

U.S. Museums Continue to Serve Despite Stress

A Report from the American Association of Museums (April 2011)

For the second year in a row, museums in the United States expanded their service to the American people despite fewer resources and significant economic stress.* Nonetheless, museum leaders are optimistic that economic conditions will improve in 2011, while identifying challenging long-term trends that are likely to affect the economic condition of museums in the future.

Here are the key findings from a new survey of American Association of Museums institutional members:

Expanded Service

- American museums experienced **increased attendance** in 2010 compared to recent years. Fully half of the museums that responded to the survey indicated some increase in attendance, with a significant increase at 32% of museums. Just 30% of museums experienced a decline in attendance. [**FIGURE 1**] Museums in the western part of the nation were most likely to experience an increase in attendance (61%) and museums in the Southeast were least likely to experience an increase (42%).
- Asked to **explain the changes in attendance**, many respondents noted that “people are staying closer to home, and are taking advantage of parks, historic sites and museums nearby.” Other common reasons offered for the boost in attendance include new “blockbuster” exhibits and better marketing. Declining attendance was attributed to a general decrease in tourism, budget reductions, fewer visits by school groups, or local circumstances such as natural disasters or museum closures for renovations.
- American museums maintained (51%) or **expanded services to K-12 students and their teachers** (27%) in 2010. [**FIGURE 2**] But as several respondents noted, “The economy has greatly affected our school group numbers.”
- American museums also **opened their doors even wider to members of the armed forces**, with 21% of museums offering new or expanded discounts on admission to military personnel and/or their families.
- The **median price** of an adult general admission ticket remained the same as it was in 2009 (just \$7) while 37% of museums remained free at all times (or only asked for a voluntary donation).

* See *Service Despite Stress: Museum Attendance and Funding in a Year of Recession* (American Association of Museums, February 2010): www.aam-us.org/upload/Service-Despite-Stress.pdf.

- In 2010, the **average attendance** for all museums in the survey was 105,855, but that reflects a range of institutions from very small (395 visitors in 2010) to very large (24,346,739 visitors).

Economic Stress

- This expansion of services occurred during a time of **economic stress** for the nation's museums. More than 70% of museums reported economic stress at their institutions ranging from *moderate* (39%) to *severe* (14%) or *very severe* (18%) – with very severe stress defined as “the very worst I have seen in at least 5 years.” [FIGURE 3] The economic stress was greatest in the mid-Atlantic states, where 82% of museums reported at least moderate levels of stress, and mildest in the band of mountain-plains states that stretches from Texas in the south to Montana and North Dakota (only 54% of museums reported stress in this area). Overall, this was slightly worse than the results from the 2009 survey, when 67% of museums reported at least moderate economic stress.
- The majority of museums also saw a **reduction in funding** last year, especially in *government support* (decreased at 52% of museums and held steady at just 36%) and *investment income* (decreased at 37% and held steady at 27%). [FIGURE 4]
- Museums adopted a variety of **budget-saving measures** to meet their economic challenges in 2010, including hiring freezes (reported by 35% of museums in the survey), relying more on volunteers (34%), deferring building maintenance (30%), and relying more on their own collections for exhibitions (29%). [TABLE 1] Very few museums (fewer than 3%) chose to meet economic stress by deaccessioning items from their collections. Just 12% raised the price of general admission.
- Museums have also responded to the ongoing economic crisis by **reducing their budgets for 2011 even further**: 40% have smaller budgets in 2011 than 2010 while 29% have been able to increase their budgets (usually by less than a tenth). [FIGURE 5]

Hope and Concerns for the Future

- In the short term, three-quarters of respondents believed that economic conditions for their museums will remain steady (49%) or **get better** (28%) in 2011. [FIGURE 6] In the words of one museum director, “We’re starting to see some light at the end of the tunnel.”
- Looking to the long term, however, the survey respondents offered perceptive comments about trends that are likely to affect the economic condition of museums for years to come, including:
 - The challenge of attracting potential donors to governing boards: “*It has been increasingly difficult to bring new trustees and potential major donors on board as many individuals ... have been reluctant to take new projects on.*”
 - A decline in local property values, leading to a reduction in local tax revenues: “*We were not hit too badly this past year but are expecting a delayed impact in the next couple of years as property tax income is expected to decline.*”

