The Cost of Free Admission: A Comparative Study Examining the Feasibility of Eliminating Museum Admission Charges

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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Graduate Program in Arts Policy and Administration

The Ohio State University

2011

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Abstract

In the past two decades, several museums have eliminated their admission charges in an attempt to be more accessible to their communities. This research seeks to identify the factors influencing organizational policy and understand the strategic changes American art museums have made to eliminate their admission charges. Through a comparative case study, four museums—the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, San Jose Museum of Art, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the Walters Art Museum—will be examined to understand why and how these museums were able to eliminate their admission charges, and whether it is feasible for other art museums to follow their lead. A genealogy of admission charges in the United States, which outlines the factors leading to the implementation and expansion of charges, will serve as the analytical framework.
Acknowledgments

I thank my advisor, Dr. Margaret J. Wyszomirski, for her endless knowledge, wisdom, guidance and humor. She is an extraordinary educator and mentor. I also thank Dr. Wayne P. Lawson for his feedback and wit.

The staff at the Wexner Center for the Arts, especially Nico Franano, has been supportive of my graduate studies and my growth as an arts professional.

I would like to thank the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Walters Art Museum, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and the San Jose Museum of Art for their cooperation in the research. They provided me with valuable documents and insight. My research would not have been possible with the museums’ assistance.

Finally, I am indebted to my family and friends for their unwavering support. I want to acknowledge my mother, Judy, who encouraged my academic pursuits, and my partner, Ryan, who been my rock throughout this process.
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Fields of Study

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As early as the 1900s, writings about museums reveal an ongoing dilemma—whether to charge admissions. Some scholars advocated for the museum to become like a public library—open and free of charge. Others suggested that users must be of certain status to enter or enjoy the museum. This philosophical debate, which stretched across the globe and continues today, is deeply connected to the museum’s public value.

Beginning in the 1960s, there was an internal and external push for museums to become more educational and accessible to a wider audience. However, as discussed in this thesis, accessibility can be achieved on a number of levels. One way is through representation in the museum’s collections and programming. Alternatively, accessibility can be the ability to access the museum’s services and collections through its website and social media outlets, enabling people to engage with the museum without having to visit the physical location. Other accessibility concerns include the museum being compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act or using language on the wall labels that are easily understood by all visitors. Financial accessibility is another consideration of museum professionals, and the one dealt with in this thesis.
While museums sought ways to increase their accessibility, they were met with rising costs and decreased giving beginning in the 1970s. Museums were compelled to seek other sources of revenue. A genealogy of admission charges in American art museums examines various factors, such as the evolving mission of the museum, professionalization of the field, and giving trends, which led to the implementation and expansion of admission charges in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the past two decades, several museums have eliminated their admission charges, including the Cincinnati Museum of Art, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Knoxville Museum of Art, U.S.S. Constitution Museum, St. Louis Art Museum, Dayton Art Institute, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Minneapolis Institute of Art, San Jose Museum of Art, the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Walters Art Museum. The main reason for this policy change is to increase accessibility, and by eliminating the admission charge, the museum seeks to remove one barrier. Two questions remain—does the policy in fact increase accessibility and is the policy feasible?

**Statement of Purpose**

The goal of this research is to determine the feasibility of eliminating admission charges in American art museums. With the recent phenomenon of museums making the change, this research seeks to identify the factors influencing organizational policy and understand the strategic changes American art museums have made to eliminate their admission charges. Through the
comparative case studies, four museums—the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, San Jose Museum of Art, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the Walters Art Museum—will be studied to understand why and how these museums were able to eliminate their admission charges, and whether it is feasible for other art museums to follow their lead.

However, in order to determine whether this change is feasible for other museums, the research seeks to understand the factors leading to the implementation and expansion of admission charges in the United States. This genealogy, which integrates literature from various fields, including museum studies and philanthropy, will provide the foundation to discern the role admission charges play in museums today.

**Research Questions**

This research explores the question: *Is it feasible to eliminate admission charges in American art museums?* In order to answer this question, there are several embedded questions that first need to be addressed:

- When and why did admission charges become the museum norm?
- What are the philosophical and economics arguments for charging admission to art museums? What are the arguments against charging admission?
- What are the demographics for the current museum audience? How does charging admission impact the demographics?
- For museums that have eliminated admission charges, how did they replace the revenue? What impact did it have on their attendance and programming?
- How is the issue of accessibility connected to the museum’s public service mission?
- How can free admission be sustainable?
Through this research, I will look at several aspects in relation to the policy, including the impact on the museums’ financial health, funding mechanisms, audience demographics and participation. It is first important to understand the initial purpose of admission charges and through the case studies, to determine if the charges serve a new purpose. My goal is to compile and understand the complex, multidimensional impact of this policy change and the feasibility of others eliminating their charges.

Significance to the Field

This research seeks to build on available literature by being a valuable resource, adding to and synthesizing existing knowledge. The genealogy of admission charges presented in Chapter 3 is a significant piece of research as it compiles and integrates literature from various fields and time periods to trace the lineage of admission charges in American art museums.

Additionally, the research can be a tool for current museum professionals. This multidimensional study of the feasibility of eliminating admission charges will assist museum professionals interested in the possibilities and impacts of this specific policy change. By highlighting the various implications, the research can serve as a discussion piece for museum leadership as they examine their current admission policy.

The factors presented are for the benefit of art administrators to engage in further research, dialogue, strategic planning, and evaluation of their
organizational policies. Overall, I believe this research will be important to the field as museum professionals and policy makers strive to balance mission with money as they set national and organizational policy.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This research offers a comprehensive look at four art museums of varying collections, budgets, and geography that underwent the policy change. I used the definition of museums the federal government employs in the Museum and Library Services Act to define my potential case studies:

A public or private nonprofit agency or institution organized on a permanent basis for essentially educational or aesthetic purposes, which, utilizing a professional staff, owns or utilizes tangible objects, cares for them, and exhibits them to the public on a regular basis.

This definition restricted my sample to nonprofit and public museums with permanent collections. In the interest of comparing like institutions, I excluded public museums, like those of the Smithsonian. As the funding streams of these public museums is radically different than most nonprofit museums, it was best to exclude them. Similarly, I did not choose museums that are subsets of larger institutions, such as a university museum. Finally, in line with my personal and professional interests, I focused on art museums. The main goal in the selection of the cases was to provide a great enough scope through the variety of the institutions and its reaction to the policy change to present a full picture of the decision and ultimately, the feasibility of eliminating admission charges.
The information presented for each case study was limited by the information obtained through public sources, organizational documents, and interviews. I tried to interview at least two people from each museum to provide different perspectives from the various departments; however, this was not possible with the Walters Art Museum where only the Director of Development was interviewed. Additionally, some of the museums have had significant staff turnover since the policy change took place. In these situations, I relied on institutional documents, news articles, and word-of-mouth accounts of the change. Some of the museums were hesitant or selective in sharing internal documents. In attempting to illustrate a balanced and comprehensive picture of the policy and its affect, this lack of transparency posed a challenge. Nevertheless, the research presents a candid portrait of these institutions and the decision and impact of eliminating admission charges.

Methodological Paradigm

When speaking on what museums “purport to disseminate,” Marcia Tucker of the New Museum in New York once wrote:

is not neutral; knowledge is not discovered, but is socially produced and reflective of the power relations of the society within which it is situated. It is therefore important to clarify the perspective from which knowledge is being presented and judgments made, and perhaps even offer alternative and conflicting knowledges and judgments as well. (cited in Weil, 1995, p. 110)

This statement can be applied to me a researcher. I am shaped by my previous experiences and education. I am a native of Cleveland, Ohio, which hosts one of
the greatest, free museums in the world. Through this museum and its free educational programming, I was introduced to and fell in love with the work of museums. I have a strong belief that museums exist to serve the public and their collections are owned by the community in which the museum is situated in. The museum’s staff and board are merely stewards.

Furthermore, as I approach this research through an interpretivist paradigm, I believe there are multiple ways to approach the subject of museum admissions. I have sought to provide a balanced review of literature. In making a significant organizational decision, such as eliminating admission charges, one must understand its varied impact on multiple departments, such as development, marketing, and education. Thus, I have offered literature from several fields, including cultural economics, audience development, and arts participation, and interviews from museum staff in different departments.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, museums have faced the difficult decision of whether to institute an admission charge. Often, there are moral and ethical considerations as the argument against the imposition of admission rests largely on the key assertion that a charge excludes those unable to pay and does not advance the museum’s public service mission. Likewise, eliminating admission charges is often a philosophical decision, but it also has practical ramifications. At the forefront of considerations is the policy’s impact on the museum’s finances, including its ability to raise funds from other sources. An additional consideration is how the policy will affect the museum’s audience.

The literature review for this study includes theoretical and empirical scholarship as well as examples from the museum field. My research focuses on nonprofit art museums in the United States, but the majority of writing on free admission policies is from abroad. A major reason for this is the United Kingdom’s decision to eliminate admission charges at national museums and galleries in 2001. While an ocean apart, the theoretical arguments and practical considerations are still relevant in the United States.

This chapter is broken down into three sections. First, the museum’s financial portrait is presented. Arguments for and against charging are
highlighted as well as admission charges relationship to other sources of funding. Second, the museum audience is defined. Factors for arts participation are explored. The third section is a discussion of the museum’s transforming role as an educational institution. The concepts of access and social inclusion are placed in the context of a museum and in relation to admission charges. This final section will provide a framework for the following chapter’s genealogy of admission charges in the United States.

Museum Financial Information

Established in 1906, the American Association of Museums (AAM) is the professional organization representing American museums of every discipline, as well as professionals in the field. Its mission is to “strengthen museums through leadership, advocacy, collaboration and service” (American Association of Museums, n.d.). The organization maintains many programs, including professional development activities, research and publications. Additionally, it advocates on behalf of museums through congressional hearings, the annual Museums Advocacy Day, and letter writing campaigns.

Since 1989, the AAM has surveyed American museums to capture the current state of museums. The most recent data, gathered in late 2008 and early 2009, was published as Museum Financial Information 2009 (Merritt and Katz, 2009). The report features three years’ worth of data with 2008 being the most recent year. With 671 museums responding, this survey provides us the most
comprehensive, up-to-date information available, which the authors state is “representative enough” of the museum field (p. 9).

When examining just art museums, one can get a sense of the typical financial portrait (Figure 1). Operating expenses totals $2,317,675 with non-operating expenses adding an additional $109,911 (p. 50, 51). The report lists $2,379,176 as the median operating income and $234,129 as the median non-operating income (temporarily or permanently restricted funds) (p. 48, 49). The breakdown of funding sources is as follows: 13.3 percent government (federal, state, local, and tribal); 46.6 percent private (foundations, corporations, individuals, parent organizations, and fundraising events); 21.5 percent earned (admission, membership, shop, café, programs/education activities, renting out facilities); and 18.6 percent investment (endowment, other investment income) (p.58). Of the responding art museums, 87 percent reported having an endowment with the median value being $9,744,500 (p. 65).

Specific data on admission charges provide an interesting look at one source of income. When asked if they have a general admission fee, 47.6 percent of art museums reported having one while 42.2 percent reported none, and 10.2 percent have only a suggested admission. Additionally, 18.7 percent charged for special exhibitions. The median adult admission was $8.00. However, all most all of art museums reported using discounts of special fee schedules (97.1 percent) and 89.9 percent had free admission days. Based on the data, art museum visitors appear to utilize free days. In 2008, median
attendance at art museums was 44,878 with just over 44 percent accounting for paid attendance (p. 43, 45). While the report doesn’t extrapolate why this situation exists, Figure 20.4 shows that since 1999, the cost of museum admission has steadily increased (p. 70).

Even with the increases in admission prices and ancillary business ventures, such as shops and cafés, the median earned income reported is $8.21 per visitor served (p. 90). However, the cost to serve each visitor is a staggering $49.94 (p. 89). It is evident that art museums must seek other sources of income, which as the financial breakdown of income streams shows, income from government, foundations, corporations, and individual donors helps to close the gap.

Another important and closely linked income source is membership. With 90 percent of all museums reporting the use of membership fees, it is the most common source of income on the entire list (p. 61). Art museums are particularly fond of offering memberships as they provide a steady income source and create a mechanism for marketing and community building. In turn, members receive valuable benefits such as free museum admission, invitations to special events and exhibition openings, discounts in the shops and cafés, and much more. Of the reporting art museums, 92.1 percent offer individual memberships with $35 being median dues. There is a retention rate of 78 percent. A majority of museums (62.9 percent) also offer corporate membership with $500 being the minimum dues, and enjoy an 80 percent retention rate.
Although this report provides the most current data, one must be careful to generalize these results to all museums. The answers differ depending on size, geography, collections content, and governance structure. With a relatively low number of art museums responding to the survey, the results may be skewed. However, as the authors suggest, this process is an “act of faith” that helps fill in the voids that exist currently.

These financial figures are useful for this research on eliminating admission charges as the first and most obvious impact of a decision is on the museum’s resources. Revenue from admission charges falls under the earned income section, which together with revenue from memberships, shops, cafés, rentals, and programs, comprises 21.5 percent of the museum’s income. If the median admission charge of $8 is multiplied by the median number of paying visitors (25,132), the total revenue from admission is $201,056, equaling 7.7 percent of the overall income. However, this figure is extracted from the data provided through the AAM survey. Admission revenue and its portion of the overall income vary dramatically from museum to museum.

**Pricing**

Bailey et al. (1997) contends, “The approach adopted by museums and galleries towards pricing is unsophisticated” (p. 359). As Rentschler, Hede and White (2007) find in their study of Australian museums, less than 30 percent use formal research techniques to develop pricing structures. The most common
techniques include benchmarking with competitors or historical factors (i.e. always been free). While the authors downplay the difficult decisions museum administrators must make with regard to admission, the authors’ museum pricing strategy matrix provides a useful diagram to chart a museum’s admission policy in respect to financial gain and public access.

The matrix (*Figure 2*) features four quadrants: Utilitarian (high financial gain, low public access); Idealist (low financial gain, low public access); Integrity (high financial gain, high public access); and Access (low financial gain, high public access). The authors argue that the Integrity quadrant with its pricing segmentation is the most effective at achieving both high financial gain and high public access. Bailey and Falconer (1998) would agree with the authors as they argue general admission fees can be used to subsidize admissions for low-income groups, expand hours of operation, and expand outreach programs. Similarly, Leksetich and Partridge (1997) state that museum patrons are not price sensitive to admission fees (p. 1558). Frey and Meier’s 2003 study found the price elasticity for art museums to be -0.17, meaning museums can generate significant increases in revenues through increasing admission fees (p. 4). While these scholars are quick to point out that museum admission is inelastic and provides an important source of revenue, they dismiss the socio-economic demographics of current museum audiences. As several authors have demonstrated (National Endowment for the Arts, 2008, Heilbrun and Gray, 2001, DiMaggio and Useem, 1978), the general museum audience is better educated
and more affluent than the general public. Museum admission may be inelastic because the current visitor can afford to pay for the service. Danielsen’s research (2008) shows income has the most significant effect on the likeliness of a person visiting a museum. Additionally, a German study, published in the Journal of Cultural Economics 22, no. 1 (1998), revealed “entrance fees to be the only significant subjective barrier” to attendance.

Furthermore, studies show evidence of a significant effect of charging on demand. Dickenson (1994) asserts charging reduces attendance with studies pointing to a drop of approximately 20 percent (p. 110). Attendance by local residents and young people is reduced. She suggests that admission further discourages attendance by those at lower-income levels (p. 110). Examples of museums that began charging admission provide further evidence of the impact. When the University of Wyoming Art Museum moved to its new facility in 1993, it began charging admission and offered one free day a week. Susan Moldenhauer, the director and chief curator, said the museum saw reduced visitation and as a state-funded university, it experienced a negative response from its statewide constituencies (personal communication, October 28, 2009). In 1996, the museum eliminated entry fees and opted for a donation box without a suggested amount. The museum saw increased visitation as well as an increase in its membership program; thus, producing an increase in revenue. Rescinding admission charges has the inverse outcome. From December 1992 through March 1993, the National Gallery of Canada repealed its admission
charge and saw an increase in visitation between 54 and 74 percent over the previous year (Dickenson, 1994, p. 110).

