Engaging Our Communities
“so here we...

sit in these places of knowledge and beauty.

We see barriers that keep people away

- tangible barriers,
  like transportation and the cost of admission

- and intangible barriers,
  like feeling unwelcome, intimidated or irrelevant.

We wrestle with how to take these barriers down,
how to get our ‘stuff’ out to communities
who can’t or don’t come in,
how to say to folks in words and actions that

you are wanted and valued here.”

– Ellen Wahl, 2003
One of the most pressing problems of the 21st century is the preservation of the world’s biological and cultural diversity. By virtue of our tremendous resources as part of a university with a strong commitment to environmental research, coupled with our own world-class collections, the Yale Peabody Museum is well positioned to play an important role in improving scientific literacy in this area. As modern threats to the diversity of life and culture continue to intensify, such literacy is becoming increasingly important.

However, one of the most fundamental challenges to achieving this goal is how to engage museum audiences that are truly representative of the community. Creating stronger partnerships is essential to attracting and involving communities that do not have a museum-going tradition, and to building ownership in an institution that may seem unwelcoming. This is true for many museums. A university museum must also address the perception that it is part of an elitist institution that has no interest in its surrounding neighborhoods. As a university institution at the heart of a diverse city, overcoming these challenges is of overriding importance to the Peabody Museum.

While we have been successful in our efforts to build such relationships, and have already worked with several community partners, we still have a long way to go. Engaging Our Communities set out to look at the obstacles to this process, examining what our audiences and potential audiences have to say about us, and how we can better meet their needs. Our goals are to transform community representatives into partners in the life of the Museum, and to position the Museum’s programs to meet the most crucial local needs, with science education foremost among them.

The Museum has been very fortunate to have been able to work with the renowned evaluation firm Randi Korn & Associates. This report, largely based on their work, focuses on the results and conclusions of most interest to other cultural institutions, particularly those in a university setting. I hope that it will be useful to other institutions facing the challenges that confront the Peabody.

This project would not have been possible without the assistance of the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, and I am extremely grateful for their support. By enabling us to converse widely with our audience and begin building deeper relationships, the Engaging Our Communities project will help us more clearly identify the needs of our community and create new partnerships as we plan for the future.

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One of the most challenging problems for museums as we enter the 21st century is how to attract a more diverse audience that is more truly representative of our communities. All people are potential museum visitors, but the probability of visiting a museum either on a school fieldtrip or as a leisure-time activity varies greatly among different groups. Significant variables that account for under-utilization of museums by certain segments of the population include socio-economic factors (e.g., education, income), institutional factors (e.g., real or perceived institutional bias); and cultural factors (Falk 1993; Hood 1993; Smithsonian Institution 2001). The effect of these factors varies for different institutions and different communities, but all studies have shown that the single most powerful predictor of museum-going behavior is education (Pommerehne and Frey 1980; Hood 1994).

Many museums have attempted to diversify their general audiences. Common techniques include: adapting existing offerings, such as exhibition and public programs; modifying the setting in which audiences experience programs; and promoting activities more effectively to underrepresented communities (Smithsonian Institution 2001). While these activities often have a temporary impact and the museum sees a shift in its audience composition, the new visitors rarely become permanent members of general museum audiences (Smithsonian Institution 2002). Without follow-through the museum loses its newly acquired audience. As Eric Jolly (2002) comments, “sustainable diversity entails mutuality between the science center’s decision makers and community leaders; ongoing relations with current and potential audience members…. Sustainable diversity is not: relying solely on outreach work with underserved audiences; offering a heritage month event once a year….” To build an ongoing relationship with nontraditional audiences, a museum needs to permanently modify its offerings to meet the needs of these groups and create a feeling of membership (Smithsonian Institution 2002).

Research has shown that there are several significant factors that encourage nontraditional audiences to use museums. Perhaps the most important is that people want to feel welcomed (Falk 1993; Randi Korn & Associates 1997; Lessane 2003). Communities also need to feel that they have a real relationship to the institution and that the programs are relevant to them (Hood 1994; Smithsonian Institution 2002). Communication is particularly important: grassroots marketing and visibility in the neighborhoods encourages people to think the museum really cares about whether they come (Wallace Foundation 1998).

