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The Room Where It Happens: How Policy and Perception are at Play in Museum-School Relationships

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The Room Where It Happens: How Policy and Perception are at Play in Museum-School Relationships

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Keywords Education; Education policy; Museums; Schools; Mount Vernon

Abstract While policy has advanced the formal educational world, perception has prevented legislative growth in the museum sector. This paper explores the communicative barriers with a review of relevant works, a case study at George Washington's Mount Vernon, and a survey conducted among teachers and museum professionals. The recent shift in museum pedagogy indicates that a museum's role in society goes beyond the care and preservation of material culture, to an educational responsibility to the public. As educational institutions, museums are natural partners for schools, but long-standing collaborative programming or partnerships are still rare. For teachers, the accountability atmosphere is often difficult to deal with and having a viable partner in museums can take some burden off the stress of standards. Are teachers, and subsequently policymakers, seeing museums as a way to fill this need for educators? Or is the previous perception of museums holding them back as viable resources?

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Years have passed since the Bush administration passed No Child Left Behind, known colloquially by its initialism NCLB, leaving teachers frustrated with new standards of learning, and museums in the dark on how to be useful educational resources. Under the Obama administration, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was conceived, which gave incentives for states to adopt academic standards that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace, and narrows the government's role in Elementary and Secondary education. While this piece of legislation will not directly affect museums, the museum sector and groups like the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) have kept a close eye on the policy in an effort to become a better partner to the formal education sector.

NCLB has had a major impact on museums and their education resources—and despite condemning literature of the Act, there is far more to the story of what's preventing effective museum-school collaborations.¹ This article attempts to summarize research findings, dig past current legislation, and start to dissect the root of the problem. The author believes that the current communicative rift between museums and schools exists due to the historic use of museums, their shifting perception today, and how this is reflected in policy. To highlight

this gap, teachers and museum professionals were surveyed in the state of Virginia with a similar set of questions regarding the educational role of a museum, and what resources they use or offer, respectively. To get a closer look and give a narrative to this data, a small case study was conducted at George Washington's Mount Vernon.

Shift in Focus

A shift internally within the museum sector revolutionized the museum's role to the public, becoming more visitor-centric. While many museums have started to adapt to this new role, the preconceived notions of a museum's role in society, perhaps best phrased from one of the later survey respondents as "a warehouse full of stuff," has largely remained stagnant in the eyes of teachers, policymakers, and the public. This is the effect of a clear lapse in communication and mutual understanding, which precedes any collaborative effort together.

Policy remains a large divider between formal and informal educational institutions because: public schools are at the mercy of policy with state and local standards; museums are loosely legislated and not governed as official educational institutions; and museum's strengths as places of lifelong learning are not considered when discussing educational policy.

Museums have been educating the public for much of modern history, with early recorded examples dating back to the 1800s.² It wasn't until the 20th century that education was recognized as a main component of the museum's mission;³ specifically with the Tax Reform Act of 1969, which offered tax benefits to institutions with a proven educational role.⁴ AAM has also issued multiple reports that move education up as a priority function in the museum.⁵

The 1970s brought about museum advocacy, particularly in creating targeted, high-value educational programming.⁶ Despite the increase in targeted programming, many classroom teachers still viewed museum created content as additional rather than something to complement or integrate into the curriculum.⁷

AAM recommended more collaboration between museums and schools with *Museums for a New Century*, and again with *Excellence and Equity* in 1992 which lead to the reevaluation of accreditation criteria and Museum Assessment Program. This report is a landmark document by AAM to prepare for the 21st century; the first ever of its kind to focus on the role of museums in education, offering that museums are capable of all different learning environments, ages, and formalities.⁸

