

A purpose-driven university museum

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Abstract

University museums expend much energy dividing their time, staff, and resources serving the needs of both the academic institution and the surrounding community. Not only does this often duplicate efforts, but can lead to either faculty and student disenfranchisement if the museum focuses more effort outward or to jeopardizing precious town/gown relations if the focus is too much inward. Through careful consideration of mission, implementing strategic planning that involves all stakeholders, and evaluating the impact of the mission on its audiences, the university museum can transform itself into a purposeful museum and address this audience conundrum. This paper will present the Hood Museum of Art's two-year initiative to demonstrate that through realigning its purpose and practices towards cultivating teaching and creating meaningful learning encounters, the museum, the university, and the community benefit equally.

"The purpose of the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College is to inspire, educate, and collaborate with our college and broader community about creativity and imagination through direct engagement with works of art of historic and cultural significance by making effective use of our collections and staff."

Purpose statement written by Hood staff, Fall 2005

Introduction¹

University museums exist for university students. They also contribute tremendous life-long learning opportunities for local residents, alumni, and visitors of all ages. Dartmouth College, located on the New Hampshire/Vermont border, has continuously operated a museum for the benefit of its students since 1772, and the Hood Museum of Art's commitment to teaching with objects has been unwavering. The museum's expansive collections and changing exhibitions also attract tens of thousands of visitors from the general public each year; indeed many in Northern New England consider it 'their' museum. The idea of contributing to both campus and community life is de rigeur for most university museums, yet many struggle with an audience conundrum as they work to appropriately allocate funds and human resources for collections, exhibitions, and programs. University museums can be seduced to favor their appreciating public, resulting in faculty and student disenfranchisement. Museums can also focus too much inward, becoming less relevant to the community and jeopardizing the university's precious town/gown relations. This paper will briefly present the Hood Museum of Art's response to this challenge. Through careful consideration of purpose, implementing strategic planning that involves all stakeholders, and evaluating the museum's impact on its audiences, the museum chose to demonstrate its commitment, first and foremost, to teaching and learning – formally in the classroom and through facilitated gallery presentations, and informally in the galleries for the unguided visitor.

Strategic planning and evaluation

In summer 2005, the Hood's newly appointed director, Brian Kennedy, held his first full staff meeting outside on the Dartmouth Green, the heart of campus and gathering place for community members

¹ Two notes on choice of terminology. I chose to use the more internationally recognized word 'university' throughout, simply to avoid the awkwardness of the alternatives 'college or university' or 'campus-based'. Also, the Hood chose to write a 'purpose' rather than a 'mission' statement, and I also consistently use 'purpose' in this essay. Although the two terms are used somewhat interchangeably in strategic plans, the definition of purpose as it relates to intentional practice was felt by the staff to be more pertinent to the direction of the museum.

and students alike. He asked us to consider the unique value of a museum on a campus and in a community and how we communicate that value to everyone. Following this provocation, the entire museum staff engaged in an invigorating three-month strategic planning process. We sought direct input from campus and community leaders, decided to write a new statement of purpose, and created a four-year plan. The Hood's strategic plan (2006–10) was written to be consistent with the mission, intellectual character, and core values of Dartmouth College, including its academic and student life and its commitment to diversity. It was also written to more vigorously engage the greater community through developing partnerships, increasing public relations efforts, and creating a membership program. It underscored the value of connecting people with original works of art through the use of our greatest resources: our collections and staff.

Once written, purpose statements are often relegated to the realms of annual reports and letterhead, and strategic plans begin to collect dust well before that 'new book' smell vanishes. Even when consulted, they rarely become the organic documents that *should* be our greatest tools for steering the museum's work. The Hood staff realized that our new statement, while adequately describing purpose, did not bring us close enough to our true intentions as a teaching museum, or to the early morning jolt a few months earlier on the Green. Many museums continue to describe the purpose of their institution in terms of *what* they do: collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret. Others joined a shift over the past two decades towards *who* they do it for: first, serve the public. Although compromise between these two models seems simple enough ("well, it's both"), it is not middle ground that we sought, but an alternate model, one that was reflective and responsive to the complexities of a museum on a university campus.

At this point, it became apparent that what we lacked most was information about the impact of the museum on our audiences. Evaluation needed to be an integral part of the planning cycle. In spring 2006, we partnered with Randi Korn, a leader in the museum evaluation field and author of several articles on intentional practice, to model a new form of evaluation that raises it from the programmatic to the institutional level. Korn had recently developed a model for *Mission Evaluation*, but had not yet tested it in any institution. This form of evaluation is designed to help museums assess how and to what degree they are achieving their purpose by being directly connected to the museum's purpose statement and strategic plan. Its goal is to measure the overall impact of the museum on its audiences and it involves the entire staff rather than being project, program, or exhibition specific, meaning that its potential to positively impact overall museum practice is quite high.