Changing people’s perception of museums and building relationships to encourage broader involvement is a slow process and requires significant resources over time (Wagner and others 2000; Jolly 2002). An example is the
PISEC project in Philadelphia which has spent the last 12 years developing relationships with community organizations (Wagner and others 2000). The first step in building these relationships is to discover what the perceptions are for a particular institution and collaboratively look at ways to overcome the barriers that are preventing people from using the museum. The purpose of the Engaging Our Communities project was to take this step with one of the Peabody’s most important audiences – the New Haven community.
The mission of the Yale Peabody Museum is to increase understanding of the earth’s history through geological, biological and anthropological research, and to communicate the results of this research to the widest possible audience through publication, exhibition and educational programs. Such understanding and communication is increasingly important as modern threats to the diversity of life and culture continue to intensify.

The Yale Peabody Museum was founded in 1866 when George Peabody made a substantial donation for the construction of a museum to house Yale’s growing collections of natural and cultural history. That same year Peabody’s nephew Othniel Charles Marsh was appointed Professor of Paleontology at Yale, the first such professorship in the United States. With his inheritance from his uncle, Marsh amassed large collections of vertebrate and invertebrate fossils, and archaeological and ethnographical objects. Between 1870 and 1873 Marsh led expeditions into the wild American West in search of fossils, the most famous of which are dinosaurs he named, including Apatosaurus, Stegosaurus and Triceratops.

By the end of the 19th century, the Museum’s vision had broadened to include all aspects of both cultural and natural history. To fulfill the enlarged mission, specimens and artifacts were acquired that laid the foundation for the Museum’s large and early collections in North American and world ethnography, archaeology and biological sciences. The present Peabody building was opened in 1925 to house the rapidly growing collections, which now total over 11 million specimens and objects. One of the largest natural history collections in North America, they offer crucial keys to the understanding of the diversity and history of life and culture.

The Museum’s public programs principally serve local and regional communities. In addition to Marsh’s dinosaurs and mammals, the exhibitions include the famous The Age of Reptiles mural, one of the world’s largest and most well-known paintings of dinosaurs; spectacular dioramas of North American and Connecticut wildlife; and an active temporary exhibition program. The Museum welcomes approximately 160,000 visitors a year.
In 1925 the Museum formed a School Service program, reputedly the first in a university natural history museum. Today this office oversees visits by 35,000 school children each year, organizes teacher professional development opportunities, and staffs the Museum’s interactive, hands-on Discovery Room. In 1996 the Museum established an Events Office to organize special weekend and holiday programs, and now presents 10 major events annually as well as many lectures and children’s activities.
The “Peabody” is part of the landscape of New Haven. It has won the *New Haven Advocate* citywide readers poll for “Best Museum/Art Gallery” for nine years in a row. Every taxi driver knows where it is and every local school student has visited. Its reputation as a “dinosaur” museum draws an audience typical of many natural history museums; largely adults with young children and school groups Grades K - 4.

The Greater New Haven community is economically and racially diverse. The majority of New Haven residents (54%) are people of color and the poverty rate is three times the state average (*New Haven Census* 2000). In the last few years the Museum has developed specific programs to engage this audience. Our major event, inaugurated in 1997, is the annual *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Legacy of Environmental and Social Justice* family festival. Working together with a group of over 40 community, business, political and church leaders, the Museum has grown this event each year. This year several thousand visitors attended the festival, making it one of the largest such celebrations in Connecticut. The success of this event led to a collaboration with the nonprofit social services agency, Junta for Progressive Action Inc., which serves the city’s Latino population, on *Fiesta Latina!*; a similar multicultural celebration inaugurated in 2003.

Despite these and other efforts, the Museum has a long way to go in establishing long-term relationships with the city’s diverse community, particularly people of color. Key questions we had were:

- Who visits the Museum and does this audience differ for our cultural events?
- What is the perception nonmuseum goers have of the Museum and what are the barriers to their engagement with the Museum?
- How can we attract visitors from our local community and encourage repeat visits?
- How does being part of Yale University affect people’s relationship with the Museum?

