Giving Thanks—and Giving Back

Generosity is in our DNA. No matter your role in the museum field, it is your nature to share, support, and educate. That is what makes the museum field so wonderful! As we end another year, it is a natural time for reflection, for giving thanks, and for giving to others.

As I near the end of my first calendar year as president and CEO of the Alliance, I’m grateful for the support and generosity of many who have helped lead me to this place. For example, when I was in high school in a quiet community in upstate New York, I was offered a fellowship for a year-long cultural exchange in Japan. I boarded my first plane as a teenager and traveled halfway around the world by myself, with zero knowledge of the Japanese culture and language. After a year, I emerged from that experience a better person, with eyes wide open about our world and an appreciation for people with different perspectives and experiences than mine.

Twenty-five years later, I draw on that experience every single day. My good fortune continued as I was able to be the first person in my family to attend college, thanks to a number of generous scholarships. I will forever be thankful for those opportunities and to the generous donors who funded the programs that boosted me.

My personal experience is why I believe so strongly in the power of fellowships and financial assistance.

For more than 15 years, the Alliance and its professional networks have awarded annual meeting fellowships to hundreds of deserving museum professionals to help pay for travel and other costs to attend AAM’s Annual Meeting & MuseumExpo, and we provide specific networking opportunities and career building sessions for fellows.

I hear feedback all the time that museum professionals’ experiences at the AAM Annual Meeting helped shaped their careers—and that the fellowships were often the reason they could attend.

We all know that networking and relationship building are critical to advancing our careers, strengthening our institutions, and reigniting our passions and ideas for the work we do each day. That opportunity is what the Alliance wants to offer to as many promising museum professionals as possible.

This year, the Alliance is taking steps to boost diversity in the pipeline of museum staff and leadership with enhancements to our fellowship program. The timing is perfect given the theme for the May 7–10, 2017, gathering in St. Louis, “Gateways for Understanding: Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums.”

Changes to our fellowship program are meant to make it even more inclusive, to encourage a broader applicant pool—including individuals who might not already be connected with the Alliance—and to offer opportunities for ongoing support. Specifically, nonmembers of AAM as well as past fellowship recipients are eligible to apply this year. Priority will be given to applicants who identify as underrepresented or marginalized, including, but not limited to, persons of color, those who identify as LGBTQ, and persons with a physical, cognitive, or developmental disability.

This is a small step toward a much larger opportunity to be a more diverse and inclusive museum field. Progress will indeed only come from all of us taking steps—together.

Please join me in making a donation to AAM’s Fellowship Fund. Visit aam-us.org/donate to make an online contribution, or send a check (payable to American Alliance of Museums) along with your story of how you benefitted from others’ generosity. A contribution of $1,500 covers the cost for one fellow to attend the annual meeting, and any amount helps support the future of our field. We’re aiming to support 45 fellows, but the more people who give, the more fellows we can welcome to St. Louis in 2017.

If you know of a candidate who could benefit from our fellowship, please encourage them to apply at aam-us.org/fellowships. Applications will be accepted December 1–January 20.

Thank you for all of your support of AAM this year, and happy holidays to everyone celebrating during this season of giving and reflection.

Laura L. Lott is the Alliance’s president and CEO. Follow Laura on Twitter at @LottLaura.