Museums face constant pressure to generate revenue in order to advance their mission. Over the past four decades, the museum community has created various guidelines of ethical behavior to increase professionalism and public trust in the field. Museum ethics universally emphasize the primacy of mission. Money, however, often comes with strings attached, leading to ethical dilemmas. The author of this article, a master’s degree candidate at Harvard University Extension School, conducted a survey over the past year to investigate mission vs. money conflicts in museum practices. The results reveal that many in the field are unfamiliar with ethical guidelines and, worse, some museums knowingly flout those guidelines to raise cash.

The Respondents

While scholarly interest in museum ethics continues to grow, inquiries into ethics concerning money, with the exception of deaccessioning to raise revenue, remain scarce, likely due to the very sensitive and private nature of financial negotiations. This survey breaks new ground by collecting information about ethical behaviors in revenue-generating practices from museum volunteers, staff, and trustees representing a diverse array of functions (e.g., collections, administration, education, finance, volunteer management).

The survey was conducted online between November 2012 and July 2013. Publicized primarily via email and social media, it collected 277 complete, anonymous responses from across the U.S., a majority of whose institutions (65%) are NEMA members. Over a third of the respondents represent organizations that are currently accredited by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), a figure that far surpasses the national rate of 6%.

Over 75% of the respondents are paid staff members at museums, defined as a broad category including nonprofit museums, historic houses, botanical gardens, interpretive centers, zoos, and aquaria. Correspondingly, paid staff members manage projects and direct the efforts of volunteers at nearly 70% of the respondents’ organizations. The remaining museums heavily involve board members and volunteers in the management of day-to-day operations.
Responding institutions represent a virtually even distribution of annual operating budget sizes, ranging from under $50,000 to over $3 million. Answers to a question on financial health closely correspond with research from the Alliance on museums’ slow and cautious recovery from the Great Recession. Eighty percent of respondents reported their institutions are in the black (if barely), with a small number boasting enviable health and growth.

And the Survey Says...

The survey asked respondents to consider five scenarios involving hypothetical ethical dilemmas inspired by current practices in the field. Respondents were asked to rank the behavior of the museums in each situation along a scale ranging from “totally ethical” to “totally unethical.” In order to reduce primacy bias, the order of response options for every other respondent was reversed. The survey also included an “I’m not sure/I don’t know” answer option and gave respondents the opportunity to clarify their choices, eliciting hundreds of thoughtful comments. The data capture the hazy essence of museum ethics: they are highly situational and subject to vast amounts of interpretation, yet on some points there is loose consensus.

Scenario 1

A long-time donor makes a request for a children’s museum to exhibit an obscure topic of personal interest from his childhood. In exchange for a large donation to name a new wing, the museum agrees to create the exhibit.

This scenario elicits an uneven array of reactions, with a majority of respondents viewing the action as either neutral or somewhat unethical. Responses seem to hinge on how respondents interpret the phrase “obscure topic of personal interest.” Comments on this scenario reveal that the ethical propriety of the situation hinges on whether the donor-proposed exhibition is mission-driven and museum-controlled. If it is, then the situation is perceived as ethical. If not, it is an unethical, mission-creeping quid pro quo. For some respondents, money has an inexorable lure and the inexplicable ability to blur lines. “[It] would be unethical for the museum to devote a large permanent gallery to the topic—but perhaps a small case or temporary exhibit would be ethical. It depends on the details and how much money,” offers one respondent.

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Scenario 2

A natural history museum plans to expand and writes a grant proposal to obtain funding. The museum primarily intends the space for K-12 programming, but the grant is specifically for tourism projects. The museum carefully words its grant request, describing the expansion as “multi-use” and emphasizing the institution’s appeal to tourists.

The actions of the natural history museum in Scenario 2 seem to rub most respondents the wrong way. Though some ask if “tourism” covers programming for K-12 audiences, ultimately the question boils down to whether the museum is being truthful in fulfilling the requirements of the grant. The Foundation Center sternly warns about creative writing exercises masquerading as grant proposals: “the worst thing an organization can do” is “spend the money on something else without permission.” Respondents’ comments on this scenario range from “money must be used for the grantor’s intended purpose” and “carefully worded’ requests often don’t hold up when compared with grant requests which really meet the requirements” to “a fact of life in many museums,” “somewhat unethical but completely commonplace,” and “happens all the time—practical.”

