASD. As stated on Autism Community's website, "research supports the fact that augmentative communications strategies have been successful in helping individuals with autism."<sup>4</sup> The Autism Community's website goes on to cite DynaVox Tech and how AAC has been used with individuals with autism, "Functional spontaneous communication is the single most important and life enhancing skills for individuals with ASD. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) interventions provide the supports for the development and realization of this skill."<sup>5</sup> Many of these individuals lack the essential skills necessary to facilitate effective communication with others which may hinder their ability to fully engage socially across multiple settings. Implementing communication supports like assistive technology may help bridge the communication gap and improve museum access programming.

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<sup>4</sup> "Strategies to Support Successful Communication." Autism Community, accessed March 12, 2015, <http://www.autism-community.com/communications/strategies-and-solutions/>

<sup>5</sup> "Articles at a Glance – Collection of Articles on AAC and Autism Spectrum Disorder." DynaVox, accessed March 12, 2015, <http://www.dynavoxtech.com/training/toolkit/details.aspx?id=303>

Developing social skills is also a need for individuals with ASD. In order to ensure acquisition of these skills, educators need to, “teach them to use socially appropriate behaviors throughout the school day to help promote generalization of appropriate social behavior.”<sup>6</sup> When teaching individuals with autism, there are often behaviors that impose barriers on this skill acquisition: “many students with autism exhibit behavior problems in the form of property destruction, aggression toward others, and even self-injury.”<sup>7</sup> These types of problem behaviors are usually situation specific, but can occur across multiple settings. The need to develop social competence is important for reinforcing these social behaviors. “Reward successive approximations, and work toward having students become more independent.”<sup>8</sup> Essentially, using reinforcement or rewards can facilitate the achievement of competence when developing socially appropriate behavior, and will encourage these appropriate behaviors across a wide range of settings.

Another need of individuals with ASD is the need to learn within a comfortable learning environment. Meaning, a safe and consistent “...learning environment in which the student with autism feels comfortable, including a predictable schedule of daily activities, a pattern of events, and class routines.”<sup>9</sup> The ability to know what is coming next can help prevent inappropriate behaviors and promote the acquisition of skills and content. Another way to establish a comfortable learning environment for these individuals in a museum setting is to create a setting that is individualized for their specific needs. For example, minimizing unnecessary distractions by establishing a specific time to focus on these visitors, or increasing staff support for these

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<sup>6</sup> Margo A. Mastropieri and Thomas E. Scruggs, *The Inclusive Classroom: Strategies for Effective Inclusion*, (Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007), p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Heward, *Exceptional children*, p.264.

<sup>8</sup> Mastropieri and Scruggs, *The Inclusive Classroom*, p.92

<sup>9</sup> Mastropieri and Scruggs, *The Inclusive Classroom*, p.92.

individuals can help create an environment that is much more supportive and welcoming for individuals with ASD.

It is clear that individuals with autism have specific needs that exceed those of the typical museum visitor, which begs the question as to how current museum programs cater to the specific needs of these individuals. Regardless of the specific ASD diagnosis, many museums are beginning to address these learning challenges which are described here. Autism Speaks addresses treatments for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) on their website:

Each child or adult with autism is unique and, so, each autism intervention plan should be tailored to address specific needs. Typically, different interventions and supports become appropriate as a child develops and acquires social and learning skills. As children with autism enter school, for example, they may benefit from targeted social skills training and specialized approaches to teaching.<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the current developments regarding the strategies and tools of existing museum access programs and how they are serving the needs of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. It is vital that museums develop programs that implement strategies to enhance the learning environment to cater to the needs of this population.

The museum access programs highlighted within this study are examples of those where museums have developed techniques and strategies that accommodate the needs of individuals with ASD. They do this through adjusting the environment to fit the needs of visitors with autism. They have regularly scheduled preplanned programs already in place and arrange individualized days for visitors with ASD. They also make school visits to help plan museum programs, provide trainings for museum staff working with individuals with ASD, and conduct evaluations of programs through the use of surveys to gain feedback on the current programs.

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<sup>10</sup> “How Is Autism Treated?,” Autism Speaks, accessed April 16, 2014, <http://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/treatment>.

Access programming itself is an umbrella term used to describe museum programs that are designed to accommodate people with disabilities, namely those with ASD. In her book

*Running a Museum: A Practical Handbook*, Vicky Woollard illustrates the term access as,

Giving the visitor the opportunity to use facilities and services, view displays, attend lectures, research and study the collections, and to meet the staff. This does not only mean physical access, but also includes access to the appropriate intellectual level that is free from social and cultural prejudice.<sup>11</sup>

Accessibility programming is intended to break not only physical barriers that may hinder an individual's access to a museum's exhibit, but all barriers that may limit any aspect of their experience.

The necessity of access programming in museums grows as the population of individuals with ASD continues to rise. Numbers as recent as 2011 show that more than 54 million people in the United States—or 18.7 percent of the population—has a disability.<sup>12</sup> Taking a look at the city of Buffalo, New York as an example, the city has an estimated population of 259,092 and 44,029 have been listed as having a disability. More specifically, 3,660 of 59,263 that are under 18 years of age reported having a disability. Then 28,098 of the 171,864 of those aged 18 to 64 years and lastly 12,271 of 27,965 aged 65 years and older are listed as having some sort of disability.<sup>13</sup> While the percentages understandably grow based on an increase in years of age, the mean stands at approximately 17 percent. This is a significant percentage and validates the need for the provision of access programming.

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<sup>11</sup> Vicky Woollard, "Caring for the Visitor," *Running a Museum: A Practical Handbook*, (France: International Council of Museums, 2004), p. 105.

<sup>12</sup> P.T. Jaeger, *Disability on the Internet: Confronting a Digital Divide* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> "American FactFinder, 2011," United States Census Bureau, accessed April 14, 2013, [http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_11\\_1YR\\_DP02&prodType=table](http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_11_1YR_DP02&prodType=table).

In 2004, Jil Kennedy forecasted in her thesis *Inclusion in the Museum: A Toolkit Prototype for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder* this growing trend within the population of individuals with ASD. She cites F.M. Hecita's statistical outline, "With autism growing at a rate of 10-17% per year, the prevalence of ASD could reach 4 million Americans in the next decade."<sup>14</sup> When looking at numbers for autism specifically, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website lists the combined numbers for eleven sites surveyed nationwide.<sup>15</sup> It lists that, as of 2010, about 1 in 68 children has been identified with ASD according to estimates from the CDC's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network (ADDM). The table (Appendix A) shows that number up from the previous study in 2008 (1 in 88), which grew from 2006 (1 in 100).<sup>16</sup> An article citing the same study also goes on to mention that, "The global prevalence of the disorder [ASD] has increased between 20 and 30 times since the late 1960's and early 1970's, CDC researchers wrote in the new report, published March 27 [2014] in the CDC's journal, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*."<sup>17</sup> This shows ASD numbers are not only growing regionally or nationwide, but globally as well. These numbers imply that there is a significant part of the population that is currently not able to access museum programming due to the extent or restrictions of their needs. It is for this reason that access programming in museums is a necessary component in need of development.

To parallel the rising statistics involving the population of individuals with ASD is the legislation that provides legal protection for these individuals within the public sphere. The

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<sup>14</sup> F.M. Hecita, Autism: Learn and educate yourself. KUAM News. 2004, November 4. Accessed January 30, 2006. <http://www.kuam.com/news/9146.aspx>.

<sup>15</sup> John Baio, Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 8 Years — Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2010, [http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss6302a1.htm?s\\_cid=ss6302a1\\_w](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss6302a1.htm?s_cid=ss6302a1_w).

<sup>16</sup> "Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Data & Statistics," Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), accessed June 18th, 2014, <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Ryan Jaslow, "Autism rates rise 30 percent in two-year span: CDC," CBS News, 2014, March 27, accessed June 18, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/autism-rates-rise-30-percent-in-two-year-span-cdc/>.

legislation designed to protect these individuals is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. This legislation—namely ADA Titles II and III as well as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act—directly pertain to both private and public museum settings. ADA’s Title II and Title III regulate a majority of the museum programs that are present within the United States. The Pacer Center describes Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act as:

a civil rights act which protects the civil rights of persons with disabilities. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability by the federal government, federal contractors, and by recipients of federal financial assistance. Organizations that receive federal funds are required to make their programs accessible to individuals with disabilities. Although its protections are limited in that they only apply to programs or businesses that receive federal funds, it was an important model for the ADA.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, programming within any federally funded organization must comply with the regulations of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in order to continue to receive said funding. As Graham Black states, “Museums have been subject to increasing pressure in recent years to broaden access to their collections. This pressure is in part a response to a legislative framework in areas such as race, relations, equal opportunities and disability discrimination.”<sup>19</sup> But pressure to adhere to legal standards can only go so far, museums must be willing to go that extra mile to serve the needs of their community for the good of their institution.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) section 106.5 defines accessible as “a site, building, facility, or portion thereof that complies with this part.”<sup>20</sup> Accessible programming itself is an umbrella term for both traditional access accommodations (such as sign language interpreters or large print programs) and distinct programming for people with disabilities such

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<sup>18</sup> “ADA Q & A: The Rehabilitation Act and ADA Connection,” Pacer Center, accessed April 9, 2015, <http://www.pacer.org/publications/adaqa/adaqa.asp>

<sup>19</sup> Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005), p.46.

<sup>20</sup> “106.5: Defined Terms,” Americans with Disabilities Act, accessed June 18, 2014, <http://www.si.edu/Content/Accessibility/Americans-Disabilities-Act.pdf>

as ASD. The Americans with Disabilities Act's Title II General Program Accessibility section states:

A public entity may not deny the benefits of its programs, activities, and services to individuals with disabilities because its facilities are inaccessible. A public entity's services, programs, or activities, when viewed in their entirety, must be readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities. This standard, known as 'program accessibility,' applies to all existing facilities of a public entity. Public entities, however, are not necessarily required to make each of their existing facilities accessible.<sup>21</sup>

In essence, the section is saying that a museum cannot simply deny the usage of any components of the museum, be it parts of an exhibit or even access to certain rooms, only because the facility is inaccessible and does not have those features.

All museums must be readily accessible to all patrons. As far as interpreting the museum's exhibitions and content, the Communication section of Title II states:

A public entity must ensure that its communications with individuals with disabilities are as effective as communications with others. This obligation, however, does not require a public entity to take any action that it can demonstrate would result in a fundamental alteration in the nature of its services, programs, or activities, or in undue financial and administrative burdens. In order to provide equal access, a public accommodation is required to make available appropriate auxiliary aids and services where necessary to ensure effective communication.<sup>22</sup>

In principle, the museum must do its best to communicate an exhibit's message across to those with disabilities, but does not have to alter the essence of an exhibit itself.

Similar to ADA's Title II, but focusing more on content rather than communication, the Americans with Disabilities Act's Title III General Requirements of Section 3 states:

A public accommodation may not discriminate against an individual with a disability in the operation of a place of public accommodation. Individuals with disabilities may not be denied full and equal enjoyment of the 'goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, or accommodations' offered by a place of public accommodation. The phrase

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<sup>21</sup> "II-5.1000 General," Title II Technical Assistance Manual, Americans with Disabilities Act, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://www.ada.gov/taman2.html#II-5.1000>.

<sup>22</sup> "II-7.1000 Equally effective communication," Title II Technical Assistance Manual, Americans with Disabilities Act, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://www.ada.gov/taman2.html#II-7.0000>.



‘goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, or accommodations’ applies to whatever type of good or service a public accommodation provides to its customers or clients. In other words, a public accommodation must ensure equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities.<sup>23</sup>

Much of Title III General Requirements Section 3 refers to the content of the museum, in its exhibits. While, as stated earlier, the museum does not have to alter the content in any way, it must do its best to make it as easily accessible as possible. Examples may be using larger format fonts for text labels, Braille signage, placing computer monitors at appropriate heights, providing audio components, having volunteer docents on staff to provide any aid to a tour or workshop, or having special education teachers help museum staff design workshops.

Whether a specific museum is public or private, it undoubtedly does serve the public. Therefore, the public’s needs are beginning to grow, and seem to already be significant in the special needs arena. “Increasingly, museums are turning their social activism inward to effect much needed change by readdressing the exclusion and/or misrepresentation of historically excluded groups like people with disabilities.”<sup>24</sup> With that being the case, it is not only in the interest of the public and their needs, but in the museums’ interest, as well to serve those needs in order to keep their specific institution accessible and sustainable.

As Smith, Ginley, and Goodwin point out, “some organizations have made significant advances whilst others appear to have neglected their legal obligations and, more fundamentally, demonstrated a lack of concern for the needs of their audiences.”<sup>25</sup> The reasons that organizations may neglect the needs of their audiences can result from an array of unintended

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<sup>23</sup> “Covering Public Accommodations and Commercial Facilities,” ADA Title III Technical Assistance Manual, Americans with Disabilities Act, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://www.ada.gov/taman3.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Lois H. Silverman, *The Social Work of Museums* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), p.20.

<sup>25</sup> Heather J.L. Smith *et al*, “Beyond Compliance? Museums, disability, and the law,” In *Museums, Equality, and Social Justice* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), p.60.

circumstances. What is important to keep in mind is regardless of those circumstances, it is important for a museum to align its goals with the needs of its audiences.

However, legality should not be the only driving factor behind the design of these accessibility programs. As Smith, Ginley, and Goodwin wrote in their article *Beyond Compliance? Museums, disability, and the law*:

A legal mandate can be used to convince skeptics of the need for change but, in the end, legislation alone is not enough to foster the comprehensive and sustained change in thinking and practice that is needed in most cultural institution. Establishing an honest dialogue and exploring the potential of this co-creative practice [collaborating with disabled people themselves] can potentially transform an organization – and the experiences it offers to visitors.<sup>26</sup>

Creating an accessible environment for individuals with disabilities will not only create a better experience for these individuals, but will also create a closer relationship with their community. The more direct input and interaction from the special needs community can help gain a better understanding of how to design a program that better meets their specific needs.

As Elise A. Freed-Brown writes, “Museums as public institutions are meant to be open to everyone. While museums have made terrific strides in accommodating those with physical disabilities, developmental disabilities can be overlooked.”<sup>27</sup> She goes on to cite Jean-Paul Bovee, who states,

Education should be equal for all, and appropriate for all, but it must be chosen individually. If adaptations and supports are needed so that children with autism can learn, make them. If methods or materials need to be provided so that children with autism can succeed, provide them.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Smith *et al.*, “Beyond Compliance? Museums, disability, and the law” In *Museums, Equality, and Social Justice* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), p.70

<sup>27</sup> Elise A. Freed-Brown, “A Different Mind: Developing Museum Programs for Children with Autism” (Theses Paper, Seton Hall University, 2010) p.2.

<sup>28</sup> J. Bovee, 2000. A Right to Our Own Life, Our Own Way. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 15(4), 2009: p.250.

As previously stated, the need for accessibility programming is rapidly growing. Analyzing how these programs serve the needs of individuals with ASD will only help the promotion and awareness of museum access programs. Analyzing the current design of museum access programming and how they implement strategies that serve individuals with ASD will help provide clarity in terms of where further development of these access programs lie.

## **Chapter II:**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

Over the years, museums have created programs that meet the interests and needs of their visitors. With this said, there are certain programs that unintentionally ignore the needs of certain groups. One group that is oftentimes left without accommodation is the population of individuals with ASD. The identified learning challenges or needs of individuals with autism vary depending on the diagnosis within that umbrella, but the needs of these individuals can be summed into three sub-categories—development of communication skills, development of social skills, and the need for a comfortable learning environment. These needs, which exist at a more intensified level in comparison to a typical museum visitor, often remain unmet within the current programming that is implemented in many museum settings.

Since the population of individuals that are classified as having ASD is currently on the rise, it is a necessity that museum programs begin to develop accessibility components within their programming structures. Accessibility programming—defined as a program that is specifically designed with the intent to accommodate people with disabilities, not only in physical access, but also includes access to the appropriate intellectual level that is free from social and cultural prejudice.— is a reasonable and effective way to meet the needs of individuals with ASD.<sup>29</sup> This literature review will provide an analysis of current research in museum programming that exists that will inform recommendations for future programming in order to provide appropriate accommodations for these individuals.

