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Item Type	event;event
Authors	Vander Stoep, Gail A.;Noh, Eun Jeong;Han, Ju Hyung
Download date	2026-03-13 05:24:34
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/37296

EVALUATING IMPACTS OF A MUSEUM-BASED PROGRAM FOR TRANSITIONAL HOMELESS ADULTS

Gail A. Vander Stoep
 Michigan State University
 Department of Community, Agriculture, Recreation and Resource Studies
 480 Wilson Road, Room 131
 East Lansing, MI 48824-1222
 vanderv1@msu.edu

Eun Jeong Noh
 Michigan State University

Ju Hyoung Han
 Michigan State University

Abstract

One broad goal of museums is to benefit community members, within their respective museum missions. Some museums are expanding their audiences beyond traditional on-site visitors to broaden and diversify their impacts, including at-risk populations. Evaluation of newly developed museum-based programs is important for program staff, partners, and sponsors to understand effectiveness of, and to find ways to improve, their programs. This study assessed perceived impacts of a museum-based program, *Your Story and Mine* (YSM), which was developed for homeless adults in mid-Michigan. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with six program participants. Based on a three-tier “hierarchy of evidence” framework, developed specifically for evaluating the YSM program, responses were coded and categorized into three levels of impacts: i) knowledge/awareness gain; ii) attitude and behavior change; and iii) group development. An emerging fourth response category, “program features” valued by respondents, was added. Participants’ responses reflected their perceptions of program benefits.

1.0 Introduction

Museums increasingly are expected to be accountable for effectiveness of both new and existing programs, supporting their respective missions, to bring positive benefits to their communities and to broaden and diversify community members served. One approach is to expand program services beyond those for traditional on-site visitors to non-traditional, off-site, and more diverse populations, including at-risk populations. Museum program staff, partners, and sponsors seek evidence of the impacts, or effectiveness, of their programs, such as positive changes in participants’ knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, self-image, and self-efficacy. Program evaluators are challenged to verify achievement of such lofty goals in the short term and during early program implementation. Nevertheless, it is critical to examine impacts of newly developed programs to determine viability and to improve them. This study explores how aspects of one program are perceived by participants, and how those perceptions correspond with program goals.

1.1 Evaluating a Museum Program for Homeless Adults

This study reports results of a preliminary evaluation of a museum program, *Your Story and Mine* (YSM), which was developed by the Michigan Historical Museum (MHM) in collaboration with Advent House Ministries (AHM). The 2008-2009 YSM program, targeting transitionally homeless AHM clients in Lansing, Michigan, was designed to strengthen participants’ literacy, critical thinking, and problem solving skills by using museum resources, history, and creative expression as teaching tools. The broad program goals included developing in homeless adults a deeper sense of self-value and purpose through shared learning via the museum-based program, and sensitizing the broader community to issues related to homelessness.

The YSM program goals, based on grant language, were that program participants would:

- 1) achieve a deeper appreciation of their heritage;
- 2) develop tolerance for cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic differences;
- 3) develop a sense of belonging in the community;
- 4) become conscious of their place in the community and exercise control of their lives and personal decisions;
- 5) develop critical thinking skills and the ability to produce new meanings and understandings;
- 6) appreciate past social challenges as a basis for evaluating current problems and identifying potential solutions;
- 7) develop greater independence, self-sufficiency, and understanding of their individual potentials as they transition from homelessness; and
- 8) develop greater self-esteem and a positive outlook on life.

