Understanding and Implementing Inclusion in Museums

Laura-Edythe Coleman

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Preface

Understanding and Implementing Inclusion in Museums is the first text to focus solely on the notion of social inclusion for museums. This book is intended to demystify the much-debated idea of *inclusion* for museum professionals, theorists, professors, and researchers. Despite the increased interest in the concept of inclusive museums, we have very little tangible understanding of the term. This book provides that understanding in a concise and complete manner.

We have heard countless times that inclusion is a good thing for museums. The word has permeated our professional conversations, conferences, and publications. Inclusion is even now considered by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) to be one of the core institutional values of the twenty-first-century museum. While AAM released definitions for diversity and inclusion in February 2014 with its updated Diversity and Inclusion Policy, these descriptions merely introduced the term *inclusion* into the vocabulary of the field, without providing clear definitions. The AAM statement is likely to have significant long-term consequences for the field, notably impacting (1) the museum (re)accreditation process; (2) professional practice; and (3) vocational training. In the wake of this AAM statement, museum professionals of all levels are left uncertain as to the

meaning of *inclusion*, and they are ill equipped to implement inclusion in their museums.

Understanding and Implementing Inclusion in Museums will be the definitive theory- and application-based practitioner guidebook for implementing inclusion in museums for the foreseeable future. But what do we mean by inclusion? Why do we need inclusion? Is it a good thing? Who or what are we including? If you are confused by all of these discussions, you are not alone. I wrote this book to answer the many questions that I have received over the recent years about inclusion for museums.

Understanding and Implementing Inclusion in Museums serves as the first-of-its-kind text on the concept of *inclusion*. In this book, I will explore the multiple theoretical, historical, and practical meanings of the term *inclusion*. The chapters within this book are intended to function as a guide for understanding and implementing inclusion in your museum. In the first chapter, I make a case for inclusion in American museums by discussing how our museums are not inclusive spaces, but rather institutions of exclusion. I develop early in the book, within chapter 2, a working definition for the term *inclusion* based on both theory and history. I highlight the incredible potential that inclusion has to expand the social role of the museum—a task that has been assigned to the American museum field for several decades. In chapter 3 I explore the significant advantages of inclusion theory application in museums. In order to formulate your own opinion of inclusion, I have outlined the advantages and disadvantages of inclusion for museums. Aided by inclusion theory, museum professionals can be reassured that their museums will reveal exclusion and develop lasting solutions to problems of marginalization and discrimination in their communities.

To implement inclusion efficiently in our museums, I have outlined and expanded on a three-tiered spectrum of inclusion, first pioneered by Richard Sandell in 1998. The vast majority of American institutions are along the lower end of this inclusivity spectrum. As museums progress along the spectrum of inclusivity, their impacts become greater upon society. Chapter 4 focuses almost exclusively on the first tier of inclusivity: the relationship a museum may have with an individual. For museums to culti-

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vate relationships with their individual visitors, they must focus on particular components of this relationship.

One hundred years have passed since museum founder and librarian extraordinaire John Cotton Dana proposed that American museums and libraries should be relevant to the communities in which they reside. The time has come for American museums to partner with community programs for the benefit of society. Chapter 5 outlines the second tier of the inclusive museum, aiding in social regeneration: partnerships with programs, agencies, and community organizations. For many museum professionals, the prospect of community partnerships is unnerving at best and unwelcome at worst. Chapter 5 explores why there are hindrances to partnerships with community organizations and how we can transform our perspectives while staying true to our mission statements. Included throughout this chapter are examples of successful museum–community agency partnerships.

Chapter 6 examines the highly contested notion of the museum as a propulsion agent for social change. Examples are presented of museums that, acting as change agents, have debunked the myth of museum neutrality. The two main types of museums in this third tier are analyzed: first, those born with a social agenda; second, those that adopt a social agenda. In response to the dire situation, that American museums are not prepared to implement inclusion, I have compiled from successful cases of inclusion a collection of tools for surveying, analyzing, and implementation. In chapter 7, I present the practical guide to implementing inclusion within your museum. I also provide steps for implementing the inclusive practice and a clear pathway to progress through the spectrum of inclusivity.

As museums grapple with their new social role and the application of inclusive practices, we will begin to see a higher demand for evaluation processes. In chapter 8, I deliver detailed procedures for successfully evaluating the inclusivity of your museum. I arm you with a series of evaluative techniques based on social science research methods and the national standards of EU/UK policies on social inclusion. I will also demonstrate blended approaches, melding American sensibility with

a Western European metric, ultimately producing a uniquely American set of tools for evaluating inclusion in our museums.

Chapter 9 highlights several of those individuals who are acting as advocates of inclusion, being agents of inclusive practice, and those designing the architecture of inclusion for American museums. On the spectrum of participation, many individuals are advocates for inclusive practices, some are also agents of social change, and only a few are *true architects* of inclusion for American museums.