For those in favor of free admission, there are two main economic arguments. First, if museums are considered a public good, there are some positive externalities resulting from the existence and use of museums. Thus, they should be paid with taxes (Frey and Meier, 2003, p. 23). Once paid with taxes, additional charges should not be levied. This argument is often used within the United Kingdom as they pay significantly higher taxes than Americans. The second argument is that museums have high fixed costs (buildings, collection, staff, insurance, etc.) and marginal costs are close to zero (Frey and Meier, 2003, p. 9-10). Simply put, the cost of an additional visitor is most of the time close to zero, and in economic terms, it would be most efficient to charge the cost of marginal cost.

Pricing is never a completely economic decision. The philosophy of the leadership and the museum’s institutional values have an impact on which pricing scheme is adopted. Elaine Heumann Gurian (2005) argues that charging presents philosophical challenges as it “fundamentally alters the nature of museums and categorically changes their functions and orientation.” Gurian (2005) contends,

Museums, if they remain oriented toward their paying customers, will not organize themselves as the more widely used resource they can become. They will not feel motivated to become essential elements within the community and an important educational resource for all individuals wishing to learn. Further, the museum that is used only on special occasions or for an organized day out will never become the forum, the
meeting ground, the crossroads, the town square that we are fond of talking about.

Gurian encourages museums to model themselves after libraries. Libraries are respected civic institutions where short and focused or extended and leisurely visits are accepted. There is no obligation to ration visits. She wonders if government support of libraries is connected to their free entrance policy. In fact, she argues, “the case for government assistance cannot be made effectively with general admission charges in place.”

Other arguments for free admission relate to the museum’s purpose. Vera Zolberg (1984) states, “public education has been claimed as the basic function by American art museums since their founding” (p. 377). This educational and public service mission provides the museums not only with a nobler objective than other leisurely activities that do charge, such as movie theaters or professional sporting events, but also with their public charity status. This public charity status provides the museums with many benefits including tax incentives for donations, property tax exemptions, and direct government subsidies. In addition, most foundations, major financial contributors to museums, require organizations to be of 501(c)(3) status to qualify for funding. Thus, it is important to examine admission policies in context with the museum’s other sources of revenue.
Relationship with Other Funding Sources

Membership

Membership provides patrons benefits such as free museum admission. Scholars argue that without this benefit, there will be a decline in memberships. McFelter (2007) states, "Museums that do not charge a general admission fee usually have much smaller membership programs. Because a yearly membership charge typically includes reduced or free entry to the museum, this becomes an attractive incentive for membership purchases" (p. 63). However, a study by Glynn, Bhattacharya, and Hayagreeva (1996) invalidates the idea that membership is primarily used as an economic incentive for patrons wishing to visit the museum. As members showed low attendance rates, the authors suggest the "reasons for being members may be more psychological in nature" (p. 272).

In practice, the issue of membership in “free” museums is more complicated. When the San Jose Museum of Art went free, it saw an increase of 20 percent in memberships in the first year (ACFnewsource, 2002). However, as McFelter (2007) cites, memberships began dropping off shortly after. While on the surface, there appears to be a correlation between no admission charge and a decline in membership, a quote from Doience Sandoval, director of marketing for the museum, provides some insight into a possible answer. Sandoval stated that a museum survey revealed that 40 percent of visitors did not know that the museum was free (Bryant, 2006). This statement brings into question whether
the museum changed its marketing and community outreach strategies to accommodate the policy change. Similarly, the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Walters Museum of Art initially experienced a decrease in memberships when free admission was offered. However, memberships slowly increased as marketing strategies were adapted (Jensen, 2007). Additionally, there is little to no research on membership programs in museums that have always been free. How do they market their memberships and what benefits do they offer to their members?

Earned Income from Shops and Cafés

A visitor can enter nearly any museum and find a shop or café. Art museums have instituted these ancillary services to provide convenience for their museum visitors and generate earned income. While the income produced from shops and cafés is a small percentage of the overall income, museum administrators find these services to be important in maintaining a balanced funding scheme. Yet the relationship between these ancillary services and admission appear fuzzy.

Some scholars argue that museum visitors that enter for free spend less at the shops and cafés than paying visitors. Martin (2002) conducted a study in Great Britain, which revealed that although there was a significant increase in visitation due to the elimination of admission fees, visitors were not significantly increasing their spending in shops and cafés. Similarly, Steiner (1997) found that
“free day” visitors spent less per person than visitors on days which required general admission. He concluded from an income-maximizing perspective, it did not make sense for the museum to add a free day.

Conversely, there are a few examples in which admission fees have had the opposite effect on spending in shops. Lampi and Orth’s 2009 study showed a decrease in museum shop revenue after the imposition of an admission charge at the Museum of World Culture in Sweden. The museum opened free in 2005, but during the first year of required admission in 2007, revenue from the shop decreased by 30 percent. When the USS Constitution Museum in Boston, MA eliminated its admission charge, the leadership calculated that the shop’s income and voluntary donations would need to increase by nearly 40 percent to cover the loss in revenue (Logan, 2005). The first year of free admission showed a 326 percent increase in attendance and surprised the administrations financial goals with a 62 percent increase in shop income and voluntary donations (Logan, 2005). This example suggest that when people do not have to spend money on admission, they may be more willing to spending money on extras (i.e. shop and café) or at the very least, give a voluntary donation to support the museum.

Government, Corporate, and Private Support

With outside sources of support providing art museums nearly 60 percent of their annual revenue, it is essential that museum professionals understand admission charges in relation to these sources of funding. There are two
common assumptions made in respect to these funding sources. First, funding sources may push out other potential funding sources. For example, if a donor knows the museum receives substantial support from another source, the donor may choose to support a different cause. Second, support from certain sources, such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) or a prominent individual donor, may attract new funding. It is often said that a grant from the NEA is like the “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.” Furthermore, a decision, such as eliminating admission charges, rather than a donor, can attract new support. Roberta Smith states in a 2006 New York Times article, “When the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston stopped charging admission in 1995, public donations increased enough to make up for the loss of income.”

Government funding comes from various levels – federal, state, and local. Direct funding from the government was initiated in part to fill the “income gap” as termed by Baumol and Bowen (1966). Their “cost disease” theory made a compelling case for foundation and governmental support of the arts by pointing to the inevitability of this income gap. However, the government through the NEA has been clear from the beginning that the federal government’s role is “intended to complement the highly active role of private citizens” (Hodsoll, 1984, p. 84). While the NEA has not made a recommendation on museum admission fees, the Treasury Board of Canada has. In 1992, the Treasury Board defined user fees as:

User fees involve the recovery of a fair share of the cost of providing goods and services from those who receive a direct benefit from them.
They are not another form of taxation; they actually increase the equity of
the revenue system by shifting some of the burden away from the general
taxation borne by the taxpayer to those individuals who derive a clear
benefit from specific government activities. (cited in Dickenson, 1994, p.
111)

From this statement, it is evident that the Canadian government supports
admission charges as a way for museums to recover some of the average cost
per visitor. Additionally, by charging admission, those who use the museum and
benefit from it services help to support the museum directly. It is important to
note that the Treasury Board is speaking about public, government-supported
museums. As outlined in the financial portrait of American art museums, non-
profit museums in the United States often do not receive a majority of income
from the federal government; thus, the amount of taxes the average American
citizen pays that goes to support museums is insignificant.

Hughes and Luksetich (1999) have researched the relationship between
these various funding sources. They sought to identify tradeoffs in, and multiplier
effects of, funding sources for American art and history museums. Their study
showed three significant factors in determining federal support of arts museums
– local government support, value of the collection, and the age of the museum.
Local government support had a small negative influence on federal support,
suggesting there may be a trade-off between the two. State support was
influenced by local government support and expenditures in development and
membership (Hughes and Luksetich, 1999). While there was a positive
relationship with development expenditures, there was a native relationship with
local government support. The authors found that local government support was influenced by state support, attendance, and development expenditures. Both attendance and development expenditures shared a positive relationship with local government support. Private contributions have a positive relationship with federal funding and local support, but a negative relationship with state support (Hughes and Luksetich, 1999). Lastly, earned income, which includes admissions, is increased primarily with private and local support and investment income (Hughes and Luksetich, 1999). The authors state, “There is no evidence that earned income is a direct substitute for public funding” (p. 32). Furthermore, the authors recommend that art museums attempt to replace federal support with increased private contributions and earned income. As a decrease in federal support would have a significant multiplier effect on art museums with a major impact on private contributions and a secondary impact on earned income, a more sustainable revenue source comes from private donors than the federal government.

Museum Audiences and Arts Participation

With one of the most common reasons behind advocating for free admission being accessibility, understanding one’s audience is critical. Arts administrators can better serve those that are visiting and strategically reach out to those that are not visiting. The audience is why the museum exists. Without an audience, the museum fails to serve the public and ultimately, it fails to fulfill its
charitable status. Several people and organizations have studied the composition of arts audiences, including museum visitors. Those results as well the reasons for visiting and the benefits visitors receive will be examined. Equally important, this section will identify those groups currently not visiting museums and their reasons.

Public Participation in the Arts

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has sponsored a series of Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts in 1982, 1985, 1992, 1997, 2002, and 2008. This data provides one look at arts participation as defined as those who attended at least one arts event in the past 12 months. For art museums and galleries, there has been a steady increase in participation from 22.1 percent of the adult population in 1982 to 26.5 percent in 2002 (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004, p. 2). However, the 2008 Survey shows a drop in attendance, which is thought to be attributed to the difficult economic times (National Endowment for the Arts, 2009, p. 76). The NEA surveys also looks at participation rates by demographic characteristics such as income, education, age, race, gender and location.

Using the NEA data, Heilbrun and Gray (2001), examines these demographics. From Table 3.3, there is striking contrast in arts participation in regards to income and education. For example, in 1997, those with an advanced degree visited art museums at rates over eleven times of those with only a grade
school education. Additionally, those in the highest income range (over $75,000) visited at rates over three times of those in the lowest income range. Heilbrun and Gray (2001) discuss the difficulties of concluding whether income or education has a larger effect on arts participation as there is a correlation between the two factors, although they do state that the difference in rate of exposure in greater in regards to educational attainment as compared to income (p. 49).

DiMaggio and Useem have also looked extensively at the composition of U.S. arts audiences. In their 1978 article, “Cultural Democracy in a Period of Cultural Expansion: The Social Composition of Arts Audiences in the United States,” which is still the best available data, they collected 268 audience studies and analyzed the results across disciplines. The analysis for the art museum audience in respect to education, occupation and income provide an interesting historical look at the composition of art museum visitors.

In comparing the educational achievement of arts participants, DiMaggio and Useem (1978, December) conclude that the “well educated are overrepresented with striking consistency in arts audiences, relative to their share of the U.S. population” (p. 185). For example, 48 percent of art museum visitors earned at least a college degree while that rate is only 13.9 percent for the general U.S. population (p. 186). Only 17.0 percent of art museum visitors were high school graduates or less, compared to 73.7 percent of the public as a whole (p. 186). DiMaggio and Useem (1978, December) state, “It is evident,
then, that visitors to museums and audiences for the live performing arts are considerably more well educated than is the public at large" (p. 185). Factors influencing these statistics will be discussed later.

As with educational attainment, occupation can tell us a lot about the museum audience. While professionals constituted 15 percent of the employed civilian labor force in 1975, the median art museum attendance by professionals was 59 percent in 1975 (p. 187, 188). The stark contrast in percentages was consistent across disciplines. However, there is a correlation with occupation and education as DiMaggio and Useem (1978, December) state, “Occupations with the highest rates of attendance were also those with the highest educational attainment” (p. 190)

The median income of art museum visitors was $18,148, compared to the 1975 median family income of the U.S. population of $14,476. However, while still above the median income of the U.S. population, the median income for overall museum visitors was $17,158, significantly lower than some of the performing arts median incomes. Visitors to museums appear to be “significantly more affluent than the general public and significantly less affluent than performing-arts attendees” (DiMaggio and Useem, 1978, p. 190). The difference between museums and performing arts may be attributed to lower admission charges and greater appeal to students, young people, and parents with young children.
Examining the racial and ethnic composition of arts audiences proved more difficult as geography can affect the results. However, DiMaggio and Useem (1978, December) conclude after discussing several cities that “blacks and other minorities are generally sharply underrepresented in performing-arts audiences and among museum visitors, relative to their share of the population” (p. 192). They go on to say, “This is not in itself surprising, since a higher percentage of minorities than whites are very young, poor, without college educations, and/or employed in blue-color or service occupations—all categories with disproportionately low participation in arts audiences” (p. 192).

While DiMaggio and Useem’s research is several decades old, more recent studies have found the same trends in arts participation. From the NEA’s 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, the average art museum visitor is largely female (55 percent), white (79 percent), and educated (more than 80 percent have at least some college education) (p. 27). Of those art museum visitors reporting income, 51 percent earned more than $75,000 in 2008. In contrast, adults with a high school education or less represented only 18 percent of art museums visitors (p. 76). The most current data shows that while the museum has begun to transform as an educational institution, it has not fully embraced or been embraced by all groups.
Factors Influencing Arts Participation

Now that the typical museum visitor has been identified, one must ask, why do they come and what benefits do they receive? This is a complex question as there are multiple audiences. However, focusing on the average visitor as identified earlier by DiMaggio and Useem and later by the NEA, we can begin to identify reasons for participation. First, DiMaggio and Useem (1978) identify education as a factor as “understanding most works of art requires a certain amount of familiarity and background information to undertake the decoding that leads to appreciation” (p. 185). One might argue that this is a dated viewpoint since museums encourage visitors to make meaning for themselves. However, there is something to be said about being comfortable in the museum environment, which a college-educated person might have had exposure to previously. The NEA (2008) found through regression models that educational attainment plays a central role in predicting art attendance or visitation (p. 28). The report states, “For example, in 2008, respondents with a college degree were 48 percent more likely to attend a benchmark arts activity than people who had just completed grade school, when controlling for other factors” (p. 28).

Henry (2010) argues that most adults make the decision to visit museums based on personal knowledge and past experience. Past experiences range from arts education in school to trips to the museum with parents. “A disproportionate number of men and women who acquire a higher education have parents who are also well educated” (DiMaggio and Useem, 1978, p. 187). Thus, the children
are more likely to have been exposed to the arts when they were young. Hood (2004) supports this claim, “Generally, nonparticipants as children were not socialized into museum going” (p. 153).