The program itself engaged participants in once-a-week programs across eight to 10 weeks, conducted primarily at the museum, in a variety of learning sessions (e.g., archaeology, archival records, museum purpose and collections) integrated with diverse creative self-expression activities (e.g., drawing, writing, crafting, personal timeline storytelling, collage-making) to facilitate personal storytelling and expression of feelings. This program was conducted two times, then followed with a more focused mural/art/music/creative writing program called *YSM: A Community of Hope* that ultimately resulted in a mural and a traveling

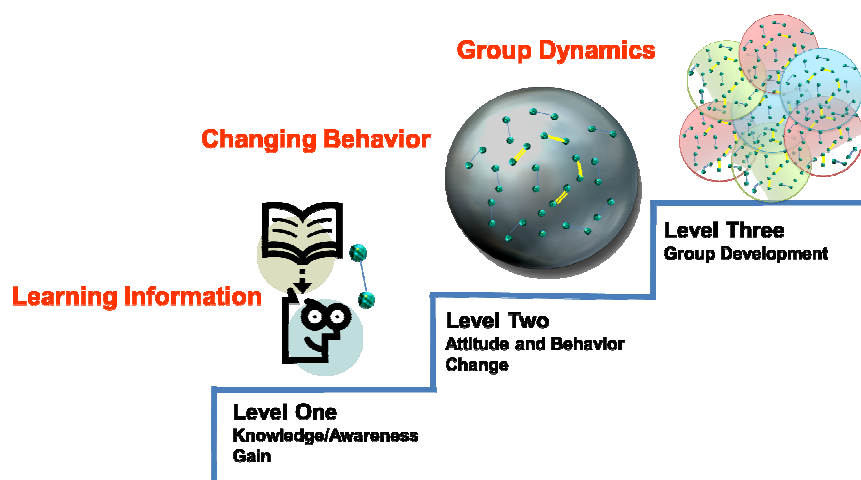
exhibit of participant work designed to share stories of homelessness with communities throughout Michigan. Some interviewees attended more than one of the programs, with two participating in all three.

1.2 Evaluation Challenges

Challenges arose because the evaluation was requested and designed after completion of three YSM program series, and because the program goals were too numerous, broad, and vague to achieve in the short term, especially through a single eight- to 10-week program. These broad goals were not supplemented with clear, measurable program objectives that could form the basis for evaluation. Although evaluation details were not considered during grant writing or program development, an evaluation to measure changes in knowledge, attitude, and behavior of program participants resulting from program participation was expected.

Because the target audience and program type were relatively new for museums, limited relevant literature on research and practice was found. Thus, as a way to frame the study conceptually, we used a “three-tier framework,” developed by a MSU graduate student team¹ and adapted from Bennett’s Hierarchy of Evidence (Bennett, 1975). This framework describes three levels of program impacts: i) knowledge/awareness gain (level one); ii) attitude and behavior change (level two); and iii) group development (level three) (Figure 1; see Han, Vander Stoep, and Noh [2011] for framework details).

Figure 1. Three-tier Conceptual Framework (based on Bennett’s Hierarchy of Evidence)



2.0 Methods

Program evaluation was conducted in two phases: Phase I analysis, based on grant language and early staff program notes, was used to develop the conceptual framework and *a priori* codes for program evaluation (see Han, et al., 2011); Phase II, presented in this paper, assessed participant perceptions. Based on the program staff’s expressed needs and the nature of the study context, a qualitative approach was adopted to collect and analyze data. Semi-structured in-depth interviews (tape-recorded) were conducted with six transitional homeless adults who had been regular participants in the YSM program. Program photographs were used to trigger memories and elicit relevant comments during the interviews. Two researchers independently coded interview transcriptions, setting aside the previously developed theme codes in the framework that guided this study. This helped researchers avoid imposing *a priori* codes on their data, and allowed them to create, delete, and reorganize codes, as necessary (Glesne, 2006). This approach is consistent with Kitto and Barnett’s (2007) argument that codes should be refined continuously as data analysis proceeds. Thus, original labels of impacts were replaced with emerging concept labels (later comparison showed numerous conceptual similarities). Any discrepancies in code labels or code assignment between the two researchers were resolved through discussion or, if needed, assessment by a third researcher. After completion and resolution of data coding, the *a priori* codes were re-evaluated for appropriate level placement in the framework, then were compared with codes emerging from interview analysis.

