

LOOKING INWARD: INSTITUTIONAL SELF-ASSESSMENT, PART I

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It's often been observed that preparing grant applications can give an organization an opportunity to take an in-depth look at its operations. This task can be a beneficial form of self-study even if the grant is not obtained. One of the most rigorous forms of self-study is the process of applying for museum accreditation. An organization is also required to step back and look closely at its activities when it develops a long-range plan.

All of these exercises involve a detailed examination of specific programs as well as an evaluation of current operations and should be undertaken with detachment and objectivity. This technical insert investigates the elements of these self-study processes and suggests some common themes that can serve as checkpoints in institutional self-assessment. The examples described below are designed for museums. However, with the exception of specific responsibilities for collections of artifacts, they can also apply to other types of nonprofit organizations.

The Institute of Museums Services (IMS) is the only federal agency that offers grants for operating costs for museums. It was established in 1976 and is administered by a fifteen-member board appointed by the president of the United States. The IMS General Operating Support (GOS) program awards two-year grants to museums for ongoing institutional activities. The GOS application form is often cited as a good model for institutional self-study. [Editor's note: IMS is now the Institute of Museum and Library Services or IMLS; grant programs for museums remain the same.]

The Museum Assessment Program (MAP), also funded by IMS but administered by the American Association of Museums (AAM), provides a free on-site consultant and a written report. There are three MAP programs. MAP I, the program referred to in this insert, provides an institutional assessment. It is especially useful for institutional planning. MAP II focuses on collections management, and MAP III is directed toward a museum's public dimension.

In 1970, the American Association of Museums initiated a process to provide accreditation for museums. A seven-member accreditation commission is appointed by the AAM chair and confirmed by the AAM

board. As a part of the accreditation process, each applicant museum completes a written self-study and is visited and evaluated by a committee constituted specifically for the assignment. Museum professionals who serve on visiting committees do so without compensation, except for expenses. They provide the applicant museum with an opportunity for dialogue and peer review. The museum's self-study and the report of the visiting committee are reviewed by the AAM's Accreditation Commission, which makes the final decision on each accreditation application.

Although the wording and sequence of these various self-study documents may differ slightly, they cover essentially the same topics. These include: purpose, mission, governance, ethics, long-range planning, personnel, membership, finances, physical facilities, safety and security, collections, exhibitions, programming, and community relations.

Purpose and Mission

At the core of any institution are its purpose and its mission. There are varying ideas about what is meant by these terms. A useful booklet published by the American Association of Museums MAP program, *Shaping the Museum: The Map Institutional Planning Guide*, offers a distinction between the two terms, stating that a museum's purpose is its reason for being. The statement of purpose tells why the organization exists.¹ A museum's mission statement explains what the organization does to achieve its purpose. It describes actions and sets limitations.² The clarity of these simple definitions can help museums draft statements that embody the tenets that guide its actions.

Some organizations combine purpose and mission into one statement. Such a statement could be labeled either purpose or mission. It tends to blur the distinction between why the organization exists and what it does to justify its existence. Often the statement simply describes what the organization does. For example, the collecting of objects is sometimes listed in a museum's purpose, but this is not why it exists. Knowing why a museum exists can help establish the types of objects that are (or are not) collected.

Nothing is more important to an organization than clearly defined statements that express why it exists and what it does to justify its existence. All policies, programs, and activities flow from these statements. Self-study efforts should always begin with a reexamination of an organization's purpose and mission. The MAP I, IMS General Operating Support, and accreditation questionnaires all refer to both purpose and mission.

Governance

A private, nonprofit organization typically has a constitution and bylaws, although some institutions have only the latter. A historical or genealogical society may operate efficiently with only a set of bylaws. However, museums frequently find there are compelling reasons to have both a constitution and bylaws, primarily because of collections responsibilities and public programming. Having a dual set of documents provides checks and balances between decisions that should involve the entire corporation and operational matters that can be delegated to a governing board. An institution may also have written contracts with agencies such as city or county governments, park districts, or forest preserve districts. Some organizations have other written agreements with support groups. An institution's governing documents should never be treated casually or virtually ignored once written. They define responsibilities and set parameters. There are organizations that were created thirty years ago or more that have never revised their governing documents. Self-study can be the catalyst to reexamine these documents. If they haven't been revised in the last five years, they almost certainly will need to be updated.

Constitutions typically describe the powers and responsibilities of governing boards and of board members. Statements about conflict of interest and self-dealing, elections, and term limitations belong in a constitution. Constitutions should include organizations' purposes, mission statements, and sections on fiscal matters, membership, meetings of the corporation, and procedures for amendments.

Bylaws describe matters delegated to the board, such as membership fees, the logistics of scheduling and holding meetings of the corporation and the board, committee charges, hours of operation, admission fees, and provisions for amendments. Self-regulatory provisions for the board, such as membership in the organization, attendance requirements, and termination, are also in the bylaws.

