

Adult Museum Programs



DESIGNING MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES



Unnie Sachatello-Sawyer
Robert A. Fellenz
Hanly Burton
Laura Gittings-Carlson
Janet Lewis-Mahony
Walter Woolbaugh



FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY



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AM 11
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2012/6/10

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Designing Meaningful Experiences

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Bib. 600001407

Item 100002202

Barcode 000010006476

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..... 2012

Date 6/10/12



ALTAMIRA
PRESS

A Division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
Walnut Creek • Lanham • New York • Oxford

ALTAMIRA PRESS

A division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
1630 North Main Street, #367
Walnut Creek, CA 94596
www.altamirapress.com

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200
Lanham, MD 20706

PO Box 317
Oxford
OX2 9RU, UK

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Adult museum programs : designing meaningful experiences / Bonnie Sachatello-Sawyer ... [et al.]

p. cm. -- (American Association for State and Local History book series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7591-0096-9 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-7591-0097-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Museums—Study and teaching—United States. 2. Museum techniques—Study and teaching—United States. 3. Adult education—United States—Curricula. 4. Non-formal education—United States—Curricula. I. Sachatello-Sawyer, Bonnie, 1964- II. Series.

AM11 .A38 2002
069'.071'073—dc21

2002001984

Printed in the United States of America

©TM The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Dedicated to Jean Thorson,
an extraordinary teacher who inspired this book

When I do educational work with a group of people, I try to see with one eye where those people are as they perceive themselves to be. I do this by body language, by imagination, by talking to them, by visiting them, by learning what they enjoy and what troubles them. . . . You have to start where people are, because their growth is going to be from there.

Now my other eye is not such a problem, because I already have in mind a philosophy of where I'd like to see people moving. It's not a clear blueprint for the future but movement toward goals they don't conceive of at that time.

—Myles Horton

CONTENTS



Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	xvii
CHAPTER 1 Adult Learners: Unique Audience, Unique Opportunity	I
CHAPTER 2 Soul-Searches to Socials: Types of Museum Programs for Adult Learners	21
CHAPTER 3 Program Planners	71
CHAPTER 4 The Instructors	91
CHAPTER 5 Program Participants Speak Out	115
CHAPTER 6 Designing Excellent Learning Experiences	137
Appendixes	171
Bibliography	197
Index	203
About the Authors	209

PREFACE



For more than a decade, I had the pleasure of working with adults who participated in the Museum of the Rockies' Paleo Field Program near Choteau, Montana. These people came to "dig dinos" for a week, arriving eager and excited, wearing new Indiana Jones-style field hats and hiking boots. The chance to dig was something they had dreamed of for a long time. Most had a passionate interest in geology or dinosaurs as children and were rekindling that interest as adults.

The Paleo Field Program was located in a spectacular and remote part of Montana. Against a backdrop of snow-capped mountains, the group settled into tipis, took their first steps into the badlands, and started to adjust to living and working outdoors. The first few days were often disorienting and physically challenging. A dry, hot landscape, blowing dust, temperamental sun showers, and personality differences posed challenges. By the third day, the atmosphere was noticeably different. Without television or other distractions, camp conversation grew rich and dynamic, as individual skills and past experiences became important. At times, everyone became a teacher and a student.

As rock and fossil discoveries were shared, so too were new perspectives. "Now I understand how rocks mark time," one participant reflected. "I also have more humility in recognizing how short a time any one person inhabits the planet. . . . This has been an awakening experience." Comments like this were the beginning of my realization that participants were learning about more than just fossils.

My interest in studying adult learning experiences began somewhere in the course of my work with the Paleo Field Program. In 1996, Dr. Robert Fellenz and I received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Field-Initiated Studies Program to explore the nature of museum programs for adults and identify what makes such programs not only successful, but transformative. With help from the American Association of Museums (AAM), the Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC) staff, and Museum of the Rockies director Arthur H. Wolf, we identified contacts at museums that offered a wide range of adult programs. Our

research team expanded to include Hanly Burton and Laura Gittings-Carlson and graduate students Janet Lewis-Mahony and Walt Woolbaugh, each of whom was a valuable and equal contributor to the project.

