

What's the BIG IDEA?

This feature presents the history, theory or critical points of the theme to provide a broad context for the issue.

Evaluating Governance: Why No Two Boards Look Alike

Berit Lakey, Senior Consultant, BoardSource

GOVERNANCE IS IN ITSELF A "BIG IDEA"

In order to effectively evaluate a museum's operations, it is essential to understand the role of governance in our museums. Boards are, however, a many-splendored phenomenon. How big they are, how they structure their work, what they do when they meet, and how they replenish their membership differs a great deal. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Effective governance has to be tailored to the organization's stage of development and its internal and external context.

However, at its most basic, governance has to do with authority and accountability. It spells out who in the organization has the right and responsibility to make what decisions, and to whom they are accountable. For an incorporated organization, whether for-profit or not-for-profit, the law has assigned ultimate authority over organizational decisions to the board. In return, the board must be accountable to the public and to the organization's constituencies and supporters. The board may delegate authority, allowing outside parties to make decisions in specific areas such as organizational management or investment of funds. Because of the board's ultimate accountability, however, all such decisions must fit within a policy framework that is established by the board.

The questions outlined in this article can be used as a guide to determine whether a museum board is providing effective governance and identify areas that need improvement.

ARE THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE BOARD WELL-KNOWN?

The term "to govern" comes from a Greek word meaning "to steer." The board is the body with the authority to decide what the museum is all about and where it is going. Is the mission statement clear and appropriate for the years ahead? What is the vision that guides our decisions? What major goals do we need to achieve? The board also must make sure that the museum has the resources—the funds, the board and staff leadership, and the reputation—to implement the mission and achieve the vision. Leadership includes both executive leadership and a board that can do what is

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THEME

This issue of *NEWSStandard* looks at the diversity of effective governance structures, styles, and techniques.

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What's the Big Idea

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needed. And because the board is accountable for the museum's work and resources, it must oversee the museum's finances, its programs, and its compliance with legal and ethical standards.

How a board fills these roles may change over time. Founding boards and boards of small museums usually have to take on many management tasks in addition to their governance responsibilities. The challenge here is not to let management tasks overshadow the board's responsibility for charting the future. As the museum grows and staff is added, the board needs to

Because the board is accountable for the actions of the museum, it has the right to require accountability from its members.

delegate management responsibilities to staff and concentrate on its governance roles. The challenge for boards of larger and older museums may be to regain more of their governance roles after functioning primarily as fund raisers and overseers of museum finances. Transition may be difficult for either.

HOW WELL-ORGANIZED IS THE WORK OF THE BOARD?

First of all, is the size of our board appropriate for what we need to accomplish? Effective boards are big enough to include a variety of perspectives, but not so big that everyone does not feel needed and decision-making gets cumbersome. There is a definite trend toward smaller boards; the average size is now between 17 and 19.

Another trend is to simplify the committee structure. Organizations are reducing the number of standing committees and laying down

those that mirror staff functions. By using task forces and ad hoc committees whenever possible, boards are learning to make more flexible use of board member time and expertise and are including interested individuals who are not on the board but who can contribute to the work of the museum.

IS THE TIME AT BOARD MEETINGS WELL-MANAGED?

Boards compete with other demands on their members' time. How well board meetings are structured and conducted may determine whether the board can attract and keep the involvement of the talents they need. Boards that understand their steering role will spend most of their meeting time on the issues that are important for the future well-being of the museum, not on "administrivia" or on listening to committee or staff reports.

Effective boards use consent agendas to deal with routine matters. All reports are in writing and are discussed only if action or feedback is needed. Items that make the agenda are those that keep board members educated about the museum or museum-related issues. Board members' expertise, interest, and critical thinking are mobilized through discussion, often in small groups, in preparation for board decision-making.

DOES THE BOARD HAVE THE SKILLS AND RESOURCES NEEDED TO ACHIEVE THE STRATEGIC GOALS?

An effective board has the mix of skills, perspectives, connections, and other resources needed to fulfill its governance responsibilities. Building such a board is a perpetual task, not one that can be effectively accomplished in a month or two before annual elections as has been the wont of traditional nominating

committees. Responsibility for assisting the board in this task is now often delegated to a board development committee, sometimes called a governance committee.

