

Museum Professional Training and Education: Results from a Web-based Survey

Ron M. Potvin

mailto:Ronald_Potvin@Brown.edu

In the summer of 2007, the John Nicholas Brown Center at Brown University undertook a survey to determine the professional education and training interests of its regional audience of museum professionals currently working in the field. In addition to providing informative and sometimes unexpected insights into the nature and interests of this constituency, as well as broader trends in the museum field, the results of the Center's survey also suggest a variety of approaches for universities and professional associations to provide continuing training and education to their audiences of museum and cultural agency professionals.

Some background on the mission and goals of the Center is essential to understanding the motivations for and desired outcomes of this survey. The John Nicholas Brown Center, based in Providence, Rhode Island, sponsors a myriad of programs that address the ways in which the humanities and cultural heritage enrich everyday life. The Center's principal means to achieve this mission is a master's degree program in public humanities, administered in conjunction with Brown University's Department of American Civilization. The program trains students to become interpreters of the humanities to the public by providing the knowledge and skills needed for jobs in museums, historical societies, state and federal humanities and cultural resource agencies, and historic preservation and community cultural development organizations. The Center's broader mission includes care and preservation of the Nightingale-Brown House, the Center's National Historic Landmark headquarters, along with the Center's collection of sixteenth- through twentieth-century fine and decorative arts. In addition, the Center sponsors fellowship programs that provide space and resources for humanities scholars and practitioners,

and a practicum program that provides public humanities students, along with funding on a competitive basis, to a variety of humanities-based projects and organizations. The Center's staff also serves as informal consultants to several museums and cultural organizations and on a variety of boards and committees of cultural organizations and professional associations.

Most important from the standpoint of the 2007 survey, the Center organizes series of workshops, lectures, and symposia designed to enhance the work of museums and cultural agencies and enrich the knowledge of their staffs and trustees. From 2005-2007, the Center conducted a series of half-day workshops free of charge and open to museum professionals and students in the public humanities program. Organized by the Center's staff, the workshops focused on topics of importance to the work of current and future museum and humanities professionals. Speakers, drawn from a regional pool of humanities practitioners, conducted lectures and workshops on topics such as "Identifying Preservation Needs and Priorities;" "Cultural Tourism: Using Heritage, Environment, and the Arts to Define a Destination;" "Developing Exhibits, Thinking about Audiences;" "Art Law 101;" "Nonprofit Fundraising 101;" and "Public Relations 101." These workshops, while well attended by students, drew very little interest from museum professionals.

A primary goal of this survey, then, was to identify topics of interest to museum professionals to help the Center better serve its constituency. Other goals included determining the composition, in terms of role and responsibility, of this audience; the preferred duration of workshop sessions; and the amount that museum professionals are willing to pay for training. The survey also solicited comments and suggestions from participants. Some of these proved enlightening, and I have included them throughout this report. In general, the survey is a measure

of the ways that museum professionals perceive their professional education needs in preparation for current and future responsibilities within the field.

Methodology

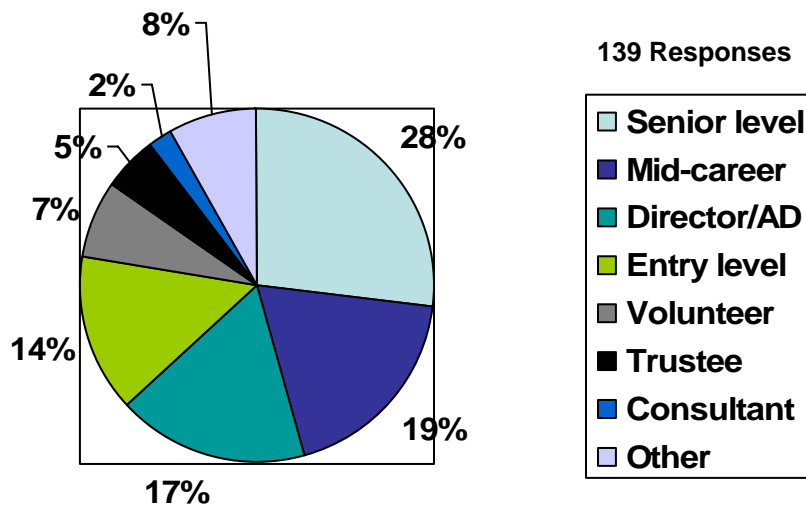
The Center conducted this study using a web-based survey tool to compile and analyze data collected from a potential pool of participants located within an arc from New London, Connecticut, to the entrance to Cape Cod in Bourne, Massachusetts, excluding museums from the greater Boston area. The resulting survey area included Rhode Island, southeastern Connecticut, and southeastern Massachusetts. A recently graduated student from the public humanities developed a list of 135 museums within this area identified email contact information for 478 staff within these museums. However, as a complete representation of the Center's chosen audience, this list had some limitations that may impact analysis of the data.

