The Museum Assessment Program (MAP) is supported by a cooperative agreement between the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the American Alliance of Museums.
Environmental Learning Center
Museum Assessment Program
Community Engagement Assessment
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The Museum Assessment Program (MAP) is a program of the American Alliance of Museums, funded through a cooperative agreement with the Institute of Museums and Library Services. The program offers small and mid-sized museums the opportunity for self-improvement through guided self-study and consultation with an experienced peer reviewer. MAP helps museums understand how their operations compare to standards and best practices in the field. MAP also provides the tools and resources to recognize how other institutions deal with similar challenges, while providing suggestions for improvement.

A MAP review visit was conducted at the Environmental Learning Center in Vero Beach, Florida from February 13 – February 17. During this time the reviewer had the opportunity to extensively tour the facility, experience programs offered for the general public, and meet with staff, board, and volunteers on a one on one basis in as well as in larger group settings. While conducting the MAP visit, the reviewer also had the opportunity to visit two area destinations that may attract similar audiences – McKee Botanical Gardens and the Barrier Island Education Center as well as hike local land trust trails.

Overview

The ELC is located in Vero Beach, Indian River County, Florida. Vero Beach has a population of approximately 16,000, with a county population of 148,000. The county population is predominately white (87%) and 30% of the population is over the age of 65. Approximately 15% of the population is living in poverty, which is in line with the national average. The region, however does have some interesting disparities in income and education. Within the county, approximately 27% of the population has a bachelor’s degree or higher and the median household income is approximately 45 thousand. On the barrier island portion of the city of Vero Beach (zipcode 32963) the median household income is $102,500, and 61 percent of adults have college degrees. A recent survey of homes for sale in the 32963 zip code showed 282 million-dollar-plus homes to choose from on the island (Beverly Hills 90210 – 167 million dollar plus homes). The economic disparity was quite clear as one drove from the gated communities of the barrier island across the bridge to Wabasso Island (location of the ELC) and then across the bridge to the mainland and the nearby low income communities.

The Environmental Learning Center (ELC) was established in 1988 and for 26 of its 28 year history, was under the leadership of the founding executive director. The ELC campus, 64 acres of Wabasso Island, provides a diverse and enviable array of resources; an interpretive hall, classroom and meeting space, open space, a beautiful trail system through a mangrove swamp, and access to the water via canoes and a pontoon boat. The facility also has an interesting diversity of ecotypes – mangrove swamp, freshwater ponds, open fields, and live oak/palmetto hammock, as well as access to the Indian River Lagoon itself. This diversity of habitat types and
mix of open land and closed forest/swamp provide opportunities for the organization from an educational and operation standpoint.

The ELC has shown great success in both creating and investing in strong school programming and in engaging subsets of the community in conservation related issues. The “Splash” and Lagoon Days programs offer a lengthy, in-depth, and hands on opportunity to explore environmental and conservation related issues as part of a field trip to the ELC for 1st, 3rd and 4th graders. Other ELC initiatives, with strong mission resonance, include a program working with home owners associations to find a balance between lawn maintenance and herbicide/pesticide and fertilizer runoff into the lagoon. Another community engagement program focusing on shoreline remediation provides opportunities for volunteers and program participants to assist in raising mangrove seedling and then planting them off-site in targeted locations.

The major challenge facing the ELC is, that for the past 5 years, the organization has seen a $150,000 operating deficit each year (with the exception of one year where the ELC received an unanticipated bequest); this situation is more severe when considering this deficit number does not include depreciation and is also after approved funds from the organization endowment are included. This is clearly not sustainable. The status quo is not working. What this situation does is put EVERYTHING the organization is doing up for consideration, evaluation and change. There are no sacred cows. Each program, goal, initiative and activity that the organization is engaged in needs to be reviewed. This need was reinforced by discussions with board members who noted the situation arose when the organization became “stale” and the attractiveness both to donors and visitors diminished while operating expenses increased.