After figuring out what skills, connections, and other resources are needed, the board development committee will identify and cultivate individuals that fit the bill. Those individuals are invited to events or recruited for committees or task forces in order to develop commitment and establish possible fit with the board. When invited to consider joining the board, they are clearly told about expectations concerning their time, talent, and treasure as well as about the satisfactions of being a museum board member.

The board development committee will make sure that new board members get a timely and effective orientation that covers the museum's past and present, and the issues it faces and introduces the board's responsibilities and processes. The committee will also ensure that new board members are put to work as soon as possible, to emphasize that their participation is needed and valued.

Effective boards hold their members to a high standard. If somebody is no longer able to take an active part, he is not automatically re-elected to another term, and may be asked to resign. This is only fair to the museum, which needs an active board, and also to the rest of the board, whose members share equally the responsibility for board actions or inactions. Because the board is accountable for the actions of the museum, it has the right to require accountability from its members. No matter its shape or size, a board needs regular check-ups to ensure its long-term health. Effective governance depends on it. ■

Remote Governance: Museums within Non-Museum Parent Organizations

Elizabeth Merritt, Director, Museum Advancement & Excellence

Berit Lakey's article in this issue of *NEWStandard* specifically addresses governance in private, free-standing museums with their own boards of trustees. However, at most, only 65 percent of U.S. museums have this governance structure¹. About 10 percent of museums are part of a college or university, and at least a quarter are organized within municipal, county, state, or federal government. Of museums that are private nonprofits, some are part of larger private nonprofit systems that do not primarily exist to run a museum. Most of these museums have "remote" governance, i.e., the director of the museum is separated from the legal governing authority by multiple levels of management. A university museum director may report to a department chair, who reports to the provost, who reports to the university president, who reports to the regents. A municipal museum director may report to the city manager, who reports to city council. In such cases, we sometimes find that museum staff—and peer reviewers—have lower expectations for the practice of governance. In fact, almost all of the expectations that the field holds for a private nonprofit board are applicable to remote governance as well, albeit in different ways.

DELEGATION OF AUTHORITY—SHARING POWER WITH PARTNERS

Private nonprofit museum boards are expected to have a document delegating authority for the opera-

tion of the museum to the director. In museums with remote governance, the issue of delegation of authority may be more complex, but it is just as important. Many museums with remote governance have additional internal or external groups that share some of the responsibility for governing or managing the museum. This includes, for example, separately incorporated private nonprofit friends groups and internally appointed advisory boards. These groups sometimes are established specifically to address some of the limitations of remote governance—a separate friends group may be able to fund raise where a government entity cannot, for example, or a university museum advisory board can provide a venue for community input. However, the legal governing authority (regents, city council, etc.) needs to clearly specify in writing what authority is being delegated to each such group. Not documenting a group's established duties and role can lead to conflicting expectations. The group may be working at odds to the purposes of the museum or may lack the authority they need to help the museum. For example, several times we have seen cases where a university establishes an advisory board and then cedes it no official role in planning, budgeting, or formulating policy. This can result in alienating the very people the museum tried to reach out to by establishing the board, not to mention losing the valuable input they could give.

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¹ All figures cited from the 1999 AAM Museum Financial Information Survey

[On the Ground] This feature incorporates the theme into the practical work of peer reviewers.

Dysfunctional or Just Different? Some Clues to Evaluating Effective Governance

Gary N. Smith, President, Old City Park: The Historical Village of Dallas

Museum governance comes in many forms, presenting a challenge for time-pressed MAP and Accreditation peer reviewers who need to quickly evaluate the effectiveness of the structure and functioning of a museum's governance. Reviewers often are required to absorb the nuances of a governance structure that may be very different from the type they are used to seeing and to do so under distracting

I always look for a governing body that is organized for governance and not for management...

circumstances. Different does not necessarily mean dysfunctional, however, and as reviewers we have the important responsibility of judging a governing board's effectiveness in carrying out the museum's mission, regardless of its form. Or, put more simply, different

or not, does it work? As a long-time MAP and Accreditation reviewer, here are some of the things I look for in determining the effectiveness of a museum's governance.

