

# SEIZE THE DAY! MUSEUMS IN THE CHANGING CULTURE OF UNIVERSITIES—A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

University museums and collections exist within a changing academic culture where a “seize the day” attitude prevails, where actions are required to be revolutionary and where strategic alliances still promise to make institutions and programs more viable. Building connections with broader communities is now seen as influential and often essential to the academic mission. With museums worldwide, community engagement strategies need to be developed and honed to work within this new culture. Our challenge, as university museum people, is to develop strategies that will position us as leaders to help shape the university’s vision by working collaboratively within the changing culture. Using a framework that outlines the changing continuum of university culture proposed by Hanna (2003), this paper describes how the University of Alberta’s museum system is working within and around the University system to develop projects and programs that strengthen the University museum system while contributing to the strategic direction of the University.

## Building a Leadership Vision

University museums in Canada, and particularly at the University of Alberta, have been part of our institutions since our universities were founded. Our collections and systems, or lack thereof, have changed within and alongside our parent institutions. Historically, universities have been slow to change and our museums have followed suit. On occasion, some of our university museums have surpassed our parent institutions in adapting to change, especially with respect to engaging the community, while at other times we lag far behind. Technology, globalization and reduction of leisure time are just some of the factors that have a significant impact on universities and museums as entities. Both institutions are struggling to demonstrate their relevance within our changing world and a fiercely competitive market.

Donald Hanna, in the 2003 *Educause* article “Building a Leadership Vision: Eleven Strategic Challenges for Higher Education,” looks at a continuum of how university culture is evolving and provides 11 strategic challenges for higher education to help build a leadership vision (2003). He suggests that universities are moving from a model where educators work within the rules to one where we have become risk-takers working without a tested methodology. This new model suggests that learners’ needs now drive decision making, not academic programs. Similarly, stakeholders in the community now share decision-making with faculty and administrators. In the past, university faculty and administrators developed programs and projects with resources in hand. Now, it is acceptable to create visions and programs based on speculative venture capital resources and use deficit financing to work within a new concept of “resources in waiting.” Staff members are now required to work collaboratively across disciplines. Organizational structures at universities have gone from being segmented to being integrated and cross-

functional to support the academy’s vision and strategy. Also, staff members are beginning to be recognized based on scholarly and entrepreneurial performance as a group, rather than receiving recognition for individual efforts.

Is the university, as Hanna’s theory states, truly shifting philosophies from “don’t rock the boat” to “seize the day”? If so, at what rate is the change taking place in our individual institutions, and how does this changing culture help make our university museums more relevant to the university community and beyond? Stephen Weil, in many of his writings over the past few years, suggests that museums must focus on the ends rather than the means to make themselves relevant. As he points out:

Unlike individuals, institutions—and that includes museums—have no inherent worth or dignity. No matter how venerable, noble or encrusted with tradition any particular museum may be, at bottom, it is still nothing more than a human fabrication, an organizational contrivance through which some group or other hopes to achieve some short or long-term objective. Whatever worthiness a museum may ultimately have derives from what it does, not from what it is. (*in litt.* 11.2003)

This paper uses Hanna’s theory of the changing culture at universities as a framework for discussing how one university museum system—the University of Alberta Museums, a distributed system with a Canadian perspective—is adapting to these changes. It also will look at what lessons and strategies we can apply from this system to help university museums move towards a purposeful future within our universities’ strategic directions, visions and cultural changes.

## Cultural Shift at the University of Alberta

The University of Alberta is located in the Province of Alberta in western Canada. Our university is the second largest English-speaking university in Canada, with a student enrolment of 36,000 and a staff of 7000. Our university is located in the provincial capital of Edmonton, a thriving city of one million people in the greater metropolitan area. Edmonton boasts that it is the “City of Champions”—a claim to fame predicated on nurturing one of the greatest hockey players ever to have lived—Wayne Gretzky—and building the world’s largest shopping mall. Our university also has a desire to be a champion through the international vision of our President.

