

MUSEUMS^{ETC}



The State of Museums

Voices from the Field

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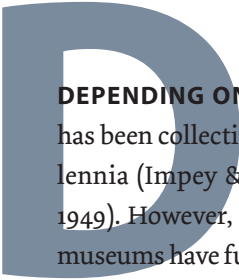
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CHAPTER FOUR

**EVALUATION AND
AUDIENCE RESEARCH
IN MUSEUMS:
THE PAST, PRESENT
AND FUTURE OF
VISITOR STUDIES**

Christina Smiraglia and Lynn Baum



DEPENDING ON YOUR DEFINITION of museums, our field has been collecting and exhibiting for centuries, possibly millennia (Impey & MacGregor, 1985; Smiraglia, 2013; Wittlin, 1949). However, it has only been in the last half-century that museums have fully embraced a role as informal learning institutions, shifting attention outward to our visitors and communities (e.g. AAM, 1992; Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011; Hein, 1998). Education and visitor services departments have proliferated, and even very small institutions now offer learning experiences for a variety of audiences. Funding agencies – and visitors – expect museums to offer value to their communities, and we have responded with zeal. But how do we meaningfully measure and document that value, not only to demonstrate our worth to external stakeholders but also to identify opportunities to strengthen our practice and become better learning partners with the communities beyond our walls? We do so through visitor studies, an important frontier for the museum field today.

This chapter explores this critical frontier, opening with a discussion of the importance of research and evaluation¹ in museums and of visitor studies' history. We then examine the current state of the field and areas of improvement needed at the field-wide, institutional, and individual levels, concluding with suggestions for the future, with a focus on the American museum sector. In these explorations, we draw on existing literature as well as our own personal observations and work as former museum educators and current museum researchers.

A brief history of visitor studies

As we consider how we have arrived at the present state of visitor studies, it may be helpful to clarify what we mean by

“visitor studies.” We find it useful to think about the scope of visitor studies that Bitgood and Shettel (1996) articulated: studies encompassing audience research and development, exhibit design and development, program design and development, general facility design, and visitor services. To better understand how visitor studies has evolved, it is helpful to have some context about the history of museums and their shift over time from institutions largely focused on collecting and preserving to visitor-centered organizations increasingly interested in understanding how their visitors learn.

Museums, as we know them today, have their roots in Renaissance cabinets of curiosity. These collections, also known as *Wunderkammer*, were a way for the wealthy to showcase their varied treasures (Impey & MacGregor, 1985), establishing museums as places for the elite, a legacy we are still grappling with today. These collections, along with a desire to provide more viewing opportunities for the public, expanded and moved into larger, slightly more accessible spaces. The focus of these museums, however, was not the visitor, but rather the collections. If the set of artifacts was complete, the exhibit was successful. With this as the measure of success, there was no need to get feedback from visitors (Rader & Cain, 2014).

Early in the last century, museums started to realize that, to survive, they needed more visitors. Buildings filled with cases of study collections were not engaging visitors. Something new was needed, and that something new was the diorama. Not without controversy, dioramas changed the role of curators from focusing strictly on collections research and preservation to exhibition design. Self-identified “museum men,” as they became known, were the champions of this new direction

(Rader & Cain, 2014: 18). This group, which also did include a few women, became synonymous with those leading the way to bring their passion for museums to the public through educational opportunities (*ibid*).

Although evaluation was still largely unknown, this early shift of focus led to some studies that did start to provide insight into visitor activity. These included the works of Arthur Melton, a psychologist and researcher, and Edward Robinson, an art authority, providing us with research on museum fatigue and exhibit satiation (Bitgood, McKerchar, & Dukes, 2013). Another early evaluator was Mildred Porter, a curator of the School Services Department at the Yale Peabody Museum, who published a 1938 tracking and timing study of a new, extensive exhibition covering 500 million years of evolution. Her aim was to learn about casual visitors' behavior and observe their pathways through and interactions with the exhibition. She found that most visitors went through backwards, less than 11% of the labels were read, and only 24% of the exhibits were examined. Her study also revealed that visitors who bought a guide gained significantly more information about evolution than those who visited on their own (Porter, 1938). Early studies like this provided insights still relevant today and laid an early foundation for visitor studies.

