



Local History Services

Baseline Capacities of County-level History Enterprises in Minnesota in 2015

Report on Baselines for Facility, Governance, and Website

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Abstract

History enterprises in Minnesota are plentiful. Using the population of 87 county historical societies, the Minnesota Historical Society's Local History Services set out to establish baseline measurements for facilities, governance, and websites. In sum, facilities maintain a modest museum environment consistently; there is a small number of standardized policies among the population; and, basic requirements for websites are inconsistently met. The result of this research then forms the basis for future analysis to determine capacity for saving and sharing Minnesota history.

Introduction

Much has been written about small history enterprises. Generally what has been written from a scarcity point of view of what those organizations lack, are not doing, or are unable to do. Local history services operate on the reverse assumption that the history enterprise will direct their own affairs including the timing and manner of assistance they need. Local history services personnel are not to judge the history enterprises seeking their help, but instead meet them where they are. This report is meant to specify where the 87 county historical societies are as of the point of contact for this project during the latter half of 2015.

Flowing from a 2015 strategic planning meeting, the Minnesota Historical Society's Local History Services determined that while it had anecdotal knowledge of history enterprises across the state, they could provide better service with solid quantifiable data. After considering many categories of data, the unit chose to observe baselines related to museum facilities, governance indicators, and web presence. While the local history enterprises total more than 500, these organizations are spread across 86,000 square miles and are more than 70 percent staffed with volunteers. The team concluded to undertake in person visits to interview contacts at the 87 county historical societies so as both to achieve geographic representation and to assure that data would be as consistently stated as possible.

We projected that few of the museum facilities would be able to maintain a proper museum environment because of the common reuse of buildings that were not designed to be museums. We also thought that few of the organizations would have eight policies and documents that are suggested by the American Alliance of Museums and the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002. And, we believed that web initiatives were not optimized to encourage greater participation, access, and visitation.

Method

Minnesota is one of a few states where there is a county level history enterprise in every one of its counties. There are 87 counties, and the organizations selected for the survey had to bear the county name in their organization's name. This requirement was chosen because some elected commissioners believe that all of the history organizations in their county are county-level organizations. The survey team wished to keep the population manageable and to not enter into local disputes.

Three baseline survey documents were developed, one for each of the three baselines to measure.

The project elected to measure visible light, ultraviolet light, temperature, and relative humidity in exhibit, object storage, research reading room, and archives storage. While there is only one reading room where they exist, recognizing multiple possibilities for the other three meant that in each visit the host organization was asked to identify what their main or primary space for each was. The four readings were then only taken in just four spaces. The facility survey document also included 26 other observations in the form of yes or no answers. Finally, categorical data on the main building of each host

organization was also collected for ownership, date constructed, museum-built or reused, and number of levels to the building.

The project used the presence of certain policies and documents as a proxy for measuring governance capacity on the assumption that stronger organizations would have more of the policies and documents in place. The American Alliance of Museums established in 2014 “five core documents,” which are the mission statement, institutional code of ethics, strategic plan, disaster preparedness plan, and collections management policy. The five core documents were chosen because AAM states that they are “fundamental for basic professional museum operations and embody core museum values and practices.” The team recognizes that the population of the project is not museums, but rather comprehensive history enterprises that operate museums. However, since facilities should be the greatest tool to preserve history, and since these facilities have museums in them, AAM’s core documents seemed the most appropriate for gauging the degree of professional governance. The Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 triggered the inclusion of three policies on the revised Internal Revenue Service Form 990, namely the conflict of interest statement, whistleblower policy, and records retention schedule. The project asked about these because a number of philanthropic foundations now require their grantees to have them and exclude others that do not have them. While we were in the field, the Minnesota Historical Society asked that the team also ask about written policies for the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. Finally, in asking about these policies and documents the survey results then will show the degree to which county history organizations in Minnesota meet expectations set by external sources.