BEFORE THE VISIT: REVIEWING THE DOCUMENTS

In your pre-visit materials you will wade through a tremendous number of documents, a few of which are especially helpful in evaluating a museum's governance:

1. Mission Statement: This is the key document, since all of our evaluations are based on how effectively the museum carries out its mission. There are literally thousands of versions of mission statements, with few hard and fast rules as to what is right and what is wrong. Your job is to determine whether it clearly outlines the main purposes of the museum and guides decision-making, and if the museum's collections, exhibits, programs, and activ-

ities are set up to carry out the mission statement.

2. Bylaws: Reading bylaws can be very enlightening, but you may find variances here from what you regard as "standard." I always look for a governing body that is organized for governance and not for management, that an executive director is provided for, and that the board has clearly delegated responsibility for management of the museum's operations to the executive director.

3. Institutional Plan: The institutional plan should be comprehensive, covering all areas of the organization, and in enough detail for

Your Words Needed

AAM is launching a multi-year recruitment campaign for peer reviewers. Help us reach the best and brightest by sharing your thoughts on why you find peer review a valuable professional experience. To submit a "testimonial," log on to the peer reviewer Web site (from www.aam-us.org) and look for the testimonial button, or e-mail Karen Bellnier directly at kbellnier@aam-us.org.

TAKE-ALONG TIPS

This feature includes suggestions from peer reviewers to make your work easier and more effective.

MAP/Accreditation

Gail Fowler Mohanty, former director of Slater Mill Historic Site, Pawtucket, R.I.

At the beginning of my most recent report, I included a brief bio describing my experience and background. The idea came from seeing this on the CAP report the museum shared with me. I felt it was important for the institution that selected me as a peer reviewer to have a sense of my range of experience and the perspectives that I bring to the assessment and that color my evalu-

ation of the site. Although the institution is aware of my background before choosing me as a peer reviewer, and likely selected me based on it, many individuals who weren't involved in that process will read the report and need that information in the report, not in a file drawer. Beyond that, as the report is shared with a wider audience over time, through changing staff and board members, it is important for future readers to know where the ideas in the report came from.

MAP

Monta Lee Dakin, Mountain-Plains Museum Association, Littleton, Colo.

I advocate presenting MAP reports to the board and staff. Otherwise it runs the risk of being a shelf report no one receives. While it is not feasible for every MAP visit, I feel that follow-up and presentation by the peer reviewer is a powerful way to ensure buy-in from the board.

Submit your tip to peer-review@aam-us.org

you to see a clear vision of the museum's future. Most importantly, does it match up well with the mission statement? And is there evidence of a regular planning process that involves board, staff, and important constituencies? No museum with effective governance will fail to have a good planning process and a good institutional plan.

4. Organizational Chart: I like to see an organizational chart that shows a clear hierarchy of the museum's governing body, any auxiliary or support groups, and the lines of report from the executive director to the staff. Sometimes the best way to sort out potentially troublesome issues surrounding auxiliary or support groups is to see how the organization itself lists them on an organizational chart. Additionally, a Memorandum of Understanding or a Management Agreement can outline the relationships and responsibilities of both parties.

ON SITE: WHO DO YOU TALK TO?

As a reviewer you will be talking to a great many people. When evaluating governance, the people that I spend the most time with are the executive director, the chairman of the board, members of the executive committee and other key board members, and principal staff members.

What do I look for? I look for obvious signs that the executive director and the chairman are working comfortably together on the MAP or Accreditation project. In a good situation, they will help you by putting you in touch with a number of key executive committee and other board members, including a combination of long-time supporters and

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PEER REVIEWER MANAGER'S CORNER

Recruiting • Supporting • Developing Peer Reviewers

As discussed in the spring issue of *NEWStandard*, we have worked over the last several months to clarify the qualifications required to serve as peer reviewers for the Museum Assessment Program (MAP) and the Accreditation Program. Printed on this issue's insert is the product of those efforts: the Peer Reviewer Qualifications for Service. What is this document and what does it mean for you?

WHAT IS IT?

The Peer Reviewer Qualifications for Service policy defines the eligibility criteria and performance expectations for peer reviewers in MAP and Accreditation. The most significant clarification specifies that peer reviewers must be currently employed at a museum (at a minimum of 20 hours per week). Current peer reviewers who are between jobs are granted a one-year "transition period," and peer reviewers who retire are given a three-year "extension period."