Dr. Robert "Bob" Fellenz became the heart and soul of this research effort. He developed our protocols, conducted research, and trained the rest of the team to do the same. His experience as professor of adult education at Texas A. & M. and Montana State University and his special interest in adult learning enabled him to provide excellent guidance in all aspects of this project. Hanly Burton collected and analyzed the learning activities of program participants. Hanly's academic background in natural resource management and interpretation and his prior experience as education coordinator at Cave of the Mounds contributed to his many intelligent approaches to participant interviews and data analysis. Laura Gittings-Carlson had prior research experience in anthropology and had worked at the Museum for over five years in a variety of capacities, before joining the research team. Laura led the effort to interview program managers and did exceptional work as an interviewer and analyst. Janet Lewis-Mahony brought more than fifteen years of informal education and research experience with the National Park Service to the team. She worked diligently on all aspects of this project and completed a master's degree in adult and community education in the process. Walt Woolbaugh brought a wealth of formal teaching and research experience to the team as a junior high science teacher and an adjunct professor in science methods, assessment, and action research at Montana State University. He led the effort to interview contract instructors at museums and did an outstanding job. Everyone participated equally in the final research analysis and subsequent production of this book.

The project also greatly benefited from an advisory panel made up of adult-learning researchers, education department faculty, museum educators, and an independent evaluator. Advisers Becky Carroll, Gary Conti, Judy Diamond, Priscilla Lund, Sharon Horrigan, and Annie Storr reviewed the research plan, improved the research protocols, and kept us on track. Their advice and insight were crucial to our success.

Our study quantified a very exciting truth: museum programs can change people's lives. Effecting a positive change in an adult's life is a measurable goal that program planners can and do reach. It is our sincere belief that the challenge for museums in the twenty-first century is to create memorable experiences that inform, empower, and perhaps ultimately transform the lives of participants. We hope the insights offered by the program participants, instructors, and planners in this book will encourage professionals in all informal learning settings to reflect upon the value of museum experiences. Excellent adult learning programs benefit participants, museums, and society in the fullest sense.

Bonnie Sachatello-Sawyer

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



This study was made possible with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Field-Initiated Studies Program. We would like to especially thank program officer Delores Monroe for her excellent oversight and constant encouragement throughout this project.

Foremost, we would like to thank the hundreds of program participants, instructors, and museum professionals who allowed us to interview them. Also, special thanks to Bill Allen, Stephen Brand, Becky Carroll, Gail Cary, David Chittenden, Gary Conti, Judy Diamond, Lynn Dierking, Elizabeth Eder, John Falk, Karen Giles, Sharon Horrigan, Barbara Humes, Mary Hyman, Maury Irvine, Gretchen Jennings, Randi Korn, Ann Lockie, Priscilla Lund, Shelley McKamey, Francie McLean, Judy Meyer, Sally Middlebrooks, Mary Ellen Munley, Charles Sachatello, Dee Seitel, Bruce Selyem, Michael Spock, David Swingle, Annie Storr, Jean Thorson, Judy Weaver, Arthur H. Wolf, and Valerie Wheat for contributing their time and expertise.

We would like to thank Carol Inman, Susan Ewing, Samuel Taylor, Mitch Allen, Susan Walters, Pam Winding, the editors, and the anonymous reviewers at AltaMira Press for their critical reading of this manuscript and suggestions for improvement.

This project would not have been possible without the ongoing encouragement and expertise of the Museum of the Rockies' staff. We owe them a debt of gratitude for their continued support.

We would like to thank all of the museums in which we were allowed to conduct interviews and observe programs. They include: Albany Institute of History & Art, Amarillo Museum of Art, American Museum of Natural History, American Museum-Hayden Planetarium, Anchorage Museum of History and Art, the Andy Warhol Museum, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the Avery Brundage Collection, Austin Nature & Science Center, the Baltimore Museum of Art, Bayly Art Museum, Birch Aquarium at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, Birmingham Botanical Gardens, Bishop Museum, Bradbury Science Museum, Brookhaven National Laboratory Science Museum, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Buffalo Museum of Sci-

