

“NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US”

Reflections on Inclusive Practices at Cultural Institutions

SHERI LEVINSKY-RASKIN AND GREG STEVENS

The phrase “nothing about us without us” is a centuries-old political slogan asserting that no policy should be created without the full and direct participation of those it affects. It was adopted by the disability rights movement in the 1990s as a call to action around the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In line with this powerful statement, AAM brought together more than two dozen subject matter experts and nearly 2,500 participants from the disability community—as well as from access consortia, museums, libraries, archives and educational institutions—to discuss how to make the field more inclusive. The group convened in a three-part webinar series titled “Stories of Inclusion: Inclusive Practices at Cultural Institutions,” which AAM launched in October 2015 as part of a multi-year initiative. Through presentations, case studies and conversations, experts and attendees explored the ADA and Universal Design; physical and cognitive disabilities; partnerships, collaborations and access networks; program planning; building institutional support; life skills development; and inclusive hiring practices.



The Intrepid Museum hosted a simulated World War II-era USO dance and sing-along for individuals with dementia and their caregivers.

The quick-paced dialogue that emerged was informative and supportive. Attendees posed questions to the group and answers were provided. Participants asked for resources and responses poured in with links to websites, publications, case studies and research. Informal groups gathered in dozens of local “watch and talk” events to extend the discussion before, during and after each program. The following summary reflects what transpired as these colleagues convened in webinars, on Twitter (#AAMIInclusion) and at

in-person events, contributing to a lively exchange of ideas, information and inspiration.

Awareness

We started the series with a brief exploration of trends in cultural practice, led by Betty Siegel, director of VSA and accessibility at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. She offered a quick overview of U.S. law and international regulation related to disability rights. Valerie Fletcher, executive director of the Institute for Human Centered

TAKING ACTION—FIND, JOIN OR START A LOCAL ACCESS NETWORK

Among the many topics of conversation throughout the webinar series was the importance of local networks. These channels provide opportunities for individuals and organizations to continually learn and share with one another, and support efforts in such areas as outreach, community participation and staff training.

A few examples of local access networks represented by presenters and attendees included the Museum Access Consortium (MAC) in New York City, Cultural Access New England (CANE), ARTability, Access Indy and the Bay Area Arts Access Collective (BAAAC). Several national organizations have local chapters serving our audiences, including the Hearing Loss Association of America, Art Beyond Sight (ABS), the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Alzheimer's Association. Anyone not already involved and engaged with local groups was encouraged to get involved, given the breadth of opportunity and sharing nature of the community.

Describing BAAAC, Cecile Puretz, cofounder of the collective and the access and community engagement manager at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, emphasized the need for museum professionals, educators, artists and members of the disability community to join together to reach “the common goal of promoting access and equity in museums and cultural organizations.” This was further supported by Eileen Bagnall, executive director of VSA Arizona, in her presentation about ARTability and how a state-level program can provide resources, technology, communications, training, funded professional development and marketing assistance to member organizations throughout the state. “It all goes toward creating an inclusive community where people with and without disabilities can learn through, participate in and enjoy the arts,” Bagnall stated, and where “all individuals with disabilities who aspire to careers in the arts should have the opportunity to develop appropriate skills.”

Networks can take many shapes, including a formal consortium, the “watch and talk” events that took place at 60 institutions and the one that began organically during online conversations among attendees. Tweets and photos were posted about local gatherings of colleagues and community members who watched the webinars, including “#AAMInclusion Full House at the @museumofscience watch and talk event!” and “Getting ready to start the @AAMers #AAMInclusion webinar at Maryland State Archives!” Attendees and presenters shared e-mail addresses with one another to create an offline network and form an “access revolution” nationwide. The enthusiasm for getting together and working together was infectious. As @MAConsortium tweeted, using a shorthand term for accessibility, “Let’s start this #a11y revolution.”

Kris Johnson, founder of Access Indy and program coordinator at the Indiana School for the Deaf, initiated the conversation thread that led to the group’s development. She said she hopes that there will eventually be representation from each state, including those with active museum communities. For Johnson, this is a great opportunity to “configure a system of communication at a national level to disseminate information and professional development opportunities related to access and inclusion.” Stay tuned for posts to AAM’s Museum Junction (community.aam-us.org) for ways to get involved.