In light of the current financial situation, there was great interest expressed in recommendations for enhanced revenue flow and cost saving opportunities. There was also considerable interest in and discussion in regard to having the center become more of a destination, attracting general visitors. There is clearly a growth opportunity as the center has had approximately 8,000 drop in visitors per year in a county with a population of 148,000. The potential is even greater considering the number of tourists visiting Indian River County (509,000 tourists in 2014 – Indian River County Chamber of Commerce).

It was clear, during the visit, that there is great excitement on the part of the Board in regard to what the organization can become, in the vision and abilities of current leadership, and the need to increase board involvement in fund raising and setting long term goals for the organization. As in all times of change, there is concern, and a certain amount of misinformation, apprehension, trepidation, and lack of knowledge on the part of front line staff.
and volunteers as to the need for change, how the organization may change, and how they will be impacted and their programs impacted by proposed changes.

**Broad Recommendations**

1. **Situation Assessment.** Frank and open conversations need to be conducted with each department and their staff, as well as volunteers, to review the current fiscal situation and the on-going deficit operations. Discussions with groups and with individuals during the MAP site visit would indicate that many of the staff and volunteers were not aware of the severity of the operating deficit and its implications regarding the health of the organization. It would also appear that many believe that their department or area of responsibility was operating in a manner that was generating income at an acceptable level. An operating deficit of 150K a year for a number of years should be considered a crisis. This has either not been made clear to all who are impacted by decisions that are being made to rectify the situation or who should be part of a larger discussion of the paradigm shift that the board and executive director are undertaking to address it.

2. **Continue to assess the campus as a destination for general visitors with focus on basic visitor needs, comfort and interests and the experiences offered to walk in visitors.**

3. **Begin the front end work for a capital campaign to fund projects aligned with having the ELC campus become more of a destination.**

4. **Explore how to effectively reach, market, and engage tourists.** The convention and visitors bureau may offer some insight into the ebb and flow of tourists in the region and how best to develop and market experiences that would meet their needs, interests and expectations.

5. **Review and consider revising every planned experience and programmatic offering to make sure it is meeting the needs of your current audience and new targeted audiences.**

6. **Review and revise ELC admissions structure and operations.**

7. **Review and revise ELC membership structure and benefits.**

8. **Review and revise gift shop operations.**
9. Review and revamp board committees to focus on governance, fundraising, and donor cultivation.

10. Begin an audience research program including, but not limited to, visitor entry and exit/post-visit surveys. Learn where your visitors are from (tourist vs year round resident vs season resident). Are they members or non-members? Are they first time visitors or returning? What was the timing of the last visit? Exit/post visit surveys could be done as guests actually exit or with an e-mail follow up. Did the visit meet expectations? How long did the guest spend at the ELC? What parts of the campus or experiences offered did they participate in? Would they consider a return visit and when?

11. Review and revise the organization brand.

**Developing the ELC as a destination**

The ELC MAP self-assessment report and conversations during the site visit with board, staff, and volunteers highlighted the desire to have the ELC become a destination. For purposes of this discussion, the reviewer will define two distinct populations. One population is the local residents, both year round and seasonal, who may or may not have heard of the ELC. The other population would be tourists. The expectations, interests, and behavior of these two groups and what needs to be done to attract them will overlap to a certain degree but there will be differences.

In regard to the year round and seasonal residents, the reviewer assumes that the ELC goals for that group would be:

a. Repeat visitation within the year
b. Becoming members
c. Participating in a certain percentage of the programs offered for individuals and families across a season or year
d. Supporting the ELC through a gift to the annual sustaining campaign, if not more

In regard to tourists to the region, the reviewer assumes that the ELC goals for that group would be:

a. Visit once during the time of their vacation
b. Return the next time they visit the region
c. Participate in some planned learning experience during the visit
Being a destination for the resident population.

Repeat visitation on the part of the residents has two significant values. First it provides the opportunity to engage residents in the mission of the organization and to build a relationship with residents that result in increased philanthropic support of the organization. Second, and equally important, the resident population is also the population that has the greatest impact on the health of the lagoon and the greatest investment in the lagoon’s health. Repeat visitation on the part of local residents will be, to some degree, a function of having something new to do, above and beyond walking the trails. For a good section of the resident population, there will always be a been there, done that, mind set when it comes to experiencing the actual natural environments that trails travel through and once done, the motivation for a repeat trail walk within a year may be having friends or family visit from out of town or not at all. Repeat visits occur when there are more things to do or experience than could be done during a single “typical” visit. Being a destination for residents may also be facilitated by having a broad selection of programmatic offerings for different age groups. The community surveys showed a trend toward seeing the ELC as a place for kids, and a need for more adult programming. And, as is often seen at many museums and cultural organizations, new and different things to do, or the perception or understanding that there are always new things to see and do within the year and from year to year.