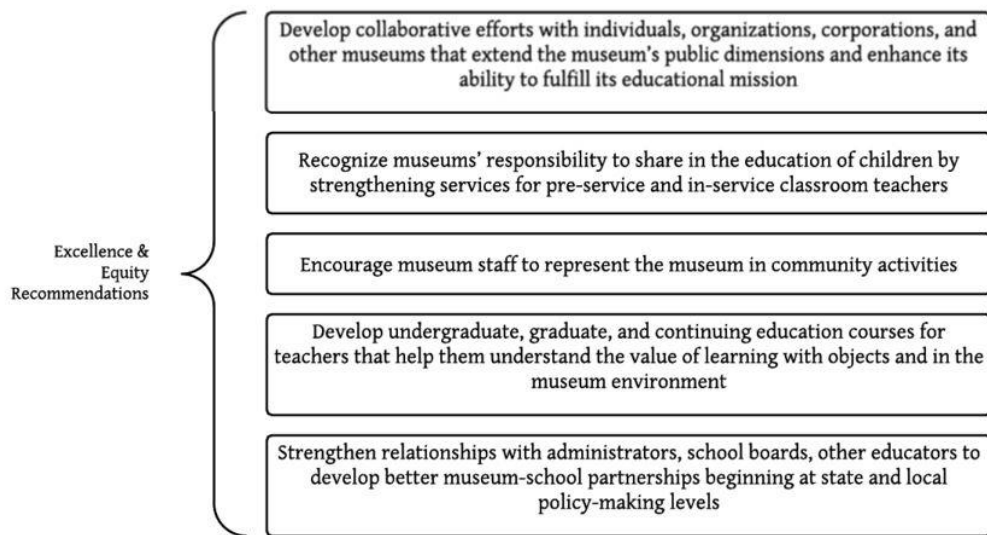


Figure 1: Recommendations from Excellence & Equity; figure by author.

A Language Barrier

Federally legislated educational policy was largely absent prior to the 1965 passing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Recognizing the strong role museums play in education, museums are included in several sections, including Arts in Education, Teaching American History, Technology, and Professional Development.⁹ Museums were also mentioned in the 2001 ESEA reauthorization, NCLB under Title II and Title V, however, are listed as cultural institutions that are additional to the classroom.

The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act also originally uses language that made museums educational outliers, excluding all museums from eligibility for funding, and including them in the same context as casinos - pure entertainment. Major advocacy efforts overcame the all-inclusive nature of the bill; however, zoos and aquariums were still denied access to funding. Sheppard comments on this discrimination stating "Zoos and aquariums are prime examples of extraordinary educators. Their commitment to raising public awareness of critical issues in conservation and environmental sustainability has been at the heart of both their institutional and their educational commitment. Yet, the language of federal legislation shows no recognition of their work."¹⁰

Current and past policy reflects the perception that museums are just an extension of the classroom; and before any real, impactful, collaborative effort or long-standing partnerships can happen, the relationship between these two institutions must be examined. The following research portion of this article does not attempt to isolate the causes of this gap, but simply draw attention to larger legislative issues going beyond the effects of NCLB, and seeks to create conversation on both sides on how to repair this relationship.

Research Introduction

Ideally, the outcome of this research would show there is a gap in the perceived educational role of museums, and their use by educators - linking perception to another root problem coinciding with the political landscape. Each of the following approaches were used to more fully understand the current relationship between museums and schools, their perceived role in society, and to develop a better understanding of how educational policy has impacted communication and collaborations between them. An exploratory case study from one Virginia museum was used to gather in-depth information and give a narrative voice.

Two separate online surveys were given to both museum professionals and teachers. A survey gathered baseline information on the perceptions of a museum's role in society, which resources they provided or used, and the status of communication between the two institutions. As many questions as possible were kept the same in order to directly compare the opinions of both parties. The survey was taken entirely online and took approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. An option at the end of the survey gave the participant the choice to be emailed an additional five questions to answer at their own leisure. These questions allowed participants to answer more direct questions on the challenges of creating and maintaining museum-school relationships, resources that should be developed, and further explored the educational role of museums.

To highlight this change in one institution, data was collected from the meeting minutes of the education department at George Washington's Mount Vernon about the types of conferences the education department mentioned, worked with, and attended. Again, to get a more narrative voice to the research collected, an interview was conducted with the Vice President for Education.

