



Focus on the Future

Guest Predictions: Ellen Rosenthal

Guest Predictions is a regular feature in which we ask leaders in a number of professions questions that affect us all.

Ellen Rosenthal is President & CEO, Conner Prairie, and outdoor history museum, Fishers, Indiana. She earned a B.A. in art history, magna cum laude, from Barnard College, Columbia University, and a M.A., Early American Culture, from the H.F. du Pont Winterthur Program.

Q: What changes in your professional environment in the past 3-5 years have you found to be the most beneficial?

A: When I began my career in the museum field more than 25 years ago, training focused on curatorial skills or program development; very little attention was paid to what would today be called the business of museums, including such areas as market research and cost benefit analysis. In the past ten years, museum professionals have paid increasing attention to incorporating best business practices. In the past three to five years, this movement has gained significant momentum.

Today, professional conferences once devoted entirely to program, now feature speakers from the business community. Museum market research, once the territory of a fringe group called the Visitor Studies Association, has become an integral part of museum operations. Increasingly, museums are pooling data to understand market trends and establish standards for salaries, costs and attendance. In short, museums are coming to understand that in order to best accomplish their missions, they must operate like businesses.

Q: What changes have been the most troubling to you?

A: Most troubling to me is the lack of change in how we prepare young museum professionals for careers of service. They come out of school with little understanding of the serious pressures on museums today. The competition for visitors' leisure time has become intense. Work, home entertainment, children's sports and for-profit entertainment venues vie for precious hours. Yet, the professional training programs available to would-be museum staff members often still rely on much the same curriculum as before.

Museums today must become bolder, more imaginative, more responsive to trends and communities to survive. Evolving becomes all the more difficult when it is so hard to find professionals trained to be open-minded and flexible enough to try different approaches to accomplishing museum objectives. At Conner Prairie, we're working hard to not only change how we engage our audiences, but also to grow our own creative young professionals and attract others who can do just that.

Q: How will globalization (e.g. the emergence of new global powers, such as China and India) affect your professional area in the near term?

A: As New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman pointed out, “The world is flat.” Globalization has made it possible to outsource work at all levels and put new pressure on America’s education system to produce creative thinkers and life-long learners. America will need to stimulate a love for learning in children that will last throughout their lives.

Schools alone cannot create an environment supportive enough for this kind of cultural change. Places for informal learning such as museums will also play important roles in stimulating excitement about learning and offering opportunities to follow individual interests. There is a growing body of research pointing to the essential role of family experiences in creating children who love to learn. Museums are places where families learn together and adults model their own excitement about education.

America is being challenged to build a culture which values education, and museums can become key players in helping the country meet that challenge.

Q: What significant challenges might be anticipated in your professional area in the next few years?

A: Museums are facing challenge on several fronts. We are facing increasing competition for leisure time as pressures to work gobble up more hours and family lives become more fragmented and harried. Not only are there more options, but there are incredibly powerful entertainment options that offer individualized, exciting virtual experiences. This raises the bar for what the public considers exciting and worthwhile. Also, there is increasing competition for fundraising. The spreading professionalization of that field means that donors are being inundated with appeals for involvement. Through mail, internet and even cell phone, adept fundraisers are calling for attention. At the same time, donors are becoming more specific about where their donations are going. This means that funding will become increasingly scarce for museums as visitor expectations increase.

Q: What are the greatest challenges confronting young professionals in Western culture today?

A: Challenges begin with finding the means to acquire the multiple degrees required to secure positions. They continue as young professionals try to find work in a crowded employment market and repay school debt.

The cost of schooling is of particular concern for young professionals considering a career in not-for-profits. Few jobs in that arena provide salary levels sufficient to retire school debt, start a family and begin to save for children’s schooling and their own retirement.

Another challenge relates to one of your earlier questions. Western—and particularly American— young professionals must find ways to be more creative and more innovative, as globalization levels the playing field in meaningful ways. We must (and we can, I believe) build a culture that produces young professionals who perpetually learn, grow, and create, throughout their lives.