Within this context, the University of Alberta is experiencing Hanna’s cultural shift in some, but not all, areas of the institution. Our leaders definitely are driving us towards a collective vision, where we regularly hear the mantra of becoming indisputably recognized as one of Canada’s great universities and among a handful of the best in the world. Some of our systems even are changing to ensure that we move forward together on such things as the development and implementation of a university-wide strategic business planning process. Our governments have also forced us to move towards this new cultural continuum by encouraging us to apply to federal and provincial granting agencies to fund large multidisciplinary projects that promise to promote Hanna’s cross-functional structure theory.

Many of our faculty members are beginning to embrace this cultural shift, as well—especially the ones who have been bold enough to apply for the major collaborative grants and become part of these successful programs, at least in the eyes of the drivers and the leaders. University administrators, some of whom have endured years of change-management initiatives, are also demonstrating the use of some of these shifts in designing new systems and processes. We see both our Research Grants and Financial Services offices much more willing to provide seed and start-up money to support a project or vision that ultimately supports the greater vision of the University. We no longer wait for all resources to be in hand before beginning work on proposed projects that ultimately support the University. However, our support staff and some administrative processes, such as the maintenance of our physical structures and our technological budgets, have not kept pace with our aggressive university-wide vision and some of the cultural changes. The University is working on these things.

Generally, the University of Alberta is moving its systems and its people toward the cultural model where a collaborative “seize the day” attitude prevails within a collective, but not yet fully-embraced, vision. We are becoming more collaborative and more integrated in our processes and systems, but it takes time to make a

cultural shift of values that have been entrenched for decades. Most academic environments still support a culture and a model that allows individual egos to advance personal visions, despite the institution-supported vision and model.

Not all would agree that the continuum proposed by Hanna is desirable. It may take us years to reach a fully collaborative, integrated “seize the day” attitude, or we may never completely get there. The important point is that this cultural shift is taking place at the University of Alberta, and we need to understand how to work within this shifting environment, or help to change it.

## Community Engagement and the University of Alberta’s Vision

As our culture has shifted at the University of Alberta, many of our systems and programs are also changing and some are being redefined. One prime example is the institution-wide shift toward community engagement with University of Alberta programs. All departments at our university are being driven to do outreach programs, and as they do so, these units are realizing the benefits of making the results of their research and research stories known to the public. It is no longer just the museums that bring school groups to campus or attract media attention, for example, but several departments and areas are now involved with outreach.

In fact, outreach has grown so much that one year ago, our Museums department facilitated a campus-wide workshop, in partnership with the University’s Public Affairs Department, to determine how widespread community engagement was, and in what ways it was done. We found that there are many, many programs across campus—from the Engineering faculty offering science camps for kids to the University Museums offering Science Sundays. We concluded that the University needs a more coordinated approach across campus to engage the broader community from a University perspective. More centrally-assigned funds and a redefinition of community engagement are needed if we are all to support the President’s vision in a strategic way.

The result of this discussion, for our museum system, is that we have learned that while our university culture is shifting to a more collaborative structure, we are no longer the only kids on the outreach block, and we need to learn to play with the other non-museum programs and be more aware of opportunities within the University.

## University of Alberta Museums: Seizing the Day

The University of Alberta is one of the oldest collecting institutions in western Canada, having collected everything from artwork to zoological specimens for about 90 years. We now boast that we house one of Canada's largest collections with unconfirmed numbers of 15 to 20 million artifacts and specimens.

Our collecting behavior, like that of many universities, resulted from passionate researchers and dedicated and interested supporters of the University, which includes alumni, friends, family and political allies. Our collecting probably started in a haphazard way, but was always strongly fuelled by each individual's curiosity and passion for finding answers to questions such as: why is the Province of Alberta home to vast paleontological resources? What is our connection to the Group of Seven artists, and why did one of their most prominent members travel all the way to Edmonton in the early 1920s to paint our first President and our first Chancellor?