To help answer these questions the Museum undertook this in-depth evaluation project focused on the New Haven community. It had two components. Randi Korn & Associates organized visitor questionnaires and focus groups in the community. The Project Coordinator and other staff conducted a series of interviews around New Haven during the summer and fall of 2004.
The specific objectives of the project’s audience research were to:

- Understand the demographic and psychographic characteristics of Museum visitors who attend special programs.
- Understand New Haven community residents’ perceptions and attitudes about the Museum.
- Determine New Haven community residents’ emotional and cognitive barriers to visiting the Museum regularly.
- Determine New Haven community residents’ leisure habits.
- Determine New Haven community residents’ ideal museum experiences.

Since we wanted to talk with visitors and nonvisitors, the research was organized into two parts. Using a standardized questionnaire specially trained staff and volunteers conducted face-to-face interviews with adult visitors at three winter 2004 programs. Two of those programs, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Legacy of Environmental and Social Justice and Fiesta Latina!, are targeted at specific audiences, while the third, Dinosaur Days, draws a general audience during the February school vacation. A total of 790 questionnaires were completed. To reach nonvisitors, focus groups were held at the Stetson Library, located near the Museum in an underserved New Haven neighborhood. A professional focus group facility recruited and selected New Haven residents who had never visited the Museum, or had not visited for a very long time. Four focus groups were scheduled, each with 10 participants, in April 2004.

In addition to formal evaluation, the Project Coordinator, sometimes accompanied by other staff, met with over 25 community leaders to discuss key questions about the Museum’s public activities and its future. While the conversations were informal and often covered a wide variety of topics, the primary questions focused on leisure habits, museum visiting behavior, perceptions of the Peabody, and suggestions for ways in which the Peabody could better partner with them. Participants included local clergy, community leaders, aldermen, and representatives of local nonprofit organizations.
Museum Visitors

Demographics:

- The Museum’s audience is largely local: 48% of our visitors come from within the Greater New Haven area and 42% from elsewhere in Connecticut.
- 75% of visitors came with children.
- 55% are college graduates.
- The Museum draws a culturally diverse audience, particularly for special events. Overall, 58% of visitors identified themselves as Caucasian/White, 19% as African American/Black, and 13% as Hispanic/Latino. There were significant differences among the events.
Visit characteristics:

- 65% of respondents were repeat visitors. The disparity between events was considerable – nearly 75% of visitors to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day festival were repeat visitors while only 56% of visitors to Dinosaur Days were repeat visitors.
- Visitors were given the opportunity to select a number of responses as to why they had come to the Museum that day. Overall, 49% came to see the Museum or a special exhibition and 46% came to attend the specific event that day. The charts below show some significant differences between event days: 71% of visitors on MLK Day had come to attend the event, while only 29% of visitors on Dinosaur Days had done so.

Generally, visitor perceptions of the Museum were very positive, with high ratings for being a “great place for families,” “welcoming” and having “a variety of interesting things to do.” Their overall experience was also positive, with a rating of 6.08 (on a 7-point scale). The significant variables associated with this score were age and visiting with children. Older people and people visiting with children gave the Museum a higher rating. Over 80% of respondents had interacted with the frontline staff, and found them very knowledgeable and helpful. Suggestions for improvements in the visitor experience focused on amenities, notably food services (the Museum does not provide any), parking and restrooms.
Museum Nonvisitors

The focus group study was conducted with New Haven residents who had never visited the Peabody, or who had not done so for a long time. Focus groups are a qualitative research tool that provide a rich source of in-depth information on the perceptions and experiences of the Museum, as well as eliciting suggestions for the future. In general the results were almost the exact opposite of the data seen in the visitor evaluation.

Background information:

- 68% of the focus group participants were African American/Black, and 24% were Hispanic/Latino.
- 78% had completed less than four years of college.
- 51% had children in their households.
- 42% never visited museums and another 40% visited museums infrequently.
- When participants did visit museums it was for a special event or occasion, or while on vacation.