ence, Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, Butterfly Pavilion & Insect Center, California Academy of Sciences, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Carnegie Museum of Art, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Chicago Botanic Garden, Chula Vista Nature Center, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Dallas Museum of Art, Decatur House Museum, Denver Art Museum, Desert Botanical Garden, Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, the Exploratorium, Fairfield Historical Society, Field Museum of Natural History, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, M. H. De Young Memorial Museum, Florida Museum of Natural History, Florida Power and Light's Energy Encounter Museum, General Crook House Museum and Library/Archives Center, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Hagley Museum and Library, Hansen Planetarium, the Health Museum of Cleveland, the Henry Francis Du Pont Winterthur Museum, Inc., the High Desert Museum, Historical Museum at Fort Missoula, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Houston Museum of Natural Science, Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, Huntsville Museum of Art, Idaho Museum of Natural History, Indiana State Museum, Institute for Learning Innovation, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Jane Goodall Institute, Joslyn Art Museum, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Kansas University Natural History Museum and Biodiversity Research Center, Kimbell Art Museum, Lied Discovery Children's Museum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Lyceum: Alexandria's History Museum, Mattress Factory, Ltd., the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Miami Museum of Science, Mingei International-Museum of Folk Art, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Missouri Botanical Garden, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Montana Historical Society, Monterey Bay Aquarium, Morton Museum of Cooke County, Museum of Art and History at the McPherson Center, Museum of Church History and Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of Fine Arts of St. Petersburg, Florida, Museum of Indian Arts & Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology, Museum of International Folk Art, Museum of New Mexico, Museum of Science, Museum of Science and Industry, Museum of Scientific Discovery, Museum of the City of New York, Museum of the Rockies, Mystic Aquarium and the Institute for Exploration, National Gallery of Art, National Museum of Wildlife Art, National Steinbeck Center, National Tropical Botanical Garden, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Nevada State Museum and Historical Society, New Jersey Historical Society, Newseum, Northeastern Nevada Museum, Norton Simon Museum, Oakland Museum of California, Orlando Museum of Art, Pacific Science Center, Palm Springs Desert Museum, Inc., the Philadelphia Art Alliance, the Philbrook Museum of Art, Red Butte Garden, Reynolda House (Museum of American Art), Rochester Museum & Science Center, Rockwell Museum, Salt Lake Art Center, San Bernardino County Museum, San Diego Historical Society, San Diego Museum of Man, San Diego Natural History Museum, San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum, Sawtooth Science Center, the Science Museum of Minnesota, Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Sher-

man Library and Gardens, Skirball Cultural Center, South Florida Science Museum, the Speed Art Museum, St. Louis Science Center, Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, Tucson Botanical Gardens, Tulsa Museum of Art, University of Colorado Museum, University of Oregon Museum of Art, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Wyoming Art Museum, Utah State Historical Society, Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Utah Museum of Natural History, Utah State Historical Society, Vancouver Art Gallery, Ventura County Museum of History & Art, Virginia Historical Society, Washington State Historical Society, Wheeler Historic Farm, Worcester Art Museum, Wyoming Territorial Prison and Old West Park, Yellowstone Art Museum.