Unlike many other universities, we do not have a large central edifice to pay homage to our collections and museums. Not that we wouldn't like one, but this scenario has just never worked out for a variety of reasons. Instead, we have a distributed system of 35 museums and collections across 16 different academic units and four faculties at the University. This system is supported by: an academic service unit called Museums and Collections Services; a Collections Committee, which is responsible for policy creation and policy monitoring for all campus collections and collecting activity; a Curators Committee, which is a resource sharing forum for academics who are designated as curators or collections representatives; volunteer programs; and a Friends of the University of Alberta Museums organization, which provides connections to the broader community, raises funds and continually reminds us of our role to support our first President's vision through our museum programs. President Tory stated:

Universities must be conducted in such a way as to relate them as closely as possible to the life of the people. The people demand that knowledge shall not be the concern of scholars alone. (qtd. in Corbett 1992)

Our collections, like those of many universities, are spread out all over campus in a variety of locations. We have some museums that have large exhibition spaces while others have only the occasional display case. Some collections provide access via visible storage, while others provide access only in their labs or via other controlled environments. But, all work together in a collaborative model.

Our system is definitely distributed and relies on people and the belief that university museum resources are integral to the mission and vision of the university as stated in our campus museum policy, which is approved by our Board of Governors. But more importantly, our system relies on being strategically linked to the broader university vision and mission. In many ways, our University Museum system has already unknowingly embraced many of the cultural shifts that the broader University is beginning to accept. This does not mean that we have abandoned the existing systems or framework. It is important to know when to embrace systems that work and reinforce partnerships that exist on campus. It is also important to recognize that all situations are not the same, so a selective strategy needs to be applied.

Using a selection of Hanna's eleven strategic challenges, the following examples provide a means to understand how the University of Alberta Museums and the systems that help them function are adapting to the shifting culture, and the "seize the day" attitude.

### Removing Boundaries

*What is "on-campus" and what is not, will become less and less apparent...activities and boundaries will be increasingly blurred as a result of the greater communication, and interactions made possible by increasingly powerful technologies. (Hanna 2003)*

Boundaries in the University of Alberta context can be those that separate the museums from the rest of campus, as well as those between the university and its broader communities. Our museum model supports initiatives that emphasize communication across campus and with the broader community. The benefit of our distributed museum system, for example, is that our community of curators intersects most faculties and departments on campus. Curators, in our context, are professors with research and teaching responsibilities who have been designated to be responsible for collections within an academic unit or discipline. They come together to work strategically on issues that affect the whole community and link the concerns back to their academic units. The Collections Committee, which approves policy and reviews issues such as deaccessions and funding opportunities, consists of representatives from across campus (and not just from units with museums) and includes students and a community member. Because this committee reports to the General Faculties Council and the Board of Governors, the issues, opportunities and initiatives of the museums reach a broad campus audience as well.

The University of Alberta Museums Virtual Museum web site, as described below, is a step towards removing boundaries for audiences that range from

children in our local community to scholars on the other side of the globe. Partnerships and alliances will also serve to remove these boundaries, as described in the Alberta Natural Science Information Facility proposal, which, through the Internet, seeks to unite collections and researchers from around the Province of Alberta.

### **Supporting Entrepreneurial Efforts and Technology**

Hanna suggests that the implementation of learning technologies to increase access has met with minimal support from faculty, as universities do not support this kind of entrepreneurial activity with appropriate funding resources. Certainly, this is the case at the University of Alberta. Though a sizeable budget is allotted to support the technology infrastructure across campus, it is still not enough to cover all technology needs, ideas and initiatives, as these are costly ventures. Though Museums and Collections Services does not have an annual operating budget for online projects, in any given year we may receive a fixed amount for capital purchases, seed money towards an initiative. We are fortunate, however, that we can avail ourselves of the campus-wide infrastructure. Despite a shortage of funds, Museums and Collections Services has implemented a project to develop distributed databases for most of its collections, and further develop the Virtual Museum, which provides online access to a range of resources supported by the databases. In many collections, applications have been piloted, such as georeferencing systems, or partnerships have been explored on campus with researchers in computing science looking to capture three-dimensional objects and spaces in unique ways. We have accomplished these initiatives primarily through a range of successful grants, applications to federal and provincial agencies and industry partners.