The third baseline looked at websites. While facilities show the capacity to preserve history and governance shows the organizational commitment to professional operations, the websites will suggest the degree to which the global public has access to these organizations. In other words, while history can be preserved and practiced appropriately, none of that matters unless people are able to discover that history and use it. Each website was evaluated against ten prototype standards meant to be offered for potential inclusion in the Standards and Excellence Program for Historical Organizations (StEPs) from the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), once validated. As such, websites were rated as to whether they met the standards on a basic, good, and better gradation as StEPs uses for all other standards. Currently, StEPs does not have standards for websites. The standards are as follows:

1. Identification: the organization is clearly identified throughout the site.
2. SEO (Search Engine Optimization): home page and major section pages are appropriately identified and described.
3. Accessibility: majority of the website is ADA (Sec. 508) compliant.
4. Privacy: well written privacy policy is available on the website.
5. Web Maintenance Plan: positions and procedures are identified for website maintenance.
6. Documentation: organization has documented critical information pertinent to maintaining the website’s longevity.
7. Collections Information Online: organization provides information about its collections holdings.
8. Exhibitions: organization uses the website to provide information or enhance in-house exhibitors and/or to have stand alone online exhibits.

9. Donations: organization uses website to collect online monetary donations.
10. Social Media: organization maintains a presence on social media.

For the first two baselines, staff drove to each of the 87 county history organizations. They used the checklists described above and an ELSEC 765 handheld environment monitor to measure lux, microwatts per lumen, Fahrenheit, and relative humidity. For the third baseline, websites and social media channels were evaluated from the team's office in St. Paul.

For the field visits, staff interviewed the principal staff person with direct knowledge about the facility and about the governance documents and policies. In the case of the relatively few organizations with a paid collections manager, staff interviewed the collections manager directly as the principal staff person for the organization in those cases may have less accurate assessments about the facility's capacity to care for collections. Prior to the field visits, staff going into the field were provided training in the use of the ELSEC 765 handheld environment monitor. To measure visible light and ultraviolet light, the light meter was placed in the brightest place adjacent to the most light-sensitive object. All four readings (visible light, ultraviolet light, temperature and relative humidity) were taken in the same spot. The idea was to record the worst possible reading. After the first 36 site visits, field staff then took a psychrometer and a second light meter to compare readings with the light meter used throughout the project. Finding identical or near-identical readings, the remainder of the project was conducted solely with the one light meter used throughout the project.

For the website evaluation, staff compared each of the 87 county historical society websites to eight of the ten stated standards from July 2015 through March 2016. Two of the standards (5 and 6) required separate interviews to determine documentation practices. Reviewing those practices was held for a second phase when more time would permit.

Facility Results

At least one stereotypical assumption about county historical societies may be that they are all volunteer and inhabit an old building converted to a museum space. Minnesota statutes certainly authorize county governments to provide a space for county historical societies in the county courthouse. There is still one county historical society in Minnesota where their gallery remains in the active county courthouse, but even for that one their storage is in another building and much of their programming is in other venues.

Of the 87 county historical societies, their buildings span 160 years of construction dates, 1853-2013. The average year for these buildings is 1946, which is nearly center in the distribution in Table A. There were three years (1959, 1960, and 1972) when each year had three facilities in general constructed, which account for more than 10 percent of the population. Additionally 9 of the years each had two facilities constructed. There is at least one facility representing each of the decades since 1850 in Minnesota (extant buildings in general date to 1820 and newer).