HOW WAS IT CREATED?

The draft document was based on the current position descriptions for MAP Surveyors and Accreditation Visiting Committee members. Using this draft, the MAP Advisory Committee and the Accreditation Commission identified the core characteristics of a good peer reviewer. Critical feedback also came from the Peer Reviewer Advisory Committee (PRAC) established this spring. Each of the three groups reviewed drafts twice, in rotation, and could see others' feedback.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

This policy provides a platform for the peer review program. We will use it to build a more consistent process of evaluating applications, reviewing eligibility of current reviewers, communicating expectations to reviewers, and developing a recruitment message that is clear and consistent. If, after reading the policy, you have any questions about your eligibility, please e-mail or call me (peer-review@aam-us.org or 202/218-7688).

NEXT STEPS

The Peer Reviewer Qualifications for Service also provides the basis for the next step: developing an effective process of evaluation and feedback for peer reviewers.

EVALUATION

MAP and Accreditation programs are accountable to the stakeholders in their programs as well as the field at large. We are also committed to improving the performance of the peer review program. With this goal in mind, we are developing ways to gather feedback from a variety of sources to help peer reviewers be more successful with their assignments and help the program staff improve the experience for client museums. As the evaluation instrument is developed, we will consult the MAP Advisory Committee, the Accreditation Commission, and PRAC. You also will have an opportunity to comment on drafts as they are posted on the peer reviewer section of the AAM Web site.

The success of the MAP and Accreditation programs depends on peer reviewers like you who so generously give back to the field. Thank you!

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REFERENCE DESK

This feature provides annotated references of articles, Web sites, books, and more that relate to the newsletter theme. You are encouraged to submit annotated references that you have found helpful.

The following electronic resources may prove valuable when reviewing the governance of an institution for MAP or Accreditation, for recommending in your report to a museum participating in the Governance or Institutional Assessment, or in addressing questions that arise in your own institution.

AAM Web Site: In the fall, AAM will launch the Institutional Members Only section of its Web site. A wide variety of sample documents from museums of diverse types and sizes will be available electronically. A database will aid institutional members in finding relevant documents to consult when creating or revising their own materials.

The Alliance for Nonprofit Management is devoted to improving the management and governance capacity of nonprofits. Web site resources include a Frequently Asked Questions section and *Pulse! The Online Newsletter of the Nonprofit Management Support Community*, which contains articles, survey results, and announcements of conferences and workshops. Web site: www.allianceonline.org.

Board Café: The Newsletter Exclusively for Members of Nonprofit Boards of Directors. This electronic newsletter is self-described as “short enough to read over a cup of coffee.” Distributed monthly via e-mail, it offers ideas, opinions, news, and resources to help board members give and get the most out of board service. Subscriptions are free. Web site: www.boardcafe.org.

BoardSource is dedicated to increasing the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations by strengthening their boards of directors. The Web site has answers to a wide variety of frequently asked questions about boards, links to additional references, and a free e-mail-based “Ask Our Consultants” service. Web site: www.boardsource.org/intel/index.htm.

Free Management Library is a service of the Management Assistance Program for Nonprofits. It is an integrated library of resources with information on 675 topics; the section on boards of directors links to numerous articles and online resources. Web site: www.mapnp.org.

The **Museum Trustee Association** is dedicated to providing ongoing board education programs, services, and resources for the special needs of museum trustees. A membership organization for trustees, MTA offers publications, workshops, and a variety of other member benefits. Web site: www.mat-hq.org.

Nonprofit Genie is a free service provided by the California Management Assistance Partnership to help nonprofit staff and board members manage more successfully. The Nonprofit Genie offers monthly features, frequently asked questions, links to other resources on the Web, and book reviews. Web site: www.genie.org.

For more references and links to these sites, visit the peer reviewer Web site from www.aam-us.org.

On the Ground

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relatively new members. I try to spend time with them and get them to talk about the museum and their hopes and dreams for it. For this reason, rather than having a formal meeting, I prefer to meet board members in an informal setting, perhaps over lunch or dinner at someone’s home. There should be an obvious and casual comfort level in how everyone talks about each other and the museum’s future plans. Finally, when interviewing key staff, I want to see that they are full participants in the planning process and comfortable with their role and that of the board.