The reviewer would recommend that the programmatic offerings (other than camps and school programs) be reviewed in regard to target audience (including, but not limited to adults, families with young children, teens, young children) and the time of the year they are offered to determine gaps or biases in audience or time of year.

The reviewer would also recommend that key staff and interested board ELC board members read Nina Simon’s “The Participatory Museum” to gain insight into strategies and ideas regarding community engagement with a cultural institution.

Being a destination for tourists.

Recommendations.

1. The Nature Center itself needs to be rebranded, name and logo. Timing of this might coincide with the launching of a capital campaign to make modifications targeted to allow the organization to better meet its mission with both residents and tourists.

Although a sensitive topic, the reviewer would strongly suggest that some consideration be given to the name of the place – Environmental Learning Center. The name accurately reflects that organization’s role in providing quality educational experiences
for school children throughout the region. It does not, however, sound like a destination for someone new to the region or a tourist, or even a local resident looking for a thing to do for enjoyment. It sounds like a magnet school. It is of equal importance to note that during the entire site visit, board, staff and volunteers rarely if ever actually used the full name, instead referencing it as the ELC, which if it was used in conversation with a new resident or tourist, would be even more confusing. I doubt there are many destinations within the region or the state of Florida that self-reference with initials. Even the logo has “ELC” in large, bold font, “environmental” in smaller font, and “learning center” in such small font that it is nearly impossible to read on a smartphone, tablet or laptop. Looking at a business card, the last ‘learning center’ line can barely be discerned. Additionally, I understand there is another very active educational organization in the county, the Early Learning Coalition, which has been in existence for some time as well that also references itself and is referenced by others as ELC.

The current logo needs significant revision, as it sets expectations for a general visit that are not likely to be met for the general visitor. Dolphins and manatee are the predominate feature of the logo, but dolphins are only seen “in season” (in the winter/spring months, again when many tourists are not visiting Florida beaches) and both dolphin and manatee rarely seen from the docks. Although iconic animals of the Indian River Lagoon, their relative importance on the logo imply that they will be seen during a visit, leading to disappointed guests.

2. The Discovery Station needs to be renovated. The Discovery Station has the potential of being a key component in making the ELC a destination. The current exhibits do not represent best practices in regard to interpretive experiences for museum visitors. The exhibit hall does not seem to have any cohesive theme other than “things about the mangrove swamp” and includes exhibits about manatee and dolphin anatomy, solar energy, pollution threats to the lagoon, bird beak adaptation, and mangrove swamp biodiversity. Additionally, many of the exhibits are worn out or broken.

The reviewer would strongly recommend that the renovation of the Discovery Station include both an enhanced touch tank and a touch tank of size and configuration that would allow it to be open whenever the nature center is open. It is a very attractive feature, a memorable feature and one of the few existing hands on opportunities available at the nature center. If the ELC wishes to be a tourist destination than this experience has to be available during open hours. The reviewer witnessed the disappointment on the part of a visitor (a grandparent) who had brought grandchildren
specifically for this experience, only to discover it was closed. Currently the touch tank hours are quite limited. Consider a tourist who has limited time and wants to maximize the value of their visit. Discovering that a key component is closed the one afternoon or morning they have for a visit is not effective.

