National Leadership Grants for Museums

Sample Application MG-245771-OMS-20
Project Category: Data, Analysis, and Assessment

Museum of Science, Boston

Amount awarded by IMLS:	$86,407
Amount of cost share:	$87,098

The project description can be viewed in the IMLS Awarded Grants Search:
https://www.imls.gov/grants/awarded/mg-245771-oms-20

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- ▪ Narrative
- ▪ Schedule of Completion

Please note that the instructions for preparing applications for the FY2021 National Leadership Grants - Museums grant program differ from those that guided the preparation of FY2020 applications. Be sure to use the instructions in the Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.

   The proposed *Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies: Art Research Team* (*COVES:ART*) seeks funding for one year to bring together art museum professionals from across the country for a two-day convening to discuss the value of and logistics involved in incorporating art museums into a collaborative system of collecting, analyzing, and reporting on visitor experience data. This system, the Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies (COVES, www.understandingvisitors.org) was designed to inform institutional decision-making in science centers, as well as expand our understanding of science center visitors nationwide. While currently positioned to include other types of institutions, there are barriers—some known and others yet to be learned—to incorporating *all* types of cultural institutions. Art museums in particular have shown a propensity for visitor studies while lacking a dedicated professional network to support this type of work, a role that *COVES:ART* seeks to fill.

   This work builds from and extends the work done through two prior Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)-funded projects: a National Forum Grant, *Creating a Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies* (C-COVES) (LG-66-12-0634-12) and a National Leadership Grant, *Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies* (COVES) (MG-20-14-0060-14). The former, C-COVES, convened a forum of science museum professionals and industry experts to discuss the affordances and challenges of creating a shared system to study the visitor experience using common methods and metrics at a network of science museums across the country. Following that, COVES then implemented the findings from the C-COVES forum to build the system that would support data collection, interpretation, and use across this network of science centers. When COVES was first funded in 2014, the collaboration included only eight science centers as part of the data collection initiative; since that time, through the support of IMLS and continued exposure at various national conferences and word-of-mouth recommendations, COVES has grown to support the work of more than 30 institutions in the United States and Canada.

   During this period of expansion, careful consideration has always been given to the types of organizations that COVES can meaningfully support. One of the intentions of a common data system is to provide valid points of comparison across the field such that peer institutions are grouped together (e.g., by museum type, size, or geographic location). Because of this, it is now necessary to convene art museum professionals to establish the value of including art museums in COVES, as well as negotiate the logistics of a shared system that includes, at the very least, both science and art museums. *COVES:ART* is the first step to making this collaboration truly capable of serving as a tool that can be used across both science centers and art museums, and potentially at other types of museums as well.

1. Project Justification
   Spearheaded by the Museum of Science, Boston (MOS) where the Research Team for COVES currently operates, and in conjunction with key personnel at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, AR and the Minneapolis Institute of Art in Minneapolis, MN, this one-year project proposes to convene a diverse group of art museum professionals over two days. Specific goals include:
   - Drawing attention to the importance of understanding the visitor experience in the art museum as a whole and not just one gallery, exhibit, or program;
   - Working toward developing a community of practice around the study of the visitor experience in art museums; and
   - Understanding the alignment between art museum practices and the current COVES instrumentation and methodology to make adaptations where necessary.
To do this, professional contacts will be leveraged among the many art museums that have signed letters of support for this project to reach a broader range of art museums in terms of geography, size, and capacity for visitor studies/evaluation. (See *Supporting Document 1* for Letters of Support.) In total, the convening will bring together as many as 40 individuals from 20 organizations, 15 of which are envisioned to be art museums,

four of which are likely to be science centers with COVES experience, with at least one representative from a national organization such as the American Alliance of Museums (AAM).

