

Oregon Historical Society: Thought Leader Interviews

Summary of Themes from Interviews with Field Experts

Trends and Promising Practices (DRAFT 3-4-2018)
--

(1) Museums are becoming more audience and community-centered, and are taking more collaborative and co-creative approaches to developing programs, services, and exhibitions.

- We are having more small group sessions off site, finding a comfortable place to hear people's perspectives: stop and listen, find out their goals, then think about how we can hook in.
- Becoming part of the community (a trend that has been well under way for over a decade) and serving as a resource to our communities.
- Connect the hyper-local with larger history (posit local within national), working closely with other (smaller) historical societies and helping them do their jobs, which extends the statewide historical society brand and helps them to be sustainable.
- We have room for improvement: Museums are typically engaging audiences late in the process, e.g., asking them to bring artifacts after we've already decided on the exhibition. Focus on relationships with communities from inception.
- Partnerships are key to success: We have a workshop on museum (any collecting organization) and university partnerships. There are a lot of opportunities, e.g., getting faculty and students (K-12 and university) engaged in being guest curators. We find that nontraditional partnerships can grow audiences, e.g., we go to senior centers and do programs with those who have lived experiences of WWII and the holocaust.

(2) Historical institutions are increasingly focused on making history relevant to contemporary life by engaging with current issues (e.g., serving as community centers and conveners).

- Historical institutions are bringing issues to light and putting them in historical context (e.g., from slavery to the "Black Lives Matter" movement). We have seen the importance of making sure the Board is totally behind such efforts.
- Historical institutions can provide context and hold people accountable. We know how to make sense of information and use evidence. Everyone should have those skills... We should not just be antiquarians preserving the past, but also helping people to navigate the world with which they are confronted.... Getting people to talk about issues and their complexities helps people build a sense of empathy.
- Contentious and challenging issues that affect our communities are also affecting our staff. How can we best support staff and volunteers to have challenging conversations (online and in-person)?
- We are being intentional about what's happening now, e.g., collecting items from the Republican National Convention and women's march. We're putting these objects on display in a special space for recent acquisitions, and sharing via social media platforms, which has generated conversations online.
- Museums are becoming sites of conversation, inviting programs, speakers and symposia on topics that shape people's lives and history as a whole – immigration, healthcare, Black Lives Matter (with deep roots in the Civil Rights Movement), for example. Historical societies can

become the stage where these conversations take place... inviting people with multiple perspectives. Key questions: What exhibits will resonate with our communities? What programs can we develop to bring people together to talk about tough ideas? How can we convene those conversations?

(3) Efforts to embed diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) are increasingly seen as essential for the continued relevance of our field(s) and institutions; this includes internal (within the institution) as well as public-facing efforts.

Public Facing:

- We are more focused on how we do the work and wanting and wanting to tell stories from diverse perspectives, especially Native Americans.
- In the archives field, working with Native American communities in new ways on “shared stewardship” – including asking questions about who has a right to these materials.
- We are telling more inclusive histories. Untold stories are beginning to come to light within outreach, archives, and programming.
- We have adopted the folk life initiative from the Smithsonian (in partnership with another private organization), which has led to a more diverse audience and more donors.
- In developing programs and exhibitions, relationships with communities need to be mutually beneficial in order to flourish and continue.
- Can museums be places for healing and reconciliation? Can we “de-colonize” the museum?

Internal:

- Staff development approaches:
 - A pilot project to increase diversity in our field(s): In Cooperstown, NY, the museum started working with historically black colleges to identify undergraduates and work with them over time, including securing internships and college scholarships, with the goal of eventually hiring them.
 - We have a summer institute for high school students (rising juniors and seniors), enabling them to gain experience over three days of working with academics; as a result, many of them continue their studies at the university level.
- Board development approaches:
 - Good equity and inclusion work involves inviting people to be part of decisions, not just adding people of color on the board of directors. It’s about engaging with communities, finding meaningful ways for them to participate in defining the institution’s direction; people will then want to join the board and help guide the future.
 - When you are trying to get inclusion, you can’t maintain practices that worked for a homogenous group of people. You can’t put responsibility for equity and inclusion on the diverse populations; the people in power have to take responsibility for that or it won’t work.

(4) Historical institutions are blending high tech and high touch approaches, moving into the digital age while also honoring the human impulse to experience authentic objects / artifacts.

- We will digitize our entire collection in 3-D and provide open access. With Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality, we will scan exhibits and have holograms of curators in the exhibit.