For a complete discussion of the methodology used to conduct this survey, please click on the following link: <http://www.brown.edu/Research/JNBC/Methodology.pdf>

To view and complete the John Nicholas Brown Center Museum Training and Professional Education Survey, with an expanded geographic focus, please click on the following link: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=x76uMtMtLQbaJmethwyq6Q_3d_3d. (After completing the survey, you will be linked back to this paper.)

Results of the Survey

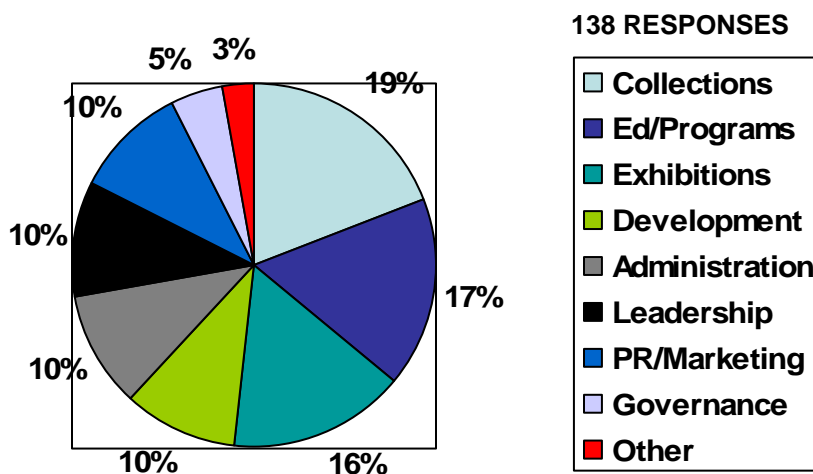
Question: Please indicate your current status in the museum field.



As these results indicate, 45% of the respondents identified themselves as senior level staff or as a director or associate director, while 33% identified themselves as entry level or mid-career professionals. These proportions do not seem to reflect accurately the nature of museum staffs, with senior or leadership level staff outnumbering “support” staff. Instead, this disproportion perhaps indicates that museums are more likely to list directors and senior level staff, as opposed to junior or support staff, on their Websites. Nevertheless, responses to this question indicate a wide range of career levels and positions within the respondent group. In some cases, especially in small museums, a single person can represent a range of levels. One respondent identified herself as “founder, volunteer, [and] acting president” of her museum. Though perhaps underrepresented, when viewed as a block, entry level and mid-career respondents form a

significant target audience for programming. Also underrepresented in these responses are trustees, volunteers, and independent consultants, again because their contact information was not readily available. These disproportions provoke an interesting question: should programming appeal to an audience—entry-level, mid-career, and support staff—which is larger but more difficult to identify and contact, or to an audience—leadership and senior staff—which is smaller but more identifiable as a group or market?