- A permanent decline in public support for higher education: “*Our parent organization is a state university, [so] we anticipate severe cuts in the FY2012 budget and beyond.*”
- Regional declines in specific industries that have traditionally supported local museums.
- And a shift in philanthropic focus, perhaps permanent, “*from history [and culture in general] towards social services, environment and other causes.*”

About the Survey

This Annual Condition of Museums in the Economy 2011 survey was conducted online between February 7 and 21, 2011. Invitations were sent to approximately 2,300 institutional members of the American Association of Museums, representing a cross-section of all museums in the United States, including art museums, children’s museums, history museums and sites, zoos and aquariums, science and technology museums, arboreta and gardens, etc. Responses were received from 383 institutions; in most cases, the survey was completed by the museum’s director, chief financial officer, or other senior administrator. Results have a margin of error of approximately $\pm 5\%$ for the entire population of U.S. museums.

About AAM

The American Association of Museums has been bringing museums together since 1906, helping to develop standards and best practices, gathering and sharing knowledge, and providing advocacy on issues of concern to the entire museum community. With more than 18,000 individual, 3,000 institutional and 300 corporate members, AAM is dedicated to ensuring that museums remain a vital part of the American landscape, connecting people with the greatest achievements of the human experience, past, present and future. For more information, visit www.aam-us.org.

For more information

Contact Philip M. Katz, Assistant Director for Research, at pkatz@aam-us.org or (202) 289-1818.

