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Correcting misperceptions: Strategies for attracting and educating a reluctant audience to a museum of textiles and clothing

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In 1900, the International Exhibition in Paris displayed the first popular fashion history exhibition. Since then, clothing and textiles have been incorporated in exhibitions around the world and effectively used to educate, engage, and entertain (Palmer, 2008). Throughout the United States, many universities, colleges, and community colleges have collections of historic dress ranging from very small holdings consisting of a few hundred garments to large collections of 50,000 plus garments and textiles (Queen & Berger, 2006). However, museums and collections that include textiles and clothing face challenges regarding their perceived importance both within and outside of academia (Marcketti, Fitzpatrick, Keist, & Kadolph, 2011). Textiles and clothing have traditionally been viewed as less important or of a lower status in museums and in academia (Steele, 2008).

The purpose of this study was to understand student, faculty, and staff perceptions of a Midwestern land-grant university's textiles and clothing museum. During spring semester 2012, the museum staff created an 11 question survey sent via Survey Gizmo to all students, faculty, and staff of the university. As an incentive, participants were able to enter their name and email address to be randomly selected to receive 2 free tickets to the annual student fashion show. The survey received institutional review board exemption. In total, 930 participants completed usable surveys regarding the perception of the university textiles and clothing museum. Analysis of the demographic data revealed that more than half of the participants were students (56%) with staff members comprising 27% and faculty members comprising 12% of respondents. Participants represented all colleges of the university.

Following the demographic questions, participants were asked to state: If they had ever heard of the museum; How they learned about the museum with prompts of: word of mouth, email, website, flyers or postcards, announcement at annual fashion show; If they had ever visited the museums' exhibit gallery; and How often they visited the gallery. Approximately half of the participants (48%) stated that they were aware of the museum. Among those participants who had heard of the museum, the top two information receiving channels were word of mouth (54%) and walking by the gallery (49%). Additional channels of information were: flyers announcing an exhibit (26%), email (20%), the fashion show (14%), and the website (12%). Of the survey respondents, 30% indicated they had visited the gallery; forty percent of those visited once per year, thirty-three percent visited when they heard about a new exhibit, twenty percent visited once a semester, and seven percent visited once a month.

Additionally, five open response questions were provided for participants including: What topics they would like to see exhibited; What they had found most interesting about the

museum; What barriers prevented them from visiting the museum; and The advantages and disadvantages of the museum. The responses to the types of exhibits respondents would most like to see revealed lack of knowledge of past exhibits as well as knowledge of what the textiles and clothing museum collects (i.e. smurf costumes). Participants unsurprisingly stated the most interesting aspect of the museum was the gallery. The majority of respondents stated the barriers of not visiting the museum were: not knowing the museum existed, not knowing the hours, location, or if it was open to the public; scheduling and time conflicts; not knowing about exhibits; lack of interest; and difficulty in finding available parking.

Participants overwhelmingly stated many advantages to the museum. These included: the historical and cultural advantage of preserving history for future generations; to educate students within the major; as a promotional tool for recruitment purposes for the department and university; entertainment value; and adding diversity and interest to the community. Many respondents stated that there were no disadvantages to the museum. Other respondents stated that while the Museum “mounted great exhibits” it was “under-appreciated” because many did not know of its existence or were unaware of its location, hours that it was open, and exhibit rotation. Stated disadvantages included dissatisfaction with a museum of any kind. There were also several respondents who stated hostility towards textiles and clothing: “It misinforms this major that there are career opportunities in this field.”

Based on the results of the survey, the museum personnel focused on increasing the awareness of the museum campus-wide, targeting students, faculty and staff. This was accomplished through an exhibit that focused on the mission statement of the textiles and clothing museum which was promoted through an aggressive advertising campaign utilizing the regional print and television media. As part of the presentation, we will include a strategic plan for increasing knowledge and awareness of the university museum, from those ideas that are free of charge; yet require staff time and resources, to those with nominal financial costs, to those strategies which would incur a greater monetary expense. It is hoped that participants will come to the session with their own knowledge and experiences of promoting university collections and museums of textiles and clothing so that we may increase the ways in which these facilities positively impact the academic lives of student, faculty, and staff.

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