Since this research was limited to teachers in the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Metro DC region, the findings cannot be generalized to all museum-school relationships. Virginia was chosen specifically for a test area due to a familiarity with the state, and the state curriculum not being subjected to the additional variable of Common Core State Standards.

The biggest unforeseen constraint was the number of school districts that required some form of formal permission to distribute a survey. A few districts required an additional application and IRB review to have the survey endorsed and distributed. After contacting the respective offices, many schools simply declined to participate citing a desire not to overwhelm teachers, or a lack of available time. One district said the survey's content failed to align with the school's mission, despite the mission statement of Loudoun County Public Schools actually citing "strong partnerships with families and our community enhance our excellence" as a core belief.¹¹ It is the author's opinion that these hardships in reaching out to school districts only emphasizes the communication barriers between museums and public schools.

Number of Institutions and Organizations Contacted	
Educational Organizations	5
Individual Schools	9
Museum Organizations	3
Individual Museums	94
School Districts	73
School District IRB Applications	5

Figure 2: Number and type of institutions and organizations contacted; figure by author.

Survey Says

Overall 25 participants responded from 20 different museums around the Commonwealth of Virginia ranging in size and museum type. Participants could choose their type of museum from 7 different selections, including Art, Children's/Youth, General/Multidisciplinary, Historic Home/Site, History Museum, Natural History/Anthropological, and Science/Technology. The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated their institution was a Historic or Living History museum.

Other information gathered helped determine if the participant's position included any education in the role, time allocated for education, and if the museum had a designated education position. Understanding how much time a single role in the museums were dedicated to education, whether it be full-time, part-time, or one of many responsibilities, helped to understand how much education was a part of all areas of the museum. This also helped identify the growing shift in serving visitors and their educational needs, rather than the care and preservation of the collections.

Participants were then asked to check off as many types of resources as the museum offered, with the option to write in additional specific programs that didn't fall into the categories of: Specialized Tours, Videos and Images, Primary Sources, Worksheets, Activities, or Lesson Plans, In-School Visits, Pre-Service Teacher Programs, and Teacher Institute Programs. Knowing the types of resources offered can help determine if the education programs either do not exist or are not well utilized. There were a total of 21 responses from 12 different schools, representing nine public school districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Every level of Pre-K to Grade 12 education was represented: one preschool, four elementary schools, three middle schools, and four high schools.

All museums represented in the survey indicated they offered some type of educational resource. Specialized tours were the most popular, being found in 92% of the museums. In-service visits were the second most populous option being found at 68% of represented museums, closely followed by visuals or images, primary sources, and worksheets, activities,

or lesson plans all found in 64% of responding museums. Only two participants indicated their museum offers less than three of the listed resources, with the average number of programs per museum being 4.6.

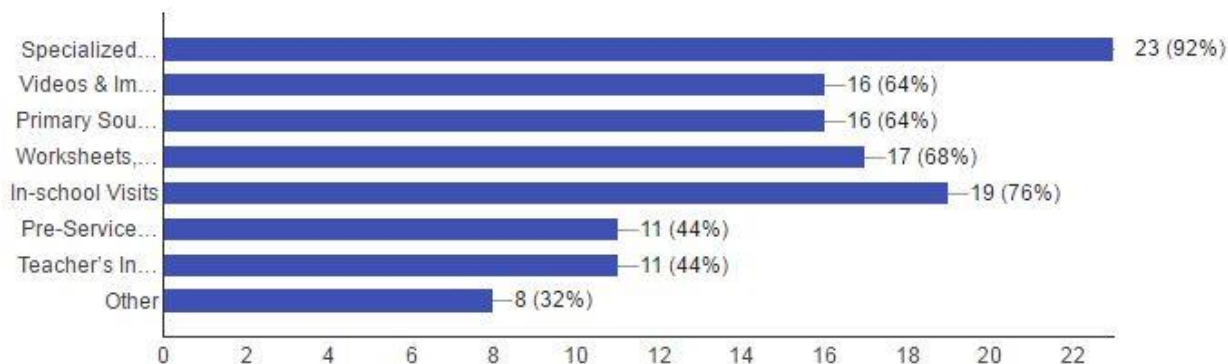


Figure 3: Resources provided by surveyed museums; figure by author.

