

Dissertation Proposal

**Serving Under-served Communities in Museums and Historical Organizations:
Creating Meaningful Public Programming**

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Abstract:

Throughout history there have been many populations that have been discriminated against or ignored by institutions and organizations of all types. The same is true of museums, and some might argue that those problems still exist today. Even with the Americans with Disabilities Act it seems that museums and historic organizations are still behind in reaching out to and welcoming people with learning or developmental disabilities. This dissertation will explore past and current relationships and attempts at inclusion of people with developmental or cognitive disabilities, and possible alternatives and programming developed specifically for secondary education students who are in special education classrooms at museums and historical organizations. This dissertation will also include a model for museums to use in developing programming and welcoming under-served populations into organizations.

Preliminary dissertation research has inspired me to explore special education in secondary schools and how public history can relate to various communities of people with disabilities that have previously been underserved by the field. Having held several positions in education departments at museums and historical sites and organizations, I have seen a severe lack of opportunities for people with special needs or learning disabilities and in many cases the complete nonexistence of programming for this group of people. My dissertation research will focus on how people with disabilities, predominantly students in special education classrooms, can be better served by professionals in the public history field, principally through educational programs in museums and historical organizations.

My dissertation will address questions about the past relationship between museums and people with disabilities, the history of special education, the history of museums as collections of curiosities, why students in special education classes are not taken on more educational field trips, what the obstacles and challenges are to taking students on field trips, and also why field trips to museums or cultural organizations would be beneficial as field trip sites. I will explore user-friendly tactics for students, teachers, aides, and museum professionals and staff members.

Preserving and distributing knowledge have been the major pillars of museums work for the modern age. Racial and ethnic inclusiveness were addressed, particularly throughout the Civil Rights Movement and the decades that followed, and accommodations have also been made for physical disabilities with the Americans with Disabilities Act. However, as stated before, many times “the world” has excluded learning disabled people. This dissertation will strive to address the history of special education, explore the past

attempts of museums to include people with disabilities, and offer a model for museum educators to address the deficiencies of educational programs for visitors with learning or developmental disabilities. Universal design is being largely embraced by the museum community, and creating museum exhibits that work for the largest audience at all times would help serve this community immensely. However, also creating specific programming to target audiences such as students with developmental or learning disabilities will be very beneficial. I will create programs for special education students that help them also see the world as an interconnected, diverse place where all are welcomed to interact and engage with the various communities in existence.

It is of utmost importance to develop these programs in league with people with learning disabilities and educators in the special education field. I will ask them to collaborate with me to meet their goals while also meeting the goals of education in the museums and with museum collections. Informal conversations with educational classroom assistants indicate that students are routinely taken on the same amount of field trips per year that “mainstream” students attend. However, these field trips generally seem to be to such locations as shopping malls or movie theaters.

In addition to evaluating information on how museums and cultural organizations of the past treated people with disabilities, in my dissertation I will also present information about how modern museums react to their learning disabled visitors, as well as their sensitivity and awareness to issues regarding these visitors, especially at the secondary level. Lastly, I will present a model for museums to use to develop specific programming and exhibits for people with learning disabilities.

This model for museums and historical organizations will be used for creating programs for special education classes in each organization's respective communities. This will help engage the community with the organization while also educating students who have previously felt unwelcome at these sites. I will also use my dissertation writing year to put into action the ideas and plans I am currently developing. I will use the resources at the various museums and sites with which I have created a relationship, particularly the Sam Davis Home in Smyrna, and I will travel to other areas to conduct research with diverse populations outside of my area. I will work with a special education teacher and students as well as the Sam Davis Home to create meaningful programming. Measuring the success of this program will be difficult because of special education curriculum requirements and the students' special needs, but through surveys of students and teachers, as well as observable data, I will be able to make an assessment of the successes and failures of the programming.

