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ELIZA NEWLAND

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The Royce J. and Caroline B. Watts Museum

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Abstract In 2016, the Watts Museum at West Virginia University implemented the American Association for State and Local History's self-assessment program entitled Standards and Excellence Program for History Organizations (StEPs). This article explains the StEPs program and highlights the museum's creative collaboration with University graduate students to complete the benchmarking and goal-setting assessment.

About the Author Eliza Newland is the Collections and Program Manager at the Royce J. and Caroline B. Watts Museum, an industrial history museum at West Virginia University (WVU). An alumna of WVU's Public History MA program, Eliza has recently done contract work for both Clio and the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum.

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The Royce J. and Caroline B. Watts Museum, located on West Virginia University’s campus, is dedicated to preserving and promoting the social, cultural, and technological history of West Virginia’s mineral resource industries through the collection, preservation, research, and exhibition of historical objects and archival materials. It is a small university museum that is funded by an endowment. The two full-time staff, Danielle Petrak and Eliza Newland, are tasked with planning and implementing rotating exhibitions, statewide traveling exhibitions, and numerous programs. However, they recognize the importance of self-assessment and set aside time in 2016 to utilize the American Association for State and Local History’s Standards and Excellence Program for History Organizations (StEPs) to improve their organization.

Created and managed by the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), StEPs is a self-study standards program designed specifically for small- to mid-sized organizations in order to gauge themselves against national museum standards. Enrolled organizations are mailed a workbook, and have access to online resources and an online community. The program is divided into six sections: Mission, Vision, and Governance; Audience; Interpretation; Stewardship of Collections; Stewardship of Historic Structures and Landscapes; and Management. Within each of these sections, organizations use self-assessment questions and performance indicators to identify their current practices as
Basic, Good, or Better. To earn StEPs certifications, an organization reports to AASLH each time it achieves all of the Basic (Bronze), Good (Silver), or Better (Gold) performance indicators in one of the six workbook sections. In addition to being a motivator, the certificates can bring recognition to organizations and can act as support material for funding requests and grant applications.

StEPs is primarily for organizations that do not feel ready for other assessment programs. For example, in order to apply for the Community Engagement Assessment of the American Alliance of Museums’ (AAM) Museum Assessment Program (MAP) an organization should have a mission statement, previous experience with self-study, and an established process for institutional/strategic planning. For the Collections Stewardship Assessment of MAP, an organization should at least have a draft of a collections management policy. So, while both StEPs and MAP are customized roadmaps to improve an organization’s alignment with professional standards, StEPs requires less advance preparation.

While museum accreditation through AAM can always be a long-term goal, it is challenging for many small organizations with limited staff and time to realistically assess their practices. StEPs is unique from other assessment programs in that it is a self-study. While MAP has numerous deadlines and should be completed within one year, StEPs can be completed at the user’s own pace.

The time it takes to complete the StEPs workbook varies for each organization, and depends on available staff time and resources, and the organization’s priorities. A museum can use the workbook to learn where it is on the road to accreditation, taking a few weeks to work through the varied sections, earning certificates along the way. Alternatively, an organization can use the workbook to inform its strategic plan, making benchmarks and setting goals to meet over the span of 3 to 5 years.

StEPs has a one-time fee of $175 for institutional members of AASLH. Nonmembers pay $290, which includes a one-year AASLH membership. An institution must maintain active institutional membership to receive certificates. The $175 one-time StEPs enrollment fee never expires.

The workbook is broken into six sections based on the aforementioned standards. The layout of each section is similar, starting with a broad overview of themes addressed, and followed by a case study with discussion questions. For example, the first page of Section Two (Audience) states, “The Audience section addresses marketing and PR, audience and visitor research, community relations, and visitor services.” The short case study is an ice-breaker and can be used to prepare an organization’s StEPs team. The introductory portion of each section is completed with a breakdown of the standards addressed in the section (Audience has five) and a short list of unacceptable practices.
The workbook pages that follow are laid out in a similar format throughout the document. On the left-hand page, the standard that is being addressed is followed by self-assessment questions and performance indicators. For example, the first standard addressed in Audience is, “The institution identifies current and potential audiences it serves, and makes appropriate decisions in how it serves them.” There are two self-assessment questions that are associated with this standard, the first of which reads, “Does the institution actively collect information about current and potential visitors?” A checklist of performance indicators, which range from Basic to Good to Better, is next to the self-assessment question. The right-hand side of the page is reserved for notes, and is broken into three sections: project work, date completed, and notes. The layout of the workbook is intuitive and makes it easy for organizations to set realistic goals and to tackle challenges in manageable steps.

The Watts Museum hired Danielle Petrak in 2009, filling a position that had been left vacant for a decade. Assisted in her role at the museum initially by student workers and then graduate students, Petrak was able to hire a second employee, Newland, for the museum in 2014. When Dr. Melissa Bingmann approached the Watts Museum about a collaboration involving StEPs during the spring of 2016, the museum staff decided that they were ready to take part in an assessment program.

Dr. Bingmann, Director of Public History at West Virginia University, often partners with local small museums during her Public History Administration course, so that graduate-level students gain hands-on professional development experience while assisting a small museum conduct a self-assessment exercise. To complete the class assignment, students were placed into teams of two, and each team was assigned one of the sections in the StEPs workbook (with the exception of Stewardship of Historic Structures & Landscapes, which is not applicable to the Watts Museum). Students also had access to the StEPs online community.

As the students met as a class and in their groups to discuss the StEPs process, the Watts Museum staff also started work on their assessment. While reviewing the provided workbook, Petrak and Newland made notations of action steps that could be completed and they generated questions about pre-existing museum, college, or university policies. The process led them to many university offices that they had not visited before: from meeting with one of the University’s insurance brokers to chatting about museum exit routes with the College’s Safety Coordinator, the StEPs process brought the staff out of their museum comfort zone and helped them become more aware of the museum’s strengths and weaknesses.
StEPs gave the Watts Museum a push to make improvements to their practices that did not take much time or effort. These changes were important to the museum’s operation and made a substantial impact towards bringing the museum more in line with professional standards. The process made staff aware of standards and best practices that they had been overlooking or did not take the time to implement, and it gave them an incentive to implement such standards now, rather than later. It also helped prepare the Watts Museum for strategic planning, which formally commenced in Summer 2016.

Each group of Dr. Bingmann’s students met with the staff at the Watts Museum to discuss the ways the museum was or was not meeting StEPs benchmarks. Students used the standards and performance indicators in their assigned sections to assess the museum's current policies and practices as Basic, Good, or Better. Students had access to all applicable documents and the museum’s current exhibition and collections. Students then finalized their StEPs worksheets and gave them to the Watts Museum.

This unique collaboration gave the students an opportunity to see deeply into a real organization in a short period of time, and permitted them to complete a museum assessment team project that might bolster their desirability with future employers. The opportunity also gave the Watts Museum much needed additional manpower. Also, the Watts Museum benefited from the opportunity to discuss their performance with “outsiders,” likely leading to a more realistic picture of the museum, and where staff want to concentrate their efforts for improvement. One major critique of StEPs is that there is no outside assistance, other than the support team at AASLH. In comparison, AAM’s Museum Assessment Program (MAP) provides expert, outside advice in the form of a peer reviewer.

In Fall 2016, the Watts Museum become the first organization in West Virginia to earn a StEPs certificate. Having completed the StEPs process, the museum now has an incremental, achievable path towards meeting national standards. Visit the StEPs webpage (http://tools.aaslh.org/steps/) on AASLH’s website, or contact AASLH’s Cherie Cook to learn more.