Continuing the shift toward a visitor focus, the concept of hands-on learning took shape in the 1960s and 70s with the rise of interactive exhibits and discovery rooms. Science museums, including the Exploratorium in San Francisco and the Museum of Science in Boston, began to emerge. Instead of merely viewing cases or dioramas, visitors were invited to interact with phenomena and learn from their own experiences, although

curators and exhibit designers continued to be the voices of authority, determining what information visitors should gain (Rader & Cain, 2014). However, unlike exhibits of the past, the only way hands-on museums could know if their exhibits were succeeding was to talk to visitors. At the same time, in the formal education realm, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act increased the need for standardized evaluation in public schools; this desire for classroom accountability helped to energize visitor studies in museums. A body of research began to accrue as museum professionals started to recognize the potential for learning within their galleries and the need to document such learning. The field of visitor studies was taking root (Loomis, 1989).

The importance of visitor studies

Existing research has shown that museum directors and educators place a high value on visitor studies (Williams, 1996). In our experience, we have encountered few museum professionals who do not value evaluation today. In truth, most of us seek feedback on our practice to improve it, and researchers such as Barbara Soren (2000) have stated that at least one purpose of museum evaluation is as an educational tool for the institution.

One key way in which visitor research can be a tool for museums is by informing the improvement of museum programs, exhibitions, and other offerings. Research that is embedded in the design process from the start can create shared goals and make the development process more intentional and methodical. Front-end evaluation can give museums insight into the interests, questions, and needs of visitors at a time when these can inform initial planning decisions. Formative evaluation,

such as prototyping exhibition components, can save time and money by highlighting issues with materials as well as with visitor access and understanding before final construction. Finally, summative evaluation allows the museum to understand whether an offering's articulated objectives were actually achieved and, ideally, how they were achieved. This information can be used to inform future iterations or other offerings. We work tirelessly to develop wonderful visitor experiences, and research allows us to know whether we were successful and how we can make those offerings better for our audiences.

With knowledge about the success of its offerings and characteristics of its visitors, a museum is also better prepared for institutional decision-making. There are often competing priorities and limited funds, and without a systematic understanding of what is – and is not – working and why, museum administrators may be making important decisions based on unexplored assumptions and personal preferences. Research efforts can help inform marketing and outreach to target audiences as well as provide more objective information about what initiatives are effective. As Serrell and Yellis (1987: 2) have noted, “evaluation, when conducted creatively, flexibly, responsively, is a powerful management tool...[that] enables administrators to make informed decisions”.

Just as a better understanding of visitors and offerings can strengthen institutions, so too can individual museum professionals' own practices be strengthened. Visitor research can give us a better sense of who to expect in the galleries and at programs and a better sense of how to connect with them personally – what backgrounds they may have, what resonates with them, what vocabulary they use, and how they think about

what the museum offers. Although some museum professionals shy away from evaluation efforts because they see such projects as assessing their individual performance, learning about our offerings' successes and challenges can provide insight into how to strengthen personal practice going forward.

In addition to the potential for visitor research to provide useful feedback that will internally improve museums' offerings, decisions, and professional practice, research is also important for funding. Museums, like other non-profit organizations, often rely on government and foundation grants for programmatic expenses (Smith, 2005). In return, grant-giving entities put pressure on organizations that receive their funding to conduct evaluations of the work done with the grant money (e.g. Carman, 2007; Kopczynski & Pritchard, 2004). Some funders even require that formal program evaluation be conducted on an ongoing basis (Carman, 2008). Thus, research becomes important not only for the self-improvement of the museum, but also a key element in securing funding by demonstrating impact.

Given their government grants and subsidies, museums also have to prove their worth to the general public (Harris, 1999; Newcomer, Hatry, & Wholey, 2004). Weil (1999: 253) asserted that "because the value that the museum can add to a community's well-being may not be nearly so self-evident as that provided by an emergency room or a children's shelter, credible evaluation will be all the more critical to the museum's survival". Many community members may not see a museum as a place for them (e.g. Drotner, Knudsen, & Mortenesen, 2017; Hood, 1983; Strager & Astrup, 2014), but inclusive evaluation practices can, quite literally, help bring in new visitors and

their perspectives. As Morrissey (1996: 2) noted, “Visitor studies is about listening to visitors and creating dialogue between museums and visitors”. As we increasingly engage in dialogue and invite our communities’ voices into our institutions, community perceptions of museums will continue to improve, and museums will be better able to fulfill their missions.