Many of the participants who said that they do not usually visit museums preferred to spend their leisure time on entertainment-based activities. Several noted that time pressures cause them to carefully select family activities:

“I wanted to say [one thing] about another reason why you don’t see a lot of African-Americans or Hispanics at museums – it’s because a lot of parents don’t have the time. You don’t have that extra time to go to a museum. You barely have the time to probably cook dinner and get them ready for school the next day…*I remember doing a lot of sacrificing just so [my daughter] would be well rounded. But I had to know that my daughter was going to enjoy the place I was taking her and that she’d get a lot out of it. I had to know in advance that it was worth our time.*”

A few participants also saw the museum environment as intimidating or uncomfortable:

“Maybe you haven’t been to a museum before so you don’t [have] the right manners. Since there are no guided tours or anything you are left [asking]. ‘What do I do? I don’t know how to act, where do I go next? Is there anybody to show me?’ ”

When the discussion moved onto the Peabody Museum, it became apparent that nearly all the participants (85%) had visited the Museum, but most had not visited for a long time. This is typical of many New Haven residents as all New Haven school children visit the Museum at least once. Most offered negative opinions about the Museum, which corresponded to five common perceptions:

No connection with the community. Most participants expressed negative feelings about Yale University and the Peabody Museum and were skeptical about whether the Museum was really committed to being part of the community.

“Yale needs to get up and come out here. Start knocking on doors, meeting the neighbors and shaking hands…. They need to say ‘Hey let’s share this stuff – come to the Museum’."

“All my children are grown now, [but] when they were young we used to go to the Peabody Museum…. They went because… of something to do with school. The
teacher gave them a flyer that said there’s a new exhibit at the Peabody Museum. But after that was over there wasn’t a consistent… connection to the Museum…. The Museum is sitting there, but it’s set aside somewhat from the community.”

The content does not connect with the community.
Most participants perceived the Museum as displaying only dinosaur bones and taxidermied animals and said they were not interested in the Museum’s exhibits because they did not connect with them personally.

“As a Hispanic, my kids have grown up here, they were born here, and they’re very americanized, but I do want them to grow up knowing more about South America. They wouldn’t have to do away with what they have – the dinosaurs. They just need to include people – something alive. *Right. Like say this fossil came from South America, so you make some sort of correlation between the two places – between people and the bones.”

“Those big bones [have] absolutely nothing to do with me, because my people didn’t find it, you need to show me how that bone connects with me. Why is it here? Why is it important?”

Inadequate communication with the community.
Some participants had seen the Museum’s local advertising and knew of its cultural events. Many had not, and most thought the Museum needed to make much more of an ongoing effort to increase awareness of the Museum and to foster an ongoing relationship with the community.

“I feel like one of the reasons that African Americans don’t go to museums [is] because a lot of us haven’t been exposed to it…. If I hadn’t gone with my school, I don’t think I would have [gone to a museum]. My parents, I don’t think they’ve been to a museum either…. I think you need to advertise the Museum…. *Every couple of months send out a flyer… regardless of whether it’s African drumming or whatever. Start inviting them to all the events…. Then people will not feel [like] you just wanted them there for Martin Luther King Day and that’s it.”
The target audience is unclear. Participants were not sure whether it was a museum for children or not. While the Museum’s focus on dinosaurs suggested it was for families, it was felt the lack of interactive exhibits indicated it was not.

“I’m not sure the Peabody is really a place for kids… The kids nowadays … need hands-on interactive stuff. Things that kids can touch and feel and play games. They don’t want to go there and just look.”

The experiences offered are uninteresting and static. When asked about their past visits to the Museum many recalled having negative experiences. Most often this was the recollection of a childhood visit. They stated that the Museum had been “boring,” felt very inhospitable, and lacked interactive exhibits.

“I know they’re not going to get rid of that big fossil… but if they could liven it up with lights or something…. *They should put on fireworks in the parking lot near the Museum – do some fun stuff for the community.”

