

## LOOKING INWARD: INSTITUTIONAL SELF-ASSESSMENT, PART II

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*[Editor's note: This technical bulletin continues Miller's discussion of institutional self-study. Part I was published in the Fall 1996 issue of MUSENEWS.]*

### Membership

An evaluation of an organization's membership involves several steps that are part of an internal assessment. The first is an examination of membership statistics in light of the institution's purpose and mission. Membership assessment raises important questions and reveals areas that may need improvement. What are the demographics of the community? Do membership figures reveal that the organization is serving its audience? Does the size of the membership reflect community support? Has membership shown a pattern of growth? What are the benefits of membership in the organization?

### Finances

Good fiscal management is vital to a healthy organization. Grant reviewers investigate to see that income and expenses are balanced and that sources are properly recorded according to the standards set by the Federal Accounting Standards Board (FASB) and other bodies. Staff or volunteers who prepare a grant application must know basic financial procedures and terms. When an application requires completing a specific financial form (as the GOS application does), an organization whose records are in good order will find that the information is easy to transfer to the form. Charitable organizations are required to prepare statements of financial position (balance sheet), including restricted and unrestricted assets, statements of activities that report changes in net assets, and statements of cash flow.

Financial records reveal an organization's primary sources of income and expenses. A review of these figures can stimulate discussion that is important to internal assessment. Are the sources of income stable? Is there an endowment? Is the organization dependent on special-event income that may fluctuate from year to year? Are massive amounts of time devoted to earned income activities, thereby draining the energy and time of trustees, staff, and volunteers? Should the organization charge admissions? What percentage of expenses are allocated to personnel? (Typically personnel expenses represent 50 percent or

more of an annual expense budget.) What expenses are fixed and what expenses can be adjusted to meet changes in income levels?

### Physical Facilities

An assessment of an organization's physical facilities is a key component of long-range planning. Questions in the MAP I grant application and in the GOS questionnaire help to focus this analysis. The MAP grant targets facilities management, master planning for physical facilities development, expansion and/or renovation, climate control, and storage. The GOS form looks at use of physical resources, both for the general public and for special groups, and assesses practices and schedules for the care of the institution's physical plant.

There are rigorous requirements for accreditation. A museum is asked to list its facilities, including the square footage for each and the total square footage of the institution. The facilities must be described in relation to the museum's mission. The date of construction and condition of buildings must be given. The applicant must describe the percentage of space devoted to administration, collections, education, exhibition space, exhibition preparation, research, public services, and building and grounds services. Accessibility for people with disabilities is questioned. Parking, hours, and admission fees are also assessed. An organization that looks seriously at how its space is allocated can draw conclusions about where expansion may be needed. Perhaps storage areas are inadequate. It may be necessary to consider the reallocation of existing space, the expansion of the facility, or off-site storage.

### Safety and Security

The topics of safety and security within an institution go far beyond fire detection and alarm systems. Grant reviewers are interested in what environmental controls are present, how the safety of staff, visitors, collections, and facilities is ensured, what emergency procedures are in place, and whether there is provision for disaster planning. In order to be accredited, a museum should have a written health and safety program for staff, offer training for persons involved in handling toxic substances, conduct health and safety inspections, have a written evacuation plan for staff and for

visitors—one that is periodically tested—and have a formal pest control program.

An assessment of safety and security procedures that is undertaken on the occasion of a grant application or for accreditation may suggest new programs as self-study raises awareness about hazards in facilities and in collections. An organization may want to post Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS), provide written information about hazardous materials, and offer training to deal with blood-borne pathogens. A security survey of the facility could be helpful. An institution might be advised to initiate an integrated pest management program (controlling pests without excessive use of chemicals).

### Collections

Collecting, researching, caring for, and interpreting objects are traditionally activities that define a museum. As a result of changes in the AAM definition of museums, organizations that utilize objects but do not necessarily own them qualify as museums for the purpose of accreditation. This accommodates science centers and children's museums. The term "objects" includes natural history specimens and living collections in zoos and arboreta. One of the major responsibilities of a museum is to provide proper management and care of objects. Therefore, any museum's self-study must address this topic. Information about all aspects of collection management and samples of forms used for deed of gift, loans, and temporary deposits may be found in *A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections*, an excellent book by Marie Malaro.

Museums need to have a collections policy, which typically covers institutional purpose and mission, the governing authority, an ethics statement, and the definition of the scope of collections, as well as the topics of acquisitions, deaccessions, loans, temporary deposit, care and conservation of collections, records, inventory, insurance, exhibition, use of collections, access, and policy review and revision. Museums should know how many objects are in their collections. The collections may be divided into permanent, educational, research, or other categories. Some museums use a tiered system of collection organization, whereby some objects receive more stringent care than others.

Grant reviewers are interested in know-

ing what percentage of the collection has been registered and catalogued, how frequently inventories are conducted, and what procedures the museum has for identifying conservation needs. For accreditation, a museum should be able to report the percentages of types of collection objects, how conservation needs are assessed and prioritized, and the training that staff and volunteers receive in handling objects. There should be documentation on objects loaned to and by the museum. Information about record keeping, handling, and storage is also expected. The museum's participation in pure and applied research is assessed, as are programs to evaluate the research.

### Exhibitions

For the general public, a museum's exhibits are the museum. The exhibits are the most visible function of a museum. There may be permanent exhibits, temporary exhibits, or both. Museums may borrow or create traveling exhibits. Self-assessment raises questions about how the museum creates exhibits. What kind of research is involved? Does the museum develop issue-oriented exhibits? What kind of interpretation is there (labels, audio/visual presentations, brochures)? Does the museum have an exhibition philosophy? Is there an exhibition policy? The accreditation self-study asks how exhibitions reflect the museum's mission, what the exhibition goals are, and if the exhibitions are evaluated.

### Programming

Exhibits may be seen as one type of educational programming. Others include classes, workshops, films, lectures, demonstrations, radio/television programs, and outreach programs. Publications are a type of program, as are special events. Self-assessment can pinpoint programming areas that need to be developed. Museums applying for accreditation must outline the goals, staffing, and volunteers devoted to educational programming and must describe how the programs support the mission of the museum. Training opportunities for staff and volunteers need to be covered, and the audience for programs (adult, children, family, community, audiences with special needs) must be considered. The accreditation self-study looks into how programs are evaluated. Publication goals and publication programs are also addressed.

### Community Relations

The assessment of how an organization serves its community is important. The MAP I questionnaire asks about the institution's location, how people get there, how often the museum is open to the public, what audiences and geographical areas it

serves, and its annual attendance. The GOS application provides space to outline noncash support from the community. Contributed goods and services are evidence that a organization is a vital part of its community.

### Conclusion

Grant applications such as the MAP I and the IMS/GOS forms, as well as the AAM accreditation self-study questionnaire, help an institution to analyze its current practices. [Editor's note: *The Institute of Museum Services (IMS) is now the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)*]. By raising questions about all areas of operation, they provide starting points for institutional assessment. Some of the queries can be answered by evaluating current policies and written documents. Others may lead to further investigation about current standards in the field. These topics may be researched in the Illinois Heritage Association library, which has many helpful resources, including sample mission statements, numerous ethics statements, policy statements (collections, exhibitions, museum store operation), information on site planning, emergency preparedness, and disaster planning, articles on long-range planning, and books and articles on educational programming.

Internal assessment produces a deeper understanding of an organization's current situation. The results of this process can be utilized to build for the future. They can form the basis of long-range planning and can provide an information base that could be used to develop an annual report, make a case for a fund-raising campaign, or promote an organization's activities.

### Selected Bibliography

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