

African American Museums and Financial Sustainability

Randall A. Williams
Prof. Michael Worth
Fundraising and Philanthropy
The George Washington University

Boom & Bust Time for African American Museums

Electricity crackles through the African American museum community, as now is a time of great triumph and frustration. A boom and bust period has dawned as new regional and national African American museums open multi-million dollar complexes while seemingly just as many disclose the depth of their financial difficulties. The boom can be heard from coast to coast, as Maryland and California both greeted new museums in 2005: the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture and The Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco. The National Slavery Museum in Fredericksburg, VA, and the Martin Luther King Jr., National Memorial in DC, both broke ground in 2006. Also, the newest Smithsonian museum took another step closer to materializing after a site on the National Mall was picked for the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). Some of the museums opening during the current wave of expansion are already showing signs of financial distress. The Muhammad Ali Center opened a \$75 million complex in 2005 with only one major contribution coming from a Black donor: Lennox Lewis, a British boxer.¹ The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati (Freedom Center) cut the ribbon on its new \$110 million dollar facility in August 2004, then posted a \$5.5 million deficit in its first 18 months and will need an estimated \$2 million to \$3 million a year in public funding to continue operating, CEO John Pepper said in March 2006.² Even venerable institutions are experiencing difficulties, some even as they expand. The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, established in 1965, moved into a new building in 1997 and struggled for money and attendance. The African American Museum of Philadelphia, established in 1976, recently slashed its payroll by letting most of the staff go in order to keep the doors open. African American cultural institutions, such as museums, are currently in the middle of a population explosion while suffering from a lack of private and public financial support.

¹ Fears, Darryl. "Black-Oriented Museums are Lacking Black Donors." The Washington Post 6 Dec. 2005, sec. A.

² McGurk, Margaret A. "Freedom Center seeks bailout: At least \$2M a year in public funding to be requested." The Cincinnati Enquirer 15 March 2006.

Non-profit organizations (NPOs), unless endowed from inception, have traditionally struggled for funding, but African American museums face a unique set of challenges that impede their efforts to achieve financial sustainability. African American museums are under funded due to historical barriers, cultural preferences for charitable giving, institutional youth, and a dearth of professional business and museum skills. As a result of these factors, virtually none are accredited with the American Association of Museums (AAM), few have endowments beyond a nominal size, and many have had to cut staff, programs, or projects in order to remain open. African American museums need an internal reorientation of missions and staff, as well as an external infusion of funds and experience to address these challenges. Internally, African American museums should be built upon clear missions with broad appeal, an active Board, and a comprehensive development strategy. Externally, foundations, established museums, and associations need to provide access to fundraising information and funds, help with staff development, and continue to evolve into more diverse institutions themselves. The combination of internal and external adaptations is necessary to address limitations both within African American museums and with or within their environment.

Barriers to Success: History, Preference, Youth, and Inexperience

Where most NPOs only cope with the challenges of fundraising, African American NPOs must navigate the twisted roads of history and racism. In a study conducted by Johns Hopkins University's Nonprofit Listening Post Project, over 80 percent of all NPOs surveyed named fundraising as a "very significant challenge," but that number jumped to over 90 percent for the museums and theaters surveyed.³ As the study found, virtually all museums struggle for funding, but most never have to deal with the weight of history as African American museums do. While a variety of museums have opened their doors since the middle of the twentieth century, essentially all African American museums began after 1960. The Civil Rights Movement made a place for museums of people of color. Racism and

³ Salamon, Lester M., comp. Nonprofit Listening Post Project: Communique No. 1. Johns Hopkins University.

segregation denied civic and legal support for African American ventures, particularly celebrations of Black culture. Margaret Walker Alexander expressed the release the 1960s gave to African Americans and the expression of themselves when she said⁴:

“We can be eternally grateful for the revolutionary decade of the 60’s for a cultural re-awakening to the worth of our heritage, and the great potential of our peoples’ destiny. What we inherit from the civil rights movement and the Black revolution of racial consciousness are gems of inestimable worth. They have given us renewed pride and dignity and a greater sense of manhood and womanhood. They have moved us one step closer toward emancipation of mind and spirit. For we no longer possess a mass slave mentality. Culturally we have watched a renaissance of the arts mushrooming across the length and breadth of this land.”