Project need:

It is well established that studying the visitor experience—in particular, who visits, why they visit, what they experience, and how they feel about their visit—can help institutions learn about their visitors, inform decision-making at multiple levels across the organization, and promote a visitor-focused approach to services and programming (Luebke & Grajal, 2011). This type of monitoring allows organizations to grow and diversify by targeting particular audiences, and fosters a culture of responsiveness to museum guests (McDonald, 1993). Measuring the visitor experience across organizations can further inform individual museums and the broader field by providing visitor experience benchmarks that can help organizations interpret the experience and characteristics of their own visitors within the scope of other similar organizations (AASLH, 2019; IMLS, 2012). Cross-organizational assessment can also help build field-wide understanding of museum audiences and the factors related to the quality and character of their visits. This type of assessment can contribute to evidence-based understanding of the nature and impacts of museum experiences on visitors, and can help museums overall meet the needs of their many audiences (IMLS, 2012). Furthermore, *ongoing* studies enable museums to engage in a continuous learning process through which they can test out various strategies for attracting new audiences, encouraging repeat visitation, and strengthening the quality of the visitor experience to see how visitors respond through changes in data over time. Indeed, COVES has explicitly addressed these many benefits through its first four years of full implementation. (See *Supporting Document 2* for the COVES FY19 Aggregate Report.)

Unfortunately, art museums lack a dedicated professional organization to help begin this type of work in their field. For example, science centers/museums have the Association of Science and Technology Centers (ASTC), members of which were explicitly recruited to participate in the earliest phases of C-COVES, and again targeted during expansion through COVES. ASTC also served as core partner during the formation of COVES, providing invaluable administrative and networking support. Meanwhile, children's museums have the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) and the Children's Museum Research Network (http://www.childrensmuseums.org/members/community-conversations/cmrn); zoos and aquariums have the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) and the Why Zoos and Aquariums Matter study (WZAM; https://wzam.org/about/); and history museums have the American Association of State and Local History (AASLH) and the Visitors Count! program (https://aaslh.org/programs/visitorscount/). Art museums have only AAM, and though a tremendous professional resource on many levels, their membership spans all of the aforementioned types of institutions (each of whom has their own, dedicated professional organization) in addition to art museums. The Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD; https://aamd.org/about/mission) is just that: exclusive to director-level persons within art museums. Finally, specific to evaluation but not to any particular type of organization, is the Visitor Studies Association (VSA), which has its very own Art Museums Focused-Interest Group—a group that in no small part has encouraged the very work proposed here. While *COVES:ART* would not establish a professional organization exclusive to art museums, including art museums in COVES would begin to break down barriers that currently prevent robust visitor evaluation permeating the more than 200 art museums across the country (AAMD, 2018).

Without a professional organization to host a conference at which to gather each year, the evaluative work that *is* currently done within art museums tends to stay isolated; if not within the singular museum conducting the work, then within a small, established network of art museums who may have a history of evaluation. While the number of art museums recognizing the value of research and evaluation has grown in recent years, these new and emerging departments and professionals require outlets and avenues for learning and knowledge sharing. The notion of studying the visitor experience beyond specific learning outcomes in art museums is relatively new, and it has been acknowledged that, like some science center evaluators, most art museum

professionals who specifically have the title of visitor/audience "researcher" or "evaluator" in their job title have only recently been designated as such. What's more, smaller museums often lack the capacity to design and implement their own visitor studies, as institutions that study the visitor experience tend to have higher annual budgets and attendance than institutions that conduct visitor research infrequently or not at all (Luebke & Grajal, 2011); meanwhile, "small" institutions make up almost 40% of all art museums (AAMD, 2018). A system that can be implemented at art museums of any size—as demonstrated by COVES' adoption by several science centers considered "very small" with 10 or fewer staff and budgets less than $1,000,000 annually (compared to the "small" designation in art museums with annual budgets of <$5,000,000)—makes COVES a valuable option for supporting capacity building across museums nationwide.