FIGURE 1

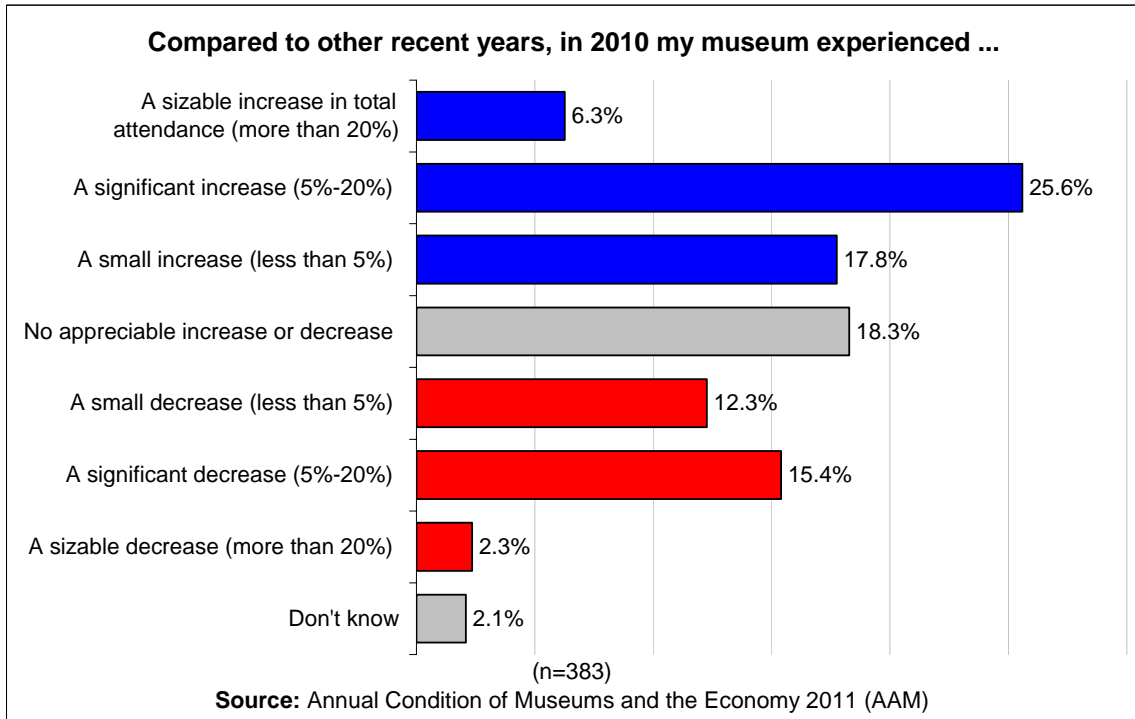


FIGURE 2

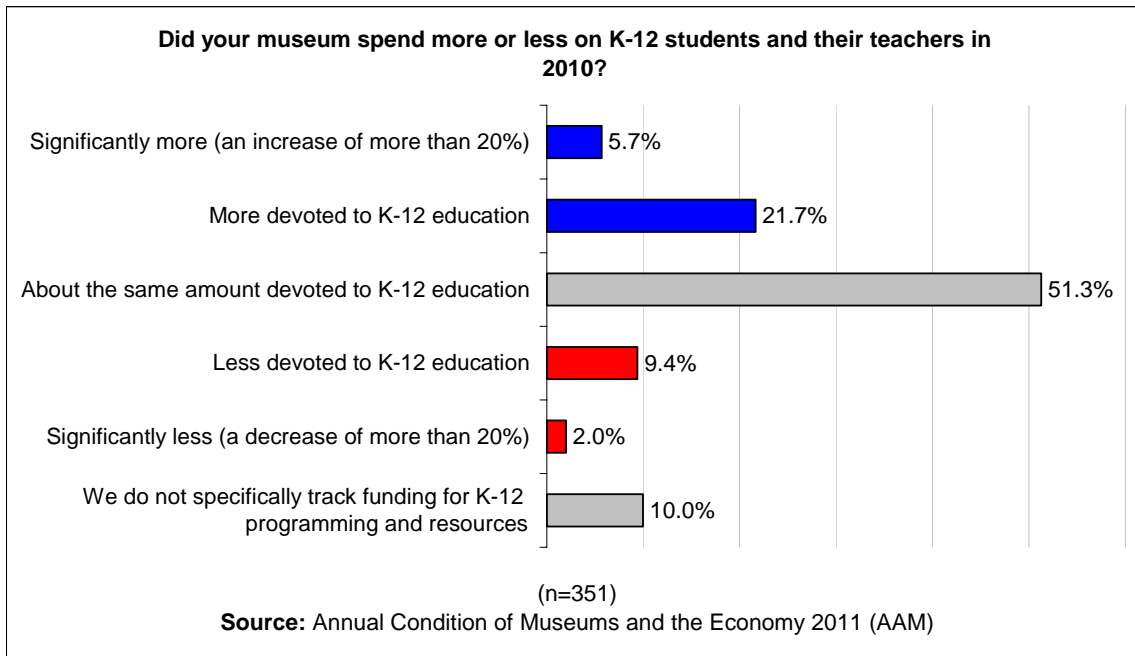


FIGURE 3

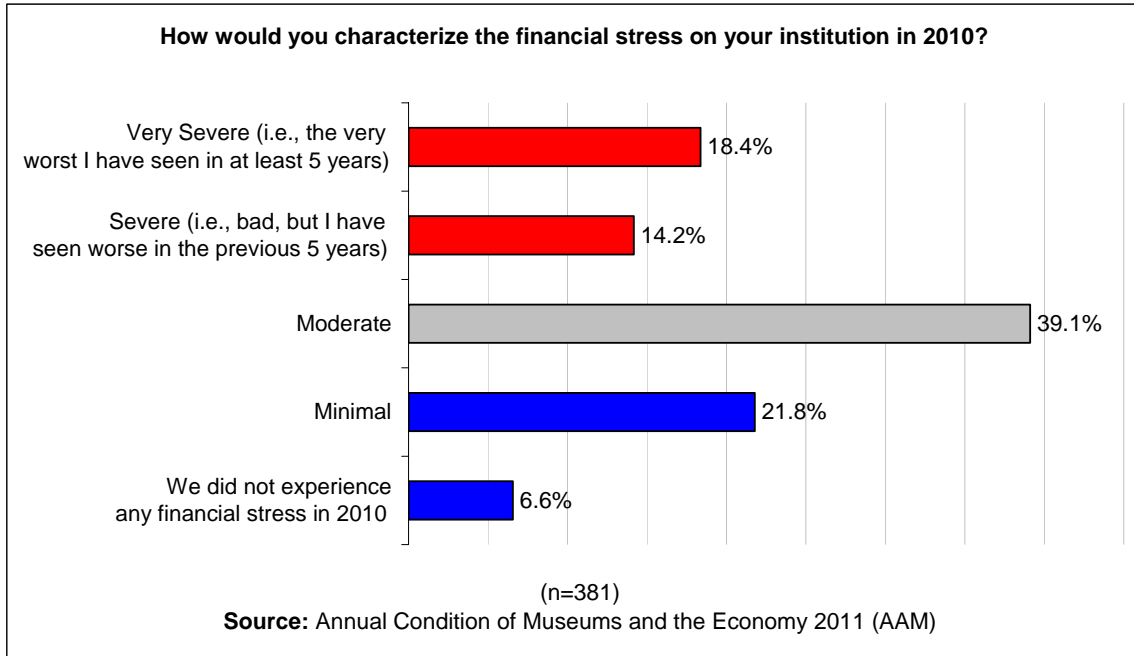


FIGURE 4

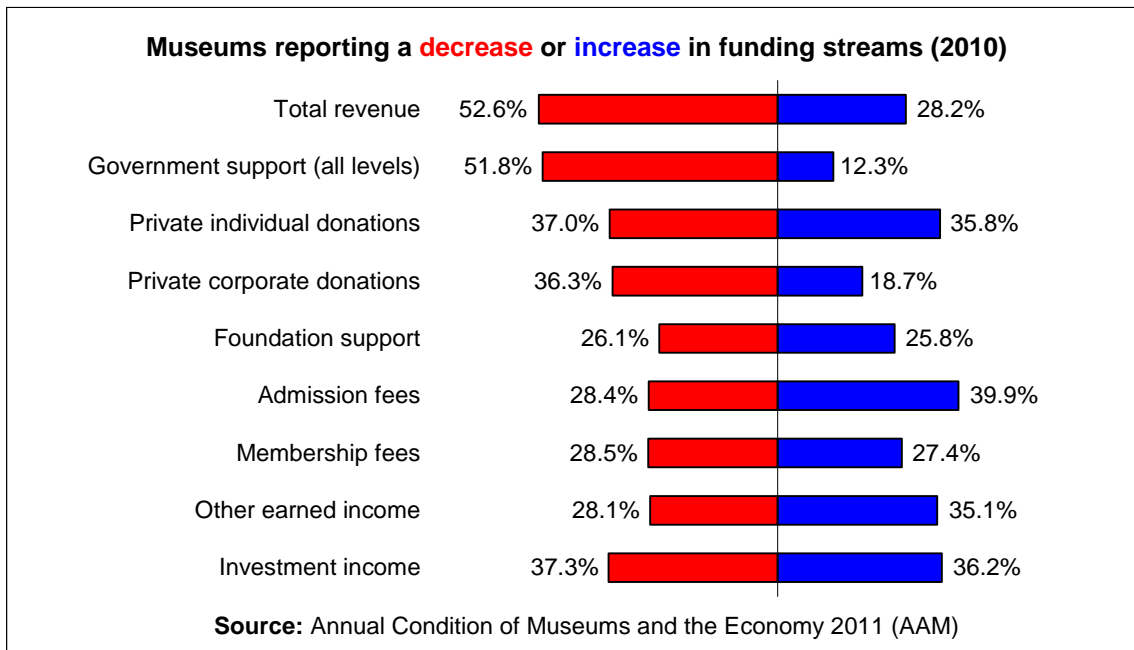


FIGURE 5

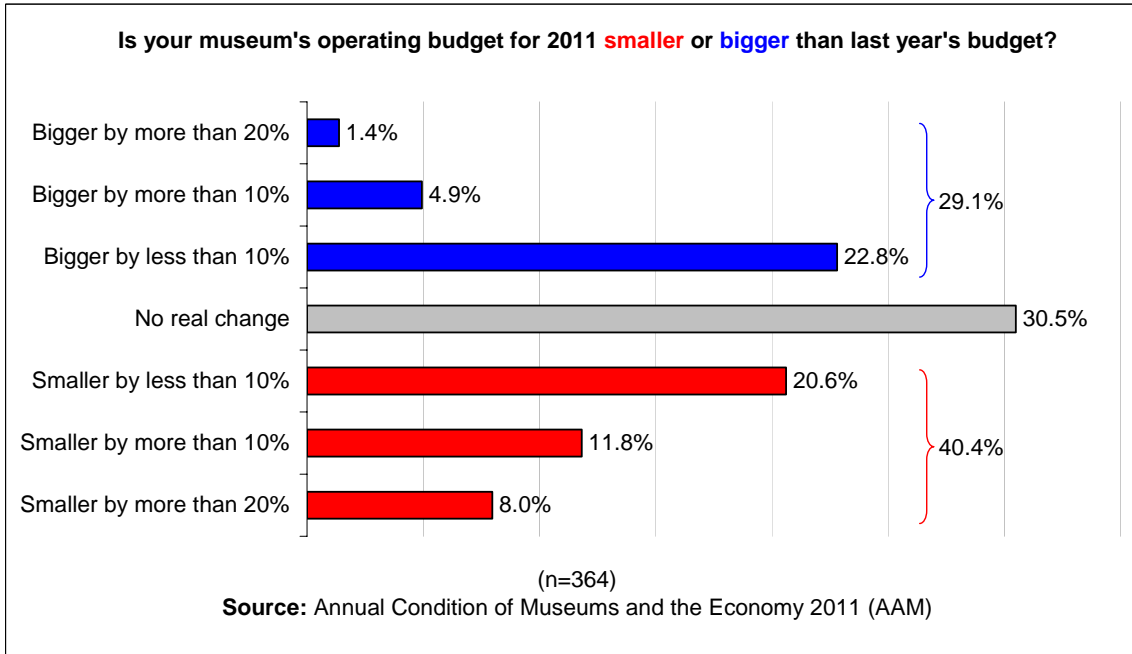


FIGURE 6

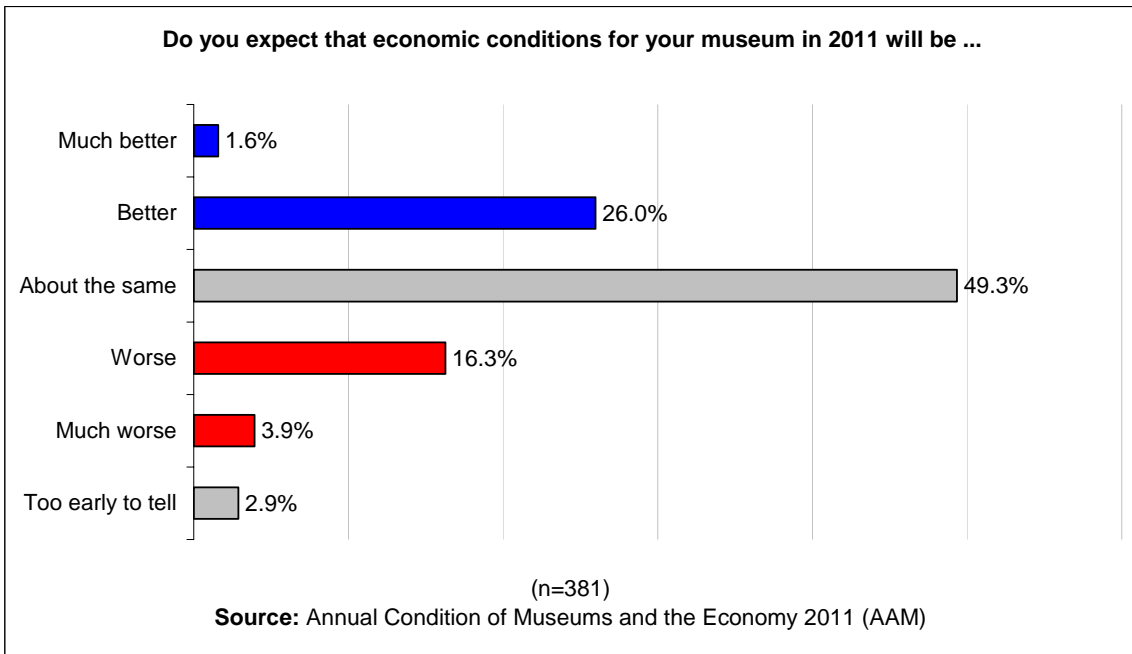


TABLE 1
Budget-saving measures adopted by museums in 2010

% of museums	Budget-saving measure
13.3%	Reduce operating hours
3.7%	Close individual galleries or exhibits on selected days
35.2%	Freeze hiring
16.2%	Lay off staff
8.1%	Furlough staff
15.4%	Reduce staff benefits
13.3%	Postpone or cancel an exhibit
13.8%	Postpone or cancel a capital campaign
14.4%	Postpone or cancel a construction project
29.5%	Defer building maintenance
2.9%	Deaccession item(s) from the collection
34.2%	Rely more on volunteers
11.0%	Shift functions from paid staff to outside contractors
1.0%	Rely more on traveling exhibits
17.2%	Rely less on traveling exhibits
28.5%	Rely more heavily on the museum's own collection for exhibits
12.5%	Other
78.6%	ANY budget-saving measure