3. Boardwalks. The mangrove boardwalks are a unique opportunity for any visitor, unlike anything in the region. The reviewer has a number of suggestions to maximize the value of this resource.

   a. Consider, as part of the capital campaign, reinterpreting the boardwalks potentially with separate interpretive themes for the east and west sides, treating each side as a different “room” in a museum. Independent of interpretive theme, the interpretive elements should place heavy emphasis on things that visitors can see, on questions they may have about what they are seeing as they walk along the trails. This endeavor would benefit from some front-end evaluation that would ask visitors to write down questions they have about what they are seeing as they move along the boardwalk. Similarly, staff and volunteers may have input as to unique aspects of the mangrove swamps that might go unnoticed, but are of interest to visitors.

   b. Strongly consider re-naming different sections of the trails or destinations along the trails. The current system is confusing and not visitor-friendly as there is a George’s trail east and a George’s trail west that are not directly connected to each other. There is also a “George’s Perch and a George’s Blind. And there is a Waterside Pavilion that really isn’t waterside and does not provide a view of the water.

   c. Getting to see the water, sit by the water, experience the Lagoon may be an important component of a visit for first time visitors and tourists. Make it abundantly clear at the trailhead that a water view can be reached in a set distance.

   d. The audio tour needs to be reconsidered. Currently many of the topics addressed in the tour are not necessarily sited where you are likely to see the animal or plant of interest (for example, snook, a fish, are the topic at post 6, which is far from water.) Also attention needs to be paid to make sure that you can actually see what the audio tour is addressing EVERY TIME someone might use it. So, can you always see the mangrove crab, fiddler crab, giant tree crab, brown and white pelicans or zebra longwings when you are listening. If you can’t, then pick another topic as it is frustrating for the visitor.
4. **Activate different parts of the Campus.** Currently most of the visitor experiences are at the nature center central building cluster itself and the trails immediately behind it. Although the native plant trail on the far end of campus is interesting, its close proximity to the road minimizes its value. The same trail elsewhere would be make a greater contribution to the overall experience. Strongly consider with campus master planning, the possibility of including a nature playscape in one of the underutilized portions of campus.

5. **Continue to move forward with the re-use of the campus cottage as a multi-purpose catering kitchen and spot for visitors to purchase refreshments.** Consider the possibility of having an outside entity run the food operation in its first few years of operation.

6. **Explore how to best use paid and volunteer naturalists in developing engaging experiences for the general public.**

7. **Continue to have the canoe quick trips as part of the general visitor experience.** Like the touch tanks, a truly unique experience. Consider discussions with Brevard Zoo to see how they have handled their wetland kayaking opportunities and the success of the fee structure (which you may consider putting in place one day). Again, the reviewer would strongly suggest considering having canoe quick trips in the summer when tourists are in the area.

8. **Engage in a professional larger master planning of the ELC campus in preparation for a capital campaign.** The reviewer would also recommend that some funds be set aside for travel to nature centers that may serve as models for possible changes at the ELC campus. At the tactical level, it will be of high value to have a full survey of the property done. The master planning discussion should include consideration of both the physical plant and your audience goals. What would be the campus capacity for visitors and still provide a quality experience for them? What percentage of your visitors do you want to take a canoe quick trip? How long do you want them to stay?

9. **Strongly consider modifying open hours, even if only to the campus grounds, so that campus is not only open during the hottest time of the day, which is least comfortable to visitors and often the time that animals they may be able to see are least active.** Having ‘open early’ or ‘open late’ several times a month would be a good start in that direction.
Programmatic Issues, Questions, and Review.

Moving forward, use the definition that any planned experience that takes staff time or money to develop and implement is a program.

1. All planned programmatic experiences, classes, camps, special events, on-site activities, the things that use resources, both staff time and money, need to be reviewed. For each experience the following questions should be answered: Does the experience (the program) as planned, as currently implemented, from the perspective of staff, volunteers and board, A) make money? B) reach an important/targeted audience? C) support the mission of the organization? When all is said and done tally up the number of programs that reach 1, 2 or 3 of the criteria and tally up how many programs meet all of the criteria. Given the current financial operating status of the organization, a bias towards a large percentage of programs not making money will require serious discussion and decisions as to which programs to eliminate, which to modify to make money and which to leave untouched.

2. Review and potentially revise all program fees. How do school program fees, camp fees, etc compare to other organizations within the region? Is there opportunity to increase fees without lowering participation rate?

3. Review existing programs to ensure that they meet audience needs and expectations as well as the needs and expectations of potential audiences. Two examples, the field trip programs offered to 1st, 3rd and 4th grades and the on-site “fun facts” programs.