WARNING SIGNS OF BAD GOVERNANCE

There are several things that, if you encounter them, should send up warning flags:

- You see a confusing and rambling mission statement that seems open to different interpretations
- In your conversations with board and staff, you hear significant differences of opinion on major directions (often self-described as “factions”)
- Key board members seem relatively unaware of the MAP or Accreditation process that is underway or actively disassociate themselves from it
- You sense a division between the executive director and the board (they talk about each other in disparaging terms)
- You hear a great deal of discussion about what the “proper role” of board and staff should be (which generally indicates confusion and disagreement)
- You see evidence of support or auxiliary organizations that have improper roles or influence over the museum’s governance and management, or that disagree with staff and/or governing authority over their role

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In Sight

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PLANNING AND POLICY

Sometimes museums in larger systems, such as a university or a park service, have trouble meeting the Accreditation Commission's expectations regarding institutional planning. The larger parent organization has a planning process, but the museum may have no distinct role in the process. There is a clear expectation in the field that every museum must have distinct plans, goals, and strategies that are both specific to the museum and integrated into the planning of the parent organization. The museum may need to negotiate some flexibility in the parent organization's usual procedures to allow for this, which can be difficult, particularly in government agencies. Sometimes the museum's support organization can step in to fill this role, as it may be better able to include a variety of constituents' input in the planning process. However, this needs to be officially approved by the parent

organization, even if the plan primarily governs funds raised and administered by a separately managed friends organization.

Museums with remote governance often have trouble carving out a unique identity with respect to policy as well. For example, the parent organization may have its own ethics policy or code of conduct, but this rarely covers museum-specific issues such as use of funds resulting from deaccessioning, data confidentiality, or personal collecting. However, all museums are expected to have their own institutional code of ethics that addresses such museum-specific issues in a way appropriate to their individual circumstances. There are 10 accredited National Park Service (NPS) sites, which have dealt with these challenges in a variety of ways. Since so many NPS sites apply for accreditation, the NPS Office of the Chief Curator helped to pull together existing pieces of NPS documentation and policy to create one document that NPS sites can submit to fulfill the ethics requirement. The Accreditation Commission recognizes that it can't change the federal government and has deemed that this document is sufficient for NPS sites, even if it is not tailored to each site. Some solutions are unique—one NPS site that is too small to be required by the NPS to have its own planning process created a long-range plan consistent with that of the larger park in which it resides in order to fulfill the Accreditation requirements.

EDUCATING THE GOVERNING AUTHORITY

Private nonprofit boards are expected to recruit, orient, and train new board members and to assess their performance. Museums

with remote governance rarely can influence the process by which their governing authority is elected or appointed or even the placement of the museum within the larger organization. However, it is reasonable to expect the museum to take appropriate steps to educate the governing authority and the director's supervisor about museum standards, such as a museum's stewardship responsibility for its collections. The form this education takes will vary depending on the size and complexity of the parent organization. It may be possible to host a meeting or reception for the governing authority, offer behind-the-scene tours, or include a section devoted to the museum in reports given to the governing authority. Perhaps the museum can be featured in the orientation material, meetings, and tours given to the new hires in the position to which the museum director reports. These are all suggestions that a MAP Surveyor may offer. Accreditation Visiting Committee members will want to look for evidence that the governing authority, or the groups or individuals to whom they have delegated authority, are making sound judgments regarding the museum's planning, policies, and resource allocation. Decisions in these areas serve as evidence that they are adequately educated regarding the museum's needs.

These examples illustrate the ways in which museums with remote governance can meet standards for good governance in several key areas. For more on how museums with remote governance can address the "10 basic responsibilities of nonprofit boards," see the peer reviewer section of the AAM Web site under "*NEWStandard* Current Issue Supplement." ■

Confidentiality Note:

A reminder that museums that participate in MAP and Accreditation may choose to share their report outside of the institution, (e.g., with funders, governments, donors, etc.). Because your name is listed on the report you may be contacted by one of those groups. Bear in mind the following:

1. The details of the visit are always confidential and only the museum's to share. Only if the museum expressly gives you permission to discuss the visit with the contacting party is it appropriate to do so.
2. After completing a site visit and all follow-up documentation, you have fulfilled your duties as a peer reviewer. You do not have an obligation to fulfill further requests, even if granted permission.