A special thanks to the following individuals who supplied information for this book: Mark Morey, curator of education, Amarillo Museum of Art; Nathaniel Johnson, senior manager, Adult Education and Technical Services, American Museum of Natural History; Karen Cane, astronomy educator, American Museum—Hayden Planetarium; Sharon Abbot, curator of education, Anchorage Museum of History & Art; Jessica Arcand, curator of education, Andy Warhol Museum; Debra Clearwater, adult programs coordinator, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the Avery Brundage Collection; Janice Sturrock, education director, Austin Nature & Science Center; Bridget Globenski, programs director, Baltimore Museum of Art; Audrey Ann Wilson, director of education, Birmingham Botanical Gardens; Guy Kaulukukui, chairman of the Education Department, Bishop Museum; Janet Temple, director, Brookhaven National Laboratory Science Museum; Sharon Schroeder, director of education, Buffalo Bill Historical Center; Pat Schiavone, public programs manager, Buffalo Museum of Science; Judy Thaler, director of education, Buffalo Museum of Science; Diane Quinn, manager, educational programs, Burke Museum of Natural History & Culture; Annette Humphrey, adult/senior program coordinator, Butterfly Pavilion and Insect Center; Beth Mason, manager of adult programs, California Academy of Sciences; Marilyn Russell, curator of education and chair of Division of Education, Carnegie Museum of Art; Patty Jaconetta, program specialist for Adult Tours and Research, Carnegie Museum of Art; Charlene Shang Miller, education program specialist, adult programs, Carnegie Museum of Art; Cathy Andreychek, program specialist, Carnegie Museum of Natural History; Christine Mills, docent coordinator, Carnegie Museum of Natural History; Holly Estal, manager of continuing education, Chicago Botanic Garden; Barbara Moore, assistant director, Chula Vista Nature Center; Joellen DeOreo, associate director, Exhibitions & Adult Programs, Cleveland Museum of Art; Bob Segedi, education director, Cleveland Museum of Natural History; Scott Winterrowd, coordinator, Outreach Programs & Academic Courses, Dallas Museum of Art; Vas Prabhu, educational director, M. H. De Young Memorial Museum; Molly Keith Neal, director of collections and programs, Decatur House Museum; Joanne Mendes, coordinator of adult programs, Denver Art Museum; Pat Smith, assistant director of educational services,

Desert Botanical Garden; Paul Doherty, director of education, Exploratorium; Heather Alexander, curator of education, Fairfield Historical Society; Steve Bell, director of public programs, Field Museum of Natural History; Kristen Webber, manager of adult programs, Field Museum of Natural History; Betty Dunckel Camp, head of education, Florida Museum of Natural History; Pat Pixley, curator, General Crook House Museum and Library/Archives Center; Jackie M., education director, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum; Carol Hagglund, manager of interpretation and education, Hagley Museum and Library; Richard Cox, administrative manager, Hansen Planetarium; Bettie Carter, manager for adult programs, Health Museum of Cleveland; Rosemary T. Krill, curator of education, Henry Francis Du Pont Winterthur Museum, Inc.; Beth Twiss-Garritty, curator of education (teacher programs), Henry Francis Du Pont Winterthur Museum, Inc.; Holly Remer, director of education, the High Desert Museum; Darla Bruner, education curator, Historical Museum at Fort Missoula; Ann Fortescue, director of education, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania; David Temple, education director, Houston Museum of Natural Science; Sue Lafferty, director of education, Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens; Mickey Heydorff, volunteer coordinator, Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens; Deborah Taylor, director of education, Huntsville Museum of Art; Stefan Sommer, curator of entomology, ecology, and community outreach, Idaho Museum of Natural History; Cynthia Ewick, curator of education, manager of education services, Indiana State Museum; Karen Giles, manager, Adult and Community Audiences, the J. Paul Getty Museum; Nancy Rounds, acting curator of education, Joslyn Art Museum; Dena Podrebarac, assistant director for public affairs, Kansas University Natural History Museum and Biodiversity Research Center; Brad Kemp, public education programs specialist, Kansas University Natural History Museum and Biodiversity Research Center; Mary Barlow, education coordinator, Kimbell Art Museum; A. J. Rhodes, director of education, Lied Discovery Children's Museum; Anne Mumm, marketing and visitor services assistant/volunteer coordinator, Lied Discovery Children's Museum; Mary Martz, coordinator, Arts for All Program, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Ximena Minotta, senior education coordinator, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Margaret Pezulla-Graham, assistant museum educator (Evenings for Educators), Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Jenny Siegenthaler, associate museum educator (Teachers Academy), Los Angeles County Museum of Art; James C. Mackay III, director, the Lyceum: Alexandria's History Museum; Elvira Finnigan, education coordinator, Mattress Factory, Ltd.; Kent Lydecker, director of education, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Mathew James, public programs assistant for adult programs, Minneapolis Institute of Arts; Glenn Kobb, institutional coordinator for adult education, Missouri Botanical Garden; Terry Thornton, curator of education, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; Kristin Gallas, education officer, Montana Historical Society; Rita Bell, educator programs manager (Teacher Institute), Monterey Bay