In lieu of an organized approach to bringing art museums into COVES, these institutions may be left to external agencies who offer data collection services by way of kiosks posted at museum exits or member feedback by way of mass emails or social media postings. These nationwide studies tend to be relatively affordable to museums due to the low cost and maintenance required by the methodologies, and have proliferated in number in recent years, with many examples readily available. Unfortunately, these data collection methods produce biased results: members are demonstratively more positive about their institutions than non-members (COVES, 2019), while kiosks that are self-selected are more often attended to by visitors who have had either an extremely positive or extremely negative experience (i.e., bimodal) (Pekarik, 1997). When compared to COVES, the influence that these alternative data sources provide can negatively affect an institution's ability to make informed decisions, and often lack the advantage of providing directly comparable data. This is further evidenced by a Cultural Data Project (CDP) study identifying factors that influence the way data are collected and utilized in cultural organizations such as museums and science centers. Findings indicated that the lack of accessibility and comparability of data limit the usefulness of existing data at a field-level, and capacity constraints hinder high-quality efforts at the organization-level (Lee & Linett, 2013).

Though there are many possible ways to establish this work in art museums, an in-person convening is critical for several reasons. First, the convening will allow for highly focused discussions on the many aspects of embedding a common visitor study in art museums. Second, as previously established, since art museums lack a dedicated professional organization and associated conference like ASTC or ACM, opportunities for these face-to-face discussions around research and evaluation are often limited, especially for institutions that do not send staff to the VSA conference. Third, the initial C-COVES forum played a critical role in allowing COVES to be successful, as it provided the opportunity for many science center professionals across a range of institutional roles to voice their suggestions and concerns openly. It also helped to establish the framework for the system while fostering working relationships that would be critical in developing a multi-institutional collaboration. The findings from the proposed convening will similarly identify key priorities necessary for moving *COVES:ART* forward.

COVES as a best practice in developing the project:
As a multi-institutional data collection initiative, COVES was thoroughly researched by project staff in advance of the initial forum grant. In addition to two of the aforementioned studies conducted by other museum professional organizations—WZAM and Visitors Count!—two more national collaborative examples were investigated and presented at the forum for discussion: the Museums Count program (IMLS, 2011) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2013). These four projects were evaluated in terms of aspects of their structures that were deemed the essential, interrelated elements of multi-institutional collaborative systems, including:
- Decision-making: how to create and sustain a trustworthy and equitable leadership and management structure.
- Questions and measures: what should be studied, and how.
- Methods and data collection: how instruments should be developed and data collected.

- ▪ Data analysis and sense-making: how information should be interpreted and shared (MOS, 2014).

In fact, an entire White Paper summarizing these investigations into collaborative data efforts has been produced. (See *Supporting Document 3* for the C-COVES White Paper.)

COVES was also vetted by more than 25 external museum and industry professionals who attended the initial forum in Boston in 2013. Following discussion at the C-COVES forum, there was consensus that the established collaborative data collection program must include the following guiding principles:

- ▪ Shared ownership and trust;
- ▪ Sustainability;
- ▪ Institutionally relevant and informative for the broader field;
- ▪ Building evaluation capacity;
- ▪ Whole-institution focus; and
- ▪ Adaptability.

Taking these to heart, COVES has subsequently been vetted again and again at various professional conferences over the last six years as the system developed (including the ASTC Annual Conference in 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019; the VSA Annual Conference in 2013, 2016, and 2019; and the AAM Annual Meeting in 2014, 2017, and 2019).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the COVES methodology has been rigorously pilot tested by the initial cohort of eight science centers under the previous NLG award. Studying three different data collection techniques (onsite exit-intercept survey, onsite exit-intercept interview, and post-visit emailed survey) and two different visitor-sampling techniques (systematic random group sampling, in which *any* adult visitor in the group approached was eligible to complete the protocol, and systematic random individual sampling, in which *one specific* adult was asked to complete the protocol), an identical instrument was tested across sites for a full six months. It is important to note that the explicit intention of the pilot study was to address questions concerning the efficacy and feasibility of the data collection and sampling methods, and *not* to summarize or compare the visitor-level data that were collected. Using several criteria for success, including response rate differences and data quality differences within site (e.g., socially desirable response bias, skip rate differences for potentially sensitive questions), one data collection method (the onsite exit-intercept survey) and one sampling strategy (systematic random group sampling) were identified as most effective and efficient across sites.