Comments overall clearly underscored the importance of connecting with local communities. As articulated by Hannah Goodwin, accessibility manager at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and a steering committee member for CANE, “A great way to continue the conversation locally, and to help move things forward, is to join a local knowledge network. The more we talk to each other and share what we are doing, the better things get!”

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» My TAKE

Design in Boston, joined Siegel in sharing current demographic information. Beth Ziebarth, director of the Smithsonian Institution's accessibility program in Washington, D.C., added to the overview by reminding us that disability rights are civil rights. She also explained the theory of experience preference—taking into account that different people focus on different elements of museum experiences, such as ideas, people, objects and physical dimensions—to help address the “whole person” as we develop programs for all visitors.

Throughout the series, colleagues and attendees emphasized going beyond compliance to develop access

and inclusion that benefit everyone. Michelle Arpey, information services manager at the New York State Archives, pointed out that it is “not just about requirements—a compliant site design is easier for everyone to use.” Several colleagues suggested that disability or functional limitation is a common element of the human experience. Fletcher added, “Variation in ability is ordinary now, not special, and affects most of us for at least part of our lives.”

Collaborations and partnerships are key to effectively meeting the needs of the disability community. “One of the most important lessons I’ve learned through cofounding the Bay Area Arts

Access Collective,” said Cecile Poretz, access and community engagement manager at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, “is that through bringing together a diversity of voices to help shape our programs, we strengthen our collective capacity to build awareness and momentum for greater access and inclusion. The power of the collective is empowering and democratizing.”

Elizabeth Merritt, AAM vice president for strategic foresight and founding director of the Center for the Future of Museums, articulated significant demographic changes, the needs of an aging population, trends in technology and shifts in the way we think about

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(dis)ability. “The future is focused on both cognitive and physical disability,” she noted, “related to a profound shift in how we use technology—from corrective ‘assistive technology’ to ‘augmentative technology’ that expands our abilities.”

Action

Among other presenters, Christine Reich, director of exhibit development and conservation at the Museum of Science, Boston, emphasized that inclusion starts with an institutional vision for access, supported by a holistic approach to continuous improvement and change through organizational learning. “This includes involving people with disabilities in our work, embedding inclusive practice in our work and communication, engaging in ongoing experimentation and promoting inclusive practice as something that benefits people with and without disabilities,” Reich explained.

At the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum in New York City, Barbara Johnson Stemler oversees a range of access programs for individuals with disabilities, including hands-on and family programs, pre-visit lessons, early morning openings for children with autism and their families and a program called “Stories Within” for individuals with dementia and their caregivers. “We focus on developing social-emotional and life skills: problem solving, respect, self-regulation, collaboration, communication, embracing strengths and areas of need,” described Stemler. “These are strategies that work for all audiences.”



Above: This photo from the 1940s shows students from North Carolina’s Governor Morehead School for the Blind engaging in a tactile learning experience at the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences. Below: “Morning at the Museum” program at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.



A teenage boy with low vision holds a glass element by Dale Chihuly during a guided tour at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Many colleagues discussed the value of including the disability community’s perspectives in program planning. Christine Murray, senior content designer for Antenna International in San Francisco, described a dynamic process for including the Deaf community in the development of an American Sign Language (ASL) tour for Alcatraz Island. The project included a valuable listening phase and robust testing, experimentation and refinement. “Over 75 percent of the people who helped create the tours were from the Deaf community: co-creators, designers, talent and audience testers,” Murray reported.

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WHAT'S NEXT?

As co-developers and moderators of this series, what resonated most for us was how the webinars revealed so many topics for future exploration. There is a real thirst to delve deeper into discussions centering on accessibility and inclusion in terms of both visitors to our institutions and our staff.

