

ISSUE TWO

MINIMAL AMOUNTS OF MEANINGFUL COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION AMONG HERITAGE ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

Inter-organization collaboration, coordination, and partnering within and outside of the heritage community are essential to organizational vitality and longevity, their leaders say. This challenge is not unique to Oregon. However, the current economic downturn, existing budget constraints, and lack of leadership undermine true collaboration in which organizations band together for solutions for their own individual challenges.

The question of whether collaboration is a priority may no longer be an option. Sharing resources may be a real solution to offset operation costs. Non-traditional partners for heritage organizations are increasingly attractive. Heritage organizations are beginning to recognize that unless they work together, their individual efforts will fail. Organizations are looking for leadership on strategic ways to collaborate, coordinate, and harness partnerships to meet shared goals and optimize opportunities for success during challenging times.

WHAT'S HAPPENING – OR NOT HAPPENING – NOW

Among Oregon museums, historic preservationists, and historic cemetery groups, two out of the top five most important issues in the next 10 years are the need to increase “community involvement and partners” and to keep “heritage organizations viable and relevant.” However, the Heritage Assessment Survey found that many do not partner or collaborate today.

The most common reasons cited for not coordinating efforts with cities and local organizations are lack of funding, lack of time, lack of current coordination, and a perceived lack of community support.

The largest percentage of Heritage Assessment Survey respondents said they have relationships with their city, county, or the state government. Fewer said they had relationships with businesses, libraries, chambers of commerce, and educational organizations, which might share resources to meet similar goals and efforts at economic development.

COLLABORATION NOW

When asked in what ways they collaborate among one another, heritage organizations reported:

- 51% reported participating in joint planning and marketing efforts with local organizations, businesses, government agencies
- 50% reported that they post links to other heritage organizations on their website
- 42% reported participating in joint programming efforts

“It’s easy to just focus on your survival. We are going to have to turn our eyes outward soon to connect with each other and to make sure we are connected to our community.”

- Janeanne Upp of The High Desert Museum in Bend

COORDINATION NOW

When reporting on ways that they coordinate their efforts with cities and local organizations, heritage organizations indicate that only:

- 48% plan/promote coordinated heritage programming or cultural events
- 43% apply for grants and carry out grant-funded activities with local organizations
- 41% coordinate the publication and distribution of brochures
- 39% coordinate local history exhibits
- 37% work together to preserve and protect archaeological resources



Southern Oregon Preservation Project

Cooperation in cyberspace is also limited. Of the Oregon museum websites analyzed for this study, only 55 percent had assisted other organizations by including at least three useful links, while 45 percent of websites had no useful links to other heritage sites at all.

The disconnect between the perceived value of collaboration and actual acts of collaboration (such as the sharing of resources, joint programming, online cross-marketing, and joint economic development strategies) reveals concerns over limited staff time and an emphasis on short-term versus long-term results.

TAKING ON NEW PARTNERS

Heritage community members want more coordination of their activities, more collaboration among organizations, and more understanding of how partnerships can meet their goals, according to the assessment survey. Sharing resources, knowledge, and activity experience were frequently suggested efforts in the Heritage Solutions Survey.

The furthest collaboration can go is the merger of two organizations. This rarely happens. However, after a decade of study and discussions, the Mission Mill Museum and Marion County Historical Society merged in 2010 to become the Willamette Heritage Center.

Another example of collaboration is the City of Portland Archives moving to a building on the Portland State University campus near the Portland City Hall. Additionally, it is working with other archives to build relationships to reduce common work activities, such as cooperative reference, including a reference wiki. Cooperative marketing efforts have been attempted in communities, typically with only short-term success.

Sometimes, partnering may take unexpected twists and include non-traditional partners. “This is a very small example, but in my institution, we are offering yoga now in the museum,” says Peter Booth of the Willamette Heritage Center. “That’s a very non-traditional museum offering. However I am bringing in a new audience that does not normally come to the museum.”

CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATION

There are numerous barriers to the creation of successful collaborations, including the willingness of organizational leaders to reach out initially even to coordinate activities and events.

The lack of coordination frustrates some leaders. “We are all working towards the same goal but there are few shared resources among historical societies. Funders should reward organizations that share resources, thereby encouraging them to do so,” says Allison Weiss of the Southern Oregon Historical Society.

Studies of archival collaborations in Minnesota and Wisconsin show they often fail because of a lack of resources, a lack of administrative support, and a feeling that the endeavor itself is bound by politics. Staff reductions and turnover, including those among volunteer-led organizations, make traditional collaboration difficult. The lack of long-term commitment to collaborations also results in failure.

Solutions suggested during this study’s two surveys highlight a need for leadership, perhaps from the state, yet with approaches focused on regional and community coordination and collaboration.

PROVIDING LEADERSHIP

Oregon heritage organizations are not alone in their desire to see more collaboration and coordination, and by working together, they could lead the way nationally. Directors of state historical societies in California and Connecticut noted they have no statewide leadership for instigating statewide collaboration.

Idaho, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Washington can provide examples of strategies to create more opportunities for inter-organizational collaboration. But as the director of the Oklahoma Historical Society, Bob Blackburn, said “collaboration takes long range planning and persistence. Turnover in leadership and laziness are the biggest problems.”

“What the unification has done is that it has allowed Mission Mill to concentrate on what it does best, programming and exhibitory, and let what is now the research library at the Heritage Center, the Marion County Historical Society, concentrate on what it does best and that’s archival and collection care”

- Peter Booth, executive director,
Willamette Heritage Center



Old Scotch Cemetery, Hillsboro