The survey itself was carefully assembled by comparing the instruments of several institutions who previously conducted their own, siloed visitor studies, including MOS, the Science Museum of Minnesota, Saint Louis Science Center, and the Exploratorium. Finding questions and topic areas that were consistent across instruments led to the recognition that most museums were interested in understanding the same things about their visitors: who visits (demographics), why they visit (motivations, e.g., Falk, Moussouri, & Coulson, 1998; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002), what they do when they visit (experiences), and how they feel about their visit (ratings, e.g., Pekarik, Schreiber, & Visscher, 2018; Reichheld & Markey, 2011). Using this basic framework, a Questions & Measures team dedicated to standardizing the question language and response options took time to pilot necessary pieces of the survey, creating a core questionnaire that could be easily implemented and customized as necessary across data collection sites. Importantly, each participating site voiced the need to add questions beyond the core set to respond to local or internal initiatives, or to maintain longitudinal reporting for stakeholders. Attention was given to ensure that in no instance was the survey overly burdensome to visitors in terms of completion time.

Advancing the field:

The core COVES survey that was created through this process is freely available online through the project website and willingly distributed to anyone hoping to benefit from this work. And while providing a tested

instrument and methodology for other museums to use is in itself a benefit to the field (Grack-Nelson, Goeke, Auster, Peterman, & Lussenhop, 2019), the real benefits are reaped only when participating in the collaboration. Primary among them is the ability to compare one's own visitor experience data to the aggregate data across sites, or perhaps to the data of a subset of peer institutions (e.g., art museums only). These comparative data can help to establish baseline metrics for longitudinal analyses or to test against census data to ensure community representation. Other benefits lie in the multitude of supports offered by participating in a centralized data collaborative:

- Personalized onsite training: prior to beginning data collection, all new sites receive a half-day training for as many staff as is desired, which provides an overview of the system, an understanding of participation and its many benefits, and a thorough discussion of the data collection protocol and data collection instrument, including hands-on practice.
- Sample size guidance: monthly survey targets are provided to each site based on historic visitation patterns to ensure that samples are proportional to visitor attendance (including weekday vs. weekend visitation).
- Continued evaluation capacity building support: with dedicated staff, developed resources, and an established COVES Community of Practice, help is always available to institutions.
- Dynamic dashboard reporting: eliminating the dreaded lag-time between data collection and old-school reporting methods (i.e., the long-form written report), a visualized data dashboard helps institutional stakeholders see all of their data, filter their data, and share their data through a password-protected website using Qualtrics software.

With these advantages in place, what COVES truly does is empower institutions to make use of their visitor data with *intention*. That is to say, the work of figuring out what to ask visitors, establishing how to collect data, finding the time to enter/clean/visualize data, and deciding how best to share findings is already done. As is so often the case, sometimes the biggest hurdle is simply knowing where to start, one that is completely resolved through a collaborative data system. This allows participating COVES institutions to approach their data with confidence, knowing how rigorously the process was established and having eliminated wasted startup energy (beyond data collection, which is no small feat in itself). Asking questions of the data, learning from peer institutions about approaches to interpreting data, listening to others' findings from prior investigations, and probing one's own data are all part of the learning curve and help to increase institutional capacity in terms of data literacy. This has led to a number of intentional approaches by COVES institutions:

- The *Science Museum of Minnesota* started tracking perceptions (and areas) of crowding in the museum, layering attendance to compare the two; findings suggest that visitors were most conscious of "crowding" on days with heavy school group traffic, but that it did not greatly impact their experience ratings.
- The *New York Hall of Science* looked at the composition of ages among groups with children to rethink the hours their young learners' space remained open; they are currently discussing ways of expanding access based on the data.
- *Great Lakes Science Center* used first year baseline metrics for external vendor contracts, such that café quality, gift shop experience, and bathroom cleanliness services are all held to standards established by COVES data.

