



TAM Conference

Roundtable Discussions, March 20, 2024

Administrators/Directors Roundtable

How are your museums dealing with polarizing issues in your community that impact your organization?

- Organization in a distressed county in upper Cumberland – Strive to address issues about poor economic area by bringing people in and showing them the history and what it has taught us about how people have come out of economic issues through business and entrepreneurial activities to provide a bright spot for the future.
- Group called Constitutional Republicans that took over commissioner seats in Sumner County government and caused significant problems related to taking over the county's historic houses and school board. Impacted people who work in public spaces of history and learning in the county and the effort has been on coming together and supporting one another – from historic houses to public libraries. Community has started recognizing negative impacts and has begun to limit political power through voting. Group opposes any tax funding going to anything where they don't control the messaging. Informal recognition of problems and supporting one another.
- Another institution in same county focuses on educating their visitors over social media and informing those who disagree on how to work against it.
- Question over how far to push agendas over history; discussion of finding a balance in this with potentially controversial issues and looking at how institutions can work together towards more controversial efforts through general education.
- Small communities are tight-knit. Outsider's viewpoint is that the community cooperates even when there is disagreement. Museum can stay apolitical, but board is willing to have open conversations about what is acceptable and stays vigilant on how to present exhibits.

Are you getting any pushback from the community or other stakeholders regarding exhibits or programming?

- One discussant had started a huge African-American program in previous position going into institution where everything was focused on one individual at historic house site and wanted to expand interpretation beyond this basic interpretation. First program was Civil War program, but brought USCT into program. Had to shut down social media

channels due to pushback from users responding with hate speech. Stakeholders largely SCV members and resulted in pushback from within the organization. Institutional reaction has been to continue pushing against this. Education programs have grown as a result due to more rounded interpretation and has given a broader and larger audience overall.

- History Fair incorporating craftspeople, living history, etc., cut back over COVID. Gets pushback from the community based on who is included in the programming, where elements of the community question why SCV stakeholders are still involved in living history programs.
- Large SCV and Union reenactors in a community. They both avoid politics and focus on explaining how soldiers lived on both sides.

If not us, who will care for your staff, paid and unpaid? What are you hearing from your staff about things that are bothering them? What are you doing for your staff that someone else might want to try?

- Museums in general are terrible about paying staff. In more recent years, we have become more vocal about paying people rather than relying on volunteers and have questioned if they can't afford to pay people, maybe they shouldn't be open for operations. Paying people a competitive wage starts with directors fighting for that. If we don't, then who? We have to stop being martyrs for the places we love. Has worked in field and lunch trips for staff to give people a break and work it into the budget. Even if pay isn't where you want it to be, invest in the staff and invest in continuing education and networking. Viewed trips as "excellence training," where staff could look at other museums and sites and become inspired by new ideas. Make the effort to focus on holidays and family days for staff. It's easy to get buried if you wear a lot of hats, but it's important to give staff the opportunity to do things they enjoy, excel at, and can take on as their own project to develop.
- Site with all volunteer staff. Were able to get a Title 5 worker that could commit to being paid and keep the site open. Worker enjoys being involved with learning projects, and they have given her projects that have expanded her interests and improved her knowledge and sense of self-value. These projects also benefit the museum overall.
- Minimal pay to docents amounts to gas money, but they also focus on making staff, paid and unpaid, feel valued.

What kind of DEAI policies do you have at your museum? What do they look like? If not, how are you working to make your museum more welcoming and inclusive for staff, volunteers, and visitors?

- Trying to step into making tours at the site more inclusive in terms of looking at house site tours vs. African-American focused tours. They are still working on how to provide information about these tours and how to incorporate information between them while still providing a safe space to discuss sensitive issues.

- Don't always think about non-English speaking visitors in terms of emergency management.
- Strategic planning for an upcoming exhibition involves listening sessions to work with community and underserved audiences to include their voices. Focus on incorporating people with limited eyesight in exhibits.
- Requires diversity training for staff and for the board members to ensure the site is welcoming.
- AASLH did a session last month on colors and exhibit panels for vision-impaired people.

How are you collecting the late 20th century, both artifacts and stories? What about the early 2000s? Are you making room for those artifacts and stories? What may you need to get rid of to accommodate these new stories?

- Received a basket from a local Black artist from the 1980s. Obtain materials from merchants in the late 1900s.
- Deaccession unnecessary things to make room for more recent items and to accommodate things from the site's family into the collection. Make an effort to gather materials from modern descendants of original occupants of historic sites.
- Is there a place for museums to communicate about deaccessioned items and where they could be transferred to?
- It can be difficult to say no to donations for items related to a site or region.
- The public isn't necessarily in the mindset that late 1900 items are old enough to be donated to a museum.