Based on information gathered during the visit, the school field trip programs appear to have been developed in partnership with the local school system to meet their specific needs and goals. The content and experiences outline in the programs appear to meet best practices. Offered to the local school system, in partnership with the ELC, teachers/classes came to the center as part of a contractual relationship. These programs, however, are very long. Lagoon Days have students arriving at 9:30 am and leaving at 3:00 pm. The Splash programs have students arriving at 9:30 and leaving at 1:00 pm. As developed, these programs clearly provided a great experience for the school system that had committed to having all of their students participate. The length of these programs, however, may be a barrier to other schools, private, parochial or out of county that would otherwise be interested in coordinating a field trip experience for
their students and would also provide additional revenue by participating in such programs. It would be of interest to speak with decision makers from other schools that are not currently using the center as a field trip destination to determine why and what would be of interest to them.

The “Gopher Tortoise Fun Facts” and “Dolphin Fun Facts” programs are designed as an enhancement experience for general visitors. As described during the review, these programs are quite lengthy (up to 60 minutes). The reviewer would strongly recommend that some front-end evaluation work be done to assess visitor interest in such lengthy programs. Also, these programs do not seem to be offered in the summer, when the majority of tourists with school age children are actually visiting the region.

4. Explore the possibility of establishing outreach programs for schools. Although the reviewer noted mention of a “speakers bureau” this would be different from formal, learning standards based programs. This may provide an additional income stream for the ELC that is currently untapped.

5. Pontoon boat trips. The ability to take visitors on a pontoon boat tour of the Indian River Lagoon is an amazing resource. While doing the site visit, the reviewer had the opportunity to go on an excursion and talk with the boat captain. A review of the organization’s two websites (I understand the organization is in the midst of transitioning to a new one) indicates that the excursions are only available in winter, when many of the tourists are not visiting Florida. It was not clear from conversations how many of the excursions scheduled actually made a profit. It would be a worthwhile activity to determine what the actual cost of running an excursion is in terms of staff time (captain, assistant, naturalist, and any time associated with actually registering guests) and fuel, maintenance, insurance and similar costs to determine how many people are needed to break even on an excursion. Along with this activity, the reviewer highly recommends reviewing records for the past 2 or 3 years to determine the number of excursions offered, the number that were cancelled, the number that ran, and, of the ones that ran, how many were at the above break-even point. Also, in regard to staffing, it was noted that at times, the head of the education department serves as the naturalist on the program, which is likely not, in the long run, the wisest use of that position’s higher salaried time. This would also hold true for the education director teaching other programs.
A similar full financial review of the canoe excursion program would also be recommended.

Revenue opportunities.

1. Review and revamp the admission policy. Currently people over the age of 12 are charged $5 and children 11 and under are free. The reviewer would strongly recommend charging admission for children 3 to 11. The current admission structure is similar to the Vero Beach Art Museum, with children under the age of 17 entering free. McKee Botanical Gardens does have an admission fee for children. Both facilities charge at least twice as much for adults. Not charging admission for children was particularly startling to discover as, as noted in the self-review materials, the facility is perceived as being a great place for kids.

2. Review and revamp admission policies for special events. Special events and programs are valid strategies to increase the number of people through the gate, as well as connecting them with nature, which is part of the organization’s mission. ELC’s Wabasso Island campus is beautiful. For the general visitor, however, there may be a sense that after one visit, there is little motivation to return within a 12 month period. A special event or a program may be a strong motivation for a return visit or a first visit. Not charging for special events eliminates a significant income stream in terms of admissions, new memberships and membership renewals.

During the site visit, when charging for special events was discussed, there was some concern raised regarding charging admission being a financial barrier to underserved audiences. There are strategies to ensure that interested families and individuals who could not participate because of a fee could participate. One strategy would be to provide “family passes” at schools with children from low SES (socioeconomic status) neighborhoods or at social services that target low income families or neighborhoods to hand out. Another might be to provide free admission to the event to individuals and families with a current EBT card.

