

THE PROJECT

“Market Analysis and Opportunity Assessment of Museum Capacity Building Programs,” Institute of Museum and Library Services and Partners for Public Good (March 2021); *Download the full report at [ims.gov/publications](https://www.ims.gov/publications).*

WHAT THEY DID

In Summer 2019, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and Partners for Public Good (PPG) conducted a comprehensive national assessment to understand the opportunities and barriers to capacity building in the museum sector. They defined “capacity building” as “the generation of resources or support intended to help an institution enhance its ability to fulfill its mission or purpose.” They employed a mixed-methods research approach that included gathering qualitative data through interviews and focus groups with museum leaders, funders, capacity builders, and museum associations, as well as a quantitative survey that reached leaders of small and mid-sized museums. The study aimed to:

- Provide an overview of the museum field and the need for capacity building support
- Identify potential gaps in available capacity building offerings
- Identify new opportunities and areas for growth

WHAT THEY FOUND

Because the report addresses museums, associations, and funders, its recommendations are wide-ranging. It emphasizes the need for museums to strengthen their ability to adapt to changes in their environment (adaptive capacity), work in relation to others (relational capacity), and be responsive to their audiences. They also make clear that not all museums are equally prepared to make the most of capacity building support, and they recommend ways that funders and associations can help institutions prepare. For museums and similar institutions, the report found:

Museums should act like athletes, not bodybuilders, by prioritizing audience responsiveness: Museums are often tempted to use capacity building support to grow bigger, like bodybuilders, prioritizing the expansion of programming and collections. They would be better served, however, by acting like athletes and using support to get *better*, “investing in the mission-driven knowledge, skills, and systems that build resilience, efficiency, and impact.” Institutions must be responsive to their audiences, considering their expert opinions on how the museum should fulfill its mission.

Your museum may never be the same: Museums must remain adaptive to their surroundings as they build capacity. Effectively building museum capacity often requires

a holistic change in individual behavior and organizational systems. Leadership and staff buy-in for new capacity building efforts is essential in adopting and sustaining holistic change.

More must be done to expand capacity for DEAI work: Museum sector stakeholders expressed museums' need for assistance to expand their capacity to address issues of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion, responding to changing audience needs and remaining adaptive to a changing landscape. Existing support in the sector is insufficient.

Small museums face major barriers to capacity building: Not all museums are equally prepared to take advantage of capacity building resources. The report finds that "availability of funding and staff time are among the factors that determine whether museums engage in capacity building." Small museums, therefore, face unique challenges when it comes to capacity building readiness.

Finally, the report emphasizes that museums must "embrace that your museum will never be the same again—in fact, it shouldn't be." Museums must prepare for capacity building by clearly defining who their audiences are and soliciting their expert feedback to understand how to carry out their mission. As museums approach capacity building to expand their impact, they must consider the museum's role in the community. Changes wrought by capacity building support should "be realistic, but ambitious," prioritize equity, and be approached with a plan for institutionalizing changes across the organization.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR YOU

History museums and other history organizations face challenging circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic and an ongoing national reckoning with our country's history have exacerbated our sector's struggle to build the capacity necessary to carry out our missions. History institutions in particular are disproportionately small, and this study rightly points out that, paradoxically, small organizations face steeper challenges when it comes to building capacity. History organizations must think realistically and strategically about how we can use support to institute change.

History museums must look beyond our immediate sector and borrow best practices from the wider universe of nonprofit organizations to survive. To sustainably build capacity, history organizations must maintain connection to and evolve with their audiences, preparing for holistic institutional changes. History organizations have rarely served more urgent needs than in the present moment, and a realistic and sustainable approach to capacity building can help us meet them.

This brief was prepared by the AASLH Public History Research Lab to connect history practitioners more directly with emerging research from across and beyond our field. To learn more about the Research Lab, visit [AASLH.org/research](https://www.aaslh.org/research).