Who, in your community, needs to have their story told? How are you collaborating and including those marginalized groups in your curation and/or programming? How can you start?

- Museum has limited information on local sites and needs to expand interpretation of those sites.
- Lebanon has strong industrial base, and local site doesn't have enough materials to interpret this history.
- Expansion of limited permanent exhibit interpretation tied to anniversary dates resulting in expanded permanent exhibits later.
- Reach out to people who don't realize that they are becoming a part of history for participation in oral history projects.
- Dealing with obsolete media (tape, floppies, etc.).
- Social media.
- Book clubs bring in context and expand stories.
- Focus on Black jockeys and horse groomers as related to racehorse breeding history.
- Legacy Tours programming to incorporate larger stories into more focused tours.

Volunteers/Docents Roundtable

How are your museums dealing with polarizing issues in your community that impact your organization?

Are you getting any pushback from the community or other stakeholders regarding exhibits or programming?

What to do with volunteers/docents that do not meet the museum's mission in their organizational capacity?

- If a docent is fundamentally at odds with the mission or goals of the institution, you may have to be willing to lose them as volunteers.
- By sticking to your goals, you may be able to pick up more volunteers from different communities or groups.
- Have honest discussions with them about why your institution is doing what it is doing to prevent misunderstandings.

Training helps:

- Have trainings and conversations with your docents about any push back or issues they may face from visitors/the community and how to respond appropriately according to your institution's guidelines.

Recruiting new volunteers is a challenge, but there are ways to find people who are interested in your site, history, and sharing that with the public. For instance:

- For community institutions, look for people that already have buy-in towards and knowledge of the community (retired teachers, VFW, etc.).
- Be persistent in asking for volunteers. Make it a part of any events you do with a sign-up drive.
- Look into groups that are known for or require volunteer hours (e.g. Beta clubs, Scouts, Shriners, etc.).
- What about university classes – extra credit, community volunteering requirements, etc.
- Think outside of just public-facing roles. Do you need someone that can stuff bags at home, someone that can make costumes, someone that can build or repair exhibit pieces, graphic design work, or even laundry? Not all people that would want to volunteer will want to speak to or be with the public.

If not us, who will care for your staff, paid and unpaid? What are you hearing from your staff about things that are bothering them? What are you doing for your staff that someone else might want to try?

To support volunteers and make them feel appreciated:

- Highlight their works internally (volunteer of the month, newsletter spotlights).
- Highlight their works externally (TAM awards, local papers may want a human interest story, social media).
- Annual or semi-annual appreciation events.

Collections/Curators Roundtable

Are you getting any pushback from the community or other stakeholders regarding exhibits or programming?

- Want to make sure the public understands what happened to the people before us.
- Trying to get funding for Black history museum/cultural center
 - Want to work with the Hispanic community also because there is no one else to do so.
- Expanding stereotypes of Appalachian concepts
 - Guests are looking for the stereotypes → people question when they don't see it = need to expand their current understanding.
- Important to have someone out in the community where the crowds are
 - You may reach demographics that you don't know.
 - Shows them that you are there for them, for the community.
- Look at businesses from university students (their stories are woven into the tapestries of TN history too) → helps bring in community; helps make the museum a cultural center.
- Little changes
 - Ex: Programs and giftshop are located downstairs to create an atmosphere/mindset before entering gallery space on upper floor.
- Community transparency
 - Limitations to what you can or can't talk about = people don't understand the politics and funding → so many layers they don't know going on behind-the-scenes in museums.
 - Talking with communities helps break those limitations/barriers down.
 - Lack of understanding of how we operate and how we collect = Ex. why deaccession?
 - They don't understand museum jargon = simplify explanations.
 - Explain what it takes to protect artifacts.
 - Adult show and tell
 - "This artifact belongs in a museum" program; Treasures Program = explained why it belongs, walked through paperwork needed.
 - Open glass "behind the scenes" areas – to show public what we do.
 - Do conservation work in viewable area so tours can see what the work is → so they can understand what their funds are being used for.
 - Guests are curious; they want to know what is going on
 - Engaging with them on another level.
 - They get to see the amount of care that goes into a museum.
 - Explain how long it takes to remove damage to touchable exhibits.
 - If a guest doesn't like something, ask them why and interact with them.

- Work with interpreters to understand frontline discussions, so that behind-the-scenes work can be discussed and shine.
- Do away with the “behind-the-scenes” concept → make it seen = potential to inspire the next generation of museum workers.
- Allow community members to come in so museums can help show how to preserve/store their personal items.

How are you collecting the late 20th century, both artifacts and stories? What about the early 2000s? Are you making room for those artifacts and stories?

