

December 5, 2001



912 Baltimore Avenue phone 800.473.EUSA (3872)
Suite 700 816.421.1388
Kansas City, MO 64105 fax 816.421.3918

Dear Colleague:

We would like to thank you for participating in the Texas Needs Assessment Survey conducted by ExhibitsUSA this past year. Data gathered from over 200 surveys enabled us to learn important information about the needs and preferences of the Texas museum community.

As promised, we have attached a copy of the executive summary of the survey report. By sharing information regarding your institution you have provided important input that will be used in both state and national dialogues regarding the resource needs of Texas museums. Thank you.

We hope you will find the summary informative. If you are interested in reading the report, you can access it by looking at any of the following Web sites:

ExhibitsUSA:	www.eusa.org
Texas Association of Museums:	www.io.com~tam
Texas Commission on the Arts	www.arts.state.tx.us

If you have any questions please contact Edana Elder McSweeney, Assistant Director, ExhibitsUSA at 800.473 EUSA (3872) or e-mail at edana.eusa.org.

Again, thank you for your participation.

With best wishes,

Mary Kennedy McCabe
Director, ExhibitsUSA
mary@eusa.org

Jack Nokes
Executive Director, TAM
tam@io.com

Executive Summary

Introduction

In 1999, ExhibitsUSA, under the auspices of the Mid-America Arts Alliance, began a dialogue with the Texas Commission on the Arts regarding the statewide needs of small and midsize museums in Texas for professional development and institutional advancement. ExhibitsUSA proposed researching Texas institutions using three specific elements in order to understand the dynamics of institutional size as it relates to access to training opportunities and to identify the training preferences of small and midsize Texas museums. Further objectives of the research were to investigate museums' needs, interests, and competency level in areas such as community programming, marketing, fund raising, and exhibition development and to survey the Texas museum population as a whole, compiling details on museum operating budgets, visitorship, disciplinary emphases, and staff/volunteer professionalism.

Research Components

Interviews with Museum Service Organizations

Telephone interviews were conducted in early 2001 with seven Texas museum service organizations. Interviews focused on each organization's purpose, constituency, environmental assessment of museums throughout the state, and opportunities in Texas for technical assistance.

In this phase of the research, we discovered that while Texas museum service organizations understand the needs of Texas museums well, it is beyond their capacities, missions, and resources to fulfill that need. Further, none of the organizations we interviewed were organizing new museum training initiatives or had plans for expansions of their field service operations. The Texas Association of Museums (TAM) leads the way in its encouragement of technical assistance to museums at both state and regional levels, and the Texas Historical Commission (THC) works hard to serve the needs of small history museums statewide, but the field's need for assistance is simply overwhelming. In addition, on-site training that sparks institutional advancement and quantifiable improvement is all but absent.

Statewide Survey

ExhibitsUSA designed the survey instrument, with input from Market Directions, an independent marketing research company subcontracting on the data compilation and analysis components of this project, and with Jack Nokes, Executive Director of (TAM). TAM provided their database and partnered with ExhibitsUSA in the dissemination and collection of the surveys and in the data compilation strategy. Five hundred seventy-four surveys were mailed, and all data collected, analyzed, and contained in this report is based on the responses we received from the 203 museums that returned their surveys, a highly responsive rate of return of 35%.

One of the key findings in our data analysis is that a museum's overall well-being and capacity to fulfill its public function is directly related to its size. Small and midsize museums have fewer opportunities for training, but more demands on their time and a broader range of responsibilities for their staff. Their smaller budgets leave them less equipped to attend professional conferences or to effectively utilize information via the Internet. Still, in relation to their size, their programmatic impact and public expectations remain as high as those of their larger peers.

On-Site Visits

To elicit qualitative information from the museums of Texas, we arranged on-site visits with twenty institutions through the spring of 2001. We visited museums in east Texas, southeast Texas, and the Texas panhandle, regions that were identified in our interviews with museum service organizations as "underserved." We selected museums that reflect the demographics of the field as a whole, particularly in size, type, and community size. These visits were used to expand upon the questions that were raised by the survey results and to inform our understanding of other Texas museums with similar attributes and behaviors. We also made "secondary" site visits to another twenty museums to obtain additional information about the museum environment in Texas.

On-site visits were an exceptional opportunity for us to witness the extraordinary virtues and unparalleled volunteerism resident among Texas's diverse museums. The visits were also key for us to observe firsthand the obstacles that many Texas museums encounter in accessing rare training opportunities and in participating in self-directed professionalization. In addition, we documented the disparities between survey data and information gathered at in-person interviews and as a result were able to name training preferences by topic for Texas museums. Finally, these visits codified a set of

training initiative characteristics that must be in place in order to serve Texas museums in the greatest need.

Research Findings

Given the geographical scope of the state of Texas, the sheer number of the state's museums, and the few agencies with spare resources that serve them, there are undeniably few opportunities for the staff and volunteers of Texas's small and midsize museums to improve their professional skills and advance their institutions. While there are public agencies committed to and capable of serving the interests of the state's museums, there is no single organization that can accept the task in total; the demand is simply too great. In addition, many of the opportunities for museum training are fleeting, too expensive for museums in the greatest need, or too broad in topic to be directly applicable.

Our research unequivocally demonstrates that Texas museums, particularly small and midsize museums, are hungry for opportunities to advance their skills in the priority areas of

- Development/fund raising,
- Marketing and public relations,
- Public programming, and
- Educational programming (K–12).

One of our on-site observations is that many small Texas history museums could uniformly stand improvement in interpretation (particularly object labeling and docent training), and exhibit design (we note that, in the written survey, exhibit design was less of an improvement priority for museums that do not host temporary exhibitions). This is based principally on our visits to their exhibitions; any number of small history museums are filled with extraordinary objects that hold the promise of fine storytelling and education, but few of these exhibits were captivating in the absence of a director's tour.

Small and midsize museums across Texas also articulate compelling needs for training in the areas of computers/technology, collections management, conservation, and volunteer management. The written survey and on-site visits illustrate dramatic requests for more consistent means for the staff and volunteers of resource-poor museums to improve their institutions. Additionally, this research points directly to the principal obstacles in receiving

training help: a lack of money and an inability for small-staffed museums to leave their institutions unattended while attending off-site training.

It is also clear that more data gathering is needed on behalf of Texas museums, particularly those categorized as small and midsize. While our study adds measurably to our understanding of this constituency, a comprehensive census of all Texas museums is warranted.

Finally, our preliminary review of Texas museum service organizations leads us to the conclusion that there is greater need in the field than there are providers of these services. No single Texas agency is equipped to handle the breadth of improvement needs; therefore new museum service organizations must be added to the training mix in order to meet these needs and/or additional training resources must be identified.

Recommendations

We suggest several criteria to TCA and TAM in sponsoring or participating in new training enterprises. New Texas museum training initiatives designed to meet the needs of small and midsize Texas museums should:

- be easily replicated and easily modified.
- be affordable to participant museums.
- utilize and improve existing networks among museum service organizations and among the museums themselves.
- complement the daily operations of participating museums.
- be specifically applicable and address the unique and particular issues of individual museums.

We believe there is a distinct opportunity for the establishment of an experiential training program in Texas. A program that is locally driven, easily replicated, subsidized to reach the museums in the greatest need, and focused specifically on the application of training to each museum's particular situation is sorely needed and would be welcomed comprehensively by the state's museums.