Question: Please indicate your area of responsibility (select all that apply)



The responses to this question represent the core activities of most museums. Staff who identified their responsibility as collections, education, and exhibitions totaled more than half of the responses (52%). Also notable are the combined responses of staff involved with development and public relations/marketing, which totaled 20% of the respondents to this question. These results, combined with the findings of a survey conducted by the American Association of Museums' Committee on Museum Professional Training (COMPT) more than ten

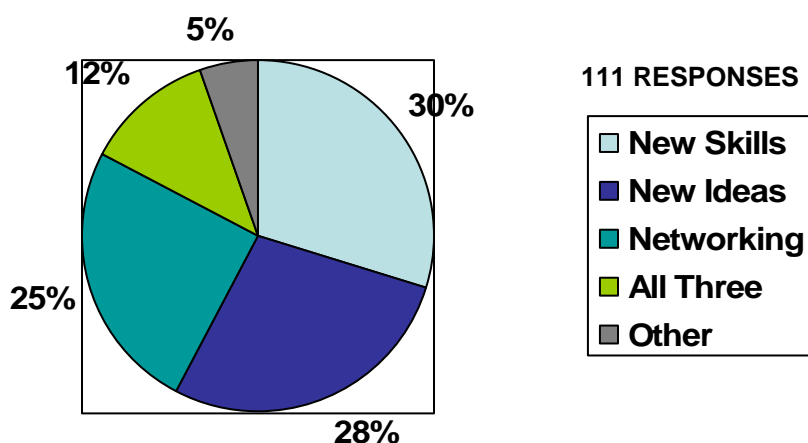
years earlier, perhaps belie a growing perception in recent years that the priorities of museums have shifted toward fund raising and “crowd-pleasing” programs and away from mission-driven objectives such as education, exhibitions, and research. One author noted, “by the late 1990s, the museum world had become a “diversified economy,” that relied increasingly on corporate sponsorships and popular “blockbuster” exhibitions, while many “proud traditionalists, those who sometimes self-identify as ‘essentialists,’ [decried] the steady drift away from scholarship, connoisseurship, the primary tasks of collecting, preserving and exhibiting. To these museum professionals, the diversity of functions within the institution serves not to strengthen it but to weaken it by fragmenting its focus...”¹ There is a great deal of anecdotal evidence for this reorganization of priorities within museums,² but quantifying it objectively has been more difficult. Quantifying the balance of responsibilities on museum staffs and their professional education priorities through surveys is perhaps one way to analyze this trend.

In 1996, COMPT conducted a survey to assess “the perceived training needs of the museum community.”³ This survey differed markedly from the John Nicholas Brown Center’s survey in terms of methodology and in the nature of the gathered data, but provides a point of comparison to the Center’s survey. Both surveys attempted to determine the specialized areas of interest of the participants.⁴ The COMPT survey identified education (19%), collection management care (15%), and exhibits (13%) as the three primary professional development needs, totaling 47% of the respondents, compared to 52% of respondents to the Center’s survey identifying their primary responsibility to be in these areas. In the COMPT survey, fundraising (8%) and marketing (8%) accounted for 16% of the responses, compared to 20% in the Center’s survey. The results of the COMPT survey need interpretation and extrapolation to align with those of the Center, but the John Nicholas Brown Center’s 2007 survey, compared with the

COMPT survey, does not demonstrate an increase in the importance of marketing and development at the expense of “essential” or traditional museum functions as reflected in the nature of museum staffs in the Center’s survey area. This conclusion was not an intended goal of the Center’s survey; but this result may in a limited way serve as a benchmark or as a method for a broader study to understand the evolving nature of museum priorities.

In addition to affirming the continued emphasis on education, collections care, and exhibitions within museums, the Center’s survey question regarding area of responsibility reveals a relatively small proportion (10%) of respondents who identified themselves under the category of “leadership.” As noted earlier, a disproportionate number of staff in leadership positions likely received this survey due to the greater availability of their contact information. Given this factor, I expected a larger number of respondents in the leadership category. Also, in the previous question, 17% of respondents identified themselves as directors or associate directors, titles that presumably carry leadership responsibilities. The subjective and unspecific nature of the term “leadership” may partially explain this discrepancy. Staff in leadership roles, especially associate directors, may have additional responsibilities within the museum, leading them to indicate this as their primary area of responsibility. A survey participant wrote, “As [the] person in charge of our small staff, I am also ultimately responsible and involved in collections stewardship and educational and event programming.” This tendency toward multitasking by directors and associate directors may even indicate a key difference between museums and the for-profit world: museum leaders are less likely to identify themselves as “boss,” “manager” or “supervisor,” and are more likely to identify themselves by their field of interest or by the key components of their organization’s mission: collections, education, and exhibitions.