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<sup>29</sup> Vicky Wollard, “Caring for the Visitor,” *Running a Museum: A Practical Handbook*, (France: International Council of Museums, 2004), p.105

An analysis of this current body of research regarding museum access programming shows that there are four subcategories of program features that are recommended within its design. These subcategories are individual-centered design, implementation of technology, outside collaboration, and environmental accommodations. This first subcategory, individual-centered design, refers to the idea of museums focusing their attention on the individual by tailoring the museum program or exhibit to that visitor in particular. The second, implementation of technology is the focus on how museums are incorporating new technologies into their exhibits in order to create a more accessible atmosphere for individuals with ASD. Outside collaboration refers to the method of museum programmers reaching out to other educational professionals in order to gain insight and support so that they can appropriately meet their visitors' needs. Lastly, environmental accommodations can be defined as museums focusing on the environment itself by making it accessible for all, particularly visitors with ASD. Each subcategory, although they differ fundamentally, provides possible solutions and accommodations that promote the inclusion of individuals with ASD in the museum.

### **Individual-Centered Design**

Individual-centered design is a recurring theme that connects much of the research already conducted within this field. This theme is suggested for museums that design programs which utilize workshops that specifically address the unique needs of visitors with ASD. With this individualized design, museum programming can help these individuals apply strategies to help them build the skills necessary to actively participate. These workshops are often held as separate events that are designed to meet the specific needs of individuals with ASD. The purpose of these workshops is to make the museum more accessible.

Elise Freed-Brown writes on developing workshops in her work, *A Different Mind: Developing Museum Programs for Children with Autism*. In order to plan effective programming, Freed-Brown suggests that the workshops form small group sessions, a routine-based structure and have clear expectations. Small group workshop sessions can "...give an educator more one-on-one time with each participant, creating a more personal relationship and better allowing the educator to help the student when necessary."<sup>30</sup> Designing programming with routine-based structure and clear expectations helps give the participants some control within the activities as well as a clear structure to follow so they do not become overwhelmed.

Another author who writes on this topic is Lenore Adler. Her article, *Learning from Autism* coincides with some of Freed-Brown's program suggestions. Adler writes that giving participants clear expectations helps them with transitioning between activities and set goals for themselves.<sup>31</sup> Adler agrees that this practice helps give control to the program participants and prevents the individuals from becoming overwhelmed or over stimulated.<sup>32</sup>

Adler goes on to provide more insight to this practice. She suggests that simply providing small group accommodations may not be enough to accommodate the individuality of each person's needs.<sup>33</sup> Adler suggests that "sometimes it may work better to meet a group's needs by separating them...[giving] available return passes if they have to leave...plan to follow a predetermined path based on the map of features they create."<sup>34</sup> These suggestions are meant to enhance the workshop programming by providing flexibility for more individualized support.

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<sup>30</sup> Elise A. Freed-Brown, "A Different Mind: Developing Museum Programs for Children with Autism" (Theses Paper, Seton Hall University, 2010) p. 42, 43.

<sup>31</sup> Lenore Adler, "Learning from Autism," *The New Museum Community: Audiences, Challenges, Benefits* (2010): p. 41.

<sup>32</sup> Adler 2010, p.41

<sup>33</sup> Adler 2010, p.43

<sup>34</sup> Adler 2010, p.43, 44

Mihaela Schwartz's *Using the Contextual Model of Learning in a Museum Program to Prepare for Student Visitors with Autism Spectrum Disorder* is a study on whether or not the Contextual Model of Learning provides a useful framework for understanding learning from museums for ASD audience. She reaches the conclusion that "the results in this study appear to support the value of the Contextual Model of Learning as an operational framework, reinforcing what most already know that learning from museums is highly complex. The Contextual Model of Learning provided a useful framework for beginning to unravel the complexities of learning in museums for ASD audience."<sup>35</sup> What Schwartz means is that the most effective teaching strategy for individuals with ASD is to put all information into a perspective that the individuals will understand. This is best done by presenting the information through a context that each individual is familiar with, or by connecting it to the individual's life experiences. By implementing this strategy into museum programming, the content will be more easily accessed by individuals with ASD. She stresses that using this strategy to differentiate for each person's learning is the key to promoting inclusion within access programming.

### **Implementation of Technology**

Another program suggestion that is highlighted is the implementation of technology within the programs and museum exhibits. One group of researchers that investigate the use of technology is Langa and colleagues in their article, *Improving the Museum Experiences of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Their Families: An Exploratory Examination of Their Motivations and Needs and Using Web-based Resources to Meet Them*. This research study specifically evaluates the importance of online surveys as a form of program evaluation. They cite online surveys as a productive way for an institution to assess itself by receiving direct

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<sup>35</sup> Mihaela Schwartz, "Using the Contextual Model of Learning in a Museum Program to Prepare for Student Visitors with Autism Spectrum Disorder." (Thesis Paper, Bank Street College of Education, 2013) p.60.

feedback from the visitors themselves on what they are doing correctly or what improvements are needed in accommodating the visitor.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, Langa *et al* point out the value of Web-based resources designed for children with ASD as a tool to help build academic and social skills. These resources include pre-visit web materials like a tip sheet, a sensory map, a sensory guide, social stories, and a picture schedule”<sup>37</sup> Langa *et al* lobby that the idea of using Web-based resources promotes positivity in some ways—one way being the ability to continue that connection outside of the museum or use it to introduce the material beforehand. By familiarizing the child with the museum and its exhibits before he enters the building, this helps him facilitate a more successful transition within the setting itself.

The authors pose an interesting point to contrast this positive view of supplemental technology. While such a constant connection with individuals with ASD using this technology is constructive, it also opens the door for institutions that have yet to build any or more accommodating access programs. They stress the possibility that these institutions may simply rely on only this tactic in order to accommodate individuals with ASD. The risk with implementing such a program is an institution holding itself to the idea that only doing that is enough – and with technology being an easy outlet to solve any problems in today’s world this could run the risk of failing to be an exception to only relying on technology. This point, however valid, has yet to be assessed using any empirical research.

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<sup>36</sup> Langa *et al*, “Improving the Museum Experiences of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Their Families: An Exploratory Examination of Their Motivations and Needs and Using Web-based Resources to Meet Them.” *Curator: The Museum Journal*, Vol. 56 Issue 3 (2013): p.326

<sup>37</sup> Langa *et al*, p.326



## **Outside Collaboration**

Outside collaboration refers to the recommended practice in which museum programmers reach out to surrounding professionals, agencies, and individuals in order to gain insight on appropriate program additions and accommodations. This practice helps to narrow the focus of the intended group of individuals and provide support for specific individuals in their community. Collaborating with other professionals also gives insight into current educational practices that may be beneficial within the access program instruction.

Aletheia Wittman and Rose Paquet Kinsley discuss direct collaboration between museum program developers and individuals with ASD and their families. In their blog, “The Inclusion: How Can We Make Museums More Inclusive?” the authors discuss how feedback is an important aspect of programming development. They recommend implementing this strategy by asking essential questions such as, “Do programs meet the participants’ needs? Are the various support materials (e.g., maps, storybooks, etc.) helpful? How do families experience the museum space and their interaction with museum staff?”<sup>38</sup> Implementing collaboration by surveying the individuals and their families gains essential information that is vital for evaluating the effectiveness of the program itself.

Another recommendation provided by Wittman and Kinsley is using collaboration with outside agencies and professionals in order to provide depth to the program curriculum. In their article, the authors state that, “museum professionals lack the expertise needed to create flexible programs and spaces suited to the needs of children with learning and developmental

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<sup>38</sup> Wittman, Aletheia, and Rose Paquet Kinsley. “The Inclusion: How Can We Make Museums More Inclusive?” Think Inclusive, December 6, 2012. <http://www.thinkinclusive.us/the-inclusion-how-can-we-make-museums-more-inclusive/> (accessed October 14, 2013).

disabilities.”<sup>39</sup> Wittman and Kinsley state that, “partnerships between museums and organizations/professionals with expertise in learning and developmental disabilities are key to inclusion,” which will ultimately enhance the experiences of individuals with ASD within the museum setting. These ideas emphasizing collaboration as a tool to shape programming are presented solely as recommendations without evidential support. However, they provide a great blueprint for future access program design.

In the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disabilities* Stuart Schleien and colleagues present data to support the recommendations made above by authors Wittman and Kinsley. In their research Schleien *et al* analyze social interactions between typical students and their peers who are classified with ASD within an inclusive art program. This program supported the use of art classes as a vehicle for promoting social interactions directed toward children with autism by their nondisabled peers. In their article, *Participation of Children with Autism and Nondisabled Peers in a Cooperatively Structured Community Art Program* Schleien *et al* designed an art program in which they enlisted the help of both regular and special educators to design an accessible art program with both art related skill instruction as well as social skill support.<sup>40</sup> The staff from the museum provided the teachers with the intended content and activities that both typical students and students with ASD were required to participate in.<sup>41</sup> The teachers provided the museum personnel with a suggested instructional structure that was center-based so that the students could control the order of the activities as well as interact socially with their peers simultaneously.<sup>42</sup> The results of this study presented evidence that combining both content-

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<sup>39</sup> Wittman and Kinsley, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Schleien *et al*, “Participation of Children with Autism and Nondisabled Peers in a Cooperatively Structured Community Art Program,” *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (1995), p. 399.

<sup>41</sup> Schleien *et al*, p.403

<sup>42</sup> Schleien *et al*, p.403

related and social skill related support did succeed in promoting the social interactions between the typical students and students with ASD. This collaboration between museum personnel and educational professionals helped to develop an access program that was effective in including individuals with ASD into the museum setting.

In Lisa Jo Rudy's article *Autism, Inclusion, and Museums* she, too, addresses the effectiveness of collaboration as a tool to support program development. In this article Rudy analyzes the unique partnership between the Illinois Autism Training and Technical Assistance Project and the Dupage Children's Museum. According to Rudy, the Illinois Autism Training and Technical Assistance Project provided the Dupage Children's Museum with a visual system intended to help children with autism become acquainted with the museum and its exhibits prior to their visit. In order to develop this system, museum personnel provided information about the exhibits and the specialists from the projects helped design visual guidebooks that broke each exhibit down into a set of tasks.<sup>43</sup> These visual guidebooks have had a positive impact on the population of children with ASD. Thus far, they have helped to facilitate successful visits to the museum by preparing the children with a prior knowledge of what they will experience. By reaching out to this particular museum, the Illinois Autism Training and Technical Assistance Project has helped establish an effective program that appropriately supports the needs of its visitors.

There are many facets within the sub-category of outside collaboration. The recommendations that are highlighted provide concrete suggestions that, if implemented, would highly improve museum programming that lack inclusive components for individuals with ASD.

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<sup>43</sup> Rudy, Lisa Jo. "Autism, Inclusion, and Museums" About.com Health: Autism Spectrum Disorders, June 10, 2009. <http://autism.about.com/od/copingwithautism/a/autismmuseums.htm> (accessed October 28, 2013).

However, there is much room for growth in terms of the actual implementation of these practices within museum programming.

### **Environmental Accommodations**

The last sub-category that serves as a linking agent throughout the analyzed bodies of research was that of environmental accommodations. Museums that focus on making the museum setting and learning environment welcoming and accessible for all fall into this category. The purpose of this strategy—making the learning environment more comfortable for visitors with ASD—includes many proactive strategies to decrease unnecessary stimuli and distractions to visitors with autism. This is intended to establish a comfortable environment by decreasing the stress level of those visitors and their families and make their museum visit more meaningful.

In Graham Black's book, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*, he analyzes museum visitors to determine how to better involve them in the museum and meet their needs. Black states, "All visitors should feel welcomed to the site, not experience a sense of exclusion."<sup>44</sup> Black notes that the single most significant barrier to inclusion is the visitor feeling unwelcome and being embarrassed. Within Black's book, Annie Delin highlights this significance by pointing out the low representation of special needs individuals visiting museums.<sup>45</sup> It can reasonably be inferred that this low number is due to the fact that individuals with ASD do not feel comfortable in the museum setting, therefore avoid the setting entirely.

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<sup>44</sup> Black 2005, p.34

<sup>45</sup> Delin 2002, p.85

In her book *Programming for People with Special Needs: A Guide for Museums and Historic Sites* Katie Stringer supports Black's arguments regarding the inclusion of individuals with ASD into the museum setting using access programs that,

assist museums and historic sites in the process of creating inclusive sites of education and well-being for all visitors, especially those with disabilities and special needs...it covers education and inclusion for those with intellectual disabilities and learning disability, which goes beyond the regular 'fixes' of compliance with American Disabilities Act for those with physical disabilities.<sup>46</sup>

This book provides a plethora of suggestions for program accommodations that stem from educational theory and practice. Stringer "explores how the potential of universal design concepts may combine with object-centered learning"<sup>47</sup> to provide a setting that is both comfortable for the individual and cultivates involvement in the program. The intent of this program guide is to "...create a greater reliance on direct experience and hands-on learning to engage those with intellectual disabilities with the museum collections and setting."<sup>48</sup> Stringer argues that designing programming that promotes direct interaction between the individuals and the museum exhibits creates the most comfortable environment through which the individuals can feel involved and reap more educational and social benefits.

Maxwell and Killeen support Black's and Stringer's observations and recommendations through their research in their article *Museum Visits: Experiences of Special Education and Typically Developing Children*. They state:

Teachers of special education classes indicate that the museum setting is often too anxiety-provoking for their students. For those with cognitive delays who may have trouble processing a lot of information, these settings can be anxiety provoking because there is too much to pay attention to and all of it is unfamiliar.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Katie Stringer, *Programming for People with Special Needs: A Guide for Museums and Historic Sites*, (London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), p.xi.

<sup>47</sup> Katie Stringer, p.10.

<sup>48</sup> Katie Stringer, p.10.

<sup>49</sup> Maxwell and Killeen, p.18

Maxwell and Killeen touch on specific needs of individuals with cognitive disabilities, which include those with ASD. They point out that the need still exists to create a comfortable learning environment that limits or at least decreases the anxiety level of those with cognitive disabilities as well as their families visiting with them. Maxwell and Killeen's study mainly focuses on information retention of typical students versus special education students: "the findings also indicate that special education students did not retain as much information about the visit as the typically developing students." The researchers' intent was to determine how these groups of students interacted differently with the museum exhibit. They concluded,

...that elementary school students can recall facts about a museum visit without cuing. However, special education children's ability to recall information may be more dependent on personal involvement related to the exhibits and characteristics of the space within the museum...For example, in the second study special education students were better able to recall and describe a more familiar space, the art workshop room, than an unfamiliar space, the African art gallery.<sup>50</sup>

This conclusion indicates that, in the museum setting, students with special needs benefit more when involved in a museum setting that is more interactive and places value on student input.

Yet another research study that aligns with this theme of developing environmental accommodations is that of Mulligan *et al* in their article entitled *Examination of a Museum Program for Children with Autism*. The authors describe how adjustments to the learning environment are critical in establishing a level of comfort for autistic visitors and their families. In the report it is stated that, "evaluations of children's museum programs should address the extent to which the environment is welcoming and comfortable, and affords opportunities for enjoyment and learning."<sup>51</sup> Mulligan *et al* achieved this comfortable setting by implementing

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<sup>50</sup> Maxwell and Killeen, p.21

<sup>51</sup> Mulligan *et al*, "Examination of a Museum Program for Children with Autism," *Journal of Museum Education*, Volume 38, Number 3, October 2013, p.308-319. Museum Education Roundtable, 2013, p. 309.

more interactive exhibits that were child centered rather than adult driven.<sup>52</sup> When observing the children and their families that passed through these interactive exhibits, the authors noted that there was an increase in the interactions between the children and the museum exhibits themselves.<sup>53</sup> Mulligan *et al* found that “the children generally appeared to be comfortable, busy, inquisitive, and well-regulated in terms of their activity and arousal levels. Most were observed to easily settle in to an activity and attend to the task for an extended period of time (over ten minutes). Observations of play revealed that the children were busy socializing and interacting with exhibit objects in ways that indicated a rich context for learning.”<sup>54</sup> The parents of these children stated that they noticed a definite increase in participation of their child with the museum material. By creating a comfortable environment that was child centered and interactive, the participation in the exhibits drastically increased.