### **Redesigning Support Services**

*As institutions become more focused on customizing programs for students, support services are being redesigned to be delivered flexibly, through multiple pathways. (Hanna 2003)*

The University of Alberta Museums system consists of our Curators Committee and the collections they represent: the Collections Committee; our community group, the Friends of the University of Alberta Museums; and the Department of Museums and Collections Services, which is the central unit and coordinating body for the system. Museums and Collections Services, as an academic support unit, works individually and collectively with the academic community to identify service needs and ensure that they are addressed appropriately and that museum standards

of practice are in place. Collections share many needs in common, but many collections have needs unique to their discipline, collection, academic program or student body.

This system or model has worked well for the University of Alberta and its distributed museum community. We have just launched a strategic planning process, which for the first time is being conducted on a campus-wide scale for museums. We will be working with internal and external stakeholders to develop a vision for the University of Alberta Museums as a whole (that supports the University of Alberta vision and mission) as well as working with the business units within Museums and Collections Services to determine the implementation process needed to achieve the vision.

Coupled with this initiative, the University museums are undergoing an audit for our federal Cultural Property Review Board, which bestows the important "Category A" status on the University museums in order to allow the institution to collect cultural property in a number of categories (e.g., textiles, art, paleontological specimens). The audit asks us to review all of our physical spaces for fire, conservation and security requirements as well as all of our museum policies and procedures. Though a considerable amount of work, it allows us to have a snapshot of our current status and consider options for the future that could include a central storage facility, or improved facilities at each location. Without our museum system and the full support of other units on campus, such as Facilities Management, Campus Security and Occupational Health and Safety, we could not tackle such an undertaking.

### **Emphasizing Connected and Lifelong Learning**

*The real need is for people who are adaptable and who know how to learn and problem solve. ...Taking advantage of context, collaborating and constructing knowledge will be valued skills. (Hanna 2003)*

The University of Alberta Museums has developed two initiatives that address children, as an outreach function, as a recruitment tool and as a means of cultivating lifelong learners. Both projects incorporate the provincial government-mandated curriculum. The Muse Project provides teachers and their classes with access to our museum system—which is not easy for the external community to navigate—through on-site tours, discovery kits for use in the classroom and web-based resources. The underlying theme is "From Wonder to Wisdom," which translates the research process into a series of five steps: wonder, focus, discovery, fusion and wisdom. As junior researchers, students learn how and why universities have museums, collect museum objects

and learn a variety of multidisciplinary skills that can be applied in a variety of contexts. Further information on this initiative can be found on the Muse Project web site located at <http://www.museums.ualberta.ca/resources>.

The second project, “KidZone,” is an interactive web site for kids located on the University of Alberta Virtual Museum Web site at [www.museums.ualberta.ca/kidzone](http://www.museums.ualberta.ca/kidzone). Children are invited to explore mysteries in the University of Alberta Museums through a series of games, stories and activities. KidZone is hosted by the characters Wendy and Iggy, two friends who begin all their adventures in a clubhouse built in a backyard tree. By exploring the site, children can gain a better understanding of what research is and how it relates to our daily lives, and become familiar with museums in a university context. The learning experiences at KidZone, while based on Alberta Learning’s K-12 curriculum, are informal. They are fully bilingual in English and French (Canada’s two official languages) and accessible to the visually impaired who use text readers.

### **Building Strategic Alliances with Others**

*All colleges and universities will seek to expand their web of alliances with others in the future.* (Hanna 2003)

Through our strategic planning process, we are looking at partnerships and alliances, as well as a range of opportunities that are possible through these partnerships. However, it is important to complete the strategic plan first, to determine where the most strategic partnerships lie. Partnerships and alliances naturally develop through the course of project development and implementation. Partnerships with our local school boards and the Faculty of Education on campus for our Muse Project, for example, have proven to be valuable alliances for the U of A Museums as a whole and beyond specific projects. The Alberta Natural Science Information Facility is a prime example of proposed partnerships and alliances, not only with other post-secondary institutions, but with government agencies and natural science organizations. Dr. Felix Sperling has described this project in his article titled, “Unlocking the Legacy of Alberta’s Natural Science Collections.” This project is pending funding, but should it not materialize, the process of seeking partners and investigating the future of such an initiative has expanded the web of alliances for this and other projects.

