The Case for Holistic Intentionality

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Abstract Museums that strive for excellence by continually clarifying their purpose and realigning all practices and resources to achieve that purpose are operating holistically within a cycle of intentionality. Working within a cycle of intentionality means that a museum, among many other activities, carefully writes intentions that reflect and describe the essence of the museum and its unique value and potential impact. Intentions represent staff members' deepest passions and meld together their hopes and expectations with community needs. A museum that works within a cycle of intentionality has created an inclusive, process-oriented infrastructure so it can write a purposeful mission and measurable intentions, and can demonstrate the value of the museum in people's lives and in its community through repeated assessment, while offering continuous learning opportunities for all staff.

Rationale

Many have observed and discussed how the museum community is experiencing a paradigm shift. A century ago, the constituents of most museums were curators and the educated upper class. Today many museums want to attract a diverse public and are particularly attentive to those who live in the communities where museums reside. Similarly, a century ago the objects were museums' *raison d'être.* Today, museum professionals are writing about museums and social responsibility (Janes and Conaty 2005), museums as centers of their communities (Pitman and Hirzy 2004), and museums and relevancy (Koster 2006). Stephen Weil characterized the shift as "from being about something to being for somebody" (Weil 1999), although Lois Silverman and Mark O'Neill note that

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"museums are about something and for somebody at the same time" (2004, 41). Sherene Suchy makes a similar point in her book, *Leading with Passion*, where she notes that the shift in focus does not mean devaluing the collection; it means "revaluing the social relationships that are built around the collection" (2004, 101).

Within this slow-motion shift, many museums appear to be searching for themselves, presenting a range of public programs to see which ones might bolster attendance and attract new audiences while also retaining existing ones. Although this program proliferation may be an indication that museums are experimenting and taking risks, actions appear haphazard and unfocused rather than deliberate. It also appears that museums are continually searching for the next blockbuster, trying to boost their attendance in every way possible, as if attendance were the only measure of a museum's success (Janes and Conaty 2005). The problem is that—except for evaluations that examine the effectiveness of individual programs and exhibitions—museum attendance is the only measure of a museum's success, since most museums are not actively studying the impact of their museum in any other way. Several have noted that museums need new performance measures (Koster 1999; Suchy 2004; Worts 2006; Falk and Sheppard 2006). Clearly, there are economic reasons why museums focus on attendance. But as Robert Janes and Gerald Conaty note: "Attendance flows from significance and significance flows from the provision of meaning and value to one's community" (2005, 9). With so much turmoil inside the museum and so much competition outside, the museum—as institution—appears hesitant, searching for the next trend for short-term gain.

Some museum practitioners are peering beyond their institutions for answers, but to look exclusively outside the museum neglects important museum assets. History and conventional wisdom suggest that looking exclusively inside the museum will not provide answers either, at least not the right kind of answers for today's complicated environment. Museums need to refocus their ideas and balance internal assets with external needs, since the answer likely lies in how the museum builds a relationship with its public and community while at the same time valuing its material and intellectual assets. Some museums appear to be questioning their ideals and shying away from acting deliberately and with conviction. Weil sees such behavior as overwhelming:

> The work that needs to be done is daunting. In many instances it may start with something so basic as getting a museum's leadership to articulate what it hopes or expects its institution to accomplish. That so many museums continue to be so unfocused about their purpose—avoid any reference to outcomes at all. . . —is only the beginning of the problem (2002, 48).

Museums and Missions

Traditionally, a museum's mission statement represents the essence of what a museum does. For many museums, collections, exhibitions, and educational programming are mission-defining characteristics (Koster 1999). The value that museums place on mission statements is reflected in books that discuss how to approach writing such statements (Jones and Kahaner 1995; Anderson 1998). However, not everyone agrees that

mission statements serve a purpose. Milton Bloch (2005) notes that mission statements are usually retrofitted to describe functions and rarely play a role in shaping the museum. The mission statement, as a declaration of the purpose of a museum, may not be at fault, but perhaps the mission statement that staff members ultimately envision does not capture the essence they feel their institution embodies. Similarly, if a mission statement does not accentuate the uniqueness of the museum, it may not be an adequate mission statement. Harold Skramstad, in his remarks during the 150th anniversary celebration of the Smithsonian, noted that mission statements do not answer the vital "so what?" question, and thus miss an important point (1996).

Weil does not discuss mission statements per se, but he often discusses institutional purpose in several of his essays published in *Making Museums Matter*. In "Museums: Can and Do They Make a Difference?"—originally written for a 1997 presentation—Weil asks what constitutes a good museum and identifies aspects of a museum that must be present in the good museum, including a clear purpose and a strong leader determined to achieve that purpose (2002). Later in the essay he accentuates Skramstad's point, saying: "The very things that make a museum good are its intent to make a positive difference in the quality of people's lives and, through its skillful use of resources and under determined leadership, its demonstrable ability to do exactly that" (2002, 73–74).

Mission statements should clarify what the museum values, reflecting what staff members feel their museum embodies and describing how they want to affect their public and community. Weil suggests that establishing a clear institutional purpose is the first step to being able to assess an institution's effectiveness, and he is partially correct. However, to begin the difficult task of institutional assessment, a mission statement, no matter how clear, does not suffice. Mission statements need a companion piece that describes, with fundamental clarity, the outcomes the museum envisions (Korn 2004). In other words, if museums' missions are going to be measured, museum leaders and their staff will have to be able to describe what such achievement looks like and what visitors and community members are doing that demonstrates success. To assess effectiveness, museum staff must write intentions that succinctly describe concepts of what they want to achieve; for survival in the twenty-first century, these intentions must focus on the impact staff envision for the public and the museum's community.

Intentions

Museums that strive for intentionality operate from a set of carefully crafted intentions that are derived from and reinforce the museum's mission; they define and describe what the museum wants to achieve. They reflect and describe the essence of the museum and its unique value and potential impact on its community. Most important, they represent the deepest passions of museum leadership and staff. Passion is tied to internal commitment and builds a sense of responsibility among individuals—essential ingredients for good programs (Friedman, Rothman, and Withers 2006). Intentions are a driving, motivating force throughout the museum; they build a genuine, shared vision held by everyone because they passionately express the impact the museum hopes to attain.

While intentionality may represent an ideal state of being, the Hedgehog Concept for the Social Sectors, developed by Jim Collins, presents a similar framework (2005). The basis of the Hedgehog Concept is the intersection of three interdependent circles—what you are deeply passionate about; what you are the best in the world at; what drives your resource engine—with each circle representing an element that must be realized in a successful non-profit institution. Collins notes that the work of a great organization must reflect staff members' deepest passions, embody the unique value and service the organization offers its community, and it must "attract and channel resources directed solely . . ." to their intentions and "reject resources that drive them away from the center of their three circles" (2005, 23). An institution with this new focus shifts from program proliferation to intentional programming. Weil notes, "The only activities in which the museum can legitimately engage are those intended to further its institutional purpose" (2005, 38). From Collins' perspective, such a museum is a great organization; in the context of this article, it is a museum whose departments are fully integrated and operating holistically and intentionally.

Intentions are similar to program objectives in that they are written in measurable terms. However, intentions are about the whole museum, not an individual program. They are statements that reflect the museum's aspirations as well as its pragmatic realities. The process of identifying intentions is a process of unpacking and analyzing what the mission statement means in measurable terms. In this unpacking, all staff should describe what the words and ideas in the museum's mission mean to them. Developing intentions allows all staff, guided by a strong leader who believes in striving for holistic intentionality, to find their collective conscience and determine which intentions are imperative and which intentions best represent what the museum ideally hopes to accomplish and realistically expects to achieve. Often a museum's mission is a statement describing an institution's purpose; intentions specifically describe the essence of a museum and the relevant, desirable results that a museum seeks to achieve over a period of time.

Philosophers (Crane 2005) and psychologists (May 1965) have written about intentions and intentionality, and their writings are inspirational in the context of this paper and important to cite in order to clarify meanings and to distinguish intentions from missions and objectives. Psychoanalyst Rollo May noted that "intention" has a strong relationship to "meaning," as in the legal phrase "What is the intent of the law?" (1965). The definition for "intend" in Webster's Dictionary—"to direct the mind on" and "signify, mean"—is also useful to discuss, because "to direct the mind on" also describes the philosophical underpinnings of intentionality, as intentionality refers to various mental states (Crane 2005). Tim Crane describes the history of the term in this way:

> The term derives from the Medieval Latin intention, a scholastic term for the ideas or representations of things formed by the mind. The term was revived in 1874 by Franz Brentano for "the direction of the mind on an object." Brentano's idea was that intentionality is the mark of the mental: all and only mental states are intentional. This idea, often known as Brentano's thesis, can be expressed by saying that one cannot believe, wish, or hope without believing or wishing something. Beliefs, wishes, desires, hopes, and the like are therefore often called "intentional states" (2005, 438).

The process inherent in museum staff developing intentions is important, but so are the intentions—as end products. Intentions are serious statements representing commitment and conviction. They "signify, mean." While they exist on paper, these intentions carry a force, a will, a meaning that has life—so much life, urgency, and import for the institution that the leadership and staff must move the intentions forward—with all the fervor humanly possible because the intention is so deeply important. Behind every intention there is the meaning of it and the movement towards it that is the act (May 1965). Staff members' actions become meaningful only when they are expressions of the museum's intentions. Each act tends towards something; that is, there is a deliberate quality behind every action a staff member takes to move them closer to their museum's intentions.

Balancing Internal Desires with External Needs

A museum striving for intentionality knows and respects its institutional self; it knows exactly who it is, who it wants to serve, and how it wants to serve. This museum's knowledge of its institutional self rises from its intellectual assets (staff), its material assets (collections and exhibits), and its staff members' passions. Such a museum also recognizes the audience and community in which it lives as an asset; it respects, values, and knows its audience and community very well because it collects information about visitors' experiences and the community's needs; and it uses that information to inform decisions and direct resources.

A museum striving for intentionality recognizes that it exists in an external environment and that the external environment affects its internal world; thus, such a museum is flexible and it balances internal desires and resources with its community's needs and external forces. Balancing potentially conflicting ideals, though challenging, demonstrates that the museum is true to itself and true to its audience and community. Museums that strive for intentionality embrace and respect their distinctive places in the cultural landscape and help others realize and experience their significance. If all museums were to strive for intentionality, each museum would be different from the next because each museum would clarify and celebrate its unique qualities. These museums would value innovation and responsiveness to their communities and make decisions based on the impact they envision. Museums striving for intentionally align their practices and resources to support to their core purpose, as identified in their mission statement and intentions.

From Philosophy to Practice

The need for museums to strive for intentionality, as an ideal, is grounded in three primary forces: Weil's and others' observation that 1) museums have not clarified what they hope and expect to accomplish; 2) survival in the twenty-first century will require museums to effectively make a difference in people's lives; and 3) museums must demonstrate their effectiveness (that they have made a difference in people's lives). What would the organizational behavior of a museum striving for intentionality look like in practice?

There are three primary characteristics that constitute intentionality:

1. **Intentionality requires that a museum operates holistically and seeks active participation from all museum staff and board.** Ideally, everyone's work is connected to a museum's purpose; therefore everyone is involved in planning and delivering programs that support a museum's intentions and measuring a museum's ability to achieve its intentions. Striving for intentionality also requires a leader to inspire staff to participate in the museum's work and ensure that all the museum's practices, activities, and resources are aligned with supporting the museum's intentions.

2. **Intentionality creates a culture of inquiry.** A leader who believes in intentionality as an ideal state encourages staff to explore their passions, and thereby the soul of the museum. Clarification during planning is sought by responding to questions, from fellow staff and others outside the museum, that challenge everyone to investigate their own thinking when determining intentions and designing programs that support those intentions. All participants appreciate when someone asks them why their ideas are important, as this kind of systematic inquiry into "why?" allows staff to think through their ideas and in the process discover what they really care about (Friedman, Rothman, and Withers 2006; Preskill and Torres 1999). Such a leader also encourages staff to explore how programs impact the public, to course-correct existing programs, and help plan new ones. Asking questions—whether during the planning phase or evaluation phase—helps the museum maintain a spirit of enduring inquiry, a characteristic of intentionality.

3. **Intentionality promotes planning and evaluation because they are interdependent processes.** Intentionality allows museums to function within a continuous cycle of planning, action, and evaluation because planning and evaluation are interdependent (Conservation Company 2002; Yankey and McClellan 2003). Conducting audience research is natural to a museum living within the intentionality work cycle because a museum's intentions meld together staff members' hopes and expectations with community needs. If the museum does not regularly collect information from its constituents and examine the effects of its programs, it will never know its public or community, or whether it is achieving its desired intentions. Thus, information collected from visitors and the community serves a dual purpose: 1) in planning, information helps staff think about and write their intentions; and 2) in evaluation, information is used to indicate the degree to which intentions have been achieved. In the cycle of work, such information helps staff continuously refine intentions and subsequent program designs. The cycle of planning, action, and evaluation requires staff to regularly ask themselves: Where are we going? How will we get there? How well are we doing? Such questions build a framework for continuously examining evaluation findings against the museum's intentions and core purpose. Such questions help staff learn how they can improve their practice and their museum.

Intentionality and Learning

A museum that embraces intentionality applies a whole-organization approach to thinking about and ultimately determining its value and the desired effect of that museum on its community. Rooted in intentionality is a process framework for planning, action, and evaluation. The questions embedded in this cycle of work (such as: What do we want this program to achieve? What does success look like?) are the traditional questions that program planners should—but do not always—ask; they are the traditional questions that evaluators always ask when they participate in all phases of program planning and evaluation. That is, they are planning questions *and* evaluation questions. However, if these questions are asked at all, they are usually asked at the program level, not the institutional level. Museum staff who live within the intentionality work cycle will ask and answer questions in all institutional levels.

Museum program evaluation (including exhibitions) has helped and will continue to help practitioners understand their programs in the context of users or visitors. While the number of museums that conduct program evaluations has increased significantly over the last several decades, remarkably few studies have addressed questions about the impact of museums on communities. While program evaluation is useful for understanding the impact of a single program, it does little to inform staff about their organization. It does not help the board, museum director, and staff members understand how museum practices support the museum in achieving its mission. Program evaluation, as a process, is not at fault; its place in the organization, however, may be the source of the problem. As implied above, evaluation in museums lives in the program realm. In a museum that pursues intentionality, evaluation is elevated to the institutional realm so evaluation can serve the whole organization. However, evaluation is one process of many that live within organizations. Raising evaluation to the institutional level will not solve all organizational problems, but because evaluation is a process that involves asking probing questions in search for clarity and meaning, it may help organizations reorganize and refocus their ideas, and ultimately their work, so they revolve around their intentions. The need for museums to demonstrate organizational impact has reached a tipping point; the need for museums to refocus their organizations and work has as well.

Twenty years, ago many in the museum field observed or directly experienced a fairly significant change in how exhibitions were developed. This noteworthy change may serve as an example, albeit on a much smaller scale, of museums learning from practice and reorganizing tasks associated with their most public work: exhibitions. In the late 1980s, exhibition development in many museums changed from being a curatorial project to an interdisciplinary team project (Blackmon, LaMaster, Roberts, and Serrell 1988). For the first time, educators and evaluators, among others, were invited to work with content specialists during exhibition development. As Kathleen McLean notes, however, the team approach was neither the magic bullet nor a guarantee for excellent exhibitions (1993). Even so, exhibition practitioners learned that interdisciplinary teams of dedicated professionals allowed for rich dialogue and deliberation, as teams weighed how to best convey often complex ideas to the public. People who participate in exhibition teams find the process messy and frustrating, but also invigorating and stimulating. Lisa Roberts notes that the team

approach "rang of democracy, fellowship and collaboration" (1994, 6). The team approach was initiated as a strategy for creating a visitor-centered exhibition, and while no one has conducted a study to determine whether the team approach creates exhibitions that are more visitor-centered than the curator-centered approach, many would agree that interdisciplinary teams contribute to the exhibition development process and product, and many practitioners new to the field clamor to work on such exhibition teams. The team approach is still prominent in many—although not all—museums.

The same type of revolution needs to happen throughout the whole museum organization—so the museum director, educators, marketing staff, designers, curators, evaluators, and development staff can convene to discuss their museum. When discussing institutional intentions, imagine staff from all departments debating the impact they expect and hope their museum to achieve in their community. Perhaps such cross-institutional discussions happen in many museums, but this author has observed otherwise. Staff from one department have been observed confessing that they do not know what their colleagues across the hall are doing; marketing staff have been observed asking educators thoughtful questions about a decade-old program that they were hearing about for the first time; and curatorial staff in some museums (obviously those that have not adopted the team approach) have been overheard saying that they have no idea what museum educators do. Courageous and intentional leaders must dismantle departmental silos and create an integrated, collaborative environment where all staff can work and learn together.

Most practitioners would agree that they value education and learning and believe that public education is at the center of what they do. They may also agree that they desire to create opportunities where visitor learning—however it is defined—can happen. They might also identify themselves as life-long learners. Should not their institutional culture support their natural tendencies as life-long learners? Should not museum directors and all staff create an environment where all staff can learn about themselves, their values, their colleagues, their work, and their organization? Organizational learning, a much talked about idea in museums and other sectors, refers to how organizations learn (Preskill and Torres 1999). As the revolution in exhibition development has shown, interdisciplinary teams allow question-asking and an open, non-threatening dialogue to flourish. Organizational learning is dependent on individuals, as well as teams, sharing their insights, questions, and values in an ongoing systemic way, and there is evidence that the impact of learning is greater when a higher percentage of employees are involved (Preskill and Torres 1999). Peter Senge discusses "real learning" in his important book, *The Fifth Discipline*:

> Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do. Through learning we re-perceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be a part of the generative process of life (1990, 14).

Intentionality, as an ideal to strive for, will appeal to directors and practitioners who care about pursuing "real learning" and excellence in their work. Such museum practitioners will use the continual planning, action, and evaluation processes embedded in the intentionality work cycle to improve themselves as leaders, practitioners, and

co-workers. At the same time, they, with their colleagues, will be improving how their organization functions.

Pursuing intentionality promotes staff learning as the museum continually explores its hopes and desires, and collects and integrates visitor experience information into its thinking and practice. In actuality, a museum will never reach its intentionality because as soon as it achieves its intentions, learning ceases. The very state of intentionality allows a museum to continuously alter its intentions to reflect new internal and external realities. Evidence of its intentionality, and thus an intentional museum, is a museum that cycles through planning, action, and evaluation. Weil, too, saw the intentionality of museums:

> If museums are to be accountable—which no longer seems a matter of choice—we will have to work together to clarify and better articulate the long-term impact and importance of the different outcomes that museums produce. . . . That we must do so against a confusing and constantly shifting background of changing demographic patterns, accelerating technological development, and evolving social structures does not excuse us from that effort. It simply means that we must accept the frustrating reality that what we are finally able to clarify about museums and their contributions today will almost certainly become cloudy again by tomorrow (2002, 97).

Striving for intentionality demonstrates a desire among staff to help their museum refocus its efforts amidst a very competitive external environment. Each museum must reaffirm its passions and unique value and then deliver this value while being sensitive to its visitors and responsive to its community's needs. The intentionality construct imposes a process-oriented infrastructure to help sustain museums into the future: assisting them in envisioning a purposeful mission and writing measurable intentions, and in achieving ongoing measurable impact in their communities by demonstrating the value of museums in people's lives and in communities, while offering continuous learning opportunities for all staff.

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