Even after the Civil Rights Movement knocked down many of the major legal obstacles, other social and cultural barriers hindered access to established cultural institutions. Howardena Pindell called the de facto discrimination by established cultural institutions against artists of color a “closed circle... The institutions which were opened to address the needs of artists of color, because of the racial bias which closed them out of the primary network, are rarely if ever permitted to enter this closed circuit, thus closing access routes to broader documentation of artists of colors’ activities and achievements.”⁵ Fred Wilson captured the feeling of continued segregation in mainstream or predominantly-White institutions with his piece, “Guarded View.” In 1991, he displayed four Black, featureless mannequins dressed in the security uniforms of four New York City museums. “In our nation’s premiere museums, frequently the only African Americans there are guards and housekeeping staff.”⁶ Culturally-specific institutions arose out of the need to fill the void created when all other institutions turned their backs on people of color, especially African Americans.

Once cultural institutions began to form in order to preserve, study, and exhibit African American culture and history, the organizations turned to foundations for grants. The boards and staffs of grant-making institutions of the 1960s – made up completely of White males – often denied any and all grants

⁴ Alexander, Margaret Walker. “Agenda for action: Black art and letters, 1972” *Ebony Handbook*.

⁵ Pindell, Howardena. “Art world racism: a documentation.” *New Art Examiner* 16.7 (March 1989): 32.

⁶ Bethel, Kathleen E. “Plenty Good Room: African American Museums At the Millennium.”

to African American institutions. Regrettably, while the rest of society has diversified, even today foundation board and staff members tend to be overwhelmingly from White, upper-class backgrounds. Foundation boards and staffs without people of color are far less likely to support diversity issues and programs.⁷ Grant-making institutions' greatest strides in diversity have come through the inclusion of White women, but they still lag behind on the addition of people of color, people with disabilities, and gays and lesbians.⁸ One major grant-making institution that has made in-roads in funding diverse programs is the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), an independent grant-making agency of the federal government. But even many of the IMLS's diversity initiatives are accelerated through federally legislated funds dedicated to particular groups, such as Native Americans and Native Hawaiians. IMLS granted only seven grants to African American cultural institutions in the 2004 and 2005 grant cycles; Native American tribes and cultural institutions received over 40 grants during the same period.⁹ A dedicated set of grant funds for Native American and Native Hawaiian interests is the primary cause of this discrepancy. 2006 was the first year of the Museum Grants for African American History and Culture Program (MGAHHC) at IMLS. It will take time before the MGAHHC program demonstrates a sizeable impact on the African American museum community. In July 2004, the IMLS convened a daylong forum of 30 African American museum industry leaders to address the state of the field. This forum noted that board diversity was an issue at African American museums, not just foundations and other institutions: "The issue of diversity on museum boards is a sensitive one for African American museums. Participants note that some institutions have benefited by a board that is diverse in ethnicity, experience, and skill base."¹⁰ Above the institutional philanthropy of foundations and government, African American cultural institutions depend mostly upon personal philanthropy and community support.

⁷ Burbridge Diaz, Odendahl, and, Shaw, comps. The Meaning and Impact of Board and Staff Diversity in the Philanthropic Field. Joint Affinity Groups.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Grant Search." IMLS. 30 Mar. 2006

¹⁰ African American History & Culture in Museums: Strategic Crossroads and New Opportunities. IMLS, 10.

One of the strongest assets of African American cultural institutions is the African American community, but the community is limited in its ability to support larger organizations. Gaps in population size, education, and income emerge when NPOs turn to the African American population for donations, as opposed to the White or the general population. According to the latest U.S. Census, African Americans represent 13 percent of the U.S. population, while Whites represent 75 percent of the total population. This disparity dramatically decreases the number of donors when an organization targets only the African American population for support. Even if an African American museum did not specifically single out an African American audience for solicitation, the name of the institution often limits the number of potential self-identifying donors to mainly African Americans. Kimberly Camp, former president of the Museum of African American History in Detroit, stated, "What happens with African-American institutions is you get the attitude that, 'Oh, that's a museum that Black people go to.'"¹¹ The same phenomenon occurs at non-African American institutions, such as the Women's Museum or the Latino Museum of Art; the name itself begins to exclude potential donors. African American museums must educate their target audience on the universality of the African American story.

The inequality in income exacerbates the population gap, because the African American population generally has dramatically less money to spend on charitable organizations than Whites. Whites average \$10,171 in discretionary income per year while African Americans average \$5,652 in discretionary income.¹² With roughly half as much discretionary income, if African Americans had the same population as Whites, then they could still only support half as many institutions by themselves. Alice Green Burnette, a fundraising consultant in Florida, cautioned organizations that although U.S. Census figures show that the income of Black households has risen by more than 20 percent since 1993, the increase shouldn't be viewed as a jump in disposable assets¹³:

¹¹ Horn, Dan. "Museum's First Job: Explain What It Is." The Cincinnati Enquirer 13 June 2004.

¹² Anft, Michael, and Harvey Lipman. "How Americans Give." The Chronicle of Philanthropy 1 May 2003.

¹³ Ibid.

