

# Part 1: Where Do We Go From Here?

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In the opening session of the 1991 Visitor Studies Conference, Harris Shettel raised some issues to keep in mind during the conference:

1. What is the status of research and evaluation in the museum world?
2. Is museum evaluation better accepted now than it was in 1988 (the time of the first Visitor Studies conference).

My answer to these questions is that the status of museum evaluation is definitely improving. For example:

- The number of Visitor Studies Conference participants has increased from around 50 at the first meeting to 230-300 for the last two meetings.
- A number of professional organizations and publications have emerged: *ILVS Review and Bibliography*, *Visitor Behavior*, the AAM Visitor Research and Evaluation Standing Professional Committee, and now, the Visitor Studies Association.
- We have expanded our perception of the goals of exhibitions beyond learning outcomes, to include social and personal outcomes. In so doing, museum evaluation is able to address the concerns of a wider circle of institutions. As Robert Kelly said: "The museum experience is much more than the interaction with objects. Thirty percent of all first time visitors do not even go into the galleries."

Now that we have broadened our definition of success, we need to understand some important distinctions among the diverse research questions we address:

1. Who attends museums and who doesn't? (demographic considerations);

2. Why do people come and not come to museums? (psychographic considerations);
3. What are the multiple outcomes of a museum visit – social, personal, affective and associational (“imaginal”), commercial and educational?

We need to consider which of these outcomes we can design into exhibits. Which do we design into the facility as a whole? Which are under the designer’s control and which are simply facilitated by creating a congenial space in which they can happen?

In this connection, we need to remember the distinction between research and evaluation presented by Chan Screven in the opening panel of this conference:

**Research asks:** What is the nature of the museum experience? What is its impact on the visitor?

**Evaluation asks:** Is this exhibit or program doing what its developers intend it to do?

The intentions for a particular exhibit or program may move away from traditional learning outcomes, but can never be as broad as to encompass the whole visit experience. As Bernard Shiele pointed out: “We’re dealing with two contexts: (1) the exhibition itself, and (2) the visit.”

Looking back over the last few days, the question which remains is: **Where do we go from here?** A number of the speakers offered answers to this question:

- Marilyn (Molly) Hood told us that we need to build a knowledge base of comparable data that will apply beyond particular institutions. This applies to demographics, psychographics, and exhibit and visit impact data. To do this, we must be aware of one another’s work and use comparable terms and categories. Chan Screven pointed out that we need to communicate to top management the practical value of what we’re doing. As Molly put it: “We researchers have to be change agents, incorporating research findings into management practice.”
- Harris Shettel pointed out that in terms of research, we have very few people with the time and talent to do the studies. We need new methods, new data. I would add that we need to look to universities for productive partnerships with museum staff in this enterprise.

- Shettel further stated that if the National Science Foundation didn't require evaluation very few museums would be doing it in the United States. I would say that this is all right. Economics is a more effective change agent than individual conscience. If you want to get people to reduce consumption of fossil fuel, you give tax incentives for increasing energy efficiency or put a tax on gasoline. Similarly, to increase the use of evaluation and accountability measures, you tie it to funding.
- Harris Shettel also pointed out that visitor behavior is lawful. (I'll never forget that wonderful image of the bell-shaped curve of fingerprints on the wall outside the National Gallery). We don't need to throw out our old experimental research paradigms; but, we can add some new ones.
- Dennis Samson shared the insight that: "Evaluation should be a stage of an overall planning process including the specification of institutional mission, exhibition goals, budget and resources." To this I add the observation that as museums move from donor-driven precincts of the elite to client-centered institutions serving a broad and diverse public, including previously non-visiting groups, they must become more concerned with inviting, welcoming, caring for and supporting these multiple audiences.
- Randi Korn observed that: "We must acknowledge the way people are and not the way we want them to be."
- Doug Worts said that: "Museums need to encourage visitors to trust their own responses . . . and work from there."

And finally, we need to remember that, as Bob Kelly said, "Visitors are looking for a treat rather than a treatment."