If you are reading this magazine, you know that competition for museum resources is increasingly tough. A relatively small group of funders is flooded with requests from many worthy endeavors. To help in the decision process, many funders now require museums to demonstrate relevance and impact with evidence-based data.

When museums talk about making an impact, that often covers the educational, economic, and social realms. Of the three, social impact is perhaps the most difficult to measure with data-based evidence. Americans for the Arts and the UK’s Museums Association have done extensive work gathering research and case studies that document the social impact of arts and museums. And in August 2018, the Institute of Museum and Library Services announced a project to measure, on a national level, the conditions under which museums and libraries contribute to quality of life and well-being in the communities they serve.

Demonstrating social impact is similarly on the minds of museum professionals in Utah. In 2017, Utah Division of Arts & Museums (UDAM) partnered with Thanksgiving Point, a multi-museum complex in Lehi, Utah, to conduct a pilot study to determine what social impact the state’s museums have on the communities they serve. The goal of the study, which is still in progress, is to develop a tool that measures how attending Utah’s museums can improve family and personal well-being, health, relationships, empathy toward others, knowledge, and understanding of one’s community and others in it.

The Study’s Catalyst
Strong partnerships are valuable in a major undertaking such as a social impact study. UDAM has tapped into the experience of Thanksgiving Point, a farm, garden, and museum complex along Utah’s rapidly growing Wasatch Front.

In 2015, inspired by the success of the Cincinnati Museum Center’s 2014 economic impact study, Thanksgiving Point retained an outside consulting firm to conduct a similar study. The firm also recommended a social impact study to paint a holistic picture of Thanksgiving Point’s impact in the community.

Later in 2015 and into 2016, Thanksgiving Point partnered with a professor and graduate students from Brigham Young University’s Public Administration program to conduct the social impact study. The students worked with Thanksgiving Point to develop a logic model, a measurement tool, and a plan for carrying out the study. The study was designed to measure short-term outcomes that research has shown lead to long-term outcomes such as

Monte L. Bean Life Science Museum’s main exhibit hall in Provo, Utah

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Photo by Nate Edwards/BYU

Utah is conducting a pilot study to show the social impact of the state’s museums.

By Stephen Ashton, Emily Johnson, Kari Ross Nelson, Jennifer Ortiz, and David Wicai
stronger families, lower drug use, higher educational attainment, and a greater sense of health and well-being. These are, in turn, indicators of strong and healthy communities, which policy makers, legislators, and other grantors want. Thanksgiving Point hoped to share positive findings with these stakeholders and garner their support.

**VITAL ECONOMIC ENGINE**
In February 2018, Innea Young Hartson & Associates, an independent economic analysis firm, completed a comprehensive economic impact study of Thanksgiving Point. This study concluded “Thanksgiving Point is the largest cultural institution in Utah and one of the most highly attended in the nation. In one year, Thanksgiving Point drew more visitors than the Wasatch Front (the most populous area of Utah) had the most people and visitors.”

Key Findings:
- Thanksgiving Point increased the economic value of the local economy by $1.3 billion in 2017.
- Thanksgiving Point generated 11,500 jobs in 2017.
- Thanksgiving Point added $228 million in value to the local economy by 2017.
- Thanksgiving Point hired 1,000 full-time employees and 2,000 part-time employees in 2017.
- Thanksgiving Point generated an additional $1 million in state funding for its operations.

**THE POSITIVE SOCIAL IMPACT**
Thanksgiving Point has a very nuanced and thoughtful understanding of its own audience and mission, and the logic model from its earlier study reflected that. This project needed a logic model that reflected the varied audiences and goals of the museums throughout the state that would be invited to participate in the pilot. Together, UDAM and Thanksgiving Point drafted a logic model to share with museums across Utah to gauge their interest in participating in the study as host sites. The final cohort of eight museums reflects those UDAM classifies as both small and large (ranging from 1.5 to more than 50 employees). They are mostly located along the Wasatch Front (the most populous area of Utah) and include art, history, and life science museums; an aviary; a garden; and a planetarium.