Deborah Mulhearn’s article, *Welcoming Autistic Visitors*, describes how following a specific set of guidelines can facilitate a positive experience for a child with ASD who enters a museum setting.<sup>55</sup> These guidelines, established by the National Autistic Society (United Kingdom), focus mainly on environmental influences that may affect an individual when entering a museum setting. Such influences specifically references include overwhelming lighting, sudden or automatic audio components within exhibits, crowded spaces, bright colors, overly interactive displays, and costumed characters.<sup>56</sup> It is mentioned that such environmental

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<sup>52</sup> Mulligan *et al* 2013, p.316

<sup>53</sup> Mulligan *et al* 2013, p.315

<sup>54</sup> Mulligan *et al* 2013, p.317

<sup>55</sup> Deborah Mulhearn, “Welcoming autistic visitors.” *Museums Journal*, Volume 114, Number 2, p.20-25.

<sup>56</sup> The Mary Rose Trust, Portsmouth and St Anthony's School, Chichester, “Going to a museum with pupils with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD).” <http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/education/educational-professionals-in-schools/resources-for-teachers/going-to-a-museum-with-pupils-with-an-autism-spectrum-disorder-asd.aspx>, (accessed March 18, 2015).

conditions can unintentionally cause distress or confusion; therefore should be taken into consideration before attending an onsite museum visit.

In her work, *Autism and Art Museums: A Call for New Accessibility Programs and Resources in Art Museums*, Meredith Martin discusses how she believes that the needs of museum visitors with ASD are not being fully met within the museum setting.<sup>57</sup> She points out how access family workshops improve the overall experience for individuals with ASD and their families. She states how the art projects made during the programs give families something tangible to take home from their experience at the museum. This experience provides a tangible reinforcement of the positive museum encounter for these individuals and their families.<sup>58</sup> Martin also mentions how physical changes to the learning environment and staff training can be essential to make families who have children with autism feel more comfortable in an art museum. “Even having staff know basic facts such as where the quiet spaces are in the museum if a child is overwhelmed by noise or crowds, can lead a family to have a more relaxed visit.”<sup>59</sup> The training of staff and physical changes to the environment are two strategies mentioned within this investigation.

Laurie Kaiser’s article “Exceptional Ed Professor Knows Autism Challenges Firsthand” supports Adler’s research regarding the training of staff to enhance the individuals’ comfort in the museum setting. Kaiser writes on Professor Kathy Doody’s project in which she helped establish “Au-Some Evenings” at the Explore & More Children’s Museum in East Aurora for families with children on the ASD spectrum. By implementing this program, Doody hypothesized that the attendance of families would increase due to the accommodations provided

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<sup>57</sup> Meredith Martin, “Autism and Art Museums: A Call for New Accessibility Programs and Resources in Art Museums.” (Thesis Paper, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2012) p.1.

<sup>58</sup> Martin, p.57.

<sup>59</sup> Martin, p.63.



for the families. Doody established private nights in which only families of children with ASD attend. In addition to establishing these events, she also helped train the staff in proper instructional techniques so as they could provide the appropriate support the children and their families need. Doody notes that the combination of these two features—separate time and appropriately trained staff—have caused an increase of attendance of children with ASD at the museum. This is positive evidence that validates the necessity of creating a comfortable environment for individuals. The successful results observed in response to this program present possible solutions and recommendations for other institutions to adapt.

Gail Gregg’s article “A Welcoming Oasis” further supports the idea of establishing separate times for individuals with autism to attend the museum. She states, “autistic children are sometimes disruptive and difficult to handle – and may elicit hostility from uncomprehending visitors. But if museums open their doors early just for them, the children and their families can relax and enjoy the experience of being around art.”<sup>60</sup> Earlier hours of operation for families of special needs visitors only can help build a comfort level necessary to establish that connection between those families and the museum. She goes on to cite Laura Lynch, director of education at the Nassau County Museum of Art, stating, “It’s really comforting when you can create a safe place where this is allowed.” Lynch adds how “disabled children can be loud or have a meltdown.”<sup>61</sup> This is also discussed when finding strategies to limit these behaviors. A comfortable learning environment can surely aid in the effort.

Jil Kennedy’s *Inclusion in the Museum* supports Doody’s aforementioned idea of having adequately trained staff. Her work provides recommendations for supporting museum staff that

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<sup>60</sup> Gregg, Gail. “A Welcoming Oasis” ARTnews, April 2, 2012. <http://www.artnews.com/2012/04/02/a-welcoming-oasis/> (accessed October 2, 2013).

<sup>61</sup> Gregg, Gail. “A Welcoming Oasis” ARTnews, April 2, 2012. <http://www.artnews.com/2012/04/02/a-welcoming-oasis/> (accessed October 2, 2013).

are not trained in supporting individuals with ASD. Her recommendations include providing docents and other museum employees a handbook in which support strategies for individuals with ASD are provided. In these handbooks should be guidelines for communicating with the individuals, strategies to provide visual support within the exhibit, and strategies to provide sensory accommodations within the exhibit as well.<sup>62</sup> Kennedy's suggestions do succeed in providing museum programmers with great guidelines for program development; however, they have not yet been evaluated through the use of research analysis.

### **Implications for Further Research**

This literature review provides an analysis of the current research and practices that have been employed regarding the accommodation of individuals with ASD in the museum setting. This analysis shows that there is some potential room for growth in the area of designing and implementing accessibility programming. One observation that can be noted is the fact that many of the authors' recommendations for access programming aligned with one another in terms of educational theory and practice. One specific example that represents this is provided within the analysis of individual-centered design. Here, authors Freed-Brown and Adler provide helpful suggestions for accessibility program design based on current educational practices. However, these suggestions are not necessarily supported by research to validate their effectiveness. This observation implies that there is a need for practical application of said program suggestions in order to provide museums with an accurate assessment of their own access programming. The lack of supporting evidential data makes it difficult to defend the validity of these program features.

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<sup>62</sup> Jil Kennedy, "Inclusion in the museum: A toolkit prototype for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder." (A Master's project, University of Oregon, 2006), p. 25-28.

Another area within this body of research that presents potential for growth is the area of technology implementation. This subcategory generated the least amount of support from the research collected. Out of all of the research, only one article presented information regarding the use of technology and its effectiveness regarding program support. In their article, *Improving the Museum Experiences of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Their Families: An Exploratory Examination of Their Motivations and Needs and Using Web-based Resources to Meet Them*, Langa *et al* provide concrete evidence illustrating how technology can positively affect access programming. As discussed earlier in the literature review, Langa *et al*'s intent was to promote the effectiveness of online surveys and how they can help cater access programming to the specific individuals within the community. This study undeniably provides excellent information in favor of technology implementation. With this research being quite recent—most occurring within the past decade—this surely is an indication that this area presents opportunity for future investigation.

### **Summary**

In the current museum culture, there is a shift of focus beginning to develop. Museums are beginning to place more and more of their efforts on enhancing the visitor's experience through active involvement within programming and interactive exhibits rather than focusing simply providing stagnant information on the collections presented. This innovative form of program development caters to the learning styles and needs of the diverse visitors that pass through a museum's door—especially visitors classified under the ASD umbrella. Though this shift is slowly gaining momentum within the museum community, there is still a lot of room for development through experimentation, research, and practical application. With the development of access programming on the rise, the goal is for physical and intellectual

inaccessibility to become a thing of the past. This literature review has helped to narrow the scope of the current body of research, and has provided some direction for future investigation as this shift continues.

### **Chapter III:**

#### **Methodology**

Throughout the investigation on museum access programs and individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a multitude of resources have been collected that validate the arguments presented. The resources used, as well as the methods of finding them, are outlined. Based on the implications from the literature review, further research was deemed necessary to explore current access programming in museums is necessary to establish a better knowledge and understanding of how these museums are impacting the experiences of individuals with ASD. In order to investigate the question of how museum access programs are meeting the needs of individuals with ASD, information was collected from currently active museums that fit the selected criteria. Such criteria included programming with a consistently offered schedule (not an as-needed basis), involvement with community, and variety of programming (i.e. workshops and individualized days.). This criteria helped narrow the research scope to focus on those institutions with effective programming in place.

In order to generate a foundation for which to begin the research, a clear definition of access programming as well as the characteristics and needs of individuals with ASD needed to be established. In order to develop this foundation, a number of textbooks were used –William Heward’s *Exceptional Children: An Introduction to Special Education* as well as *The Inclusive Classroom: Strategies for Effective Inclusion* by Margo Mastropieri and Thomas Scruggs. They were recommended by a colleague in the teaching field, specifically special education. From these textbooks, information on the definition of ASD as well as characteristics and

specific learning needs associated with ASD were obtained. These definitions were beneficial in establishing a lens through which to research museum access program features.

Once a background of the needs of individuals with ASD was established there was a need to determine what research had been done regarding these individuals and how they are involved in museum programming. In order to collect and analyze any research, online databases were used.

First, a general search was done via SUNY College at Buffalo State's E.H. Butler Library online. The search terms used were different combinations of the following: "museums," "autism (and ASD or Autism Spectrum Disorder)," "access," "programs (and programming)," and "informal setting." The databases used from those search terms were WorldCat, Education Research Complete, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), EBSCO Host Electronic Journals Service, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Google Books, and United States Census.

WorldCat was used due to its collection of resources from libraries worldwide. Education Research Complete and ERIC were used due to their collections of educational research. EBSCO Host Electronic Journals Service was used because of its collection of journal articles related to the topic of museums and museum education, namely the *Journal of Museum Education*. JSTOR was used because of its archive of back issues from scholarly journals that were related to the thesis topic. Google Scholar was used for its multidisciplinary references to scholarly books and journal articles, which brought up many resources used for this thesis.

Resources cited in this thesis that were available through Google Books were also utilized. United States Census database was used to retrieve numbers on individuals with disabilities. Using this method, information was collected on other museum access programs, articles that advocates of access programming have written, studies on museum programming for

individuals with ASD, and resources focusing on how individuals with ASD learn in an informal setting. The use of these databases as investigative tools gained much information on the research that served as groundwork for this thesis.

While investigating current access programming in museums, the museum websites themselves became an important source of information on programs that were listed. An initial broad search was conducted using the terms “museums access programs.” A collection of New York City museums dominated the search results. The decision was then made to contain the case studies to a reasonable perimeter, which was New York State. These museums were used as a reference to establish criteria through which to determine the effectiveness of their access programming. The criteria, as stated previously, included programming with a consistently offered schedule (not an as-needed basis), involvement with community, and variety of programming (i.e. workshops and individualized days). The research scope was then turned locally to analyze the museums found in Buffalo, New York. The purpose of this was to provide an analysis of the access programs available in the museums familiar to this area. The case studies presented establish a contextual relevance regarding the need for further access programming in museums within the city of Buffalo.

When visiting the museums’ websites, all of the institutions highlighted in the case studies had specific sections of their website devoted to access or special needs programming. Within that section of the site they would vary upon how much each institution would go into describing their programs. First, a background of what the museum did and how often programs were scheduled was attained. After reviewing the museum’s program, a comparison was made to determine how well this program aligned with the previously established criteria. Using this

method, a list of museums was generated based on how well they represented each of the criteria. These museums were to be further investigated using personal contact.

The museum representatives responsible for operating these programs were accessible via email or telephone, and this information was listed on the website. After taking the next step to contact them via email about their programs, a few general questions were asked through a generic questionnaire. Such questions contained information as to how programs were initiated, what trainings for staff were required, and are there any specific goals of the program.

After making contact with the representatives from each of the museums, phone interviews were set up with the intention for collecting more detail pertaining to the specifics of each program. Consent forms were signed by these representatives that gave permission to release the information discussed in the interviews as their answers related to this thesis. Evidence was collected describing how each of the museums acquire funding, prepare their space for the program, how the museum provides training for the staff that will be working with individuals with ASD, how the museums advertise and promote their program, as well as the implementation of the program itself. Collecting information using this questionnaire made it easy to compare each of the programs using similar parameters.

## **Summary**

Using the structure outlined above to guide the research, a variety of resources such as scholarly articles, masters theses, and information from the museums examined within the case studies were analyzed to create a foundation on which to focus the research question. A review of the current literature on this topic has uncovered what actions museums have already taken to implement and evaluate access programs within the museum setting. This helps to pinpoint what



further research is necessary in order to create a clear picture of how current access programming in museums is helping accommodate the ASD community.

## **Chapter IV:**

### **Case Studies**

An investigation of access programming in the museum setting reveals that there are currently existing museums within the state of New York that employ different strategies and programs to serve the needs of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Within this case study, five museum access programs are highlighted that have developed techniques and strategies for these individuals. This investigation includes the Queens Museum, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, The Jewish Museum, the Buffalo Museum of Science, and the Explore & More Children's Museum. All of the museums listed are located in New York State, either in the Buffalo area or within New York City. The museums presented are different types, including art or history museums from the two locations. This chapter presents a full description of each museum and its relevant access programs, as well as comments about each program from representative staff members from each. The case studies presented set the stage for the following chapter which provides an analysis of the strategies within each of the programs designed for visitors with ASD.

#### **Queens Museum**

The Queens Museum is an art museum located in Queens, New York. Their collections are represented by more than 10,000 objects pertaining to the 1939 and 1964 World's Fairs as well as exhibitions on New York City's water supply system and a panorama of the city itself.<sup>63</sup>

According to the website, its mission is:

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<sup>63</sup> Queens Museum. "Exhibitions." <http://www.queensmuseum.org/exhibitions>, (accessed April 16, 2015).

dedicated to presenting the highest quality visual arts and educational programming for people in the New York metropolitan area, and particularly for the residents of Queens, a uniquely diverse, ethnic, cultural, and international community. The Museum fulfills its mission by designing and providing art exhibitions, public programs and educational experiences that promote the appreciation and enjoyment of art, support the creative efforts of artists, and enhance the quality of life through interpreting, collecting, and exhibiting art, architecture, and design. The Queens Museum presents artistic and educational programs and exhibitions that directly relate to the contemporary urban life of its constituents, while maintaining the highest standards of professional, intellectual, and ethical responsibility.<sup>64</sup>

The Queens Museum is a member of the Museum Access Consortium (MAC) which takes part in trainings and community meetings hosted by the organization, discussing issues in access with families and access staff members from area institutions. When interviewing Michelle Lopez, former Manager of *ArtAccess* programs at the Queens Museum, she said research for access programming at the museum is not done on each component of the programs separately; rather, data is collected through anecdotal records in order to see how effective the program is as a whole. Lopez refers to this program research method as collaborative action research which evaluates the interaction between the program and its participants

The development of access programming started at the Queens Museum as early as 1983 when it launched a program for those with visual impairments called *Please Touch*. In the late 1990's, this developed into an art therapy framework what is now known as *ArtAccess*. This slate of programs, which is still in place today, makes the museum accessible to visitors with varying special needs, namely those with ASD. This paved the way for the development of further programming for individuals with disabilities. Within *ArtAccess*, the Queens Museum has developed programs that support families with children with autism. These programs provide guided exhibition tours and art-making workshops are designed to engage all participants by providing layers of multisensory experiences and support for differentiated

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<sup>64</sup> Queens Museum. "Mission Statement." <http://www.queensmuseum.org/about>, (accessed March 11, 2015).

learning. There are also bi-monthly workshops provided for adults with ASD where they can engage with art in a safe space, led by a licensed art therapist. These programs are designed to promote social inclusion and self-determination skills through interaction and involvement within each of the museum's exhibits.

The Queens Museum's *ArtAccess* is a slate of interactive community-based art therapy programs involving the visitor within different areas of the museum or with specific pieces of artwork. There is a two and a half hour program holds guided tours and workshops for self-contained groups such as NYC Department of Education District's seventy-five school classes or Adult Day Habilitation programs throughout the city. The Queen's Museum's website describes how the tours and art-making workshops are designed to engage all participants by providing layers of multisensory experiences and support for differentiated learning.