"Blacks shouldn't be looked at as a new market, or like they're a brand... There's a preacher who says that as soon as Black folks get two nickels to rub together, White folks want one... I worry that people in fund raising will see those figures on Black giving and start going after Black wealth. Blacks don't necessarily have more wealth, just more income."

Much of the disparity in income levels results from the education gap. Of the total population that has earned a bachelor's degree or higher, 84 percent are White while only 6 percent are Black.¹⁴ A college degree does not guarantee success, but the presence of a secondary degree is linked to much higher income levels, therefore a greater capacity for giving. In addition, the expansion of African American museums is paralleled by increased professionalism in the museum industry. New museums need new scholars and increasingly researchers, curators, and collections managers need a college degree for employment and credibility. What money that is available in the African American community for charitable organizations is generously donated at high levels, but generally to religious programs.

African Americans are the most charitable ethnic group in the U.S., but cultural preferences for charitable giving steer most of the gifts away from cultural institutions. African Americans donate 25 percent more of their discretionary income to charities than Whites, but 90 percent of those donations go to religious organizations.¹⁵ Mary Beth Gasman, an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author on African American philanthropy, writes that, "Since its inception, the Black church has been the single most important institution involved in Black philanthropy. It has also been the chief beneficiary of the Black community's generosity as well."¹⁶ Combined with the discretionary income disparity, Whites give, on average, \$2500 per year to non-religious charitable causes and African Americans give \$560 per year to non-religious charitable causes. Whites give almost four and a half times more per year per person than African Americans to non-religious charitable causes, such as museums.

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. Factsheet for a Race, Ethnic, or Ancestry Group. 2000.

¹⁵ Fears, Darryl. "Black-Oriented Museums are Lacking Black Donors." The Washington Post 6 Dec. 2005, sec. A. Whites give 75 percent to religious organizations and 25 percent to non-religious charitable causes.

¹⁶ Gasman, Marybeth. "Trends in African American Philanthropy." OnPhilanthropy (2006).

African American museums couldn't exist until the Civil Rights Movement opened the door, creating a situation of sector-wide institutional youth. The 2005 Museum Financial Information Survey found that of the overall museum population (n=794), 25 percent are 70 years or older, 50 percent are over 40-years old, and only 25 percent of all museums are under 25-years old.¹⁷ Comparably, research into African American museums found that of surveyed museums (n=183) one percent are over 70-years old, five percent are over 40-years old, and, further, a full 46 percent of African American museums surveyed are under 10-years old.¹⁸ This youth creates an environment of little institutional history, few established organizations from which to borrow, and a scarcity of information on museums and philanthropy of African Americans. Relative and actual institutional youth means that there has been less time to develop policies and procedures for running a museum. Younger institutions are less likely to have as well-developed an audience and donor base as an institution in the prime of the organizational life cycle. Many young institutions are concerned most with establishing their identity and keeping the doors open, not reaching out to other organizations or establishing standards and programs that can be exported. For some young institutions, the identity of the organization is wrapped up in the leadership of the executive director. Many have a missing or unproven succession plan for Trustees or the executive director.¹⁹ The July 2004 IMLS forum concluded that “[m]any African American museums are in a transition phase. They were created by dynamic and strong leaders who are now retiring. Making the difficult transition from founding director to board-led organization requires renewed attention to educating board members so that they can effectively advance the museum’s mission.”²⁰ Many young

¹⁷ Merritt, Elizabeth E., ed. 2006 Museum Financial Information. Washington: AAM, 2006. The Listening Post Project survey found that of the general population museums surveyed (n=73), 31 percent are 50 years or older, 63 percent are over 30-years old, and only nine percent of all museums are under 10-years old. These numbers may skew older than the actual museum population due to the selection process for participating in the Listening Post Project. Salamon, Lester M., comp. Nonprofit Listening Post Project: Communique No. 1. Johns Hopkins University.

¹⁸ African American statistics compiled from museum websites, GuideStar, Charity Navigator, and interviews, by the author of this paper.

¹⁹ Bunch, Lonnie G. Personal interview. 4 Apr. 2006.

²⁰ African American History & Culture in Museums: Strategic Crossroads and New Opportunities. IMLS, 10.

organizations are driven completely by their founding executive director and can falter when he or she steps down.

The African American museum community is short on established institutions to borrow from, both intellectually and physically. Museums, in general, form an industry-wide support network through traveling exhibits, loans, and exchanging research and professionals (e.g., hiring away curators or CEOs from other institutions). Many African American museums exist both in and out of this circle because of their institutional youth. Most African American museums can be categorized as small history museums that, generally, operate on a neighborhood or city level. Large African American institutions, such as the Freedom Center or the new Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, are a relatively recent phenomenon. Growing African American museums are often not stable enough to begin helping other institutions. New regional or national level museums struggle with their own financial and identity problems and have little time or resources to help other organizations. The Freedom Center exemplifies this dilemma.