Despite all of these success stories, COVES has yet to be tested in an art museum setting. To do so, it is essential to intentionally assemble experts in the field of research and evaluation within art museums to provide additional validity evidence by reviewing and discussing the tool, methods, and overall system of COVES. In addition to providing art museums with valuable data capable of informing decision-making, expanding the types of institutions included in COVES allows the national data set to advance the field by being more representative of all museum types.

Project Collaborators:

To accomplish this project, several working groups will be necessary. First, the Research Team who currently works on various aspects of the existing COVES project, including data cleaning, technical support, and evaluation capacity building, is composed of:

- Ryan Auster, Senior Research & Evaluation Associate, MOS;
- Alexander Lussenhop, Research & Evaluation Associate, MOS; and
- Sarah Cohn, Principal Evaluator, Aurora Consulting (Minneapolis, MN).

These three individuals have supported COVES from its earliest days, and provide a wealth of knowledge gained through experiences training institutions in visitor data collection, designing surveys and analyzing data, and creating resources to support evaluation capacity building.

Equally important in this work are two key art museum professionals who will serve as Expert Leaders, helping to plan the two-day convening with the COVES Research Team while also establishing their art museums as *COVES:ART* pilot sites, which will share their experiences at the convening:

- Juli Goss, Director of Audience Research & Evaluation, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (Bentonville, AR); and
- Rachel Wolff, Audience Insight Analyst, Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) (Minneapolis, MN).

Both Crystal Bridges and Mia have had internal, ongoing visitor surveys operating for at least a year. While the Mia visitor survey began just last year following 15 years of contracting externally to conduct a seasonal exit study, the Guest Experience and Motivation Study (GEMS) was started at Crystal Bridges in the summer of 2016. Importantly, both sites recognize the value of participating in a collaborative system and prefer to join COVES rather than continue to operate independently.

Lastly, seven Core Partners have each submitted letters of support toward *COVES:ART* and plan to attend the convening along with one additional member of their institution from a department different from their own:

- Cincinnati Art Museum (Cincinnati, OH): Caitlin Tracy-Miller, Visitor Research Coordinator;
- Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, OH): Hannah Ridenour, Manager, Research & Evaluation;
- Crocker Art Museum (Sacramento, CA): Michelle Maghari-Dong, Director of Visitor Services;
- Detroit Institute of Arts (Detroit, MI): Kenneth Morris, Director of Evaluation and Research;
- Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (Kansas City, MO): Laura Brown, Manager, Evaluation & Visitor Research;
- Peabody Essex Museum (Salem, MA): Cristy Hebert, Evaluation Associate; and
- Philadelphia Museum of Art (Philadelphia, PA): Kerry DiGiacomo, Director of Audience Research.

Collectively, these three groups—the Research Team, the Expert Leaders, and the Core Partners—will leverage connections within the art museum field to invite others to the two-day convening, particularly small institutions lacking internal evaluation capacity, and those located in rural areas or geographies not currently represented in the lists above.

Addressing NLG-M goals:

COVES:ART is designed to **build capacity** throughout the field of art museums. Although the existing COVES system employs a centralized hub for survey building and data processing, the remaining elements of the system mimic collaboratory models: network-based partnerships that allow for cooperation, interaction, multi-institutional access to tools, the sharing of data, and distributed meaning-making (Corley, Boardman, & Bozeman, 2006; Kinzie et al., 2006). As such, "a rising tide lifts all boats;" the intention is that the capacity to collect and use data and evaluative thinking are extended to other projects and areas within participating museums, and that these mindsets overflow into connections in the art museum field well beyond COVES. This project is in direct alignment with the **data, analysis, and assessment** category through its intended implementation of cross-institutional data to support individual institutional improvement, as well as enhance field-wide understanding of visitors across art museums.

2. Project Work Plan

The following one-year plan mirrors the phases used to plan the C-COVES forum, but operates on a shortened timeframe due to the work previously established through COVES. In order to engage the perspectives of stakeholders and institutions in the thought-process of including art museums within the existing collaboration most effectively, this project will take place in two phases. During the first phase, the core team (all three working groups detailed above) will meet virtually to plan the two-day convening, which includes identifying the full set of invited participants and solidifying intended outcomes; in the second phase, the two-day convening will be held, feedback will be assembled, and project results will be shared.