In June 2018, UDAM staff began reaching out to museums across Utah to gauge their interest in participating in the study as host sites. The final cohort of eight museums reflects those UDAM classifies as both small and large (ranging from 1.5 to more than 50 employees). They are mostly located along the Wasatch Front (the most populous area of Utah) and include art, history, and life science museums; an aviary; a garden; and a planetarium.

In June 2018, UDAM led an introductory training for others who had attended their museums and those who had not. Participants would be allowed to visit their host museum on how to recruit participants. The museums were allowed to recruit both individuals and families to participate as host sites for the study.

A minimum of 40 survey responses were needed to conduct this kind of study. The second phase, anticipated to begin in summer 2019, will use findings from the pilot to determine the best ways to expand this project throughout the state and ultimately create a tool for museums—from our small, volunteer-run historical societies to our large, accredited museums—to use independently.

One of the first steps UDAM took in customizing Thanksgiving Point’s study was to re-create the logic model governing the study. Thanksgiving Point has a very nuanced and thoughtful understanding of its own audience and mission, and the logic model from its earlier study reflected that. This project needed a logic model that reflected the varied audiences and goals of the museums throughout the state that would be invited to participate in the pilot. Together, UDAM and Thanksgiving Point drafted a logic model to share when recruiting museums to participate as host sites for the study.

The first phase of the study involved conducting a pilot with a small, representative group of museums from Utah. The goal of the first phase was threefold:
1. To demonstrate the social impact these museums have in the community;
2. To test the validity of the social impact measurement tool;
3. To discover the time, effort, and money required by UDAM and participating museums to conduct this kind of study.

Getting to Work
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- Test the validity of the social impact measurement tool;
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The logic model that governed the first phase of the social impact study (the pilot)
As of February 4, 2019, 187 participants from the eight participating museums across Utah had completed the end-of-experience survey. Participants were asked to mark levels of change, if any, that occurred across 104 indicators using retrospective post-then-pre survey questions. These questions were compared using two-tailed paired t-tests and a 0.05 confidence interval. Of those 104 indicators:
- 100 indicators (96.2 percent) had a statistically significant positive change, such as: 
  - I can see how exploration leads to learning.
  - I often contemplate the positive aspects of my life.
  - I learn new things from people who are different than me.
  - I often engage in meaningful conversations with my friends and/or family members.
  - I am motivated to learn about conservation.
  - Only four (3.8 percent) did not have a statistically significant positive change.

The 104 indicators measured short-term impacts that lead to intermediate impacts. Those intermediate impacts, according to the literature review, lead to the following long-term outcomes/impacts on the logic model.

Lessons Learned So Far
Conducting a social impact study with museums of various sizes has its challenges. Following are a few of the things we have learned along the way.

Partnerships can fill in the gaps. Partnering with Thanksgiving Point, with its research experience and prior similar study, strengthened the validity of UDAM’s work. Communication is key—and time consuming! The research team knew that communicating with and organizing the eight host museums and their study participants would be challenging. UDAM was responsible for coordinating training, developing marketing materials, and managing participant contact lists. Additionally, UDAM was responsible for all direct communication with study participants. This included thousands of emails related to accepting participants, encouraging them to attend, and reminding them to complete the survey following their visits. Every museum has its own motivations. Some museums hope for audience data to help them determine future programming. Others want data about the impacts of their programming to help them make stronger arguments for funding. Still others want to investigate their place in their community and reflect on their mission in a data-driven way. It is important to understand these motivations and try to accommodate them, while also being clear about reasonable expectations from the data.

Museums Association, Museums Change Lives
museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives/the-impact-of-museums
Cincinnati Museum Center, Quality of Life, Quality of Living: Economic & Community Benefits of Cincinnati Museum Center

communication issues that make museums more valuable—but also necessary—endeavor.

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