Table A: Decade when county historical society facilities (museum built) were constructed

	Total	'00	'10	'20	'30	'40	'50	'60	'70	'80	'90
19th Century	13						1(0)	2(0)	3(0)	2(0)	5(0)
20th Century	68	9(0)	10(0)	1(0)	1(0)	3(0)	6(1)	11(7)	12(11)	9(8)	6(5)
21st Century	6	3(3)	3(3)								

Surprisingly (if the stereotype is to be believed), 38 county historical societies are in buildings purposefully built as history headquarters (hereinafter “museum” though the facilities often support more than just museum functions). The construction date span is 1959-2013, just 54 years and with an average construction date of 1982. The oldest “for that purpose” constructed headquarters buildings remaining are the former Minnesota Historical Society building (1916) and the Mower County Historical Society Pavilion (1948). The impact of the American Revolution Bicentennial in 1976 and the construction of the Weyerhaeuser Museum in 1975, along with greater emphasis on collections care since the mid-1970s seem to be reflected in the stock of buildings built as museums. In fact, 25 of the 38 museums are built 1975-2013, and among all buildings in use for county historical society headquarters only two (2) of the 27 built 1975 to present are buildings built for other purposes and reused. From 1965-1976 the United States planned for its American Revolution Bicentennial. In that period, 14 of the 17 facilities used as county historical society headquarters were built to save and share history. Of the three (3) remaining, two (2) were built as libraries, which are very compatibly reused for museums. However, since 1959 all 38 purpose-built facilities were constructed, with only an additional 9 facilities reused from other purposes. Clearly, the shift to building facilities to accommodate professional practices has occurred among Minnesota’s county history enterprises if construction dates are used. The survey did not ask when the organization began using the facility.

The other 49 are in buildings built for other purposes. The table is far from surprising, except that there are so many related to automotive uses (farm implement dealers, truck depots, auto parts store). Since they numerically follow former depots, these automotive-machinery-related buildings may simply reflect the mid-20th-century transition from railroads to automotive-based transportation. Certainly with the wide-open spaces needed to accommodate vehicles, these buildings provide flexible floor plans to support museum purposes.

Table B: Buildings re-purposed for county historical society headquarters

Government Administration	8
Residential Homes	8
Railroad Depot	7
Automotive	6
School	6
Church	5
Library	4
Commercial Use	3
Community Organizations	2

There are 25 of these reused facilities that have been included in the National Register of Historic Places. For history organizations, these NRHP-listed facilities are the largest historic artifact in their possession. Of those built originally for government purposes, 65 percent (13 of 20) are currently listed in the NRHP. Of the 29 built originally for non-government purposes, 41.4 percent (12 of 29) are listed in the NRHP. However, original purpose does not predict inclusion in the NRHP as Table C shows. The f-statistic should be larger than 3.84 to be significant at the 5 percent level. The f-statistic generated is not even significant at the 10 percent level meaning that government construction and being listed in the NRHP is not correlated for this population. When considering whether NRHP status might suggest government ownership, the chi squared contingency table yields a poorer statistic of 1.74. It would appear that government ownership of buildings is purely a local decision based on variable circumstances.

Table C: Buildings reused as museums

		Government Built		
		Y	N	T
NRHP	Y	13	12	25
	N	7	17	24
	T	20	29	49
co-eff		2.6		
f-stat		3.8		

In general, the buildings are very accessible. For access by car, 95.4 percent meet the Minnesota Department of Transportation’s definition of adequate parking, which is necessary to receive a brown directional signs on certain highways. Once on site, 88.5 percent have an at-grade entrance to the facility. Then, once inside the facility, 43.7 percent are one level, and of the remaining 49 facilities with multiple floors 44.9 percent have an elevator or lift. There were several with multiple floors that had a shaft but no elevator or had a plan to add an elevator - both cases these were counted as not having an elevator. Similarly with restrooms, 79.3 percent were clearly labeled as accessible. The provision of power-assist on main entry doors was fairly infrequent at just 31.8 percent. The year 2015 was the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Despite the many reports generated about progress, no benchmarks were located with which to evaluate county history enterprises. Nearly all of those interviewed indicated that welcoming all people through their doors was a priority.