Project team make up:

In order to think through the affordances and challenges of incorporating art museums more broadly into a system like COVES, it will be necessary to include a diversity of stakeholders from a range of art museums across the country in the conversation. This means bringing together art museum professionals spanning the U.S. from small, medium, and large institutions who serve in evaluative or visitor research capacities along with quite literally all other departments: marketing, education, visitor services, membership, and senior leadership, to name but a few. The goal is to include two individuals from each of 15 art museums including the Core Partners, along with the Research Team, Expert Leaders and members of their institutions, and a select number of current COVES participants to reflect on existing practices and identify potential adaptations that will help engage the art museum field in benefitting from this collaborative work. In preparation for the convening, the Research Team will work with the Expert Leaders to identify the necessary materials to prepare. The Core Partners will be engaged to recruit additional convening participants and, as desired, contribute to the proposed agenda to the convening itself.

Project activities: Phase 1 – Planning the convening

Beginning in September 2020, the Research Team and Expert Leaders will meet bi-weekly to begin planning for the two-day convening. These Expert Leaders have been strategically identified as individuals who can help think through the more challenging aspects of encouraging art museums to become involved in *COVES:ART* based on their history of beginning internal visitor studies in art museums. Situated within institutions that are committed to piloting the system in advance of the convening, both Crystal Bridges and Mia will implement the COVES core instrument using the standardized onsite exit-intercept survey methodology to test the application within art museums for roughly six months prior to the convening (October 2020—March 2021). Collectively, the Research Team and Expert Leaders will note problems and successes with technology (tablets/devices, web-based administration), the instrument (questions, response options), methodology (random sampling procedures, art museum visitor response rates), and anything else that is deemed critical to the process.

Though the details of the convening will largely be determined through the meetings with Expert Leaders in the early spring of 2021, activities may be similar to those from the C-COVES forum held six years ago. Questions guiding the planning process include:

- What outcomes of the multi-institutional collaboration for studying the visitor experience are most important for the *field* of art museums?
- What outcomes of the collaboration are most important for *individual* art museums?
- What do individual art museums require of the collaboration in order to participate?
- What are the benefits, challenges, and considerations of conducting multi-institutional studies from the perspective of each art museum in attendance?
- What are the benefits, challenges, and considerations for collaborating around conducting visitor experience studies from the perspective of the art museum field as a whole?

To provide ample opportunity to explore the many perspectives in answer to these questions, convening activities will mix formal presentations, guest speakers, small-table discussions, and hands-on working sessions, which will contribute products as evidence of the collective work achieved.

Once the convening date is set and the Research Team, Expert Leaders, and Core Partners have finalized the list of expected art museums, invitations detailing the event will officially be sent in January 2021, so that travel planning can begin. Virtual meetings will increase in frequency (weekly) between the Research Team and Expert Leaders as the details of the convening activities come together in the final weeks of Phase 1.

Project activities: Phase 2 – Hosting the convening and disseminating results
The two-day convening will be hosted by the Minneapolis Institute of Art in early April 2021. Centrally located within the U.S., travel to Mia for the convening will allow for a greater range of geographic participation. Furthermore, Mia is known as a visitor-focused art museum with a history of audience research and evaluation, and is well positioned within the field of art museums to serve as convener. Critical to the success of the event, two primary objectives will guide the culminating day of the convening:
- Develop an action agenda addressing what resources and supports would be needed to fully incorporate art museums within the collaborative system; and
- Actively begin creating a Community of Practice around systematically studying the visitor experience across art museums.

