From the Editor-in-Chief

Cynthia Robinson

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Eighteen years ago, frustrated by the lack of discourse about how history museums and historical societies could forge strong connections with their geographic communities, Gretchen Sorin, now Director and Distinguished Professor of the Cooperstown Graduate Program and I researched, wrote and published *Going Public: Community Program and Project Ideas for Historical Organizations*. It was a book of ideas, highlighting 27 specific programs that focused on building and diversifying audiences. We selected them out of a pool of more than 100 possibilities, and we chose them because they were mission-based, reproducible and innovative.1 We hoped that the case studies would inspire those who worked in historical organizations, especially in places where attention to object care far exceeded attention to building constituencies. We argued that historical organizations that did not strategically increase community involvement might not survive. We also believed that local historical societies had the potential to make a difference to their communities, and that programing, rather than exhibitions, presented a dynamic, participatory and cost-effective strategy for building engagement.

The book sold modestly well in New England, but the problem that inspired us to write the book remains. Other than through conference sessions or private conversations with colleagues, it is often difficult to learn more about museum programs than what is communicated to the public through website descriptions and marketing. Concrete, practical information about a specific program’s impetus, resources, goals, implementation and effectiveness is hard to access.2

JME rarely publishes straight-up case studies. Instead, we ask authors to establish a premise and argue with evidence, and to contextualize with theory and history from a 10,000-foot perspective. But without the sharing of everyday work processes and products, museum educators are doomed to reinvent the wheel when they try “new” things. Worse, without the input and catalyst of “new” ideas, museum educators can get stuck in the rut of producing the same old programs that their institutions have done for years.

“New” is in quotation marks because it “new” is contextual and situational. What is new for one museum may be old for another. That may not diminish its value. Museum professionals borrow ideas from each other all the time, and as long as the “new” program’s outcomes achieve something important for that museum, the fact that the program may not be original should not matter.

Kudos to guest editor Elisabeth Nevins for putting out a call for museums to share new (for them) responses to familiar and common programs. Not all of the case studies in these pages are programs, a few examine interesting structural and operational changes. The majority, however, proffer terrific ideas, as well as lessons learned, regarding program planning, implementation and assessment. I hope that you are inspired to share this issue with your museum’s staff, and that it lives on your office bookcase, well within reach. This idea issue will inspire you to try new things.

Notes

2. Museum funding agencies often list funded projects on their websites, this source can be a starting point to pursue new ideas.

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About the Editor-in-Chief

*Cynthia Robinson* is director of museum studies and senior lecturer at Tufts University, where she specializes in museum education. She spent 25 years working in and with museums and has extensive experience in developing programs, curricula and exhibitions, as well as in museum management and administration. Cynthia recently received the 2017 John Cotton Dana Award for Leadership, presented by the Education Committee of the American Alliance of Museums. The award recognizes individuals outside the field of museum education who exhibit outstanding leadership and promote the educational responsibility and capacity of museums. It has been awarded only 9 times in the past 32 years.

Reference


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