

Museum on Main Street
2008 National Planning Conferences
Sharing Best Practices

Best Practices Model: Using Mentors and Scholars

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MoMS Tour(s) That You've Coordinated (exhibition and year): YT 2003; New Harmonies 2008

What needs did you identify among your local hosts that led you to develop this component of your MoMS tour? Or, how did this all come about?

VAM had offered mentoring programs in the past, to great success. We consistently found that small museums needed a lot of help, but weren't quite ready to attend workshops or search out the help themselves. A mentor, pulled from the ranks of longtime museum professionals in Virginia, gave them a bridge to the world of professionals in museums and to the knowledge base the small museum needed without taking them too far outside of their comfort zone. When we had the opportunity to host a MOMS exhibition, we thought combining our success with mentor programs with the successful elements that MOMS brought to the table would really make a big impact on the sites selected.

What council resources/expertise were you able to utilize? What partner resources/expertise?

In providing mentors for the projects, we utilized our network of VAM members—we called on longtime museum professionals who had been involved with VAM for a long time, and who we knew were good teachers and loved to give back to the museum community.

What were the steps involved in implementation?

The main step was finding the mentors and pairing them with the sites. For the first tour, I based the pairings mainly on geography, to ensure that the mentors could visit their sites regularly if they so chose. (we allowed each site and their mentor to define the relationship in a way that worked for them—we only provided basic guidelines such as who would pay for mileage, etc). For the second tour, I chose to pair folks on expertise—our museums for this tour are more advanced, and each had a better sense of what they wanted to learn, so matching them to mentors who could respond to that was important.

After matching, it was mainly oversight, ensuring that all the mentors had contacted the sites, that they had communication on a regular basis. All the sites sent reports of their mentor meetings to let me know what the mentors had agreed to help with, and how they were being utilized by the site. What were the results?

The results were mixed in both tours. Some sites had what I would consider "perfect" pairings; the mentors visited the sites regularly, offered solid assistance on various topics, and remained in contact with the site after the exhibition left. Other sites weren't quite sure how to best use their mentor, but did communicate with them and got their assistance on several projects while preparing for the exhibition. There were a couple sites that never really connected with their mentors, either because of personality differences, or scheduling.

What adjustments (if any) did you make along the way?

During our first tour, I realized about halfway through that while the museums appreciated the mentors, a couple of them were such small sites and in such beginning stages of development that they didn't even know what to ask of their mentor. I hadn't anticipated this, and decided to build a better framework for communication between mentors and "mentees", giving them specific suggestions and questions for how to use their mentor. For the second tour I also changed the way I paired mentors to sites (see implementation question), though I am still undecided about which type of pairing worked better overall.

What's been the short and long term benefit to the local hosts?

The short term benefit was, of course, professional, free expertise at their fingertips to help them prepare for the exhibition. The long term benefits varied depending on the site, but I think it did a couple of things:

1. for the smallest sites, having a personal connection to a museum professional helped them feel comfortable as a museum professional themselves, which opened them up to coming to workshops and conferences, where they wouldn't have felt they belonged before
2. some of the mentors have kept in touch with the sites long after the exhibition departed, continuing to share their expertise and guidance

What's been the short and long term benefit to the state council?

The short term benefit was that we felt confident that the exhibition was in good hands at each site; we knew there was a trusted pair of eyes from our "team" involved in the process, even though our staff couldn't be there all the time.

The long term benefit was that we now have more small museums who feel empowered, and come to our professional development classes; several from the first tour are actually teaching on conference panels now!

What advice would you have for other state tour coordinators trying to make a similar impact in this area?

The mentor pairing process is key—make sure you set your goals and determine what you most want to see happen before you do that; that will inform what criteria you will use to pair up sites with mentors.

Make sure you clearly lay out the boundaries and guidelines, for both the mentor's and the "mentee"'s sake. What is off-limits to ask the mentor to do? What is reimbursed by the council? How often do they need to meet? (we did not put a max or minimum on this).

Do you have any files, forms, documents or digital images illustrating this component of your MoMS tour(s) that we could post on-line to share with others?

I have mentor guidelines, table of contents for a mentor manual, and a mentor evaluation form.

Would you be willing to serve as a mentor to other state coordinators, advising them on this topic? If so, please indicate the best way for them to contact you.

Yes, absolutely. Email is best, jweiskotten@vamuseums.org