Scenario 3

A nursery approaches a botanical garden with an idea. In exchange for a donation to support the garden’s senior wellness initiative, the nursery would like its non-native flowers offered for sale in the garden’s shop. The botanical garden’s mission is to protect and advocate for native wildlife. The garden accepts the donation and agrees to sell the nursery’s flowers along with native varieties.

Scenario 3 explores how museum stores fit into the overall ethical landscape. Can a museum store sell something unrelated to mission if the proceeds serve the mission? Yes. Under the law, a museum store can sell unrelated items and simply pay UBIT (unrelated business income tax). In this case, however, most respondents feel that the botanical garden is selling something arguably in conflict with its mission, constituting an infringement of ethical museum practice. The garden should assess if visitors to the shop might be misled. A mission-centered approach to the situation could involve providing educational interpretation in the shop to engage visitors in making informed choices about what they plant in their own yards. As one
Museums must carefully steward their financial and physical resources for the public’s benefit. More specifically, museums are educational institutions, not perpetual storage vaults for wealthy donors. However, survey respondents are conflicted about Scenario 4, offering interpretations that fall fairly evenly among the answer choices. An almost equal number land on the poles of “totally ethical” and “totally unethical;” the other choices garner only slightly less support. Comments reveal widely varying views on whether the museum is accepting an encumbered gift or not. While one respondent begrudgingly admits, “Museums accept items all the time that may or may not have anything to do with their mission,” another calls the museum’s action “just foolish.” Scenario 4 describes a situation in which diplomatic discussion of the art museum’s mission and responsibilities with the board member might foster a healthier outcome.

Scenario 4

A board member of an art museum owns a painting of strictly sentimental value. The board member, who is a primary source of funding for numerous exhibitions, is in poor health and asks the museum to acquire the painting and care for it since no one in her family would like it. The art museum agrees to accept it for the collection as long as the board member makes a donation to help defray the expense of perpetual storage.

Scenario 5

A science center launches an educational program on new technologies, partnering with local schools. The science center forges an alliance with a corporation to fund the program. The center agrees to a request from the corporation to feature the corporation’s products briefly during classroom lessons as examples of emerging technologies.

Testing the Silo Effect

One of the goals of the survey was to gather data to support or refute anecdotal evidence indicating that one’s functional role in a museum has an impact on an individual’s interpretation of museum ethics. In other words, do directors and collections managers view ethics similarly? Can educators and development officers see eye to eye? The survey shows, for the continued on the following page
most part, our field is not divided on ethics by what we do in museums. In comparing the four aforementioned groups, which were the most-selected functional roles of respondents, the distribution of responses generally follows the same pattern when analyzing the percentages of responses within each group. The data for Scenario 4 serves as an example (see chart below).

Though the survey shows functional role groups tend, in general, to distribute opinions on ethics similarly, the responses to Scenarios 1 and 3 by “director/Administration” respondents lean relatively toward the answer choices closer to the neutral position or ethical side of the scale. The data for Scenario 1 serves as an example (see chart on the next page).

**Airing Dirty Laundry**

The survey asked respondents to describe ethical dilemmas faced by their own institutions. Some respondents admit that their museums fall short of the ideal, but not on purpose. One respondent recounts:

*We have dealt occasionally with “mission creep” in grants sought and collections and sales policy issues. I don’t feel we have ever been unethical, but we have sometimes compromised from what are generally considered museum best practices in order to build support for our museum. We fall short more of often due to lack of resources than due to conscious choices.*

Other respondents take the opportunity to anonymously purge themselves of their museums’ clearly unethical behavior. The tales of woe include:

*Many favors, exceptions to the mission to ‘encourage’ donor contributions.*

*Accepting collections objects from board members—just because they are board members. Designing exhibits around the wishes of donors.*
We have programs funded by corporations that … run contrary to our educational mission. As a result, we have used ‘research’ to give the programs an educational veneer.

Board member wanted to exhibit his collection to gain validity for the art. Museum paid to have exhibition built and installed although it is a history and science museum and the art collection does not pertain to the museum’s mission.

A much smaller number of respondents report their museums withstood pressure to make unethical compromises: Paintings offered from a major donor that didn’t fit we rejected.