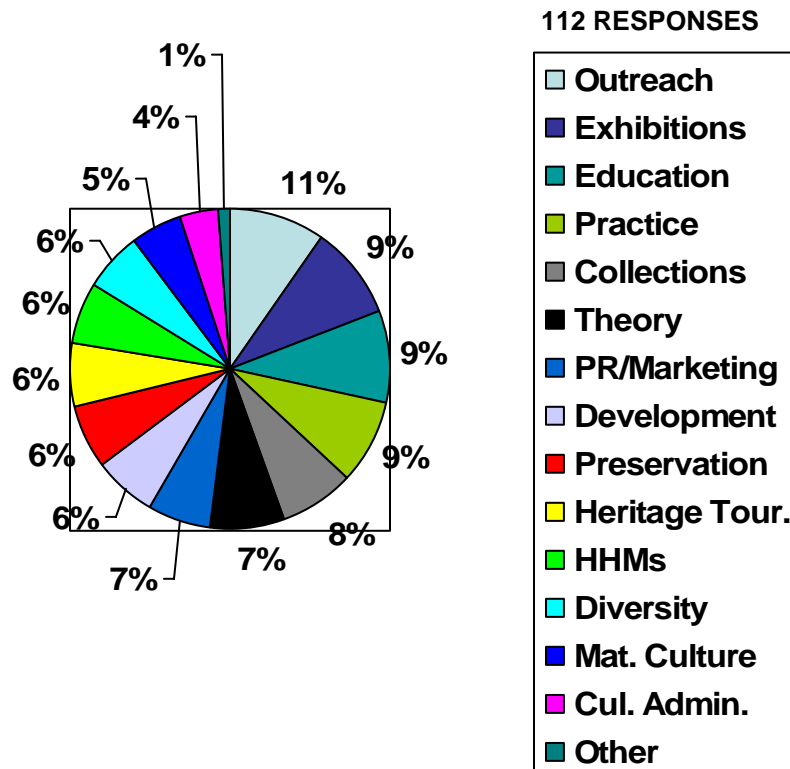
Question: I am most interested in: new ideas, new skills, networking.



Notable in these results is the balanced interest respondents expressed for learning new skills (30%), new ideas (28%), and networking (25%). This suggests a wide range of options for training and education in museum practice and theory or a combination of both elements in a single workshop. The International Council of Museums “Curricula Guidelines for Museum Professional Development” noted, “Museum work has a fundamental practical side which must be experienced in conjunction with theoretical constructs.” The report further noted that, “a significant shortfall in training at the practical level exists,” which further suggests that workshops should include practical—“nuts and bolts”—components alongside theoretical elements.⁵ Further, the strong interest in networking indicates that all programming should incorporate opportunities for social interaction. One respondent summed up an ideal merger of training and networking: “For me, personally, the most useful kind of program would be one that allowed me to meet with recognized scholars in a particular area of our collections.” Another commented, “I am...interested in an exchange of ideas and networking.” As an organization committed to fostering the exchange of a broad range of ideas and information, the John

Nicholas Brown Center, along with other university museum studies or public history programs, in collaboration with cultural organizations and professional associations, may be ideally suited to develop programs that bring together scholars, professionals, and the public to further these goals.