Aquarium; Shana Powell, curator, Morton Museum of Cooke County; Celeste DeWald, programs education curator, Museum of Art & History at the McPherson Center; Jenny Lund, curator of education, Museum of Church History and Art; Lorri Berenberg, associate director for outreach, Division of Education and Public Programs, Museum of Fine Arts; Rebecca Russell, curator of education, Museum of Fine Arts of St. Petersburg, Florida; Fran Parson, docent organizer, Museum of Fine Arts of St. Petersburg, Florida; Carol Cooper, curator of education and programs, Museum of Indian Arts & Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology; Laura Temple-Sullivan, director of education, Museum of International Folk Art; Sue Sturtevant, chief of education, Museum of New Mexico; Brent Jackson, director of travel programs, Museum of Science—Boston; Paul Fontaine, director of public and school programs, Museum of Science—Boston; Kathy Benson, education director, Museum of the City of New York; Dee Seitel, volunteer coordinator, Museum of the Rockies; Kathy Lepore, director of education, Mystic Aquarium and the Institute for Exploration; Lynn Russell, head, adult programs, National Gallery of Art; Ann Henderson, head of teacher programs, National Gallery of Art; Julie A. Springer, coordinator of teacher programs, National Gallery of Art; Elaine Walsh-Partridge, adult education manager, National Museum of Wildlife Art; Celeste DeWald, curator of education and public programs, National Steinbeck Center (formerly of the Museum of Art & History at the McPherson Center); Anne O'Malley, senior interpreter/programs coordinator, National Tropical Botanical Garden; Isabel Rosenbaum, volunteer programs coordinator, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County; Barbara Slivac, curator of education, Nevada State Museum & Historical Society; Jan Petersen, program coordinator, Northeastern Nevada Museum; Nancy Gubin, director of educational programs, Norton Simon Museum; Barbara Henry, chief curator of education, Oakland Museum of California; Sidney Williams, director of education and programs, Palm Springs Desert Museum, Inc.; Emily Goodwin, program coordinator, Philadelphia Art Alliance; Dick Hildreth, director of education, Red Butte Garden and Arboretum; Adrienne Cachelin, manager of natural science education, Red Butte Garden and Arboretum; Nick Braggs, executive director, Reynolda House (Museum of American Art); Marjorie Northrup, assistant director for programs, Reynolda House (Museum of American Art); Kathleen Hutton, coordinator of education, Reynolda House (Museum of American Art); Ramona Englebreck, coordinator of adult programs, Rochester Museum & Science Center; Jenny Monroe, supervisor, public programs, Rockwell Museum; Rebecca Campbell, curator of education, Salt Lake Art Center; Jolene Redvale, education director, San Bernardino County Museum; Linda Canada, education coordinator, San Diego Historical Society; Angelica Docog, director of education, San Diego Museum of Man; Dee Norton, program coordinator, education, San Diego Natural History Museum; Pat Flanagan, director of education, San Diego Natural History Museum; Margaret Kadoyama, education coordinator, San Francisco Craft & Folk Art

Museum; Chris Gertschen, director and founder, Sawtooth Science Center; David Chittenden, vice president of education, Science Museum of Minnesota; Bill Allen, manager of adult programs and tours, Science Museum of Minnesota; Tessa Bridal, director of public programs, Science Museum of Minnesota; Jane Wangberg, director of volunteers, Science Museum of Minnesota; Ruth Ladwig, exhibit gallery supervisor, Science Museum of Minnesota; Caroline Robbins, director of education, Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art; Wade Roberts, garden director, Sherman Library & Gardens; Adele Lander-Burke, director of museum instruction and education, Skirball Cultural Center; Michele Turner, director of education, South Florida Science Museum; Dale Clark, director of education, Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer; Meg Quinn, education director, Tucson Botanical Gardens; Holly Coons, curator of education, Tulsa Museum of Art; Lauren Schwartz, director of public programs, University of Colorado Museum; Lisa Abia-Smith, director of educational outreach, University of Oregon Museum of Art; Caci Manning, public relations coordinator, University of Oregon Museum of Art; Deborah Carl, outreach coordinator, University of Oregon Museum of Art; Gillian Wakely, assistant director for education, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology; Scott Boberg, curator of education, University of Wyoming Art Museum; Bernadette Brown, curator of education, Utah Museum of Fine Arts; Claudia Oakes, assistant director for operations (Museum & Hansen Planetarium), Utah Museum of Natural History; Beth Steele, administrative manager of museum education, Utah Museum of Natural History; Cheryl Sneddon, museum education curator, Utah State Historical Society; Alexis O'Neil, education director, Ventura County Museum of History & Art; Bill Obrochta, education director, Virginia Historical Society; Pat Blankenship, director of museum services, Washington State Historical Society; Glenn Humphreys, curator director, Wheeler Historic Farm; Claire Loughheed, assistant director of education, Worcester Art Museum; Pam Malone, executive director, Wyoming Territorial Prison and Old West Park; Becky Davis, curator of education, Yellowstone Art Museum; Len Adams, Community Leadership Supervisor, Pacific Science Center.

