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# Developing a new model for reaching at-risk families. The Ringling WEB: A Place Where Everyone Belongs

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The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art

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**Keywords** museum community; museum fundraising; museum partnerships; at-risk families

**Abstract** This article is based on a talk given by Anna E. von Gehr, Chief Development Officer at The Ringling Museum, at the 10x10 conference on November 10, 2016, in Sarasota, Florida. It explains a new approach for museums to serve local at-risk populations. Von Gehr recognized that adult caregivers drive attendance at cultural organizations, so The Ringling sought to develop relationships with caregivers in at-risk households. A shift in marketing, programming, and community outreach led to a successful pilot program. The Ringling later secured significant funding that underwrites the program for an additional four-year period. Through her unique perspective and role as Chief Development Officer, von Gehr shares how her position helped to create new community connections, and a new approach to serving the at-risk population in the Sarasota-Bradenton metropolitan area (Florida).

**About the Author** Anna E. von Gehr joined Florida State University (FSU) in 2013 as the chief development officer for The John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art. During her tenure, she has reorganized the development operation which has more than doubled fundraising results for the museum. She serves as an executive staff member of The Ringling providing administrative oversight for marketing, membership, and development. Prior to joining FSU, she served as the first Director of Development for the U.Va. Art Museums at the University of Virginia. Working in partnership with museum directors, she restructured the programming for both academic museums resulting in dramatic increases in attendance and annual support. In addition to stabilizing the museums and their role at the University, she completed a \$30 million campaign for the Fralin Museum of Art as part of the University's ambitious \$3 billion campaign. She then assumed the role of Director of University Arts Development. She worked in partnership with the Vice Provost for the Arts creating and supporting strategic pan-University Arts initiatives. Anna was a Regent Scholar at the University of California Santa Cruz and majored in History. She earned her master's degree in Museum Studies from San Francisco State University with an emphasis in Non-profit Management and Development. Her passion for the humanities and their critical role in today's society runs deep, and is evident in her consistent advocacy for liberal arts programming.

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Museums are on a quest. For more than a decade, the museum industry has sought to connect more deeply to increasingly diverse and growing audiences. This topic is discussed frequently across the museum profession, and is a common theme explored at major museum conferences in the United States. Museums utilize different terms, including relevance, inclusion, diversity, incubator, lab, inventor, and community center, all of which point to what museums ultimately and continually seek: to be understood by their audiences. Museums seek relevance.

In order to do this, museums have successfully repositioned their organizations as places for all visitors to be engaged with exhibitions, programming, and collections. Many museums have diligently worked to shift from being a traditional “palace on the hill” devoted to elite scholars—typically Caucasian male scholars—to a place where every person belongs: a town hall for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an incubator of new ideas and technology-based learning, a home for entertainment or edutainment, a place of escape, a hub for families, a place for millennials, a space for connection, a venue for civil discourse, a site to celebrate philanthropy, a place for lifelong learning, a spot for your dog, a site for the hottest brewery to launch its newest creation, even a site for Pokémon. Through experiences ranging from docent tours and scholarly symposiums to free yoga classes, museums do excellent work creating public programs that engage different facets of society with the powerful objects museums house.

Each of these definitions, programs, and audience development tools are critical for a museum’s sustainability and survival. As I watched the arch of these programs and the quest to remain relevant to today’s audiences, I could not help but wonder if museums are straying too far from the very soul and power of why museums exist and why museums matter now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century more than ever before. The etymology of the word “museum” refers to a “seat for the muses,” a philosophical institution of contemplation. After all, we are the stewards of the collective community identity through the creation and interpretation of culture. I began asking if my own institution, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art (The Ringling) in Sarasota, Florida, was generating the results intended through the variety of programming it provided to its more than 400,000 annual visitors. The following article reflects how The Ringling recently worked to re-connect with what it deemed as core values of mission and public responsibility by expanding programming in an accessible way for the local community.

In order to expand programming in an accessible way, The Ringling first sought support from the board of directors, initiating a standing committee devoted to Community Engagement. Board members grew focused on and engaged with the question of how the museum could reach audiences that were underrepresented to make the museum a visitor-centered and welcoming environment. As the Chief Development Officer at The Ringling, my involvement in the discussion grew, at first to understand the goals of the museum to secure funding to make the programs possible. I knew the work of the talented education team and their dedication to reaching underserved audiences. Led by Maureen Zaremba, the education staff, including Bonnie Thomas and Angelica Bradley, had created broad reaching relationships within the local community and schools. Inspired by their passion, I began to pose questions to the museum’s senior leadership team about how current programming was designed and measured while exploring best practices in the museum field. As the work of The Ringling’s Board via the activities of the Community Engagement Committee moved forward, coupled with an internal analysis of existing programming, our institutional focus began to shift to creating programs specifically for at-risk families.