### **Measuring Program Quality**

*A dramatic shift in how quality is measured—with flexibility, responsiveness, timeliness efficiency and applicability becoming new, important measures of*

*quality. ...Criteria for institutional accreditation and program quality assessment are changing to reflect more specific measurements of learning.* (Hanna 2003)

The University of Alberta, as part of its four-year planning cycle, sets the expectation that each unit will determine performance measures and identify benchmarks. Our provincial museums association, Museums Alberta, has just launched its “Achievement Program,” which is an extension of its standards practices handbook, and has been many years in the making. The University of Alberta Museums has adhered to the standard practices handbook, and is looking to incorporate the Achievement Program into its strategic planning process. An extension of this program could be the development of benchmarks and measures applicable to the whole province. This could also be an initiative for UMAC to develop a set of benchmarks and measures that are meaningful in the university museum context.

### **Achieving Institutional Advantage**

*The abundance of opportunities demands greater focus and clarity about purposes and competitive strengths as institutions compete in a larger, more complex marketplace.* (Hanna 2003)

One of the University of Alberta’s competitive strengths is the University of Alberta Museums. Without the model and system that support the museums collectively, this strength may not have been realized and subsequently recognized. Although the university has supported museums for close to a century, it is only in the past few years that senior administration has recognized the value of the museums in relation to its broader vision, and it may or may not be because of the model.

Addressing many of the strategic challenges that Hanna has proposed might be natural outcomes of the model that the University of Alberta Museums has implemented. Some have been deliberate choices in accepting the cultural shifts and exhibiting the cultural traits required to seize the day. Our model is built on collaboration within the university environment and beyond by ensuring that our community is involved in our decision-making processes. We recognize the need to be integrated—ensuring the museums are embedded in a range of university programs and services, and extending our unique museum skills to the University for some non-museum related activities. Our model allows us to work on system-wide projects, such as developing repatriation and other policy documents for all collections, but within the context of the University. Our current strategic planning process hopefully will allow us to identify potential new strategies for our

museums both within the university and beyond. We have understood for several years that vision and strategy are important for the University of Alberta, but because of our collective model, they have become equally important for the University of Alberta museums.

### Some Final Advice

Seize the day! Our distributed museum model for the University of Alberta definitely has allowed our museums and collections staff and our faculty to work together campus-wide to implement considerable change and progress for our museums. The system is not perfect, and we continually struggle with issues such as inclusiveness and maintaining a good communication strategy campus-wide as the administrative structure and its personnel change. We know our system is dependent upon vision, strategy, personalities, policy, collaboration and flexibility. Our model depends on several activities which have been collectively identified: ensuring intellectual and academic freedom in the pursuit of knowledge; benefiting the entire University and its many disciplines, departments and programs; assuring the highest possible care for our collections; encouraging bold ideas in research, teaching and community engagement; being steadfast in the pursuit of new knowledge created through the interaction among, and within, individual collections and curious minds; showing respect for, and being accessible to, our diverse communities; and supporting lifelong learning through fascination with objects and specimens and the ideas that result. We do feel that, because of our collaborative model and by actively acknowledging that the university culture has shifted and is shifting, we are much stronger as a campus museum community than if we each operated as single university museums or collections in isolation, or in competition with each other.

In order to ensure that our university museums are relevant to our university specifically, and to society in general, and that our museums are not seen as merely an administrative contrivance, we strongly believe that we must be connected to the university's larger vision and have a role in shaping it. We must always be diligent and observe the changes that are taking place in our academic environments and beyond, so that we can embrace change where relevant. As we have found, a "seize the day" attitude has helped us move forward on several initiatives that have become important to the university as a whole.

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