Museums Need Shared Definitions

The field needs to adopt a shared framework and language because we still lack an accepted way to measure our impact.

By John W. Jacobsen

Do you count visitors or visits? Do you count them once or twice if they buy a combination ticket? How do you measure average dwell time? How many partnerships do you have today? Do you include function rental guests in your annual attendance? How are you doing compared to your peers?

The only way a museum can answer the last question is if all other museums answer the previous types of questions using the same definitions. To improve individual museums, as well as the field as a whole, we need shared data definitions and collection methods.

The Need to Measure Impact and Performance

The philanthropic sector now demands metrics through donor-funded initiatives such as the Cultural Data Project (CDP) and Charity Navigator. According to Charity Navigator, its system focuses on "the two most important questions ever to face the sector: how to define the value of all the work we are doing, and how to measure that value… [in pursuit] of how to identify high-performing nonprofits and how to better direct donors' contributions to them." In addition to ratings based on fiscal metrics, Charity Navigator is working on approaches based on measuring impact.

A 2013 analysis by CDP's Sarah Lee and Peter Linett of the use of data in the cultural sector, including at museums, performing arts organizations, and other nonprofits, found that we face an abundance of information. But it is not yet clear that the cultural sector is making strategic use of all of this data. The field seems to be approaching an inflection point, at which the long-term

health, sustainability, and effectiveness of cultural organizations depend on investment in, and collective action around, enhancing our capacity to use data strategically to inform decision-making. CDP's report also found issues with non-standardization of data definitions, which means all this information cannot be aggregated easily.

Efforts to Standardize Operating Data and Reporting

Having noticed this issue, a number of cultural organizations have developed initiatives to assess and overcome the challenge of standardizing museum data definitions. For example:

- CDP established rigorous standards and reporting mechanisms for collecting, aggregating, and reporting on financial data from grant-seeking cultural nonprofits. It also is adding programmatic data fields.
- The American Association for State and Local History standardized

comparison and assessment resources in its Visitors Count! survey and StEPs program, a standards and excellence program for small- to mid-sized history organizations.

- The Association of Science-Technology Centers and Association of Art Museum Directors established definitions for member surveys in the science center and art museum sectors, respectively.
- The Association of Children's Museums established its online ACM Benchmark Calculator, which suggests shared key performance indicators.

The White Oak Institute (WOI), specializing in museum field research, has partnered with various cultural organizations on standards. The Museum of Science, Boston, established the national Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies (COVES) to develop shared metrics related to the visitor experience and its learning outcomes.

WOI partnered with the museum's evaluation department to develop the Museum Indicators of Impact and Performance evaluation model, and I am an adviser on COVES. In addition, WOI and AAM collaborated on the Museum Operating Data Standards initiative of 2007–11, which successfully engaged other museum associations to support the goal of shared definitions. This led to:

- recommended data definitions for the Institute of Museum and Library Services' (IMLS) Museums Count census, which IMLS contracted WOI and AAM to develop with the field. This in turn resulted in IMLS's draft Museums Count Survey Instrument.
- ISO 18461:2016, a set of international museum statistics with definitions and data collection methods. It was developed by the Swiss ISO,

The museum field has not aligned data definitions and collection because alignment is difficult. Someone would have to establish field-wide standards, a job no association has been willing to take on, as each already has its own definitions. Each association and museum also would need to compare its current definitions to the new standards and decide whether the effort and disruption are worthwhile.

In response to these resistance points, my recent book *Measuring Museum Impact and Performance: Theory and Practice* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016) establishes definitions and shared assumptions. It also provides a process for individual museums to select metrics that can help them evidence and improve their impact. Such processes, however, also need consistent and comparable data.

peers, which helps identify and celebrate best practices, provides motivation and models for low-performing museums to improve, and establishes networks for sharing practices, programs, and exhibitions

Where Do We Go From Here?

We can get there. I believe we have indicators of impact and performance if we adjust our thinking to evaluate museums as multipurpose, community service institutions rather than solely as mission-focused institutions. We also must recognize that in addition to public impacts, museums create private, personal, and institutional impacts. We need to admit that for museums, some key performance indicators may also be evidence of impact. And we need to accept that there is no one standard to measure all museums, but that each museum will need to declare its own intentional purposes, theories of action, and evaluation indicators. If we do this, we'll be better able to demonstrate the value of museums and make the case to funders, policymakers, and ultimately, to those we serve that museums provide a strong return on investment.

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the International Organization for Standardization, in collaboration with the International Council of Museums and the European Group on Museum Statistics, and it references IMLS's survey instrument.

These recent initiatives seek to strengthen, standardize, and document operating data. However, their long-term impacts and benefits are largely aspirational at this writing. Earlier efforts to standardize data, such as an IMLS call in the 1990s, have not had any real impact. Further, participation in online data-reporting portals run by the associations appears to be declining since the days of printed surveys. Why the resistance to data sharing and standardization, when most agree it is a worthy goal?

Benefits of Measurement

How would consistent and comparable measurements be useful? How could shared data help your museum? The benefits of defining ways to measure a museum's impact and performance can be understood by taking a leap of imagination over the hurdles of logistics, politics, and established procedures. Envision a bright future in which:

- museums have hard data and clear evidence of annual changes in their impacts, benefits, and performances, measured by their selection of key performance indicators
- museums have dashboards featuring reliable, meaningful data that management can use to continually tune and steer institutional resources
- museums share data with comparable

AAM members receive a 30 percent discount on Jacobsen's book with the code 4M16JWJ through the end of 2016. Available at http://bit.ly/1Weuuta.