DiMaggio and Useem, along with another scholar Bourdieu, are discussing the concepts of social and cultural capital. Social capital is connections within and between social networks while cultural capital is “educational credentials and familiarity with elite culture” (DiMaggio and Useem, 1978, p. 188). Certain questions arise when discussing social and cultural capital. How can one gain social and cultural capital? Is some amount of social and cultural capital inherited in certain groups of people (elite, affluent)? DiMaggio and Useem (1978) argue cultural capital can be transmitted,

Cultural capital, both in formal education and in refined aesthetic taste, can serve as a useful medium for the transmission of elite position from generation to generation. By instilling cultivated aesthetic tastes and providing support for advanced university training, elite families endow their offspring with cultural capital that can be converted into social standing and economic position in later life. (p. 195)

DiMaggio and Useem contend cultural capital can build social status, or social capital, which can then build economic capital. The authors assert that this chain and its strength among the elite continues the hierarchy in our society, “Familiarity with cultural matters and the possession of cultural credentials—initially bestowed by elite family socialization and later reinforced by involvement in cultural affairs—are important assets for ascent in the class hierarchy” (DiMaggio and Useem, 1978, p. 180). This view of culture and hierarchy may help us understand why some people do not visit art museums.
American sociologist Herbert Gans once wrote that high culture serves “a small public that prides itself on exclusiveness” (cited in DiMaggio and Useem, 1978, p. 180). Has this exclusive and elitist tone kept away some potential audience members? It seems that our museums’ architecture (temple-front buildings referencing classical architecture) even speaks to this issue. If one should dare to ascend the stairs to enter the museum, one may find oneself in an unfamiliar setting of museum-specific norms (social capital). DiMaggio and Useem (1978, March) provide the example of more diverse audiences at outdoor performances where physical features and interactional rules are less strict than at the traditional performance hall (p. 151). Similarly, museums have their own “code,” as Hood (2004) termed it, such as regulation of talking and appropriate interaction with the artwork. Considering that, the atmosphere and architecture of the museum could be enough to discourage potential visitors. Combined with the lack of arts education in underserved communities (cultural capital) and the current marketing strategy of most museums, it may not be surprising that the general museum audience is a homogeneous group of educated, affluent white professionals.

Transforming Purpose of the Art Museum

One of the most common arguments for eliminating admission charges is to become “more accessible.” In the United Kingdom, this has been termed “social inclusion” while in the United States, museums speak of “accessibility.”
For the cultural sector, these terms have remained “fluid and ambiguous” (Sandell, 1998, p. 403). The terms’ multiple interpretations related back to the museum’s transforming role in society, and the recent re-emergence of its public purpose as an educational institution, and in the United States, as a public charity.

*From Object-based to Visitor-focused*

Most American art museums have always valued education, although in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, education was often defined as refining taste and uplifting the spirit. Knowledge existed independent of the visitor and learning was a passive action (Hein, 1998). Significant shifts in educational philosophy and museum structure led to art museums adopting a visitor-focused agenda. As E. D. Chubb, curator of the Durban Museum and Art Gallery of South Africa, concluded,

> By such means, museums have advanced from the passive and static phase and have become an active and aggressive force in education. They are recognized in America as an important and essential part of the educational system, equal to the public libraries, and second only to the schools themselves. (cited in Sweney, 2003, p. 88)

The shift of museums thinking of themselves as educational institutions was gradual. It began in 1969 with The Belmont Report, which was commissioned by the federal government and published by the American Association of Museums (AAM). The Report argued for federal support of American museums based on their educational mission and status as public charities. “It was not until the
1970s that the first real efforts began to be made to move education into a place of prominence in museum missions” (Sweney, 2003, p. 95). In 1984, AAM pronounced a commitment to education through a report, *Museums for a New Century: A Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century*. However, at this time, ‘museums as educational institutions’ was still an ideal. A more aggressive push to escalate the educational mission of museums was stated in *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (1992). The report states, “Museums can no longer confine themselves simply to preservation, scholarship, and exhibition independent of the social context in which they exist. They must recognize [that] the public service of education…” (American Association of Museums, 1992, p. 8). With this statement, AAM’s taskforce on education is advocating for a shift in how museums view their public purpose.

**Public Purpose**

American museums began with a primary purpose of collecting with the aim of preserving our natural and cultural assets. While they were open to the public, they were, in most senses, private institutions. These “cabinets of curiosities” were composed of collections of private individuals and served the elite. More recently, “museums are being asked to assume new roles and develop new ways of working—in general, to clarify and demonstrate their social purpose and more specifically to reinvent themselves as agents of social
inclusion” (Sandell, 1998, p. 401). Museum scholar Stephen Weil (2002) described how the museum institution has changed:

In little more than an generation, we have witnessed the museums’ metamorphosis from an institution that’s turned primarily inward and concerned above all with the growth, care and study of its collection to an institution that’s turned primarily outward—an institution striving, above all, to provide a range of educational and other public services to the individuals and communities that constitute its target audience. (p. 1)

With a goal of serving the community, the museum had to evaluate who their community was, whether it was being inclusive as a public institution, and how it could more effectively fulfill its public service mission.

The museum audience has always been and continues today to be overwhelmingly educated, affluent white professionals. Visitor demographics often do not reflect the demographics of the community in which the museum is situated. With this understanding, museums began to develop more innovative programs, reaching out to new audiences, and making concerted efforts to meet the public’s needs and expectations. Collaborations with other local organizations, including public schools, and cultural and social service organizations, began to emerge. Furthermore, a “commitment to equity in the public service” was at the forefront of museum discourse (American Association of Museums, 1992, p. 6). Museums were looked upon to help “create the sense of inclusive community so often missing in our society” (American Association of Museums, 1992, p. 6).
Inclusiveness and Access

As “inclusiveness” and “access” are broad concepts, it is important to understand the context in which they are being used in the debate over admission charges. Generally defined, “social inclusion is the provision of equal access to all members of society” (Riewe, 2009, p. 18). In its negative form, social exclusion, it is concerned with the “breakdown of the links between an individual and their family, friends, community and state services and institutions” (Sandell, 1998, p. 404). While sometimes linked to ‘poverty’ in United Kingdom, the term emphasizes the dynamic process in which this can occur. Sandell (1998) states that it is “a broader term which included those who, whether living in poverty or not, are prevented from fully participating in the different systems of society” (p. 404). However, one should not ignore the close tie between levels of income and opportunities available. Bhalla and Lapeyre (1997) argue that the terms social exclusion and poverty cannot be so clearly differentiated since many of the negative outcomes of social exclusion are in some way determined by levels of income.

In a cultural dimension, access is the opportunity to enjoy and appreciate cultural services, which incorporates both representation (the extent to which an individual’s cultural heritage is presented within the mainstream cultural arena) and participation (the opportunities an individual has to participate in the process of cultural production) (Sandell, 1998, p. 410). The dialogue around admission charges and access is focused on the latter element, participation, although the
importance of representation cannot be diminished as participation may be more inclusive if the collection was more representative.

John O'Hagan (1995) makes different distinctions in defining access. He states that there are three levels of equal access (p. 270). First, there is the issue of more equal access to participation in the supply of arts services to consumers. For example, does everyone have access to training and employment as an actor or violinist? Second, one may speak of more equal access to participation in the decision-making process of arts policy. Third, does the consumer have equal access to the consumption of arts services? This level addresses the availability of art forms.

O'Hagan (1995) also identifies three levels of equality – equality of rights, equality of opportunity, and equality of participation. Equality of rights are “where such rights are construed as the absence of legal and institutionalized barriers to entry in a given institution or system (absence of discrimination)” (p. 270). Equality of opportunity involves not only “providing formal rights, but enabling and encouraging certain sections to participate on an equal footing with others” (p. 271). Equality of participation implies equality in terms of outcome or success (p. 271). O'Hagan argues, “Only when this is achieved, particularly across broad socioeconomic groups, it could be argued is equal access being effected” (p. 271). The decision to eliminate admission charges often targets the equality of opportunity (entrance is free so everyone has the opportunity to enter the museum), but the underlying goal of the policy is to increase equality of
participation (i.e. bringing new visitors into the museum to diversify the audience). Additionally, one could argue that establishing potential barriers of cost impresses a form of “unequal rights.”

**Museums as Exclusionary Institutions**

Art museums have been accused as being elitist. David Fleming (2002) observes:

> Traditionally, museums have not been positioned to contribute to social inclusion for four reasons: who has run them; what they contain; the way they have been run; and what they have been perceived to be for...museums have not been democratic, inclusive organizations, but agents of social exclusion, and not by accident but by design (p. 213)

Fleming identifies the four causes of the museum’s position in society – management, collection, processes, and public perception. These exclusionary elements are present in Schwarzer’s (2006) history of American art museums. As mentioned earlier, these museums were built from the collections of the wealthy and led by the collector, traditionally a white male. The objects themselves are those of “high art” category. Non-western art was not collected and displayed until later and the manner it was displayed was often ethnographic. Exhibition designs often lacked creativity and the visitor was a passive participant. Furthermore, the museum’s structure followed a top-down model. Even though museums are educational institutions, educators did not have much, if any, input for the content and design of the exhibitions (Sweney, 2003). The perception of
the museum was influenced from all of these factors, as well as the traditional museum going audience. Sandell (1998) suggests:

The exclusion of minority groups from the political, economic and social dimensions of society is reflected in the museum which fails to tell the stories of those groups and denies them access to its services through mechanisms of exclusion (non-representation within collections and displays, selective promotional targeting, admission charges, etc.). Furthermore, it might be argued that the museum not only reflects the exclusion of groups from social systems, but also reinforces and perpetuated the processes by which they are excluded. (p. 408)

While museums cannot ignore their origins, it has become apparent that they must acknowledge the hierarchy that exists between the museum and the public, and the ways the museum has prevented access to their services to a range of groups.

Fleming (2002) argues that it is not enough to be of relevance to a wider community, but museums should overtly attempt to counter social exclusion (p. 221). Some museums have acted on Fleming’s recommendation. For example, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC goes beyond Holocaust-era content to include contemporary examples of hatred and genocide, which flows out of their mission to promote human dignity. However, examples within the art museum community are sparse.

**Significance for Museums**

The question still remains, should museums be required to increase access and promote social inclusion? On an organizational level, the answer is deeply connected to the institutional values of the individual museums. As
Fleming (2002) states, the real possibility for social inclusion comes when the entire museum decides that inclusion is its primary goal (p. 223). However, as Robert Putnam (1995), author of *Bowling Alone*, argues, “art is especially useful in transcending conventional social barriers” (p. 411). In 1999, Putnam’s consulting firm hosted the seventh annual Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America, which focused on the arts. A conference summary report states:

> Cultural endeavors offer social capital effects both direct and indirect, immediate and long lasting. The arts provide a powerful way to transcend the cultural and demographic boundaries that divide us and to find deeper spiritual connections with those like us. To use our phrasing, the arts create both “bridging” and “bonding” social capital. (BetterTogether: The Report of the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, 2001, p. 45)

Museums are uniquely positioned to be a community resource because of the transcending nature of art and history. However, Sandell (2002) agrees with Fleming that this movement hasn’t translated into actions:

> Whilst there is a growing consensus of the importance of broadening access to museums and diversifying their appeal and visitor profiles, relatively few museums have purposefully explored their wider social role to engage with and impact upon social issues facing their communities. (p. vxii)

Sandell and other scholars argue that for museums to remain relevant in today’s society, this paradigm shift must happen. The external forces currently transforming our society will impact the museum and its audience.

> Hoppe (2008) states, “Shifting demographics are reshaping every museum’s communities” (p. 22). A report from the Center for the Future of
Museums (2008) identifies these shifts to include an aging population and a growing minority population. “A conservative estimate is that by no later than 2050, half of the U.S. population will be from ‘minority’ groups” (Office of Policy and Analysis, 2004, p. 12). What does this mean for museums? Currently, minorities make up only 9 percent of the core museum visitors (Center for the Future of Museums, 2008, p. 6). Museums that are willing to reach out to and work with new communities, especially the growing ethnic population, will have the opportunity to more effectively fulfill their public service mission. As the Smithsonian Institution’s Office of Policy and Analysis concluded, “Leaders must be willing to listen to members of demographic groups they wish to reach, and to allow what they hear to influence how programs are developed” (2004, p. 7).

Changes in the ways we communicate will also have an impact on museums. With most things available digitally at little to no cost, museums will need to reassert themselves as valuable resources. The Center for the Future of Museums (2008) has already identified a “dramatic structural shift in the expectations of the public (particularly among young adults)” (p. 14). With the Institute for Museum and Library Services reporting 43 percent of museum visits in 2006 were remote, predominantly via museum websites, we have already begun to see this shift. The Center for the Future of Museums (2008) suggests that this will rise and “the content of remote visits to museums will continue to shift from basic information gathering to more complicated forms of engagement” (p. 15). Museums will be investing more resources in their digital presence, but
they will also need to look for participatory experiences within the museum’s walls. This will be a challenge for many museums still practicing traditional outreach strategies.

As audiences and expectations change, museums will need to evolve to become more inclusive places through changes in policy, programming, and collections. However, as these changes occur, museums should also be attentive to evaluating the continually shifting environment as well as internal policy decisions.

The national museums in the United Kingdom provide museums with lessons on evaluation social inclusion policies. Responding to the increasingly commercial environment and business-minded museum management, some national and independent museums introduced admission charges, which “tended to exclude some audiences through financial barriers to access” (Sandell, 1998, p. 402). In response, by December 2001, admission fees for national museums and galleries had been eliminated as a result of increased funding from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

In the summer 2002, the DCMS reported a 62 percent increase in visits in the seven months of free admission (Martin, 2002, p. 3). Andy Martin of MORI, a marketing research company in the United Kingdom and Ireland, conducted a follow-up study on the policy change using their own data. Martin (2002) states that the decision to eliminate admission charges was to encourage those who were not traditional museum visitors to attend (p. 6). “In particular, non-traditional
museum-going groups – such as social classes D and E, those without higher educational qualifications and older people – were supposed to be encourage to visit‖ (Martin, 2002, p. 6). Martin (2002) found that visiting has increased across all age groups, including a 15 percent increase of those aged 55 and older (p. 6). There was also a 5 percent rise in the DE social classes (unskilled manual workers), and an 11 percent rise for C2s (skilled manual workers) (p. 6). While these targeted groups showed an increase, there were significant increases among all groups, including those well represented in museums and galleries. While Martin dismisses the policy as ineffective in increasing the diversity of the museum audience, it is important to note that “two in five members of the public were not even aware of free entry‖ (Martin, 2002, p. 9). This draws into question the marketing strategy of the DCMS and the individual museums. Changing the policy alone is not enough to increase attendance. The public must be informed of the policy change and that responsibility falls on the DCMS and the individual museums. However, it also takes time for the public to understand and embrace a new policy. Conducting a study within a year of the policy change may not be enough time for the true impact to be revealed.

Besides the annual attendance figures published by the DCMS and the MORI study, little research about the impact of the policy has been completed. Ben Cowell (2007) considered ways that current data collected by the DCMS in the funding agreements with the individual museums could be used to measure the impact of free admission. He examines overall attendance, attendance at
individual museums, visits by C2DE visitors, and visits by black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. While he does state that the policy has met its objectives in terms of increasing attendance from DCMS’s priority groups (BME audiences and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds), he also highlights several considerations. First, he states that attendance figures are compiled using a variety of methodologies, including ‘magic eye’ automatic counters, manual ‘clickers,’ and the use of sampling techniques. Estimates of the proportion of visitors from particular socio-demographic groups are self-reported by the individual museums (Cowell, 2007, p. 216). Secondly, the data from the DCMS measures visits rather than visitors. Cowell (2007) echoes Martin’s concerns that it is difficult to know if the increase in attendance is repeat visitors or new visits. Finally, with a number of new branch museums opening and major capital refurbishments carried out in DCMS-sponsored museums, some may question that impact on the attendance figures (Cowell, 2007, p. 220).

A decade since the policy change, the DCMS reports a 128.12 percent increase in attendance from 7,165,800 visits in 2000/01 to 16,346,757 in 2009/10 (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2010). However, scholars, including Martin and Cowell, argue additional data collection is necessary to fully evaluate the free admission policy. Standardization in data collection across the museums would help increase the validity of the data collected. Additionally, Cowell (2007) suggests that a calculation of value for money of the additional visits generated by the free admission policy should also be considered (p. 222). The example of
the national museums in the United Kingdom illustrates the importance of valid and reliable data, increased and targeting marketing, and partnerships with other organizations, including the government, to advance the public service mission of museums. Without quality data, the impact of the free admission policy remains unknown.