Community Interviews
Generally the conversations with community leaders mirrored those in the focus groups. Individuals associated with nonprofit organizations were more likely to have a positive perception of the Museum as a place where they and their family had an enjoyable experience. Usually those individuals were frequent museum goers.

“I remember seeing all the dinosaurs and how beautiful they were put together. They looked real and the awesomeness of their details stayed with me. I can still remember them to this day.”

However, many of the interviewees mentioned that they and their communities had felt unwelcome when visiting the Museum in the past, and that feeling welcome was a very important part of deciding how to spend their limited leisure time:

“Well first and foremost it has to be a place that I would feel comfortable taking even the youngest of my grandchildren.”

Most people knew the Museum as a “dinosaur” museum. However, as in the focus groups, several people felt that the Museum was not attractive to younger children because of the lack of interactive exhibits and technical nature of the exhibit interpretation.

“I mean I know it’s a Museum that children can’t touch… but when you are taking children that is not a good thing – they have to be welcomed. I know the most wonderful thing that they have added there is the Discovery Room, where they can actually go in and touch things.”

“You have to be very mature to understand the Peabody, you have to have background history to have any idea what the exhibits are about.”

Interestingly only one individual brought up the Museum’s focus on evolution, which had been considered by the Museum to be a possible obstacle for certain communities. Several mentioned that since children visited with their
schools many parents felt there was no need to take them to the Peabody again.

Interviewees emphasized that attracting the local community would require a sustained effort to build partnerships, and that while the MLK Day and Fiesta Latina! events were a good start, such events should not be limited to one day a year but become a regular part of the Museum’s calendar. They cautioned that it was important that the Museum consistently and continually welcomed the community. Many mentioned the importance of regular marketing within the neighborhoods. There were several discussions about admission prices being a deterrent, and interviewees felt that discount programs were important.

Encouragingly, most organizations were very positive about working with the Peabody. Suggestions for the future included having staff go out into the community to deliver programs and encourage people to visit; programs for seniors; summer programs for inner-city youth; after-school programs; more frequent cultural events; and diversity training for staff.
The Museum is serving its existing visitors well. People gave high ratings in nearly all questionnaire categories. The suggested areas of improvement were related to visitor amenities, which we recognize as a problem. The visitor demographics, particularly the diversity of the audience, were very encouraging. Eighteen years ago the Museum carried out a visitor survey that showed 94% of our visitors were Caucasian/White, 3% were African American/Black, and 2% were Hispanic/Latino. Four years ago 89% of our visitors were Caucasian/White. However information gathered during Dinosaur Days (the only event studied which was not specifically cultural) showed 67% of visitors were Caucasian/White, 16% were African American/Black, and 8% were Hispanic/Latino. This steady improvement is likely the result of many factors, but undoubtedly the increasingly active events program has played a part.

The results of this study are similar to those from other museums in urban settings (see Randi Korn & Associates 1997; Johnson & Green 1997). There is an obvious contrast between Peabody visitors and nonvisitors in terms of education, ethnicity and museum-going behavior. Also, focus group participants’ attitudes and perceptions were almost completely the opposite of those expressed in the visitor questionnaires. While the Museum’s cultural programs are diversifying our audience and providing a good experience for visitors, those who attend are often frequent museum goers. This suggests that the Museum will need to make significant changes if it hopes to attract and satisfy nonvisitors – changes in how the Museum communicates and partners with the community, and changes in how programs and services are delivered.

The differences between the focus groups and museum visitors seem to be primarily attributable to three reasons: museum visiting patterns, past experiences at the Peabody, and attitudes towards Yale itself.
• **Museum visiting patterns.** Questionnaire respondents tend to visit museums, which suggests they are comfortable in traditional museum environments. Focus group participants have much less experience visiting museums and as such have different expectations for their free time. The Museum needs to provide nontraditional interpretation that helps nonvisitors to see the significance and relevance of exhibits. For example, many participants emphasized the importance of entertainment, multi-sensory experiences (such as music and food), and social experiences. Such experiences are already a feature of some of the Museum’s special events.