Question: I am interested in learning about all of the following (select all that apply)



A word about methodology is perhaps necessary to examine the results of this question. In most areas of the survey, I attempted to include responses that were broad in nature. The intent of this survey was not to learn the specific titles and roles of museum staff or to solicit specific suggestions of topics for workshops and classes, but to gain a sense of the general nature and

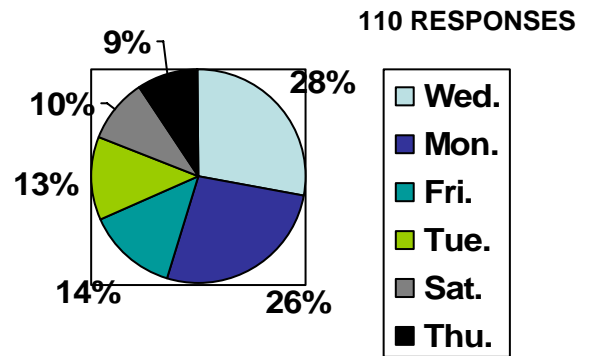
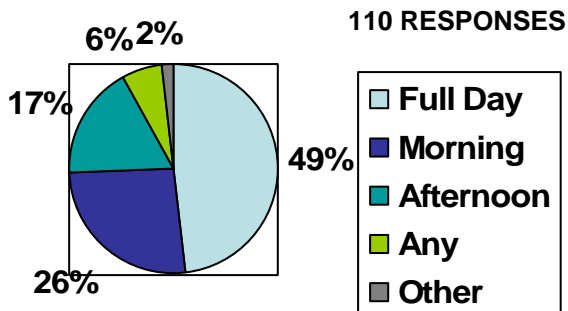
interests of the Center's museum audience. For this question, I thought that a wider selection of responses was appropriate, in part because the museum field is very diverse and in part to ensure the survey represented the majority of interests, rather than relying upon respondents to complete the open-ended "other" field. While the balanced interest in most of the possible responses is noteworthy, most striking is the level of interest in "outreach," which received the highest percentage of responses. While the definition of "outreach" is somewhat vague, the high number of responses suggests that museums are struggling with finding ways to link their missions and activities with those of other museums and with their communities. While it may be difficult to plan specific programs because of the broad nature of the topic, workshops on conducting community oral history or community memory projects, discussions of case studies of successful community or joint museum projects, or methods of involving communities in gallery or neighborhood traveling exhibits are some possibilities.

The following set of questions dealt with logistics, rather than with audience or workshop content. One question asked participants for their preference regarding the duration of sessions and workshops. Out of 113 respondents, 57% preferred one-day sessions; 41% would consider attending either a one-day or a multiple-day intensive training session, and fewer than 2% percent preferred only a multiple-day session. Options included in the survey for multiple-day training were 2-3 days, 4-7 days, 7-10 days, 10-14 days, and semester long evening classes. Out of forty-seven respondents who indicated interest in extended training, 79% preferred 2-3 day training, 2% preferred 4-7 day extended training, and 19% chose semester-long courses. The remaining options did not receive any interest. It is clear that the greatest demand is for one-day workshops (sixty-five respondents) and for 2-3 day extended training (thirty-seven respondents).

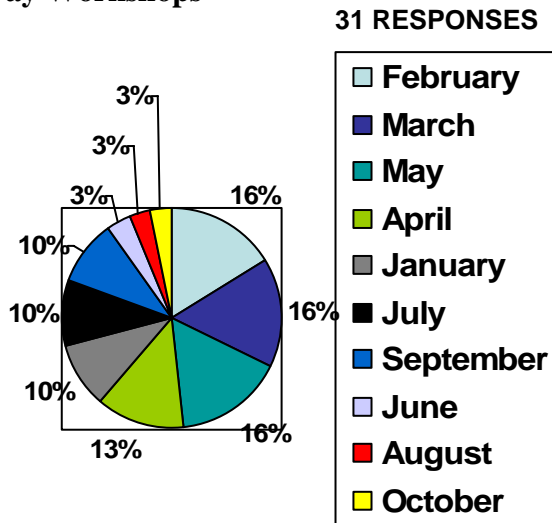
The other choices totaled only ten responses. Given these results, I will focus the remainder of this section of analysis on these overwhelming preferences.