When speaking with Lopez about the Queens museum and its programs, she stated that she believes exposure to the arts plays an essential role in the lives of all people by promoting self-expression and communication. Creativity is not only involved in viewing and making art but also in exploring art one-to-one with the viewer.<sup>65</sup> Most of their programs draw inspiration from the museum's permanent exhibitions as well as changing modern and contemporary art exhibitions, allowing teachers and program coordinators the flexibility to design an experience based on the needs of the students or clients. This is accomplished by a school or group leader contacting the museum beforehand so that teachers and museum staff can plan programming together in order to set the individuals up for a successful visit. The Queens Museum's website describes *ArtAccess* as a nationally replicated framework that presents programming designed to

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<sup>65</sup> Lopez, 2014.

allow audiences with diverse abilities to enjoy a personal connection to works of art.<sup>66</sup> *ArtAccess* received the Mayor's Award of New York City to commemorate the 18-year anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act.<sup>67</sup> This is given to individuals and organizations that have made significant contributions to increasing accessibility for people with disabilities.

The programming within *ArtAccess* is dedicated to creating more welcoming spaces for families affected by autism. The presence of these programs supports the idea of the need for a more comfortable learning environment. The first program, *Spinnerz*, is a museum club for teens with autism that encourages socialization through music and photography. The *Museum Explorers Club* is a program where families affected by autism partake in art making workshops in an informal social setting. The Queens Museum states that the goal of the program is that exploration and play will help bridge connections to the exhibit artwork and build literacy. It is a monthly one hour program held on Saturdays, and groups can include up to six families at a time. Each program gives alternative ways to be included in the museum atmosphere.

The Queens Museum's website mentioned that a former coordinator of *ArtAccess*, Donnielle Rome, has been recognized for her efforts in designing and implementing access programming within the museum. In 2009, Rome was awarded the Excellence in Leadership Award, and because of her unique programming, the Queens Museum was given the Outstanding Community Partner Award by The Kennedy Center's Very Special Arts (VSA) organization and its affiliates. The VSA, an organization within the Kennedy Center, recognizes the institutions and individuals who provide arts and education opportunities for people with disabilities.

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<sup>66</sup> Queens Museum. "People with Special Needs." <http://www.queensmuseum.org/events/special-needs> (accessed April 17, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> NYC.gov. "News from the Blue Room." [http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/menuitem.c0935b9a57bb4ef3daf2f1c701c789a0/index.jsp?pageID=mayor\\_press\\_release&catID=1194&doc\\_name=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nyc.gov%2Fhtml%2Fom%2Fhtml%2F2008b%2Fpr312-08.html&cc=unused1978&rc=1194&ndi=1](http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/menuitem.c0935b9a57bb4ef3daf2f1c701c789a0/index.jsp?pageID=mayor_press_release&catID=1194&doc_name=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nyc.gov%2Fhtml%2Fom%2Fhtml%2F2008b%2Fpr312-08.html&cc=unused1978&rc=1194&ndi=1) (accessed August 3, 2014).

The interview with Lopez uncovered more ways in which the Queens Museum promotes accessibility beyond its programming. Lopez mentioned how the focus of the Queens Museum developed into a “humanistic approach” that evolved into focusing on the needs of individuals rather than just highlighting disabilities.<sup>68</sup> In order to accomplish this, the Queens Museum brings the museum to the community, such as visiting a hospital or school. Here, the Queens Museum staff is able to replicate what they do at the museum and bring key elements of the programming, such as art-making and workshop activities, to these offsite locations. Included with that, they create adaptive tools to make the art experience more accessible to those visited. She went on to describe that the Queens Museum’s first grant toward their access programming was devoted entirely towards training access staff through professional development workshops led by staff members with art therapy backgrounds. Reiterated multiple times in this thesis, training of staff is an integral strategy in addressing the needs of individuals with ASD. Another positive is their ability to collaborate with the surrounding community, a necessary component of museum programming. One partnership is how they work with the Queens Library to make community spaces more accessible for visitors with ASD. Another is serving in select New York City schools, specifically self-contained classrooms. These partnerships are intended to develop better programming by making their programs known and build a comfort level with these individuals and their families in a setting that is familiar to them.

Lopez mentioned that the museum staff has begun incorporating ideas from Temple Grandin’s book, *Thinking in Pictures*.<sup>69</sup> Grandin is widely cited advocate for the rights of individuals with autism. These ideas that support the inclusion of individuals with ASD into a public setting were a part of the inspiration for the Queen’s Museum’s own *Room to Grow* guide,

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<sup>68</sup> Lopez, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Lopez, 2014.

one of the model examples used in this study, written by Michelle Lopez and Jennifer Candiano.<sup>70</sup> It provides practical tools and addresses common questions about designing and hosting educational programs for children. The program designers developed the programming model around the needs of children with autism and their families. The authors describe how the guide is intended to “help kids generalize important skills learned in school into existing community spaces...to learn within the context of their daily lives.”<sup>71</sup> The guide begins with outlining goals for their model access program and what the program strives to achieve for special needs individuals. It segues into a brief description on autism and the characteristics learners might show. It offers guidelines regarding skills and behaviors that are reinforced within these programs that educators should strive to increase or decrease from the participating individuals. The skills reinforced within this program include appropriate communication skills, problem solving skills, storytelling skills, and skills that promote an individual’s independence and self esteem. The behaviors associated with these skill sets are explicitly modeled for the participants by the facilitating educator within that session. The guidelines provided within this book give parents and educators an at-a-glance look at what social supports are integrated alongside the museum-based curriculum. The guide then goes on to give instructions on setting up programs, followed by an FAQ section answering questions on how to implement programs for museums wishing to design programming with similar elements. The focus of this guide is to highlight the museum’s ‘participant driven’ programming and break down the educational structure behind the art-based curriculum. The *Room to Grow* guide is intended to inspire confidence and awareness in educators of our cultural institutions and to help them design inclusive programming that welcomes the learning styles and social goals of children with ASD.

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<sup>70</sup> Lopez, p.3.

<sup>71</sup> Lopez, p.7.

On issue of barriers, Lopez described that the museum can encounter issues trying to design and promote programming for adults with ASD. She told of a main reason being that funding is much harder to get for adults than for school-age children mainly because adults do not have strong advocates like children do, so it is much more difficult to get programs started for them in the community.<sup>72</sup> Though, the Queens Museum does find in-house ways to fund and do programs for adults with ASD.

### **The Jewish Museum of New York**

The Jewish Museum in New York, New York describes itself as an art and Jewish culture museum that serves visitors of all types of audiences. Its mission statement declares:

the dedication to the enjoyment, understanding, and preservation of the artistic and cultural heritage of the Jewish people through its unparalleled collections, distinguished exhibitions, and related education programs. Using art and artifacts that embody the diversity of the Jewish experience from ancient to present times, throughout the world, the Museum strives to be a source of inspiration and shared human values for people of all religious and cultural backgrounds while serving as a special touchstone of identity for Jewish people.<sup>73</sup>

The dedication to this philosophy is evident through their implementation of their programs. In particular, the Jewish Museum's access programs for visitors with ASD go far beyond any minimum requirements.

When interviewing Dara Cohen and Meredith Wong, Access and Scheduling Coordinators, from the Jewish Museum they discussed how they began working at the Jewish Museum over seven years ago. They mentioned how access programs first evolved prior to then when some 'basics' of the program were in place - i.e. accommodations for those with hearing

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<sup>72</sup> Lopez, 2014.

<sup>73</sup> The Jewish Museum. "Mission Statement." <http://www.thejewishmuseum.org/Mission> (accessed July 6, 2013).



and visual impairments.<sup>74</sup> From there, the museums began to host groups for visitors with special needs to tour the museum.

For visitors with learning disabilities or ASD the Jewish Museum currently hosts family workshops which include gallery activities where visitors can examine art, explore exhibits and then create a work of their own. The Jewish Museum does offer twenty-five of their school tours for free on a first-come, first-served basis, with a maximum of two free tours per school. The museum also has verbal description tours designed to provide additional support for people who are blind or partially-sighted as well as tour in American Sign Language for people who are in the ASL community. Public tours to all of these communities are offered periodically and private tours are available with two weeks' notice.

The Jewish Museum's touch tours are not intended to only support visitors who are blind or partially sighted; they also provide support for other visitors such as people with ASD through its multisensory components. These tours are designed to provide a wide range of accommodations. As previously mentioned, their touch tours incorporate tactile objects based on the permanent exhibitions of the museum. This experience allows students to explore the collection using replicas, fabric samples, and raised drawings. These tours include a gallery program, and may include a hands-on studio art project, and focus on either art in the ancient world or the modern Jewish experience. These additional program components provide multisensory experiences for individuals with ASD which promote the individuals to interact directly with each exhibit.

For grades three through eight, there is an archeological version of the touch tour. Educators guiding these tours are also trained to assist visitors using verbal imaging techniques.

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<sup>74</sup> Cohen and Wong, 2014.

In addition to the touch tours the Jewish Museum offers, they provide Verbal Description Tours of their exhibitions, which are offered bi-monthly or by appointment. On these tours, educators are trained to provide detailed descriptions of the exhibitions and integrate certain touch objects into the gallery tours. Along with these tours, tactile books are available upon request that can be used with one of the museum's specially trained educators. These books are based on parts of the Jewish Museum's permanent collection, *Culture and Continuity: The Jewish Journey*. Also available upon request, when entering the museum, are large print labels for special exhibitions and the museum's permanent galleries. These tools help present exhibit information in alternate forms.

Cohen and Wong said that six years ago the museum started to host training sessions for their staff in which outside consultants or trained museum staff from other institutions would come in.<sup>75</sup> The training of staff is a vital strategy in addressing the needs of individuals with ASD. Trainings for staff are for museum educators employed by the Jewish Museum to teach museum programming. The Jewish Museum also hosts professional development workshops for special education teachers are free of charge free workshops for special education teachers from schools outside of the organization. Some of the access educators at the Jewish Museum work in other museums as well and trained with another museum before helping the Jewish Museum bring their access staff up to speed. Access Family Workshops at the Jewish Museum is closely modeled after that of the Museum of Modern Art, after they partnered with them to launch our family programs for individuals 18 and over. Both of these museums are active members of the Museum Access Consortium (MAC), participating in trainings and community meetings hosted

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<sup>75</sup> Cohen and Wong, 2014.

by the organization. This shows the collective effort and the communication between the access community.

The subject of funding for these programs was broached. Cohen and Wong went on to say that while money is available for programs when needed, when applying for a grant, the funding needs to be specific to the program.<sup>76</sup> Access Programs at the Jewish Museum are made possible by the J.E. and Z.B. Butler Foundation, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and other donors.<sup>77</sup> The J.E. & Z.B. Butler Foundation describes their mission as supporting life-enhancing opportunities for at-risk and underserved individuals and families through partnerships with community-based organizations.<sup>78</sup> The Foundation supports innovative direct service programs that respond to emerging community needs and collaborates with community and agency leaders to create networks that provide a continuum of services.

While problems and complications can always arise with funding, one of the barriers of implementing access programming, Cohen and Wong did say that, “Over time, access programming has become an institutional priority.”<sup>79</sup> Certain programs such as access school partnerships, access school tours, and access family workshops have brief evaluations for participants to complete. The Jewish Museum is currently working with an evaluation consultant to create evaluations for all access programming and to streamline such methods. Cohen and Wong also went on to add that they want to start coding the passes they give out at family workshops to begin seeing if the families are using these vouchers and returning to the museum regularly on their own when they are not coming for a specific program or event. However, the

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<sup>76</sup> Cohen and Wong, 2014.

<sup>77</sup> The Jewish Museum. “Access Programs.” <http://www.thejewishmuseum.org/AccessPrograms> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>78</sup> [http://www.butlerfoundation.org/butlerfoundation\\_mission.htm](http://www.butlerfoundation.org/butlerfoundation_mission.htm)

<sup>79</sup> Cohen and Wong, 2014.

Jewish Museum keeps registration lists for all of their programs in order to tell if a visitor has been there before.<sup>80</sup> This shows the Jewish Museum's goal in applying one of the strategies such as evaluations and surveys. Either through the evaluation forms that participants complete or by analyzing the number of visitors that return for these programs, the museum can critique itself through these methods.

### **Albright-Knox Art Gallery**

The Albright-Knox Art Gallery is an art museum focusing on modern and contemporary art in Buffalo, New York. The gallery's collections are represented by post-war American and European art as well as Impressionism and post-Impressionism. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery describes its mission to be an artistic and cultural hub that strives to be an educational resource for all audiences. The gallery offers a variety of programs intended to include individuals with ASD into the museum experience through the use of alternate programming and multisensory tools.

One of the programs provided by the Albright-Knox is entitled *Access AK*. Within the *Access AK* program, there are two sub-programs that provide various supports for visitors with special needs. The first sub-program is a combination of a former *Access AK* program named *Please Touch* along with another former *Access AK* program, *Art Sense-Ations*. This program accommodates visitors who are blind or partially sighted and guides them through touch tours of selected sculptures within the gallery and special exhibitions with in-depth verbal descriptions. This is followed by a hands-on art activity with a member of the Gallery's Education Department.

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<sup>80</sup> Cohen and Wong, 2014.

The second sub-program that stood out was the *Creative Connection* (formerly *Matter At Hand*) portion of the *Access AK* program. This program provides enriching art experiences for individuals with ASD. Participants from kindergarten-age and up can enjoy tours of the gallery and participate in art-making sessions. The gallery's website mentions how groups are usually limited to a maximum of ten participants, and must be accompanied by agency or school staff at all times. Sessions are ninety minutes long and are free of charge. Groups can schedule up to four visits in a six month period, depending on availability. To register, prospective visitors are directed to contact Accessibility and Community Programs Coordinator Teri Fallesen. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery website states, "The program combines tours of the Gallery's Collection and special exhibitions, hands-on art workshops, and group discussions to enable individuals to express themselves and to learn about the language and creation of art. *Creative Connection* tours and workshops are designed to meet the needs and interests of the specific school or agency group."<sup>81</sup>

Fallesen and *Access AK* outline some suggested goals that can be reinforced through the gallery tour and art activity. Such goals stated are to provide participants with opportunities for recreation and socialization, improve feeling identification and expression through the use of art, increase sensory awareness and integration, develop language skills, reinforce elements of art, and introduce participants to art history. Needs such as effective communication strategies, teaching socially appropriate behaviors, developing social competence, as well as skill development are all directly addressed in the programs descriptions. These program goals allow educators to adapt the *Creative Connection* program to meet its needs and interests within their respective classrooms. The ability to provide individuals with disabilities an outlet into an arena

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<sup>81</sup> Albright-Knox Art Gallery. "Access AK Programs and Services." <http://www.albrightknox.org/education/access-ak/about/> (accessed January 3, 2015).

where they can likely express themselves more openly and more easily, without judgment or the confined structure they may be accustomed to can be invaluable. Then the opportunity to become more familiar with elements of art is an additional benefit. An exhibit entitled “Engage, Exchange, Expand” is a collection of works created by participants in the *Creative Connections* program and was viewable at the gallery during March and April of 2013 and is currently still viewable online.<sup>82</sup>

According to the Head of Development of the Albright-Knox, Jennifer Bayles, the *Access AK* program at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery dates back to 1973. At this time, it was known as the *Matter At Hand* program. When communicating with Bayles, she mentioned that “Albright-Knox is among the first museums to have a program developed to special needs audiences.”<sup>83</sup> Teri Fallesen, the Accessibility and Community Programs Coordinator, mentioned that as the program has developed and expanded it has been run by her and a group of dedicated volunteers. Fallesen went on to describe how she has several other museum responsibilities, such as coordinating community programs. Fallesen disclosed that she has a dual bachelor’s in Ceramics, Art Education, and a minor in Art Therapy, as well as an initial New York State teaching certification in Visual Arts K-12, General Education grades 1-6, Special Education in grades 1-6 and working on their Master’s degree in Childhood Special Education. Fallesen stated that despite these aforementioned qualifications, she still regularly attends trainings that prepare her to work with groups with specific disabilities as well as helping the museum to remain current with ADA standards. This is a vital first step before working with individuals with ASD. Lastly, Fallesen described that, “for our *Art Sense-Ations* program we are fortunate to

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<sup>82</sup> Albright-Knox Art Gallery. “Engage, Exchange, Expand.” [http://www.albrightknox.org/exhibitions/exhibition:03-15-2013-engage-exchange-expand-education-exhibition-/](http://www.albrightknox.org/exhibitions/exhibition:03-15-2013-engage-exchange-expand-education-exhibition/) (accessed February 23, 2014).