I have several resources I will utilize throughout this process. I know several special education teachers in my personal life including close friends and family members. Additionally, I have made a professional contact with Dr. Craig Rice of the Middle Tennessee State University Special Education graduate faculty. I will work on case studies and research through partnerships with local museums. I am also compiling an extensive bibliography of a multitude of education books, museum education manuals, and other historiographical sources that interpret the history of disabilities and cultural organizations.

One of the experiences I had during my time as a doctoral student that sparked this research idea took place at the Sam Davis Home. There, special education students from

Lavergne and Smyrna have the opportunity to do service projects around the historic home such as sweeping, picking up sticks across the property, or doing small maintenance work throughout the buildings. In conversations with their educational aid who attended the weekly trips to the property it was discovered that the students did have the chance to go through the museum and see the house, but they were not really given the experience that most children get on a field trip, or even most visitors get when taking a tour. This seems problematic since the site is a historic home with a great history and fabulous educational opportunities.

During the summer of 2012, I will work as an assistant counselor at Camp Will in Franklin, Tennessee. The camp is a specialized therapeutic day camp for individuals with physical and/or developmental disabilities. The goal of the camp is to “build confidence and self-esteem, enhance social skills, foster independence and provide an exciting and fun-filled summer for the campers through swimming, dance, art, music and recreation therapy.”¹ This will put me in contact with the community my dissertation focuses on in order to better learn their needs and wants. The director of the camp, Traci Hamby, is a certified recreational therapist and has already served as a great resource for my research. I believe that my time working at Camp Will and with Ms. Hamby will continue to be beneficial.

From May 7 until May 12 I will undertake research in New York City, New York to meet other museum professionals and learn about programming that is currently being presented or developed. I have set up several meetings to talk about programming with the following individuals and museums. Lori Stratton is a Recreational Therapist who has

¹ <http://www.wcparksandrec.com/seniors-therapeutics/activities>, Accessed April 2, 2012.

trained museum educators throughout New York City on how to work with students with learning disabilities. She used to work at the Transit Museum in Brooklyn and now works at the Intrepid Museum. Dara Cohen is an educator at the Jewish Museum, which has developed some programming days for students with disabilities. Danielle Linzer is the Manager of Access and Community Programs at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and has agreed to meet and talk with me about programming during my trip. Lynette Morse, an Educator at the New York Transit Museum, has also agreed to meet to talk about their autism programming. Laura Steefel-Moore is in charge of Community and Access Programs at the Museum of Modern Art; she invited me to observe the “Meet at the MOMA” program for adults with dementia and later talk with staff about programs for their elderly community. Sarah Litvin, Education Associate at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum has also been in contact to meet and talk about their programming opportunities. I have also been in contact with other members of the New York City Access Consortium, and I believe this will be an excellent resource for the dissertation research process. A series of questions for museum professionals, physicians, and special education experts and educators is included at the end of this proposal.

This research will add to the historiography of the public history and museum education fields. As far as I can tell from preliminary research, this is not something that has been done on an extensive scale or been published. The information I will uncover and the model I will develop are seemingly groundbreaking. I have yet to find resources or articles specifically related to teaching people with learning disabilities in museums. My research and consequent articles and dissertation should pave the way for others

interested in pursuing the inclusion of learning disabled people in museums and historic organizations.

The historical context for this dissertation is found in information about institutions such as the Mutter Museum of Medical Curiosities in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and at the Sideshows of Coney Island, New York. By looking at the past treatment of people with disabilities by museums and exhibits, where they were essentially treated as exhibits instead of valued visitors, I will investigate the history of these exhibits and offer alternatives to this previous relationship.

As for historiography, there is little information about historical museums and special education program opportunities. There is information on physical disabilities and on students and the arts, but searches for information about museum programming or exhibits in relation to students with learning and developmental disabilities have yielded no results. As for dissertations and theses, there do not appear to be any written by historians or from the point of view of the museum. A view from museums is particularly important for the field of public history; if they are to be truly public, they must address all audiences. No real evidence of others attempting this is obvious from looking at conferences, blogs, internet interactions, or other resources. When the topic is mentioned to other museum professionals it seems obvious that this area is the next frontier to approach in reaching out to the community of people with disabilities.