INTRODUCTION



A coherent, diverse list of offerings helps us make more of the museum's resources available to the public. Exhibits alone can't touch the wealth of information and expertise housed here.

—Diane Quinn, manager of educational programs,
Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture

Museum programs attract hundreds of thousands of mature learners each year. They come to learn something new, to be entertained, and to socialize. Many are seeking experiences that can lead to personal growth and transformation. Museums have a tremendous potential to serve the education and personal growth needs of these adult learners. When administered well, adult museum programs can pay for themselves, build family and community involvement, encourage museum patronage, and promote lifelong learning, while providing role models for young people.

Adult Museum Programs: Designing Meaningful Experiences is based on the premise that excellent museum programs can change people's lives. Confirmation of this came from a three-year research study, conducted among adults in many types of museums across the United States, in which the attributes of excellence were framed. In these pages, you will find chapters that describe certain excellent programs, articulate the characteristics and categories of adult learners and instructors in museums, and make recommendations for creating programs to match mature learners' needs. Insights about excellence and adult programs are offered by adult-learning experts, museum education specialists, course instructors, and program participants. We want to share their "voices of experience" with readers interested in promoting adult learning through museum programs.

Funding for this study came from the U.S. Department of Education, Division of Post-Secondary Education, Field-Initiated Studies Research Program. This innovative move by the division demonstrated recognition of the impact that informal education has on our country's adult population. Museums, libraries, and the emerging

resources of the Internet together with the more traditional resources of newspapers, magazines, and television provide an important informal learning network for adults.

Prior Research on Adult Museum Programs

In the past three decades, significant professional studies have examined adults' motivations for participating in museum programs. Marilyn Hood identified six criteria that individuals used when judging leisure activities,¹ including:

- Being with people, or social interaction
- Doing something worthwhile
- Feeling comfortable and at ease in one's surroundings
- Having a challenge of new experiences
- Having an opportunity to learn
- Participating actively

Similar criteria have been identified by others investigating successful adult learning experiences.

Over the past two decades, research in museum education has increasingly focused on the needs of the learners. From this we have gained new insights on the learning styles and needs of children, family groups, and adult learners.² However, museum professionals continue to struggle with descriptions, measurements, dimensions, and values of learning in museums. Most agree that museums have the capacity to affect an individual's knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and concepts. Museums can even provoke life-changing experiences.³ The nature of museum learning is indeed broad, rich, and multifaceted.

Research findings reveal that museum learning includes behavioral traits (skill building and physical training); cognitive attributes (comprehending information and organizing it); affective attributes (encompassing self-confidence, attitudes, emotions, spirituality, and personal growth); and social attributes (interaction, interpersonal relationships, civic pride, and cultural and community values). Learning involves the negotiation of meaning as adults make sense of scholarly interpretation through the lens of their own experience.⁴ It involves valuing nature, humankind, exquisite objects, history, ideas, the unique, and the mundane. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Kim Hermanson maintain,

Learning involves an open process of interaction with the environment. This experiential process develops and expands the self, allowing one to discover aspects of one-

self that were previously unknown. Thus, the learning experience involves the whole person, not only the intellectual, but the sensory and emotional faculties as well.⁵