<sup>83</sup> Bayles, 2014.

have three or four wonderful docents who give their time on a monthly basis to assist in these tours.”<sup>84</sup>

The Albright-Knox Art Gallery’s website points out that funding for *Access AK* is made possible through non-profit organizations such as the James H. Cummings Foundation, Inc. Endowment and the William M. Wood Foundation. In addition to those organizations, National Fuel sponsors the *Access AK* program. Having the right sponsors and funding can make a difference, for instance the James H. Cummings Foundation lists specific guidelines in the application proposal such as requiring progress reports as well as program monitoring.<sup>85</sup> Such monitoring and required reports can in effect force an institution to keep their programs up to date and meeting their goals.

### **Buffalo Museum of Science**

The Buffalo Museum of Science is a science museum in Buffalo, New York. The museum was originally established as a research institution in 1836 for the Young Men’s Association (YMA), which later grew into the Natural History Society in 1861.<sup>86</sup> Their collections present categories such as anthropology, botany, geology, zoology, and mycology. They are represented in exhibits about outer space, artifacts and anthropology, as well as new hands-on exhibits regarding physical motion, the Earth’s weather patterns, and dinosaur fossils. The museum serves visitors of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. It describes its mission as being a non-profit educational institution that is dedicated to the study and interpretation of the natural and physical sciences while “inspiring curiosity through exploration.”<sup>87</sup> With a wide

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<sup>84</sup> Fallesen, 2014.

<sup>85</sup> James H. Cummings Foundation, Inc. “Grant Application Procedures.” <http://jameshcummings.com/#> (accessed February, 24, 2014).

<sup>86</sup> Buffalo Museum of Science. “History.” <http://www.sciencebuff.org/about-us/history/> (accessed April 16, 2015).

<sup>87</sup> Buffalo Museum of Science. “About Us.” <http://www.sciencebuff.org/about-us/> (accessed April 15, 2013).

array of collections and diverse exhibits, they also have a comprehensive educational department. The Buffalo Museum of Science's website tells of how they offer a variety of programs that span from hands-on workshops to outreach programs that take their collections into schools and classrooms in the area.

When speaking with Jodi Protas, Learning and Interpretation Administrator at the Buffalo Museum of Science, about programs for special needs audiences, she first talked about the outreach programs and a Sensory Tour. The Museum offers numerous outreach programs from preschool through grade seven. While the programs are not specifically designed for audiences with ASD, the museum can customize programs for these environments by teacher request which will occasionally occur. The outreach programs can take place in a classroom setting with an estimated audience of twenty to thirty people, or an assembly setting for possibly over three-hundred people. The classroom programs are designed to enhance the classroom curriculum and can include artifacts and live animals from the collections. These programs connect the science disciplines with math and social studies, and include many hands-on activities that support the New York State Math, Science, and Technology Standards. The assembly programs are interactive and engaging and bring science and theatre together in dynamic ways. Another type of outreach program the representative went on to describe is a Science Fun Festival. Schools choose four to six hands on stations on topics of their interest or curriculum, and students and their families explore each of the stations. At these stations there will be various artifacts or hands on activities from the collections at the Museum based on the school's request. These programs, such as the Sensory Tour and Science is Fun Festival, give the opportunity to address needs such as effective communication strategies, teaching socially appropriate behaviors, and developing social competence while interacting during these sessions.



One of the tours offered at the Buffalo Museum of Science is the Sensory Tour and it is for all visitors and can be particularly helpful to those with ASD. Protas explained that “This tour allows for visitors to learn about and to touch, smell, see, and hear different animals. In addition, if asked by any group, we would customize a program to suit the specific needs of the particular group. We also offer reduced admission for special needs groups to come and do a self-guided visit.”<sup>88</sup> Additionally, if groups with special needs visitors call ahead, the Museum can tailor the program that the group books to what the teacher or group leader requests. If there are no particular requests, a standard program is used for groups going on a Sensory Tour or doing any other Museum program. During a Sensory Tour, visitors learn about the different animals in the local region and can touch (fur), hear (bird call), and smell (skunk odor) an animal in addition to seeing it.

The Buffalo Museum of Science also runs professional development programs. Here, the Museum engages with teachers on relevant topics using inquiry based strategies so the teachers can bring these ideas and strategies back to their own classrooms. Currently, to attend a professional development session it is thirty dollars for non-members and twenty-five dollars for Museum members. However, the Museum also offers the ability to customize professional development programming to a district or group’s needs. The rates vary depending on what the training entails.<sup>89</sup> Reiterated multiple times in this thesis, training of staff is an integral strategy in addressing the needs of individuals with ASD. Without these trainings, strategies and programs that are intended to address the needs of disabled individuals are at risk of not being properly executed. Be it through their trainings that they host or the programs themselves, the

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<sup>88</sup> Protas, 2014.

<sup>89</sup> Protas, 2014.

Buffalo Museum of Science displays not only their ability but commitment toward implementing programs that address the needs of those who have ASD.

### **Explore & More Children's Museum**

The Explore & More Children's Museum, located in East Aurora, NY, is a non-profit organization that describes its mission to be an environment for creative play and learning through hands-on exhibits, activities and programs that spark creativity, curiosity, and imagination. The museum is intended for children ages 1-10 but describes how it can be enjoyable for the entire family. It was founded in 1994 by a group of parents, educators, and designers focused on the goal of creating quality exhibits and programs for children and families.<sup>90</sup>

Their *Au-some Evenings* program is a once a month program at dedicated to giving children with autism spectrum disorders along with their friends and families an opportunity to play and learn together in an understanding and supportive environment. The need for a comfortable learning environment is an important factor in ensuring an access program's success. Once comfortable learning environment is attained, needs such as effective communication, teaching socially appropriate behaviors, and developing social competence can be addressed while interacting with individuals with ASD during these sessions.

The museum's website also includes a social story to download and help prepare children for their visit to the museum. The use of visual supports and social stories is another strategy to help address the needs of children with ASD.

Dr. Kathy Doody, an assistant professor in SUNY Buffalo's Exceptional Education department, has established a service learning partnership between SUNY Buffalo and the

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<sup>90</sup> Explore & More Children's Museum. "About Us." <http://www.exploreandmore.org/pages/About-Us.aspx> (accessed April 11, 2014).

Explore & More Children's Museum in East Aurora, NY. Through this partnership, she acted as the principal investigator within the research study regarding the inclusion of individuals with autism within the museum setting. This research study investigated which exhibits were preferred the most by participants with ASD. Through the information collected from this research study, Doody was able to found the *Au-Some Evenings* program at the Explore & More Children's Museum. Upon discussion of the museum's *Au-Some Evenings*, Doody outlined what went into the initiation of the program. She specifically spoke of trainings for museum staff prior to the program's launch and meetings with the museum administrators to secure funding. Graduate students from a local college would also come to the events to help facilitate play and to supervise children, which would help take some of the pressure off of the museum employees, and in turn help these graduate students become more familiar with working with children with autism.<sup>91</sup> The use of graduate students as volunteers is a notable strategy when encountering barriers such as funding. Additionally, Doody spoke of an extremely thorough environmental assessment of the museum; to make sure that the exhibits were sturdy enough to withstand the play of children with autism and that there were no potentially dangerous situations. She also noted that they have taken precautions, such as heavily supervising the exit doors, so that no child can leave unattended.<sup>92</sup>

Coinciding with the goal of providing recreational welcoming and secure opportunities for children and families with special needs are a few other goals of the program. One example Doody mentioned was a research project being conducted during these events on the play preferences of children with autism and those of children with typical development, then seeing

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<sup>91</sup> Doody, 2014.

<sup>92</sup> Doody, 2014.

where the common ground is between the two.<sup>93</sup> This was done specifically to help the museum in designing future exhibits, particularly as they prepare for moving to their larger waterfront facility next year.<sup>94</sup> This research project conducted is a prime example of the commitment by access program staff members at museums. Staff commitment such as this can help a museum overcome certain barriers or modernize their respective institution.

The program is free of charge and was developed in collaboration with The Children's Guild Foundation Autism Spectrum Disorder Center at Women & Children's Hospital of Buffalo and the Center for Autism Support and Education (CASE). The museum's website describes it as the first program of its kind in Western New York. As discussed throughout this thesis, funding can be a barrier to the successful implementation of access programming. However, the Explore & More Children's Museum's list of donors is quite lengthy and is headed by the East Hill Foundation and the John R. Oishei Foundation.<sup>95</sup>

## Summary

An investigation of access programs shows how the museums within the case studies provide exemplary programming for individuals with ASD. The variety of programs gives each of these visitors the opportunity to access the museum in multiple ways. "Several studies have shown that parenting a child with ASD is often stressful, which may limit the family's energy, and motivation for participating in community outings such as visiting a museum."<sup>96</sup> Therefore, when a family who has a child with ASD visits the museum it is important for them to feel at ease and comfortable during their entire visit. The strategies and tools of existing museum

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<sup>93</sup> School of Education (BuffaloState.edu). News: "Playing with autism."  
<http://schoolofeducation.buffalostate.edu/news/playing-autism> (accessed December 13, 2014).

<sup>94</sup> Doody, 2014.

<sup>95</sup> Explore & More Children's Museum. "Donors List."  
<http://www.exploreandmore.org/include/uploads/1/2013%20donor%20list.pdf> (accessed April 11, 2014).

<sup>96</sup> Abbott *et al*, "Parenting Stress and Psychological Functioning among Mothers of Preschool Children with Autism and Developmental Delay," *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice* 4 (2009).

access programs listed here intend to serve that and other needs of individuals with ASD. Those needs, such as effective communication strategies, teaching socially appropriate behaviors, developing social competence, skill development, providing a comfortable learning environment, are all addressed within these access programs at these various institutions. These case studies set the stage for the following chapter which will further analyze those strategies the museums implement to address the needs of visitors with ASD.

## **Chapter V: Museum Program Strategies**

With a sizable portion of the population classified as having some type of a disability, the responsibility begins to grow for museums and institutions as it becomes their duty to properly accommodate these individuals. Some museums are going beyond the legal obligations of the ADA. The necessity for access programming becomes more immediate due to the growing number of individuals with disabilities in the population. In virtually every case study, any program offered on a periodic basis was always said by the museum representative contacted that it had been filled. Outside of the case studies, many access programs do serve the needs of those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), but not all go above and beyond the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). “While museums have made accommodations for persons with physical disabilities (motor, sight, and hearing), children with cognitive disabilities have not received the same attention.”<sup>97</sup> Regardless of the size of a museum or its income, most museums have a legal obligation to provide accessibility for visitors with disabilities.

This chapter will delve into some highlighted strategies that the museums from the case studies use as well as certain barriers that hinder the progress of programming. A few strategies addressed within these case studies include adjusting the environment to fit the needs of visitors with ASD, having preplanned programs already in place, individualized days for visitors with developmental disabilities such as ASD, school visits to help plan museum programs, trainings for museum staff working with individuals with ASD, and self-evaluations such as surveys to gain feedback on access programming. Following an analysis of those methods, this chapter will

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<sup>97</sup> Maxell & Killeen, p.18

touch upon the barriers that can impede the successful implementation of access programs and how museums can overcome them. Such barriers can include limited physical available space and restricted amount of funding obtainable. This analysis shows a correlation between the development of these programming strategies and how they are stunted by their surrounding barriers.

Some museum access programs that go above and beyond the legal mandates of the ADA are the Queens Museum, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, The Jewish Museum of New York, the Buffalo Museum of Science, and the Explore & More Children's Museum. Despite being split between different locations as well as being different types of museums, all do share one quality—each implements access programs that effectively utilize their resources to provide access programming that accommodates visitors with ASD.

### **Adjusting the Learning Environment**

One way individuals with ASD are being accommodated by these institutions is through a shift in thinking. This shift specifies the necessity to form a more flexible learning environment that can be changed to adapt to different individuals' needs. Rappolt-Schlichtmann and Daley were cited in this investigation as describing a disability as not being situated with the person, but rather in the interaction between the person and the environment. That idea of the interaction between the person and the environment—rather than focusing on the disability alone—is echoed by other museum professionals in this study. This point stresses the need for visitors to feel comfortable within the museum setting, which is important for all visitors, but especially for individuals with ASD.

Museums are currently making an effort to meet the needs of individuals with ASD by implementing programs and workshops that are tailor the learning environment to the physical

and developmental needs of these visitors. An example of this would be the Queens Museum's *ArtAccess* program, specifically their "Room to Grow" guidebook. The guide points out ways programs can meet the needs of special needs learners by attempting to "build receptive and literacy skills"<sup>98</sup> using the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Also within the QMA's "Room to Grow" packet is a chapter on setting up an ideal learning environment.<sup>99</sup> It covers areas such as where to place certain tables and boards along with distributing materials and visual supports and icons with the goal of promoting socialization in a safe environment. Chapter four gives a step-by-step map of where and how to set up the tables and materials needed for a program. It further discusses specific chair and table placement that helps create a more open space for individuals,

Setting up the tables in two rows facing each other with the middle clear allows for the students to see each other. The leader and co-leader can easily navigate from student to student, while bending down to gain eye contact. This also diminishes safety concerns because the leaders are always able to have a clear view of each of the students.

This setup is important because it maintains a clear organization of the space and ensures that all of the materials stay neat and organized in order to alleviate stresses and anxiety that accompanies disorganization. As stated earlier within the case studies, the skills reinforced within this program include appropriate communication skills, problem solving skills, storytelling skills, and skills that promote an individual's independence and self esteem. "Intentional, goal—directed actions for supporting families has been shown to enhance children's learning."<sup>100</sup>

Using the parameters listed in this book as a guide, the Queens Museum has begun to develop more inclusive programming for individuals with ASD within their own setting. Using

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<sup>98</sup> Lopez, p.26.

<sup>99</sup> Lopez, p.23.

<sup>100</sup> Haas 1997.



the strategies mentioned above, the Queens Museum's slate of programs dedicates its efforts to creating more welcoming spaces for families affected by autism. Additionally, programs for adults with ASD are implemented in a safe and comfortable environment which accommodates their needs. These efforts of museum staff prove that this museum is not just a place where children and adults with ASD can go to relax or have an experience that is out of their ordinary routine, but a place where they can find the right tools to engage with that are familiar to them. Alterations to the environment using specialized approaches such as these can help create long-term and beneficial responses such as development of targeted social and learning skills.

Adjustments to the learning environment, such as the previously mentioned programs, are critical in establishing a level of comfort for autistic visitors and their families. "Evaluations of children's museum programs should address the extent to which the environment is welcoming and comfortable, and affords opportunities for enjoyment and learning."<sup>101</sup> One museum that has designed programming with this philosophy as the foundation is the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Upon analysis of their *Creative Connection* program, it is clear that this program focuses directly on the individuals involved through the use of its workshop classes. These classes provide individualization of instruction for its participants by encouraging their feelings of identification and expression through the use of art. These workshop settings are more intimate and provide more one-on-one support which helps the individuals feel more at ease. Specifically, participants are given a separate area in which they can either work in small groups or independently. This intimate setting, as stated previously, creates a more comfortable learning environment in which they can interact with museum staff and the exhibits on a more personal basis. In addition to modifying the staff-to-visitor ratio, other accommodations are provided

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<sup>101</sup> Mulligan *et al* 2013, p.309

within the programming itself. For example, individuals get the opportunity to experience the exhibit through multisensory integration. They receive support through the provision of manipulatives, kinesthetic movement integration, and structured socialization. Through the use of these multifunctional program components, it is easier to create a program that can reach all types of learners.

This theory of differentiating workshop instruction parallels how classroom teachers make changes to the learning environment. In order to differentiate each experience for each individual that passes through the program, “adaptations to the physical environment and instructional materials...will be required.”<sup>102</sup> In order to create programming with the structure and flexibility needed in order to effectively support individuals with ASD within the museum setting, staff members with the appropriate qualifications are a must. What makes program coordinator Teri Fallesen a prime resource for access program design is her many qualifications. They include a dual bachelor’s in ceramics and art education, an initial New York State teaching certification in visual arts K-12, general education and special education for grades 1-6.