Finally, in chapter 10, I issue a challenge to the museum field in general, and to the American museum field in particular: *understand and implement inclusion now*. Although this book is written from an American perspective, with specific applications to American museums, I draw upon the more considerable body of research and experience of our UK museum colleagues.

We have never had a book solely about inclusion for museums, and never with such a strong focus on American institutions. I invite you to join the conversation concerning inclusion armed with greater understanding and the tools to implement change through your museum.

Acknowledgments

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Zach, my logical son, I am so proud of you.
Emily, my whimsical daughter, I am so proud of you.

Dearest Chuck, thank you for being my partner; as in all things, this book is as much yours as it is mine.

1

Why Do Museums Need Inclusion?

Over the last several years, the American museum professional field has been energized around the word *inclusion*. You may have heard the term and want inclusion for your museum. But why do museums need inclusion? Why are we driven as a field to embrace and implement inclusion—a term that we know little about? It is all too easy to be caught up in the fervor of new terminology without understanding why (or even *if*) we need inclusion for museums.

Why do museums need inclusion? In short, we crave inclusion because American museums are exclusive and excluding spaces. Every recent statistic brought forward by the Center for the Future of Museums has reported the exclusiveness of American museums (Center for the Future of Museums 2010). There is conclusive evidence that American museums, as institutions, have not echoed the democratic nature of our nation. Quite simply, our museums are not "by the people, for the people" (Lincoln 1863). In fact, quite the opposite is true: if American museums are for the people, it is often only for certain elite people. How can this be? Truly, we are twenty years past the moment in which Stephen Weil summarized the shift in museums from being "about something to being for somebody" (Weil 2002). I argue that although museums are for somebody, they are not yet for everybody.

American Museums Are Currently
Exclusive and Excluding Spaces

How are American museums exclusive? I use the term *exclusive* to describe the inherent nature of our museums to be places for the elite, the fashionable, the educated, and the wealthy. The term *exclusive* describes a scenario of discrimination and segregation. In what ways are American museums exclusive spaces? First, American museums struggle to be culturally responsive and inclusive of their entire community. Second, as institutions, American museums are hesitant to form partnerships with social organizations and agencies that have similar but still different mission statements. Third, American museums refuse to become the conduit or platform for broad social change. These points are harsh—a hard truth for us as American museum professionals to bear, and, hopefully, we are urged to look for inclusive solutions to our problems.

American Museums Are
Not Culturally Inclusive

American museums are far from inclusive—especially regarding museum visitor demographics. In 2010, the Center for the Future of Museums reported that there is a widening gulf between the national population and museum visitor demographics (Center for the Future of Museums 2010). The national population data was drawn from the census, performed every ten years within the United States. The museum visitor demographics were compared against the national population changes in the United States. As demonstrated in figure 1.1, the current minority population of the United States is 34 percent and is expected to grow to 46 percent over the next twenty-five years. American museums report a mere 9 percent minority population in their annual attendance figures.

If the numerical data is not impressive enough, there is a growing body of anecdotal evidence to support the notion that
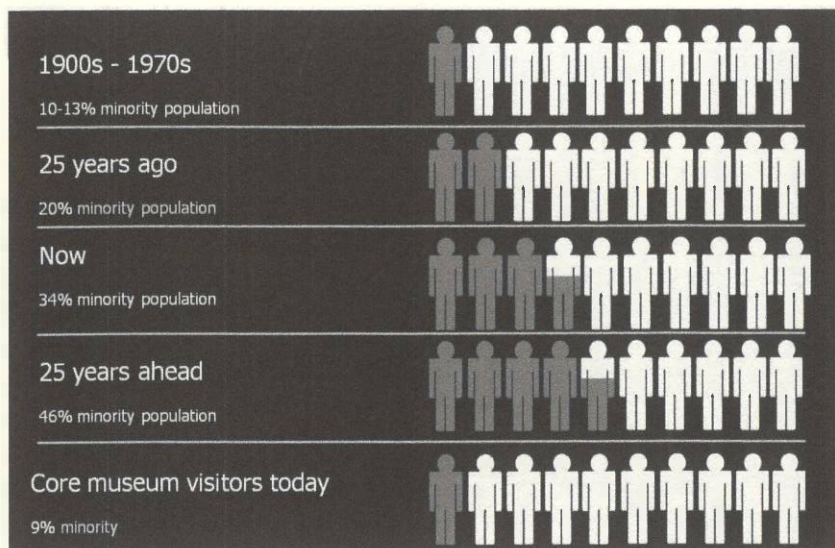
1900s - 1970s	
10-13% minority population	
25 years ago	
20% minority population	
Now	
34% minority population	
25 years ahead	
46% minority population	
Core museum visitors today	
9% minority	

Figure 1.1.   Museum Figures.
US Census Bureau, Reach Advisors.