The facility checklist included questions about the safety of collections objects. The most important was whether there were any occupancy switches for gallery lights. Light, being energy, is the most dangerous threat to collections (and at high intensity energy can result in fire. To reduce light exposure is to better preserve the collections, as well as save operational energy costs. Only 15.7 percent had observable occupancy switches in some or all of their exhibit galleries. In general, curatorial staff believed their facilities had adequate circulation routes to safely move collections throughout the building. Only about half of the facilities had separate receiving and isolation areas. For those that did not have separate receiving and isolation areas, new collections entered the building through the front door.

Survey staff observed storage conditions and materials. While for the most part collections were off the floor and did not appear to be overcrowded, there also appeared to be room for growth. One of the more often repeated concerns is that facilities like these are running out of room, yet over two-thirds of the facilities observed appeared to have some room to store additional materials. And, with the field-wide focus on better collections care for the better part of the last 30 years, virtually all of the paper-based collections appeared to have proper materials in use, and three-fourths of the museum collections benefited from proper materials.

Finally, in terms of collections, the survey asked about the presence of culturally sensitive materials (Table D). Over two-thirds of the 87 county historical societies reported having something that either they considered culturally sensitive or were observed in exhibit galleries during the visit. For the purpose of this research, a culturally sensitive object is either governed by law (e.g. the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, and others) or could not be exhibited without deliberate interpretation. Minnesota county historical societies generally participated in NAGPRA in the mid-1990s. This is not to say that there are no objects covered by NAGPRA remaining in these collections. Although the survey team did not physically see the vast majority of the items recorded, what was verbally reported seemed to be of the latter category.

This report uses the Minnesota Protected Classes schedule and adds two more groups of artifacts that did not seem to fit easily: human dignity and war trophies. The types of objects specified were identified by communities or by the historical organization, and are reported here without further comment. And, due to the complexity of history may appear in more than one place. Also, the Ku Klux Klan is placed among Creed not because of any legitimacy, but because it is a secret oath-bound society with a set of beliefs that guide members' actions. The number of instances when culturally sensitive objects were reported appears in parentheses.

Table D: Culturally Sensitive Objects arranged by Minnesota Protected Class

Protected Class	Subgroup	Types of Objects
Race	African American (26)	Blackface photos -21; clown in blackface; oil painting in blackface; language; stereotypes with watermelon; racist toys
	American Indian (28)	Whites in "Indian" regalia/School Monikers – 9; commercial "Indian" regalia; cigar store Indians; catlinite/pipestone pipe bowls and other objects; caricatures; Sun Dance Fan and Whistle; Little Crow's jacket, pouch, and moccasins; documentary paintings; 1920 photo of Campfire Girls in "Indian" regalia; Indian Boarding School objects
	Asian American (4)	Film of Boy Scouts in "Hula" Dance; Whites dressed as Chinese for Chinese New Year's Dinner
	Jewish American (1)	Anti-Jewish propaganda
	Pacific Islander Americans (1)	"Zap the Jap" board game

Color		
Creed “Para-religious” or ritual-oriented	Ku Klux Klan (10)	Photos of Klansmen; seal of local KKK; robes and other regalia; KKK Charter
	Masonic (2)	Regalia; aprons meant to be buried with the mason could be considered grave goods
	Paranormal (3)	Ouija Board
Religion	Christian	Host/Communion Wafers that are consecrated may be sensitive to Roman Catholics
	Islam	The Quran should be displayed closed
	Jewish (1)	Torah
National Origin	Chad (1)	Burial goods
	Germany (2)	Anti-German propaganda
	Japan (1)	Katana (traditional Japanese swords)
	Kenya (1)	Spirit Sticks
Sex	Women	Exploitive and demeaning depictions in photos, illustrations, and advertisements
Marital Status		
Disability	Alcoholism (1)	Stills
	Drug abuse (1)	Bowls and paraphernalia
	Mental (1)	Materials relating to treatment of cognitive disorders
Public Assistance		
Age		
Sexual Orientation	Gay (1)	“Womanless” Wedding photo
Familial Status		
Local Human Rights Commission Activity		
Human Dignity	Atrocities	Items related to genocide
	Crime Photos (1)	Gruesome photos of the bodies of dead victims
	Funerary Objects (2)	Casket Flag; Masonic aprons
	Human Remains (4)	Teeth, vertebrae, and bones; scalps
	Medical Records	Individually identified records
War Trophies	Confederate (2)	Col. Albert Lea related items; Jefferson Davis’ cape
	Imperial Germany	Battlefield souvenirs taken from war dead
	Imperial Japanese (1)	Katana (traditional Japanese swords)
	Nazi Germany (14)	Weapons, flags, regalia
	Philippines	Battlefield souvenirs taken from war dead
	Vietnam (1)	Battlefield souvenirs taken from war dead