Another method through which a comfortable learning environment can be established is through the implementation of different planning techniques. One technique that is particularly successful in avoiding undue stress is the creation of a schedule of daily activities and a pattern of events.<sup>103</sup> This method requires planning ahead of time and preparing individuals with ASD with their expectations well before their visit to the museum. One museum from the case studies presented that incorporates this strategy is the Buffalo Museum of Science. When contacted by a group before a visit, the museum staff is able to customize a program that suits the needs of that particular visiting group. Some accommodations that can be provided for these groups include

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<sup>102</sup> Mastropieri, p.90.

<sup>103</sup> Mastropieri, p.92.

separate location, increased staff-to-visitor ratio, and hands-on instruction. These pre-planning measures are entirely dependent on the needs of the individuals attending the program. Pre-planning provides flexibility that ensures that the appropriate accommodations and supports are put into place to set all visitors up for success. By incorporating this strategy, the Buffalo Museum of Science works diligently to ensure that all visitors, despite the extent of their needs, can maximize their experience.

As ideal as this type of learning environment is, this luxury is not always readily available within the regular museum setting. Au-Yeung and colleagues write, “researchers have demonstrated that families with children with ASD are often challenged to access comfortably and benefit from settings and programs enjoyed by others in their communities.”<sup>104</sup> Once a comfort level within a new activity or program can be developed, the success of individuals with ASD within these programs increase:

Highly complex environments can heighten anxiety in children and increase levels of distraction. Museum spaces may be anxiety provoking because the spaces are unfamiliar and children may become disoriented. If children are distracted by attributes of the space, they may pay little attention to the exhibits. If teachers and museum educators want children to get the most educational benefit from museum trips, attributes of the physical environment should decrease both distraction and anxiety.<sup>105</sup>

The way that these museums establish comfortable learning environments for individuals with ASD is essential for the success of that program as well as the individuals participating in it.

### **Programming in Place**

Another way museums go beyond expectations of access programming for audiences with ASD is having frequent access programming already in place. By regularly offering preplanned programs and maintaining suitable trained staff, the museum can provide an element

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<sup>104</sup> Au-Yeung *et al* 2010.

<sup>105</sup> Maxell & Killeen, p.18

of consistency and continuity for individuals with ASD and their families. This continuity is extremely vital in order to build that aforementioned level of comfort with autistic visitors. Having consistent alternative programming does not mean that restrictions are in place that limit an individual's participation within that environment or program. Rather, the program is designed in such a way that it can be tailored specifically for a designated group depending on the individuals' needs. However, instead of modifying from a standardized program structure that provides no opportunity for individualization, alternative programming provides a base element from which further accommodations can be made for each group of attendees.

All of the museums in this study, at minimum, have a monthly program in place for visitors with learning challenges, auditory challenges, and those who are blind or partially sighted. Disabilities such as these are not uncommon within the autistic community. These programs are offered on a regular basis, and whether they occur weekly or monthly is based on the museum's discretion. Museums design these programs with the intention that the individuals are included within the museum setting. These programs offer designated times within the museum's regular hours in which individuals with ASD receive the accommodations and extra support they need within this setting. Common characteristics of these programs include enlarged print on boards, audio guides, verbal tours, and sensory tours (Touch Tours). These program supplements help bring an element of depth to the museum experience by opening up the museum exhibit to these individuals by using multisensory methods.

One example of this would be the Queens Museum's program *ArtAccess*, which welcomes visitors to a program for individuals with ASD and their families. Most of their programs allow coordinators the flexibility to design an experience based on the needs of the

students or clients. The museum can alter a program, either remove certain materials, or focus on a specific portion of the program longer, be it a workshop or a hands-on tour.

Along with the Queen's Museum's *ArtAccess* program, the Jewish Museum's access family workshops and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's *Creative Connections* program also provide visitors with ASD the opportunity to explore their institutions with family and friends. These programs are tailored to their wide range of abilities and learning styles. Through programs like these, once that aforementioned comfort level is readily presented it is more easily attainable.

### **Individualized Days**

Aside from having regularly scheduled access programming already in place, another way museums can accommodate visitors with ASD successfully is through individualized days dedicated specifically to visitors with autism. These days welcome special needs visitors and their families into the museum by closing the museum completely to the general public in order to dedicate the full facility and staff to these individuals. Individualized days are offered less frequently than in the regular programming in place. As Judy Rand writes in her *Visitors Bill of Rights*:

“Welcome/belonging – ‘Make me feel welcome.’ Respect – ‘Accept me for who I am and what I know.’ Visitors want to be accepted at their own level of knowledge and interest. They don’t want exhibits, labels or staff to exclude them, patronize them or make them feel dumb.”<sup>106</sup>

On these days, visitors are more easily given those rights in a more accessible fashion due to the increased attention they receive. This time is separate and is hosted either before or after regular operating hours. One museum that presents separate individualized days is the Explore & More Children's Museum. This museum hosts a program entitled *Au-some Evenings* which is a once a

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<sup>106</sup> Rand 2000, p.158

month program dedicated to giving children with ASD and their friends and families an opportunity to play and learn together in an understanding and supportive environment. “Children’s museums provide opportunities for families to spend quality time together in interactive environments that aim to foster a sense of community and enjoyment for those who attend.”<sup>107</sup> This program is intended to invite these visitors in, perhaps for the first time, in the hopes of building that comfort level and then return again, possibly even during regular hours of operation.

### **Collaboration with Schools**

Another effective access strategy observed within the museum programs from the case studies is outside collaboration. In order to create the most accessible environment for individuals with ASD, it is essential for the museum staff to be willing to collaborate within the community. The Queens Museum highlighted their work with libraries, museums, historical sites, and schools in the surrounding area to augment ASD programming. One partnership that they rely on to develop their access programming is with select New York City schools—specifically self-contained classrooms. This museum collaborates with these schools by sending museum staff into classrooms in order to directly work with classroom staff. The museum staff can work with the teachers to create a museum visit specifically tailored to their group of students. Partnerships like this are intended to develop better programming by creating program awareness and by building a comfort level with individuals with ASD in a setting that is familiar to them.

Another museum in the study that utilizes collaboration for program development is the Jewish Museum of New York. This museum hosts professional development workshops for

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<sup>107</sup> Mulligan *et al* 2013, p.308

special education teachers from outside of the organization that are either minimal cost or free of charge. These workshops can be customized to fit the grade level and curriculum requirements for the specific group of teachers that are enrolled. Through this programming, teachers learn about what exhibits the museum has to offer and how these exhibits can fit into their specific curriculum. Through these workshops, teachers become equipped with the knowledge and tools necessary to facilitate a museum experience for their students within their own classroom setting.

The Buffalo Museum of Science collaborates with schools in a different way. Rather than relying on on-site workshops, the Buffalo Museum of Science provides outreach services to the community as well. They engage in outreach programs in which they take their collections into schools and classrooms in the area. This type of programming is very effective for individuals with ASD who may have trouble visiting the museum itself due to behavioral concerns. Programs like this bring additional accessibility to individuals with ASD by providing an element of mobility to museum collections. This helps eliminate any additional barriers that may hinder an individual's ability to gain access to the museum setting.

These programs stand by the idea that bringing the museum to the individuals in their most familiar setting helps them connect to the collections more so than they might be able to via a simple tour of display cases. In the case of accommodating visitors with ASD, continuous involvement with area schools is imperative. Programming geared toward all visitors with ASD is crucial, but the ability to reach school age children while they are in their classroom setting is a clear-cut opportunity to take advantage of. Providing access opportunities to young children within their most comfortable setting is a strategy that will help encourage future participation and involvement in the museum setting.

## Trained Staff

Training of staff is an initial step in approaching the proper preparation of museum programming.<sup>108</sup> In Julia Furlan’s article “Museums Reach Out to Artists with Special Needs,” she cites a museum used in the case studies within this investigation – the Queens Museum. She points out this museum’s ability to provide activities and workshops from trained professionals with art therapy backgrounds in order to meet the needs of visitors with ASD. For the Queens Museum, the proper training of staff is a keystone element behind the success of its access programming. Such training entails educating museum staff members through specific workshops and programs with the understanding that they are working with individuals with ASD. These programs ensure that the staff is properly prepared to provide support to these individuals within the museum setting. In any museum, it is the staff that provides support to individuals with ASD and their families. It is for this reason that the staff must undergo the necessary training in order to provide adequate and appropriate support.<sup>109</sup>

From each institution researched in the case studies, the corresponding representatives from each institution spoke of trainings that were offered, either at their museum or at another. In each instance, this training was validated by the need for that museum to accommodate individuals with ASD at the museum. These trainings are either facilitated by the museum itself or through a network of institutions such as the New York’s Museum Access Consortium (MAC). Regardless of the facilitating institution, the training sessions themselves are conducted by museum professionals with a background in a specific area related to museum access programming. These professionals carry out trainings for new staff or volunteers who may be unfamiliar with working with individuals with ASD. When speaking to the representatives from

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<sup>108</sup> Adler 2010, p.36

<sup>109</sup> Mulligan *et al* 2013, p.311



the institutions in each case study, many of the training backgrounds specified were either on the educational side, be it in special education itself, or more often in the area of art therapy.

A number of museums in the case studies, especially those associated with MAC, put aside time to hold trainings for their staff in order to better suit the needs of individuals with ASD. One such example, the Queens Museum reached out within their local community and allocated their first grant towards their access programming which was devoted entirely towards training both Queens Library and Queens Museum staff. The Queens Museum directed this grant to these facilities so that their staff could better support area families who have children with special needs. In addition, the Jewish Museum then started to host trainings for their staff in which outside consultants from other institutions—specifically the Museum of Modern Art—would come in to provide supplemental training.

Along with these New York City area museums, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and the Explore & More Museum provide opportunities for their staff to educate themselves with the intention to better support individuals with ASD within their respective museums. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery's Accessibility Programs Coordinator Teri Fallesen stated that she still regularly attends trainings that prepare her to work with groups with specific disabilities as well as helping the museum to remain current with ADA standards. The Explore & More Children's Museum's access programs were being developed, the museum held trainings for its staff prior to the museum's launch. In order to carry out the programs properly and provide the appropriate supports, the staff must be adequately trained. These museums' commitment toward ensuring the success of their programming is evident through their determination to have a trained staff that can properly serve the needs of individuals with ASD.

## Evaluations

Coinciding with staff commitment is the ability to critique and evaluate one's programming. Surveys are a direct way to study the effectiveness of museum access programs.<sup>110</sup> The Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC) reiterates the notion that in order to ensure that they are providing consistent accessible environment institutions must re-evaluate themselves on a periodic basis: "To strive for compliance in existing exhibits, facilities and visitor services, museums need to know what is accessible and what needs improvement. Conducting an access survey provides that information."<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, the ASTC gives recommendations in how to build survey teams from staff at the museums as well as accessibility checklist. For an example survey see Appendix B.

Dara Cohen and Meredith Wong from the Jewish Museum mentioned that certain programs such as access school partnerships, access school tours, and even access family workshops have brief evaluations for participants to complete at the conclusion of an event. They went on to describe how they are working with an evaluation consultant to create evaluations for all access programming and to streamline these methods of evaluation. In terms of tracking, they keep registration lists for all of their programs in order to tell if a visitor has been there before. Return visits likely mean the attendees are pleased and getting valuable experiences, and their needs are met. Methods such as these can validate the notion that these museums have a core group of repeat visitors for their access programs.

Dr. Kathy Doody mentioned that she designed the exit parent satisfaction evaluations and surveys for the *Au-some Evenings* program at the Explore & More Children's Museum. She

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<sup>110</sup> Mulligan *et al* 2013, p.311

<sup>111</sup> Association of Science-Technology Centers. Resource Center: "Access Survey" <http://www.astc.org/resource/access/survey.htm> (accessed February 26, 2014).

went on to say how the evaluation has a “Likert scale of satisfaction from 1-7 and a place for additional comments. Parents in general are very happy. Their comments reflect things like, ‘I wish you offered this twice a month’ and things like that.”<sup>112</sup> Short evaluations like these can be easily created and administered regularly to museum patrons. They are simple tools that should be administered by museums to measure the ongoing effectiveness of a museum’s access programming.

### **Barriers to Success**

The museum community is composed of a diverse group of institutions with varied agendas, staffing, and physical space. When looking at access programming and evaluating the factors that go into a designated level of effort or action, there will likely be differing opinions on the adequacy of resources. The level of effort that museums put into access programming include many variables, as effort itself is difficult to measure. Museum leadership can institute a culture of self-evaluation, and require open discussion that generates ideas that result in change as new exhibits and programs are planned. Smaller museums can offer effective access programs. This is exemplified in museums from the case studies such as the Queens Museum the Jewish Museum of New York, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and the Explore & More Children’s Museum. None would be considered grand scale institutions by most, yet they all attempt to provide adequate services to individuals with ASD when it comes to museum programming. Regardless of a museum’s size or budget there are usually always some barriers to the successful implementation of access programming.

Some barriers observed within the museums presented in the case studies include limited physical space available, restricted amount of funding obtainable, implementing access

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<sup>112</sup> Doody, 2014.

programming for adults, and finding adequately trained professionals. These barriers have presented these museums with many challenges in terms of developing and implementing access programming.

One barrier to the successful implementation of access programming is limited physical space of an institution. This can also impede successful implementation of access programming. Dara Cohen and Meredith Wong from the Jewish Museum of New York cited physical space as an issue. They said that they wanted to do more with their access programming, specifically expand the number of participants, but just did not have the physical room available to do so.

The Explore & More Children's Museum experiences similar issues in regards to spatial capacity. Physical space limits expansion of exhibits, social play areas, and adds to limitations in number of participants. This issue will be alleviated when the museum moves to a much bigger location on Buffalo's waterfront in the spring of 2016. This larger space will provide more opportunity for program expansion so that the museum can continue to incorporate more individuals.

Availability of funding is another important hurdle. What percentage of a museum's programming budget is dedicated to programs for visitors with ASD? While none of the museums interviewed revealed specific budget numbers toward such programs, there were cases in which representatives from different institutions would equate the difficulty of their efforts to a lack of funding. In some cases, access programming departments themselves would raise funds for their programming. This lack of funding not only limits programming efforts, but leads to a limitation of staff members as well. One museum staffer contacted mentioned that aside from occasional outside help, most of the labor—be it setting up and developing programs then implementing them—is done by the trained museum staff. Inadequate staffing causes

setbacks both in planning and execution of access programming. Additionally, Michelle Lopez from the Queens Museum reported that there are always future ideas or plans to modify or expand their *ArtAccess* program, but that they are at the mercy of investors in terms of the amount of money available that is allocated toward the slate of programs itself.

Dara Cohen and Meredith Wong from the Jewish Museum of New York mentioned how funding can be difficult to obtain due to very strict guidelines that must be followed when obtaining grants. Because the museum's funding comes primarily from grant writing, it is vital that the programming adheres to these guidelines provided within the grants. When program design is directed based on grant requirements, this limits the variety of programming that can be offered. Access programs at the Jewish Museum are made possible by the J.E. and Z.B. Butler Foundation, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

Lopez revealed another barrier that hinders access program development within the Queens Museum. This barrier, as Lopez describes, is a lack of access programming for adults. This greatly limits the number of individuals that the museum can accommodate. While the Queens Museum was the only museum from the case studies that cited difficulty in implementing access programming specifically for adults with ASD, it is apparent that other museums do not implement these programs as well. Lopez stated that the reason for a lack of adult programming is that funding is much harder to get for adults than for school-age children mainly because adults do not have strong advocates like children do. It is for this reason that it is much more difficult to get programs started for them in the community.<sup>113</sup> With this being said, the Queens Museum does find in-house ways to fund and do programs for adults with ASD. The museum organizes fund raisers and galas that serve as the financial support behind the

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<sup>113</sup> Lopez, 2014.

development of these programs. In order to avoid limiting the scope of access programming to one age group, it is necessary to provide ways in which funds are secured to support access program development.