Teacher Resources:

With 1 being the first choice, and 5 being the last, participants ranked where museums fell when considering outside resources to use inside the classroom. The average of these responses was an overall rank of 3.38, five responses with a poor rank of 5 compared to only one response with a positive rank of 1. In the same vein, the overwhelming majority of participants showed they use some type of outside resources in the classroom, but are teachers using museum-created resources? Participants could write-in specifically which resources they frequent, which generally fell into four categories outside of museum-based resources: images and print-based resources, video, in-school visits, and web or technology-based resources. Nearly half of these responses listed web-based resources or specific websites.

While many museums reported that they provided a variety of resources for teachers, many of the types teachers indicated they use, teachers ranked museums as a primary resource average-to-low. When asked which museum resources they did use, respondents mentioned field trips over other resources offered by a museum, stunting its growth as a viable partner.

While they are arguably the most common type of educational museum-school interaction, traditional field trips can be problematic. A field trip to visit an institution is usually the only interaction due to many limitations.¹² Due to differing philosophies of teaching, classroom teachers and museum educators have different objectives for a field trip experience, teachers preferring conceptual gains, while museum educators focus on broad cognitive gains matched with specifics. According to Falk and Dierking, “any good learning experience builds upon previous experiences to be successful, and museum trips are no exception.”¹³

Field trips and other programming from museums can also be seen as frivolous unless justified in the eyes of school administrators.¹⁴ However many teachers still continue to push for field trips because they believe they are a useful learning environment outside of the

classroom. Teachers must prove the learning outcomes of field trips, connection to curriculum, and logistically figure out everything from lunches, transportation, and chaperones. Because of this, one respondent explained, “this makes it hard to legitimize a trip to a specific museum to admins.” Weak alignments with standards also work against most proposals for field trips. To remedy the situation, museums are changing their field trip programming to a more catered approach, moving away from tours and object show and tell.¹⁵ The partnerships with schools that are thriving don’t always follow the typical field trip trend.¹⁶

Despite a majority of teachers indicating they believe that museums are educational institutions, an average-to-low rank shows there’s a disconnect. Overall, museums can offer a broader cultural and environmental context simultaneously, because they don’t need to conform to national educational standards. This helps them create non-traditional approaches to create a new educational atmosphere.¹⁷

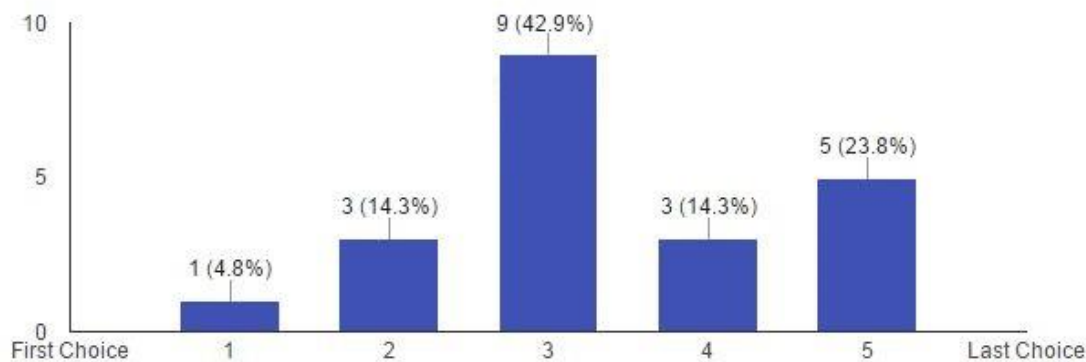


Figure 4: Teachers rank where museums fall as a preferred outside resource; figure by author.