- One museum’s issue = newer museum (a bit behind right now just trying to get settled, can’t focus on that time period yet).
- There needs to be a shift in thinking to realize what is important to collect now.
- Preservation note = modern materials have different needs for preservation/storage, and museums need to keep that in mind and learn how to care for those items.
- One museum’s issue = They are a house museum that represents a certain time period, so they feel frozen in time → They have to really brainstorm about how to bring a modern twist to their exhibits/stories.
- Oral histories = collecting histories from elder generations
 - Is there a place in the museum? Only archives? How to preserve for future generations and improve future stories?
 - What “modern-day” oral stories are important to your museum or neighborhood/community that should be captured now?
- Issues when actively collecting from minority communities = seen as appropriation? That you are taking something from that community?
- If you don’t have physical space for new items, maybe consider digitizing what you can to represent image-wise at least.
- Some museums’ physical collecting issues = Have too many items so struggling with what they have; no storage space at all; have to pay for storage space so is limited → where do you put new?
- Make room for new items by deaccessioning
 - Looking for poor condition or hazardous materials in museums to remove from collection.
 - Remove via repatriation = McClung Museum provided as example → not only did they deaccession and return but also left display space empty and included signage explaining what happened and why.
 - Is there a deaccession line to determine what to keep/remove? = What was collected then VS what the collecting mission is now; made sense to collect then, but no longer makes sense to keep.
 - One museum’s issue = They are a house museum and feel they must keep everything that was original to the house. They have space issues (and bad

conditions). Do they take the space back in order to make more space available for new stories? Are the modern-day staff the decision makers now?

- One opinion = Deaccessioning needs to be done more often (when done right) so that those items can be used at other institutions.
- We are storytellers, and if it doesn't fit our story, it might fit someone else's.
- Question was asked whether it is now standard to include deaccessioning in your collections policy → answer was yes (Code of Ethics is tricky to nail down → lean on other resources to find the language that works for you).
- TAM is brainstorming about developing a resource for sharing disaster/emergency resources, archival or exhibit materials, and deaccessions → asked what the group thought:
 - Could be a Google Sheet that we all have access or request access to.
 - Good for museums to know what others are doing.
 - How to have TAM and TSM work cohesively together?
 - Host on TAM or TSM website.
 - Coordination would be nice.
 - Loan agreements = one institution could have more to offer.
 - To be able to put out "this is what we have, who wants it" marketplace (could get overwhelming).
 - Did show-of-hands poll:
 - How many people get on TAM website other than conference needs? No one
 - How many knew we had forums on TAM website? No one
 - How many use Facebook? Nearly everyone
 - How many use Linked In? Some
 - How many use Slack? Hardly anyone
 - Who would contribute if we shared via a Facebook page? Most
 - Could TAM website alert users of forum posts?
 - There may have to be a bit of a wall, so TAM can approve deaccessions to make sure everyone is doing it ethically/correctly so could offer deaccession training.

Who, in your community, needs to have their story told? How are you collaborating and including those marginalized groups in your curation and/or programming? How can you start?

- Example = Music exhibit at TSM
 - Focuses on different genres.
 - There was a previous iteration, and they added new genre (hip-hop).
 - Bringing story of hip-hop into the present.
 - Didn't have many artifacts (but had some), so had to reach out for donations/loans.

- Not forcing → providing an avenue for someone to tell their story.
- New museums are popping up to tell an untold story.
- When reaching out to other communities for collecting, need to begin with relationship building:
 - Museums have mostly started with white stories.
 - If go into a community without building relationship, won't have luck (won't give just because we ask).
 - Need that in order to get culturally significant items and stories; people might even approach the institution first.
 - Areas are underrepresented because those relationships haven't been made yet.
 - TSM wants to build relationships so that EVERYONE in Tennessee feels like it is their museum.
 - Community outreach = not just looking for artifacts, but also participating/investing in the community (building that relationship) to help show a present-day representation of the museum and what it supports.
 - Show support so it can be returned!
 - Balance to not seem like the "big guys" are taking from smaller communities/local communities.
 - Don't want them to feel like we want to take because they can't/aren't able to tell the story themselves.
 - Look within also = maybe have something in storage that needs to be returned to preserve local efforts at storytelling.
 - Fine line between appropriation and appreciation.
- Represent the community at the museum = seeing themselves represented in artwork and also staff.
- Reassess collection:
 - Look to bring more in that isn't being included.
 - See who has been left out of the conversation/story.
 - How to bridge the gap and bring people together .

Opened for questions from participants:

- Does anyone try to give credit to staff on the physical signage for who wrote that graphic text?
 - Adding signature/name to graphic?
- When people ask what do you do in collections, how do you describe?

Educators/Interpreters Roundtable

How are your museums dealing with polarizing issues in your community that impact your organization?