Current successes in visitor studies

Given the importance of visitor studies discussed above, it is not surprising that the museum field has made great advances toward understanding visitors in a systematic way over the past few decades. Here, we explore those developments at the field level and the institutional level. This is not intended to be an exhaustive listing; rather, the intent is to comment on the range and kinds of efforts that are taking place in the field today.

Successes across the museum field

Notable advances have been made recently in the opportunities for training in visitor studies, sharing of methods and results throughout the field, and an increase in museums that evaluate. Professional groups such as the Visitor Studies Association (VSA) and the American Alliance of Museums’ Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE) were formed in the past 25 years as interest in and appreciation of studying visitors has grown, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ (IMLS) webpage on evaluation resources suggests many key texts on visitor studies arose around the turn of the 21st century (2017). Since that time, some museums have formed collaborations to share resources and increase their evaluation capacity, such as the Denver-area Evaluation Network of fifteen

museums and cultural institutions (Steele-Inama, 2015) and the Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies of science museums across North America (Auster, 2014). Report-sharing websites like InformalScience.org also allow museums to learn from one another's studies.

Mirroring the rise of these associations and collaborations has been the rise of American museum studies graduate programs as well as museology-focused doctoral programs in countries like the United Kingdom and Australia, offering more formal training to museum practitioners (Dubuc, 2011). Some Master's programs offer a course on museum evaluation, such as the Museum Evaluation and Audience Research course that we co-teach at Harvard. Organizations like VSA and CARE offer additional professional development opportunities at conferences and workshops, and some general museum conferences also host evaluation-focused sessions.

In addition, although relatively few of the thousands of American museums publicly engage with visitor studies, many of them are quietly evaluating behind closed doors. In the Smithsonian's 2004 national study, almost all of the 69 educators indicated they engaged in informal or formal evaluation (although not often on a regular basis). Years later, co-author Christina Smiraglia surveyed American museum evaluation practices, and 90% of the 155 respondents across 32 states reported conducting some kind of evaluation. However, only 40% conducted longitudinal evaluations, and 54% and 48%, respectively, conducted front-end or formative evaluation. History museums were in general less likely to evaluate, while large institutions and science museums were more likely to conduct longitudinal research than other types of museums.

An evaluative stance is becoming embedded across the museum field, although there is still much work to be done.

Institutional successes

Many of the current achievements in visitor studies are due to the efforts of individual institutions. Key successes at the organizational level include dedicated in-house evaluation staff, the development of institutional cultures of inquiry, greater participant inclusion in the research process, expanded study time-scales, and collaborations with university researchers.

For some museums, the desire to ensure continuous access to visitor research has led to the creation of dedicated in-house positions or departments (as well as internal institutional review boards to approve research proposals). The Museum of Science, Boston and the Exploratorium, for example, have created internal research/evaluation departments, institutionally demonstrating their commitment to visitor studies. Others, like the Field Museum, have a staff position dedicated to evaluation, though not a department. Some museums, like the Exploratorium and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, make reports publicly available on their websites. Beyond that, there are other museums, like the Science Museum of Minnesota, that offer their in-house expertise to others in the field.

Many museums initially brought in evaluation only at the end of a project to create a summative report. Although summative reports alone are still appropriate for some cases, there is an increasing understanding that evaluation is beneficial at all stages of a project's development. Front-end evaluation – using focus groups, interviews and other kinds of early-stage data collection – is now recognized by many museums as a

means to learn more about what visitors know about a topic and what questions or specific areas of interest they might have. For example, when the Museum of Science, Boston was developing the *Star Wars, Where Science Meets Imagination* exhibition, focus groups helped us determine that the one specific feature visitors really wanted in the exhibit was the ability to get in the *Millennium Falcon* and jump to lightspeed.