Another barrier that hinders access program development and implementation is finding adequately trained professionals. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery's Teri Fallesen and Jennifer Bayles described their staff for their *Access AK* program as rather small, with one full time staff member who coordinates *Access AK* and is responsible for several other museum functions as well. In 2005, this particular position was cut to half-time, but then in 2009 restored to full time. For their *Art Sense-Ations* tour program, Fallesen said that, "we are fortunate to have three to four wonderful docents who give their time on a monthly basis to assist in these tours."<sup>114</sup> This shows the staff's commitment toward ensuring their programs are implemented to their fullest potential, while dealing with barriers such as having limited staff to fulfill roles within access programs.

Other museums within the case studies mentioned similar hurdles. Michelle Lopez described how the Queens Museum has a dedicated staff ensuring their access programs are implemented to their fullest capacity, but that there are many responsibilities for each member due to limited numbers. However, due to these limited numbers in access staff, it can be difficult to delegate responsibilities equally.

### **Overcoming Barriers**

There are outstanding individual cases in which the level of effort toward museum access programming does exist. Where it lies is with the museum staff itself. In each of the case studies, staff members described their staff's dedication through the time spent towards

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<sup>114</sup> Fallesen, 2014.

organizing, planning, and executing these access programs. In many cases, museum staff would work outside of their paid hours, volunteer their time, or arrange and secure funding for their programming in order to see that their access programs would thrive.

In one instance, Michelle Lopez from the Queens museum mentioned that they find in-house ways to fund and create programs for adults with special needs. In many cases, museums offer regular special needs programs free of charge, or reduced admission, for special needs visitors. Such is the case for the Buffalo Museum of Science. One way to increase contributions for special needs audiences is through fundraising efforts. Another example could be to get buildings fitted for access through donated services from architectural design firms or construction companies.

In the case of The Jewish Museum of New York, one way to overcome the barrier of funding is by seeking out donors that help make access programs possible. One of those funders is the J.E. and Z.B. Butler Foundation, who supports innovative direct service programs that respond to emerging community needs and collaborates with community and agency leaders to create networks that provide a continuum of services. Clearly the foundation views the Jewish Museum of New York as a worthy applicant in granting funding to the museum. However, the process for receiving such funds is not an easy task. The J.E. and Z.B. Butler Foundation requires a description of the organization, the project, goals and objectives, other potential funders along with a preliminary budget before formal application is considered. If the project meets the Foundation's criteria, a site visit will be scheduled and then the organization may be invited to submit a formal proposal.<sup>115</sup> The Albright-Knox Art Gallery's coordinator told of how they were lucky enough to have a dedicated group of volunteers to aid in the implementation of

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<sup>115</sup> J.E. & Z.B. Butler Foundation. "Application; Proposal Requirements." [http://www.butlerfoundation.org/butlerfoundation\\_grantapplication.htm](http://www.butlerfoundation.org/butlerfoundation_grantapplication.htm) (accessed June 10, 2013).

their access programming. What to take note of here is the level of effort museums must make in applying for and receiving such funding.

One suggested solution for museums that are not largely federally funded and lack a sufficient amount of museum staff could be to advertise vacant staff positions as internships or volunteer positions for people with some expertise or training in museum programming or working with individuals with ASD. Working with volunteers who may have worked with this clientele can help stretch the museum's budget further. This can ease the workload of the museum staff without taking from the museum budget.

### **Summary**

The need for access programming and program accommodations is present in all museums. Individuals with ASD do not always receive the accommodations they need in order to be active participants within the museum setting. In order to promote the inclusion of this population within the museum setting, the museum needs to ensure that there is appropriate programming in place to support these individuals. The museums from the case studies are a few examples of those that implement the strategies discussed in this chapter. These strategies provide different yet vital methods of accommodating visitors with ASD in the museum. While there are barriers that can impede the successful implementation of access programs such as limited physical available space, restricted amount of funding obtainable, and limited staff, museums are working to present ways in which to overcome them.

When looking at programming components within each of the museums investigated in the case studies, it was noteworthy to compare which components were shared among each. For example, many museums that implemented the idea of an adjusted learning environment in order to build a comfort level for visitors with ASD were the Queens Museum, Albright-Knox Art



Gallery, and the Buffalo Museum of Science. These museums shared the idea that establishing a comfort level through various environmental adjustments was a vital addition to their access programming. Museums that shared similar ideological frameworks when implementing regularly planned access programs were the Queens Museum and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. These museums shared the idea that visitors with ASD deserve access programming that is offered consistently within their museum schedule. They used this idea to validate the need for their regularly planned access programming. Museums that collaborated with schools were the Queens Museum, Jewish Museum of New York, and the Buffalo Museum of Science. These museums viewed these partnerships as valuable resources from which to provide supplements within their access programming. The Queens Museum, the Jewish Museum of New York, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and the Explore & More Children's Museum all noted the need for a trained staff equipped to accommodate individuals with ASD. These museums viewed their trained staff members as their most valuable resource for a successful access program. Lastly, the Jewish Museum of New York and Explore & More Children's Museum emphasized the importance of access program evaluations. These museums were the only two that used parent and participant evaluations to drive further program design and implementation.

Despite the program similarities that were shared, there were some museums that stood alone as lone examples within certain categories in this study. For example, the Explore & More Children's Museum is an example of a museum that acts as a pioneer in their efforts to implement individualized days with their *Au-some Evenings* program. This museum was the only institution to provide a day solely dedicated to individuals with autism within the museum setting.

Another area in which museums shared similarities was noted when investigating limitations of programming provided by barriers. Museums that cited limited physical space as a barrier were the Jewish Museum of New York and the Explore & More Children's Museum. These museums noted that the lack of physical space within their museum led specifically to the issue of program expansion. Museums that mentioned funding as a barrier to overcome were the Queens Museum and Jewish Museum of New York. The Jewish Museum's funding limitations came from the need to adhere to specific grant requirements, while the Queens Museum simply did not have a large budget. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery and the Queens Museum mentioned finding enough adequately trained professionals as a barrier. Both institutions noted that lacking appropriately trained staff limited both the variability of programming and the success of the programs themselves. Furthermore, the Queens Museum was a lone museum from the case studies that cited difficulty in implementing access programming for adults with ASD. This was due to the fact that there are fewer advocates for adults with disabilities.

## **Chapter VI:**

### **Implications**

When discussing museums that live up to and go beyond expectations for access programming or rise above barriers such as funding issues or limited physical space, the question arises: what separates these museums from others in reaching a level that exceeds expectations and goes above the legal obligations in the access programs they offer? Characteristics of a museum's size and budget always seem to factor in, but this is not always the case. Other differentiating factors are a museum's ability to advertise and make their programs known; staff's commitment towards planning and executing programs; ensuring their programs' success.

There are a number of ways museums can sustain good programs and reach the level of accommodation for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as the museums highlighted in the present study. Important strategies include targeted advertising, staff commitment, redefining loan kits, and forming associations through which institutions can train, communicate, and work together, such as New York City's Museum Access Consortium (MAC).

#### **Advertising**

A differentiating factor that can help promote museum programming is the museum's ability to widely advertise their programs and make them known to the public. In today's world of telecommunications and electronic interaction, online advertising and publicizing is becoming a popular and cost-effective way for museums to make their programs better known.

One way to advertise museum access programming is to utilize websites that promote other various programs for individuals with ASD. One example of this type of resource is the

Mommy Poppins' website.<sup>116</sup> This website provides parents with children with ASD with information about specific programming and activities that are available in the New York City area. Another example is the *Western New York Family Magazine Special Needs Edition* online, with tips and a list of activities and services for families with children who have special needs. Museums have the ability to utilize specialized websites such as these in order to pinpoint their intended audience.

Another way to advertise programs is through the official museum website and through social networking. Of the museums mentioned in the case studies that have programs in place all have easily accessible websites that detail the access programs at their respective museums. A few of these examples are the Queens Museum, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and the Jewish Museum of New York. In terms of social networking, many of the same museums listed have Facebook and Twitter pages. The museums currently have the opportunity to capitalize on the growing reliance on social networking to promote their programming. Social networks are a great resource to use to reach a large number of people at little or no additional cost.

While online promotion via websites and advertising via social networking has moved beyond a popular trend to become a necessity, the customary means of marketing programming has not completely gone by the wayside. Attending community meetings, engaging in offsite visits to libraries, community centers, and schools can still be a vital way to help access programming become more widely known and make potential visitors aware of them. There are inexpensive ways to advertise: flyers and leaflets printed in-house, local newspapers, as well as radio and television public service announcements. An example of this would be the Museum Access Consortium (MAC), in which the Queens Museum and Jewish Museum's representatives

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<sup>116</sup> Mommy Poppins. "Things to Do in NYC with Kids." <http://mommypoppins.com/> (accessed April 7, 2013).

all referenced. Collaboration with the surround community is vital. An example is the Queens Museum's representative mentioned that they work with schools, libraries, other museums, and historical sites in the local community to promote programs in that area.

### **Museum Staff Commitment**

Staff commitment toward ensuring the success of the programs is an integral factor in differentiating what museums live up to and go beyond expectations in access programming. “As many scholars have pointed out, actually including oppressed groups like people with disabilities...and their ‘hidden histories’ in the collections, exhibitions, and fare of museums is a fundamental first step.”<sup>117</sup> This all starts with the planning process and finishes with the proper execution of a designated special needs program. A representative from the Queens Museum told of how their access program, *ArtAccess*, first began stemming from their “humanistic approach” that they spoke of, to asking themselves the questions of how they can make their museum better.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there are individual cases in which staff commitment toward museum access programming helped an institution overcome certain barriers such as financial limitations. Examples from the case studies in which museum staff would work outside of their paid hours, volunteer their time, or arrange and secure funding for their programming shows their commitment toward seeing that their access programs thrive. Other programs may want to follow that example of finding trained professionals who are dedicated to the cause.

Coinciding with the idea of improved staff commitment is making an effort to find qualified volunteer staff. Accomplishing this would help to overcome staffing issues that cause

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<sup>117</sup> Vanegas 2002, p.131

limitations within program development. In order to solve this issue, museums need to advertise their need for properly qualified individuals. Qualifications that would help support appropriate access program design include but are not limited to art therapy, special education (all ages), or museum studies. An obvious preference would be that the candidates have a combination of at least two of these qualification areas. However, just having one of these degree areas covered would be a step in the right direction.

### **Redefining Loan Kits**

A museum loan kit is another opportunity to positively engage with audiences with ASD. While the concept of the loan kit has gone by the wayside, and been referred to as *passé* by some in the museum community due to the increasing reliance on technology. However, the approach of keeping the instructional activities tangible and focused on hands-on interactions highlights the development of social skills and knowledge acquisition.

Loan kits can be used as a preparatory step leading to an offsite visit to a school, or used simply as a method to bring the museum into the classroom to supplement in-class instruction. Using loan kits, museums are able to take objects and artifacts from the collections or replicas of artifacts directly into the classrooms. Furthermore, the kits come with portable workshops with activities and supplies for children or a group. One thought is that using these objects from loan kits can “help educators create enduring learning experiences.”<sup>118</sup> These tools can provide special needs classrooms with an opportunity to engage in object-based learning. “Object based learning can offer something to all learners whatever their learning or intelligence type. It can facilitate the development of many skills - observation, questioning, prediction, weighing of

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<sup>118</sup> Carnegie Museum of Natural History. “Educational Loan Collection.” <http://www.carnegiemnh.org/programs/loan.html> (accessed June 28, 2013).

evidence, justifying proposals – and it allows for the use of most of the senses.”<sup>119</sup> Many museums studied both here and worldwide implement this approach. Yet what makes such a program so useful is the simple and practical means by which the museum can use them. While there can be larger more extravagant programs in which many artifacts are transported, there can also be instances in which only a few objects are taken to the classroom.

With loan kits, regardless whether a museum staff member comes along for the visit or not, the classroom teacher as well can lead a lesson using the supplies and materials provided in the kit from the museum. And in both cases, that classroom teacher plays a vital role in being the transitional mediator between the students and such unfamiliar foreign objects, as well as the museum staff member if they come for the visit as well. Ideas such as loan kits can also be useful in how students can be introduced to the idea of the museum and its artifacts in their environment, where they are more comfortable, and are likely more willing to be open to learning new ideas. When discussing therapeutic tutoring as far back in 1968, Mary Farragher states:

“Learning is an ego function. Under favorable conditions, the ego progressively develops, expands, and adapts so that intellectual knowledge is readily incorporated, assimilated and produced. Under unfavorable conditions this development fails to occur, and as a consequence the capacity for learning may be severely impaired.”<sup>120</sup>

Farragher is implicating the need for the ego to be coddled and comforted in order for knowledge and learning to be better absorbed. This idea implies that adjusting the learning environment is the most effective way to promote acquisition of knowledge for visitors with ASD.

Loan kits can also be beneficial when transitioning students from their classroom—in which they are likely more comfortable in—to the museum setting. Using this resource, the

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<sup>119</sup> Groups for Education in Museums. “What Can We Gain From Using Objects?” [http://www.gem.org.uk/res/advice/ball/res\\_lfo.php](http://www.gem.org.uk/res/advice/ball/res_lfo.php) (accessed June 28, 2013).

<sup>120</sup> Farragher, p.117

teacher can introduce the idea of the museum and what it is, along with any docents or tour guides that might be joining the group. This can be done through social stories museums lend out or are available on the website, as well as, through museum loan kits. “Social stories explain social situations and concepts, including expected behaviors of the persons involved, in a format understandable to an individual with ASD. Social stories are usually constructed with one sentence per page.”<sup>121</sup> They can include pictures to help illustrate concepts. “Social stories are written from the perspective of the student, taking into consideration the characteristics of the target student.”<sup>122</sup> The intent of social stories is to describe the desired behavior and feelings of others about a situation and reinforce rules. In 2003, the effects of social stories in improving social behaviors of adolescents with autism were studied. “Results indicated that the targeted social behaviors improved for four of five students almost immediately and appeared to maintain over time.”<sup>123</sup> The pictures that social stories usually include reinforce the concepts the stories are intending to communicate. “Visual supports encompass a wide variety of interventions that involve visual cues and prompts that help students perform skills with greater independence and accuracy.”<sup>124</sup> These visual supports can be another helpful aide in overcoming that barrier of communication with individuals with ASD. As Jil Kennedy adds that, “there is an assumption that visitors with disabilities experience a benefit when involved in a visual art experience.”<sup>125</sup> In addition to social stories, picture activity schedules are another visual support strategy used by museums in order to specifically meet the needs of children with ASD.<sup>126</sup> These strategies are intended to promote successful learning, participation, and enjoyment. This strategy can be

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<sup>121</sup> Heward 2009, p.280.

<sup>122</sup> Grey 1994, p.94

<sup>123</sup> Graetz, 2003, p.94

<sup>124</sup> Cohen *et al* 2007, p.277.

<sup>125</sup> Kennedy 2006, p.10.

<sup>126</sup> Mulligan *et al* 2013, p.311



helpful in how it can be a constructive plan to have a familiar face of the museum staffer that visited the classroom when the class comes to the museum. These social stories provided through the museum loan kits have proven to be effective in maintaining that necessary comfort level that individuals with ASD need in order to facilitate a successful museum experience.

### **Local Associations and Consortiums**

Coinciding with reaching out to local schools and the teachers of special needs classrooms, is the ability to help provide an additional avenue of preparation and education by offering trainings for the teachers themselves. As mentioned in the previous chapter, an illustration of this would be how the Buffalo Museum of Science engages in professional development programs for area teachers. In these programs the museum instructs how they can bring the ideas of the collections at the museum to their own classrooms. The museum has pre-organized professional development programs for members or non-members with a set cost. In addition to those trainings, the museum also offers the ability to customize a professional development program to a specific group's needs in which the rates for these programs vary depending on what the training entails. Then there are the New York City area museums - the Queens Museum and the Jewish Museum of New York - that hold trainings with each other via a local association. One of those associations is the Museum Access Consortium (MAC) in which largely New York City area museums participate in training for working specifically with people with disabilities. However, museums nationally and even internationally do participate. These representatives are from various museum departments throughout the New York City Metropolitan area. Here, these members and representatives of the disability community can exchange information, ideas, and resources, as well as provide a network of mutual support. However, these representatives strive to enable people with disabilities to access cultural

facilities of all types and those who attend may come from around the country or worldwide. In their mission, the MAC defines accessibility to include architectural, physical, programmatic, communication, attitudinal and other forms of access.<sup>127</sup> Through this investigation, representatives from the Jewish Museum and the Queens Museum all stressed the importance of their participation in the Museum Access Consortium and the connections it has brought.