If you have any questions, please call Karen Bellnier at 202/218-7688 or e-mail kbellnier@aam-us.org,

On the Ground

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SIGNS OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

While not all are necessary, the following items are evidence that a good governance structure is in place:

- The museum has a clear mission statement that you can easily understand
- There are abundant indications, as gathered through both formal and casual interactions with board and staff, of a general awareness of and consensus on the museum's goals
- Board and staff alike demonstrate a high level of self-awareness of the museum's strengths and weaknesses, and what is needed to

overcome any obstacles

- A good working relationship obviously exists between the board and the executive director, indicating mutual understanding and respect of their roles
- The museum has a good track record of board participation and is made up of a combination of long-term members and relatively new arrivals
- The museum has a history of employing relatively long-tenured executive directors
- There is evident awareness of AAM and its Accreditation

or MAP programs

- A commitment to professionalism is a stated goal of the museum. For example, achieving AAM Accreditation

Those are my tips. For a complete list of all of the guidelines you will need, familiarize yourself with the Critical Issues Checklist in the *Governance Assessment Surveyor Handbook* and the Criteria and Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum in the *Visiting Committee Handbook*. ■

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS!

Keep an eye on this space in every issue for deadlines, important dates, and exciting opportunities of interest and benefit to peer reviewers and museum professionals.

Evaluating Governance: A Workshop for AAM Peer Reviewers

This workshop explores how to assess governance in a museum setting and identifies the characteristics of good governance. The workshop is free and lunch will be provided; participants must pay for their own travel and accommodations. Sign up by contacting Karen Bellnier or at www.aam-us.org.

Oct. 16, 2002 • Southeastern Museums Conference Annual Meeting, Richmond, Va.

Nov. 12, 2002 • Canterbury Shaker Village, Canterbury, N.H., (prior to NEMA conference)

AAM Annual Meeting and MuseumExpo 2003™

May 18–22, 2003 • Portland, Oreg.

AAM Professional Education Programs

For descriptions of each, visit the Seminars and Workshops section of the AAM Web site at www.aam-us.org.

Leadership Through Diversity

Oct. 16, 2002 • Southeastern Museums Conference Annual Meeting, Richmond, Va.

Oct. 27, 2002 • Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums Annual Meeting, Albany, N.Y.

Slaying the Financial Dragon

Nov. 1–2, 2002 • Washington, D.C.

Current Issues in Collections Stewardship: Mastering the Essentials
Dec. 13–14, 2002 • Hosted by the Pueblo Grande Museum • Phoenix, Ariz.

July 11–12, 2003 • Hosted by the Rhode Island Historical Society • Providence, R.I.

Building Community Connections

Jan. 10–11, 2003 • Hosted by the Japanese American National Museum • Los Angeles, Calif.

Jan. 17–18, 2003 • Philadelphia, Penn.

Mutual Concerns of Air and Space Museums

March 1–4, 2003 • Washington, D.C.

Legal Problems of Museum Administration

March 26–28, 2003 • New Orleans, La.

BoardSource offers workshops for nonprofit board and staff members to help strengthen nonprofit boards. For descriptions of each, visit www.boardsource.org/training/workshop.html.

Washington Workshop Series

Sept. 19–20, 2002 • Washington, D.C.

Power of Partnership

Oct. 7–8, 2002 • Irvine, Calif.

NEW MAP DEADLINE!!

Dec. 1, 2002

Accreditation Program application deadlines:

Dec. 31, 2002

June 30, 2003

Regional Museum Associations' Annual Conferences

Regional conferences are an excellent professional opportunity to keep current on the issues and expectations of the museum field.

Western Museums Association

Sept. 11–15, 2002 • Tucson, Ariz.

Mountain-Plains Museums Association

Oct. 2–5, 2002 • Topeka, Kan.

Southeastern Museums Conference

Oct. 16–19, 2002 • Richmond, Va.

MidAtlantic Museum Association

Oct. 27–30, 2002 • Albany, N.Y.

Association of Midwest Museums

Nov. 11–14, 2002 • Minneapolis, Minn.

New England Museum Association

Nov. 13–15, 2002 • Manchester, N.H.