The two most commonly observed objects that are culturally sensitive are those associated with American Indians and African Americans. Not surprisingly, the most common problematic collection item relating to American Indians is related to White misappropriation of American Indian dress and names. While most often connected with schools, the practice also extends to community celebrations

and community clubs. Clearly more work needs to be done to carefully account for culturally sensitive objects held in Minnesota history organizations.

While all of the facilities have exhibit galleries, storage and reading rooms are nearly universal as well. The survey team used an ELSEC 765 handheld environment monitor to measure the intensity of visible light in lux, ultraviolet light radiation in microwatts per lumen, temperature in degrees Fahrenheit, and relative humidity. The readings were taken in four spaces only. A representative from the surveyed organization chose the main exhibit, 3-dimensional storage, and archival storage space if there was more than one. The readings were then compared to recommended amounts in the book, *Building Museums: a handbook for small and midsize organizations* (MNHS Press, 2012). Table E below reflects the percentage of instances where readings fell within the recommended levels. The best results tended to be for relative humidity, but really none of the aggregated readings demonstrated that any of the spaces in general were well regulated. The lowest percentage of compliance was for visible light intensity in reading rooms. This is likely due to a variety of factors, but the most often cited was the need for greater amounts of light for researchers to use either due to age, readability of documents, or maybe both. While the very low level of compliance may be concerning because paper-based collections are among the most light-sensitive, reading rooms typically feature many records committed to microfilm, duplicate “user copies” of materials, and only the briefest of appearances of research materials normally kept dark in storage boxes.

Table E: Spaces in history facilities meeting desired environmental readings

	Have	Vis. Li.	UV	Temp.	Humidity
Main Exhibit	100.0	28.7	36.8	36.8	60.9
Main 3D Storage	86.2	48.8	57.0	33.7	51.2
Reading Room	98.9	15.1	30.2	59.3	58.1
Main Archival Storage	82.8	39.5	44.2	10.5	59.3

Governance

The second baseline used the rate of adoption of standard-but-optional core documents to understand something of the quality of governing authorities (commonly known as, and called hereafter, “boards”). Assessing the quality of groups of people is very difficult, and certainly whether or not these groups of people have adopted certain documents is not the only or even best measure. However, whether or not documents have been adopted is a sign of awareness for issues in the field and fiduciary preparedness in the best interest of their organization.

The method of collecting was through interview. Of the 87 county historical societies, one declined participation in the method, and therefore only 86 observations were made.

The first five documents (Table F) are those identified in 2014 by the American Alliance of Museums as their “Five Core Documents.” American Alliance of Museums states that these five are core “because they are fundamental for basic professional museum operations and embody core museum values and practices. They codify and guide decisions and actions that promote institutional stability and viability, which in turn allows the museum to fulfill its educational role, preserve treasures for future generations and be an enduring part of its community.” While most history enterprises have museums, remember that these enterprises encompass a broader range of activities than museums alone. Still, each of the five core documents are essential to any enterprise, museum or otherwise. In Minnesota, among history enterprises, only the Stearns History Museum and the Minnesota Historical Society are accredited by AAM, but there are several others known to be pursuing accreditation. These five documents are at the heart of the accreditation process. These five, then, are a very appropriate to measure.