The Freedom Center opened with about 100 artifacts, 800 books in its educational library, and a nominal research archive.²¹ Dick Croy, co-author of The River Jordan: A True Story of the Underground Railroad, laid out a system of mutual benefit for smaller African American museums and the Freedom Center a few months before it opened²²:

“What all of these museums and events require to become more effective - in many cases, just to survive - is a little financial help. Professional guidance and a pittance, compared with the Freedom Center's annual budget - or perhaps "just" assistance from a Freedom Center grant writer - could in many cases help the best of these local institutions become self-sustaining. But what do they have to do with the Freedom Center and its own long-term survival?

Think of the Freedom Center as the mother ship, lacking the historical resources and real-life ambience of the actual sites, while providing the professionalism and prestige that can garner funding to operate the whole system. So, think of the Freedom Center's partial funding or grant-writing assistance for the best of the local sites and events as investments in its own future.”

²¹ Horn, Dan. "Museum's First Job: Explain What It Is." The Cincinnati Enquirer 13 June 2004.

²² Croy, Dick. "Regard Freedom Center as Mother Ship." The Cincinnati Enquirer 27 June 2004.

Unfortunately, the Freedom Center has enough growing pains of its own that it is unable to establish itself as a fount of fundraising expertise and support. Beyond the previously stated operating deficit, the Freedom Center has a major problem in identifying what it is about and how to communicate that to its target audience. Lack of a clear mission or purpose has hurt the Freedom Center.²³ The Freedom Center is dedicated to presenting causes for freedom from around the globe, but the title, The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, beguiles this point. Henry Burke, co-author with Dick Croy, posted on the Underground Railroad Research Forum website a note of exasperation at working with and trying to understand the true purpose of the Freedom Center²⁴:

“For a long time, I had been attempting to present my Underground Railroad research to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati (NURFC). I had incorrectly assumed that NURFC was the repository for the history of the Underground Railroad across the United States! The name: National Underground Railroad Freedom Center misled me, and I think a lot of other local Underground Railroad researchers. This has never been the goal or function of NURFC... In defense of my making this horrible mistake, I think the NURFC is responsible for some of this misconception. They should have clarified their goals, so everyone would understand! This would certainly have saved me and others a lot of time and effort, and it would have prevented some of my negative comments about NURFC.”

There is a dearth of information on either African American museums or African American philanthropy, because African American museums' youth and lower numbers compared to other sections of the museum population, such as art museums. Of the studies conducted on African American museums, none have surveyed a large enough percentage of the population to avoid low confidence intervals. Compounding the problem, the last study occurred more than a decade ago. These studies are only good as anecdotal evidence. The African American Museum Association, now known as the Association of African American Museums (AAAM), conducted a study of its members in 1986-87, but only 52 responded out of 99 surveyed (Confidence Interval: 9.4%). The 1988 Ford Foundation survey

²³ National Underground Railroad Freedom Center's mission: "We reveal stories about freedom's heroes, from the era of the Underground Railroad to contemporary times, challenging and inspiring everyone to take courageous steps for freedom today."

²⁴ Burke, Henry R. "TO ALL CONCERNED -- NPS-UGRR-NTF & NURFC." Underground Railroad Research Forum.

of Black and Hispanic art museums had only 29 respondents (Confidence Interval: 15.4%). While African American philanthropy is old, the study of it is relatively new. In fact, the professional examination of African American philanthropy really only blossomed as a field in the past decade.²⁵ There are few published studies on African American philanthropy and those that do exist were mostly released within the past five years. The National Conference on Black Philanthropy and the National Center for Black Philanthropy are two recent additions to the study and promotion of African American philanthropy, both founded since 1999.²⁶

Finally, there is a dearth of essential professional skills in African American museums, either due to untrained personnel or a lack of professional development. Most African American museum staff members have an education background, rather than a background in business, fundraising, or collections management. Lonnie Bunch, the founding executive director of the NMAAHC, when asked about professionalism in African American museums, he responded: "How do you define professionalism? I think the issue is transferable skills. Most people in African American museums come from the educational field. They don't have the business or the collections management skills to take care of the museum."²⁷ The educational focus of museums today has long been a part of the African American community, Mr. Bunch said. While connecting with the core audience and conveying information is a strong suit of African American museums, they have long demonstrated problems attracting personnel outside of the education field.

