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## Diversity and the Development of Cultural Competence

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One of the most striking findings from the most recent ACM diversity survey was that the vast majority of respondents believed that diversity is important to their institutions, both internally and externally. Despite this perception of importance, the survey also showed that most respondents rated the level of diversity among personnel at their museums to be low. To begin to address this gap between the acknowledged importance and the reality of diversity within their institutions, children's museums may be well-served by reviewing how they define diversity based on the specific demographics of their communities. To succeed in closing the gap, institutions may also need to develop new skills for building inclusive organizations. This article offers a definition of diversity that recognizes its complex and multidimensional nature and it also proposes the development of cultural competence as a valuable tool for the alignment of perception and reality and the achievement of diversity goals.

### From Diversity to Inclusion

Children's museums, striving to be reflective of their communities in both personnel (both staff and board) and visitors, may need to reexamine their definition of diversity. All too often, the term diversity is narrowly used to refer primarily to race and ethnicity. Recent history reveals compelling reasons for how this came about.

The first reason for this limited viewpoint is the extensive coverage of demographic changes in the United States related to race and ethnicity. We've all seen the statistics that document these changes. In the United States, people who are at least seventy years old have lived most of their lives in a society where the ratio of non-Hispanic whites to people of color was over 5:1. People who came along thirty years later found the ratio had shrunk to 2:1. The primary audience for children's museums, kids under ten years old, are living in a world where the ratio has shrunk even further to a mere 1.5:1. Such a dramatic shift in the country's racial/ethnic composition in a relatively brief period of time helps to explain why discussions of diversity are often focused on these two aspects. A contributing factor may be the persistent and pervasive disparities that continue to impact and separate racial/ethnic groups from the rest of "Americans."

While a focus on racial and ethnic differences is understandable, there are also significant demographic shifts occurring in other areas, such as generational and religious differences, which suggest a need for a broader definition of diversity for all, including children's museums working to create and sustain inclusive environments. Such a definition might be:

*diversity encompasses all those differences that make us unique, including but not limited to race, color, ethnicity, language, family status, education, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, age and physical and mental abilities.*

While some readers may wonder how such a broad definition could possibly be useful, it is important to remember that diversity is about the different perspectives individuals bring to the table based on the multiple cultural influences that have shaped their view of the world. The goal should not be to design programming for each of these often overlapping population segments but rather to create an organizational environment that is welcoming and respectful of all stakeholders regardless of their cultural background. The shift must occur first in our attitudes before we even begin to think about attempting to fulfill our stakeholders' expectations.

With a broader definition in place, children's museums might begin to reexamine their policies and programs for attracting and serving diverse audiences. School/community outreach programs, free admission days, occasional ethnic exhibits and similar strategies are unlikely to produce the sought after goal of inclusion. These strategies may succeed in increasing the number of under-represented children served by the museum, but do they actually succeed in making these children and their families regular museum visitors? And, what about those children and families who are not typically included in the category of under-represented (e.g. those with mental, physical or religious differences) but are nonetheless part of the museum's community?

Children's museums that are succeeding in attracting diverse stakeholders do not automatically succeed in creating an inclusive environment. The ability to effectively engage and work with individuals who are different from ourselves is not an innate human skill. It must be learned. While an inclusive environment may lead to greater diversity, diversity does not necessarily lead to an inclusive environment.

Every individual views the world through a unique set of "cultural lenses" based on the patterns, traditions and heritage of the groups with which they predominantly interact (e.g. family, race/ethnic, religious, gender, age, etc.) Becoming aware of these cultural lenses and understanding their impact is essential to creating an inclusive environment where individual differences strengthen rather than diminish the organization.

Cultural competency is a process of lifelong learning resulting in knowledge, skills, behaviors and attitudes that allow us to interact effectively with other people from different backgrounds. Cultural competence begins when individuals develop an understanding of their own cultural lenses. In developing an awareness of one's own lenses, it becomes possible to gain a greater appreciation of the ways such cultural lenses might impact interactions between people with lenses different than our own. Cultural competence is the link that helps organizations move beyond diversity to inclusion. Becoming culturally competent is more than memorizing specific facts or lists of "do's and don'ts" about specific cultural groups. It is developing the awareness and skills to communicate effectively in any multi-cultural setting and to feel confident and comfortable in the process.

