

September 25, 2002



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Dear Study Participant:

Thank you for participating in the research we conducted on behalf of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. As promised, an executive summary of our research results is attached. By sharing information regarding your institution you have provided important input in the dialogue regarding the training needs of museums located in Knight communities across the country. Your generosity in sharing both your time and experience are greatly appreciated.

If you have any questions regarding the research, please feel free to contact me at 800.473.3872, or email edana@eusa.org. If you are interested in learning more about the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and their programs, please contact Lisa Versaci, Director of National Venture Fund at 305.908.2600.

Again, thank you for your participation.

With best wishes,

Edana Elder McSweeney
Acting Director

Training Needs Assessment for John S. and James L. Knight Community Museums

Executive Summary

Introduction

ExhibitsUSA, under the auspices of the Mid-America Arts Alliance, has a rewarding history of serving the exhibition needs of small and midsize museums nationwide. Recently, with a resounding increase in the number of these organizations, as well as our growing knowledge and concern for their health and well-being, ExhibitsUSA received a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to assess the needs of small and midsize museums among Knight communities for professional development and institutional advancement. While ExhibitsUSA is concerned with the support of excellence at any institutional size, this research allowed us to focus our efforts on Knight community museums using three specific methods in order to understand the dynamics of museum size as it relates to access to training opportunities, and to further identify the training preferences of small and midsize Knight community museums. Further objectives of the research were to investigate competency levels in areas such as community programming, marketing, fund raising, and exhibition development, and to compile details on museum operating budgets, visitorship, disciplinary emphases, and staff/volunteer professionalism. Our ambition is that this research will enable us to better understand the virtues of and obstacles faced by small and midsize museums in Knight communities in their quest for excellence; in addition, we are confident that these findings will inform the development of museum training programs by us and other museum service organizations.

Research Components

Telephone Interviews

After a thorough consultation with Knight Foundation staff, telephone interviews were conducted from January to September 2001, with museums representing each of the twenty-six Knight communities. Interviews focused on each museum's purpose, constituency, environmental assessment, the community in which it operates, existing opportunities to receive technical assistance, and preferences for staff, volunteer, and board training.

In this phase of the research, we discovered that while Knight community museums exemplify a broad sweep of various institutional sizes and disciplines, there are in fact some common characteristics that would enable tailored technical assistance initiatives to take root. In addition, we uncovered the unique virtues of and obstacles faced by individual museums, and so were able to begin the preliminary task of assessing museums for the overt signs of institutional readiness to participate in any future training initiatives.

Further, these interviews allowed us the opportunity to recognize the scarcity of training initiatives that currently serve these museums. Telephone interviewees were honest in their assessment of internal constraints that preclude their involvement with existing technical assistance efforts and passionate in their desire to participate in new training initiatives that would be tailored to their needs and preferences.

Needs Assessment Survey

With input from Market Directions, an independent marketing research company, ExhibitsUSA designed a comprehensive strategy for the survey, dissemination, and data compilation for all museums located in Knight communities. Seven hundred forty surveys were mailed, and all data collected, analyzed, and contained in this report is based on the responses we received from 168 museums that returned their surveys.

One of the key findings in our data analysis is that a museum's overall well-being and capacity to fulfill its public function are directly related to its size. Small and midsize museums have fewer opportunities for training, but more demands on their time and a broader range of responsibilities for their staff. Their smaller

budgets leave them less equipped to attend professional conferences or to effectively utilize information via the Internet. Still, in relation to their size, their programmatic impact and public expectations remain as high as those of their larger peers.

On-Site Visits

To elicit qualitative information from Knight community museums, we arranged on-site visits with twelve institutions through the summer of 2001. We visited museums in ten Knight communities that reflect the demographics of the field as a whole, particularly in size, type, and community size. These visits were used to flesh out many of the questions that were raised by the survey results and to inform our understanding of other Knight community museums with similar attributes and behaviors.

On-site visits were an exceptional opportunity for us to witness the extraordinary strengths and unparalleled volunteerism resident among these communities' diverse museums. The visits were also key in allowing us to observe firsthand the obstacles that many Knight community museums face in accessing rare training opportunities and in participating in self-directed professionalization. In addition, we documented the disparities between survey data, information gathered via phone interviews, and in-person interviews. As a result, we were able to name training preferences by topic for Knight community museums, particularly those of small and medium size.

Research Findings

Given the sheer number of small and midsize museums resident in Knight communities (estimated to be 53% of all Knight community museums), and the spare resources available to them, there are undeniably few opportunities for the staff and volunteers of these small and midsize museums to improve their professional skills and advance their institutions. Our research indicates glaring needs for additional technical assistance and training for staff, volunteers, and board members. The survey, interviews, and on-site visits codified a set of training initiative characteristics that we recommend in order to meet the training needs of Knight community museums. Support for new initiatives for small and midsize museums should take particular care that they are not fleeting, too expensive for museums in the greatest need, or too broad in topic to be directly applicable.

Our research unequivocally demonstrates that Knight community museums, particularly small and midsize museums, are hungry for opportunities to advance their skills in the priority areas of:

- Development/fund raising;
- Marketing/public relations;
- Public programming;
- Volunteer management.

Small and midsize museums among all Knight communities also articulate compelling needs for training in the areas of educational programming (K-12), computers/technology, collections management, conservation, and exhibition design. The phone interviews, written surveys, and on-site visits illustrate dramatic requests for more consistent means for the staff and volunteers of resource-poor museums to improve their institutions. Additionally, this research points directly to the principal obstacle in receiving training help: a lack of financial resources.

Finally, our preliminary review of the training needs and preferences among Knight community museums leads us to the conclusion that there is greater need among this constituency than there are providers of these services. At present no single agency, state or national, is equipped to handle the breadth of improvement needs; therefore, new museum service organizations must be added to the training mix in order to meet these needs and/or additional training resources must be identified.