The results are not surprising. Since at least the early 1980s the Minnesota Historical Society has provided a manual on how to start a historical organization in Minnesota. Indeed, in 1922, MNHS published a document that is part mission, part organic document, and part training manual on how to collect and operate. This 1922 document still informs most mission statements across the state. There were only two of the 86 that did not have an adopted mission statement, and perhaps even in that both may have had mission statements. Likewise with the collections management policy, the high rate of adoption is likely a reflection of how long a template has been available. Strategic planning likewise is high likely due to governmental emphasis on such planning starting in the 1980s and reaching a crescendo with the Government Performance and Reporting Act of 1993 that has required annual strategic planning by federal agencies since 1997. With state and county governments integrated into federal structures, and nonprofit history enterprises serving state and county governments, if there is any surprise in the results it would be that the rate of adoption is less than half. While not new, the other two documents are newer than mission statement, collections management policy, and strategic plan. That almost a third has even these documents is very encouraging.

Table F: History organizations and AAM Five Core Documents

	Don't Know	No	Yes		
			Draft	Adopted	Have
Mission Statement	0.0	1.1	1.1	97.7	98.9
Institutional Code of Ethics	10.3	57.5	3.4	28.7	32.2
Strategic Plan	4.6	41.4	10.3	43.7	54.0
Disaster Preparedness and Response Plan	3.4	56.3	9.2	31.0	40.2
Collections Management Policy	1.1	6.9	4.6	87.4	92.0

In addition to the AAM Five Core Documents, observations were made on what are collectively known as the Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX) policies (Table G). The Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 addressed accounting issues arising from the failures of Enron, WorldCom, and others. While aimed at accounting practices in publicly traded enterprises, these documents were included in the 2007 revision of Form 990 that nonprofits use to annually report to the Internal Revenue Service. Most history enterprises in Minnesota do not meet the threshold for filing the full Form 990. And, having or not having these policies in place is nothing more than a simple yes or no response. These nonprofit history enterprises might choose to operate without these documents easily enough. However, a number of philanthropic foundations in their grant processes have begun looking at Form 990 to determine whether the applicant has these documents or not because SOX ended any exemptions for nonprofits regarding whistleblower policies and document destruction. Having the documents prepares history enterprises to seek grants from private foundations.

If there is a reason for differences in adoption of these policies in Minnesota, it may be that the Minnesota Historical Society has operated a grant program for history enterprises since 1969. Through that program many perhaps have become aware of conflicts of interest particularly with regard to open procurement practices in state and local statutes. Due to the grants program it appears that money has influenced adopting conflict of interest policies. The record retention schedule is understandably next as such have been around a long time, the Minnesota Historical Society is the State Archives that publishes the State's record retention schedule, and that such schedules do not intersect much with the money in the grants programs. Whistleblower policy seemed to be a very new concept in many observations.

Table G: History organizations and Sarbanes-Oxley Policies

n=86	Don't Know	No	Yes		
			In Draft	Adopted	Have
Conflict of Interest Policy	4.6	55.2	0.0	40.2	40.2
Whistleblower Policy	3.4	75.9	2.3	18.4	20.7
Records Retention Schedule	1.1	70.1	6.9	20.7	28.7

In Tables H and I, county historical societies have about 3 of the AAM Five Core Documents and 1 of the SOX policies. Since the revision to Form 990 (2007) predates the AAM Five Core Documents (2014), for 10 to have all three SOX policies and only five to have all five AAM documents is probably not all that surprising. Yet, if an organization were to have any of the documents, the enterprise would have one from the Five Core Documents. The overlap of organizations having all eight, however, is just two. This may suggest that enterprises have focused on one set or the other. Clearly more needs to be done to put more of these documents in place.