American museums are exclusive institutions. Studies dating back to the 1980s have linked low museum attendance by minority populations to "subtle forms of exclusion" (Dimaggio and Ostrower 1990, 753–78). This exclusivity in other American organizations—schools, for example—would be termed discrimination. This problem is rampant and denounced by many, including former First Lady Michelle Obama. During her remarks at the opening of the Whitney Museum on April 30, 2015, Mrs. Obama spoke of her disconnect from museums due to the long-standing marginalization of African Americans: "You see, there are so many kids in this country who look at places like museums and concert halls and other cultural centers, and they think to themselves, well, that's not a place for me, for someone who looks like me, for someone who comes from my neighborhood" (Obama 2015). When the wife of your nation's leader cannot see herself in an American museum, we must acknowledge both as museum professionals and as Americans that there are significant levels of exclusion (discrimination) occurring within our museums.

Figure 1.2. Michelle Obama at the Opening of the Whitney Museum.
Filip Wolack, courtesy of the Whitney Museum.

American Museums Are Hesitant to Form Partnerships with Social Organizations and Agencies

American museums provide significant value to their communities (Scott 2013). This value is often found to benefit the local economy and strengthen public education. Museums could partner more often with social agencies to provide physical and mental health benefits; yet they do not. Why? The main anecdote provided by museums concerning their hesitancy to form partnerships with other agencies is "mission purity" (Jacobsen 2014, 1–18). American museums are concerned that their main mission, a statement unique to their institution, will be neglected should resources be allocated to another endeavor. The other agencies are viewed as competitive, no matter how complementary, to the mission statement of those museums.

American Museums Refuse
to Become the Conduit or Platform
for Broad Social Change

The vast majority of American museum professionals do not envision their museum as a space to instigate broad social change. For many museum professionals, the idea of taking a stand for or against anything in a museum is repugnant. Why? Because the myth of museum neutrality still exists. American museum professionals and the general public revere museums as neutral zones—places where politics are off limits (Murawski 2017c). Perhaps most American museum professionals recognize this fallacy; yet they hold on to the superstition that museums are spaces hidden from the harsh reality of life. Only a small minority of museum professionals dares to speak loudly about this myth, a reflection, perhaps, of the American museum as an institution.

Why Does Our Nation
Need Inclusive Museums?

It is an understatement to say that we live in divisive and turbulent times in America. The events of solely the past five years have revealed the deep racial divide still abiding in America. Public battles have been waged over the removal of Confederate statues in the Southeast, the 2017 Charlottesville protests being most prominent (Fortin 2017). Similar battles have been waged regarding the flying of the Confederate flag at government buildings and the killing of black men by police, such as in Ferguson (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, 4–17; Phillip 2015). These arguments have boiled over to produce riots and violence in America (Buchanan 2014). Nationalist fervor has resulted in harsh feelings toward immigrants and foreigners. All of these recent events can be tackled by museums through inclusive practices. Our museums are called to be culturally responsive. What's

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more, we need to be more than responsive; we need to initiate cultural inclusion. The American museum community has been criticized for not responding quickly (if at all) to these devastating events (Paquet Kinsley, Wittman, and Moore 2014). I argue that through inclusion we have the ability to preemptively initiate inclusion in our society. Instead of taking a reactive stance to the events as they unfold, museums have the ability to impact society in advance. Our museums have a responsibility to live up to "the growing belief among practitioners, policymakers, and the public alike in the power of museums to inspire hope and healing, improve lives, and better the world" (Silverman 2010). We must accept that responsibility and commit to becoming agents of social change (Sandell 1998, 401–18).

Inclusion Is More Than a Buzzword

American museums have the opportunity to use inclusion if they recognize it as more than a mere buzzword. As practitioners, we love buzzwords and phrases, but such language can obscure the true power of the idea behind the word. We must realize that inclusion is powerful, not because the word is popular in American museum professional discourse, but because it represents struggle, the battle to end exclusion and discrimination. What evidence exists to promote inclusion as the preferred theory of museum practice? In this book I will examine the growing number of cases, studies, and reports of inclusive practices globally. The social role of the museum is "more than simply a passing phase," and American museum practitioners must adapt inclusive practices now (Weil 2002).

We Have Tried Other Methods and Failed

We have tried other methods of tackling exclusion and marginalization in our museums, and they simply have not worked. As I will discuss in chapter 3, inclusion goes beyond our discussions

of traditional notions such as diversity and multiculturalism. These methods fail our museums in several ways, and in turn our museums do not live up to their potential in society. In chapter 3 I will discuss in detail the advantages inclusion theory has over traditional frameworks such as diversity and multiculturalism. Implemented correctly, inclusion can effect change where diversity and multiculturalism fail.

We Have a Unique Opportunity

American museum professionals have the unique opportunity to implement, evaluate, and articulate inclusive practices for our museums and in doing so expect real social change. Museums exist to be in "the service of society and its development," and the professionals who work within those museums are charged with the mission to serve society (International Council of Museums 2007). Inclusive practice assists both museum professionals in their mission to serve society and museums in their mission to create real social change.

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