3. Consider/research the development of an outdoor event/rental space. The large open fields in front of the ELC entrance (near the poet house) would be ideal for events for corporations or individual groups. Many organizations have a tent erected through the season or offer space for such to occur. An attractive package could be developed to provide an event site, canoe or paddle boat excursions and the like. The renovation of the small house at the entrance into bathrooms and catering kitchen would make this easier.
Similarly, the possibility of offering use of the pontoon boat (staffed by ELC staff or well-trained volunteers) as an excursion opportunity (evening cocktail cruise? small event/party) could provide another income opportunity. This would not necessarily have any educational component, but benefit from staff who could answer questions from participants or point out interesting viewing opportunities that might otherwise be missed.

Membership

The membership program should be reviewed from two perspectives, from the ELC perspective, a review of the membership levels and associated benefits. From the member’s perspective, what is motivating them to become members.

The reviewer would propose that members who join at the $75 dollar level and up are joining because they believe in the organization and its mission. This is not necessarily true for the friend, family, and grandparent levels. These individuals may value the organization (as evidenced by their desire to visit more than once) but the decision is often driven more by economics. For example, a parent may opt to become a member, because the discounts for camps for their kids as a member are greater than the cost of a family membership. Or, individuals may simply do the math and realize that it is cheaper to become a member than to pay admission each time.

Charging admission for kids between the ages of 3 and 11 will have significant, positive impact on membership. For example, at Wesselman Woods Nature Center (which for 43 of its 44 years of existence did not charge admission), charging admission resulting in memberships increasing from 220 to 325 in a month’s time.

Recommendations and things to consider regarding membership

1. Discontinue providing gift shop gift certificates for upper level donors. These are the individuals who can afford to purchase things. Look for other ways to thank them. One possibility would be to consider providing tickets or passes for ELC activities that help them engage deeper in the organization, such as canoe excursion or pontoon boat passes.
2. Review the member/non-member differences in prices. For example, a $2 difference in members and non-members on the pontoon excursion doesn’t seem like a huge benefit. Maybe $5?

3. Consider canoe quick trips free for members and a small charge for non-members.

4. Clarify which events members (at a designated level and above) get in free, for example Eco-Fest.

5. Consider a broader interpretation of “family” beyond 2 adults and household members.

6. Is there a need to differentiate Family and Grandparent? Could they both be family members?

Board

The ELC board is poised to engage in significant, important, and exciting activities. Developing a master plan/strategic plan that will help end a deficit spending culture, add to the ELC’s foundation of strong school programming and equally exciting and engaging visitor “programs” and embarking on a capital campaign to make those changes possible are all in the near future. Given the tasks that lie ahead, it would be advantageous for the board to minimize their involvement in the majority of the day to day operations of the organization to have the time to focus on the financial future.

An important step in the continuing evolution of the ELC board would be to review and streamline current board committees. At its minimum, the organization needs an Executive Committee, a Finance Committee, a Governance Committee, and some permutation of a Development Committee. The current ELC Board has 12 standing committees. Part of the review would be to determine which groups should be standing committees and which are ad hoc with a specific task and lifespan (for example, the technology committee and the long range planning committee). Another aspect of this review would be to see if current standing committees exist because they were established when the organization did not have paid staff to carry out the activities and the committee filled the gap, a situation that may no longer be true. If this is true, those committees can disband and the responsibilities given to staff. Other committees might be subsumed. For example, the Special Events committee, the Alliances committee and the Communication committees may all be part of the Development Committee (Community Engagement Committee?). The Building and Grounds Committee and the
Personnel Committee may have more focus on day to day operations and are now staff driven. Other committees may be more advisory committees that are open to board members to serve on, but not necessarily a standing committee (for example, the education committee).

The reviewer would also strongly suggest that the development committee members and Development Director invest a significant amount of time putting together a development plan that outlines agreed upon goals, activities, strategies, and responsibilities. It is clear that the Board will need to play a significant role in changing the course of the organization in regard to its current financial status. This will have to occur with the support of the Executive Director and Development Director. It was not clear, based on the site visit that there was a history of having such a document on hand in the past, and certainly not a current one. The first/new one needs greater involvement of the board and can act as a template for future plans.