Phone conversations with Karen Wade of the Homestead Museum in Los Angeles County, California indicate that the historic home and museum staff are attempting to run some pilot programs for adults with Alzheimer's and developmental disabilities later this year. However, specific programming for students has not been addressed. The Transit

Museum in Brooklyn, New York and the Jewish Museum in New York City have done programming specifically for students with autism in the past. The Museum of Modern Art in New York has also worked on programming for elderly adults with dementia.

My professional teaching residency project at Middle Tennessee State University gave me the opportunity to think about historical context and content and how it can be presented to various groups of people. Having a Master of Arts degree in Ancient History, it can be difficult to find a way to communicate the vast span of history to a group of undergraduate non-History major students. Compiling all the information into a single semester that covers world history from the beginning of time (Paleolithic and Neolithic) to 1500 CE is a daunting task indeed. Making connections and creating a sense of relevance is key. Through this experience I was able to grasp the differences in learning levels, interest, and understanding that my class of wide diversity embodied. This will be essential in developing program relative to a specific site for a group of people with learning and/or developmental disabilities.

The research and dissertation will bring new audiences to museums, serve a new population in museums, involve a new community in the process, and provide more opportunities for students and museum staff. This could also possibly provide educational jobs and work service opportunities, or volunteer experiences for students. Specialized programming has the potential to reach more students and families, spark other interests in students, inspire children, teach students something new and worthwhile, while also providing social, educational, physical, and motor skill education to students.

Outline:

Chapter One: Introduction

- Introduction of questions and thesis
- Define museum programming, learning/developmental disabilities, museum education
- Historiographical review to include discussions of the past treatment of community by museums and historical organizations, the state of museum education, and public history and ADA compliance
- Discussion of general themes and questions for specifically targeted museum education (grade level, disabilities)
- Methodology (case studies, chapter information)

Chapter Two: History of Disabilities and Museums

- Disability history overview
- Exhibits or “sideshow”, portrayals (freakshows, films, advertising)
- How the past has informed the present – attitudes and shortcomings
- Development of special education, history of special education
- ADA Compliance – a history, consequences,

Chapter Three: Museum Education programs

- How to welcome students to museums
- How existing programs might be adapted for use with special education
- Small budgets and staffs – options for “low maintenance” solutions
- Incorporating motor, social, physical skills with education
- General exhibits for sped?
- Similarities/differences between “mainstream” and sped education

Chapter Four: Sensitivity and Awareness: Preparing the Museum and Staff

- TN Association of Museums Conference Panel session
- Training TN State Museum Security Guards
- Fall Workshop_– “Disability and Your Cultural Organization: Sensitivity and Strategies for Going Beyond ADA” at MTSU

Chapter Five: Creating a Model and presentation of created model

- The Special Education student – differences, similarities, problems
- Why target this audience?
- Success and failures, the process of creating a model
- What goes into it – research, interviews?
- Model itself
- How is it successful? How is that measured? How can it be adapted?

Chapter Six: Conclusions

- Introduction

- How to use the model in different museums, adaptation – conferences, list-servs, websites, presentations, - how will I make this available?
- Where does this research leave the discussion of students with learning disabilities in museums?
- Where should/could the discussion go? (future consideration / research)

Plan for Completion:

- Research Plans and Travel, professional contacts, IRB
 - May 7-12, 2012: Travel to New York City, NY for research meetings
 - IRB – in contact with Emily Borne for further review and assistance
 - In contact with Mutter Museum for informational research visit

- Funding
 - Assistantship - tuition and living expenses (~\$1000/month)
 - ZTA Scholarships – applied (from \$1500-9000) – announced late July 2012
 - Research travel – Public History program funds up to \$500/year
 - Research grant from Dean Allen and College of Graduate Studies and Office of Research: \$1000 for research trip in New York City
 - Minimal payment for working with Williamson County summer day camp, Camp Will in Franklin, TN
 - Bart McCash Memorial Scholarship - \$2000

Benchmarks for Completion:

Summer Semester: 3 Dissertation hours

May 7 – 12, 2012 – Travel to New York City, NY to meet with several museum professionals and members of the Museum Access Consortium (Lori Stratton: Recreational Therapist formerly of the Transit Museum, now at the Intrepid; Dara Cohen: Jewish Museum, NYC; Danielle Linzer: Manager of Access and Community Programs at the Whitney Museum of American Art; Lynette Morse: Educator, New York Transit Museum; Laura Steefel-Moore: Community and Access Programs at the Museum Of Modern Art; Sarah Litvin: Education Associate, Lower East Side Tenement Museum, and more as may arise)

June 1 – July 20, 2012 – Work as assistant camp counselor at Camp Will in Williamson County

August 2012 - Complete draft of Chapter 1 (Intro) and Chapter 2 outline

Fall 2012: 6 Dissertation hours

October 2012 - Complete draft of Chapter 2 (History of Disabilities)

November 3, 2012 – “Disability and Your Cultural Organization: Sensitivity and Strategies for Going Beyond ADA” workshop at MTSU

November 2012: Complete draft of Chapter 3 (Museum Education programs)

December 2012: Complete draft of Chapter 4 (Sensitivity and Awareness)

Spring 2013: Dissertation hours

January 2013: Complete draft of Chapter 5 (Creating a Model and presentation of created model)

February 2013: Complete draft of Chapter 6 (Conclusions)

March 2013: Full, revised draft to Chair

April 2013: Further revisions, full draft to committee
Defense (2nd or 3rd week?)

May 2013: Graduate!

Schedule of questions for museums/professionals on NYC trip:

1. What kinds of programs do you offer on a daily basis for field trips?
2. What kinds of programs do you offer for people with special needs or disabilities?
3. What disabilities or disorders do you focus on?
4. How do you feel about universal design? Is that incorporated into your exhibit design?
Programming?
5. How did you research for program development?
6. Do you have a specific staff member or set of staff members that you work with on this?
7. What resources did you use outside of the museum (community, consultants, experts, audience members)?
8. How do you evaluate results of programming?
9. What kind of sensitivity and awareness programs or training do you have for staff?
10. How do you advertise your programming to the public?
11. Museum mission and education mission?
12. How does the staff, board, community, etc react to these programs?
13. Recommendations, do's and don'ts, problems, suggestions?

Questions for Coney Island Board Member, Dr. Jeffery Birnbaum

1. What kind of work do you do with Coney Island?
2. What is your background?
3. What are your research interests?
4. What do you know about the past of disabilities in museums or sideshows?
5. How have things changed? How have they stayed the same?
6. What is the future of sideshows and freakshows?
7. Suggested readings and/or films?

Questions for special education teachers/students/aides/experts

- Joe Tilley - sent
 - Dr. Craig Rice
 - Susie Jackson - sent
 - Abby Gatreau's mom
 - Sara Cantrell (good source as former museum professional!) - sent
 - Brent Bonds - sent
 - Stacie Bradshaw - sent
 - Dee Brock - sent
 - Teachers in Rutherford County areas
 - Traci Hamby
 - Kristen Clary
 - Michael Dunn Center – Roane County
1. What is the dynamic of your class (ages, disabilities, teacher – student ratio)
 2. Where do you typically go on field trips? Why?
 3. What do you want to get out of a field trip?
 4. How do you measure successful programming/education? IEPs and standardized testing?
 5. How often are students placed in inclusion classes, and what are your thoughts on that? What classes do they attend with “mainstream”
 6. What kinds of cultural activities does your class do (arts, music, history)
 7. Have you taken your students to cultural institutions (art museums, children's museums, history museums, historical sites)? Why or why not?
 8. What would you need as a class/teacher to feel comfortable going on such a field trip?
 9. Would a field trip to a cultural institution be something you would consider worth your time and trouble? Good or bad for the student?
 10. What kinds of programming would you like to see for your students? (educational, tactile, entertaining, physical, one-on-one, with “mainstream” students)

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