**Conclusion**

Museums are complex institutions that are influenced by their external environment, such as giving trends, philosophical changes within the field, and the needs of the public. The changing role of museums puts a great emphasis on inclusive access and reversing the negative perception of museums. The museum’s role as an educational institution is connected to its financial portrait. Museums receive income from a variety of sources, including public support from government entities. These various sources of support, including admission charges, are interconnected. Admission charges have and continue to play an important part in the museum’s funding structure. However, the recent push to become more inclusive institutions raises the question as to whether admission charges, often considered financial barriers to some communities, are contradicting that call for accessibility.

One question still remains: *when and why did admission charges begin?* Building off the review of literature, the next chapter will investigate this question more intensely. It will reveal that admission charges, a more recent source of
income, were created to respond to several factors, including philanthropic failure, professionalization in the field, and museum’s evolving role.
Chapter 3: Genealogy of Admission Charges

Although several scholars have sought to describe the funding structure of American art museums (American Association of Museums, 2009, 2006, Institute of Museum and Library Sciences, 2008, Smolensky, 1986, Feldstein, 1991, Rosett, 1989, Temin, 1989), none have constructed a genealogy of admission charges within the United States. The information about the factors influencing the introduction and expansion of admission charges is piecemeal. This genealogy traces the lineage of admission charges in American art museums, identifying the factors leading to the introduction and expansion of charges. By adding to and synthesizing existing knowledge, the research becomes a useful resource to track the discourse surrounding admission charges.

Integration into Thesis

This research is an integral part of my thesis research. The purpose of my thesis research is to examine the feasibility of eliminating admission charges in American art museums. Through an extensive literature review, I have constructed a genealogy of admission charges in American art museums. The genealogy will help create a baseline for my case studies. As I seek to determine the factors influencing organizational policy with regard to admission charges and
understand the strategic changes American art museums have made to eliminate their admission charges, I must first understand why and how admission charges have become a common practice.

**Methodology**

For the theoretical construction of this paper, I employ Jim Scheurich’s *Policy Archeology* (1995). Scheurich designed this new framework to understand policy formation. The four arenas—context of time, regulatory bodies/influencing factors, possible policy solutions, and functions in society—provide a proper theoretical framework for this research. Additionally, this framework aligns with my constructivist paradigm, as I believe in multiple realities. This analytical lens is united in purpose with the construction of a genealogy as there are various strands of thought and multiple influences exerting their forces on the policy (admission charges). A linear history would not suffice.

**Early Museums**

*Origins*

At its founding, the American art museum was a nineteenth-century copy of an eighteenth-century original, the European art museum (Weil, 1995, p. 85). However, unlike their European counterparts, which were founded to house the great collections of the nobility, American museums were influenced by their democratic society. As Nathaniel Burt states:
The American museum was and is an idea. The European museum was a fact. Almost without exception the European museum was first a collection. With few exceptions most American museums were first an ideal...Almost without exception the larger American museums began with a deliberate appeal to the public. Most of the earlier European museums remained semi-exclusive cabinets of curiosities visible only to a few. The American museum began, and has remained, wide open. (cited in American Association of Museums, 1984, p. 18).

While there may have been a desire to provide an educational resource for the public, it is important to note that it was mainly individual philanthropists seeking to display their own collections of art who primarily supported many of the American museums established early on. Wealthy men, such as J.P. Morgan and Andrew Mellon, provided their collections to establish elite institutions based on the interests of a select group of patrons. Yet there was a particular goal of uplifting and educating the public. Schwarzer (2006) questions the institution’s emphasis on education and public service as the museums provided “mix messages”:

Their doors were open every day of the week, even Sunday, and often at night, but to whom? Even with no admissions charge, museums asked a lot of the middle- and working-class visitor. The architecture was often grand and imposing, implying who might belong and who not. So too the location of choice for many museums: public parks, most of which were off-limits to people of color. Other museums opened their doors to “colored” visitors one day a week, but limited access to basic amenities, like restrooms. Even in northern museums that did not overtly abide by segregation laws, some museum guards refused entrance to black visitors. (p. 10)

Those visitors without the social and cultural capital to behave “appropriately” in the museum were not welcomed. As the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1890s stated:
We do not want nor will we permit a person who has been digging in a filthy sewer or working among grease and oil to come in here, and by offensive odors emitted from the dirt on their apparel, making the surroundings uncomfortable for others. (cited in Schwarzer, 2006, p. 11)

The museum’s origins from wealthy patrons had a direct influence, sometimes negatively on the museum’s public purpose.

**Purpose**

Originally most American museums lacked depth and quality in their collections; hence their focus was on reaching and teaching the masses. As former Secretary of the Smithsonian S. Dillion Ripley recalls:

> Many of these collections represented a conscious effort by what was called the enlightened class to donate materials for public show in order to elevate and educate our citizens. Art collections…were to be exhibited for public edification. The [donors] were concerned, as a moral issue, with the educational and cultural development of their fellow citizens…There was a strong, a zealous missionary desire to uplift, to create cultural equality as one of the fundamental outgrowths of our new democracy. (cited in Weil, 1995, p. 86)

The museum was said to be a temple, which the architecture of many of the buildings reflected. It was meant to be a place where all might come to “improve themselves, their lives, and their communities by communing for an hour or two with the exalted works of art” (Weil, 1995, p. 87). A hierarchy between the museum and its audience emerged. As the first director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Luigi Palma di Cesnola, states, “So the Museum, in any of its branches, is a magnificent, an unsurpassed, library and school of object-
teaching; making the casual visitor learn something, whether he be so inclined or not” (cited in Genoways and Andrei, 2008, p. 52).

This veiled elitism occasionally became more overt, as illustrated by Benjamin Ives Gilman’s, comments, “We are misled into thinking educational effort is the panacea for all the ills of society” (cited in Schwarzer, 2006, p. 13). Gilman, the Secretary of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston from 1893-1925, believed the purpose of museums was to raise the aesthetic tastes of the educated upper class. Bourdieu suggests that his later studies support this idea, stating that the art museum’s function is to “reinforce for some the feeling of belonging and for others the feeling of exclusion” (cited in Weil, 1995, p. 106). He contends that these cultural institutions have been appropriated by the “cultivated classes” as a means to establish their own social position, potentially underpinned by the origins of museums as being founded by wealthy patrons.

In opposition to Gilman’s elitism, educational reformer and philosopher John Dewey and Newark Museum Director John Cotton Dana helped to advance the early notion that education is central to the museum’s mission as well as offering experiences relevant to each museum visitor. For Dewey, that was possible through creating real-life experiences where students could “learn by doing” (Schwarzer, 2006, p. 9). Dana believed that the “true work of the museum as service institution, was in enriching the quality of people’s lives” (Weil, cited in Peniston, 1999, p. 15). Dana assembled displays of common items, such as merchandise from five and dime stores (Schwarzer, 2006, p. 13). This populist
thought continues to prevail at several museums, including Dana’s Newark Museum.

Admission

In the early years of American art museums, admission was generally free (Schwarzer, 2006, p. 10). Occasionally, museums would institute a charge on certain days for various reasons, such as crowd control or visits from schoolchildren. Victoria Dickenson (1994) recounts:

Although the tradition of free public access was long-standing, it did not necessarily preclude the levying of charges on the visitors. In fact, many museum supporters championed fees as a way of regulating demand and discouraging idlers. John Ruskin, a great supporter of the museum’s civilizing influence, suggested that a ‘small entrance fee’ would prevent the museum from being ‘encumbered by the idle, or disgraced by the disreputable’ (Ruskin 1880: 62). This strategic use of admission fees has long been the norm among the French museums, where – even today – a charge is considered to encourage respect for the objects and to discourage the attentions of the uninterested. (p. 105)

As a few historical documents illustrate, the free days offered by the museum were greatly utilized by the public. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA) reported in June 1915 that “Nine-tenths of the visitors come on Saturdays, Sundays, and public holidays—the days when admission to the Museum is free” (p. 37). Additionally, Sunday’s limited hours (afternoon only) produced 45 percent of the total attendance for the year. The MFA Bulletin goes on to report that Sunday attendance is “a representative selection of the native population of the city, including a large proportion of men, especially of young men” (p. 37). Not even three years later, the MFA trustees voted to eliminate its admission charge
completely (February 1918, p. 1). The President of the Museum, Mr. Gray, states that the museum should be free

not merely because it would increase presumably the number of visitors, but rather because it would develop a deeper interest in the Museum through the substitution of equality of privilege in place of the constant differentiation between those who pay and those who do not pay—that equality of privilege which goes far towards making a great public library the intellectual home of the people. (p. 1)

Gray goes on to state the opposing argument, including the loss of income from admissions, which he states is less than 3 percent of the running expenses. He does express concern over the potential loss of annual subscribers, which amounts to 20 percent of the expenses (p. 1). Yet, Gray colorfully states, “Let us swing the doors wide and make the entrance as free as is the entrance to the parks of a great city.” The 1918 Bulletin continues,

The step is one of far-reaching significance. In abolishing admission fees the Museum announces once for all that, although wholly supported by private gifts, its intents and purposes are those of a public institution. The needs of the hour have inspired the resolve. What the Museum collections can offer in refreshment of spirit and inspiration of purpose shall no longer be exchanged for money, but granted without price.

These sentiments reflected the notion that the museum could invigorate and uplift the visitors, by merely being in the presence of the art. Furthermore, the “publicness” of the institution is put to the forefront of the contemporary argument to eliminate admission charges.

Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1905-10, recounts his experience as director of the South Kensington Museum:

There were pay days at South Kensington. But whenever I chanced to observe a group of disappointed sightseers at the doors I gave orders to
pass them in. Tourists or “seeing London” folks who came on the buses could not be expected to know what were and what were not pay days. So I gave orders that “anything on wheels” was to be admitted. (November 1906, p. 192)

Clarke experienced similar situations at the Metropolitan, as he writes that it is impossible for people to keep track of free days and pay days. He feared that people turned away because of pay days would not return again. He states that this is “a great loss to the educational influence of the Museum” (p. 192).

Speaking about the shift from an internally looking museum to an externally looking museum, Clarke (1906) writes, “Now the policy is to give the public the freest possible access to museums, so that it will receive the greatest possible educational influence from them” (p. 193).

**Evolving Role of the Museum**

The museum and its role in society has transformed since its early nineteenth century form. This is evident by the changing definition of museums as defined by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). In 1946, museums included “all collections open to the public, of artistic, technical, scientific, historical or archaeological material, including zoos and botanical gardens, but excluding libraries, except in so far as they maintain permanent exhibition rooms” (cited in Hein, 2005). In 2007, ICOM revised their definition of museums to be:

> a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment (International Council of Museums, 2010)
In the earlier definition, the museum is defined by its collection and permanent exhibitions. In the latter definition, there is a new self-awareness of the museum's relationship to its audience. The museum is to be responsive to its community through service. While ICOM made this change official in 2007, this refreshed perspective had been circling the museum community since the 1980s.

Stephen Weil writes in 1983 that museums are having an identity crisis. Attendance figures, broad outreach, and public accountability have become important factors, as evidenced by this quote from Allon Schoener, chief of the Visual Arts Section of the New York State Council:

The kinds of questions that are going to be asked of museums are the kinds of questions that are asked of us, The New York State Arts Council, by budget examiners in Albany.... Who is being served by the money spent? How many people are going to expect something as a result of this money? Where is this money going to be spent? These questions really have not been placed before museum people in the past, because their financial support has come from a restricted audience that was able to maintain it. (cited in Weil, 1983, p. 19)

These expectations were met with pressures for the museum to be more educational. Weil states that the buzzword of “education” has been important in obtaining funding from foundations and the federal government. However, in 1931, only 15 percent of American museum had formally designated education departments. Today that figure is well over 80 percent (Weil, 1983, p. 20).

Williams (2001) contends that newly developed departments of education established in the 1960s and 1970s created programs that were designed to “promote curatorial information through tours, lectures, and other types of
activities primarily for elementary school groups” (p. 316). Educational programs for “nonschool-affiliated individuals or adult visitors were typically unavailable at this time” (Williams, 2001, p. 316). These shifts show that education is moving from the periphery to the essential function of the museum. Through more explicit programming and organizational structure, education is becoming the implicit and self-evident purpose of the museum.

*Museums as Educational Institutions*

Pressures to become more “educational” grew from both within and outside of the museum community. The Belmont Report, commissioned by the federal government and published by the American Association of Museums in 1969, made the case for federal support of American museums based on their educational mission. It proposed that the educational work of museums be strengthened. Williams (2001) argues that The Belmont Report was “intrinsically tied to the Tax Reform Act of 1969, which provided government monies for public institutions whose mission was overtly declared as educational in purpose” (p. 316).

In 1984, the AAM published *Museums for a New Century: A Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century*. In this report, two dominant themes emerged—a pronounced commitment to education as the primary mission of museums and the museum’s obligation to serve the general public. However, the commission struggled with defining what “learning” would look like
in a museum. The examples provided were centered on the objects and did not provide an outlet for the objects to be relevant to the contemporary visitor. Furthermore, the commission did not contain a single educator—museum or otherwise.

In 1992, the AAM published *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*. Williams (2001) argues that the publication represents AAM’s “most aggressive efforts to escalate the educational mission of museums” (p. 316). Joel Bloom, the president of the American Association of Museums, was a driving force behind the publication. He supported two advocacy positions—education and women’s rights (Gurian, 2006, p. 16). As a majority of museum educators were women and the original focus of museums was research and curatorial functions, women rarely held positions of power within these institutions (Gurian, 2006, p. 15-16).

As Elaine Heumann Gurian (2006) recounts, the process of creating *Excellence and Equity* was filled with tension and ideological clashes (p. 14). Gurian describes a battle of the “and.” The members of the task group landed on either the side of excellence (scholarship that should not be “dumbed down” for new audiences) or equity (attention to underserved visitor groups and cultural sensitivity). In order to pacify the group, the “or” was substituted with “and.”
Educational Philosophies

Declaring the museum’s educational role is not enough. As Gurian (2006) states, “acknowledgment is very far from action” (p. 16). The ways museum educators thought about learning in museums began to evolve. George Hein (1998) outlines theories of knowledge and theories of learning. Until the early twentieth-century, museums and museum education took the position of expert. They proposed that knowledge existed independent of the knower and learning was a passive action. The progressive movement in education helped turn the museum’s philosophy to object-based learning through inquiry and problem solving. In the spirit of John Dewey, the learner was now an active participant. As Kenneth Hudson wrote:

…the most fundamental change that has affected museums during the [past] half-century . . . is the now almost universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public. The old-style museum felt itself under no such obligation. It existed, it had a building, it had collections and a staff to look after them. It was reasonably adequately financed, and its visitors, usually not numerous, came to look, to wonder and to admire what was set before them. They were in no sense partners in the enterprise. The museum’s prime responsibility was to its collections, not its visitors. (cited in Weil, 1999, p. 232)

Museums, more recently, have experimented with the notion of their social responsibility to support a participatory democratic society (Hein, 2005). Hein argues that this can be accomplished in two ways—the subject and style of exhibitions and programs and/or challenging our own practices within the museum. Social justice is another concept transforming some museum education
departments. Social justice refers to the idea of creating a society based on the principles of equality and commonality.

**Professionalization of the Field**

Parallel to the changes in museum education and the museum’s relation to the public was an internal push to follow a business model (personal communication, Gurian, February 28, 2011). Echoed in the earlier quote by Allon Schoener of the New York State Council, museums were being held to new levels of accountability. Before this, the collectors were the curators, and as private museums, they were not accountable to the public. However, as new business-minded leadership was trained in management of nonprofit museums, a greater emphasis on financial and public accountability emerged. Museums were now expected to diversify their revenue through earned income. With increasing costs, they could no longer be dependent on their patrons. These factors and others, which will be examined, led to a professionalization of the field.