The 1988 study by the African American Museums Association and American Association for State and Local History, Profiles of Black Museums: a survey commissioned by the African American Museums Association, found staff issues a continuing theme. Many museums existed on a month-to-month basis without a formal plan for all or most of the current year (29 percent), with 70 percent lacking a five-year plan. Survey respondents prioritized their needs as fundraising, more paid staff, physical plant

²⁵ "African-American Philanthropy: a Bibliography and Resource List." [Fdncenter.Org](#).

²⁶ Brake, Yvonne M. "Black Philanthropy." [Learning to Give](#)

²⁷ Bunch, Lonnie G. Personal interview. 4 Apr. 2006.

concerns, collections preservation, staff training, and collections acquisitions. Two of the reported top six concerns are directly staff related, and all of the concerns are at least indirectly related to museum staff.²⁸ Dr. Lawrence J. Pijeaux Jr., president of AAAM and president and CEO of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI), stated the situation simply when he said, “It is related to money. Our institutions are challenged with their fundraising efforts because they are relatively new, small staff – not generally able to develop sophisticated methods of development.”²⁹ In 2004, the IMLS forum on African American museums concluded that attracting non-education professionals and training the current staff is of the utmost importance for positions in curatorial services, marketing, technology, and collections management.³⁰ African American museum leaders at the IMLS Forum expressed frustration at the use of outdated and poor fundraising techniques³¹:

“Historically, African Americans have not had the wealth base to rely on individual benefactors. Today, that wealth base exists [though limited], but there is not yet a collective consciousness among African Americans of ‘owning’ African American cultural institutions. Moreover, African American museums are not investing in developing and harvesting relationships with potential significant donors. Paradoxically, it was also observed that some organizations were pursuing ‘celebrity’ funding to the detriment of building a more reliable base of ‘regular’ donors...Many African American museums, it was suggested, have not taken advantage of advanced techniques (such as data mining) to identify and cultivate sources of new and larger donations. Given the small size of many of these museums, a number of participants thought it may be valuable to explore shared ways to improve the level of fundraising expertise across the community.”

Without training and experience in museums, marketing, and fundraising, few African American museums will be able to achieve Mr. Bunch’s definition of financial sustainability³²:

“I think there are two definitions for financial sustainability. The AAM definition is the ability to tread water, to keep the doors open. If you can run the museum with a small staff and little in the way of a budget, then you are sustainable. As long as an organization is fulfilling its basic educational objectives it could be considered stable. I think growth is the key. True financial sustainability should mean that an organization can grow and evolve as a living organism.”

²⁸ Profiles of Black Museums: a survey commissioned by the African American Museums Association, xiii-xv.

²⁹ Pijeaux, Lawrence J. Telephone interview. 1 Mar. 2006.

³⁰ African American History & Culture in Museums: Strategic Crossroads and New Opportunities. IMLS, 8.

³¹ African American History & Culture in Museums: Strategic Crossroads and New Opportunities. IMLS, 4.

³² Bunch, Lonnie G. Personal interview. 4 Apr. 2006.

Drawing upon the Boom

In spite of the historical, cultural, or institutional barriers, African American museums are surviving and expanding. Today's growth is predicated on two major factors: the ascendancy of the African American middle class and society's continued strides in embracing diversity.

The African American middle class grows every year, increasing both in political and economic power. After the 1960-70s, the growing African American middle class spurred a movement on the local political level. Mr. Bunch explained that "[t]he ascendancy of Black political leadership in cities has led to a push for Black cultural institutions." The growth in political and economic equality drives and is driven by a growth in cultural equality. Dr. John Fleming, founding director of the National Afro-American Museum & Cultural Center and current Vice-President for Museums at the Cincinnati Museum Center, explains the growth of cultural institutions as the next step in the African American community's quest to define itself and stake a claim on America³³:

"Those [museums] that have lasted and those that are coming on stream are responding to a modern day cultural imperative. Blacks sense a need to complete their life cycle. For a long time, education was our main kingdom – the route to liberation. Then the political kingdom, then the social. Now is the cultural kingdom. Culture embraces religion, lifestyle, heritage and all the questions that have to do with being. So, we are saying who we are. We used to go and say, We need this. Now we are saying, What can we do for ourselves? The museums are responding to this need to define ourselves."

As a result of the Civil Rights Movement, African American families and communities made great though unfinished progress toward integration into much of the predominately White culture of America. This integration allows for greater economic, political, and social opportunities, but at the risk of disconnecting the growing African American middle class from its heritage. Mr. Bunch believes that much of the increase in African American cultural institutions is attributable to a desire to reconnect: "The Black middle class wants its children to understand their history and culture, a reconnection with African American roots. Integration has expanded the Black middle class, but also allowed for mobility

³³ Trescott, Jacqueline. "Museums on the move." 26-27.

that has distanced families from their roots.”³⁴ Dr. Pijaux noted that heritage tourism is the largest growing area of regional tourism.³⁵ The expansion of the African American middle class is directly related to the expansion of society’s interest in diversity issues.