• **Past Peabody Museum experiences.** Most focus group participants had not attended the Museum for a long time. In their recollections they mentioned feeling intimidated and having had negative experiences with frontline staff. These memories had colored their perception of the Museum for years. Research has shown that infrequent museum visitors often are unclear about the function of museum guards and find them off-putting (Johnson & Green 1997), thus underlining the importance of staff training in customer service and communication skills. Participants also said they had not enjoyed their childhood school visit, which emphasizes the importance of this opportunity to shape perceptions. While visiting museums on a school field-trip does not necessarily affect future museumgoing behavior (Falk 1993; Smithsonian Institution 2001), it obviously does have an effect on people’s opinions and attitudes.

• **Poor attitudes toward Yale University.** Participants voiced negative opinions about Yale University and its relationship with the surrounding community. Not surprisingly this adds to the perception of the Museum being an elitist institution and acts as a barrier to their visiting the Museum. Participants stressed the need for personal invitations and for the Museum to come out into the community.

Understanding the community viewpoint is the first step in developing new relationships and is the starting point for change. The Museum now needs to devote significant resources to a thoughtful and consistent effort to provide mission-oriented experiences of relevance to the community. There were several recommendations from the evaluators and participants, including:

- Reach out to the community by visiting neighborhoods; personally invite people to visit the Museum in their churches, community centers and “places where regular people go.”
• Carefully consider our exhibition strategies. Many people now think of museums for children and families in terms of highly interactive institutions. We need to evaluate our exhibit interpretation in light of that change. We also need to address the issue of the relevance of the exhibits to the community and answer the question “Why is it important to me?” This includes involving communities more directly in exhibition planning, focusing on the human stories behind the collections and helping visitors understand the significance of the collections so that they are proud to have the Peabody in New Haven.

• Increase the interactivity of school tours. Many New Haven residents first visit the Museum with their school and this trip shapes their perceptions of the Museum, often for many decades. In addition, many minority students only come to the Museum on school fieldtrips (AAAS 1996). It is therefore essential that such trips provide a positive experience that encourages students to return.

• Concentrate on family programming. This has the greatest potential for success in that the programs we offer seem to work best for families. It has been shown (Falk 1993; Smithsonian Institution 2001) that children who attend museums with their family are much more likely to visit museums as adults, so over time this will diversify our audience.

• Craft educational experiences that are entertaining, social and multi-sensory. Nonvisitors expect and value different things from their leisure time than typical museum visitors. Many of our cultural events already follow this model, but it is important that other Museum activities follow suit.

• Develop programs to increase the number of “staff” on the floor at general visitor opening times to encourage people to enjoy their visit. Also look at developing tools to help familiarize people with the Museum, including films and tours.

• Provide more training of frontline staff in customer service protocol and dealing with diverse audiences.

• Think more carefully about free admission passes. Currently the Museum provides New Haven libraries with passes for their patrons, and also gives free passes to New Haven students when they visit with their school. The take-up rate for both these programs is very low. Suggestions for improving this include giving passes to churches, aldermen and community organizations and providing passes for specific event days when there are many more activities going on.

The Museum has already started to move forward on several of these recommendations. For example a new coordinator has been hired to develop an after school program for students from three local middle and high schools. These students, nearly all of whom are African American or Hispanic, come to the Museum twice a week to learn about behind-the-scenes activities and the natural and cultural environment. We hope they, and their families, will be ambassadors for the Museum in their neighborhoods and also act as interpreters for exhibitions. We are also entering into a
new partnership with the City of New Haven’s senior citizen centers to bring art and botany classes to another population that does not visit the Museum.

Changing a museum’s relationship to its community is, of course, a long-term undertaking that requires considerable commitment. None of these activities, in isolation, will be effective and all of them will require nurturing new partnerships. As Eric Jolly (2002) observed, museums need to take as much care and interest in their community partners as they do in their funding partners. For the Peabody Museum *Engaging Our Communities* is the start of this change in thinking.
References


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