A museum staffer from the Queens Museum, who was hired in the 1980's, discussed how access programming first appeared in the United States 1970's. The Queens Museum started their program in late 1970's and early 1980's when there were very few programs happening in New York. The staffer went on to disclose how they and four others that had special needs service positions started the Museum Access Consortium (MAC).

Another organization that brings together individuals and institutions to help promote accessibility is the Leadership Exchange in Art and Disability (LEAD). LEAD is a similar concept to the MAC in how it connects museums to one another in order to share ideas, obstacles, and solutions. The organization started as an initial group of museum professionals with the desire to create accessible cultural arts programs that are inclusive of people with disabilities including older adults. That has since grown into a professional network focused on expanding the breadth and scope of accessibility services and programming across the country and around the world. The organizations states that their goals are to explore practical methods for implementing accessibility in cultural environments, communicate information about arts and accessibility, and share resources and knowledge among professionals in the field of

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<sup>127</sup> MAC: Museum Access Consortium. "What/Who is the Museum Access Consortium?" <http://www.cityaccessny.org/mac.php> (accessed November 2, 2013).

accessibility.<sup>128</sup> They hold an annual conference each year with seminars on topics such as access, universal and socially sustainable design, legal issues, marketing strategies, and advocacy of programs. Lenore Adler, a program outreach specialist at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Museum of Natural History, suggests, “museums and disability groups can partner together to improve programs.” The opportunity to cultivate these connections are more likely to be made through groups such as MAC or LEAD.<sup>129</sup>

As half of the museums from the case studies are from the New York City area, they belong to the MAC. A percentage of the museums from the case studies, which are from Buffalo, NY, belong to the Museum Education Consortium of Buffalo (MECOB). They state that, “The mission of the Museum Education Consortium of Buffalo is to provide inspirational and challenging educational opportunities in art, architecture, history and the natural and physical sciences for the residents of and visitors to Western New York.”<sup>130</sup> One suggestion that the MECOB could add to their association is a section or group of it dedicated to bringing together the access community of the various access programs that positively impact their institution and its visitors. Here, they could use the same ideas and strategies that an organization such as the MAC uses to help one other’s programs through exchange of planning tools, materials, or staff trainings.

## Summary

This chapter shows that so much more goes into what characteristics separate one museum from the others in overcoming barriers for implementing access programming than just

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<sup>128</sup> The Kennedy Center. “LEAD: Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability.” <http://www.kennedy-center.org/accessibility/education/lead/> (accessed November 2, 2013).

<sup>129</sup> Adler 2010, p.45

<sup>130</sup> Museum Education Consortium of Buffalo. “Explore MECOB: MECOB’s Mission Statement.” [http://www.museums4buffalo.org/MECOBmembers/MECOBmembers.html#anchor\\_56](http://www.museums4buffalo.org/MECOBmembers/MECOBmembers.html#anchor_56) (accessed July 14, 2014).

a museum's size or budget. One of those factors discussed was a museum's ability to advertise and make their programs known. Another is the museum staff's commitment towards planning and executing programs, along with ensuring their success. The ways in which museums can become sustainable and reach the level of accommodation for individuals with ASD that the museums modeled in the case studies are at each play a vital role. Newer and more modern advertising strategies can help promote access programs better. Staff commitment toward ensuring the success of programs is critical for these programs to get off the ground. Redefining loan kits can bring a classic concept of the museum back in a new way toward engaging individuals, school groups, or families in a leading activity prior to visiting the museum. Lastly, associations such as New York City's Museum Access Consortium (MAC) can help provide a connecting outlet through which institutions can train, communicate, and work together.

## **Chapter VII:**

### **Conclusion: Access Programs Moving Forward**

As this study has shown, the museum is a place where people can have very different experiences, and it is imperative that visitors with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) be included in museum environments. “Most museums are committed to the principle of making their collections as widely accessible to their audiences as possible.”<sup>131</sup> Not only do they bring their own past with them, influencing their outlook at the museum, but the museum is showing that it can be a place where visitors with special needs are forever welcome, and more importantly, can always be comfortable.

Visitors with special needs come in many different forms; there is no generic type. Disabilities can range from physical, to psychological, as well as social/emotional, and developmental. The needs and behaviors of individuals with ASD are effective communication strategies, inappropriate social behaviors, developing social competence, having a comfortable learning environment, and skill development. The strategies used to address these behaviors associated with ASD are adjusting the environment to fit the needs of these visitors, having preplanned programs already in place, individualized days for visitors with developmental disabilities such as ASD, school visits to help plan museum programs, trainings for museum staff working with individuals who have autism, and surveys to gain feedback on access programming. There are also barriers that can impede the successful implementation of these strategies. They include limited physical space available and restricted amount of funding obtainable.

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<sup>131</sup> Besterman 2006, p.431

In accommodating these visitors, museums are provided with legal obligations, led by the Americans with Disabilities Act Title II & Title III, as well as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Many programs embody what a museum should be in terms of providing accessibility for the individuals with ASD

The significance of this study is the promotion and awareness of museum access programs as well as analyzing how these programs serve the needs of individuals with ASD. There are many museums that do hold themselves to a high standard in their ability to reach out to these audiences. A few of those who were interviewed are among this group such as the Queens Museum, the Jewish Museum, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the Buffalo Museum of Science, and the Explore & More Children's Museum.

The Queens Museum's *ArtAccess* program goes above and beyond as an interactive community based art therapy program involving the visitor in different areas of the museum or specific pieces of artwork, as well as going out and bringing the museum to the community itself. The Jewish Museum, despite their limited resources and physical space, implements a number of access programs and like other museums in this investigation works with other institutions and the community via the Museum Access Consortium. The Buffalo Museum of Science's outreach and professional development programs displayed them as a local example of an institution accommodating special needs visitors. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, another local museum, provides enriching art experiences for individuals with special needs ranging from kindergarten-age and up. The Explore & More Children's Museum's *Au-Some Evenings* program is dedicated to giving children with autism spectrum disorders and their families an opportunity to play and learn together in an understanding and supportive environment – a fundamental need of these visitors.

In conjunction with using programs such as those illustrated in this study as models, the need for promoting access programs is vital to creating new ones. Museum professionals must remain diligent in publishing their work, as well as the work of the institutions they serve, and advertise their efforts. Highlighting success stories in museums is crucial to gaining attention for programs. Tamara Golden and Lynn Walsh's article<sup>132</sup> spotlighting the Chicago Children's Museum or Julia Furlan's article<sup>133</sup> featuring the Queens Museum are only a couple examples of what others need to follow in drawing attention to their programs. What is notable is that the current advocates for access programming are from many different backgrounds. While many are museum professionals, others are educators, some are journalists, even part-time bloggers, and a few come from unrelated professions. Though, most have one trait in common – they know or are in frequent contact with an individual or individuals with special needs.

As this investigation has shown, many of the programs examined are open-ended and allow free-expression. The confidence that the visitors who these programs are intended for can gain, be it through real-life scenarios or from art-expression, are described by the museum staff members consulted as invaluable for these visitors moving forward. However, as Mindy Duitz describes, the ultimate goal is that:

It is critical that all museums realize that serving their communities does not mean just a seasonal program or an annual exhibition in the 'community gallery.' It is an ongoing activity that requires clear policy and sufficient resources. It is also a reflection of an institution's mission and its vision of its role as a public educational institution.<sup>134</sup>

As described earlier by Golden and Walsh, the cornerstone viewpoint of this investigation is that, "being ADA compliant was not enough and that being truly accessible and

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<sup>132</sup> Golden, Tamara, and Lynn Walsh. "Play For All at Chicago Children's Museum: A History and Overview." Curator: The Museum Journal, July, 2013

<sup>133</sup> Furlan, Julia. "Museums Reach Out to Artists with Special Needs" WNYC, May 15, 2011.

<http://www.wnyc.org/story/134905-museums-reach-out-artists-special-needs/> (accessed September 27, 2013).

<sup>134</sup> Duitz 1992, p.242

inclusive meant going above and beyond the ADA. It meant asking questions, discovering needs, and following through with responses.”<sup>135</sup> This course of thought becoming standard is the goal of those who advocate on the behalf of individuals with ASD along with the individuals themselves taking part in the process. Additionally, Smith and colleagues point out, “Working collaboratively and on an equal footing with disabled people is crucial to helping practitioners approach accessibility in the same creative and knowledgeable way that they tackle other aspects of their work.”<sup>136</sup> In order to extend such an attitude to museum professionals and institutions themselves who have yet to be in accordance to this view, further legislation can help.

Ultimately, the responsibility rests on the institutions themselves and the moral obligation to accommodate every individual to their institution. As Lois Silverman reiterates, “By improving their own representation practices, museums support empowerment at the societal level.”<sup>137</sup> That societal level is the stronger community Silverman continuously advocates for. She illustrates in her book *The Social Work of Museums*, giving the opportunity to visitors with special needs to experience the museum for themselves is vital. It is important for individuals with autism to access museums because the museum as an institution, and even broader, we as a society have a moral obligation and responsibility to provide an equal opportunity to every individual, and not judge their abilities.

In summation, giving the opportunity to visitors with special needs to experience the museum for themselves is vital. The significance behind this idea is immeasurable. It is important for individuals with ASD to access museums because the museum as an institution, and even broader, we as a society have a moral obligation and responsibility to provide an equal

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<sup>135</sup> Golden and Walsh, p.338.

<sup>136</sup> Smith *et al*, p.70

<sup>137</sup> Silverman 2010, p.132



opportunity to every individual. The museum is no exception to that, as the mission statements of many institutions themselves advocate similar sentiments:

Persons with disabilities strive for equality in all areas of life, including museum visitorship and participation in all that museums have to offer. That is where museums find themselves today – including and engaging the Disability Community. A museum has to be open to possibilities and be willing to work on inclusion.<sup>138</sup>

More museums recently are turning their focus toward the idea of implementing access programming within their institutions. While improvement for growth remains, there is no doubt that progress has been made. The findings within the case studies on the New York City and Western New York area museums compare somewhat similarly against national trends. Museums that provide model programming include the Queens Museum and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. These institutions present thorough work in making sure all accommodations are made in implementing programming for individuals with ASD. Additional museums from the study are examples of museums with developing programs showing the effort to accommodate these individuals as well.

When looking at national trends, there are a number of museums nationwide implementing thorough programming similar to that of the Queens Museum and Albright-Knox Art Gallery. There are also a number of museums developing their access programming that are in the early stages of implementation. One example of this is the Smithsonian Institution's Introductory Training: *Children on the Autism Spectrum and Museums*. It covers the basics of ASD and how museums can better engage families with children on the Autism spectrum.<sup>139</sup> Another example is websites such as *Autism in the Museum*. Here, they have lists of museum programs and events for people with autism, tools and resources for families affected by ASD, as

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<sup>138</sup> Adler 2010, p.32

<sup>139</sup> Smithsonian Institution. "Accessibility." <http://www.si.edu/accessibility>, (accessed April 29, 2015).

well as a section for museums on marketing to the ASD community.<sup>140</sup> While examples such as these show signs of progress, there is still much room for overall improvement as many institutions have yet to implement such programming.

ASD has certainly gained medical and educational attention throughout the past decade, and has more recently begun to gain momentum within the media. An example of this is the naming of April as Autism Awareness Month, and more specifically April 2<sup>nd</sup> as Autism Awareness Day. One example of a museum that has taken advantage of the added attention to autism is the Conner Prairie Interactive History Park. The museum celebrated Autism Awareness Month in April by offering early free admission on select days for visitors with autism and sensory or developmental challenges.

The early hours are designed to respect the needs of those with sensory challenges who benefit from a quieter experience. Visitors with sensory or developmental challenges will be able to enjoy full access to the park and its offerings, such as interacting with baby animals, self-guided exploration of five outdoor historical areas, crafts and more. The free admission for these families is good for the entire day. The early hours and free admission are designed to provide visitors with autism, sensory, or developmental challenges an opportunity to experience the fun of Conner Prairie in a supportive environment. We trust that the public will respect this time for visitors who will benefit from a quieter experience.<sup>141</sup>

However, while the topic is gaining more awareness in museums, there still appears to be an imbalance between its attention in such institutions in comparison to medical, educational, and media outlets.

Museums and institutions who have yet to implement access programs can start by using the applied work of existing programs, such as those exemplified in case studies, as a model.

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<sup>140</sup> Autism In the Museum. "Home." <http://www.autisminthemuseum.org/p/blog-page.html>, (accessed April 29, 2015).

<sup>141</sup> Conner Prairie. "Conner Prairie Focuses on Autism, Celebrates Autism Awareness Month." <http://www.connerprairie.org/Newsroom/2014/Conner-Prairie-Focuses-on-Autism,-Celebrates-Autis>, (accessed April 29, 2015).

They can also follow the implications made following the analysis of those museums. Their work, as well as programs that are similar, can be used as an inspiration for other museums, especially those with sufficient resources, to implement access programs that accommodate special needs individuals in their respective institutions.

Suggestions for further research include a national survey for museums to complete on current accessibility for individuals with ASD, finding adequately qualified staff, and utilizing museum support services such as consortiums like the Museum Access Consortium of New York. One suggestion for a national survey is that it could be initiated by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) in which they could either institute the survey themselves or delegate it to each state to deliver it to each museum. Suggestions for research into finding adequate staff would include qualifications that help support appropriate access program design. These qualifications include but are not limited to art therapy, special education (all ages), or museum studies. Having a combination of at least two of these qualification areas would be preferred, but possessing one of these degree areas covered would be a step in the right direction. One final suggestion for further research would be into support services such as consortiums like the Museum Access Consortium of New York. Through support services such as these, museums, along with members and representatives of the disability community can exchange information, ideas, and resources, participate in trainings, as well as provide a network of mutual support.

The aim of this investigation, and the hope of many of the museum staff members consulted and referenced moving forward, is that access programming not only gains more attention but becomes a required staple in every institution in the near future. For the moment, the tireless efforts of the museum professionals mentioned within this study, as well as countless others like them, will continually strive toward accomplishing that goal.

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**Appendix A:**

**Identified Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder**  
 ADDM Network 2000-2010  
 Combining Data from All Sites

Surveillance Year	Birth Year	Number of ADDM Sites Reporting	Prevalence per 1,000 Children (Range)	This is about 1 in X children...
2000	1992	6	6.7 (4.3 - 9.9)	1 in 150
2002	1994	14	6.6 (3.3 - 10.6)	1 in 150
2004	1996	8	8.0 (4.6 - 9.8)	1 in 125
2006	1998	11	9.0 (4.2 - 12.1)	1 in 110
2008	2000	14	11.3 (4.8 - 21.2)	1 in 88
2010	2002	11	14.7 (14.3 - 15.1)	1 in 68

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<sup>142</sup> “Identified Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder,” Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), accessed June 18th, 2014, Retrieved from: [http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/images/autism\\_data\\_graphic2012-copy.jpg](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/images/autism_data_graphic2012-copy.jpg).

**Appendix B:**

**Example Survey:**

**Level of Accommodation for Individuals and Groups with Autism Spectrum Disorder**

**1** Very Poor

**2** Poor

**3** Moderate

**4** Strong

**5** Very Strong

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Parking and entrance accessibility					
Amount of available room to move around facility					
Signage/Directions efficacy					
Quality of exhibit explanations (written, Braille, or audio)					
Quality of equipment (listening or visual)					
Ability to provide a comfortable atmosphere					
Ability to provide necessary spaces for quiet rest/relaxation					
Staff/Docent help with guided tours					
Quality of opportunity to engage with exhibits					
Staff/Docent help with workshops					
Quality of workshop in providing a stimulating activity					
Opportunity to interact with other special needs visitors					
Reinforcement of skills learned in classroom/home					
Quality program awareness/promotion prior to visit					
Probability of returning to museum for access workshops					
Probability of returning to museum during operating hours					

**Additional Comments** - Areas Enjoyed and/or Things We Can Improve Upon: