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Professional Standards for Museum Educators

Preface

The publication of *Museum Ethics* in 1978 marked the first time in more than 50 years that the American Association of Museums had issued a statement on ethics for museums and museum professionals. In the decade since, we have seen a renewed attention to professional standards and practices, as the museum community has thoughtfully engaged in the continuing self-examination that appropriately characterizes any profession in this complex world.

Today there is a strong consciousness that museums as institutions and museum professionals as individuals have far-reaching obligations to their public and their collections, obligations that are not to be taken lightly. A revised statement on museum ethics is in progress, a sign of the firmly held commitment to setting standards for our profession that are consistent with both the traditional functions of museums and the tenor of the world in which they operate.

This statement on professional standards for museum educators complements and amplifies both *Museum Ethics* and the International Council of Museums' *Statutes/Code of Professional Ethics* (1987). It represents the fruit of an ongoing dialogue among museum educators about museums' mandate as public educational institutions and museum educators' responsibilities as practitioners who help fulfill that mandate. It too is the sign of a firmly held commitment—a commitment by museum educators to strive for excellence in the service of the public. As the first statement of professional standards in our field—and the first to focus on the museum's educational obligations to its public—it is a hallmark in the evolution of museum education.

In the spirit of the museum profession, the preparation of this statement has been a collaborative effort. Educators in the Southeast region, led by Karen King and Nancy Glaser, created a draft that was a major step toward realizing the final product. Groups of educators around the country, at regional and local museum meetings, offered thoughtful critiques of the document-in-progress. More than 40 individuals took the time to study it and make substantive suggestions; Diane Brigham, Barbara Henry,

This document is being considered for adoption by the members of the AAM Standing Professional Committee on Education. It is printed here in lieu of "Notes from EdCom."

Kate Johnson, Teresa LaMaster, Joan Madden, Gordon Murdock, Susan Shaffer, and Bret Waller were especially helpful. Mary Ellen Munley incorporated all of these comments into a revised draft. Mary Alexander, Nancy Glaser, Elaine Heumann Gurian, Mary Ellen Munley, Carol B. Stapp, and I worked as a committee with editor Ellen Cochran Hirzy to produce the final document.

We hope that all museum professionals will see this statement as an affirmation of the vital mission we share: helping to make museums places of inquiry, discovery, and learning for all.

Patterson Williams

*Chair, AAM Standing Professional
Committee on Education*

Introduction

Every museum has an educational responsibility to the public it serves. Museums offer a unique encounter with objects and ideas for people of many ages, interests, and backgrounds. Museum education strengthens that encounter by building bridges between visitors' experiences and expectations and the experiences and ideas that emanate from a museum's collection.

To fulfill the educational mandate of their institutions, museum professionals must work together to ensure the following:

- the integrity, authenticity, preservation, and quality of the objects the museum presents;
- the accuracy of information disseminated to the public about those objects;
- the intelligibility and usefulness of such information to the museum's audiences;
- the quality of its presentation; and
- the recognition of the diversity of audiences and the importance of intellectual integrity in the exchange of ideas and in the collection and presentation of objects.

This statement of standards is intended to encourage museum professionals to strive for excellence as they carry out these important responsibilities. These standards provide reminders of the variety of public service obligations that all members of the museum profession assume, benchmarks against which the educational responsibilities of museums can be measured, and guidelines to help museum educators examine their own professional conduct.

Although this is a statement by and for the members of the American Association of Museums Standing Professional Committee on Education, its principles apply to all museum professionals, paraprofessionals, and volunteers who are involved in helping visitors have an enriching experience in the museum.

Defining Museum Education

Museums collect, preserve, present, interpret, and conduct research on tangible objects of cultural, historical, scientific, and aesthetic value. Each of these functions is part of a museum's relationship to its audiences, but presentation and interpretation figure most prominently in the domain of museum education.

Museum educators serve as advocates for museum audiences. Their primary responsibilities are to assure public

access to the museum's collections and exhibitions and to create both the environment and the programs that encourage high-quality experiences for all visitors. Public education in a museum is accomplished through the thoughtful application of audience analysis and principles of teaching and learning to the processes of interpretation, exhibition, and, where appropriate, to collecting and research.

The Museum's Obligations to Its Public

The museum's role as an agent of education carries with it certain obligations to the multifaceted public it serves.

Audience Diversity

Museums should be well integrated into their communities and accessible as educational resources and places of inspiration. Museums should seek to expand their audience base by actively extending into their communities with efforts and activities designed to build new audiences. Not every museum need serve every potential audience. Decisions about audiences, however, should be consciously made and carefully examined to ensure that they do not, by default, exclude those who traditionally have not felt welcome in museums. As a general rule, each museum should strive to make itself and its collections accessible—physically, emotionally, and intellectually—to the widest possible audience.

Audience Needs

To meet their responsibilities to a diverse public, museums must reflect a knowledge of their audience and a sensitivity to the varied capabilities and experiences visitors bring with them. The museum audience is a heterogeneous blend of publics that have both unique needs and common interests. The exhibits, programs, and services that a museum offers should attract and serve a diverse audience and stimulate the spirit of inquiry at all levels of capability, mastery, and interest.

Diversity of Perspectives

Research, exhibitions, publications, programs, and other forms of interpretation are powerful mediums of expression, even more so because the public vests museums with considerable authority. A museum's interpretive practices should acknowledge clearly the variety of cultural, aesthetic, and intellectual perspectives that can legitimately contribute to the visitor's understanding of a given exhibition, program, or collection. The integrity of the objects, the freedom of museum staff to express informed points of view, and the freedom of visitors to discover ideas and form opinions all deserve respect in the interpretive process.

Education within the Museum Structure

The magnitude of museums' educational responsibilities requires a commitment on the part of each museum to afford education a major place in the institutional policymaking and planning structure.

Education Policies and Plans

Service to a diverse audience and creation of a responsible interpretive program are important functions that require creativity, knowledge, skill, and dedication. Just as well-managed museums have formal, written policy statements

to guide their collecting activities, so should they have formal, written policies that set out their educational purposes, identify audiences to be served, and give direction to education programs. The success of a museum in meeting its educational mission should be measured against these policies.

Education Resources

A supportive institutional structure and an appropriate commitment of financial and human resources are essential to creating and sustaining high-quality educational services in museums. This commitment entails hiring experienced and highly trained education staff and providing compensation commensurate with job responsibilities, experience, and education.

Institutional Structure

The process of presenting and interpreting museum collections is enriched by collaboration among professionals with a variety of skills and talents. Museum staff with knowledge of audiences and expertise in education theory and practice should participate actively in the formation of all policies and practices that affect visitors' experiences.

The way in which an object is exhibited and interpreted powerfully influences the kinds of perception and learning that take place. The museum educator's role in the early stages of exhibition planning is to identify audiences and articulate clear educational objectives in order to develop appropriate communication and interpretive strategies. These strategies can then be employed to create links between visitors and objects so that curiosity is fostered and exploration of ideas, topics, or objects is encouraged.

Knowledge from outside the museum can be an important ingredient in program development. Therefore, museum educators should involve others in the community who can contribute to the interpretive process and provide bridges between the museum and its public.

Responsibilities and Competencies of the Museum Educator

Every museum educator brings a blend of experience and skills to his or her position. For all museum educators, however, certain responsibilities, principles, and competencies are necessary.

■ **Knowledge.** Museum educators help visitors see, understand, and respond to objects in museum collections in intellectually, aesthetically, and emotionally rewarding ways. Museum educators must have the skills to encourage interaction between the visitor and the objects on exhibit, at whatever level the visitor requires. To do this effectively, educators must know both their museum's audiences and their museum's collections. This means having a demonstrated knowledge of developmental psychology, philosophy of education, educational theory, and teaching, especially as related to the kind of voluntary and personal learning that takes place in museums. Equally important are a solid grounding in the history, theory, or practice of a field of study relevant to the areas in which the museum collects, as well as the ability to identify and cooperate with scholars and specialists in the appropriate fields.

■ **Principles.** Museum educators should possess a love of learning and a concern for the ways in which learning can enhance the quality of life. Fairness, honesty, and cross-cultural respect should guide a museum educator's decisions and behaviors. He or she should not endanger the reputation or property of the museum.

■ **Advocacy.** As advocates for museum audiences, museum educators must have thorough knowledge of and sensitivity to the audiences their museums serve. Museum educators must also express a willingness, and demonstrate an aptitude, for expanding the museum's audience over time. Toward this end, educators must understand the trends, issues, and changing attitudes and demographics in the museum's immediate community and in contemporary society.

■ **Communication.** Museum educators should facilitate communication both within the museum family and between the museum and its communities. Effective oral and written communication skills—for teaching, volunteer and staff training, public information functions, and internal management—are needed by the museum educator.

■ **Evaluation.** Museum educators must understand how to assess the effectiveness of exhibitions and programs, both from the museum audience's point of view and in light of the museum's educational mission and the distinctive nature of museum learning. The ongoing evaluation of exhibits and programs should be used to ensure that the museum's educational objectives are being realized.

■ **Management.** Museum educators should have a clear understanding and appreciation of the museum's philosophy and mission and be able to articulate and foster it in those with whom they work. Furthermore, museum educators share responsibility for the economic health of the institution. Museum educators should demonstrate skills related to the management of fiscal and human resources needed to accomplish the museum's educational goals.

■ **Collaboration.** Museums are just one part of a universe of formal and informal educational institutions. Museum educators should develop sound working relationships with other museums and cultural institutions, schools, universities, and community organizations to provide the best possible public educational experience for the visitor.

■ **Dissemination.** Museum educators should share their knowledge of the principles and practice of museum education with others in the museum field and in the educational community at large. This can occur through workshops, publications, and participation in state, regional, and national conferences.

■ **Professional Development.** Recognizing that learning is a lifelong pursuit, museum educators should persistently seek opportunities to expand their own expertise in education methods, knowledge of their museum's collections, evaluation, and management. Museum administrators and educators should create an atmosphere that encourages this professional growth and development.