The Hood staff developed, with Randi Korn, two measurable intentions that are derived from and reinforce the museum's purpose:

- (1) cultivate teaching with objects, and
- (2) create learning encounters.

They were written to measure the desired outcomes specific not to a particular audience, but to any single visit to the Hood Museum of Art. These intentions, which distill the museum's educational purpose to its essence, can be used to measure the museum's current success and to guide future museum activities. Three survey tools were developed to benchmark the museum's current level of success against its purpose and were implemented between August 2007 and March 2008. One focused on the Hood's intention to cultivate teaching (Dartmouth faculty and local teachers) and two focused on learning – facilitated (public program participants) and unfacilitated (walk-in visitors).

Teaching

The Hood's intention to cultivate teaching with objects lies at the core of a university museum's contribution to the educational purpose of its parent institution. Interviews with Dartmouth faculty who

use the museum revealed a very high satisfaction overall and indicated what they value most: (1) the museum visit benefits students by providing stimulation and inspiration, (2) the object's physicality and authenticity promotes depth of learning, (3) the museum visit facilitates visual learning, and (4) the museum visit affects Dartmouth students. Based on their detailed feedback, the museum has already increased advocacy for visual literacy in a liberal arts education to the college administration, increased staff time allocation to directly support teaching, and increased object digitization to support use of the museum's collections more broadly across academic disciplines in the college classroom.

In addition to setting these ongoing strategies for cultivating teaching with objects, the Hood has specifically chosen to improve the faculty teaching experience. The purpose evaluation study taught us that we should work more closely with professors on their interpretive practice, focusing not only on which objects they choose to teach from, but *how* they teach with those objects. The museum staff now offers targeted workshops for faculty entitled *The Art of Observation: A Workshop on Teaching with Visual Material*. Survey feedback from faculty members who already value the collections helped us create workshops that demonstrate effective strategies specifically for teaching with works of art. In the interviews, faculty members also indicated certain obstacles to making their teaching more effective. These included the small size of the Hood's designated teaching space and their desire for study collections that could be viewed outside the museum's facility, for example in their classrooms. This feedback provides the museum, and the college, with valuable data for future collections and facility planning.

Learning

Regarding its intention to create learning encounters, the Hood has already begun to adjust its walk-in interpretive materials based on purpose evaluation feedback. The four hundred interviews conducted with walk-in visitors revealed that visitors roughly divide into three groups, with most preferring to visit with one or more other people and learn through discussion with those companions. Others enjoy reading labels quietly themselves, and still others prefer to be left on their own with no interpretive materials. Interviews conducted with in-gallery program participants revealed what they most valued about a facilitated learning experience: (1) they inspire new or heighten existing interests, (2) they make personal connections, (3) they stimulate thought, (4) they deepen knowledge, and (5) they create experiences that transform the way a visitor looks at art, the world, or their own lives.

The purpose evaluation study has shifted our practice most profoundly in the area of interpretation. The vast majority of Hood visitors do not attend programs, but rather walk into the museum to see an exhibition or permanent display. The question became: how do we create those same high-level learning outcomes for our walk-in visitors? What we learned from the program participant interviews is that the most successful programs were those where the presenter emulated the *Learning to Look* teaching technique developed by Hood staff for regional K–12 teachers and their students. This technique was developed to empower students to approach and learn from any work of art using five steps: observation, analysis, research, interpretation, and critique. The adult program participants reported the best learning experiences when the program leader – whether a curator, professor, or other museum staff member – encouraged direct looking, reflection, and group discussion, supplied supporting materials, and gave time for individual reactions and questions. Based on this, the Hood has chosen to adopt *Learning to Look* as its overall interpretation strategy for visitors of all ages, and has begun to develop new materials for walk-in visitors that utilize this technique, including special exhibition *Looking Guides* and permanent collection brochures entitled *A Closer Look*. The texts describe the five-step process and lead visitors through the steps with particular works of art. The brochures are designed to be useful for a visitor on their own, or in discussion with companions, in response to the learning dynamic preferences reported by walk-in visitors. Further evaluation will test if

walk-in visitors describe more similar outcomes of their museum experience to program participants, indicating that we have achieved a higher level of success in creating learning encounters for everyone.

Conclusion

University museums are uniquely situated to be leaders in demonstrating the positive impact of purpose-driven practice. Ultimately, this impact should demonstrate to the university administration, faculty, and students the value of visual literacy in a liberal arts education while attracting and retaining the support of the local community because they value a museum that demonstrates its commitment to learning. This paper introduced two ways that the Hood staff addressed the audience conundrum by focusing not on one audience or the other, but on our intentions to cultivate teaching with objects and create learning encounters. Purpose has become not a lofty statement that covers all the bases, but a carefully crafted set of intentions that are easily understood, flexible, and meant to deliver particular experiences. The Hood is currently launching its next strategic planning cycle armed with the knowledge that effective and inclusive planning, implementation, and evaluation continues to lead the university museum towards greater achievement of purpose, a course where everyone benefits.

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