The survey queried participants regarding the preferred time of day, duration, and day of the week for one-day workshops, and the preferred month for 2-3 day programs. The following graphs summarize those responses.

One-Day Workshops

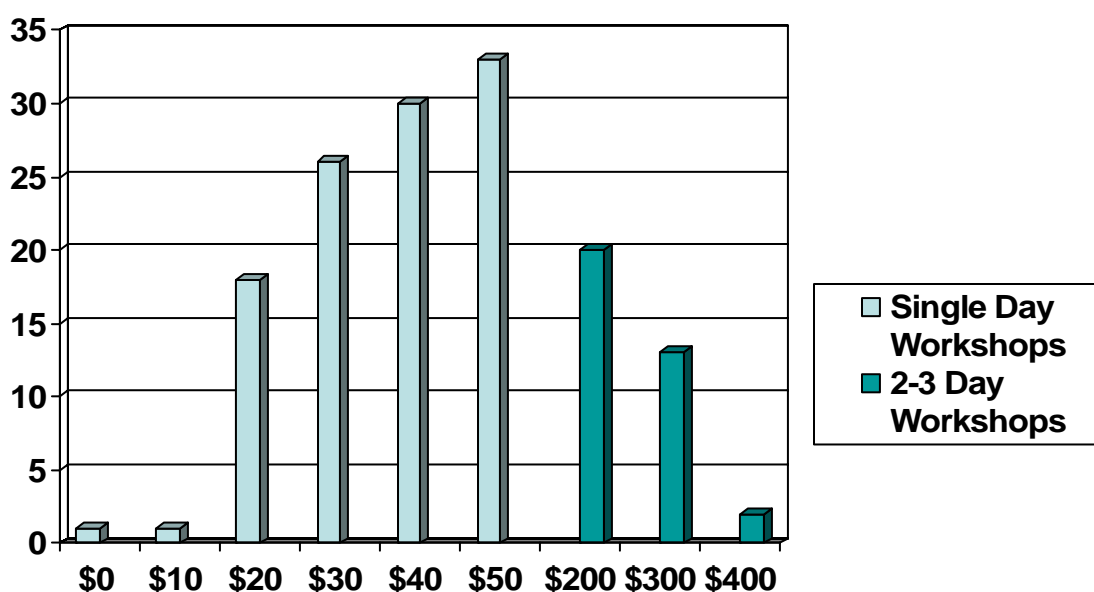


2-3 Day Workshops



Full-day training sessions, which received almost half of the responses (49%), were the clear preference of participants, possibly because this duration, rather than a half-day session, represents better “bang for the buck” and more reasonable justification for travel time and time spent away from work. Respondents preferred Wednesdays (28%) and Mondays (26%) over any other day by a ratio of nearly two-to-one. However, one respondent commented, “Most workshops are offered during the workday, which makes it difficult for volunteers who hold full-time jobs to attend. Evenings or Saturdays would be preferable.” For 2-3 day workshops, respondents evenly preferred February, March, and May (16%), with April (13%) barely trailing. Another participant explained the probable reason for this preference toward late winter and spring months: “Like most museums, off-season (Nov - April) is ideal for seminars and training programs as it is a much slower time in general.”

Finally, the survey asked participants to indicate the maximum fee they were willing to pay to attend a workshop. The survey indicated that lunch would be included in the cost of a one-day workshop and that some meals, but not lodging, would be included in the cost of a 2-3 day workshop. The graph below summarizes the responses to these questions.



Responses to this question were inversely proportional to the cost and length of the program. For one-day workshops, the largest proportion of respondents (33 people) indicated they were willing to pay the highest amount indicated on the survey (\$50). Respondents selected the remaining options in descending order of cost with only one person selecting the \$10 and \$0 options. The mean response for a one-day workshop was approximately \$35. In contrast to input on costs for one-day workshops, the largest number of respondents (20 people) preferred the lowest cost option (\$200) for 2-3 day sessions, followed by the remaining options in ascending order of cost, with thirteen people choosing the \$300 option and only two people choosing the \$400 option. None of the participants selected the \$500 option.

