



Wadsworth
Atheneum
Museum of Art

Community Engagement Initiative



Phase 1 Final Report
November 2009

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Executive Summary

In May 2008 the Wadsworth Atheneum began Phase 1 of a new Community Engagement Initiative under the leadership of the Museum's new director Susan L. Talbott.

Mission: The Community Engagement Initiative of the Wadsworth Atheneum focuses on how best to engage new, diverse audiences and broaden its base of traditional audiences through activities and program partnerships and to make the Museum more accessible and welcoming to the entire community.

Chatback Summary

From September 2008 to February 2009 the Museum invited various constituent groups to participate in discussion sessions, called "ChatBacks," to provide feedback about the institution. In total over 1,000 people were invited to the ChatBacks and 212 people participated from across eight groups. Significant feedback and the most commonly discussed questions are detailed in this report. Five key areas of focus emerged from the feedback including providing greater access, developing a more welcoming environment, creating greater relevance for visitors, engaging with the community and building awareness.

What We Heard – Summary Of Chatback Responses

Notes from each of the ChatBack sessions were compiled and over 900 comments were analyzed for patterns and trends. This section is reflective of the conversations that took place and highlights what was said most frequently.

Expectations

People attended the Chatback sessions with the expectation of making connections between the Museum and community and opening the door for future partnerships.

Impressions

The Wadsworth, the oldest public art museum in the country, is generally recognized as a world class institution and a gem for the city of Hartford. There were positive responses to the "quality offerings" of programming and special exhibitions, but there is a need to improve communications and alert the community to what is taking place at the Wadsworth. However, the Wadsworth also has the reputation for being unwelcoming and exclusive. Starting with the fortress-like building, the Museum has been perceived by many as "cold" and "intimidating."

What Encourages Visitation

Overwhelmingly, participants agreed both the temporary exhibitions and the permanent collection are very highly regarded. Programming and social events also attract a large portion of visitors to the Wadsworth.

What Discourages Visitation

For 55% of ChatBack attendees, parking is one of the top factors hindering a visit to the Museum. Time is a major factor for 41% who said that they are too busy to visit, inferring that the Museum is not a top priority for them. Another 39% thought that the art at the Museum is not relevant in their lives. We also heard various comments about the building being uninviting. Signage is an issue, various amenities like benches and water fountains are lacking, and bathrooms are difficult to find.

Communication

Lack of consistent marketing and communications impede visitation. Too often potential audiences do not know what's happening at the Museum. Overall, there simply needs to be more information in the community about what the Wadsworth has to offer. Oftentimes participants were entirely unaware of programming and events taking place at the Museum.

Suggestions

The majority of feedback came in the areas of community outreach, connecting with families, developing targeted exhibitions and opening up opportunities for collaboration. Participants stressed that there is a real need to see the Museum out in the community and that we need to “get out from behind the walls!” Attendees also suggested that the Wadsworth connect with kids and use them as ambassadors to get their parents to visit. Participants suggested that exhibitions have more relevance to the community, such as featuring multi-cultural art. Finally, we got a lot of feedback that it is imperative for the Wadsworth to interact with other organizations to connect to the community. Overwhelmingly, people want the conversation that the ChatBacks initiated to be continued.

Introduction

Under the leadership of museum director Susan L. Talbott, the creation of a Community Engagement Initiative became a priority at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in May 2008. The Community Engagement Initiative of the Wadsworth Atheneum focuses on how best to engage new, diverse audiences and broaden its base of traditional audiences through activities and program partnerships and to make the Museum more accessible and welcoming to the entire community. The initiative is one of four pillars supporting Talbott's vision for the Wadsworth Atheneum: artistic excellence, community engagement, fiscal stability and facilities improvement. Additionally, engaging diverse audiences is fundamental to the mission of the institution.

Wadsworth Mission: Established in 1842, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is one of Connecticut's principal cultural and civic institutions and a Museum of international significance. Through the preservation, expansion and exhibition of its outstanding collections, through the exhibition of exceptional works from outside the collections, and through scholarship, education and programs of outstanding quality the Museum seeks to engage diverse audiences with the stimulating experience of art, history and culture. In all activities, the Museum is committed to the highest standards of professional excellence.

Both internally and externally, it is recognized that there is an estrangement between the Museum and its communities and potential audiences. Talbott strongly believes the rapport between the Museum and the community needs to be restored. Through the formation of the Community Engagement Initiative project, this has become an institution-wide priority. Community engagement will become the lens through which the Wadsworth views its future activities to make the Museum more relevant to its community.