Other recommendations

1. Look for and take advantage of internal marketing opportunities. For example, the reviewer noted a sign stating “canoes” and “canoe dock” but there was no mention of canoe excursions or canoe quick trips, an opportunity that may not have been noticed at the entrance. Similarly, when you have some chance of seeing a dolphin from one of the docks, let people know when they come in, somehow.

2. Evaluate the need to continue to produce printed, mailed materials and strongly consider reducing or nearly eliminating them. They are expensive and may have very little bang for their buck. E-mail, social media, websites and electronic newsletters may be a better option for many currently printed documents (annual reports, newsletters).

3. Gain a clear understanding of the actual net income that the gift shop generates and re-evaluate the amount of square footage dedicated to the gift shop. There seemed to be a discrepancy between what the gift shop staff felt they netted and the understanding of leadership staff and board. This needs to be clarified and clearly communicated to all who are impacted by any decision related to the gift shop. Twenty five years ago, it may not have been easy to find the selection of items offered in the gift shop anywhere else. Today, between on-line shopping and other nature related stores (eg. Wild Birds Unlimited) people can find the same or similar items in many other places. The gift shop should definitely be reduced in size and combining its operations with that of the admissions desk in the main area of the welcome center should be strongly considered. It might be of value to have a meeting with the staff/volunteers who manage the Barrier Island Center gift shop to have an understanding of their numbers.
The Welcome Center/entrance building is valuable real estate in terms of orienting visitors to the facility. The volunteers who work there are enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and dedicated. The concierge level activities help personalize the visit and make visitors feel welcome. Downsizing of the gift shop square footage and enhancing the orientation and welcoming aspects of the entrance building through repurposing of the current gift shop space to that of a film room and multi-purpose group informational gathering space may be a viable path to take. Additionally, the Welcome Center interior redesign should be considered so that it appears less like a highway rest stop with countless informational brochures and is more welcoming, exciting and informative of what visitors can expect to experience.
***Please remember that your museum is now the owner of the following titles because of their participation in the Museum Assessment Program.

- Alliance of Spirit: Museum & School Partnerships
- Excellence & Equity
- Introduction to Museum Evaluation
- Mastering Civic Engagement
- National Standards & Best Practices in U.S. Museums
- Magnetic: The Art and Science of Engagement

Also as part of your participation you have access to the following AAM resources through the end of June 2016:

AAM’s Information Center [http://www.aam-us.org/resources/information-center](http://www.aam-us.org/resources/information-center)


AAM’s Online Programs [http://www.aam-us.org/resources/online-programs](http://www.aam-us.org/resources/online-programs)

Username and password: **2015MAP**
1. PUBLIC TRUST & ACCOUNTABILITY

1.1 The museum is a good steward of its resources held in the public trust.
1.2 The museum identifies the communities it serves, and makes appropriate decisions in how it serves them.
1.3 Regardless of its self-identified communities, the museum strives to be a good neighbor in its geographic area.
1.4 The museum strives to be inclusive and offers opportunities for diverse participation.
1.5 The museum asserts its public service role and places education at the center of that role.
1.6 The museum demonstrates a commitment to providing the public with physical and intellectual access to the museum and its resources.
1.7 The museum is committed to public accountability and is transparent in its mission and its operations.
1.8 The museum complies with local, state, and federal laws, codes, and regulations applicable to its facilities, operations, and administration.

2. MISSION & PLANNING

2.1 The museum has a clear understanding of its mission and communicates why it exists and who benefits as a result of its efforts.
2.2 All aspects of the museum’s operations are integrated and focused on meeting its mission.
2.3 The museum’s governing authority and staff think and act strategically to acquire, develop, and allocate resources to advance the mission of the museum.
2.4 The museum engages in ongoing and reflective institutional planning that includes involvement of its audiences and community.
2.5 The museum establishes measures of success and uses them to evaluate and adjust its activities.