Corporations, universities, and society in general, are increasingly promoting diversity issues of all kinds. While America is far from equal and income disparity between the rich and the poor widens every year, sensitivity toward diversity issues and a genuine interest in other cultures has increased. “There is a growing interest in the history of our country where individuals across the board are becoming very interested in the contributions of minorities,” Dr. Pijaux explained.³⁶ Organizations, local to national governments and individuals are all pushing for more culturally specific institutions. The NMAAHC is one of the most recent examples, a new federally mandated museum on African American history and culture. “Financially, the idea of the NMAAHC as a lens for telling the story of America resonates with a lot of people,” Mr. Bunch said. “People need to understand, whether they want to or not, that so much of America’s history is about race. We will include stories of race through a different lens. Our stories will have a broad appeal, because we will be telling the stories of America.” Increasingly more Americans agree with Mr. Bunch’s assessment. Both Mr. Bunch and Dr. Pijaux see corporate partnerships and sponsorships as a path to future funding. Mr. Bunch expects to see “an increase in partnerships with companies that have diversity as a core value” and will bring “an influx of corporate cash.”³⁷ The Freedom Center benefited from several major corporate donations, most notably \$10 million from Proctor & Gamble, based in Cincinnati. While corporate donations did not spare the Freedom Center from financial troubles, they allowed the museum to build a large, beautiful new facility. The goodwill of the general population and corporations in particular, must be cultivated for African American cultural institutions to do more than tread water financially.

³⁴ Bunch, Lonnie G. Personal interview. 4 Apr. 2006.

³⁵ Pijaux, Lawrence J. Telephone interview. 1 Mar. 2006.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Bunch, *op. cit.*

Internal Reorientation

African American museums and other institutions interested in their promotion must seize upon the current expansion to rectify the accompanying financial woes. Culturally specific museums need internal and external change in order to stabilize their fiscal situation. Internally, a clear mission with broad appeal, an active board, and a comprehensive development strategy that plans for the future must guide African American museums.

For African American museums, the proposed solutions amount to a reorientation and rededication to mission and good governance. The mission is the most important factor for any NPO. If an NPO has too broad or vague a mission, then it will be nearly impossible to build a case for support or evaluate an organization's success. As pointed out previously, the Freedom Center suffers from a vast and unclear mission so much so that Underground Railroad experts were perplexed by the Freedom Center's lack of interest in their research. In 1994, Dr. Fleming, the founding director of the Freedom Center, stated, "It's really the responsibility of the Black community to support its museums. All we can do is build buildings. It takes people to bring museums to life."³⁸ Hank Rosso, renowned fundraising expert, would have disagreed, holding that it is the responsibility of the museum board and staff to explain the mission and goals of the museum to the people and win their support, both intellectually and financially.³⁹ The new breed of regional and national African American museums must cultivate larger, more diverse audiences. This requires a clear, compelling case for support that appeals to a broader population. African American museums looking to develop a larger donor base must explain how their mission and programs concern a more diverse population. As Mr. Bunch put it, these new museums need to explain how they "will be telling the stories of America."⁴⁰ Development of the mission and approval of the case for support falls upon the shoulders of the board.

³⁸ "Black Museums: Keeping the Legacy Alive." [Find Articles](#).

³⁹ Rosso, Henry A. [Hank Rosso's Achieving Excellence in Fund Raising](#). 49.

⁴⁰ Bunch, op. cit.

Ultimately, the economic success or failure of an NPO is the responsibility of the board as fiduciary trustees. The board must be the most committed group of individuals to the museum and its mission, because they must lead the way for others' support, especially financially. Thomas Wolf, author of Managing A Nonprofit Organization In The Twenty-First Century, outlined the role of the board of trustees to the organization's success⁴¹:

“These individuals, who have agreed to serve the organization in a variety of ways, must set the tone for others—people in the community, funders, constituents, audience members, and clients. Trustees must support the organization in spirit, encouraging others to be as enthusiastic about its programs and activities as they are, and they must support the organization more tangibly with money, demonstrating that those closest to the organization, its trustees, are 100 percent committed to it. Put quite simply, everyone who serves on a board of trustees must contribute some cash every year to his or her organization.”

