

How to Start a Tribal Museum

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Why have a tribal museum?

- ❖ The history of museums and Native peoples has been negative.
- ❖ It has become important to tell our own stories.
- ❖ Do we want to have a place to hold our returned items?

What is a museum? Museums are unique educational institutions where we teach and learn through objects. History, art, culture, ideas, and information are taught or distributed through objects that represent those concepts. In order to perform their role as educational organizations, museums collect, preserve, and present objects in special settings called exhibitions or displays.

Museum terms

Exhibitions are presentations of objects created to teach visitors. The lessons of the objects can be historical, aesthetic, social, cultural, or related to some other aspect of knowledge. Exhibitions are integrated approaches to teaching that involve many objects with well-defined themes, accompanied by related information that the presenters wish to share with visitors.

Displays are less involved presentations of objects that typically do not involve efforts to integrate themes and concepts to tell stories. Displays are not interpreted in depth, and the learning may be through an appreciation of the object itself.

Interpretation is what we say about an object or group of objects. Interpretation is presented in label copy, text panel copy, media pieces, and other formats that inform, using the object or objects as the vehicle for teaching.

Concept

The idea: Careful thought should be given to defining what purpose this museum or cultural center will have and how it will serve the community. Define the end goal, “the prize.”

Purpose & function: One of the first questions that should be asked and answered is, What do we want this to be, a museum or cultural center?

A museum is usually an educational organization that teaches through objects and is geared more towards a non-Native public.

A cultural center focuses on the needs and wants of the tribal community.

Concept, continued

Will the facility accommodate researchers, attract tourism dollars, be a collecting institution? Many tribal museums turn into collecting institutions because members of the community come to see them as a safer place to store their items.

Will it be based on collections, or, if you don't have a lot of material culture, will it be media-based? A good example of a media-based presentation is the Citizen Potawatomi Nation Cultural Heritage Center.

Will it have language programs, basket-weaving programs, participate in repatriation matters, or be an economic venture?

Your facility can be whatever you want, but its concept should be clearly defined and agreed upon. Maintain that focus.

Concept, continued

CAUTION: Focusing your facility primarily as an economic-development venture can be costly and hugely disappointing. Typically museums and/or cultural centers are not considered sound economic ventures. They can be developed into successful, sustaining operations, but that will likely depend on federal and state grants, tribal budget allocations, and their staff's own in-house marketing skills and community's commitment.

Concept, continued

Who does the facility serve? Who is your audience?

Identify stakeholders: The stakeholders are your community members. You can define your community in any way that works best for you. The community can be specifically tribal members, the local Native and non-Native communities, or perhaps local politicians or entrepreneurs. Stakeholders are those who have a vested interest in the end product and will support your efforts every step of the way.

It's necessary to have broad support so that you are (ideally) less affected by changes in tribal administration or broad political and economic trends.

Stakeholders

How do you build stakeholder relationships?

- ❖ Present your ideas at social or political community based events.
- ❖ Create meet-and-greet opportunities in specific community venues, usually around food!
- ❖ Invite community groups to meet with you one on one.
- ❖ Work with your tribal college if you have one.
- ❖ Use good public relations strategies such as having a consistent presence in your tribal newspaper; write a regular monthly article to inform stakeholders about any updates or delays.
- ❖ Create a Facebook page or other website; access local tribal radio stations, arts & crafts shows, etc.

What stories do you want to tell?

What are the stories and themes most important to your tribal community that you would like others to know? Keep in mind that the audience can also include tribal members who may be unaware of or never exposed to cultural traditions.

Are there creation stories, tribal philosophies, or symbols that can be told or explained? Ask:

- ❖ What do we need to have in order to tell these stories— e.g., collections/objects/media?
- ❖ How much space will be required?
- ❖ Who will develop these stories—staff, community scholars?
- ❖ How much time will this take?

Defining key jobs

The project manager is someone, ideally, with expertise in construction and/or a management background. You may want to consider hiring for this position in phases, based on the expertise necessary. This position should have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and the authority to conduct business on a day-to-day basis.

The museum director is hired during the construction phase. The museum director should have museum experience and/or some type of museum training and fundraising experience. This position should have clearly defined duties and responsibilities, and the authority to conduct business on a day-to-day basis. The museum director will develop the staff, collections, fundraising campaigns, and curatorial oversight.

Mission statement

This is also the time to develop a mission statement. A mission statement will state your vision of your facility and its purpose. It is not always easy to write these. Some examples:

“The Agua Caliente Cultural Museum inspires people to learn about the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians and other Native cultures. We keep the spirit alive through exhibitions, collections, research, and educational programs.”

—Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, Agua Caliente, California

“The primary purpose of the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum is to preserve and interpret the culture, language and customs of the Florida Seminoles.”

—Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, Hollywood, Florida

Mission statement, continued

“The Citizen Potawatomi Nation Cultural Heritage Center serves to educate tribal members and the public on the historical and contemporary aspects of the tribe through the acquisition, preservation, exhibition, and exploration of the diverse materials pertaining to the culture and traditions of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation.”

—Citizen Potawatomi Nation Cultural Heritage Center,
Shawnee, Oklahoma

Planning phase

Project team development: The project team must be in place to start this process.

An important decision: Who will be the team leader? Early in the planning it is usually a project manager; hiring outside of the tribe is okay if someone has specific expertise.

Be open and flexible to working outside of your comfort level, but always maintain your sovereign prerogative to assert and hold onto your vision!

Planning phase, continued

Important roles on the project team: Bear in mind, some people can do more than one job:

- ❖ Team leader (usually a project manager)
- ❖ Museum director
- ❖ Scholar/cultural leader
- ❖ Public affairs officer
- ❖ Development officer, fundraiser, grant-writer
- ❖ Advisory architect
- ❖ Advisory construction engineer
- ❖ Advisory conservator

Thank you! Questions/comments? norwoodj@si.edu