Art has the power to reach people, to change and enrich lives. As a world-renowned public art museum and arts leader within the community, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art must make an institutional shift from top to bottom, recognizing the importance of community engagement to ensure a stable future and to play a meaningful role in the positive, ongoing transformation of Hartford.



Process

A committee of Museum staff was formed in July 2008 to brainstorm the direction that such an initiative should take and begin the process of reaching out to the community. It was determined that the best way to gather input would be through discussions with various constituents. After a summer of planning, the “ChatBack” sessions began at the Museum in September 2008 and were completed by February 2009. Eight community groups were invited to ChatBacks in the following order:

- Downtown Neighbors (35 in attendance): September 15, 2008
- Educators (21): October 14, 2008
- Social Service Agencies (25): October 30, 2008
- Artists (43): November 5, 2008
- Latino Community (30): November 20, 2008
- African Americans (18): December 10, 2008
- Young Professionals (7): December 15, 2008
- Regional Audiences (33): February 25, 2009

The eight groups were selected based on local demographics as well as an analysis of our current and largest constituents. Participants at the ChatBack sessions came from almost every walk of life; there were people from corporations, small companies, colleges and universities, faith-based organizations, social service agencies, the arts and local and state government. Residents of Hartford, as well as dozens of other towns and cities in Connecticut had a voice. The hope is that more organizations and individuals within these constituencies will become a part of the Wadsworth family. By seeking natural collaborators and developing lasting partnerships—not outreach, but equal relationships—it will be possible to develop a mutually beneficial plan of action for the Museum’s future endeavors. The goal is to develop new programming partnerships and new operating strategies to both grow and diversify the Museum’s audience.

The conversations were a cross between a town hall meeting and a focus group. In total, over 1,000 people were invited to ChatBack sessions, with 212 people attending the eight sessions. However, there was a range in participation throughout the process—for example 43 artists came, but only 7 young professionals—which reflects our strengths and opportunities in diversifying our audience. Usually in groups of eight to ten people, the attendees were asked a series of questions and provided feedback. It was imperative for the staff to listen in a neutral way to the different voices of the community and gather the information volunteered.

In June 2009, a ChatBack Recap was held to share the cumulative findings of the eight previous sessions and 116 people attended. Susan Talbott and other staff members made a presentation outlining the results and the Museum's next steps for the Community Engagement Initiative. The potential programs presented were a direct result of community feedback and the audience was asked to consider if our summary resonated with them. Based on the lively questions from the audience the Museum is on the right track and there is enthusiasm for the process as well as excitement about the progress. While it was noted that institutional change takes time and some programs will be dependent on funding, the importance of this critical engagement of the community was repeatedly stressed. In an online follow-up survey, 94% of respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement, "Based on what I've heard, I believe that the Wadsworth is committed to improving its level of engagement with the community."

Feedback Summary – Five Key Areas Of Focus

After analyzing the data from the eight ChatBack meetings, five core issues rose to the forefront and will direct the next phase of the Community Engagement Initiative.

The Wadsworth must take steps to provide Access for All by improving language, facilities, and admissions. Welcoming Visitors must become a higher priority by improving amenities, customer service, and internal communications. The museum must create relevance for the community: Art Matters! The interests of the community must be considered in terms of exhibitions, programming and interpretation. The Wadsworth must also take steps in Engaging with the Community by being good neighbors, creating mutually beneficial partnerships, and developing offsite programs. Lastly, we need to Build Awareness with institutional branding, targeting marketing and public relations strategies, and an enhanced online presence.

Staff reviewed the ideas presented in these key areas of focus to develop the vision for the Community Engagement Initiative.



What We Heard – Summary Of Chatback Responses

Expectations:

What Do You Expect From Today's Session?

People attended the Chatback sessions with the expectation of making connections between the Museum and community and opening the door for future partnerships. They were eager to give feedback and encourage the Museum to engage audiences that better reflect the community, particularly younger audiences and families. There was also curiosity over meeting the new director and an eagerness to hear her visions for the Wadsworth.

We are looking for opportunities to partner because art is a part of our clients' lives.

– *Social Services ChatBack attendee*

Want to open new doors and see how we can connect the Museum more with the community.

– *African American ChatBack attendee*

Help Hartford!

– *Social Services ChatBack attendee*

Impressions:

What is your general impression of the Wadsworth?

The Wadsworth, the oldest public art museum in the country, is generally recognized as a world class institution and a gem for the city of Hartford. For many people, the Museum is a part of their lives and they came to a ChatBack session because they care deeply about the Museum's role in the community. There were positive responses to the "quality offerings" of programming and special exhibitions, but there is a need to improve communications and alert the community to what is taking place at the Wadsworth.

The Museum is a source of pride and an asset to the community.