3.0 Findings

Of the six interviewees, four were female, two were male; two were Caucasian, four were African American. The number of program series attended ranged from one to three. Some had earned high school diplomas, others had not. Circumstances leading to homelessness varied, and included generational welfare dependence, unsupportive or dysfunctional families, death of a child, childhood pregnancy, drug or alcohol abuse, “nasty” divorce, and wages going to gambling.

Before participant interview transcripts could be analyzed, the original framework needed to be modified to better accommodate participant perspectives rather than staff perspectives. *A priori* codes from Phase I analysis were reassessed and re-categorized by framework level, new theme codes and impact categories emerged, and some labels of impact categories were modified based on analysis of participant interviews. First, *a priori* codes in the original conceptual framework were reassessed and re-categorized in the three-tier framework (see Table 1 for code changes and final placement). Relocation of theme codes was necessary because of perspective differences in the two data sources. The original framework captured expected program outcomes based primarily on program staff's perspectives; this study examined program impacts based on perceptions of program participants. During Phase I program evaluation, Han, et al. (2011) used grant language and staff project notes to identify themes and develop a conceptual framework. Although staff notes included direct quotations from program participants, quotes were self-selected and highlighted based on professional staff experiences, perspectives, and expectations. This study's results were more comprehensive, based on more rigorous methods, and used perspectives of homeless adults. Consequently, there were discrepancies in the theme codes between Phases I and II analyses. For example, "self-esteem" originally was coded as a Level Three impact, because this theme referred to an expected outcome of increased self-esteem resulting from mentorship (considered "group" behavior). A staff note in Phase I data explained, "*The mentoring component adds countless benefits that are as unique as the people involved. These benefits include increased self-awareness and self-discipline.*" However, when analyzing participants' interview comments, program participants expressed confidence to speak-up and personal growth as results of personal participation in a variety of program activities rather than as a result of mentorship activity. Thus, self-esteem was moved from impact Level Three to Level Two, which includes themes about individuals' attitude changes. In another example, "social connection" was moved from Level Two to Level Three. Originally, social connection was placed in Level Two and "networking" in Level Three because the former was intended to reflect individual participants' personal relationships within the program, and the latter to reflect relationship development beyond the program. Yet, during Phase II analysis, we noticed that participants expressed increased connectedness both within and beyond the program. Accordingly, social connection was moved to Level Three. Additionally, a new category, "program features," emerged while analyzing interview transcripts. Participants mentioned numerous program features that influenced their perceptions of program effectiveness. Finally, we changed the Level Three impact label from "group transformation" to "group development" because the YSM groups did not exist prior to the YSM program, so they could only develop, not transform, in such a short time. Table 1 presents placement of codes resulting from both Phase I and II analyses, and presents emergent codes within the additional category. Theme codes emerging from participant interview analysis were categorized into three levels of program impacts plus program features.

Table 1. *A priori* conceptual framework theme codes and theme codes emerging from participant interview analysis

Category	Theme Codes in the Original Conceptual Framework (Phase I Analysis)	Theme Codes in the Revised Conceptual Framework (Revised for Phase II Analysis)	Theme Codes Emerging through Analysis of Participant Interviews
Level One Impacts (Knowledge/Awareness Gain)	N/A	N/A	Learning
Level Two Impacts (Attitude and Behavior Change)	Social Connection Historical Connection Family Connection Motivation for Program Motivation for Life	Self-esteem Historical Connection Family Connection Motivation for Life	Confidence to Speak Up Creative Self-expression Personal Growth
Level Three Impacts (Group Development)	Self-esteem Mentorship Capacity Building Networking Program Growth	Social Connection Mentorship Capacity Building Networking Program Growth	Relationships Mentorship
Program Features (new category from Phase II analysis)	N/A	Motivation for Program Participation	Variety of Activities Hands-on Activities Fun Kindness of Staff

3.1 Three-tier Hierarchy of Evidence Impacts

Level One Impacts (labeled "knowledge/awareness gain") represent perceived participant learning resulting from program participation. Based on Bennett's Hierarchy of Evidence (1975), it is assumed that, as participants are involved in a program, particularly in a learning context, hierarchical levels of change in skills, attitudes, and aspirations ensue from a base of knowledge, which they can apply to their own living and working environments (Bennett, 1975). Although results show limited evidence in participant comments about "things learned," one participant did say "*I learned a lot out of it.*" Nevertheless, it is assumed that learning took place that provided the foundation for personal creative expression and growth. The YSM program was structured

to provide opportunities to learn about other people, places, and history by interacting with museum artifacts, documents, and photographs. However, learning was not overtly expressed by participants as a specific program outcome.