The board must be fully invested in the organization and understand the importance and seriousness of their role. Most African American museums are small and young with many board members without NPO trustee experience. If the board is inexperienced, then the executive director, with the help of their staff, may need to educate the board on everything, including their responsibilities for fundraising. Marie Malaro, foremost authority on museum governance and collections management, explains why trustees must be educated⁴²:

“But board members usually come to their positions with little training in issues of crucial importance to the [nonprofit] sector as a whole and in those of particular interest to their organizations. Accordingly, it is unrealistic to assume that these board members are prepared to govern well, and, when in fact they fail, the tendency is to look the other way because of their volunteer status... The sensible solution is to focus on board education and then require more thoughtful governance.”

Participating in fundraising is often listed as one of the worst things about being a trustee, but the old adage of ‘give, get, or get off,’ must be applied. As mostly small institutions, African American museums must depend upon the skill set of the board even more so than a large, well-staffed organization. If the board does not have a diverse set of skills—financial, legal, public relations, technical—then it is

⁴¹ Wolf, Thomas. Managing a Nonprofit Organization in the Twenty-First Century. 57.

⁴² Malaro, Marie. Museum Governance: Mission, Ethics, Policy. 35.

imperative that new or additional trustees be found to fill these gaps. A solid case for support built upon a clear mission and a board of trustees dedicated to the success of the institution must be in place before the organization assembles a comprehensive strategic development plan to fund the future of the organization.

An organization can survive on a month-to-month basis, but a strategic plan for the future lets an institution thrive. Every organization should have a strategic plan and a business plan in place, whether the goal is to open a multi-million dollar complex in six years or just to hire enough staff to properly exhibit the collection. The strategic plan sets out the organizational and operational goals, initiatives, and timelines for the short- and long-term future of the organization, then provides strategies to achieve these objectives.⁴³ The business plan describes in detail the short- and long-term initiatives and programs that will fund the organization's operations, such as fundraising, earned income, and partnerships. African American museums must approach development as a systematic process that intertwines mission, marketing research, audience cultivation, solicitation, and evaluation. Too often, development is thought of only as asking for money. A good business plan should layout the strategies and tactics for building the audience and donor base through the annual fund, cultivating larger gifts through the major gifts initiative, creating stability and growth with endowment and capital campaigns, and ensuring the future of the organization through planned giving.⁴⁴ The business plan should also act as a check on unrealistic aspirations. Many times, boards or executive directors take on too ambitious an initiative because they have not researched the capacity of their donor base or ability to generate earned income. The business plan provides a reality check on current operations, while working towards increasing the capacity for future ventures. Of course, if the organization has not already implemented an overall strategic plan, then the business plan will not be able to accurately prepare for the future. A good business plan depends on solid information, including information on the direction of the institution. African American museums

⁴³ Genoways, Hugh H., and Lynne M. Ireland. Museum Administration: an Introduction. 75.

⁴⁴ Seiler, Timothy L. "The Total Development Plan." Hank Rosso's Achieving Excellence in Fund Raising. 59-68.

will require personnel with the professional skills to create these strategic plans. The resources—human and financial—to recruit and train a professional staff will require support from other organizations and an environment conducive to success.

External Support

The African American museum population is a small community (about 300⁴⁵) that will need to lean on the substantial knowledge and resources of the greater museum community (17,500 organizations and counting), grant-making institutions, and universities for fundraising information.⁴⁶ John Havens and Paul Schervish, in “Wealth Transfer Estimates for African American Households,” examined the coming trillion-dollar plus wealth transfer from African American households between now and 2055, and determined that “the amount of wealth to be transferred by African American households will be small compared to the aggregate transfer from all households, this relative scarcity places a special emphasis on wise allocation of financial resources. They raise the need to increase the visibility of philanthropy and set the tone of giving by working closely with high-wealth African American households.”⁴⁷ In order to apply current best practices for development and cultivation of these donors, African American museums will need a transfer of fundraising and business skills from other institutions. The IMLS has several grants designed to help museums obtain current professional skills. Regrettably, as pointed out in the analysis of IMLS grant recipients, African American museums are not taking advantage of these resources. In some cases, the blame falls on the museums for not applying or incorrectly applying. In many situations, the onus can be put upon the grant-making institution to educate the pool of grantees on the available grants and how to apply. Again, IMLS leads the way as demonstrated by a 2006 conference convened to provide African American museum executive directors with a solid understanding of the institution’s granting opportunities. A greater dissemination of information on seminars and conferences,

⁴⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. 2002 SURVEY OF BUSINESS OWNERS. 18 Apr. 2006.