– *Social Services ChatBack attendee*

I appreciate that it's here but think it's an unknown gem.

– *African American ChatBack attendee*

I love it, enjoy it, and come here to wander, sit and contemplate.

– *Social Services ChatBack attendee*

However, the Wadsworth also has the reputation for being unwelcoming and exclusive. Starting with the fortress-like building, the Museum has been perceived by many as "cold" and "intimidating." The question of how relevant the Wadsworth is to the community also came up repeatedly. Pertinent exhibits and interpretive strategies are needed to improve the disconnect existing between the Museum and the community.

The growth in local communities has not been reflected by the Museum.

– *Latino ChatBack attendee*

The Wadsworth is stodgy, but beautiful. It is staid and lacks creativity.

– *Downtown ChatBack attendee*

You only see a certain type of person walking through the door.

– *Latino ChatBack attendee*

Museum needs more publicity within the community, more multi-lingual outreach and more outreach in general.

– *Educator ChatBack attendee*

What Factors Encourage Visitation?

Exhibitions

Overwhelmingly, participants agreed both the temporary exhibitions and the permanent collection are very highly regarded. The variety of the collection is “superb” and “incredible” as there is something for everyone. However, it is the special exhibitions that attract new audiences to the Museum; according to the ChatBack survey, for 86% of visitors, special exhibitions are one of the top three reasons they come to the Wadsworth (versus 14% for the permanent collection). The complimentary nature of paired exhibitions created a sense of “event-full-ness,” for one Regional ChatBack attendee. Additionally, many visitors come to enjoy the Museum experience; for them the Wadsworth is a local haven.

The average person isn’t interested in what’s special in our collections—they will come for special exhibitions and programs that are new and different.

– *Downtown Neighbor ChatBack attendee*

Incredible collection! Gallery guides and wall labels are great but should be in Spanish and English.

– *Latino ChatBack attendee*

I come when I’m artistically dry—for inspiration, when feeling too isolated, for community, to be part of the scene, for conversation and interaction.

– *Artist ChatBack attendee*

Programming and Special Events

Programming and social events get people through the doors of the Wadsworth and represent at top three attraction for 41% and 36% of visitors, respectively. A variety of programs like lectures, films, performances and tours received positive feed back. Additionally, “fun,” “cocktail hour” events like First Thursdays and Collage, with their networking and social aspects, are other ways audiences enjoy what the Museum has to offer.

One of the best events here was the Juneteenth weekend. It was a great family event but there was no follow-up or hook to pull people back.

– *African American ChatBack attendee*

Connect with other downtown events to create a whole evening out.

– *Educator ChatBack attendee*

What Factors Discourage Visitation?

Parking, Time Constraints and Relevance

For 55% of ChatBack attendees, parking is one of the top three factors hindering a visit to the Museum. Time is a major factor for 41% who said that they are too busy to visit, inferring that the Museum is not a top priority for them. Another 39% thought that the art at the Museum is not relevant in their lives. Unfortunately, for many community members, there is a disconnect between art at the Museum and art that potential audiences would have an interest in seeing.

I want to see my culture.

– *Latino Community ChatBack attendee*

It’s a matter of interest and desire—we have to build both in the communities we are trying to reach.

– *African American ChatBack attendee*

Facilities and Amenities

We heard various comments about the building being uninviting. Signage is an issue, various amenities like benches and water fountains are lacking, and bathrooms are difficult to find. Attendees suggested improving lighting indoors and adding more color outdoors to brighten up the Wadsworth.

You can’t see the doors until you are right in front of the Museum—they’re hidden behind the front pillars.

– *Latino ChatBack attendee*

Only the “front” door is open. Even if there is not enough staff to do admissions at the Avery door, members should be able to show their membership card (no fee for entrance). At the Met, there is a different line for members.

– *African American ChatBack attendee*

The economy is an issue and people are looking at lower cost options.

– *African American ChatBack attendee*



Communication:

How do you hear about what is happening at the Wadsworth?

Too often potential audiences do not know what's happening at the Museum. Overall, there simply needs to be more information in the community about what the Wadsworth has to offer. Oftentimes participants were entirely unaware of programming and events taking place at the Museum that are pertinent to their lives. Lack of consistent marketing and communications impede visitation. Young professionals cited a lack of branding and advertising as a deterrent.

We found that for 61% of attendees, online forms of communication work well. Unfortunately, our website is not user friendly. There is opportunity to “create a buzz” online, as this is also how a majority of people find out about events. Technology needs to be better utilized, including improving the website, and people expressed a desire for podcasts and cell phone guides.

We need to tech up the museum, run an online campaign, young it up!

