

For Everyone

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I had lunch with one of my favorite museum colleagues recently. He's a fixture in the Chicago museum scene and one of the country's most talented directors. In our conversation about the challenges museums face in the future, he casually said, "museums aren't for everyone, you know." He saw the look on my face and doubled down. "I mean it, museums aren't for everyone."

I know what he meant. I've heard it before from many museum professionals over the years. And I get it. Museums aren't appealing to everyone. Some people don't feel comfortable in a museum, others feel downright unwelcome, and others are just not interested in the subject matter or the model of informal learning.

On the surface it makes sense to be sanguine about it. We're not going to get everyone to visit so we should focus our energy and our limited resources on those that might. And maybe we shouldn't beat ourselves up when our attendance numbers suggest that we only draw a small percentage of our local population annually. Because, you know, museums aren't for everyone.

I've been working in and for museums for a long time. I was trained to believe that museums are a public resource, not a club. While we might not get everyone to come, that wasn't for lack of trying. The goal was to provide a service for the entire community.

I've spent most of my career in history museums. For the past few decades, many American history museums have been working hard to elevate the unheard voices and unfamiliar experiences left out of the dominant narrative and to expose people to fresh perspectives. The hope is that in the process we can foster greater understanding and inspire community dialogues. It's important to note that there are at least two audiences in that approach. There are the folks who shared the stories that we're hoping to bring to a wider audience and there's the wider audience. It seems fundamental that we get these people together if we're going to bridge gaps and build stronger communities. But if the people who don't know these stories don't hear them, then what are we doing and who are we doing it for?

About 15 years ago, I was at the annual meeting of the American Alliance of Museums and the moderator challenged the room on our commitment to diversity. In a surprise take on it, he asked everyone in the room who voted Republican to raise their hand. In a massive room with easily 500 people present, one hand went up.

Museums are one of the few places in our world where we might be able to foster dialogues that bridge some of our social divides. However, today we seem to be leaning into the notion that museums are biased rather than striving to demonstrate that all people (and their perspectives) are welcome. In an era when so many of us are talking about inclusion and diversity, what are we doing to welcome people with diverse social or political views? What does inclusion mean in a museum that's not for everyone?