Museum Contact:

The overwhelming majority of respondents commented that in some capacity or another, they or their institution kept up with educational policy, particularly to align their programs to current standards. One respondent even noted their institution works closely with a Teacher Advisory Panel that meets to review the educational programs specifically for the museum. Museums were also asked about roughly how much they contact schools where 75% of respondents indicated that they have regular contact.

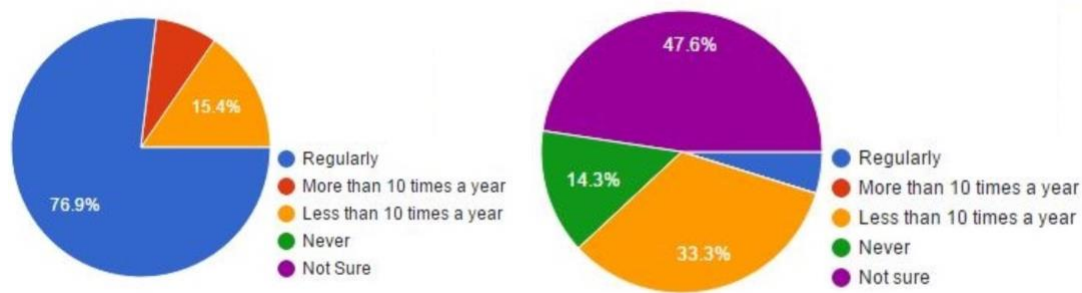


Figure 5: Museums response to frequency of contact (right) compared to contact initiated by teachers (left); figure by author.

Teacher Contact:

Respondents were asked if they directly keep up with museums. While there were a range of responses, an overwhelming 47.6% indicated they did not follow news and events at museums and their resources. Only 19% indicated a strong response that they kept up to date with museums.

Overall the relationship between museums and schools can be strengthened through partnerships, and used to strengthen the surrounding learning community, however this will not happen without ongoing open dialogue.¹⁸ Teachers and museum professionals were asked how often they believed their school or institution respectively, reached out to the other, and the results compared to each other are jarring. Museums reported frequently reaching out to schools, while a majority of teacher responses indicate low communication levels, or respondents didn't know if their school communicated with museums. This not only showcases the communication disconnect between the two groups, but even inside the school between administrators and faculty. Conversations about learning must be broad, and address education that goes beyond school walls. "If we don't," said Wendy Blackwell, Port Discovery's Director of Education, "we will miss the opportunity to cross-pollinate education and inject new life into communities of learners."¹⁹

Respondents to the additional email questions from both groups all cited communication as a necessity to creating stronger relationships. However, all five teachers that responded to the additional questions implied that museums are the ones to shoulder the responsibility to reach out and begin a dialogue.

Museum Perception:

All the respondents agreed that museums are educational institutions. Some participants elaborated stating the caveat to this depends mostly on the museum's mission, and how well they perform that mission. One respondent summed it up saying, "traditionally one is a classroom and the other a repository. It is what one does with the stories and collections at a museum that allows it to be an educational resource or experience. They are the wellspring for heritage and culture. Museums are where we come into contact with our history, art and

world and learn about ourselves and the universe. It is the job of the museum staff/educators to educate the public and make the experience relevant.”

Teacher Perception:

Despite an underwhelming response over the contact with museums, all participants sans one agreed that museums fit their definition of an educational institution. In an open-ended response section, three respondents noted they were not aware of any local museums around their school. Five respondents specifically cited field trips as either a desire or a resource they would like to use - in fact, it was the only specific resource cited.

While both groups mostly agreed that museums fall under their personal definition of an educational institution, the primary role of museums to those polled was not education. Care and preservation of collections was indicated as slightly higher in importance. Despite continuing redefining efforts, many teachers do not recognize museums as a viable educational resource.²⁰ Erskine comments “historically in many Western museums education was seen as an ‘add-on’ service, even though the whole purpose of museums is educational. This is still the (unfortunate) situation in many Western museums where ‘education’ is still used in a limiting sense.”²¹ Confronting these assumptions are major challenges faced by institutions.²² Museums must constantly re-evaluate their tactics, particularly if they continue attempting to break the mold of their “stuffy” image and prove themselves as real institutions of learning.²³ These results help show they are often still seen as a service provider or a destination that acts as a break from the classroom, rather than a potential partner. The constraints put on teachers by standards, and subsequent educational policies limits a teacher’s time to even find or contribute to viable resources, or in the case of this research, voice their opinions on which resources are desired.