Written agreements between cultural organizations and local governing agencies define ownership of assets (land, facilities, collections), fiscal responsibilities, employment and contractual arrangements, and lines of authority. Documents that describe support groups usually detail the degree of autonomy of those groups in fiscal and programmatic matters. These documents are the bedrock of an organization's legal status. Granting agencies and the AAM visiting committees and accreditation commission review them to determine who is accountable for what. Periodical review of basic governing documents is important to institutional assessment.

Ethics

Governing documents usually include some statements prohibiting conflict of interest and self-dealing. Policies (such as those pertaining to collections, personnel, a museum store, and exhibitions) may include provisions about ethics as well as legal matters. Ethical statements go beyond legal requirements. As of January 1, 1997, accredited museums are expected to have an institutional code of ethics. However, it is not enough simply to adopt a blanket statement such as "our museum subscribes to the principles stated in the AAM Code of Ethics" or some other code of standards.

Scattered references to ethical behavior need to be gathered into a document labeled "Code of Ethics." There are many guides for formulating such a code. Both the AAM and the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) have recently passed ethics statements. Standing AAM committees (those for curators or registrars) also have ethics statements. The Museum Store Association has a code of ethics. The American Institute of Conservation has a code of ethics and standards of practice. The AAM's booklet *Excellence and Equity* defines other ethical issues. The AAM also has published an inexpensive publication, *Code of Ethics for Museums*, that provides a framework for developing an institution's own code of ethics. All of these documents suggest practices that can be adapted to the needs of individual organizations.

Long-Range Planning

The process of long-range planning is an ongoing endeavor. An important component of planning is internal assessment. The booklet mentioned above, *Shaping the Museum*, offers succinct advice about the planning process, why and how to plan, and the steps to be taken in developing a plan. The GOS grant questionnaire and the MAP application probe an institution's provisions for planning. A museum without a long-range plan would be unlikely to receive a GOS grant. A museum that receives a MAP I grant frequently finds that planning is emphasized in the follow-up report. Accredited museums are expected to have a written long-range plan that applies at least to a five-to-ten-year period. Some institutions refer to these plans as strategic plans, reviewing and updating them annually and concurrently developing a plan that envisions perhaps twenty years down the line. The key components of preparing a planning document generally include: reviewing purpose and mission; examining internally and externally; assessing strengths and weaknesses; exploring possibilities; narrowing the options; setting goals, objectives, and strategies; and implementing and evaluating the plan.

Personnel

Fairness and consistency are the key elements in personnel matters. Written personnel policies help to avoid problems. Both paid and unpaid staff are considered in grant applications and in the accreditation questionnaire. Staff-board relations, ethics, personnel management and development, and volunteer recruitment and training are all covered in the MAP I application. The GOS form explores the qualities, responsibilities, and professional activities of staff; personnel policies and practices; and methods by which supplementary staff are selected, recruited, trained, and used. The GOS application requires submission of an organizational chart illustrating the responsibilities of the board and staff.

The question of personal collecting of art objects or artifacts by staff members (and possibly by volunteers, including board members) needs to be addressed. Grant reviewers and accreditation committee members also want to know if the institution pays adequate wages, if it provides benefits, if it encourages professional development, and how it evaluates the performance of staff and volunteers.

Organizations may find it helpful to compare their situations with those of other

institutions of similar size and discipline. Colleagues are often reluctant to share specifics about their institutional salaries and benefits, but those who are associated with governmental bodies are more free with such information. In some parts of the country, publications are issued that provide current salary information for the region. The AAM publication *Museums Count* contains statistical data about employment in museums. However, information published in books is usually not up to date, simply because of the length of the research and publication processes. Although *Museums Count* was published in 1994, the information in it was gathered in 1989. Some inferences about current salary levels can be drawn from advertisements for jobs in newsletters of regional and national organizations. Some privately operated museums, especially smaller ones, do not offer any benefits. Few provide health care. However, other institutions do offer retirement packages. These are matters that are evaluated by grant reviewers and accreditation committee members.

The provision of ongoing development opportunities for staff and volunteers is a mark of a professional organization. Grant reviewers check to see if there is a line item in the budget for these activities; they are interested in how such funds are spent. In addition to paying for staff training, some organizations encourage supplemental participation in workshops and conferences by allowing staff to attend at their own expense without losing vacation days. A periodic evaluation of performance is essential to a healthy organization. Written evaluation of both staff and volunteers provides feedback and encourages goal setting and growth. These processes need to be part of a total program of orientation, training, and evaluation for trustees, staff, and volunteers.

Notes

¹ American Association of Museums. *Shaping the Museum: The MAP Institutional Planning Guide*, p. 13.

² *Ibid.* p. 14.

Part II of this technical bulletin will be published in the Winter 1997 issue of MUSENEWS. It will continue the discussion by covering the topics of membership, finances, physical facilities, safety and security, collections, exhibitions, programming, and community relations.