Communications plan:
Following the convening, several methods will be employed to share the results of the convening. Most notably, one month after the meeting in Minneapolis, the Research Team and Expert Leaders will travel to the AAM Annual Conference in Chicago, IL to: 1) present a session focused on collaborative data collection in art museums based on findings from the convening,[1] and 2) host a booth in the Museum Expo, with the explicit purpose of sharing results and building support for art museum participation. Several years of hosting a booth in the Exhibit Hall at the ASTC Annual Conference has proven helpful in establishing a reputation for COVES among science and technology centers, and the opportunity to do the same within the art museum field will help us broaden participation even more widely. Additional dissemination methods will include a series of short webinars (e.g., summarizing the results of the convening, introducing COVES to art museums not present at the convening), and a short (<10-page) report on what was learned at the convening and what questions still remain following the event. Lastly, a written statement on the value of a collaborative approach to understanding visitors through data will be co-authored by the Research Team and Expert Leaders, and shared with the Core Partners for review before finalization.

Timeline:
The attached Schedule of Completion details the timeline for the project's activities. (See *Schedule of Completion*.)

Project maturity and associated risks:
Although COVES is firmly in the mainstreaming phase with more than 30 participating institutions across the U.S. and Canada, *COVES:ART* is truly about **scaling**. Specifically, how can the system that was previously designed and built for science centers embrace art museums? This project will attempt to unpack the similarities and differences between the museums, audiences, and institutional cultures using a crowd-sourced learning approach. As noted in IMLS blog, the intention is "to increase quantity while maintaining quality" (Matthew, 2018).

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[1] The call for AAM Annual Meeting session proposals is typically open through late September; therefore, the first project activity of this grant will be to submit a session description that essentially says we will be presenting on incredibly timely outcomes from a convening yet to happen.

There are risks associated with the work of *COVES:ART*, including the potential for discord at the proposed convening. Particularly when bringing together professionals who feel strongly about the need for visitor data with institutions that have little experience or perceived capacity to incorporate this into their work, there may be misconstrued feelings of inadequacy that are not intended through this effort. Understanding this potential for resistance, the core team will emphasize that the ideas that will be discussed at the convening in no way constitute value judgements, and project staff with trusted experience moderating difficult discussions will be relied on to negotiate a convening in which all perspectives are appreciated.

Key Staff:
The personnel who will plan, implement, and manage this project include the Research Team and Expert Leaders noted above. Specifically:
- *Ryan Auster*, MOS, will serve as the Project Director. Ryan has directed COVES since its inception and has a background in research and evaluation methodologies that enhance the project.
- *Alexander Lussenhop*, MOS, will co-lead the project. Similarly, Alex has led COVES since its inception and has tremendous experience in working with multi-institutional collaborations and data analysis.
- *Sarah Cohn*, Aurora Consulting, will help plan the convening and moderate discussion. Sarah brings a valued history with evaluation capacity building and working across organizations, which will be essential in connecting art museums with COVES.
- *Juli Goss*, Crystal Bridges, will help plan the convening, liaise with Core Partners, and share pilot *COVES:ART* findings with others. Juli's role in establishing GEMS at Crystal Bridges and pushing to find ways of comparing visitor experience data in art museums were instrumental in the formation of this group of experts.
- *Rachel Wolff*, Mia, will also help plan the convening, liaise with Core Partners, and share pilot *COVES:ART* findings with others. Rachel's evaluation experience at several art museums make her an invaluable asset to connecting across the field.

Time, financial, personnel, and other resources:
This is a one-year project (September 2020—August 2021). IMLS support will be fully integrated into the overall *COVES:ART* project. MOS will meet the 1:1 cost share requirement through a combination of funding sources or endowment, as well as some cost share funds from Crystal Bridges and Mia. MOS has already had a number of encouraging conversations with project partners and expects that the IMLS commitment will act as a catalyst for further investments into the future of the project. Existing assets include access to Qualtrics software (which will need to be increased to handle the addition of a cohort of art museums), the COVES website (www.understandingvisitors.org) which can be enhanced to include art museum representation, a Community of Practice message board through ASTC that includes COVES members only, and all previously developed COVES resources.