**Trained Staff**

As early as the 1920s, programs emerged to train art connoisseurs and restorers. One of the earliest programs was established by Frederick Keppel, using Carnegie funds, at Harvard University (Schwarzer, 2006, p. 179). Some museums, such as the Newark Museum, created apprenticeship programs in the
more community-oriented aspects of the museum, including teaching. However, these programs were attended by the wealthy, continuing the elitist traditions of museums. In the mid-century, programs trained art historians and curators as professional connoisseurs. It wasn’t until the 1970s that universities offered programs in museums studies, museum education, and arts administration. These academic programs were not about connoisseurship, but the management of these complex arts organizations. Weil (1983) recalls that these professional employees, “no longer drawn from an elite social class or blessed with independent incomes,” began to receive salaries commensurate with their training (p. 5). Additionally, unionized blue-collar workers, such as maintenance workers and janitors, demanded wages equal to those paid by private industry (Weil, 1983, p. 5). If blue-collar workers were to be paid a fair wage, the professional museum workers certainly demanded to be paid for as specialists.

With these new professionals, professional associations began to form. Specialized professional committees and organizations dedicated to advancing specific job functions, disciplines, and regions provided museum staff to share ideas freely. From these support groups, literature began to develop and disperse, further contributing to the professionalization of the field (Schwarzer, 2006, p. 180).
Standards and Best Practices

Beginning in the 1970s, the American Association of Museums (AAM) launched programs with the goal of encouraging museums to embrace the highest standards and for the staff to raise their own professional practice. These standards ranged from conservation to management of the museum. Along with stricter conservation and collections care standards, museums made advances in technology, which increased operational costs (Weil, 1983, p. 5). With new federal reporting requirements for grants, museums were compelled to new levels of bookkeeping and internal accounting. Museums implemented financial audits, complied with employment laws, and kept accurate records (Schwarzer, 2006, p. 200). In 1978, AAM adopted an expanded code of ethics. These principles would help determine accreditation. In 1981, the Museums Assessment Program (MAP) was established by the Institute of Museum and Library services and AAM. The program is designed to help museums assess their strengths, weaknesses, and plan for the future.

The programs, standards and best practices, while established with good intentions, have caused isomorphism among art museums. Structurally, all museums appear similar if not identical. Standards have created norms affecting all facets of museum operations from exhibition design to collection care. Furthermore, institutional policies, such as admission charges, are affected as museums often benchmark against each other.
**Expanding Services**

With greater public use of museums, museums expanded their services. Museum began keeping longer hours and hiring larger staffs (Weil, 1983, p. 5). Education programs expanded as education departments were established and the educational mission of museum was embraced more fully. The need for public accountability and growing institutional size required additional administrative support.

Exhibition schedules became increasingly competitive to attract audiences and funding. Weil (1983) states that the vigorous programs of loan exhibitions drained museums’ budgets (p. 5). Additionally, contemporary art added new dimensions to storage, shipping and installation. The physical size and weight of contemporary art increased costs beyond what was previously known. Congress responded to museum directors’ cries over increasing exhibition and insurance costs. In 1974, Congress created the Arts and Artifacts Indemnity Program, which is administered by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), with the goal of reducing the costs of insuring international exhibitions. However, the complex application and rigorous standards allow only the most sophisticated museums to participate in this program.

**Earned Income**

With increasing operating costs caused by the professionalization of the institution, museums could no longer rely on their patrons or their boards of
directors to close the income gap. At the same time, increased competition from other social causes increased the demands on private philanthropy. Museums were left to earn their own income through ancillary services like shops and cafés. These ancillary services occasionally fed into the museum’s mission, as is the case with selling art-related books in the shop, but other times it is purely convenience. In either case, museums visitors grew to expect more.

Blockbuster exhibitions became one of these expectations. James Cuno, president and director, Art Institute of Chicago, states, blockbusters “came to dominate the museum’s activity and people’s expectations of the museum” (cited in Beizer et al., 2005). Blockbusters not only draw crowds, but also provide the museum with substantial earned income. Even museums without general admission charges began charging for special exhibitions as a way to offset high exhibition costs and because the popularity of these exhibitions produced a new source of earned income.

One of the original and largest blockbusters was the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “Treasures of Tutankhamen,” or known simply as “King Tut.” The exhibition drew 8.25 million visitors at its venues across the country during its 17-week run in the 1970s (Schwarzer, 2006, p. 152). Schwarzer (2006) argues that the exhibition “changed the focus from objects to crowds and money” (p. 152).

“Money” is now seen through special exhibition tickets, but in the 1970s, it was still not acceptable to charge regular admission. Instead, the art was commercialized for mass production. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of
Art greatly benefited from “King Tut” as they created reproductions of jewelry and sculpture, which was sold in the store at the end of the exhibition. Additional products, like posters, scarves, towels, and tote bags made their way to other museum shops and even department stores. Herbert Muschamp wrote, “the collection of objects gave way to the collection of crowds” (cited in Schwarzer, 2006, p. 153). Seeing the potential for increased revenue, art museums pursued temporary exhibitions of a grand nature.

Volker Kirchberg (2003) argues that this trend, “McDonaldization of museums,” includes the “commodification of everything” and provides a “successful allure of consuming everything” (p. 6). He states:

This also means the blending of real and simulated products. We are paying money for simulations, and art not even interested in whether these commodifications are real or false (i.e., they are simulacra, cf. Baudrillard 1989), as long as they satisfy our need for experiencing spectacles.

One way this manifests itself within the museum is the widely accepted business models for museum management, which are intended to increase efficiency, calculate productivity, and standardize exhibitions (p. 7). The end goal is to maximize revenue, which was and continues to be the goal of blockbusters. However, as Quit Gregory warns, this can be a dangerous approach, “The blockbuster runs away from serving the scholarly good in the name of being accessible in an easy, McDonald’s-like way. It doesn’t serve the common good. It actually does ill and injures our understanding of history and culture” (cited in Beizer et al., 2005).
Philanthropic Influences and Impact

The external environment in which the museums operate is equally as important as movements within the museum sector. With increasing costs, changes in philanthropy and the laws that govern philanthropy becomes a significant factor in determining organizational policy.

Tax Code

Through the federal tax code, the government indirectly supports the nonprofit sector in general and museums, specifically. The tax structure in the United State is unique and a critical reason for the nation’s strong third sector. In 1954, the Excise Tax Reduction Act was signed, which exempted museums from paying taxes on admission charges. Schwarzer (2006) argues, “Direct federal support was politically unfeasible, due to Cold War paranoia about communism” (p. 189). There was a concern that this direct support would indicate an “official art” and that the “arms length” principle would be jeopardized. An “arms length” policy is often evoked to avoid excessive government influence over other bodies, such as the arts. However, with the Cold War mistrust fading, direct federal support of the arts would begin with the establishment of the NEA in 1965, although the museum program did not begin until 1970. More significant tax reforms begin in the 1960s as the United States promoted charitable giving.

The 1969 Tax Reform Act had a significant impact on museums. Foundations were required to make their records public and donate 5 percent of
their annual earnings. With a new pool of money, museum quickly learned how to write grants and pursue private donors. As Harney (1994) recounts, “Happily, in many museums these skills have been carefully refined. Unhappily, there developed a growing universe of groups after the same shrinking pot of gold” (p. 132). Additional changes in 1969 included raising the portion of individual income that might be deductibly contributed from 30 percent to 50 percent. For private museums, the deduction remained at 20 percent and all museums became subject to a federal income tax of 4 percent on their net investment income (Weil, 1983, p. 9). Weil suggests that the tax policy was being used to push museums towards being more public. A statement from the Business Committee for the Arts echoes this sentiment:

> Businessmen and local, state and Federal governments are showing an increased awareness of the importance of the arts to the individual and society. The likelihood and levels of their efforts to provide financial support of artists and arts organizations will depend in large measure on increasing evidence of public interest. (cited in Weil, 1983, p. 11)

**Government**

The push for “publicness” and public service is evidenced in giving by governmental agencies. In 1965, the NEA was established with the help of President John F. Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson. Congress created the Institute of Museum Services (IMS) in 1976. The IMS became the Institute of Museum and Library Service when the 1996 Museum and Library Services Act combined IMS and the Library Programs Office. By the 1970s, federal support to the nonprofit sector in general was the main source of funding,
although this was not the case for museums or the arts (Salamon, 2002). In the 1980s, the Reagan administration made significant cuts to the federal budget. Most of the cuts were targeted at social programs (Salamon, 2002). These drastic cuts caused a budgetary crisis for nonprofit organizations. This, ultimately, led to changes in how nonprofits operate. Nonprofits, including art museums, turned to a business model in which they expanded fee for service practices (Voth, 2007, p. 32).

In response to federal cuts in the 1980s, state and local governments increased their levels of assistance, but this did not cover the gap in funding (Voth, 2007, p. 32). After 1990, the NEA was required to allocate 27.5 percent of its funding to states and regions through state block grants and to fund programs that serve under-served communities. The ‘culture wars,’ which began in the summer of 1989, led to major cuts in the NEA budget. Additionally, in 1995, Congress required the NEA to allocate 40 percent of its appropriations to states and regions, consequently having a direct impact on the budgets of state arts agencies. Museums, and other arts organizations, found themselves with less government funding—the same funding that was designed to fill the “income gap.”

*Individual Giving*

The tax code has fostered a culture of giving in the United States. From the 1950s through the 1980s, contributions by individuals continued to rise, even
when the percentage of wealth contributed declined steadily from the 1970s onward (Voth, 2007, p. 19). Simply put, the number of households giving to the arts increased, but the average gift amount per household has declined. One reason the pace of individual giving in the 1970s slowed was due to the recession. With Reagan’s cuts in the 1980s, individual giving was expected to make up for the loss in funding. Although individual giving increased, it was unable to completely replace the loss in funding for those social organizations largely dependent on government funds (Bremner, 1988, cited in Voth, 2007, p. 19). Another decline in charitable giving in the late 1980s and early 1990s was due to another recession.

Foundations

As described earlier, the Tax Reform Act of 1969 impacted foundations greatly. The law put foundations under federal oversight, set standards for public reporting, outlined the types of assets foundation could have and stipulated that foundation must use at least 5 percent of their assets per year (Voth, 2007, p. 28). This act slowed the growth of foundations and a number of smaller foundations dissolved.

Shortly following the tax reform was a recession that began in 1973. Foundation assets were reduced, affecting the size of grants available (Brember, 1987, cited in Voth, 2007, p. 28). Rentz (1994) identifies a period of growth in
endowments from 1983-1989, although that growth seems to be concentrated regionally in the West, Southwest, and Southeast (cited in Voth, 2007, p. 28).

Although many feared that fluctuating economy would bring about a “cultural depression,” foundation support for the arts remained steady through the 1980s (McCarthy, 1984, p. 13). McCarthy (1984) states, “The commitment to long-term cultural philanthropy seems undiminished” (p. 13). In fact, in the 1980s, there was an increase in arts funding based on both the number of foundations and their assets. However, later in the decade and into the early 1990s, foundations were affected by the recession. The share of arts funding fell (Voth, 2007, p. 29).

**Corporations**

Business, as early as the late 1960s, take up the concept of “social responsibility.” This was in response to accusations that corporations abused labor, the environment and consumers (Schwarzer, 2006, p. 193). Muirhead (1999) argues that corporate philanthropy was also connected to the riots of the 1960s. Business wanted to “communicate their contributions to the community” (Voth, 2007, p. 42). By 1979, over 600 corporations had developed foundations, and corporate giving had surpassed foundation giving for the first time (McCarthy, 1984, p. 21).
Partnerships with corporations have proved to be mutually beneficial. The corporation not only receives tax breaks for supporting the arts, but also as Julian Stallabrass (1999) writes:

Companies providing sponsorship get a range of benefits: they associate their name with a form of philanthropy and culture distinction (and those businesses with troublesome images—those dealing in oil or arms or tobacco, for instance—are keen to do that); they get an impressive venue for corporate hospitality; and they get the chance to display their name before a distinguished group of consumers, notably wealthier and better educated than the average public. (p. 174)

With the cuts from the Reagan administration, as already discussed, private donors, including corporations were expected to make up the gap. Some corporations embraced this call to action, as expressed by Chase Manhattan Bank’s statement, “With the Government giving less to art and education, somebody’s got to give more. And that somebody is America’s corporations” (Wu, 2002, p. 122). However, initially, the level of corporate funding did not increase (Voth, 2007, p. 42). By 1984, corporations began to give in higher amounts, reaching an all-time high in 1985 with $4.4 billion (Muirhead, 1999, cited in Voth, 2007, p. 42).

This relationship didn’t last. The recession caused companies to downsize or merge, and giving programs disappeared. Corporate giving was looked at more strategically. Corporations encouraged their staff to support and lead nonprofit organizations through service on boards, always keeping in mind business goals. The altruism was lost, and instead, replaced with marketing and branding. Sponsorship of blockbusters became a common practice. Some
corporations associated their names with exhibitions of high quality and visibility, while other funded educational or outreach programs.

Summary

The philanthropic trends and impacts outlined in this section show the turbulent environment art museums faced from the 1950s through the 1990s. Since the creation of the NEA in 1966, many non-profit arts organizations, spurred by market failure, or the inability for the private market to provide these goods, have sought government assistance. But with the reduction of public funding at all levels that has resulted from political controversies and the economic recession, arts organizations have been experiencing a degree of government failure. According to Weisbrod (1977), different citizens want public goods to varying degrees. As a result, there will be citizens who are unsatisfied with the level of production of a particular public good, generating government failure. In the face of such government failure, non-profit organizations, including art museums, must turn to their philanthropic base to secure income not provided by the market or government. When this base is unable to sufficiently fill the “income gap,” the organization experiences philanthropic failure, or as Salamon (1987) calls it, “voluntary failure.” Art museums experienced philanthropic failure when funding from the government, foundations, corporations and individuals was insufficient to sustain museums operations.
A Solution: Admission Charges

John Sawyer stated, “There is no way that corporate or private philanthropy, already facing requests that far exceed available funds, can make up the difference in the face of substantial federal cutbacks” (cited in McCarty, 1984, p. 25). As evidenced by the giving trends of the time, Sawyer was correct. Institutional entities did not increase their arts funding to cover the gap. Museums began exploring other revenue generating sources. As Dickenson (1994) states, “The pressure on museums to generate their own sources of income has led many to introduce some form of admission charges. The heated debate around this issue in the 1980s tended to be slanted towards moral and ethical considerations.” (p. 104)

The debate around admission charges was not isolated to the United States. By 1989, all British national museums, except the National Gallery and the British Museum, were charging some sort of admission fee (Dickenson, 1994, p. 104). Local authorities and trade unions began the ‘Free Access to Museums Campaign’ in 1986. The House of Commons responded in 1989 with a blue book entitled Should Museums Charge?: Some Case Studies. The report detailed the policy of charging at the national museums in Britain. Sir Frederic Kenyon states:

The question at issue is a very simple one. Is it desired to encourage the use of the museum or is it not? There is not the smallest doubt that the imposition of fees discourages attendances....The question, therefore, simply is whether it is worthwhile to exclude the public (and especially, of course, the poorer members of the public) for the sake of the pecuniary return to be expected from fees. (House of Commons, 1989, p. 50)
Sir Kenyon draws attention to the purpose of museums. Museums were seen as a public good, “based on the assumption that visitors would gain benefit from the very existence of the collections on display” (Dickenson, 1994, p. 105). Although there was a long-standing tradition of free public access, it did not necessarily prohibit the levying of charges.

For the French, the use of admission charges had long been the norm as “a charge is considered to encourage respect for the objects and to discourage the attentions of the uninterested” (Dickenson, 1994, p. 105). For the British and Canadian museums, the use of admission charges was an economic decision. However, Dickenson (1994) argues, “The appearance of admission charges at the national museums and galleries of Britain and Canada between 1984 and the present has gone against a long tradition of public policy and public expectations” (p. 106).