Ethics and the Alliance

Although over a third of respondents represent AAM-accredited museums, nearly 42% of those surveyed confess that their organizations have no current plans to seek accreditation. The Alliance rebranded in September 2012, redoubling its mission to nurture excellence in the field. As part of that effort, the Alliance unveiled a “Continuum of Excellence” for museums to ascend, beginning with Alliance membership and culminating in accreditation, aiming to bring more of the museum flock into the fold of ethical standards and best practices. The survey captures how a significant portion of the museum field views the accreditation program’s relevance at an important turning point in its history. In a nutshell: not very relevant.

Respondents’ comments shed light on their perception of the barriers to participation. Cost, in terms of finances and staff time, is an issue for some: “Our financial and staffing positions make it impossible to pursue anything like this at this time.” Another respondent describes a darker view: “These days, accreditation to some means others looking over their shoulders when tackling decisions.”

It is easy to see how misunderstandings of ethics can abound. Over 40% of the survey’s respondents report their board members are “somewhat unfamiliar” to “very unfamiliar” with fundamental standards championed by the

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Alliance. And comments paint a disturbing picture:

Most know virtually nothing about museum standards and practices and don’t care about them. The majority are on the board for social and prestige reasons. A small minority carry out all of the work.

If they are familiar with the standards and codes, they display a complete disregard for them.

Our board members are lay people at best with no concept of how a museum should be run.

However, light does peek through the clouds: We use [the standards and Code of Ethics] in everything we do.

In one question, the survey turns the spotlight directly onto the practicality of the Alliance’s ethical guidelines. The results reveal a giant gap in the field’s knowledge of the guidelines: over 41% of respondents admit they lack enough familiarity to determine if they are realistic. Another roughly 12% simply cannot decide. Only time will tell if the Alliance’s rebranding effort and renewed promotion of its standards and excellence programs can increase the museum field’s awareness of its own ethics. As one respondent explains, “As we enter deeper and deeper waters in securing funds from the general sponsor/donor marketplace, we will need clear guidelines and helpful decision-making tools more than ever.” The stakes are high: “We live and die on the public trust.”

Nonprofit museums steward their resources for the public’s benefit. Ethical standards for the field provide guidance and allow for interpretation based on individual circumstances. Some members of the public, including many donors, care deeply if a museum acts ethically or not. Ultimately, an organization’s long-term sustainability depends upon its reputation, or ethical capital. Money always plays an essential role in decision making, but never outweighs a museum’s responsibilities to its community.

Greater awareness and application of the field’s ever-evolving ethical guidelines strengthen a museum’s focus on mission and ability to cultivate funding relationships based on integrity. However, this survey sheds light on the complexity of ethical decision making and shows that the field’s ethical standards, represented by the Code of Ethics for Museums, need greater acceptance and buy-in from the field itself.

(Endnotes)


8 See all four of the "Ethics Smackdown” posts on the Center for the Future of Museums’ Blog from June 2013 or the recording of the “Ethics Smackdown” session at AAM’s May 2013 conference in Baltimore, MD.
guidelines to include permission for deaccessioning if the survival of the museum is at stake.

Some museum professionals believe that it is preferable to close a museum and transfer its collection intact to another institution rather than open deaccession revenue to operational support. The opposing argument was made by one of the survey participants: “If a museum goes belly-up there is no assurance as to what may become of its collections, especially if the museum’s assets may be seized and capitalized to resolve unpaid debts. In such an instance the collections would leave the public domain and probably go into private hands, and no mission-related purpose would be served in the process.”

Participants were given a selection of scenarios that might justify an expansion in the Alliance’s guidelines. Most respondents, 75%, viewed preventing closure as a potentially acceptable reason to alter the guidelines. When asked the same question within the context of small museums the response rose to 79%. This majority opinion seems to indicate a red line. Once the museum itself is in danger of closing, preventing fiscal deaccessioning becomes a secondary concern. Professionals want to preserve the integrity of their collections and the strongest challenge to this position occurs when the museum is in danger of closing.

Museum professionals need a nuanced deaccession guideline to inform their collections policies. The evidence is clear. More than half of the survey participants agree that under certain circumstances a museum should be allowed to fiscally deaccession. Three-quarters of survey participants would support deaccessioning if their museum was in danger of closing. The current Alliance guidelines need to be expanded, according to the survey respondents, to include some forms of fiscal deaccessioning, especially if the museum’s survival is at stake.