Evaluation plan and intended results:
While the planning of the convening will require successful adherence to the timeline, a successful convening will have several measurable outcomes. In alignment with **IMLS Agency-Level Goal 2: Building Capacity** (IMLS, 2018), convening participants will:
- Increase their awareness and understanding of collaborative/comparative data initiatives;
- Increase their interest in participating in a collaborative visitor experience study; and
- Increase their perceived value of visitor experience data in informing decisions within art museums.
To ascertain whether the convening was successful in achieving these goals, a short retrospective pre/post survey will be administered to all attendees the week following the convening. Embedded questions in the series of webinars will also collect data responding to the capacity building efforts of *COVES:ART*.

3. Project Results

Audience Impact:

If the goals identified in the Project Justification above are successfully achieved, *COVES:ART* will be well positioned to take next steps toward firmly embedding art museums within the broader collaboration. Following the grant period, the project team would then be able to:

- Create a cohort of art museums focused on understanding and improving the visitor experience;
- Support visitor data collection and streamlined analysis/reporting across a diverse range of art museums in order to build field-wide knowledge and understanding of art museum visitors and their experiences;
- Build the evaluation capacity of art museum professionals broadly; and in doing so,
- Increase and enhance the use of visitor data-informed decision-making among art museums across the country.

Importantly, it would also be possible to immediately launch data collection at interested art museum sites to accomplish these goals, while leveraging the existing COVES survey platform and dashboard reporting tool that have enabled success at the many sites currently participating.

Challenges for broad adoption:

One potential barrier to this work would be if art museums and their visitors were different enough from those in science centers to warrant a fundamentally different approach to data collection and visitor sampling, in which case the existing COVES methods may be insufficient for supporting comparative data analysis among the broader collaboration. However, there is no indication from early art museum contacts that this is true; in comparing current art museum exit surveys administered by the Expert Leaders to the established COVES core instrument, the majority of question categories overlapped. Furthermore, differences would certainly be discussed at the convening if any invited art museum professional felt this to be the case.

Fortunately, one barrier that does *not* appear to exist is a lack of interest, as indicated by the many enthusiastic responses received from institutions that were contacted to participate and were overwhelmingly positive regarding the potential of a COVES art museum cohort predicated on a convening to which they would be invited. Admittedly, all of the committed institutions have professionals with some combination of "visitor/audience research/evaluation" in their job title, but it is nonetheless encouraging that many art museums who value this work are also interested in convening with the strong possibility of joining together following *COVES:ART*. In order to be truly valuable to the field, of course, art museums who do *not* currently conduct internal visitor studies projects or have an evaluation specialist on staff will be essential to the conversation, and will be recruited to participate in the convening as well.

Tangible products and sustained benefits:

If successful, *COVES:ART* will result in several documents that will guide the extension of COVES into art museums, including the convening summary and the written statement on the value of understanding art museum visitors through comparative data. These will help inform the formation of an entire cohort of art museum participants in COVES.

Over time, two outcomes are expected: 1) art museum participation in COVES will increase, albeit slowly at first; and 2) data use and literacy will increase across the field as more art museums join and *converse using shared data as a language*. This is perhaps the most salient feature of this project—that broad implementation can occur and capacity can be enhanced not just through direct participation, but also exposure to participants. *COVES:ART* is poised to serve as the tipping point for increasing and improving visitor data use for art museums.

Schedule of Completion

Project Activities	Year 1											
	2020				2021							
	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG
Draft & submit session proposal to AAM 2021 Annual Meeting	▬											
Biweekly meetings with Expert Leaders		▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬										
Crystal Bridges and MIA pilot testing		▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬										
Core Partners engaged to recruit for the convening			▬▬▬▬▬									
Convening date set				▬								
Convening invitation formally sent to all parties					▬							
Intense planning for convening (weekly virtual meetings)						▬▬▬						
Convening held								▬				
Convening results compiled								▬				
AAM 2021 Annual Meeting									▬			
Continued dissemination, including a written statement of findings & webinar series										▬▬▬		
Ongoing art museum recruitment									▬▬▬▬▬			

← Phase 1 | Phase 2 →