- We need to be running towards digital media as fast as we possibly can... while not giving up the other things we do. We are designing an exhibit around the idea of focusing on less and making it experiential: You got to the area and have the experience of a place, give people easy access, and they can then get into the research room, where they will find research guides that match the themes of the exhibit. There will also be digital content, in the exhibit hall and online.
- Find clever ways to use technology – such as apps and social media – to disseminate stories in a wider way. Pokémon Go, etc. The Atlanta History Center has a story corps booth in their museum.
- Online collections are the future, opening up new ways to interact with the material. Artifacts and “toughing” the collection is not being replaced: You need both.

(5) Museums are deepening their understanding of the visitor experience with research, and adjusting their methods and programs accordingly.

- We just did research on how connected people feel to their community and identified that many in the 20 to 35 age group feel disconnected and would like to be more connected. Now we will develop an engagement strategy.
- We have a Visitor Studies Manager position on staff who does research and allows us to continually learn (see previous point). Sometimes it’s quick research such as a quick interview protocol that enables our staff to test the language they are considering for text or signage.
- Visitor research has been blossoming for many years (See Steven Weil’s work at the Smithsonian in the 90s)
- We do a ton of focus groups and ask for a lot of feedback.

(6) Historical institutions are increasingly focusing on historical literacy and information literacy.

- Students who visit the museum are missing skills that students used to have. We are providing remedial classes in critical thinking.
- With the 24-hour news cycle and decline of history and social studies within K-12 education, it has become even more important to provide context.
- We help students build their skills: information literacy, historical thinking skills, e.g., learning research skills, ability to examine bias, avoid “presentism”

Other trends/promising practices:

- Working across methodologies and disciplines: What can docents learn from improv comedy? What can we learn from community organizers and mediators? How can history museums be influenced by art therapy? Bring people from diverse disciplines onto our teams: we need them for the work we are trying to do.
- Blend popular with traditional: You need a scholarly element for credulity, but a popular approach and some fun will help get people through the door!
- “Let 1000 cameras flash” – sharing seflies builds interest in exhibits and makes it fun (“you have to induce a desire to share.”)

Populations that could benefit from greater engagement with OHS?

- K-12: With fewer offerings in the classroom, OHS is a critical partner.
- Boomers: We have an enormous population of boomers who are retiring, and have time, money, and a desire to stay active.
- New Americans

- Millennials (Remember, they are already in their 30s and have kids)
- Racial and ethnic diversity
- Socio-economic diversity
- Other cultural institutions that have common missions (Can OHS bring them together to advocate jointly for cultural heritage?)
- Anyone who is new to Oregon: OHS has fundamental importance as we are experiencing this huge influx of people to our state. We need to preserve what Oregon has been while it is redefining itself, because people are looking to understand the story of the place. We are responsible for preserving at a state level the story of the place, so that people who are moving here can get their questions answered about it.

How will people be learning history 20 years from today?

- Continuing to rely on the virtual world combined with authentic, place-based experiences.
- School experience will incorporate skills-based approach to learning history, such as the History Day program, which incorporates research, seeing the connections to the present day, and learning to learn.
- It will be more about consuming digital content and less about coming to a place.
- History will be interpretation-focused: not just facts and timelines, but also framing issues from different perspectives.
- Hopefully, not learning in isolation and alone.
- If someone told me that an immigrant writer would have written an opera (Hamilton) about a long past U.S. president, and used rap music to convey the drama, and that it went viral globally, and that my young nieces would memorize the entire libretto, I would not have believed it! We can't even imagine how we will learn history 20 years, but we need to be adventurous, stay open-minded, and be ready for huge surprises!

Interviewees:

- Sarah Pharaon, Senior Director of Methodology and Practice, International Coalition of Sites of Conscience
- Natalia Fernandez, Multicultural Librarian, Oregon State University
- Megan Wood, Director of Museum and Library Services, Ohio History Connection
- Linnea Grim, Director of Education and Visitor Programs, Monticello
- Jody Blankenship, CEO, Connecticut Historical Society
- James Buckley, Venerable Chair of Historic Preservation, U of O
- Jake Nadal, Director of Preservation, Library of Congress
- Dave Harrelson, Grand Ronde Cultural Resources Dept. Manager, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde
- Elizabeth Joffrion, Director of Heritage Resources, Western Washington University
- Catherine Lewis, Public Historian and Author
- Barclay Ogden, Head of Library Preservation, University of California, Berkeley