



Focus Group Report: Member Voices Steer the Future of MESC

INTRODUCTION

The Museum Educators of Southern California (MESC) was formally founded in 1977 and obtained 501 (c)(3) status. MESC is one of the oldest and largest museum education professional organizations in the country providing Southern California museum educators with professional development, theoretical discourse, practical training, and networking for over 30 years.

As the field of museum education has evolved and the state of museums has changed, the roles and responsibilities of educators have expanded. MESC, with its focus on presenting a series of professional development programs, has faced challenges in serving the multiple needs of its members and achieving its mission. MESC is operated by a volunteer board of directors who provide strategic leadership as well as program planning and implementation services. In order to remain a high quality professional organization, the work and governance structure of MESC is in need of a transformation.

To inform decisions about new directions, MESC embarked on a two-year research and assessment project, during which the board of directors hired outside consultants to evaluate the state of the field, analyze the practices of similar organizations, and review the current work of MESC. This report summarizes the results of a series of focus groups with MESC members conducted during the spring of 2015. Mary Ellen Munley of MEM and Associates trained the board to be research practitioners and conduct focus groups to evaluate the current status and need for MESC among museum education professionals.

METHODOLOGY

Mary Ellen Munley facilitated a one day training for the MESC Board of Directors to conduct three focus groups. The training included a discussion of the goals for the focus groups, a tutorial about focus group methods, and a creation of a focus group plan. The defined goals of the focus groups were to determine if there is a need for MESC to exist, to inform the strategic direction of MESC, and to get feedback from MESC members. Invitations to participate in the focus groups were sent to the MESC membership with an aim to have a diverse representation of museums and individuals from a range of career phases.

The focus groups took place at three locations: February 27, 2015 at the Hammer Museum; March 11, 2015 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); and March 16, 2015 at the Natural History Museum, Los Angeles. There were nine to ten participants in each focus group. All three focus groups were facilitated by the same member of the board of directors. The focus group facilitation script, used for all three groups, was written collaboratively by the board of directors with guidance from Munley (See attachment A). All focus groups were recorded with the consent of participants and transcribed. Three museum education professionals, who were not at the focus groups, analyzed the transcripts. First, they independently read the three transcripts, and each person identified common themes in the comments made by MESC members. Second, they met in-person for a discussion of the findings and arrived consensus about the key messages for an

assessment of MESC in its current configuration and about recommendations from the membership on changes and future directions.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGIC DIRECTION

The regional scope of MESC is an organizational strength.

Participants identified the regional coherence and ready access of MESC as assets. National conferences are valued as opportunities for professionals to connect with colleagues and engage with the field. MESC offers the same valued opportunities with the added value that they are more frequent, accessible and affordable. Furthermore, MESC convenes local museum education professionals who are serving similar audiences and communities and therefore face many of the same challenges and prospects for collaborations and shared learning. Though regional in scope, focus group participants noted that MESC serves a geographic area with a large number of museums and therefore, there is a wealth of knowledge to be shared.

Implications for strategic direction:

MESC can capitalize on its service to Southern California, with an emphasis on creating a local network of practice and resources.

MESC has a wealth of local knowledge that can be tapped.

MESC is a valuable resource for entry level staff, providing local, affordable opportunities for professional development and community.

MESC events are affordable and require no travel costs; therefore, entry level professionals can afford to attend MESC events and managers are able to send multiple employees to affordable professional development. MESC provides a space for newcomers to the field to learn the landscape of the field and build relationships within the community of museum educators in Southern California.

MESC struggles to engage senior and executive staff.

Seasoned professionals expressed a decrease in participation in MESC as they advanced in their career because MESC programs are more often geared toward entry level and mid-career professionals. As museum educators advance in their career, the type of professional development they need changes. When inspirational, MESC events draw seasoned professionals who are inclined to skip programs focused on skill building because they already have that knowledge. It was suggested that speakers from outside the field may draw more senior staff. The focus group participants also expressed a need for increased upper-level buy-in for supporting MESC through participation and/or funds to attend MESC events.

Implications for strategic direction:

MESC needs to continue to serve entry level professionals while crafting sophisticated programming and opportunities for those later in their career.

