

Expanding the Community Connection

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The 1996 AAM meeting *Expanding Possibilities: Opening Up--Reaching Out* comes at a time when many museums are evaluating the success of their efforts to implement the goals outlined in Excellence and Equity. One of those goals is to "Engage in active, ongoing collaborative efforts with a wide spectrum of organizations and individuals who can contribute to the expansion of the museum's public dimension."¹ Building ongoing collaborations and relationships assists museums in attaining several other Excellence and Equity goals, including reflecting diversity through a broad public dimension, assuring multiple perspectives in the interpretive process and achieving diversity among trustees, staff and volunteers.

Museums will reflect diversity through a broad public dimension when they build lasting relationships with the community. New bonds are formed, new audiences are identified and served, and the museum's network widens. Every community has its core of community activists and leaders, and there are often strong networks established among these community activists. Museums are welcomed into this network, if the commitment to community-based work is apparent.

When museums forge these bonds, they develop relationships with community leaders, who then become advocates for the museum in the broader community. As their involvement with the museum deepens, they become potential candidates for the museum's board. They also become part of the museum's network to identify candidates for open positions and potential volunteers, and provide a source of new perspective in the interpretive process.

This article and the session at the 1996 AAM conference, *Expanding the Community Connection*, focus on the process of developing meaningful and ongoing linkages with the community. It is crucial to realize the importance of process. The ultimate goal of establishing community ties is not the successful completion of a particular event or exhibit (although, that is important), but the building of an ongoing relationship which all parties embrace and support. Since it would be presumptuous to develop a program *for* the community rather than *with* the community, it is particularly important to understand the perspective and concerns of our potential community partners from the very beginning of the process. It is for this reason that the session *Expanding the Community Connection* incorporates the community's perspective throughout. This double session includes panelists representing museums and community groups, and roundtable discussions co-facilitated by community and museum representatives.

Museum staff and community representatives join together to address appropriate methods of reaching select communities, dealing with community values and specific cultural concerns.

There are a few key points to keep in mind as we expand our community connection. Listed below is a brief set of tools for enabling museum staff and volunteers to work more closely with community groups. These suggestions arise from many sources: AAM program sessions, discussions with colleagues, and personal experience.

Tools for Establishing Community Partnerships and Collaborations

--Establish the relationship first. Collaborations are more likely to succeed if there is a trusting relationship already established.

--Get to know the organization' s work style. Respect their philosophy, pace and resources.

--Work with organizations which have a mission related to your organization' s mission.

--Develop the goals for the project together. Each organization may have a different reason for entering into a partnership, and each may have different goals, but it is important that all goals work toward a common purpose.

--Have the goals be flexible and appropriate to the partners' missions and resources.

--Develop long-range goals, too. Plant the seed for future collaborations.

--Start small. Build in a high chance for success.

--Expect to proceed slowly.

--Expect the project to take a lot of time. Look at the long-term benefits and realize that this is time well-spent.

--Plan for ongoing evaluation of the project and the collaboration process itself. Plan to adjust the partnership accordingly.

--Be balanced in your actions. For instance, alternate meeting sites.

--Be honest, respectful, trusting, flexible.

--Be clear about expectations. Clearly identify roles and responsibilities.

- Share decision-making.
- Focus on the process.
- Acknowledge the different levels of resources available. Acknowledge that the community organization has a great deal to offer.
- Formalize the partnership through a memo of understanding.
- Give every partner equal credit and recognition.
- Involve the leadership early on to ensure support.
- Realize that, as a process, there will be rough spots along the way, just as there are in any relationship. Be honest in working through these rough spots. Remember to keep the goal of the partnership always in mind.

Final Thoughts

As museum professionals, we envision the time when all museums are vital members of the community, with full community participation and involvement. As we strive to accomplish this, we need to keep our vision of the future clear. If we truly want to be inclusive, we must be committed, especially at the leadership level, and devote the time and resources necessary to attain our vision.

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