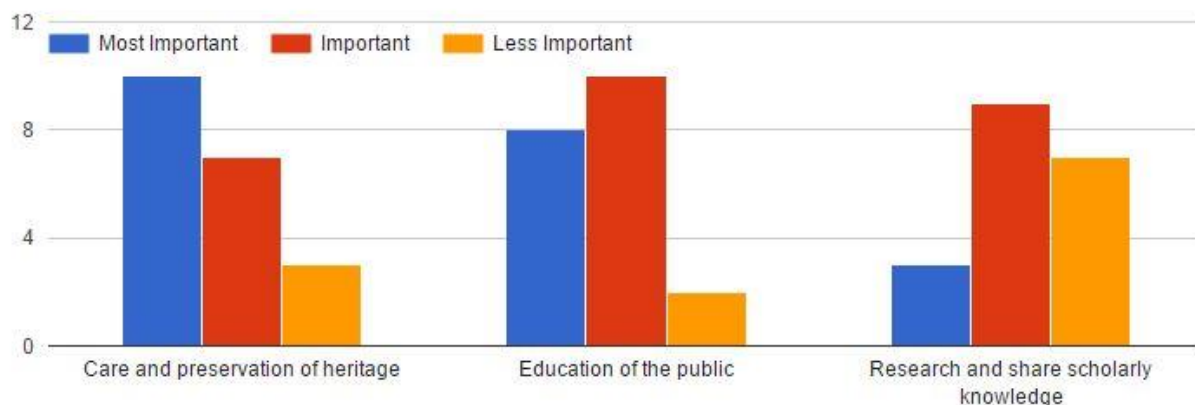


Figure 6: Teachers perceived role of museums; figure by author.

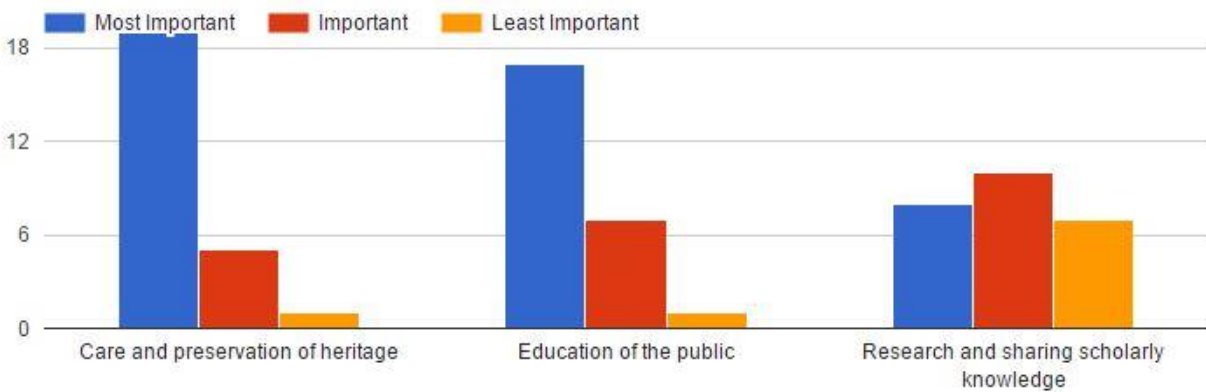


Figure 7: Museums perceived role; figure by author.

