

Initiating Cross-Sector Partnerships

... in four easy steps

This short guide aims to provide museum professionals and university academics with tips for initiating cross-sector partnerships. From finding the right people to work with to developing better lines of communication between museums and universities, this guide will lead you through the first steps toward collaborative partnership.

1. Identifying partners

Finding new project partners outside of your own organisation, let alone your sector, can prove challenging. For one thing, there is no obvious shared forum to meet informally, discuss ideas, and test out the potential for a good working relationship. So, a little more ingenuity is required.



The Eternal Handshake, Orin Zebest

Whilst those working in museums might use their local or regional museum federation or museum development service events, the [Museums Association](#) conference, or exhibition openings as opportunities to meet new people; academics working in higher education tend to use staff profile pages, or the online fora: [LinkedIn](#) or [Academia.edu](#) to find out about each other's research interests. In addition to online networking, academics attend a range of subject-specific events, such as seminars, workshops, and conferences – all of which provide excellent opportunities to meet other academics but rarely to meet professionals outside of university life. The use of different professional networks can limit interaction between the sectors, but there are a few simple steps that can be taken to overcome this problem.

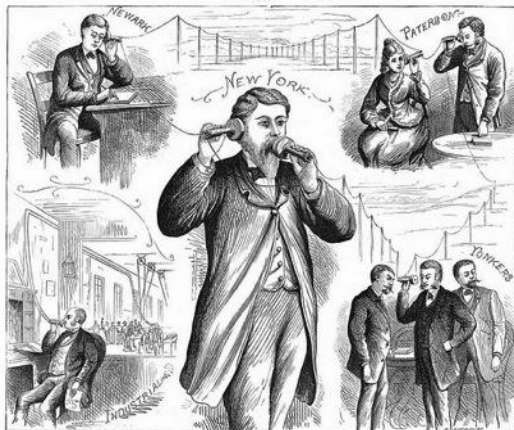
Most university websites are organised by department or, in other words, by academic subject. It is worth taking the time to explore staff profiles on departmental webpages, looking for contacts with interests that connect with your museum and its collections. This is often how academics will find and contact each other. Where universities have their own museums, these can provide another point of contact with higher education. Staff working in university museums usually have established relationships with a range

of individual academics and their departments and will be in a good position to advise a museum colleague about who might be a useful academic contact.

If you work in a university and you are keen to establish contact with museums, the regional Museum Development Service will be a good source of information on regional museums with knowledge of collections, facilities, and subject specialisms that might prove useful to your research, teaching, or public engagement activities.

2. Contacting partners

First: don't be afraid to email someone you do not already know. If, based on their staff profile page or museum website, you can see that there may be potential to work together, then go ahead and get in touch. No-one is offended by interest in their work, quite the opposite, and a straightforward email can be the best way to get the ball rolling. By and large academics use email as their primary method of communication and the nature of their role means that they are not always at their desk or near an office phone. On the other hand, if you are an academic seeking project partners in the museum sector, then a phone call is often the best place to start. By ringing a museum you can quickly establish which member of staff might be the most appropriate contact



Applications of Professor Bell's new telephone, *Scientific American* (1877), Marcel Douwe Dekker

and when they will next be available to speak with you. Museum staff are very likely to be in the museum during working hours, but may be busy with an exhibition or a visiting group. Also, there are many part-time and voluntary positions within the museums sector which means that museums work as teams, more so than staff in academic departments.

Second: arrange a face-to-face meeting. There is a good reason why most of us turn to the people we already know when we are planning a new project – mutual confidence is key to success. So, when establishing a new partnership this step should not be skipped. The best way to ensure a good working relationship is to get to know each other and discuss openly your expectations of the project management and outcomes.

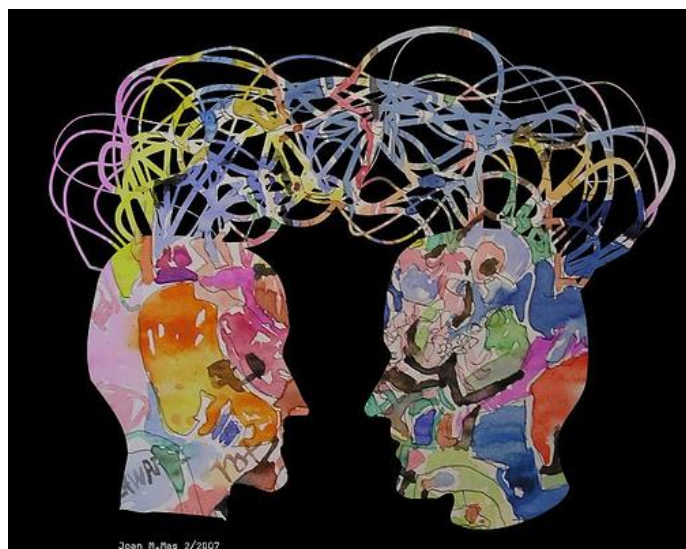
3. Being aware of difference

One of the main difficulties in working with another type of organisation is that the institutional culture or common professional priorities might differ from your own. But knowing what the differences are can help to avoid misunderstanding and smooth the way to forging a partnership.