MESC needs to be strategic in cultivating support from senior staff at institutions – both to have their support for staff training and to serve their advanced learning needs.

MESC could provide more career development opportunities and guidance.

While members identified MESC being a resource for the practicalities of their work, they also expressed a desire for programming or services that aid them in advancing in their careers.

Transparency about the experience of senior staff in museum education could support entry level professionals in cultivating awareness and consideration of their personal growth in their career. There were many discussions about mentorship as the potential way for all career levels to have mutually beneficial results. Interestingly, one focus group discussed that there are no senior positions for entry level and mid-career educators to move into because all the senior positions have been filled by the same people for over ten years.

Implications for strategic direction:

MESC could provide a safe environment that fosters transparency about the experiences of seasoned professionals and senior staff so that entry level and mid-career professional can benefit from their successes and challenges.

MESC should consider creating a mentorship program that leverages the knowledge of seasoned educators without taxing their time.

MESC needs to support mid-career professionals as they face the realities of limited opportunities for advancing to senior level positions.

MESC promotes networking and creates a peer support network.

MESC provides in-person opportunities for professionals to build and continue relationships. The focus group participants referenced MESC as a source of inspiration for programs, ideas, and a peer support network. MESC keeps members current on education practices and gets them out of their silos. There were many suggestions on how MESC could support a peer network and be a clearinghouse for current research in the field such as Facebook, a book club, a blog, or a listserv. Members also expressed interest in collaborating with colleagues at other institutions through MESC.

Implications for strategic direction:

MESC should provide offerings that are a combination of individual programs and activities that facilitate the formation of learning communities where resources and knowledge are shared on a more regular basis.

MESC could be instrumental in identifying and promoting collaboration opportunities across institutions.

Membership should drive the content of MESC programs.

In order for MESC to be relevant to members, programs should address questions from the membership. There could also be several programs that address the same questions or a theme for an entire year of programming.

Implications for strategic direction:

MESC's programs will be based on member needs and recommendations.

MESC could offer diverse program formats.

There was a lot of discussion in the focus groups around possible program formats that stray from the tradition panel or keynote speaker format. There could be a combination of formal (traditional) and informal events that are more flexible. A list was generated of suggested program formats (See attachment B).

Implications for strategic direction:

MESC will experiment with innovative formats for its programs.

MESC members want to continue the discussion after and between programs.

MESC programs activate inspiration and motivation that can lose steam after a program. Members expressed a need for continued dialog following MESC programs where members share how they are applying what they learned at their institution and the challenges they may be facing.

Implications for strategic direction:

MESC could facilitate ongoing conversations among its members.

MESC could be a vehicle for advocacy.

MESC distinguishes itself from other organizations and conferences by its sole focus on the museum educator. Advocacy as a potentially important aspect of MESC was highly discussed. However, there were multiple ideas about what MESC could be an advocate for, rather than one common definition. MESC could help membership learn how to advocate for themselves within their department and/or in their institution. MESC could help advocate for field of the museum education. MESC could also advocate for best practices and help define the education culture in Southern California museums.

Implications for strategic direction:

As a well-respected and focused organization, MESC has the opportunity to affirm the field of museum education.

MESC is active in a region with many museum educators doing high quality work. It could leverage its membership to build the case for museum education and drive the agenda for what is important in the field.

SUMMARY

The focus groups affirmed that MESC is a valuable resource for the museum education field in Southern California. The focus groups also suggested that MESC has several opportunities to increase the value of the organization to the membership. As MESC transforms into its next iteration, the implications for the strategic direction included in this report should steer the rewriting of MESC's mission and bylaws and be considered in the restructuring of the organization.

The implications for a new strategic direction identified by MESC members and summarized in this report will serve as the foundation for outlining the future direction of the organization. Most notable is the desire for more than occasional programs, and the call for more continuous network building and communication that brings entry-level and senior professionals in more contact with each other.

The board of directors comes away from this research project reassured that there is a need – and a potential for increased membership – for a Southern California professional organization for museum educators. The next step is to reimagine MESC, activate more of its membership, and use physical and online platforms for strengthening the ties among museum educations – and the quality of their service.