3. LEADERSHIP & ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

3.1 The governance, staff, and volunteer structures and processes effectively advance the museum’s mission.
3.2 The governing authority, staff, and volunteers have a clear and shared understanding of their roles and responsibilities.
3.3 The governing authority, staff, and volunteers legally, ethically, and effectively carry out their responsibilities.
3.4 The composition, qualifications, and diversity of the museum’s leadership, staff, and volunteers enable it to carry out the museum’s mission and goals.
3.5 There is a clear and formal division of responsibilities between the governing authority and any group that supports the museum, whether separately incorporated or operating within the museum or its parent organization.

4. COLLECTIONS STEWARDSHIP

4.1 The museum owns, exhibits, or uses collections that are appropriate to its mission.
4.2 The museum legally, ethically, and effectively manages, documents, cares for, and uses the collections.
4.3 The museum’s collections-related research is conducted according to appropriate scholarly standards.
4.4 The museum strategically plans for the use and development of its collections.
4.5 Guided by its mission, the museum provides public access to its collections while ensuring their preservation.

5. EDUCATION & INTERPRETATION

5.1 The museum clearly states its overall educational goals, philosophy, and messages, and demonstrates that its activities are in alignment with them.
5.2 The museum understands the characteristics and needs of its existing and potential audiences and uses this understanding to inform its interpretation.
5.3 The museum’s interpretive content is based on appropriate research.
5.4 Museums conducting primary research do so according to scholarly standards.
5.5 The museum uses techniques, technologies, and methods appropriate to its educational goals, content, audiences, and resources.
5.6 The museum presents accurate and appropriate content for each of its audiences.
5.7 The museum demonstrates consistent high quality in its interpretive activities.
5.8 The museum assesses the effectiveness of its interpretive activities and uses those results to plan and improve its activities.

6. FINANCIAL STABILITY

6.1 The museum legally, ethically, and responsibly acquires, manages, and allocates its financial resources in a way that advances its mission.
6.2 The museum operates in a fiscally responsible manner that promotes its long-term sustainability.

7. FACILITIES & RISK MANAGEMENT

7.1 The museum allocates its space and uses its facilities to meet the needs of the collections, audience, and staff.
7.2 The museum has appropriate measures to ensure the safety and security of people, its collections and/or objects, and the facilities it owns or uses.
7.3 The museum has an effective program for the care and long-term maintenance of its facilities.
7.4 The museum is clean and well-maintained, and provides for the visitors’ needs.
7.5 The museum takes appropriate measures to protect itself against potential risk and loss.
Characteristics of Excellence for Museums
In Plain English

Public Trust & Accountability
» Be good
» No really—not only be legal, but be ethical
» Show everyone how good and ethical you are
» (don’t wait for them to ask)
» Do good for people
» Know which people
» And to be on the safe side
» Be nice to everyone else, too
» Especially if they live next door
» Avoid cloning
» Look something like the people you are doing good for
» And maybe a bit like your neighbors
» Let other people help decide what games to play
» And what the rules are
» Share your toys

Mission and Planning
» Know what you want to do
» And why it makes a difference to anyone
» Then put it in writing
» Stick to it
» Decide what you want to do next
» When you are deciding what to do, ask lots of people
» for their opinion
» Put it in writing
» Then do it
» If it didn’t work, don’t do it again
» If it did work, do

Leadership and Organizational Structure
» Make sure everyone is clear about who is doing what
» The board knows it is governing
» The director knows she is directing (and the board
knows it too)
» The staff know they are doing everything else
» And have it in writing

Collections Stewardship
» Know what stuff you have
» Know what stuff you need
» Know where it is
» Take good care of it
» Make sure someone gets some good out of it
» Especially people you care about
» And your neighbors

Education and Interpretation
» Know who you are talking to
» Ask them what they want to know
» Know what you want to say
» (and what you are talking about)
» Use appropriate language (or images, or music)
» Make sure people understood you
» And ask them if they liked it
» If not, change it

Financial Stability
» Put your money where your mission is
» Is it enough money?
» Will it be there next year, too?
» Know when you will need more $
» Know where you are going to get it from
» Don’t diddle the books

Facilities and Risk Management
» Don’t crowd people
» Or things
» Make it safe to visit your museum
» Or work there
» Keep it clean
» Keep the toilet paper stocked
» And if all else fails, know where the exit is
» (and make sure it is clearly marked)