Level Two Impacts (labeled “attitude and behavior change”) include themes coded “confidence to speak-up,” “creative self-expression,” and “personal growth.” These themes highlight growing self-awareness experienced by participants as a result of program participation and learning experiences. Irving and Williams (1999) described personal growth as a gradual process of acquiring knowledge and skills to grow awareness of self, place, and a society, and personal relations within that society. Results show that the YSM program enabled participants to address personal issues and develop self-esteem by orally expressing their personal stories through art, poetry, photography, and song. Throughout the YSM program, participants gained the confidence to speak up. For example, one participant pointed out, *“I used to be trapped into little circles inside my life. Now I like to be, when I’m around people, I like to be in the open. That’s a good feeling.”* Results also showed that YSM participants developed skills for self-expression through activities such as painting and writing. Skill development elevated participants’ understanding of their personal value. One participant said s/he liked *“to open up and express myself by drawing.”* Another participant similarly recalled, *“I loved writing the way I feel. Expressing my anger ... I express it.”* Throughout the program, participants saw themselves changing. This quote reflected personal growth: *“I was really hesitant at first. I just wanted to sit and watch everybody else because I knew that there [were] artists in that room. But I’m like, okay, I’ll go ahead and participate. This was fun, and this was good, and I was able to do it.”*

Level Three Impacts (labeled “group development”) include themes coded “relationships” and “mentorship.” These themes emphasize the interpersonal aspects and interactions among participants and between them and program staff. Level Three Impacts focused on participant social interactions, both within and outside the program context. Results show that the YSM program helped develop participants’ confidence in and enjoyment of relationships and mentoring. Some participants indicated they would like to serve as mentors to future participants. They felt confident in what they had learned and that they could share the program’s values to help others benefit as much as they had. One participant mentioned, *“I think that, uh, like if I came in, it would be as a speaker and as a mentor, even just, just to share with them my, you know, how I felt about it. And maybe, and actually it would be in hopes that that would spark something in them. Like there were things that I picked up that I was not aware of before.”* Also, building relationships between program participants and staff while engaged in creative expression activities was a theme expressed often in the interviews. One quote reflected how one participant perceived the staff: *“They were people trying to do something instead of, oh, where we gonna get the next bag of weed.”*

3.2 Program Features

YSM participants talked extensively about program features, which were much more tangible than the personal and group development goals hoped for by program staff. Thus, “program features” was added as a major results category even though it does not fit within the three-tier hierarchy-of-evidence framework. These features are important to include, however, because they appear to facilitate positive impacts identified in the three levels of the original hierarchical framework. Additionally, they are important because they motivated continued program participation, through which the other outcomes were derived. Results show that participants identified four YSM program features that were attractive/interesting/important to them: program variety; the hands-on nature of the activities; fun; and kindness of and positive interpersonal relationships with project staff. One participant said, *“I kept going back because of the variety.”* Another participant mentioned, *“All the classes were interesting...everybody tried to make, make it interesting and everybody did a good job at doing that. Drawing out a map, a simple map, you know, you get some jokes and stuff like that.”*