As museum experiences have become more interactive and visitor-focused, formative evaluation, and prototyping in particular, has become increasingly used in projects' design phase. Today, many museums are recognizing that evaluating during development can guide necessary changes far more inexpensively than attempting to fix problems after an experience is fully developed. This can go beyond specific exhibits and programs: when the Detroit Institute of Arts embarked on a major overhaul of its entire interpretive strategy, front-end, formative, and summative evaluation were all used to guide decision-making (Serrell, Sikora, & Adams, 2013). The increased use of evaluation across the stages of museum projects is a promising move forward.

The field has also learned from colleagues like Nina Simon, author of *The Participatory Museum* and *The Art of Relevance*, that as we expand the ways we interact with visitors and invite visitors to interact with us, the methods we use to collect and examine data must also evolve. Data collection can actually become part of the gallery experience. Simon has described the power of incorporating A/B testing – a format for asking visitors questions through multiple feedback stations with different prompts or settings – to create both an embedded visitor experience and a data collection opportunity (Simon, 2014).

With the availability of handheld digital devices, museums like the Detroit Institute of Arts (Serrell, Sikora, & Adams, 2013) and the Columbus Museum of Art (Samis & Michaelson, 2017) collect data by asking visitors to take photos in the galleries and discuss what they learned and which images most interest them. In other museums, the role of data collector has shifted. The American Museum of Natural History and the Shedd Aquarium, for example, both recruit data collection volunteers from the public, and the Denver Art Museum has explored how the roles of museum practitioner and researcher might be merged (Munley, 2017). These kinds of opportunities expand the ways that museums think about research while helping us learn more about visitors.

Museums are also now engaging in longer-term studies that provide more depth and help staff better understand how evaluation can inform their ongoing work. For example, the Dallas Museum of Art has taken a visible role in using visitor research to both guide them in redesigning galleries and to provide a body of research for the field (CAM, 2013). Their *Framework for Engaging with Art* was the outcome of a seven-year study implemented by Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. that resulted in “fundamental changes in all aspects of the DMA’s practices and programs” (DMA, 2018, para. 1). The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum has used both in-house educators and outside researchers to conduct studies over time. A multi-year research project led by Marianna Adams from the Institute for Learning Innovation explored the effects of using Visual Thinking Strategies in their multiple-visit partnership with local elementary students (Adams, Foutz, Luke, & Stein, 2006), and education staff have conducted a number of their

own studies focused on student audiences and are working to share and compare their data with others (Grohe & Egan, 2016).

Finally, another positive development has been university-museum partnerships, developed in a variety of formats to the benefit of both parties. In some cases, independent museums have developed links with a local university, such as the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh and the University of Pittsburgh Center for Learning in Out-of-School Environments. The unique resources of both institutions can be used for further learning about specific populations; the museum becomes a learning lab, better understanding their target population, and the university has an opportunity to study a ready audience and produce research that may be generalized to a broader population (Knutson & Crowley, 2005). In addition to such longer-term partnerships, other museums bring in local university researchers as one-time evaluation consultants, as the Harvard Art Museums did when they asked Project Zero researchers from the Harvard Graduate School of Education to investigate the learning happening in their art study centers (Tishman, McKinney, & Straughn, 2007). Yet another model is the Museum of Science, Boston's Living Laboratory, where local university researchers conduct psychological studies in the museum and also share their work with visitors, further contributing to the public's understanding of science (Letourneau & Barrett, 2011).

There are many other museums and researchers actively engaging in and expanding the ways we are learning with and from our visitors. Since those early years of the first interactive exhibits and discovery spaces, a focus on visitor-centered design and the accompanying addition of visitor studies have become more visible standard practices throughout many institutions.

Improvements needed to better understand visitors

Despite the clear benefits of visitor studies and the existing field-wide and institutional successes, there remain a number of possible areas for improvement. Given its relatively new incorporation into the field, visitor studies is one of the major frontiers for museums in the future; the Institute for Museum and Library Services' (IMLS') current website explicitly states that "evaluation is still new to library and museum management" (IMLS, 2017). Here we explore ways in which we – as a field and as institutions – can strengthen our use of and preparation for visitor research.

Needed improvements across the museum field

There are opportunities for improvement across the museum sector in four key areas: better shared definitions, greater access to and use of institutional review boards, improved professional training, and increased research sharing and implementation.