Museums across the United States have relentlessly worked to research and to develop programs to reach families defined as at-risk. The Ringling's education team produced numerous regular programs that were free or low cost, designed specifically to be financially accessible for low-income and at-risk families. But questions remained: did these programs actually reach the audiences they were designed to reach? Did financially accessible programming in and of itself make a notable impact, as defined by the museum? Was The Ringling relevant to these audiences? Did the museum matter to these families?

My interest in how to enhance the already successful work The Ringling was doing to reach at-risk families was of great personal interest. I was a child raised in challenging circumstances, whose life was forever changed by my first museum visit. As a child in crisis, whose parents were in crisis and unable to think more broadly beyond the family's day-to-day existence, I had a transformative experience that changed my life in an instant when I stood before one work of art in the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, Virginia. In that moment, I realized that the world was larger than my current experience. I realized that there was hope and beauty, that humanity could make epic creations, and that my current childhood challenges were perhaps only temporary. As an adult, I reflected on that personal childhood moment, and realized that even had I been provided a free pass to attend a museum, it would have been impractical for me to return home and explain my transformative experience effectively to my guardians. It would have been impossible for me at that moment to articulate what this museum experience meant to me, or to express and encourage my guardians to invest in taking me back for a return visit to the museum.

This personal experience, coupled with The Ringling's research initiated via the board's community engagement work, and through reviews of existing at-risk family programming at the museum, led to a new set of questions. Instead of relying upon children in at-risk families to be the catalyst for museum visits, what if museums instead focused their attentions on the adult decision-makers? What if the museum worked to engage both generations in the visit process? Could the museum collect data to measure whether an affinity change amongst at risk families had occurred? To do so, it is necessary to define opportunities to engage with and build trust with the adult at-risk population in order to change pre-conceptions and behaviors, and to bring at-risk families into the micro-society of the museum family. The Ringling took this adult-first approach to attract families at risk, noting that slight shifts enacted by the museum could make a significant impact on at-risk visitorship.

To answer these questions, the museum conducted research. It soon became clear that the museum programming itself was not at issue in attracting at-risk families, but that the museum needed to improve its methods of personally engaging families at risk. The board's Community Engagement Committee invited community leaders to breakfast discussions with museum leadership, and the museum took these meetings very seriously. Through these conversations, and through reviewing data collected about program participation, The Ringling learned that local residents aware of the museum's accessible programming fit primarily into the affluent demographic of existing museum visitors. Many were current

museum donors who were already engaged with the museum, which differed greatly from the target market for whom the museum had designed these accessible programs. Focus groups with community leaders demonstrated a lack of awareness about current museum programming. Research also demonstrated that financial costs were not the single and sole barrier to museum attendance, but that the true barrier was rooted in a negative affinity for the museum held by the adults in the at-risk family population. The Ringling then worked to shift marketing strategies. This shift was small, but represented a significant starting point for changing the museum's attitudes in connecting with the local at-risk community.

While adjusting a marketing campaign to better target certain demographics is helpful, marketing alone cannot remove the most significant barrier that stops at-risk families from visiting the museum. As The Ringling discovered, that barrier is a consistent pervasive negative affinity for museums held by adult caregivers in families at-risk. The museum realized that new marketing strategies would be ineffective without at the same time trying to approach the problem at its root: how The Ringling could actively and systematically work to remove the negative affinity certain adults feel toward the museum when they are facing crisis within the family.