What was the American rationale? From this research, it appears to be a hybrid of social and economic reasoning. The economics is clear. Increasing costs and decreased funding in the 1970s and early 1980s pushed museums to find other sources of income. While some museums reluctantly instated admission charges, others promoted it. Gretchen Mehring, then coordinator of public services for the Cincinnati Museum of Art, advocated for an admission fee. She was quoted in the March/April 1984 issue of *Museum News*:

Don’t be afraid to do it! While attendance may drop, the added revenue can help you maintain an audience because there will now be income for ongoing operations, exhibitions and programs. Our visitors and members
understand it and recognize that the income generated is essential to our financial well-being. (cited in McFelter, 2007)

Another more subtle, but still important rationale is the desire to be valued. Value is easiest understood economically, although it is not necessarily the best or only way to understand value. Through a personal communication, Schwarzer states, “I also am in favor of museums charging an admission fee to those who can afford it because art and culture has a value in our society and museum visitors must understand that it is not something we should give away.” This statement assumes the museum leadership controls or even owns the artwork and the institution. However, as public institutions, museums exist to serve their communities. Many museums, such as the Baltimore Museum of Art, were given to the people of their respective cities. The argument of “ownership” is closely tied to the purpose of museums. Are they depositories for objects or community centers of enjoyment and learning? Often the decision to charge admission comes down to one’s philosophical stance, and the debate over admission charges—in all their forms and intentions—continues today with the same ethical and moral considerations that were present with the admission charges’ introduction and expansion.

Summary

Using Scheurich’s four arenas, the policy formation of admission charges can be deconstructed. During the 1970s and 1980s, increasing costs from expanded services, exhibitions, and professionalization provided the context for
the identification of the problem (a need for increased income to balance the museum’s budget). Regulatory bodies included the NEA, AAM, and IMS. They promoted the educational mission of museums. Meanwhile, changes in the tax code encouraged museums to embrace this mission as public charities. This push speaks to the museum’s function in society as an educational institution, dedicated to public service. Museums explored possible funding solutions, including partnerships with corporations, ancillary services, blockbuster exhibitions, and admission charges. The factors identified through the policy archaeology framework did not happen in every museum nor did they happen simultaneously. However, by the late 1980s, charging for general admission became the museum’s new norm. Three aspects ultimately led to the expansion of charges—income/expenses balance, isomorphism within the museum field, and the philosophical stance of museums regarding the public purpose of the institutions.
Chapter 4: Methodology

This thesis examines the recent experiments in a free admission policy in America art museums. My research strategy uses mixed methods. I will incorporate discourse analysis to trace the way we talk about this policy issue. A review of the literature surrounding admission charges will identify key resources for the discourse analysis. Chapter 3 provided a historical baseline in which the case studies can be examined. Additionally, to better understand the factors leading art museums to this policy change and the impact on the museum as well as their constituencies, I employ a multiple case study of four museums: the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the San Jose Museum of Art, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the Walters Art Museum.

Research Design

A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its current context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined (Yin, 2009, p. 18). Through comparative case studies of museums that recently eliminated admission charges, the research highlights the similarities and differences between specific cases. As each museum is unique, each has approached the
policy change through a different lens and various means. To understand the feasibility of eliminating admission charges more generally, it is most effective to understand individual circumstances and how these factors may apply to other art museums. Areas for exploration include ways the reasons why the museums eliminated their charges, the decision-making processes, how they replaced the loss in revenue, new development strategies that emerged, and the impact on arts participation, including the diversification of audiences.

**Methods**

For my case studies, I utilize a dual approach to data collection. Interviews with museum staff and document analysis are used to assemble information to build understanding about the individual museum’s policy changes.

*Interviewing*

Interviewing within a qualitative research design provides the researcher with the opportunity to understand why something happened, as well as to better understand opinions, perceptions and attitudes of research subjects (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992, p. 65). With this rationale, I conducted six interviews with staff members in the education, operations and development departments at the case study museums. I selected participants based on their knowledge of the museum’s admission policy and its impact in various forms (financially, market-based, and audience impact). I sought to gain multiple perspectives from each
museum in order to compile a comprehensive narrative of the museums’ policy change. The following individuals were interviewed:

- Ann Benrud, Director of Membership, Minneapolis Institute of Arts
- Deborah Norberg, Deputy Director, Operations, San Jose Museum of Art
- Judy Gibbs, Director of Development, Baltimore Museum of Art
- Anne Manning, Deputy Director, Education & Interpretation, Baltimore Museum of Art
- Becca Seitz, Director of Communication & Marketing, Baltimore Museum of Art
- Joy Heyrman, Director of Development, Walters Art Museum

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via “Skype” Internet phone.

For transcription and validation purposes, each interview was recorded and converted to MP3 format using “Call Recorder” software. I used a data collection form for the semi-structured interviews as it provides space for remarks unique to each interview, as well as seven scripted questions (Appendix C). As the interviews evolved, the questions were modified. The following questions were used to guide the interviews:

- Which parties initiated the policy change? Did any oppose it?
- Why did those parties want to eliminate the admission charge?
- What concerns did you have about the change?
- Did you do any type of visitor survey or trial run before eliminating the admission charge?
- Did you look at other museums that had already made the change?
- After eliminating the charge, did your development strategies change? If so, how?
- How did the policy change affect your audience?
- How did the museum change how it marketed itself, its new admission policy, and its programming?
- Is there anyone else at the museum that you recommend I speak to regarding the elimination of the admission charge?
Document Analysis

I critically analyzed all available organizational and historic documents related to the museums’ admissions policy, including press releases, free admission policies, annual reports, consulting reports, visitor surveys, and news articles from journalistic and professional association sources. These documents revealed important and relevant information about issues, decisions, and outcomes concerning the museums’ policy change. These documents identified key stakeholders and their intentions, motivations, observations, and opinions. Additionally, the documents helped to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources, such as the interviews.

Selection of Cases

The four case study museums I identified early as potential research participates were the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the San Jose Museum of Art, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the Walters Art Museum. I had found several public sources, including news articles and opinion pieces, referencing their policy change. Each was selected to show a different development in the policy. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts eliminated its charge in 1999 and provides lessons for other museums how the policy can be sustainable. The San Jose Museum of Art eliminated its charge in 2001 and reinstated it in 2006. I include the example of San Jose to highlight the challenges with a free admission policy. The Baltimore Museum of Art and the Walters Art Museum went free in 2006.
While they operate in the same city and “went free” with the same seed money from the city and county, the museums have adopted different strategies to maintain their free admission policy.

While the selected museums do not represent a random sample of American art museums, they were selected as a representative sample of those museums that have eliminated their admission charges. The four museums featured in this research vary in geography, budget and staff size, funding sources, and governance structure. The San Jose Museum of Art and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts are both non-profit museums. The Baltimore Museum of Art is an agency of the city government and the Walters Art Museum is an instrumentality of a municipality (personal communication, Joy Heyrman, January 31, 2011).

Other museums that are known to have eliminated their charges include the Cincinnati Museum of Art, the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and the Knoxville Museum of Art. Other non-art museums have also went free, including the U.S.S. Constitution Museum in Boston. Still others have always been free, including the Smithsonian’s 19 museums, the National Gallery of Art, Cleveland Museum of Art, Toledo Art Museum, Kimbell Art Museum, Menil Collection, Amon Carter Museum, Des Moines Art Center, Virginia Fine Art Museum in Richmond, Timken Museum of Art in San Diego, Fry Art Museum in Seattle, J. Paul Getty Museum, and the St. Louis Art Museum.
Data Analysis

The researcher seeks validity in the data collection process through triangulation of sources, including comparative case study sites and extensive literature review. By recording and transcribing the interviews, the researcher will increase accuracy. The research participants will be able to confirm the accuracy in the representation of her interview through a member check.

Several modes of analysis will be used as a way to enhance internal validity. First, the historical baseline information will provide a framework to understand an organizational policy within a larger field context. Why did museums begin charging admission and how has this funding source expanded? Often, organizational policy is established by benchmarking and historical trends. This creates isomorphism within the museum sector, which will be discussed in Chapter 3 as well as the last chapter of analysis. By understanding the factors that initiated and expanded admission charges, as discussed in Chapter 3, one can begin to analyze the current trend to reverse admission charges.

Within-case analysis will also be employed as the researcher studies each organization’s written documentation and interview responses as a separate case to identify unique patterns within the data for that single organization. A detailed case study write-up will follow. The researcher will then use cross-case analysis to examine pairs of cases, categorizing the similarities and differences in each pair. As patterns emerge, certain evidence may stand out as being in conflict with the patterns. The researcher will conduct focused follow-up
interviews to verify or correct the preliminary data in order to connect the evidence to the findings and to state relationship in answer to the research questions.
Chapter 5: Case Studies

This chapter examines the cases of four art museums—Minneapolis Institute of Arts, San Jose Museum of Art, Baltimore Museum of Art, and Walters Art Museum—and their elimination of admission charges. The account of each museum follows a similar framework. First, a brief history of the museum will be provided to understand the institutional mission of each museum. Next, the contemporary context and relevant stakeholders involved in the decision to eliminate admission charges will serve to illustrate the social and political environment in which the decision was made. An in-depth look at the financial implications and audience impact will provide an encompassing account of the policy change. As identified in the genealogy, the three themes leading to the implementation of admission charges—income/expenses balance, isomorphism within the museum field, and the philosophical stance of museums regarding their public purpose—will be the platform for analysis.

Minneapolis Institute of Arts: Leadership in Action

Historical Overview

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA) originated in 1883 when 25 citizens founded the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts with the goal of bringing the arts
into the life of their community (“About the Museum,” n.d.). The Society began by opening the Minneapolis School of Fine Art in 1886. They moved to the Minneapolis Public Library in 1889 and then made a final move in 1914 to MIA’s current home. Two subsequent expansions happen in 1974 and 2006.

From early in the Institute’s history, writings illustrate the founders’ interest in public ownership and stewardship of the art. In 1915, trustee Herschel V. Jones wrote, “The Art Institute is for the people to make the fullest use of and to protect from false friends, if they ever arise, who would monopolize it or make it exclusive” (Johnson, 1988, p. 2). Current MIA Foundation Relations manager, Elisabeth Brandt, cites that one of the original placards of the Society that speaks to the museum’s populist nature, “The Museum owned by the people of Minneapolis and maintained by its citizens” (cited in Riewe, 2009, p. 44). Scholar Nathaniel Burt’s account of the creation of the MIA further underpins the philanthropic beginnings. Burt (1977) writes:

The Institute moved into its building with only a score of paintings to its name; but the devotion of two men, their fortunes, and their families soon changed all that. Clinton Morrison, who started the whole thing off by donating the land on which the new classic McKim, Mead and White building was to stand, also donated a daughter and son-in-law. The son-in-law, John Van Derlip, was first President and held office for twenty years. When he died in 1935 he enriched the museum with a large collection of Renaissance paintings. His wife died before him and left a three-quarter-of-a-million-dollar fund. The other great early donor was William H. Dunwoody, who started off the original fund drive with his one-hundred-thousand-dollar gift and then left the museum a million dollars for acquisitions. (p. 189)

After more than one hundred years, the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts, the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts
became autonomous organizations in 1988. The split occurred so that each organization could “more actively pursue their separate missions” (Star Tribune, 1989). Two years later, the MIA opened its new installation of the 20th-century crafts and furniture gallery in its East Wing, and the Purcell-Cutts house, which was bequeathed to the museum in 1985 (Maurer, cited in Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1990).

Today, the MIA continues the founders’ original pursuit of public service as Minnesota’s largest art educator and a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. The Institute’s encyclopedic collection of 80,000 works of art receive more than a half-million visitors each year with approximately 100,000 more children being reached through educational programming (“About the Museum,” n.d.). The Institute’s mission emphasizes that its efforts in “collecting, preserving, and making accessible outstanding works of art” is for public benefit.

**Context & Stakeholders**

In February 1988, the MIA Board of Trustees met for a daylong retreat that resulted in identifying the issue of accessibility at the museum (Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1989). The Institute conducted research on the issue of access. Through the findings, the Institute identified the museum’s admissions charge as “a prominent barrier to accessibility” (Maurer, cited in Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1989). With concern over the negative effect of admission fees on the public, the trustees voted to remove the $2 admission fee and make the museum
free to the public. As identified in Director Evan Maurer’s report in the museum’s magazine, the museum wanted to be “sensitive and responsive to [their] position as the only arts organization in the Twin Cities area to receive substantial funding from public sources.” The decades of government support had a significant impact on the trustee’s decision. As Maurer states:

More than seven decades ago, the trustees of The Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts and the officials of Hennepin County agreed that the property the museum stands on and its building would be donated to the public, in return for a tax millage to support museum operations for the public at large. (cited in Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1989)

In the original 1911 agreement between the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board and the museum, it is specified that the museum would be free three days a week (Martin, 1989). Ann Benrud, Director of Membership, emphasizes the influence of this partnership, “because we are supported by the Park Board, they really urged the museum to adopt this admission policy too, and there was some talk that we have this original agreement because we’re on park property” (personal communication, February 22, 2011).

Accessibility specifically for the local Whittier neighborhood residents was a great concern, and factored into the decision. The local newspaper described the Whittier area as a “racially and ethnically mixed neighborhood with many low-income families” (Martin, 1989). Maurer states that the “entry fee is being dropped because it is perceived as ‘a barrier to accessibility’ by residents of the Whittier neighborhood, where the museum is” (Martin, 1989). Benrud says that the philosophical force was Director Maurer, “It wasn’t, you know, a board or the
city government…the desire purely was to try to increase attendance…and they were willing to take the financial risk to see if they could make that happen” (personal communication, February 22, 2011). Benrud describes Maurer as the “godfather of all this” and credits his respect within the region as the reason why he was able to accomplish this policy change (personal communication, February 22, 2011).

Financial Implications

At the time of the policy change, Director Maurer (1989) wrote, “Some people have expressed the opinion that if you don’t have to pay for something, it isn’t valued or appreciated. The importance of art cannot be measured by a price of admission or the cost of a membership” (p. 1). While this statement reveals the director’s philosophical view of the arts, the museum could not ignore the financial implications from such a significant policy change, especially during a time when the national trend was “more and more museums instituting new or increased fees to cover rising costs “ (Star Tribune, 1989). In an announcement for members, Maurer (1989) recognizes this:

In an era when many cultural organizations are increasing their fees and charges, we believe this new policy makes a bold statement about our commitment to serve and enrich the community. The only reason we can afford to make this change is because of the continuing strong support of our contributors, visitors and members. (emphasis his)

The museum saw the policy change as an opportunity to leverage support from a variety of sources. In the MIA’s Open Admissions Policy (1989), the
museum states “This change in admissions policy will underscore the need for broad community support and strengthen our case for increased support among our annual, capital and planned giving programs.” It continues, “The new admission policy will strengthen our case for support by local, regional and national governmental agencies.” Additionally, the museum leadership hoped to recoup some of the forfeited revenue through a new voluntary donation system with marked donation boxes at the entrance.