– *Latino ChatBack attendee*

Banners are great but the website is horrific and not user friendly.

– *Regional Chatback attendees*

“Word of mouth” was another primary way people get information about the Museum. This further supports the argument that the Wadsworth needs to have a greater presence in the community. Word of mouth is a very powerful tool in terms of creating a more positive perception of the Museum and reaching potential audiences. Newspapers, connections in the community, and mail are also necessary to keep potential audiences informed.

Suggestions

Community Outreach

Participants stressed that there is a real need to see the Museum out in the community and that we need to “get out from behind the walls!” This means collaborating with community organizations to develop a more active presence in people's lives.

Take the Atheneum's programs on the road—go into the community.

– *African American ChatBack attendee*

Send museum representatives into the community.

– *Downtown Neighbor ChatBack attendee*

We need to see you guys in the community—have a presence at Latino events—posters, advertising, making a contribution, actually being there.

– *Latino Community ChatBack attendee*

Connect with Families

Attendees also suggested that the Wadsworth connect with kids and use them as ambassadors to get their parents to come. One good way to do this is through the school system. Also, programming needs catchy, eye-grabbing names.

Make a commitment to families in Hartford.

– *Social Services ChatBack attendee*

Provide something for parents AND kids.

– *Educator ChatBack attendee*

Targeted Exhibitions

Participants suggested that exhibitions have more relevance to the community, such as featuring multi-cultural art. However, such art must not be viewed in isolation but integrated into the collections. There were also strong feelings about integrating more local artists and being more innovative.

Put on more provocative exhibitions and plan events around them with panels and thought leaders.

– *African American ChatBack attendee*

Collaboration

It is imperative that the Wadsworth interact with other organizations to connect to the community. Overwhelmingly, people want the conversation that the ChatBacks initiated to be continued—the conversations were an excellent first step.

The Wadsworth Atheneum has the potential to be the convener—take a leadership role in being a meeting place for groups.

– *African American ChatBack attendee*

Collaborate with grass roots organizations—take advantage of their connections to the community to help communicate programs to their contacts.

– *Latino Community ChatBack attendee*



Appendix A – Community Partnerships 2008-2009

Program Partners

Amistad Center for Art & Culture
Artists: Anne Cubberly
Dan Blow
Victor Pacheco
The Artists Collective
Full Force Dance Theatre
Greater Hartford Jewish Community Center and Trinity College
Hartford Public Schools
Hartford Symphony Orchestra
Young! Studios

Ongoing Partners

Billings Forge
Bristol Public Schools
Hartford Art School, University of Hartford
Hartford Public Library
Hartford Stage
Manchester Community College
Middletown Public Schools
PIXAR (Disney)
Trinity College
University of Connecticut
Wesleyan University

Presenting Organizations

City of Hartford
Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism
Connecticut Family Theatre
ConnectiCon
CT Ballet
CT Coalition for Achievement Now
First Night Hartford
Greater Hartford International Jazz Festival
Hartford International Film Festival
Hartford Jazz Society
Many Colors of a Woman
Salsa Fundamentals
Soma Dance

Access Partners

Big Brothers Big Sisters

Billings Forge

Catholic Family Charities

Connecticut Public Library System—Library Art Pass

United Way

The Village for Families and Children



Appendix B – Current Programming

The ChatBack sessions provided valuable and constructive information about the interaction between the museum and its communities. It became apparent during each ChatBack that information about the museum’s activities was not reaching intended audiences—our key constituents are unaware of many current programs and organizational partnerships. The challenges and needed improvements in the public relations and marketing areas are a key component of the Museum’s future vision. In response to questions and concerns about programming, the following segment of the report offers insight into current programs, partnerships and special services.

School And Teacher Programs

The Education Department offers tours to school groups of all ages and served over 11,300 students in FY2008. Hartford Public School students enjoy free admission to the Museum at all times and free busing and tours when visiting through school. Director Susan L. Talbott is on the Hartford Public Schools Task Force on the State of the Arts created by Superintendent Adamowski to plan for the future relationship between the Hartford Public School system and local arts organizations, including the Wadsworth Atheneum.

Our students really enjoyed the Impressionist exhibit. Several mentioned that they wished they had more time to look at the paintings... The docent was excellent and certainly able to reach these young women. Thank you again for all you have done and are doing to encourage the students from Hartford to appreciate art.

– Julie Education Center, Hartford

The Hartford Youth Art Renaissance is a collaborative museum exhibition established in 1974 by the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford Public Schools and the City of Hartford to promote and encourage young students to excel in the visual arts. This exhibition is devoted to artworks created by Hartford Public School students in kindergarten through the twelfth grade and on view to the public every Spring.