The museum reviewed several data sources, including IMPACT data, demonstrating that at-risk families do visit zoos and the aquariums – that admission fees were not the sole barrier – and that the families would spend their time and precious financial resources to engage with their children in those cultural and collection-based environments. Why not the museum? The typical model cultural institutions currently use to attract at-risk families to visit is to offer free and/or low-cost programs, free subsidized tours to Title 1 schools, and/or to provide free passes or memberships to children as a way to encourage a return to the museum with their families at another time. While certain programs have had great success with this model, this method places significant weight on a child to drive the household decision making by utilizing the free pass, and persuading a parent that the family visit to the museum has value. That approach does not address the underlying bias the household's decision-maker may hold against the museum itself as an "elite" institution lacking relevance to the family's life, the negative affinity that caregivers may have for museums as a whole. As The Ringling learned, no parent in crisis mode wants to engage in an experience with their children that makes the parent feel "less than," where the parent cannot serve as an instructor to his or her own child, where the parent does not see him or herself reflected in the programming, where the parent simply does not feel that he or she belongs. That negative affinity, coupled with having the time and resources to attend museum programming or seek it out, were the core participation barriers facing families in crisis. The Ringling thus began to determine how to adjust existing accessible programming to focus on the adult, as well as on the child.

The Ringling required a two-pronged approach to achieve success. It was necessary to secure funding to pilot this two-generation strategy, and it was important to know the local community's key funders and most significant projects in the field of poverty. In my role as Chief Development Officer, I viewed the project holistically, and worked to connect The

Ringling with the best community partners and potential funders whose interests aligned with the museum's goals in order to create an impact on the local community through philanthropy. The Ringling's Executive Director, Steven High, and I presented this concept to the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, which is invested in helping to solve the problem of poverty through a Two Generation Lens model. The primary tenet of the Two Generation Lens approach is that programming only succeeds in making significant and lasting change when two generations are involved, the parent and child. Seed funding and guidance from the Community Foundation of Sarasota County enabled The Ringling's education team, led by Maureen Zaremba, to tweak an existing museum program, Art in Play, to focus on adult caregivers, predominantly single mothers. This pilot program, entitled Artful Families, resulted from productive meetings between the education team and the Community Foundation of Sarasota County. The museum harnessed the Community Foundation's current relationships with two Sarasota-based nonprofit service organizations, each of which provided support to at-risk families.

The Ringling partnered with Forty Carrots Family Center and Visible Men Academy, which served at-risk families in existing programs. The partnerships with these service providers were critical, preventing the museum from the buckshot approach to marketing specific programs, and hoping that the targeted demographics would appear as museum visitors. By partnering with nonprofits that had families already committed to participate in programming, the museum itself could begin building a relationship with families. Forty Carrots and Visible Men Academy invited museum educators to enhance existing programming at their respective locations. It was critical for the educators to meet the families in a location to which the families already felt connected. Participating parents and their children got to know The Ringling's education team, building relationships in a safe space.

The at-risk families were soon invited to the museum to participate in programming designed for them. These programs were not only for the children, but were tours for the adult caregivers to have with other adults. It was important to provide a positive museum experience for the household decision-makers. The tours demonstrated that the caregivers, too, are reflected across the museum's exhibitions and performances, providing transcendent moments that permitted each person to determine the value of the museum for their children and, perhaps more importantly, for themselves. At this moment, these visitors' preconceived notions about The Ringling began to shift.

Each family received a complimentary museum Family Membership. Museum staff gave each family a clear message that the museum values them and wants them to remain part of the museum family. The Ringling encouraged the at-risk families to visit often, to attend the varied programming, and to utilize all membership benefits. The complimentary membership not only secured the museum's relationship with these families, but it also provided The Ringling a much needed source of data mining. The museum's membership system will log every visit these families make to The Ringling. Over time, the museum will evaluate the success of this pilot program by interviewing participants and by assessing the

number of their museum visits. The results will demonstrate whether The Ringling has impacted caregivers' affinity toward the organization and whether the families utilize the museum at a higher frequency.

The successful pilot program enabled The Ringling to approach the Charles and Margery Barancik Foundation for a gift that would expand the pilot into a formal program entitled The Ringling WEB: Where Everyone Belongs. A gift from the Barancik Foundation totaling \$175,000 now permits The Ringling to hire a full-time Community Engagement Officer to work with additional nonprofit service providers in Sarasota and Manatee counties to provide this program to 200 at-risk families in the community each year for four years.

The Ringling agrees that museums should be the town hall for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Museums should be a place where everyone belongs, yet it is no longer sufficient for museum professionals to simply create space for diverse communities and expect different demographics to appear. As The Ringling WEB: Where Everyone Belongs demonstrates, it is possible for museums to better serve populations by adopting creative solutions to change negative preconceptions about our institutions. It is possible to partner with individuals and with organizations that seek similar outcomes to create seats at the museum together, and not just any seat, but a seat for the muses.