On a conceptual level, variations in definitions of *research* and *evaluation* in museum contexts are worth further consideration, if not standardization. Spero (2015) noted this in her recent retrospective examination of visitor studies: "we periodically reframe what we call and how we describe the act of studying our visitors: be it as Research, Evaluation, Visitor Studies, or the Learning Sciences. The terminology shifts as we refine our perspectives and methods in order to systematically understand the visitor experience" (para. 9). We have found that this terminology shifts not only as our perspectives as a field shift; it also varies across different professionals at a given point in time (e.g. Loomis, 1989).

The main difference exists in whether research and evaluation are considered separate and distinct or whether one is considered to be a sub-type of the other. As noted above, we use the latter definitions here (that evaluation is a specific type of research); we feel this is the most intuitive, especially for professionals who may not have much research training. However, some of our colleagues consider research and evaluation to have separate aims. This likely has some roots in historical differences in the training and disciplines of those doing academic research and in-house museum investigations. Still, some of the earlier assumptions about research vs. evaluation – such as the idea that research does not include qualitative approaches (Bitgood & Shettel, 1996) – are outdated given the state of contemporary social science research. However, a valid distinction between the terms is related to the federal government’s definition of research as “a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, *designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge*” (our emphasis) (Protection of Human Subjects, 2009: sec. 46.102).

Museum researchers sometimes bypass government requirements for oversight and procedures related to human subjects research by emphasizing the difference between evaluation and research, claiming evaluations are not aimed at creating generalizable knowledge. *Generalizable knowledge*, however, is a term that is also not well defined. Institutional review boards (IRB), oversight bodies that review proposed research in accordance with federal guidelines and ethics best practices, often must simply take an investigator’s word that a study will not produce generalizable knowledge. Heimlich (2015: 21-22) recently summarized our field’s current conundrum:

Federal standards suggest that many of our evaluation studies about a specific exhibit or experience when data are only used internally for improvement purposes do not fall under the definition of research. However, if we intend to, or do publish or share findings because there is insight from the work that we see as of value to others regardless of whether it is considered research or evaluation, we have shifted into a “gray” area where the definitions are blurred.

In practice, we often – and rightfully – share externally what might otherwise be considered internal evaluations. We share findings informally with colleagues in other institutions, present at professional conferences, and post on research-sharing websites, with the understandable and commendable idea that what we found may be useful to others. Are we not then entertaining the possibility of creating generalizable knowledge? This is an open question that the field needs to explore further going forward, especially given the implications these definitions carry for necessary project oversight.

As we expand the sharing of findings for the improvement of future studies and of offerings across the field, we expect that more museums will need to carefully consider establishing their own IRB or working with an external one. It may not make sense for many museums, especially small and mid-sized institutions, to create an internal IRB, so having more visible and accessible boards to review museum research – and having museum practitioners better trained in research guidelines so they understand the need to seek out an IRB – will likely be helpful going forward.

More research training for museum professionals in general is needed. This has been echoed across decades (e.g. Eisner & Dobbs, 1986; NRC, 2009; Williams, 1996) and continues to be true today. Training on guidelines and ethics is needed, including more museum professionals being certified in social science research training programs, such as the free NIH Protecting Human Research Participants course. Such online courses ensure that we understand the rights of study participants, what we need to consider before interacting with them, and how to carefully engage them, ensuring they fully understand their rights and can give informed consent. Beyond that, more training is needed in the theory and practice of the research process – from developing research questions to research design, data collection, data analysis, and reporting. Many current museum professionals have little or no formal training in research; often evaluation skills are picked up on the job without an understanding of the literature, underlying theories, or best practices (and possibly without mentorship from a trained colleague). Even some journal reviewers do not have the necessary research training to effectively critique empirical studies that are submitted to general museology journals.