For example, planning horizons can be quite different in universities and museums. In general, museums plan much further ahead than universities. Academics may assume that a museum will be able to make arrangements to accommodate a research project or student internship programme with only a couple of months' notice. However, ideally, a major undertaking would be planned a year or more ahead of schedule and if academics could think ahead when arranging joint projects then that would smooth the way to a successful partnership. Likewise, museums might view some requests from universities as extremely last minute and, therefore, unreasonable – but in effect this is just the outcome of the different timescales at work at the different institutions. Explaining clearly the parameters of the situation will go a long way towards improving mutual understanding and, therefore, cooperation.

Lack of time or capacity for new ventures, and not knowing who to approach if one did have time, are all commonly cited obstacles to cross-sector collaboration and for good reason. Professionals on both sides of the fence feel that it is their lack of free time that prevents them from making connections with colleagues in other organisations. Also, even when a good contact has been established, an exciting project idea may flounder on the lack of capacity within either or both organisations. This is especially true of smaller museums, with more limited resources in terms of staff and space. To overcome these significant challenges, planning ahead is crucial.

In general, academics are motivated by the opportunity to undertake research that will lead to publications, fully engage students in their subject, and – sometimes – to engage wider audiences in the processes and outcomes of their research. Although teaching forms a large part of most lecturers' roles, in terms of career development – it is the production of high



Communication, by Joan M. Mas
Daily Pic

quality research that is the key driver. Museums, on the other hand, are very public-facing; seeking to engage audiences with their collections is core business, and research into those collections may become a secondary pursuit. Both universities and museums feel that they lack funding.

However, these differences in motivation can also lead to extremely compatible partnerships. Where museums seek research expertise, academics may be able to provide it whilst developing their own career through scholarly publication. Academics often lack the facility of reaching wider audiences, and increasingly they are required to demonstrate how their research can have an impact on society. A collaboration with a museum could provide that. Moreover, in teaching students, museums and universities could usefully team up – students might count as a valuable and under-developed audience for a museum and for the academic, a museum could prove an inspiring space in which to teach students. Student internship programmes are also an increasingly common part of university life, and museums offer fantastic opportunities for hands-on experience and, when carefully matched, could benefit from the input of skilled and motivated students.

4. Building-in sustainability

Forging new relationships is hard work and so, where possible, approaching partnership in a way that encourages long-term collaboration is beneficial. Many people working in museums and universities have experienced disappointment when their main contact at an organisation, with whom they have worked for years, moves on to another role – and with them the connection to that organisation is lost. Currently, most collaborations across the sectors are based on these fragile, personal connections and are not conducted at organisation-level. This has major implications for the sustainability of collaborative work.

There are a number of reasons why most collaborations are formed between two individuals. Firstly, good collaboration is usually based on trust and so people work with the people they already know. Secondly, making arrangements at institution or departmental level is much more difficult, but it is still worth trying. Taking the example of a working relationship between the Education Officer of a small museum and a senior Professor of History at a university, whilst this relationship might work well in the short term – it is likely that either the Education Officer finds work at a museum in another city or that the Professor retires. If this relationship could be converted into one between the museum (its Director, all its staff and volunteers) and the History

Department at the given university, which runs courses every year on a subject that links closely with the museum’s collection, then the partnership could be relied upon. More than this, a stable long-term partnership between a museum and an academic department could build capacity – it could provide a platform from which the two organisations could jointly apply for grant funding, establish a programme of student internships, or develop new teaching or public engagement activities that serve to meet both their needs. Whilst incredibly valuable work starts with individuals, building sustainable cross-institution partnerships offers substantial rewards for the future.

| Tips for museums seeking academics | Tips for academics seeking museums |
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| Do look at online staff profiles and departmental websites to discover expertise that can complement the museum’s collections or activities | Do use regional museum development services/federations to discover new museum partners and to find out more about expertise and lesser-known museum collections |
| Do use email as the primary method of communication with academic staff | Don’t rely solely on email – try ringing a museum to speak to a member of staff |
| Do arrange a face-to-face meeting early on in the process of initiating a partnership | Do arrange a face-to-face meeting early on in the process of initiating a partnership |
| Don’t ignore the differences in working practices, priorities and pressures that exist between your organisations | Don’t ignore the differences in working practices, priorities and pressures that exist between your organisations |
| Do be clear about what you would like the museum to gain from the project | Do expect a museum to have objectives of its own for the project, which are different from your academic goals |
| Do (where possible) establish department or institution-level agreements with universities | Do (where possible) develop organisation-level agreements with museums e.g. between your department and the museum as a whole |