With eliminating admission charges, the MIA forfeited up to $200,000 annually. The museum adopted a multi-tiered effort to maintain their financial stability. It continued to charge for some special exhibitions, lectures, and classes, which produces additional revenue and helps to sustain the free admission policy. The museum also hoped that membership levels would remain consistent or increase after the change. There was also a positive response from foundations, corporations, and major donors. Benrud states:

[We look to corporate funders and major donors and say, you know, it is about accessibility. And it’s about education, and it’s about creating an arts opportunity for all kinds of people. You know, we really pride ourselves on the fact that we tour something like 75,000 school children through the museum every year, and that’s because it’s free. (personal communication, February 22, 2011)]

Benrud emphasizes the philanthropic spirit of Minneapolis, “[W]e really have a philanthropically rich community here. I mean Minneapolis is known for its really generous givers, and that starts all the way back with the Daytons and Pillsburys” (personal communication, February 22, 2011).
That generosity has built up a base of long-term members. When the MIA went free, it has 14,825 member households, and in the first year of free admission, its membership increased 33 percent (Green, 2011). Ten years after the introduction of free admission, membership had grown to more than 28,000 households (Knight, 1999). Data since 2003 show the membership base has lingered between 20,000 and 24,000 households. In benchmarking against other free museums, the MIA is normally in the top one or two in terms of membership numbers (Ann Benrud, personal communication, February 22, 2011). Benrud says that the MIA’s membership success has been a balancing of the philanthropic message with a message that resonates with value-driven members (personal communication, February 22, 2011). Benrud states:

They [MIA staff] did a lot of strategizing on what would be the primary sales message after they lost their traditional sales message, and they say that this community in particular, they knew that it had a strong philanthropic tradition based on kind of our public radio and public television stances and all the membership kind of programming that they do, and so they felt like this would be a kind of fertile environment for a membership program.

With the change, the museum took on a more aggressive approach that used a combination of sales messaging and a philanthropic plea. Large-scale direct mail appeals and an in-house telemarketing program were established to take the place of admission fees (Ann Benrud, personal communication, February 22, 2011).

For the value-driven audience, the MIA pushed its membership benefits, which includes daily free admission to special exhibitions, a quarterly member
magazine, reciprocal benefits with other museums, and other discounts. Special exhibitions continue to be an important development strategy for the MIA as it provides a source of earned income and drives membership. Benrud says:

especially as it pertains to membership because that’s when you actually have a value proposition for membership or you can do the membership math, and you say that if you are going to pay for “x” number of tickets and a whole year membership is this amount…it’s just a better financial decision. And we have within our membership offer, the benefits, you know, you can go as many times as you want to the ticketed exhibitions. So, for forty-five dollars, you can go see the Louvre everyday if you want. (personal communication, February 22, 2011)

Through the marketing of memberships, the MIA has saturated the message of unlimited visits.

More recently, the museum has been using outreach events to build its membership base. In 2007, the MIA began a new effort to engage young adults called Third Thursdays. Benrud describes it as a “member for a day” program. The monthly days attract between 500 and 4,000 people, depending on the month and theme. Visitors received all the benefits of membership for one day, including access to ticketed exhibitions, discounts in the store and restaurants, and any other events that there is usually a charge. In exchange, the visitors give the museum their contact information. Benrud states, “we try to cultivate and keep a kind of an understanding of the value of membership in terms of its financial value, but also the fact that it makes our community great” (personal communication, February 22, 2011). The return on investment for the Third Thursdays has been greater than any direct mail piece Benrud has ever done.
Audience Impact

In a 1990 report, Maurer reflects on the MIA’s initial successes, stating that MIA experienced one of their most successful years in history. “During the past year, the museum attendance exceeded more than 500,000 people—the greatest in the 75-year history of this institution” (Maurer, cited in Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1990, p. 1). Maurer continues, “our attendance this year was 26 percent higher than it has been for the past five years” (Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1990, p. 1). However, the museum leadership understood that it’s not only about the physical doors being open. The local newspaper reported about the MIA’s other efforts to improve public access, “Dropping the admission fee is only the first step in a multiyear program to make the museum more user friendly. MIA’s other initiatives included the installation of interactive video and closed-circuit radio that guided visitors through the museum’s exhibits” (Star Tribune, 1989).

With annual attendance remaining between 500,000-550,000 visitors, the MIA has focused on creating engaging outreach programs. In the 2004-2005 Annual Report, the museum states, “Free admission is the most visible way that The Minneapolis Institute of Arts serves the community, but it is just one piece of a rich and interconnected approach to reaching out to the public” (p. 21). The report highlights the extensive educational opportunities for adults and children, schools partnerships, tour guide training program, public programs, and
interactive web tools as some of the ways they accomplish this. The director that succeeded Maurer, William Griswold, states in the next year’s Annual Report:

The MIA is one of the only major American museums to offer free general admission. This is vitally important to our mission. But in order for us to continue to grow, we must find ways to expand our membership, engage the next generation of community leaders, and work more closely than ever with our philanthropic partners. (2006, p. 2)

Understanding that access goes beyond free entry, the museum seeks to deepen its connection with the community. If attendance is any assertion of the success of this growing relationship, then the MIA is making a statement. The museum’s attendance in fiscal year 2009-2010 rose to 553,576, an increase of 21 percent from the previous year (Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2010, p. 7). This is impressive as the 2010 Census counts for Minneapolis is 382,578, a 0 percent change since the 2000 Census (U.S. Census Bureau, March 16, 2011).

Building a loyal constituency is not without its challenges. Benrud states, “the challenge [with] free admission is that you’re not recording people as they come and go” (personal communication, February 22, 2011). The same anonymity enjoyed by visitors is an obstacle for museum staff as they seek to create a personalized experience for each visitor and invite them for further engagement with the institution. The MIA has tried to overcome this hurdle with increased marketing as well as a branding campaign with the slogan, “Come as you are.” The website graphic juxtaposes an average person with a piece of art. The goal of the campaign is to invite people into the museum. Benrud states, “whoever you are, whatever walk of life you come from, there is something that
you can identify with here, and it’s free” (personal communication, February 22, 2011).

Summary
The MIA has maintained its free admission policy for 22 years. However, without the visionary leadership of Evan Maurer, the initial change would not have happened. Maurer, an expert on Native American art, understood about underserved people and reached out to the community’s philanthropic spirit to financially sustain the policy. This local public support is essential. The museum has experienced buy-in from the community, to which its large membership base can attest. Additionally, the museum has maximized earned income opportunities, such as special exhibitions and membership. This combination has helped the MIA become a model for other museums looking to eliminate their charges.

San Jose Museum of Art: The Challenging Nature of “Free”

Historical Overview
The San Jose Museum of Art (SJMA) grew from a grassroots movement to save an old library that was slated for demolition during the 1960s urban revival ("History," n.d.). Deb Norberg, Deputy Director of Operations, states, “There was no single large donor to begin with who started the institution or the collection” (personal communication, February 10, 2011). Rather, a small group
of San Jose citizens turned the historic 1892 building into a civic art gallery in 1969. The SJMA credits this “democratic, grassroots spirit” as what has shaped its current character, which Norberg calls “populist.” The museum identifies its institutional values of “inclusivity, new thinking, and visionary ideals” in contrast to the “older museums often founded upon the riches of a few patrons.”

Today, the SJMA is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with 1,400 works from the 20th and 21st centuries. A special emphasis is placed on West Coast art. It views itself as a “lively center of arts activity in Silicon Valley” with a commitment to “providing access for its extraordinarily diverse populations and to pioneering new approaches to interpretation” (“About,” n.d.). San Jose has a population of 945,942 people (U.S. Census Bureau, March 8, 2011). Each year, the museum welcomes 100,000 people, including 37,000 school children, making it the largest provider of arts education in Santa Clara County (“About,” n.d.).

Context & Stakeholders

By the 1990s, San Jose was the center of the booming local technology industry. With a growing population, the SJMA added a new wing in 1991 (“History,” n.d.). “The museum more than tripled in size to 78 000 square feet through a 1991 expansion (designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill) and, in 1997, the original historic building underwent renovation” (Grodach, 2008, p. 203). The expansion allowed the museum to exhibit its growing permanent collection, host special exhibitions, and open a café, store, research library and
education center. The expansion and renovation was mainly funded by the San Jose Redevelopment Agency (Grodach, 2008, p. 203). As downtown San Jose saw much of its commercial activity flee to the expanding suburbs in the 1960s and 1970s, the Redevelopment Agency was formed to funnel tax revenue from “its flourishing tech-based office parks into a series of downtown revitalization projects” (Grodach, 2008, p. 203). The Agency hoped to establish the city as the “unique creative and cultural center of Silicon Valley” (City of San Jose, cited in Grodach, 2008, p. 204). This public investment in downtown redevelopment and expansion prompted a more public approach by the SJMA.

In November 2000, Dan Keegan was recruited from the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, MO, where admission was free. The Board was interested in free admission since the SJMA was founded as a free museum, and admission was only added in the 1990s (Keegan and Schwarzer, 2005). After Keegan come to the SJMA, the museum explored the possibility of expanding into a vacated library building next to the convention center (Deb Norberg, personal communication, February 10, 2011). This new location was going to be a “branch” gallery that could serve tourists and locals alike. However, after several feasibility studies, the museum leadership determined that the physical expansion would not be financially possible. Nevertheless, the museum still wanted to expand its services and increase access to the community. This desire led them to follow the original reason for Keegan’s directorship—to eliminate the museum’s admission charge.
The San Jose Museum of Art dropped its admission charge in June 2001. Daniel Keegan, the director of the museum, said that the “decision was prompted by a strong belief in having access to the arts for all members of the community, not just those with $7 in their wallets for an adult admission and a chunk of time to spare strolling the galleries” (ACFnewssource, 2002). This philosophical stance behind the change was inspired by the American Association of Museum’s publication, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (1992). The report represents AAM’s most aggressive efforts to escalate the educational mission of museums. The report states, “Museums can no longer confine themselves simply to preservation, scholarship, and exhibition independent of the social context in which they exist. They must recognize [that] the public service of education…” (American Association of Museums, 1992, p. 8). With this statement, AAM’s taskforce on education advocated for a shift in how museums view their public purpose.

When constructing its Free Admission Policy Statement (n.d.), the SJMA cites the report and states that a free admission policy will address four significant challenges posed by the question, *How can museums welcome a broad spectrum of society, and present programs that engage and are accessible to citizens of all backgrounds and abilities?*

1. SJMA’s admission charge is a deterrent to San Jose’s large, underserved population with limited financial resources. Free admission would throw our doors wide open.
2. Despite new litigation, arts components in K-12 public school curriculum are frequently not public schools’ priority. SJMA remains the primary provider of art experiences to regional public school children and their
families—as such, it is our responsibility to make public arts education more accessible to the public.

3. Downtown San Jose’s busy workforce has little time to allot to leisure. Free admission would make SJMA less daunting at lunchtime, or for short visits; as easily accessible as a public park.

4. Out significant technological community, for whom art is not always the most obvious priority, may be reluctant to risk the cost of admission. Free admission would provide a pragmatic incentive.

The SJMA ends its Free Admission Policy Statement (n.d.) by saying that the museums must “adopt a policy that fosters excellence and equity.”

However, in fostering such a policy, the museum also needed to understand the practical implications. Before the change, the museum did not conduct a formal visitor survey or trial run of free admission. A member of the education department had called other museums that had gone free, including the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Deb Norberg, personal communication, February 10, 2011). After the change, the museum conducted a brief survey to see if visitors were visiting specifically because it was free. Norberg could not recall the results of this survey.

Financial Implications

In eliminating its admission charge, the museum passed up about $200,000 of earned income (Mullins, 2001). Taking into consideration the cost of ticketing staff and equipment, the museum found a net loss of $90,000 (and Schwarzer, 2005). To replace that income, seven major donors came forward in June 2001 to support free admission, including The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Knight Ridder Inc., the Arbutus Fund, the Mayfield Fund, AT&T,
Deedee and Burt McMurty, and Deborah and Andy Rappaport. Additionally, the Oshman Family Foundation made a $2 million contribution to the museum’s endowment (Mullins, 2001).

Initially, the museum saw a very positive response from the public, which translated into increased levels of funding. Annual paid membership was up 20 percent to 6,000 member households (ACFnewsource, 2002). Individuals were upgrading to higher levels. Director Keegan said, “I saw one donation at $60 that they renewed at $600, and the person scribbled a note at the bottom: ‘This is so great for the community to have a free museum’” (Mullins, 2001).

Just months after the change, Diane Maxwell, director of communications, reported that while there is no longer an entrance free, the museum stands to post a net revenue gain if more visitors patronize the store and café, and give voluntary donations (Mullins, 2001). A news article from 2002 reported that café sales tripled since the elimination of the charge (ACFnewsource). The “dot.com bust” in 2000 did not seem to have an impact on the museum’s decision to go free.

**Audience Impact**

Immediately after the policy change, the museum experienced increases in attendance. Two months after eliminating of its admission charge, the museum saw its average daily attendance more than triple (from 134 to 430) (Mullins, 2001). From June 24, 2001 through August 26, 2001, more than 23,000 people
had visited the museum, up from 7,236 in the same period a year prior (Mullins, 2001). It was a 221 percent increase in attendance. In the first year of free admission, admission doubled to 200,000 (ACFnewsource, 2002). In the previous few years, museum attendance had stalled at 100,000 visitors.

Additionally, the museum observed a change in its visitor demographics, better reflecting its community. An annual survey showed 50 percent of visitors are white, compared to 75 percent in 2000 (ACFnewsource, 2002). The museum also saw more men visiting with a 1:1 female to male ratio, instead of females outnumbering men 2:1 as in previous years. Norberg also said that the audience appeared younger (personal communication, February 10, 2011). A key attendance increase was in first-time visitors. The survey showed that 61 percent were first-time visitors to the museum, up 20 percent from a year before (ACFnewsource, 2002). The visitor demographics began to reflect the museum’s free admission policy’s intention to serve as “an invitation to all of San Jose’s diverse communities to participate in and support Museum programs, exhibitions, events and educational offerings.”

A Return to Charging

With building financial pressures from decreased giving and membership, in 2006, the SJMA began working with a consultant to identify earned income possibilities (Deb Norberg, personal communication, February 10, 2011). To Norberg’s surprise, the consultant suggested reinstating admission charges. In a
PowerPoint slide provided by the SJMA, the following reasons for reinstating admission were listed:

1. It served its purpose, but is no longer driving high attendance
2. Clear relationship to higher earned income—above and beyond admissions (especially in store)
3. “If you don’t pay, you don’t value it.”
4. Would give clearer benefit to membership
5. 40% of visitors don’t know it’s free
6. Better sense of audience (better tracking of numbers, zip codes, etc.)

Beyond the reasons compiled by the consultant, the museum found itself in a turbulent external environment. Museum membership renewal rates began to decrease (Deb Norberg, personal communication, February 10, 2011). The museum experienced a decrease in funding from the Office of Cultural Affairs (OCA), “whose grants have been impacted by declining hotel occupancy rates” (Bryant, 2006). The Transit Occupancy Tax funds grants through the city arts commission. At its peak, the SJMA was receiving over $400,000 (Deb Norberg, personal communication, February 10, 2011). In 2011, the museum receives under $200,000 from the OCA. Additionally, the June 27, 2006 sale of The San Jose Mercury News, under the ownership of Knight Ridder Inc., resulted in a loss of financial support from this major corporation. Knight Ridder had been a major sponsor since the museum’s establishment with an annual gift of $100,000 (Bryant, 2006). Knight Ridder was one of the seven major sponsors of free admission.

While the consultant strongly recommended returning to charging for general admission, she also proposed other solutions, such as charging for
special exhibitions only. However, this would also involve sealing off exhibition space. Ultimately, after 5 years of free admission, the Board of Trustees decided to reinstate their admission fees at increased rates ($8 for adults instead of $7 prior to the policy change) on August 8, 2006. The museum sought other ways to provide financial discounts and increase accessibility to its visitors. Initially, it offered a $2 discount with a San Jose Public Library card and two free Community Days a year. The museum dropped its partnership with the library, as they did not find people taking advantage of the discount (Deb Norberg, personal communication, February 10, 2011).

