

TIP SHEET

Mission Based Programming (2015)



Mission Based Programming

Museums are educational institutions that exist to serve their identified communities.¹ They offer an informal learning environment in which visitors of all ages can explore representations of themselves, the society in which they live, and other societies around the world. Museums provide opportunities for voluntary, self-directed learning without the constraints of a classroom environment.

In a world where most people spend about six hours per day in front of a screen, museums offer an opportunity for the public to participate in face-to-face interactions in a three-dimensional space.² The centrality of objects in the museum further enhances the physical experience by allowing visitors to feel as if they are in the presence of the past. Museums offer opportunities for individuals to learn at their own pace and to immerse themselves. They therefore engage audiences whose needs may not be met by formal learning institutions.

Public programming invites visitors to engage with the museum and its collections through a facilitated learning experience. However, the starting place for any program must be the museum's mission statement.³

What is Mission-based Programming?

A mission statement is essential for all museums as it steers the institution's

goals, objectives, and policies.⁴ An effective mission statement defines the purpose of a museum by explaining the site's distinctiveness, clarifying its main aims, and identifying the value it offers to society.⁵ Mission-based programming is a vital way for a museum to achieve its goals and to demonstrate the value it offers to the public as an informal learning institution.

A successful mission-based program:

- Is designed to appeal to the target audience(s) identified in the mission statement.
- Includes activities that feature the collections, skills, and knowledge of the museum.
- Helps the public understand the purpose of the museum.
- Achieves institutional goals.⁶

The Diefenbunker: Canada's Cold War Museum developed an excellent mission-based program for grade seven and grade eight students. The museum's mission is: "To increase throughout Canada and the world, interest in and a critical understanding of the Cold War, by preserving the Diefenbunker as a national historic site, and operating a Cold War Museum."⁷

The program is a three-day series of conflict resolution workshops that help youth learn vocabulary and skills to successfully resolve conflicts. For one of the three days, the students visit the museum and take on different military and government roles while they respond to an international conflict.⁸ The chosen themes and situations echo situations from the Cold War.

This program fulfils the Diefenbunker's mission statement by increasing awareness of the Cold War in the identified audience of grade seven and grade eight students in Canada.

This program also promotes a critical understanding of the Cold War by asking participants to engage in role-play and conversations to better comprehend historic situations and relate them to modern events. By bringing the activities into the museum on the third day, the Diefenbunker is also fulfilling its goal of operating a Cold War museum.

Programs that are not mission-based may be incompatible with the purpose of the museum and aren't always well connected with its collection and focus. When activities do not fulfil the site's mission, the museum is misdirecting its funds, energies, and resources toward programming which is contrary to its values and purpose. This affects the credibility of the museum in its community and with its staff and volunteers. The development of programs which are not mission-based can also impact the financial support a museum receives from businesses and the government.

Businesses that fund heritage programming typically ask how museum activities contribute to the local community. The answer can be found in the value that a museum offers through its mission-based programming. Government funding applications often request information on how programs will fulfil the goals set out by the museum's mission. A museum is more likely to receive funding when it can explain how its activities achieve its institutional goals.

When programming is irrelevant to the site's mission statement, the chances of receiving funding are greatly reduced. The museum cannot explain how its goals are achieved through its programs nor can it explain how

its activities contribute to the local community. Staff and volunteers will notice when programs do not relate to the institutional mission statement as they will have difficulty relating activities to the museum's collections either directly or indirectly. They may notice that participants are unengaged, dissatisfied, and perhaps ask for other activities. All visitors have pre-conceived notions of what they will experience in a museum. Their ideas will be based on previous visits to other museums and potentially any exposure to your museum's website or program advertising.

If visitors experience programming that is unrelated to the museum's mission statement, they may be disappointed, bored, and occasionally uncomfortable.

Establishing a Programming Policy

While the mission statement steers a museum's efforts, it is too general to detail specific procedures. Therefore, the museum creates policies which guide particular activities. A programming policy, sometimes called an education policy, explains why museum programs are created and how these activities will fulfil the museum's mission statement.⁹

A good policy is well researched, establishes priorities, and provides a common sense of direction for everyone involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating programs.¹⁰ It considers the limitations of the museum and its resources as well as the strengths of its collections and staff. The policy will establish a system of evaluation that incorporates feedback from staff, volunteers, and participants into the development of programming initiatives.

A written programming policy ensures that all museum activities meet the site's objectives and that the museum has a clear vision for how it will support its community. Museum programs that follow the institution's policy will establish and grow positive relationships with the local community.¹¹

Policy Considerations

To create effective policies, the following points are important to consider:

- **What space, money, collections, and time are available?**¹² This will create boundaries to the types of activities that can be offered and will inform an annual program plan.
- **What are the skills of the existing staff and volunteers?**¹³ These individuals will design and lead programs and their expertise will shape the type of opportunities that can be offered.
- **What are the needs, objectives, and expectations of the target audience?** The best way to ensure that programs meet the specific needs of an audience is to work directly with the group during the planning process.
- **What programs do competing sites offer?**¹⁴ To attract participants, create unique experiences that only your museum, with its special collection and expertise, can offer to the public.
- **How will programming affect collections management practices?** For example, will the museum establish an interpretation collection of duplicate artifacts or replicas for participants to touch? Will artifacts be handled and used only by staff during programming?

These factors inform the ability of a museum to create programs and determine the types of activities that are realistic and achievable.

Overcoming Obstacles

When designing a policy, it is important to create guidelines that will assist staff and volunteers in overcoming potential obstacles. Many museums face difficulties such as low staff numbers, inexperience with marketing, uncertainty about emerging technologies, and concerns about meeting the needs of diverse audiences.

When looking for solutions, it can be beneficial to connect with local organizations or invite experts into the museum to provide advice.

By reaching out to community groups or local businesses with shared interests, museums can establish partnerships that increase access to resources and manpower as well as expand the museum's reach. Partnerships establish important community connections and grow awareness of the museum.

Museums can also develop internships or volunteer experiences for local high school, college, or university students. These youth are eager to gain new skills and will bring a wealth of knowledge related to new technologies and innovations. When struggling with marketing initiatives, young people can be invited to work on social media outreach. Museums can also create competitions for local marketing classes to design program posters and campaigns.

A programming policy should include guidelines and practices for establishing connections with other groups to overcome common obstacles. This will ease the development and implementation of programming.

Mission-based programming is a vital part of achieving institutional aims outlined in a museum's mission statement. To steer the development of these activities, a museum must create a written programming policy that provides guidance to staff and volunteers on how to achieve programming goals. Successful mission-based programming provides informal learning opportunities for visitors to engage with a museum's collections and knowledge.

References

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¹⁰ Wilkinson, Sue., "Developing and Revising an Education Policy", in *Museum and Gallery Education: A Manual of Good Practice* (California: AltaMira Press, 2014), p.12.

¹¹ Genoways, Hugh H. and Lynne M. Ireland, 276.

¹² Wilkinson, 13.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

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