Table H: Presence of AAM Five Core Documents

n=86	Number	Percentage
1 or more	85	98.8
2 or more	78	90.7
3 or more	54	62.8
4 or more	24	27.9
All 5	5	5.8

Table I: Presence of SOX policies

n=86	Number	Percentage
1 or more	35	40.7
2 or more	19	22.1
All 3	10	11.6

Websites

Standard 1: Identification. About two-thirds of the 87 websites reviewed met basic and good criteria. For basic, each supplied phone numbers, email addresses, and mailing addresses. For good, each also included the organization's name, location, directions, a map to their location, and the contact information in the basic level on a dedicated page. Just over half met the better level with staff and board information, and stating its mission statement, programmatic offerings, public hours, and membership information.

Standard 2: Search Engine Optimization. Meeting the three levels was varied. Almost two-thirds met basic expectations for page titles to be used for home and major section pages, along with metadata appropriately identifying content on these pages. The good level requires heading tags (H1, H2, H3, ...), but just 21.5 percent used them. H-tags increase navigability and the likelihood of being found by search engines. Over 75 percent update their pages frequently and use descriptive URLs (www.acmehistory.org/donate rather than www.acmehistory.org/&n=502394).

Standard 3: Accessibility. Fully 80 percent of all websites meet the basic expectation that enables screen readers to function because their pages are text-based rather than use images and/or Flash. Just under 40 percent meet the good expectations by providing ALT tags with what images they do use, which means that more than 60 percent of images posted by county historical societies cannot be accessed by screen readers. In terms of meeting the better practices, just 17.5 percent have "Skip Navigation" to allow users to skip repetitive navigation links.

Standard 4: Privacy. Not one of the websites when surveyed had a privacy policy. While one had a link to one, the link was not functioning. Privacy policies should (basic level) identify categories of personally identifiable information collected by the website, (good level) third parties (if any) that the organization would share the information, and (better level) a process that the user may follow to request changes to collected information.

Standard 7: Collections Information Online. More than 87 percent lacked any online information about the collections they held. Often collections information is meant to convince researchers that the effort to visit would be justified. Just five (5) organizations had searchable databases whereby online users could search collections.

Standard 8: Exhibits. Almost 60 percent had no information about their exhibits online. This would be important not only for travelers who missed open hours, but also for those remotely considering the effort to visit. The good news is that the balance had at least narratives about current exhibits, with a few providing materials supplemental to current exhibits or providing virtual exhibits.

Standard 9: Donations. The impact of ecommerce is clear in these results. Over half have a secure online method of donating funds toward the organization, with a third of all being easily located in 3 seconds of landing on the page. However, only one website indicated a follow up “Thank You” letter would be sent. Perhaps more do this, and that is something that might be learned in a later phase of this study.

Standard 10: Social Media. Only 9 of the 87 county historical societies could not be located in social media. Nearly 90 percent had one or more social media channels to which they posted three or more times a week. Encouragingly, almost 74 percent allow fans and followers to engage with them through social media. Where such engagement is weakest is among counties in southeastern Minnesota.

Discussion

No similar study like this has been undertaken in the past in Minnesota. These baselines are intended to show a starting point in 2016 that can benchmark progress for the future.

We projected that few of the museum facilities would be able to maintain a proper museum environment because of the common reuse of buildings that were not designed to be museums. However, about one third of the environments are adequate. We also thought that few of the organizations would have eight policies and documents that are suggested by the American Alliance of Museums and the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002. While fewer have all of the core documents and policies than might be desired by the general field, the rate of adoption appears to flow from history. Encouragingly, nearly every organization interviewed expressed interest in adopting the documents and policies it lacked. And, we believed that web initiatives were not optimized to encourage greater participation, access, and visitation. The results show a much more complicated story than was imagined.

Inherent Problems. There are many problems with a study like this. For the facility baseline, because of the brevity of each visit, comprehensive readings could not be taken and practices could not be observed. Therefore the data for the individual organization is not reliable for that organization. However, because data were observed for an entire population (less one that opted out in part), used in aggregate the findings may be reliable as a baseline reading for this population.