Several studies on family learning in museums have analyzed the role of parents in informal education settings. For example, Judy Diamond has described the powerful impact of shared museum experiences and the contributions of individual family members.⁶ John Falk and Lynn Dierking have described parent and child museum recollections.⁷ In studying adult and child interactions, Minda Borun and her colleagues developed a useful protocol to describe different levels of family learning in exhibits.⁸

Until recently, little research has focused on adult museum programs. In 1975, Mary Hyman of the Maryland Academy of Sciences studied the status of adult programs in science centers. In a survey of science museum professionals, she found that 80 percent of educational programming was aimed at children, while just 20 percent was directed toward adults—a clear indication that science centers have “justifiably been considered ‘children’s museums’ by the general public.”⁹ At most, science centers were considered “family-oriented.”¹⁰

In 1995, Bonnie Sachatello-Sawyer initiated another survey to assess the types of adult museum programs taking place, to delineate the predominant teaching styles used by museum educators with adults, and to determine how adult education methodology is used in program design and planning.¹¹ This research project surveyed 110 museum educators from a wide variety of museums that were members of either the American Association of Museums or the Association of Science-Technology Centers. Data from this study illuminated the status of adult museum programs in the United States and how well they utilized adult education methodology in learning situations.

Of the 110 museum educators who completed the 1995 survey, 94 percent noted that they offered some type of adult museum program. But when asked what percentages of their total museum education programs were designed for adults, families, and children, they reported on average that only 27 percent of their programs were designed for adults, while 24 percent were designed for families and 49 percent were designed for children. “Child-oriented museums” made up 77 percent of all museums surveyed. “Adult-oriented museums” made up only 16 percent of the population. These museums created fewer children’s programs and offered more programs for adults, including lectures, tours, gallery demonstrations, volunteer-training courses, and discussion groups. Different types of museums (e.g., art museums, history museums, science centers) were found in both groups.

Real Stories, Real People: Our Research Design

For our national study of adult museum programs, we chose a qualitative approach to the research and followed the general principles of naturalistic inquiry advocated

by Edward Guba,¹² Robert Bogdan and Sara Biklen,¹³ and Sharon Merriam.¹⁴ Naturalistic inquiry uncovers important, idiosyncratic stories told by real people about real events, in real and natural ways.¹⁵ From the very beginning of this project, we wanted the "important stories told by real people" to be heard. A complete set of all of the interview protocols that we developed can be found on our Web site: www.realexperiencesinc.com.

As adult educators working with adult learners, we were also guided by Merriam's six principles of qualitative case-study design. Such research (1) is concerned more with process than product; (2) is grounded in the search for meaning, or how people make sense of themselves and the world; (3) makes the researcher, rather than an inventory or questionnaire, the primary instrument in collecting and analyzing data; (4) involves field work in a natural setting; (5) is descriptive; and (6) builds concepts from details inductively. These principles also fit well with the guidelines for naturalistic research published by the U.S. Department of Education.

Between 1996 and 1999, our research team scattered across the country to examine a variety of successful adult museum programs. We were particularly interested in identifying and measuring the personal, transformative effect programs had on adults. In all, we interviewed 508 museum program participants, 75 instructors, and 143 museum program planners in all types and sizes of museums, including art institutes, natural and cultural history museums, science centers, historical homes, and botanic gardens. Our team studied a wide array of programs in various formats, including credit and noncredit classes, lectures, symposia, field trips, guided tours, gallery demonstrations, discussion groups, volunteer-training courses, teacher workshops, film series, and dramatic presentations. Adults were defined broadly to include mature individuals who freely chose to participate in leisure learning activities.

Three primary questions drove our study:

1. From participants' perspectives, what constitutes an excellent museum program for adults?
2. What teaching strategies are employed in successful and innovative museum programs?
3. Does the informal learning environment of a museum add anything unique to the adult learning experience?

Preparation for addressing these questions included an extensive review of the literature in the fields of adult and museum education. Then interview schedules were created, tested, and revised. Systems for data storage and manipulation were selected. Only then could the exciting task of visiting museums, observing programs, and interviewing museum educators begin. In addition, our research team informally discussed many issues with museum educators at varied conferences and during visits.