Museum evaluation courses in graduate programs are an important start to such training but have their limitations. Students may not see the value in visitor studies without taking such a course (and thus not enroll), and even those students that do complete a well-designed course may not be fully prepared. We co-teach a graduate course, *Museum Evaluation and Audience Research*, and while we feel we give students a sound introduction to visitor studies, we recognize that it is only an introduction. In a one-semester course, we cannot explore all

aspects in-depth. Data analysis, especially inferential statistics, is an area that many students would benefit from studying further, but few do. Co-author Christina Smiraglia has taken four graduate statistics courses and still has more to learn. Although not all museum practitioners who may undertake visitor studies need to have such deep statistical knowledge, it is clear from our work with colleagues and students in various institutions that museum practitioners need to have a much better understanding of the research process to be quality developers, implementers, as well as consumers of visitor studies.

In addition to more training for museum professionals, even more sharing of studies will be useful going forward. Sites and consortiums like those discussed above are a good starting point, but these are currently still fragmented, often by discipline, and not always widely known. More publicity for sharing venues will be helpful, as will more centralized and integrated repositories. For example, many of the studies on the InformalScience site could be of methodological use for museums of any collection type, but professionals doing studies in other kinds of museums may not explore the site because of its focus on science. In addition, more open access to museum journals would allow high-quality, peer-reviewed studies to be available to the field at large.

More inclusion of visitor studies at conferences is also an area where we can improve. Although the Visitor Studies Association annual conference is an excellent venue for discussions of museum research, few museum practitioners outside of the evaluation field attend. More sharing of methods and results at general museum conferences at the regional and national levels would be useful. For example, across the 2010-2017 New England

Museum Association conferences, which are often the largest American regional conferences (NEMA, 2017), only 24 of the more than 550 sessions were either directly or somewhat focused on the results, process, or theory of visitor studies. Museums are excellent at sharing what we do, but we need to be better about sharing how effective we are, and why, based on concrete evidence.

While existing research needs to be shared more effectively and broadly across the field, more new research also needs to be done. The field of visitor studies has blossomed rapidly, but there is far more to learn at every level: about each program and exhibition, each institution, and across the field. More systematic, rigorous visitor research is needed to help museums understand how we are doing (e.g. whether we are accomplishing objectives, how we can improve) and who our visitors are (e.g. why do they come – or not, what are their interests and misconceptions). This may naturally happen if museology moves beyond a professional field and becomes more of an academic field, as it has in other countries. This is certain to be a slow change, however, and we expect museum practitioners will still be undertaking a majority of visitor studies in the near future. It is imperative that we support them with training, shared resources, and a culture and expectation of evaluation across the field.

Needed improvements within institutions

Institutions also face a number of challenges to successfully integrate research and evaluation into practice, some of which mirror improvements needed across the field. Key organizational considerations are: building institutional capacity, formal policy-setting, as well as sharing and accessing visitor studies.

Building evaluation expertise within an institution is

becoming important for all museums. This does not mean that all staff need to become skilled in designing and implementing research. However, staff do need to understand why visitor studies are important, how to think like an evaluator when designing experiences, and how to work alongside researchers. This means using information provided by an evaluation throughout the development process and, to the extent possible, applying what is learned from a summative report to future projects. The Harvard Museums of Science and Culture is an example of an institution that has begun the process of capacity building. In addition to a core team focused on evaluation, a broader initiative began in 2016 to provide all staff with at least a basic understanding of how evaluations are designed, implemented, and used to guide decision-making.

As more museums engage in visitor research, it also is increasingly important that policies be established within each institution to ensure that data are collected and used appropriately. We can do as much harm as good if we are not careful about our procedures, including the ways that we interact with visitors while collecting data. Because everyone involved with evaluation may not have formal training, it is even more important that museums have organizational guidelines to set clear and consistent standards for visitor studies, one of which may be a requirement that staff involved in evaluation complete human subject research certification. An example of this is the Minnesota Historical Society's (2011) *Program Evaluation Handbook*, designed to help guide staff through the evaluation process and articulate the museum's commitment "to using evaluation results for organizational decision-making" as well as the Shedd Aquarium's *Evaluation Toolkit* (Kubarek, 2015). Formal

commitment and guidelines may help bridge the gap found in the Smithsonian's survey of evaluation in museum education: although many educators evaluate, visitor research is rarely embedded into regular practice (2004). In addition to clarifying the role and standards of evaluation within the institution, handbooks can provide valuable guidance to other museums.