Attachment A: Focus Group Facilitation Script

Section I: Introduction

Welcome to this focus group, and thank you for coming. I am... a member of the board of the Museum Educators of Southern California. The MESC board is interested in learning more about how Museum Educators of Southern California is perceived in the community and how MESC can best serve Museum Educators and Informal Educators in Southern California. I am joined by ...who will help make sure we accurately keep track of what you share with us today.

First, I'd like to say a few words about what a focus group is. A focus group is a way to bring people together to give them an opportunity to express their views on a specific topic. We want to hear from YOU. There are no right or wrong comments or opinions. There are only YOUR opinions. Please feel free to express whatever comes to mind as we go through our discussion today. You will be most helpful to the MESC board if you offer honest and thoughtful reflections. Some ideas you may agree on; others you may not. We just want to know your true thoughts and understand your experiences so that the board gets a realistic sense of its audience.

So, please participate and make this a lively conversation. If someone is quiet on a topic, I know that does not necessarily mean you agree with what is being said. So if you had a different experience, be sure to speak up so we don't come away thinking there is more commonality among your lives and experiences than there really is. And even though we want this to be lively, it's still important to speak one at a time and to not engage in side conversations.

We will be recording the discussion so we can be sure to be accurate when we report what you have to say. In our report we will be summarizing the group's reactions and your individual comments will be kept anonymous. [Tell participants they are welcome to help themselves to refreshments, and give direction to the restrooms. Point out that they have paper and pens at their places for jotting notes.]

As we begin, let's take a few minutes to get acquainted. You have a nameplate in front of you with your name on it, but will each of you still say your name for the recording and tell the group the following:

- If you are a member of MESC and if so, whether you are an individual or institutional member?
- What currently keeps you continuing to participate in MESC related activities and /or be a member of MESC?

On the wall are listed a mix of professional identification categories that might be found in a MESC program audience.

- Entry Level museum professionals
- Mid-career museum professionals
- Seasoned museum professionals
- Gallery teachers
- Program designers
- Audience developers
- Administrators/ Managers

How do you identify yourself using one or a combination of the categories we just discussed?

Section II: Current Role of MESC

MESC has been an organization for 37 years serving Museum Educators all over Southern California. Based on your experience, what do YOU think MESC provides to its members?

Listen for: Similarities and differences in responses

Specific follow up question:

What do you think MESC provides that you might not get elsewhere?

Section III: MESC's Audience

As the Museum Education field matures and grows, so does the audience of an organization like MESC. Based on your previous responses, we know there are a mix of ... [entry-, mid-career- and gallery teachers] here. Let's identify how MESC serves each of these audiences. We will go through them one by one.

- How do think MESC currently serves each audience?
- Follow up: Do you think MESC does a good job, a satisfactory job or is lacking at serving each audience? Why or why not?
- Follow up: How would you like an organization like MESC to serve each audience?

Listen for: Explanations about why people answered as they did, similarities and differences in responses

Section IV: MESC; a Professional Community

I would like to read a short definition of a Professional Community: A professional community is an extended learning opportunity to foster collaborative learning among colleagues within a particular work environment or field.

MESC is interested in moving beyond its traditional role as a primarily programmatic organization to one that operates more like a professional learning community; a place to share ideas, network and gain support from colleagues in our field.

- What kind of professional support do you consider necessary that you might not currently be receiving from your employer, other professional development or networking outlets, or your local community?
- How do you think a shift like this would affect your relationship with MESC?

Listen and probe for these specifics: These are not must ask questions. Would this shift make you more or less likely to contribute to MESC with your time? For example: participating in peer learning communities, sharing articles and resources, leading or hosting networking events etc. Would this shift make you more or less likely to contribute to MESC financially either through donations, or individual or institutional membership dues?)

Section V: Reflections and Summing Up

We're almost finished. Just two more questions.

- If MESC, in its current form, dissolved how would it affect you?
- Is there something on your mind that we have not talked about yet?

Thank you for coming.

Attachment B: List of Suggested Program Formats

Roundtable

Think Tank

Town Hall

Teaching Lab

Program Shadowing/Behind the Scenes

Speaking Opportunities

Collaboration Opportunities

Follow-Up Conversations

Book Club

Online Forums (i.e. specific Facebook groups)

Retreat