



From the President & CEO

Measuring What Counts

Completing the fifteenth edition of the *AASLH Directory of Historical Organizations in the United States and Canada* in 2001, its editors reported they had created ten thousand entries based on mail-in questionnaires. Glancing back to the previous, 1990 edition, they imagined it would “certainly...not be another eleven years before the sixteenth edition” would appear. Today, almost twenty years have passed, and that next version never materialized. A burgeoning internet made it easy to find basic statistics about historical organizations and reduced anyone’s interest in a bulky, nine-hundred-page directory.

What was lost along the way, however, was the coherent, big-picture perspective that a directory provided. Off and on through the early 2000s, AASLH sought but failed to get grants to conduct a thorough census. A professional association, after all, should be able to track trends and state with some authority the size and character of its constituency.

These days, AASLH is getting back into large-scale data collection. A few months ago, we launched a new visitation survey for historic sites and organizations. We hope to report on this important research this fall and continue to build a picture of the field by repeating the survey every January. As we analyze the results, there are already some interesting numbers to compare them to. According to the newest Survey of Public Participation in the Arts by the National Endowment for the Arts, 28 percent of adults in 2017 reported having visited a historic site in the previous year. This is a 4.4 percent increase over the 2012 survey, with the greatest gains among women (up 5.4 percent), African Americans (up 5.4 percent), and 35–44-year-olds (up 8.7 percent). (See www.humanitiesindicators.org).

Making sense of what these visitation figures mean for history organizations, however, will require more information. We need a clearer picture of the number of institutions, their geographic distribution, budget size, staffing, and other resources. One should be able to compare public to private, and those serving rural, suburban, and urban communities of different regions of the country. In other words, we need a true census of the field.

In seven quick years the 250th anniversary of the United States will be here. What changes, if any, will it bring for the history field? Will reinvigorated public attention, new federal dollars, or serious corporate support affect the health of the historical enterprise? What about its sheer size? We’ll

need baseline data in the next few years to know. Thanks to the 1976 Bicentennial, greater interest in history resulted in the genesis of many new history organizations. An AASLH study in 1983 found that half of all history organizations in the U.S. had been founded prior to 1960, and nearly a quarter emerged in the eight years surrounding the bicentennial. In the nearly fifty years since the Bicentennial, the total has continued to tick upward.

In 2014 the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) counted more than 35,000 museums and related organizations in the U.S., of which it stated 55 percent, or about 19,500, were concerned with history. Last fall, IMLS refined its data to prepare for a major new study and reported a revised total of 30,171 museums and related organizations, of which 1,776 are history museums, 14,783 are historical societies and historic preservation organizations, and 7,959 are uncategorized or general museums. A close look at samples from this last category suggests 70 percent or more are general museums that focus on history. Thus, the total history-related count is closer to 22,000 organizations. AASLH’s first *Directory* in 1936 listed 583, and the first issue of the AASLH newsletter in 1941 referred to “more than a thousand organizations in the field of state, provincial, and local history.” Has our field grown by more than 20,000 organizations in the past eighty years?

Research is necessary to understand our vibrant historical community. To know our individual and collective strengths allows us to do our jobs more effectively and to advocate for the field. We all can make a better case that history institutions matter when we can effectively count their numbers and identify changes in their resources, attributes, and impact. We can convince community stakeholders and major funders when we speak knowledgeably about the health of the field and our institution’s place in it.

To do this kind of research and advocacy, AASLH will need your help. We will ask you to respond to questionnaires and to encourage your colleagues to do so, too. We will ask you to comment on the research analysis and to use it to advocate for your institution and the history community. And we will ask for your support, provided through membership dues and donations, to help us expand our collective ability to measure what counts.

Sincerely,

John R. Dichtl
President & CEO, AASLH