### **Why Focus on Cultural Competence?**

At a very young age, children begin to distinguish between the familiar and unfamiliar. They gain a sense of belonging, of what is important, and what is right and wrong. This is also a time when stereotypes and unconscious bias can begin to develop. If uninterrupted, negative attitudes will continue to evolve as the child moves through adolescence and adulthood.

Children strongly benefit from diverse environments in which they can engage in cooperative learning and shared educational experiences with their peers. Inclusive environments provide children with a supportive network to develop and enhance their abilities to be understanding and to develop their social skills.

A growing body of research confirms the positive impact of diversity on learning outcomes. Patricia Gurin's landmark studies at the University of Michigan found that "students who had experienced the most diversity in classroom settings and in informal interactions with peers showed the greatest engagement in active thinking processes, growth in intellectual engagement and motivation, and growth in intellectual and academic skills" (Gurin 1999). In addition, empirical findings, such as those reported by Kathleen Cotton in *Fostering Intercultural Harmony in Schools: Research Findings*, reveal that children who experienced the most diversity in informal interactions with peers, and in classroom settings, showed the greatest engagement in active thinking processes and critical thinking ability.

Children's museums are uniquely positioned to provide the type of learning experiences that help children value and gain an appreciation for a broad range of abilities, perspectives and talents. By tapping into the natural curiosity and openness of children to explore the "unknown," children's museums can offer opportunities for positive experiences with diversity and build upon the pure delight all children feel when they meet new challenges. Such experiences offer the added benefit that the memory created for the child is not only one of personal accomplishment but also one of positive interaction with others who are different. To deliver on this potential, however, museums must be committed to and invest in developing a culturally competent organization.

### **Cultivating A Culturally Competent Learning Environment**

Cultivating and sustaining a culturally competent environment requires a long-term commitment to transformation that emphasizes a systemic approach to align policies, systems and organizational culture. Change begins with training, and training begins with an awareness of our own cultural lenses. Then and only then will staff understand and be receptive to the additional knowledge, awareness and skills that form the critical first step toward building a culturally competent organization. In addition to enhancing staff skills, a systemic approach to creating an organizational environment based on inclusion might be facilitated by five basic steps.

#### **1. Identify the museum's stakeholders and their most important needs.**

Stakeholders should be broadly defined as all of the people a museum must reach and satisfy in order to fulfill its mission. They are the museum's target audiences— both current and potential visitors. They also include the people who are called upon to support the museum's activities in the successful delivery of its mission—board members, staff, volunteers, donors, partners, etc. During this step, an effort should be made to understand the strengths, challenges and opportunities your organization faces in serving diverse audiences. A series of focus groups with diverse stakeholders is a good way to gather such information. If diverse stakeholders are not currently engaged with the museum, inviting community-based organizations to participate in these focus groups could yield valuable information while also offering the opportunity to build critical relationships.

#### **2. Set goals related to your stakeholders' most important needs.**

Once museum leadership has gained an understanding of its stakeholders' needs, the institution must set specific, measurable goals for addressing those needs. In other words, develop a strategic plan for diversity. The plan should articulate, step by step, continuous improvement goals based on what has been learned about its stakeholders' needs.

#### **3. Take action to improve.**

Information collected from stakeholders and establishing goals for improvement will be meaningless unless accompanied by action. A museum can use the information to pinpoint those areas of its operation (remember to look systemically) that are in greatest need of improvement and begin with those. Engage all staff in the process and, at minimum, provide cultural competency training for every member of the staff.

#### **4. Check with stakeholders on how you are doing in meeting their needs.**

Regularly communicate with stakeholders to determine whether they think you are meeting their needs and whether those needs have changed. Don't forget to be inclusive in who you ask to be stakeholders! Collect and process information to measure actual performance against the improvement goals that were established. Be flexible and be prepared to make adjustments along the way. Regularly scheduled roundtable dialogue sessions, on-line chats, or conference calls among key staff and focus group stakeholders provide opportunities to measure progress. Though less personal, Web-based surveys can also be used to gather data but, in this event, consider using an established newsletter or list-serve to share survey results and outcomes.

#### **5. Periodically select a new group of stakeholders and begin the process again.**

Communities change, and so do the stakeholders. A periodic scan of your environment might reveal new populations whose involvement in the museum is limited or absent entirely. Remember that cultural competence is not some magical endpoint that we reach. It is a lifelong process where we continue to

learn and grow and strengthen our museums and communities as a result. Museums that commit to this endeavor are more engaged with their communities, more vital, and more exciting places to visit and to work.

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