- One common thread is that since the educators and interpreters are often the people who interact with people most, they have become like the PR team for museums. We deal with the challenging questions on a regular basis, so we have the skills to handle some of the contentious issues of the day.
- Another common thread is that museums have the actual objects from the past, so there is undisputed evidence of the challenging events.
- Some examples:
 - Confederate statues issue, there was one near town courthouse. People came to museum to talk about it, even though the museum had no connection to that or the issue. The education department essentially took over the role in talking with the public, answering questions, dealing with internal communications, etc.
 - School groups at sites of enslavement. How do you teach this to young children, be trauma-informed? How much do you talk about it? Their director had to meet with a school board about their approach to it and helped inform how they navigated that.
 - Summer camp program removed problematic content (songs) or added context (to the songbook) to explain the history and build understanding. Kids did not seem worked up about it. This specific program did not have adults react either. Wondered if adults would be upset before, but it ended up not being too challenging. Children rarely react badly, but sometimes parents get grumpy.
 - Managing the changing identity of Tennessee as population changes are happening all over the state (Charles Googe) – Chattanooga’s identity is shifting from “Chattanooga choo choo” 1909 building. But site is owned by a Chicago site that is redeveloping, and public is in flux about names. Was connected to “choo choo” but names and places are changing. Now hotel chalet. Can’t stay in old railroad cars. People say it is a loss of heritage, but need to maintain relationship with developer, North Pond. The museum is recovering a lot of the artifacts as a way to keep the history alive. Here is where you can learn about the heritage and choo choo, we are keeping, protecting, and connecting with people so we don’t lose completely.
 - Publicly funded organization developing traveling trunk about African-American journey during reconstruction through Tennessee, in the midst of CRT drama – One thing they landed on is that museums have the objects, the primary sources, that provide the context. We have the witnesses to whatever that event is to tell marginalized stories. We look to the object as the grounding point to say “we are telling these stories no matter what” because the physical evidence proves it happened.
 - We can use educators’ skills in PR situations to maintain consistent vocabulary and messaging.

- Consider pre-damage control. Prepare your staff (not just educators) about potential exhibits that could challenge visitors.
- If you don't tell marginalized stories, then you aren't telling the full history. Even if it can make the public upset about narratives, etc. How do you display content (WWII Japanese imagery) and interpret this information to educate and make sure they leave with an accurate message. Don't hide the history, but there are nuances to how to share info to different audiences (kids, adults, etc) – context is so essential to challenging objects and imagery.
- Educators have to adapt on the fly to make the same info relatable to different groups.
- Sometimes we can find ways to laugh about our challenging visitors. An example was moonshining history. Local history book about moonshine runner and NASCAR resulted in Tennessee Whiskey Trail wanting to do whiskey tasting. They have Cornbread and Moonshine Festival to tell story. Great until local minister started a protest. Made some people leave, visitors feel uncomfortable. The museum staff joked saying that it tells the full story of moonshine and even today we are seeing both sides of that era. By the end many visitors thought the protester was part of the event. Invention out of necessity. Sometimes you have to pick your battles. They just asked this guy to move over and he did, but kept on. The less we make of it, the less the angry visitors stay. They're looking to get a rise out of you.

How are you collecting the late 20th century, both artifacts and stories? What about the early 2000s? Are you making room for those artifacts and stories? What may you need to get rid of to accommodate these new stories?

- Having discussion with younger generations is different for us. Students today see a time like 9/11 as part of the past, even though we were alive through that. That is history. It is a shift among collecting from that time because it seems so recent. Look to the future as educators thinking “what is it that we want to teach with? What objects from the pandemic do we want to keep or remember to talk about?” All of us, at all ages, need to keep in mind that we are living through history. It is valuable to consider momentous things (county's first Covid vaccine) and how those could be interpreted. BLM signs were donated to ETHS.
- Beyonce making country music, use these modern moments as platforms to bring to site, to educate the history, and have big conversations.
- Historic homes can be tied to certain years, but we can look to genealogy, home additions/changing construction, and how the space has endured to tell stories outside the scope of the notable family/families. Example was using genealogy at site so visitors could walk the timeline into the 20th century. It had a connection to music history so they were able to tie in themes about music history and broader societal connections. It is easy to stop with the generation(s) that lived there, but follow the genealogy. Another

idea was to talk about restoration, preservation, and the history of running the space as a museum and how previous changes impact how we understand the house today.

- Asking elders questions about living through historic moments. Ties past into current lives.
- Can talk about history after you become a museum, how we do history today and continue researching. Look at what people did when they were alive – travel, shop, eat? How can we look to those interests to tell more stories about those times.

Who, in your community, needs to have their story told? How are you collaborating and including those marginalized groups in your curation and/or programming? How can you start?

- Finding individual stories that connect to a broader history. Telling a difficult history is a gateway to understanding challenging or confusing topics.
- When creating interpretation of difficult histories, invite community members and leaders of subject to review to give OK.