The Pride of Mount Vernon

Mount Vernon, located in Alexandria, Virginia just outside of the US Capital, is the home of the first President of the United States, George Washington. Mount Vernon is a unique site in the sense that it is privately owned by the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, which bought the property in 1853 from the Washington family. The estate also employs around 500 staff and works with approximately 400 volunteers. It also has a unique position regarding policy, as Mount Vernon does not accept grants from federal, state, or local governments, and thus is afforded an extra degree of flexibility. Furthermore, no tax dollars are used to support Mount Vernon. The primary sources of income are revenue from the retail and dining facilities, ticket sales, and donations from foundations, corporations, and individuals.²⁴ The subjects the site aligns to, most notable social studies, civics, and history, are also subjects in need of more teaching time in the classroom due to prioritizing other tested subjects. Particularly, the history-related content Mount Vernon covers, George Washington and colonial America, is also relevant to all K-12 curriculums regardless of state or standard.

The site boasts many types of educational programming offered to teachers, schools, and community groups, but all educational programming falls to the responsibility of the education department. At Mount Vernon, education permeates all departments individually, while the education department primarily works directly with teachers, and ensures the programs offered are easily accessible to teachers. Allison Wickens, the Vice President for Education explains, “we don't create everything online, but our department's responsible for making sure teachers can find those things. Or that we've leveraged or designed them with entry pages so that they're directly relatable to classroom application.”²⁵

For example, Mount Vernon had created content regarding the 2016 Presidential Election, inserting the historical interpreter that plays George Washington into the Republican and Democratic debate videos, and subsequently creating campaign logos donning Washington's name instead of the current political frontrunners. This creation came out of the marketing department and gained a large social media pickup, eventually being used by some civics teachers. Despite its original intent, the job of the education department is to connect this content to teachers and any subsequently relatable classroom applications.²⁶

Allison describes the change in the department that “there was a point where education was responsible for a lot of the on-site as well as in the classroom work.”²⁷ This overwhelming responsibility was also reflected in the meeting minutes of the education department, chronicling all the different programming created, and communication internally. Departments collaborated on content of the educational endeavor, but eventually the shift was created, after some changes in leadership, to have the individual departments handle educational programming, while the education department focused on teachers - creating content for them and connecting them to other educational programming offered by Mount Vernon.²⁸ Ultimately, this is summed up by the outcomes of the department:

“We design our programs to reflect current best practices in interdisciplinary learning, primary source analysis, technology integration, and collaborative work. We ensure our participants strengthen their content knowledge and skill development based on the current scholarship in history, civics, education, and leadership fields. And we evaluate the impact of our work to ensure it is relevant to the educators and students we reach.”²⁹

This organizational change shows how Mount Vernon is focusing on more effective ways to connect with classrooms across the county. In this way, prioritizing teachers is an effective way to permeate the museum’s resources into the classroom.

Teacher training programs, such as those Mount Vernon has created, help formal educators learn about resources that can benefit the classroom, and integrate new strategies for learning that include those found in a museum setting. These types of programs may also serve as a link to help create a flow of dialogue between schools and museums. Expanding the definition of ‘teacher’ to include pre-service teachers is another way for museums to create a lasting impression and a connection with formal educators. Mount Vernon has created a partnership with the University of Maryland aimed at pre-service teachers, to help encourage the use of museum resources before they enter the classroom.³⁰ Future teachers must be able to think critically and have inquiry-based responses to objects if they are to expect it from their students; skills that museums can help foster. Museums must recognize their responsibility to share in the education of children by strengthening services for this demographic.³¹

Museum literature cites an overall change in museums that focuses the missions on the public rather than the collection. To see this change in practice rather than in theory, the meeting minutes from the education department archive were sorted through in search of real evidence of this shift. On a small scale, these meeting minutes can show the same shift that much of the literature cited by exploring the thought process of a museum. To showcase this as a quantifiable change, data was collected from reading through the meeting minutes from 1997-2015 of the conferences that were mentioned or attended by the education department.