Some of the ideas shared during the webinars referenced ways to involve community members as co-creators of their experiences. Cecile Poretz, co-founder of the Bay Area Arts Access Collective and the access and community engagement manager at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, worked with people with disabilities to build awareness for visitors without disabilities, helping the latter group learn about access and inclusion. She sought content, input and feedback from community members representing a range of disabilities in the development of the exhibition “Patient No More,” organized by the Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability at San Francisco State University. Others turned the conversation about inclusion inward, calling for introspection and examination of internal practices and staff support.

A few of the topics that arose from attendee questions and comments during the webinars and on Twitter (#AAMInclusion) regarded hiring practices, staff training, outreach, community relationships, partnerships, internships for individuals with disabilities, resource sharing, lower cost options for smaller budgets and institutional inclusion statements. Even more revealing was how these topics related to the 2016 AAM Annual Meeting theme of “power, influence and responsibility,” as museums look to improve and advance their inclusive practices externally and internally.

The AAM Education Professional Network (EdCom) will explore this topic more specifically at its Marketplace of Ideas in May 2016 in Washington, D.C. EdCom will facilitate discussions about how museums define inclusion and how accessibility, accountability and advocacy are approached in practice. The Marketplace will feature examples of inclusion statements already adopted by a range of institutions. Find the call for participation and more information on Museum Junction (community.aam-us.org).

For more information about the 2016 AAM Annual Meeting, visit aam-us.org/events/annual-meeting.

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Francesca Rosenberg, director of community, access and school programs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City (MoMA), highlighted MoMA’s series of staff training videos that include people with disabilities. “We decided the most effective way to train staff would be to identify their levels of awareness, their attitudes and their misconceptions about people with disabilities, and then for staff to hear from people with disabilities,” Rosenberg said. The videos are available on the MoMA website (moma.org).

Not all institutions, however, have the resources to fully implement accessible and inclusive strategies or programming. According to Kat Burkhart, executive director and curator (and the only paid staff member) at the Carnegie Museum of Montgomery County in Crawfordsville, Indiana, “Our goal is to make everyone welcome at the museum, regardless of their ability. But we also have limited staff and resources, so we do the best we can. We are very upfront and honest about what we can and cannot do. We are mostly low-tech, but we try: QR codes on labels, large-print materials, emphasizing our accessible entrance. Little things make a difference.”

Advocacy

So much of our commitment to the cause stems from our personal and professional experiences with disability. “We need to recognize the variety of preferences, needs and learning modalities that we all have,” suggested Cindy VandenBosch, former co-chair and project leader for Cultural



Disability Open House at the de Young Museum in San Francisco.

Connections for People with Autism at the Museum Access Consortium in New York City. “People with disabilities are already coming to our institutions; our challenge is to change our collective mindset, our practice and our communication. Rather than defining disabilities, perhaps it’s better to think about ‘variations in the human spirit.’”

In addition to identifying and serving people with disabilities as visitors, presenters addressed the issue of adopting inclusive hiring practices in our cultural institutions. Barbara Cohen-Stratynier, curator of exhibitions at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, suggested that “cultural institutions must commit to the ‘human variation’ community with regard to staff, volunteers and interns.” Beth Redmond-Jones, senior

director of public programs at the San Diego Natural History Museum (and the mother of an adult child with autism), was equally emphatic about programming and employment opportunities: “It’s not just a focus on childhood programs; children transition to adulthood. We need to provide new content, new ways of doing things, especially internships and other work opportunities.”

Gathering information, sharing resources, exchanging ideas and promoting best practices: all are part of advocating for accessibility and inclusion. Fletcher articulated that our vision of inclusion supports the common shared goals of the cultural sector and that we must “catalyze a community of cultural learners and innovators who believe in life and all its variations.”

Sheri Levinsky-Raskin is the assistant vice president for education and evaluation at the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum in New York City. Greg Stevens is assistant director for professional development at the American Alliance of Museums.

This article is based on the three-part AAM webinar series “Stories of Inclusion: Inclusive Practices at Cultural Institutions.” The series was produced in collaboration with the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), the Museum Access Consortium and the Education Committee (EdCom) and Diversity Committee (DivCom), two of AAM’s 22 professional networks. The series was supported in part by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and is available for download in the AAM Recorded Webinar Library: aam-us.org/resources/online-programs