Furthermore, the results would be even stronger with results from similar projects in other states. There are an estimated 19,200 history enterprises across the nation. While 87 observations is valid because it is a discrete population, with even a thousand or more observations the results that would emerge could be generalizable to the whole of the 19,200, and provide greater direction for the field. That Minnesota Historical Society staff did this project in their state may be an example to other individual states. To be truly useful some degree of national coordination will be necessary to achieve a statistically generalizable study. The results here are only valid for county-level history organizations in Minnesota.

Secondly, baseline readings were taken to achieve the worst case reading. For example, light readings were taken on light sensitive objects exposed to the most light available. In this regard the aggregate readings may be taken with a sense of hope because of the relatively high percentages that still met specifications despite readings taken in worst-case settings. In fairness, the percentages may be much higher if taken either in a common setting or in a best-case setting.

In terms of the age of the facility, the research design failed to ask for when the organization began to occupy their facility. For museum-built facilities, one may presume occupancy is the date of construction. It would have been helpful to know when an organization occupied the building to get a sense of when facility upgrades were made as a context for how often an organization chooses to build new as opposed to reusing a better facility.

Measuring human performance is another problem. Doing so based on the passage of certain documents as a proxy for performance adds another layer of issues. The largest problem in finding something about governance to aggregate is that each governing body is composed of a variable number of people with even higher variability in skill sets. Measuring the outputs of the organization makes a certain amount of sense, but measuring programs or exhibits for quality is difficult due to an array of variables including research materials, writing skills, and access to consultants. Certainly another avenue would be measuring word frequency in recorded minutes as has been done in other studies, but the inherent issues with this approach were both the limited time on the part of the research team and the variable education levels of secretaries that might impact word choices. The research team felt that using two lists of external expectations might gauge how well organizations responded to these expectations or how alert to national expectations the organizations were.

The inherent problem with measuring websites is that they change. The results if taken a day or two later or earlier may have been significantly different because the frequency of change in technology can be swift and sudden. An issue with the way this part of the study was done is that there is much packed into each of the standards. The reason that this approach was used was to potentially add standards like these to the Standards and Excellence Program for Historical Organizations (StEPs) from the American Association for State and Local History. If undertaken in the future, checklists should be used to capture nuances missed in this study, but continuing to use the website standards in the background. Also, the results were observations of what was online. There are two standards (5 and 6) that would require telephone conversations to learn more about web maintenance plans and documentation. There was insufficient time to conduct the necessary telephone conversations because of the inconsistency in who was responsible for websites at each organization. Having results for those two standards would create a clearer picture of the health of websites for county historical societies.

Despite issues and relative severity of these problems, the results remain useful as a baseline by which similar measures in the future may be contrasted. Presumably these baselines will be the floor in the future in that facilities, policies, and websites will be much improved.

Future Directions for this Research

The power of baselines is that future research can be measured against a starting point. In that regard the results should be used to drive each of these enterprises forward to greater proficiency in saving and sharing history.

For facilities, more data is needed concerning how long each facility has been occupied to determine the emphasis on new construction for facilities. In addition, more data is needed concerning the relative ability for facilities to be rehabilitated for museum purposes. Beyond data for decision making like these, further research is needed on the effort to ensure each facility fully meets the Americans with Disabilities Act. While that certainly includes mechanical treatments like power-assisted doors and elevators for multiple floors, there are many other treatments needed to ensure full access.

For governance, beyond the presence of certain documents, a comprehensive list of documents and policies should be created and monitored. While governance ought never be considered a checklist, such a list would form the basis for ongoing training as new board members are empanelled.

For websites, more needs to be done to understand the routines of maintenance and documentation because operational fundamental practices will ensure better access. This research could be expanded beyond websites to all electronic media and marketing practices for a more comprehensive understanding of how discoverable county history enterprises are.

In sum, facilities maintain a modest museum environment consistently; there is a small number of standardized policies among the population; and, basic requirements for websites are inconsistently met. The result of this research then forms the basis for future analysis to determine progress in consistency for saving and sharing Minnesota history.