⁴⁶ "AAM ABCs of Museums." American Association of Museums. 1 Mar. 2006

⁴⁷ Polycarpe, Marjorie. "BOOK REVIEW: a Closer Look At Black Philanthropy."

as well as plain-language guides to fundraising —grants, methods, solicitation, cultivation— would benefit all cultural institutions, but especially those that are most in need. There must be an expansion and proliferation of training opportunities like the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund (LCCREF) in Washington, DC, which offers opportunities to aspiring minority development professionals and furthers the understanding of diversity in donor relations.⁴⁸ Charles R. Stephens, in “Professionalism in Black Philanthropy,” notes that over the years the fundraising profession has made progress in achieving professional status: a common curriculum, a common code of ethics, and an accepted certification. He also notes the need to establish educational programs at historically Black colleges and universities to encourage more African Americans to choose a career in fundraising.⁴⁹ Growth of fundraising courses and degrees at historically Black universities is a long-term initiative that is needed to increase the philanthropy sophistication of the African American community, but most African American museums also require immediate help with skills and staff development.

External organizations need to provide professional development opportunities to raise the level of professionalism across the board at cultural institutions. Not just African American museums suffer from a dearth of professionally trained staff, but generally small cultural organizations are starved for professional skills in fields like collections management, marketing, and development. Other organizations need to step forward with programs for transferring the necessary professional skills to the resource-poor small institutions. Mr. Bunch plans to make the NMAAHC a “breeding ground” for new museum professionals that can then take their skills to other organizations⁵⁰:

“The Smithsonian Institution needs to return to a position of growing museum professionals. We should again be a national breeding ground for future museum leaders. People used to come to the Smithsonian, work, learn, and then take that knowledge and skill sets to other museums. We need to return to this model. The NMAAHC must provide strength to other institutions.”

⁴⁸ “New Diversity Fellowship for Fundraising.” *AFP*. 13 Feb. 2006.

⁴⁹ Polycarpe, Marjorie. “BOOK REVIEW: a Closer Look At Black Philanthropy.”

⁵⁰ Bunch, Lonnie G. Personal interview. 4 Apr. 2006.

Parralleling the limited opportunities to study development at HBCUs, there are currently no museum studies programs in any HBCUs. Since most African American cultural institutions are young and many are struggling financially, it behooves established organizations to lend support to an important sector of American cultural institutions by sharing fundraising information and supporting professionals that decide to leave for African American museum positions. While most of the funds to support cultural institutions must come from their own fundraising efforts, some external funds will be required by many organizations to achieve a more successful and professional staff. “Fundraising initiatives are driven by resources. If you don’t have the financial resources there are a variety” of fundraising strategies that are not available, Dr. Pijaux explained.⁵¹ An infusion of well-placed funds in cultural organizations with better-trained professional staffs could dramatically reverse some institutions’ financial woes.

The external environment must continue to evolve towards diversity. Foundation boards and staffs ought to diversify. Grant-making institutions are a bastion of upper-class Whites that do not reflect the diversity of the nation. The tide is turning and foundations are slowly evolving towards representing America, Yvonne Brake explains in "Black Philanthropy:"⁵²

“Some foundations, like the Cleveland Foundation, are establishing African-American advisory committees and designing marketing tactics targeting African-American donors. Other major foundations, like Lilly Endowment, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, sponsor research and events related to African-American philanthropy (such as The National Conference of Black Philanthropy).”

In addition, museum boards and staffs at most non-culturally specific institutions need to diversify. Mainstream museums need to begin or advance efforts to hire diverse staff members, thus bringing in new ideas, new audiences, and spreading vital experience in running a cultural institution. The Civil Rights Movement continues today, reshaping the politics, culture, and society of the U.S. As American society learns to further embrace all facets and all faces of its people, cultural institutions will truly be different lenses for focusing and examining the American experience.

⁵¹ Pijaux, Lawrence J. Telephone interview. 1 Mar. 2006.

⁵² Brake, Yvonne M. "Black Philanthropy." *Learning to Give* (2005).

Conclusion

African American museums are enjoying a new generation of regional and national museum openings, but this expansion exposed common weaknesses of culturally specific institutions. This sector of the museum industry struggles against historical barriers to success, as well as a general lack of professional skills, particularly in business. African American museums must reexamine their goals, missions, and boards, in light of the target audience and good governance. Education will play a significant role in the reshaping and buttressing of African American museums. Education is necessary for the board, the staff, future museum professionals, and the potential audience in order to reshape and strengthen African American museums. For small museums, access to greater professional development will come from new educational programs at universities; sponsored conferences, seminars, and guides from other associations and organizations; and the movement of experienced museum and business professionals into positions at resource-limited institutions. It is necessary to conduct more research into African American philanthropy and the financial health of African American museums in order to target the limited resources that are available. Solid research is needed to shape best practices and highlight the efforts and requirements of culturally specific institutions. As the general climate of America turns toward acceptance and celebration of its diverse population, culturally specific institutions will be thrust into prominence as increasingly important perspectives on the American vision.

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