The simplest explanation for these results is that costs become less manageable the higher they rise. One-day workshops represent less of a commitment in terms of time and money, even at the highest cost option. In contrast, even the lowest fee option suggested by the survey for a 2-3 workshop (\$200) may be difficult to manage for small-budget institutions or staff members who must pay professional development fees out of their own pockets. These respondents considered more carefully the value of a longer-term workshop when it requires two or three days away from their work and their families and \$200 from their budgets. One respondent put it this way: "A longer length program would have to be something that I was extremely interested in and organized in a way that I really thought would be useful...I would be less demanding about a one day workshop...I might go to something slightly out of my field if it were local, one day and reasonably priced." Another explanation comes to simple math. If the Center's audience is willing to pay a mean fee of \$35 for a one-day workshop, multiplied over three days this comes to \$105. A lower cost option on the survey for 2-3 day workshops may have yielded clearer and more significant results.

The responses to this question do not necessarily indicate that \$50 for one-day workshops or \$200 for 2-3 workshops would be a manageable cost for all museum employees. One respondent observed, “I would love to attend professional workshops and I think they are much needed. Obviously, the more affordable the workshop the better, as I believe it is mostly the small-budget organizations that need these workshops.” Another participant commented, “The fee for the workshop is a big concern; there is little/no institutional money for this.” For programs to reach the broadest possible audience, workshop organizers must accommodate those for whom even a nominal fee is difficult, perhaps by offering a number of “fellowships” on an application or first-come-first-served basis.

Conclusion

By distilling the results of the Center’s survey, the “ideal” professional development workshop organized by the John Nicholas Brown Center would attract senior level collections staff from museums in Providence County, Rhode Island, interested in learning new ideas about outreach. The workshop would be on Wednesday and cost \$50. Of course, the museum field is not reducible to any common denominator, and reading the survey results in this way is not particularly useful in planning professional development programs, either by the Center or by other university program or professional associations. Instead, readers should view the results of this survey as a mechanism with many parts, which organizations providing museum profession education and training may assemble in a multitude of ways. The respondents to the Center’s survey represent a broad range of career statuses, specialties, interests, and financial means, and each respondent, no matter how representative or non-representative of the field as a whole, has

a stake in the types of professional education available to them. But it is an equally fruitless exercise to develop programs that appeal to a small portion of museum professionals; the workshops would be poorly attended and of little broad use to the museum field. This suggests, instead, that the “ideal” workshop should be inclusive enough to serve a range of the respondents’ needs and interests.

It is my hope that other universities and professional organizations that organize museum professional training conduct similar assessments of their own constituencies, and that the John Nicholas Brown Center’s survey may serve as a template to combine and compare results from these assessments. In this way, we can all better serve the professional education needs of our audiences and the museum field as a whole, while fostering collaboration between the institutions that provide these services.

Endnotes

¹ Marjorie Schwarzer, *Riches, Rivals & Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America* (American Association of Museums) 2006, pp. 8, 215.

² See, for instance, “Museum Priorities and the Curator’s Voice: Art or Entertainment,” transcript at <http://www.artdealers.org/events/forum01t.html>; Kathleen McLean, “Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue,” *Daedalus* 128(3), 129 - 162 (1999); and Nancy Villa Bryck, “Reports of Our Death Have Been Exaggerated: Reconsidering the Curator,” *Museum News*, March/April, 2001.

³ “Museum Community Training Needs Assessment” (American Association of Museums Committee on Professional Training) can be viewed at <http://www.compt-aam.org/resources/surveysstudies.html>.

⁴ The Center’s survey asked participants to indicate their area of responsibility, while the COMPT survey asked participants to identify their professional development interests among these areas of responsibility.

⁵ “ICOM Curricula Guidelines for Museum Professional Development,” Adopted by the ICOM Executive Council, June 2000, can be seen at <http://www.city.ac.uk/ictop/curricula.html>.