Another area where institutions – like the field in general – could improve is in the sharing and accessing of studies. The body of visitor research has grown tremendously over the last few decades, but finding these studies is not always as easy as it could be. Some museums make their reports available online, but many do not actively or visibly share their results. It is rare even for museums that have created a substantial body of visitor studies to make that readily apparent on their website or in some other visible form. Sometimes this is purposeful, as institutions may wish to keep studies proprietary; in other cases, publication is just not considered or not a priority. But for the many museums just starting the process of developing an evaluative culture, there is much to learn from other institutions, and all museums can benefit from knowing what others have done and what works – as well as what does not.

Suggestions for the future of visitor studies

As museums become more visitor- and community-centered, it is clear that visitor studies have a significant role in helping us understand our work and our audiences. In *Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum*, the first of six elements common to visitor-centered museums is “formative audience research” (Samis & Michaelson, 2017: 46). We are now just beginning to see research and evaluation appearing in more visible ways: on

websites, in stated missions, and in greater resources dedicated to investigations. As we move into the future of visitor studies, we leave you with the following suggestions to improve the museum sector going forward.

Funding and support

- Direct federal (e.g. IMLS, National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts) and foundation funding for research projects, beyond funding for program/exhibition development with an evaluation component.
- Increased national and regional museum association support for museum research consortiums.
- National organizations (such as the American Alliance of Museums or Visitor Studies Association) could establish an institutional review board for those museums without an internal IRB, or coordinate the services of an external IRB organization for member museums.
- Increased institutional fundraising and budgeting for visitor studies.
- More dedicated in-house staff positions focused on evaluation and/or regular use of evaluation consultants.
- Institutional support for museum staff to engage in continued professional development to build research skills at workshops and conferences.

Training

- More courses on visitor studies in graduate programs, including statistics for social science research.
- Requirements for education and exhibition concentrators

in museum studies programs to have evaluation coursework.

- Possible development of national, museum-specific human subjects research certification.
- Targeted institutional capacity-building initiatives that include training for museum staff and board members on the importance of evaluation, illustrating the need for visitor studies as part of the overall mission.
- Institutional requirements for museum professionals who are, or who may be, engaged with visitor studies to complete human subjects research certification.

Sharing

- Greater inclusion of visitor studies at general museum conferences, nationally and regionally.
- Development or expansion of research sharing venues like InformalScience for art, history, and other content areas and institutions.
- Centralization, integration, and increased publicity of research sharing venues.
- More open access journals.
- Discussions across the field of key concepts, such as the distinction between research and evaluation.
- Increased institutional sharing of what might otherwise be internal evaluation reports, especially posting reports on museum websites and/or in centralized sharing venues.
- Creation of visitor studies teams within institutions to support individuals' and departmental research and to share experiences.

Heightened expectations

- More detailed inclusion of evaluation practice in national accreditation standards (for example, the American Alliance of Museums' Accreditation Self-Study (2014) does not include common data collection methods like interviews or tracking in the list of possible evaluation approaches and does not ask about data analytic approaches).
- Ensure museology journals have reviewers with in-depth research training to hold published studies to high reporting standards.
- Institutional discussions of visitor studies, especially driven by administrators, to spark organizational conversations and demonstrate directorial support.
- Establishment of formal visitor studies policies within institutions.
- Increased use of front-end and formative evaluation, in addition to summative.
- More longitudinal studies to better understand changes over time.

Professional development for individuals

Many changes would be useful at the field and institutional levels, but individual museum professionals can also take charge of their own professional development as it relates to visitor studies, in the following ways:

- Seek out professional development opportunities related to all parts of the research process, especially data analysis.
- Get certified in human subjects research through free

opportunities like the NIH Protecting Human Research Participants course.

- Reach out to colleagues in universities and research settings for assistance.
- Seek out colleagues in your institution who have more research training and can serve as mentors.
- Read peer-reviewed visitor studies and investigate any methods or terms that are unfamiliar.
- Consider starting or joining a visitor studies interest group in your museum.

NOTE

1. Here, we use the term “research” to encompass any systematic investigation designed to answer a question and use “evaluation” to refer to research aimed at assessing effectiveness or value, often in relation to stated goals. We realize that definitions of these terms vary across the field and address this when discussing areas for improvement.

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ISBN 978-1-912528-09-7