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A Practical Guide to Integrating the Visitor Voice

(Continued from the last issue)

THINKING EVALUATIVELY: ENGAGING YOUR WHOLE STAFF

One of the greatest challenges in developing an institution that thinks evaluatively is embedding this mindset among all staff – from the front desk to curators, administrators, and educators – and incorporating it as a regular part of institutional practice and culture. Institutional change takes a long time, and there are many small steps along the way. Further, developing a visitor-centered organization cannot happen through the work of one or two individuals. Following are some strategies and examples that can help get all staff on board.

1. *Have staff from all levels and departments observe visitors on the floor.* Thinking from the visitor perspective requires spending time with them. Doing observations is a relatively quick, simple, and non-threatening way for staff and volunteers to get a better sense of how visitors use exhibits or programming. Suggest that staff members take thirty minutes to walk around the museum and take notes on what visitors are doing and talking about. Ask them to observe what works well and potential problems or issues they notice. Encourage staff to write down whatever comes to mind, including thoughts, feelings, and impressions. At a follow-up meeting, have them share what they noticed, what trends they found, what was surprising, or what met their expectations. Specifically ask what they learned from this activity and what more they want to learn.

2. *Engage staff in a visitor role-play exercise.* The key to thinking evaluatively is being able to walk in the visitor's shoes. As this can be a difficult task, role-playing activities can help staff shift their thinking in a fun, engaging way. For example, Institute researchers conducted a workshop with staff from the Art Gallery of Ontario focused on evaluative thinking. They broke staff into groups and assigned each team a visitor type (such as an older Asian couple interested in architecture; or family with children aged two, six, and thirteen). Each team was then asked to think about the ideal experience for this visitor group and describe it in an imaginary letter/email. This activity allowed staff to clarify what they truly wanted visitors to experience. Surprisingly, many staff found that

they did not focus as much on learning content but more on having the visitors feel excited, curious, comfortable, and welcome.

3. Encourage staff to bring family and friends to the museum and visit with them. While many staff bring friends and family to the museum, they usually take on an educator or tour guide role. Instead, have them practice coming to the museum or site as a *true visitor* and try to experience it as a visitor rather than a staff member.

4. Involve staff in developing evaluation questions. Involving staff from all different levels and departments in evaluation offers two key benefits. First, staff bring a variety of perspectives and visitor experiences to share. Second, they are more likely to gain a sense of ownership and appreciation for what evaluation can offer. Facilitate a brainstorming session with staff. Ask them what questions they have about visitors or what they have always wanted to know about visitors but were never able to ask. What do you think are some of the biggest issues visitors face or areas that the institution needs to improve upon in terms of the visitor experience? Next, encourage them to articulate which questions would need to be asked of visitors in order to understand the issue better. This activity can serve as a foundation for understanding what needs the institution has in terms of visitor research, while helping staff find value in visitor research.

5. Involve staff in analyzing visitor feedback. Another good way to engage staff in thinking evaluatively is to involve them in part of the analysis process. For example, set up a system in which different staff members are responsible each week (or each month) for reading visitor comment cards and summarizing notable trends for other staff. You can also have staff sort the cards into categories, look for patterns, and discuss what they learned and what that might mean for the institution. Often staff is surprised to find that their own perspective is not necessarily the same as that of many visitors.

6. Have staff make predictions about the outcomes of a study. If you are planning a simple evaluation study – such as what concepts visitors prefer or what exhibit/interactive is used the most – have staff make predictions about the results and support their assertions. Then have them help collect and analyze the data, followed by a discussion of the results and to what extent their predictions were correct. This exercise can help build enthusiasm and interest in the visitor experience, challenge people’s assumptions, and simply make evaluation fun!

While history museums face multiple challenges in attendance, resources, and sustainability, the field is also currently poised for exciting changes and growth. Whether you are conducting evaluation yourself, with an outside evaluator, or in combination, integrating evaluative thinking into planning an implementation can create incredible opportunities to connect with your visitors in more effective ways, build stronger relationships with the community, and generally keep your fingers on the pulse of a rapidly changing public.

Not only can evaluative thinking result in more effective programming and exhibitions, it can also energize staff, increase buy-in, and help them appreciate the impact of their work in new ways. In short, thinking evaluatively provides a crucial opportunity to drive change in the history museum field. It can help refine institutional and field-wide goals and outcomes, align programming with mission and offer engaging, valuable and relevant experiences for diverse audiences.

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This information was compiled by Jill Stein, Marianna Adams, and Jessica Lake and originally offered in the *AASLH Technical Bulletin* number 238 and *History News*, volume 62, number 2, 2007.

Lincoln Legacy: The Homestead Act,
The 20th annual Governor's Conference
on North Dakota History...

will be held November 7 and 8 at the North Dakota Heritage Center in Bismarck. Highlighting the impact of the Homestead Act on our state and region, the conference is part of North Dakota's observance of the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth on February 12, 2009. The actual Homestead Act document, signed by Lincoln, will also be on display during the conference. It is on loan from the National Archives.

Lincoln Legacy: The Homestead Act is the second in a two-part theme for the annual history conference. The fall 2007 conference theme, *Lincoln Legacy: The Railroad*, examined the impact of the railroad on North Dakota and our region.

Conference workshops include a full-day presentation by the Midwest Art Conservation Center in Minneapolis titled *After the Disaster: Saving and Salvaging Collection Materials and Artifacts*. Friday's programs will include Jim Muhn, retiree of the Bureau of Land Management, speaking on "Land Office Tract Books"; Jim Davis, State Archives Head of Reference Services, presenting "Research Methods and Tools in the Archives"; Susan Quinnell and Tim Reed, SHSND, will present "How do You Read a Building? Techniques and Resources for Homesteading"; Mark Halvorson, SHSND will speak on "The Artifacts of Homesteading – Collecting and Preserving." On Friday evening there will be a country-style dinner with musical selections from *Handcarved Prairie Rose*, a drama by Larry Sprunk.

Saturday's programs include Bob Carlson, North Dakota Farmers Union, on "What is the

Homestead Act?"; Barbara Handy-Marchello, presenting "The Gender of Homesteading"; Frank Vyzralek of Bismarck, a historian and former SHSND archivist, presenting "Dispelling the Homestead Myths"; Greg Gagnon will explain "The Impact of Homesteading on the Native Populations."

Also planned is a panel discussion on how the ethnicity of homesteaders differed and impacts on homesteaders and their neighbors. Panelists will include Marilyn Hudson of the Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara Nation, Norwegian-American Leroy Fladseth, Icelandic-American Rosemary Myrdal, and descendants of North Dakota's Germans from Russia along with a performance of homestead era music by the Old Five 'N' Dimers of Bismarck.

For more information on the nominations for the SHSND History Awards that will be awarded during the Governor's Conference on North Dakota History and copies of the nomination forms, contact SHSND awards chairman Scott Schaffnit, State Historical Society of North Dakota, 612 East Boulevard Avenue, Bismarck, ND, 58505-0830, call (701) 328 2794 or email sschaffnit@nd.gov.

Nomination forms are also available by visiting the SHSND website at www.nd.gov/hist and clicking on "Nomination Forms for Awards" at the bottom of the website's home page.