4.0 Discussion and Conclusions

This study evaluated the YSM program by soliciting program participants’ perceptions about program outcomes and features. Knowledge/awareness gain is a fundamental program impact. Participants discovered the importance of personal histories and value through the diverse learning activities of a museum-based program. The YSM program featured varied, hands-on, and fun activities that facilitated learning-based outcomes by increasing motivation for continued participation. This is important because regular participation provided the foundation for other program outcomes. As participants continued participating and became more comfortable being with each other and program staff, they increased their confidence to speak up and improved their self-expression skills. These transitional homeless adults, the YSM program’s target audience, live in personal and social situations that often limit their participation in learning programs and positive, productive social group activities. Also, homeless adults have limited opportunities to publicly express their identities and thoughts. Although long-term changes in attitude and behavior may not be observed as a result of participation in a short-term program, the potential for such changes can be reflected in how program participants described their experiences with the program. Participants applied their learning and expressive experiences to their own issues, thus helping develop positive outlooks for their lives, at least in the short term. In addition, participants began engaging in interpersonal relationships with program staff, in-class participants, and new program participants. Social relationships developed within the program facilitated group development. By sharing their experiences, thoughts, and feelings with other people, participants developed affection toward others and openness to new relationships. From this perspective, the program can be considered successful.

However, assessing success by meeting most or all of the program goals as expressed in the grant proposal was not possible. As described in section 1.2, evaluation details were not considered during grant writing or program development, and program goals

were too numerous, broad, and vague to examine whether the goals were achieved through the program. Nevertheless, the results of this study showed that, of eight program goals (see section 1.1), one goal, number eight (develop self-esteem and a positive outlook on life), was addressed, and goals three (develop sense of belonging in the community) and five (produce new meanings and understandings) were partially addressed. These three goals supported the program's broad goal, "develop in homeless adults a deeper sense of self-value." However, there is no evidence that the other five goals were addressed. One possible explanation is that these five goals reflect the relationships between program participants and the rest of society, to which homeless adults often are not perceived as belonging. According to Johnson & Cnaan (1995), one characteristic shared by homeless people is a sense of isolation and un-connectedness. Another possible explanation is that the other five goals – broad in nature – probably are not possible to achieve in the short-term or as the result of a single program, and thus were not perceived by participants as being results of the YSM program.

This study provides insights for programmers and researchers about possibilities as well as limitations of evaluating impacts of a newly developed museum program based on assessing program participants' perceptions. The study does indicate that homeless adults perceive positive benefits of their participation, yet these perceptions were limited to things most directly and immediately relevant to them rather than to the broader social goals identified by the grant writers. Two major study limitations are noted. First, although this is a qualitative study, the low number of interviewees limits our understanding of program impacts on the participants, particularly on those who were not regular participants. Considering the personal and social situations of homeless adults, it was difficult to contact program participants after the program ended, so subject recruitment was difficult. Second, there is possible bias in collecting information from at-risk populations. Some participants may not have had the language or conceptual awareness of some of the higher level impacts desired by program staff. More importantly those broader goals probably were considerably less relevant to them than the outcomes they expressed. To further explore short-term program impacts with homeless adults, we recommend that future studies conduct interviews as soon as possible after program completion. Adding perceptions of program staff can complement the understanding of program impacts on participants and on post-program goals such as "sensitizing the broader community to issues related to homelessness." Assessment of long-term impacts would require longitudinal studies and more complex methods. Finally, clear and measurable objectives appropriate for evaluation should be integrated into program development from the beginning rather than added as an afterthought. Program activities should be designed specifically to address the measurable objectives.

5.0 Citations

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Acknowledgements

This study was a part of a collaborative project between Michigan Historical Museum (MHM), Advent House Ministries (AHM), and Michigan State University (MSU). Special thanks go to project partners at MHM (Martha Bloomfield and Chris Dancisak), AHM (Toni Townsend and Allyson Bolt), and MSU (Eric Bailey, David Dilworth, Jayne Goeddeke, and Anna Stein).

Note

1. The "MSU graduate student team" refers to the research team whose members included Eric Bailey, David Dilworth, and Ju Hyoung Han. The team was created for the YSM program evaluation project in 2008, under the direction of professor Gail Vander Stoep, as part of course requirements for *ACR 873: Culture, Communities and Tourism*. We thank team members Eric Bailey and David Dilworth, whose work helped build the foundation for this study.