The primary conferences referenced were expectedly museum-focused. Except the Museums and the Web conference in 1998, the concentration of museum conferences were focused

on state and local history, or just the state of Virginia. As time progressed, there was an increase in discussion and attendance of education-based conferences.³²

Beginning in late 2001, education-based conferences enter the discussion in the meeting minutes, along with attending nationally focused and history specific conferences. These references steadily increased year-by-year, gaining notable momentum around 2004-2005. Following this time period, regular discussion about educational conferences are mentioned or attended by the staff. A professional development program created for teachers pays off from 2009 onwards, when alumni teachers of the program could represent Mount Vernon on their behalf at the participant's home state education conference.³³

In this way, we can see that the Mount Vernon education department over time was investing more time into immersing themselves into the formal education atmosphere, and prioritizing making connections with teachers. The professional development programs helped to enhance the relationship between the Mount Vernon education department and teachers, which is evident by the later representation by the alumni participants of the program at state conferences around the country.

This small glimpse into a working education department of a museum helps to reiterate this shift. Changing the focus to conferences outside of the museum fields embodies this attempt to reach out to teachers, but also to learn about their world. Allison Wickens has told her staff that to build networks, the key is to build personal relationships. Maintaining a real personal relationship will help sustain involvement in Mount Vernon, and subsequently will help to share with others in the teaching field. Focusing on the audience, and subsequently education, has advanced in the museum world but those audiences, teachers, or policymakers may not have accepted the role of museums beyond extra entertainment.

Conclusion

This research began questioning what impact the widely criticized NCLB had on the museum world. It then sought to understand the root issues at the heart of the communicative gap between museums and schools, through the lenses of policy and perception. Examples of working museum-school partnerships or collaborative efforts can be found, but having a true dialogue and relationship isn't yet fully embraced. Museums have developed their role in the education field, taking on creating resources in the accountability era, creating standard specific content, and professional development programs that pass skill-based teaching methods to teachers struggling with new delivery methods. This means that museums are embracing a new educational role and having to convince other educational institutions and policymakers to be considered in this new way. In particular, emerging museum professionals can give new perspectives, a voice to this growing collaborative movement, and advocate for radical policy changes.

Even in light of the lack of solidarity with our present policy, there are many things museums wishing to expand and continue their educational mission can do to strengthen potential relationships.

Personal Connections:

Museums can make personal connections by appointing a point of contact in the museum department to be an outreach person specifically for school groups and teachers.³⁴ This helps to build an active community of practice by developing opportunities and tools for stakeholders, building an educational network, and a local learning community.

Assessment:

Museums should constantly examine their values about what constitutes a quality educational program and align them with long and short-term educational goals of the museum.³⁵ Museums can support additional research into informal learning and its relationship to learning in the classroom. A combination of both qualitative and quantitative data from a more robust research effort can shed valuable light on how libraries and museums make a difference in their learning community and convince potential investors to help fund programs.³⁶

Keep Up with Trends:

Museums should keep with what is happening in educational policy, trends, and learning styles. AAM recommends “Museums should keep up on changing trends in education so that they can anticipate the needs of teachers, students, and the community in general in order to be well-positioned as an educational resource. Museum staff members should begin to think about how they might incorporate 21st-century skills into their programming and exhibits.”³⁷

Advocacy:

Building better relationships with education policymakers and other education stakeholders, with formal partnerships at the federal, state, and local level, and by working with educational associations, parent organizations, etc., is crucial to museum advocacy.³⁸ Strengthen the presence of libraries and museums at the policy-making tables when K-12 educational priorities and policies are considered at the national, state, and local levels.³⁹ Museums are not considered in the discussion of education policy or even an important component of the learning community. This leaves institutions out of the discussion of the educational policy and prevents creative partnerships and programming. Advocacy is the greatest tool museums have to get into those discussions and eventually be in the room where it happens.

List of Figures

Figure 1: Recommendations from Excellence & Equity; figure by author.

Figure 2: Number and type of institutions and organizations contacted; figure by author.

Figure 3: Resources provided by surveyed museums; figure by author.

Figure 4: Teachers rank where museums fall as a preferred outside resource; figure by author.

Figure 5: Museums response to frequency of contact (right) compared to contact initiated by teachers (left); figure by author.

Figure 6: Teachers perceived role of museums; figure by author.

Figure 7: Museums perceived role; figure by author.

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