Community Days

Since 2003, the Wadsworth Atheneum and the Amistad Center for Art & Culture have worked in partnership to offer three Community Days per year, providing free admission and a broad spectrum of art activities, family-friendly tours, live music, theater performances and films for visitors of all ages. In FY2008, attendance at Community Days totaled 4,413.

Thank you for this wonderful opportunity to celebrate and observe MLK Jr. Day in a spiritual and educational way! I really appreciate it and couldn’t have afforded this day were it not free.

– Community Day participant

Cultural Partnerships

A number of the Museum's programs for children and adults depend on cultural partnerships and the skills and creativity of locally and nationally recognized artists and musicians. Artists work with staff to provide studio instruction for the following school and children's programs: Discovery Days during School Vacation Weeks in February and April, Art Matters for grades one-six, Art Explorers for families with children ages 6-12, and the Drawing Studio for high school students. Local artists also teach Drawing from the Masters, a five-week gallery drawing class for adults. Emerging and established artists give gallery talks and lectures at the Museum regularly.

A series of multi-media performances based on the elements began in 2006, the first three shows called DROP, WHOOSH! and FIRE. The performances include puppets, original dance and music, and star local artists, dancers and performers.

In recent years, cultural partnerships taking many forms have evolved with The Amistad Center for Art & Culture, Young Studios, Hartford Symphony Orchestra, Hartford International Film Festival, Black and Latino Film Festival, Adam Miller Dance Project, Hartford Stage, Hartford Public Library, Manchester Community College, University of Hartford, Connecticut Women Artists, Hartford Jazz Society, Hartford Jewish Film Festival, Hill-Stead Museum and Gardens, Connecticut Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, among others.

Access

The Museum's Access Services have grown exponentially during the past three years. Our Access Art Bus provides free transportation for groups in need both to and from the museum. We offer free ASL interpretation upon request, descriptive Verbal Imaging Tours and large-print labels for low-vision visitors.

“Having the Wadsworth Atheneum Art bus is a terrific idea.

We hope that you continue to make visiting your museum so easy.”

– English Teacher, Phoenix School, Simsbury

In addition to free Community Days, the Library ARTpass is distributed to over 200 public libraries in Connecticut and provides free general admission for two adults and two youth. Hartford Public School students are always admitted free of charge. We have recently added free hours on the last Saturday of each month from 10 am to 1 pm. Our Docents speak many languages including Spanish, French, Russian, Chinese and Portuguese. We will do our best to accommodate requested languages on tours.

Appendix C – Committees

Phase 1 Community Engagement Staff Committee

Debbie Gaudet, Curator Film and Theater, Committee Chair
 Sue Carey, Visitor Services Manager
 Lee Oliver, Group Visit Coordinator
 Charlene Shang Miller, Associate Museum Educator, Docent Program & University Audiences
 Johanna Plummer, Georgette Auerbach Koopman Director of Education
 Kim Reynolds, Director, Public Relations & Marketing
 Anne Rice, Associate Museum Educator, Adult Audiences
 Lida Terry, Membership Coordinator
 Olivia White, Executive Director, The Amistad Center for Art & Culture
 Aileen Bastos, Public Relations & Marketing Assistant

Phase 2 Community Engagement Staff Committee

Susan Talbot, Director and CEO
 Debbie Gaudet, Curator Film and Theater
 Patricia Hickson, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art
 Johanna Plummer, Georgette Auerbach Koopman Director of Education
 Kim Reynolds, Director of Communications
 Olivia White, Executive Director, The Amistad Center for Art & Culture

Ad Hoc Community Engagement Committee

Andy Buck, Artist
 Carlos Hernandez Chavez, Musician/Community Activist
 Luis E. Cotto, Councilperson, City of Hartford
 Keith Darby, Member, Wadsworth Atheneum and Amistad Center
 Susan Dunn, CEO, The United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut
 Venton B. Forbes, Special Events Coordinator, First Cathedral Church
 Brittany Garlock, Young Professional, XL Center
 Ricardo Herrera, Executive Director, ConnectiKids
 Dorothy Keller, Professor, St. Joseph College
 Emil Kopcha, East Hartford Public Schools
 Janice LaMotta, Program Coordinator, The Studio @ Billings Forge
 Jamie Mullarkey, Young Professional, Broker Marsh, USA
 Tomas Nenortas, President, SoDo
 Victor Pacheco, Artist
 Jane Rainwater, Artist
 Wesley Santiago, Latino ChatBack attendee
 Robert Szczepanski, State Department of Education
 Stephen Thal, Connecticut Radio Information System



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