The SJMA reports that it did not experience much, if any, public outrage over the reinstatement of admission charges. There were internal staff discussions about the need to create other ways to be accessible (Deb Norberg, personal communication, February 10, 2011). Some of this was accomplished through increased programming, including a noontime lecture series, and the continuation of free Community Days, which brings in an average of 1,500 people. Even with the increased programming, the museum has not seen its attendance rebound. In fact, it has returned to pre-free admission rates. The museum hopes that potential sponsorships for free museum days will help increase attendance and accessibility.
Summary

Inspired by the values behind the publication *Excellence and Equity*, the SJMA desired a way to serve a wider audience. At first, it explored the possibility of a branch gallery, but when this showed to be infeasible, it eliminated its admission charge. Seven individuals and corporations stepped up to fill the “income gap” caused by the forfeited income. The public also responded positively with increased membership sales and café usage.

While the leadership held that philosophical stance that the museum *should* be free, it met the practical challenges of maintaining such a policy. With decreased giving from the government and losing a major corporate sponsor, the museum’s leadership erred on the side of caution and reinstated admission charges. When asked why the philanthropic motivation didn’t work for maintaining or increasing the number of memberships, Norberg said she didn’t know. However, she also acknowledged that marketing has always been underfunded (personal communication, February 10, 2011). This may be the cause of the statistic that 40 percent of the SJMA visitors did not know the museum was free. Marketing is a fundamental element in a successful free admission policy. Through successful marketing, the museum could have promoted an active public role in supporting the policy instead of relying heavily on the seven donors.
Baltimore Museum of Art: Opening the Physical and Metaphorical Doors

Historical Overview

In 1914, eight “civic-minded” Baltimoreans founded the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) with a single painting (“About,” n.d.). The BMA opened its John Russell Pope-designed building on April 18, 1929. With its opening, an education department was created to present tours, lectures, and classes, making it one of the first art museums in the nation with an education department (“Timeline,” n.d.). Expansion of both the building and collection continued, leading to a collection of 90,000 works of art (“About,” n.d.). A $24 million capital renovation is slated to finish in 2014, which will increase the museum’s physical space and services to its visitors (Baltimore Museum of Art, February 1, 2011).

The BMA serves more than quarter million visitors annually. Many of those visitors are Baltimore’s 620,961 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, February 9, 2011). The museum’s mission states that it is “committed to creating an environment that inspires creativity, encourages learning, and fosters human understanding in a place where everyone feels welcome” (“Mission & Vision,” n.d.). The inclusive nature of the museum is illustrated through its various programming, ranging from Black History Month Family Day to Jazz in the Sculpture Garden concerts.
Context & Stakeholders

The museum conducted a strategic planning process in 2002-2003. There were two “big bold ideas” highlighted in the resulting plan (Becca Seitz, personal communication, March 4, 2011). The two goals were to open the doors to the historic entrance of the museum and to provide greater access by eliminating admission charges and expanding hours. Director of Marketing and Communications, Becca Seitz reflects about the positive message the museum sought to send, “It was about really the trustees and the staff seeing that it, the relationship between the museum and the community changing as a result of being free, kind of swinging open your doors” (personal communication, March 4, 2011). While the BMA was founded as a free museum, admission charges were instated in the 1980s, reflecting the field’s trend of instituting admission charges (Becca Seitz, personal communication, March 4, 2011). The board believed that eliminating admission charges would be essential to bringing in more of the community. Additionally, with Baltimore’s proximity to Washington, DC, the leadership believed that “free museum going” is ingrained in the Baltimore-Washington region.

In doing so, the museum sought to “secure sources of consistent funding to support free admission and increased public hours” (Anne Manning, personal communication, March 4, 2011). The goal of free admission resonated with the donors and at this time, the BMA established the idea that it would need to raise endowment funds (Becca Seitz, personal communication, March 4, 2011).
In early 2006, the Baltimore Museum of Art and Walters Art Museum were approached by a city official with a proposed partnership. Both museums were already receiving money from the local governments; however, the official suggested that the city, along with the county government, could increase the grant should the museums eliminate their admission charges. The BMA, which already had their board and staff backing the idea, accepted the proposal.

The BMA, along with the Walters Art Museum, opened its doors free to everyone on October 1, 2006 with the help of an $800,000 grant from the City of Baltimore and the Anne Arundel County. With the museum’s strong connection to the local government, they were able to leverage this relationship to benefit the museum and the community. Speaking of the upcoming change, the Anne Arundel County Executive Janet S. Owens, said, “I believe the arts are a critical component to our quality of life. The ability to expose all citizens to great art will enormously enhance our region” (Baltimore Museum of Art and The Walters Art Museum, 2006). Baltimore County Executive Jim Smith shared this opinion, “This is an investment in the future of the entire metropolitan area. I am delighted that both museums are approaching this initiative together for the benefit of the people in our community” (Baltimore Museum of Art and The Walters Art Museum, 2006).

For the BMA, free admission fulfilled critical aspects of the strategic plan, including increasing accessibility, expanding audiences, and generating publicity: It has increased visibility as the announcement was heralded by The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and National Public Radio. Free
admission has also received a significant amount of regional coverage by being launched in conjunction with Free Fall Baltimore, an innovative citywide program under the direction of the Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts designed to make the arts available to everyone. (Baltimore Museum of Art, 2006, p. 6)

The 2006 Annual Report goes on to stress the policy’s “transformative impact on the future of the Museum and the community” (p. 6). The museum believed the policy would be a “catalyst that will expand the BMA’s role as an educational resource for students and teachers, a cultural center for the community and a destination for cultural tourists who contribute to the region’s economy” (p. 6). Fundamentally, the BMA saw this policy as a way to fully embrace its public service mission as an educational institution, and the opportunity for increased funding presented to the museum by the local governments meant that the museum was more focused on making it happen.

Financial Implications

Prior to the elimination of admission charges, revenue from general admission made up 2 percent of the museum’s operating budget, which equaled about $225,000 a year (Becca Seitz, personal communication, March 4, 2011). Seitz estimates that approximately 51 percent of the museum’s audience was visiting for free (personal communication, March 4, 2011). This number is attributed to the museum’s free admission policy for children 16 years old and young, college students, select evening hours, and all day on Thursdays. The
museum did not see the loss of this revenue as disruptive to their budget, but it did want to prepare for the potential financial impact of the policy.

In preparing for the change, the development and marketing departments contacted every museum that was free, including the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, San Jose Museum of Art, and the Cincinnati Art Museum (Judy Gibbs, personal communication, March 4, 2011). With the budgets already established for the upcoming fiscal year, the BMA took serious looks at attendance projects, the impact on membership, and overall revenue forecasts (Becca Seitz, personal communication, March 4, 2011). However, the process was very quick as the mayor approved the funding in late May and the kickoff date was October 1, 2006 (Judy Gibbs, personal communication, March 4, 2011).

Out of that research, the BMA expected the impact would be greatest on the lower levels of giving ($75 and below), but did not expect any kind of change with the upper levels (Judy Gibbs, personal communication, March 4, 2011). The staff determined that the museum might lose up to 30 percent in memberships in year one and another 20 percent in year two (Becca Seitz, personal communication, March 4, 2011). The museum’s estimates were high; it experienced an 11 percent decrease. The museum suspects the highly popular Pizzaro ticketed exhibition in the spring helped to slow down the decrease in membership.

To sell memberships, the BMA used a dual messaging approach. Judy Gibbs, Director of Development, states, “We started using a more philanthropic
message in the $150 and above [levels]…I mean certainly we promoted free admission as a great benefit to the community and how enormously important it was for our members to help support this” (personal communication, March 4, 2011). Additionally, the BMA made some shifts in membership benefits. For ticketed exhibitions, members could come in every day. Gibbs admits people did not take complete advantage of that policy, but she states, “it looked good on paper” (personal communication, March 4, 2011).

The BMA experienced a decrease in membership that the development staff attributes to two causes: those members that were taking advantage of free admission as a membership benefit and the economic downturn. Gibbs argues, “And then your challenge becomes to replenish” (personal communication, March 4, 2011). The museum, through its increased and varied marketing, was able to do just that. In fiscal year 2008, the BMA had its highest annual fund ever (Judy Gibbs, personal communication, March 4, 2011). That same year, the BMA launched a major campaign, “In a New Light: The Campaign for The Baltimore Museum of Art.”

With the grant from the city and county being short-term, the BMA sought other ways to sustain free admission. The campaign, which is ongoing, has a goal of $65 million with $40 million raised in the silent phased. One of the goals of the campaign is to “offer free admission in perpetuity” through the establishment of an endowment for free admission (Baltimore Museum of Art, 2008). With maintaining a solid level of programming in conjunction with free
admission, the museum determined that it would need approximately $12 million to endow the free admission policy, which would include marketing and programming (Judy Gibbs, personal communication, March 4, 2011). However, with the lost admission revenue, the BMA knew it couldn’t take annual revenue to begin an endowment to maintain the policy. Through this campaign, $5 million has been earmarked for free admission (Judy Gibbs, personal communication, March 4, 2011). The museum has individuals, foundations, and corporations donating to the endowment, and recognizes endowment gifts from the Cohen Family Fund for Free Admission, Lord Baltimore Capital Corporation, Mary J. and James D. Miller, James Riepe Family Foundation, and the DLA Piper Fund (Baltimore Museum of Art, 2009).

In addition to an active campaign, the BMA has begun soliciting “immediate impact” or “bridge funds” until the endowment is raised (Judy Gibbs, personal communication, March 4, 2011). These funds serve two purposes. First, the draw from the museum’s endowment is on a three year rolling average, so it takes three years from when the money is invested for it to be available for use. Second, some corporate donors will not give to endowments, but want to support the policy (Judy Gibbs, personal communication, March 4, 2011).

*Audience Impact*

The 2006 Annual Report states, “Dramatic increases in attendance and in the diversity of our visitors during previous free days indicate that the BMA will
serve an even greater audience as a result of introducing free admission.”

Indeed, the museum experienced significant increases in attendance. The most significant benefit the museums saw was an increase in total attendance, first-time visitors, and family program participation. The Baltimore Museum received 124,125 visitors from October 1, 2006 through March 31, 2007, an 8 percent increase over a two-year average of the same period. First time visitors comprised 37 percent of admissions. Additionally, October 2006, the first month of free admission, had 24,200 visitors—the highest attended October in the past five years. The Baltimore Museum also had an 89 percent increase in participation of Sunday family art activities (Baltimore Museum of Art and The Walters Art Museum, 9 May 2007).

In the following year, first-time visitors comprised 42 percent of the audience and family program participation increased by 190 percent (Baltimore Museum of Art, 2008). However, Anne Manning, Deputy Director of Education, points out that the BMA had also increased their family programming. The regularly monthly free family workshop went to every Sunday (Anne Manning, personal communication, March 4, 2011). The museum also began holding Art Blast, a day-long event with indoor/outdoor activities, including performances, exhibitions, and art making. Those events drew a very large family audience of between 2000 and 4000 individuals each year depending on the exhibition. Seitz states:

[F]ree has increased the diversity of our audience and attracted new visitors, but free, free alone is not an overall driver for attendance on an
ongoing basis. Exhibitions and programs still drive attendance, not just the fact that we’re free. So every institution and how they approach it is different. (personal communication, March 4, 2011)

The 2008 Annual Report echoes the same sentiments:

In its second year, free admission continued to reinvigorate the BMA for people of all ages and backgrounds. It attracted new audiences and encouraged repeat visitations to the Museum. But the BMA recognizes that it is not enough to simply be free and to open the doors; audiences must be engaged in making connections between their own lives and art in the collection.

As a way to drive attendance and attract new visitors, the museum has put an “emphasis on creating new, engaging, vital programs for engaging new audiences” (Anne Manning, personal communication, March 4, 2011). Manning came on board as the Deputy Director in 2007, less than a year after eliminating charges. As the position was vacant when the museum went free, she suspects there wasn’t a lot of program strategy before her arrival (personal communication, March 4, 2011). Now, the BMA is hosting more late night programs in response to their young visitors.

Along with younger visitors and new visitors, the museum reported more visitors of color. Before the elimination of charges, the BMA worked with a market research firm to look at visitors during regular museums hours, members of the museum, and visitors during the Thursday free days. With this data, the museum has been able to compare the demographic characteristics of the visitors before the change to the visitors during their free years. While the museum has not had a full-fledged study after the change, the museum continues to do internal
surveying with the results showing “observable increases in diversity and younger visitors and new members, new visitors” (Becca Seitz, personal communication, March 4, 2011). These increases have helped to compensate for the decrease in public hours.

Besides increased and varied programming, the museum has dramatically changed its marketing. Seitz argues that it is not about being free, but rather the need for “multiplatform communications” (personal communication, March 4, 2011). This has been especially important for promoting free special exhibitions. The museum pairs the free message with the exhibition marketing, with the hope that it creates more interest (Becca Seitz, personal communication, March 4, 2011). Contemporary exhibitions is one area that has benefited from this messaging:

For our history before when we did a major contemporary exhibition whether it was monographic or thematic or whatever the time of year, the attendance was pretty much the same. We had more hours then and in post-free we have fewer hours but those attendance numbers are much higher. (Becca Seitz, personal communication, March 4, 2011)

Since the elimination of admission charges, the museum has been able to attract and keep visitors by creating a dynamic relationship through multiplatform marketing, and increased and new programming. Free admission helps the museum do this.
Summary

For the BMA, free admission was a goal of the board several years before the elimination of their charges. When the opportunity presented itself, the staff researched the impact, changed its programming, and more fully developed its marketing techniques. The BMA did not see the new admission policy as a cure all, but rather a stepping-stone to becoming a more inclusive organization. This mindset began with opening the historic entrance and continued with providing engaging programming. In addition to forfeiting nearly a quarter million dollars in income from admission charges, the museum increased its programming and marketing costs to fully utilize the new policy. These increasing costs were built into the “cost” of free admission, and a part of the grant from the city and county was used for this purpose. The museum continues to seek sustainable funding solutions to maintain the free admission policy, including building an endowment for free admission and looking for immediate impact funds to sustain the museum until the endowment is active.

Walters Art Museum: Accessibility Beyond Free Admission

Historical Overview

The Walters Art Museum grew from the interests of William T. Walters and his son, Henry. During the 19th and 20th centuries, they began collecting a range of artwork from around the world (“History of The Walters Art Museum,” n.d.). As early as 1874, William Walters opened his Mount Vernon Place residence to the
When his collection outgrew his house, he bought the adjacent property and expanded the gallery. Burt (1977) argues William Walters "hoarded his art" (p. 158).

Henry Walters inherited his father's collection when William Walters died in 1894. The museum's website states, "From the outset, Henry Walters envisaged a museum that would fulfill an educational role within the community" ("Henry Walters," n.d.). Henry pursued collecting aggressively and expanded the property. He too offered public hours. Henry died in 1931, bequeathing the building and contents—a 22,000 work of art collection—to the mayor and city council of Baltimore "for the benefit of the public" ("Henry Walters," n.d.).

The collection and buildings have expanded since the original gift. The BMA, a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, now has more than 28,000 objects. The current mission statement reflects the intent of the initial gift: The Walters Art Museum brings art and people together for enjoyment, discovery, and learning. We strive to create a place where people of every background can be touched by art. We are committed to exhibitions and programs that will strengthen and sustain our community.

The building expansions and renovations detail the rich partnership between the museum, city and public. A 1966 Baltimore City bond and a grant from the State of Maryland enabled the 1974 expansion ("From Art Gallery to Art Museum," n.d.). The Hackerman House was presented to the city in 1984 to be
used to exhibit Asian art. The most recent Centre Street building renovation was completed through a $37 million capital campaign in 2002.

**Context & Stakeholders**

When the building closed in 1998 for the Centre Street renovation, the museum also took to rethinking their exhibitions and public outreach (“From Walters Art Gallery to Walters Art Museum,” n.d.). One significant yet symbolic change was the institution’s name change from Walters Art Gallery to Walters Art Museum to better reflect its role as a large, public institution. With the Centre Street Building opening in June 2002, the board refocused its attention on the Charles Street Building, which was reinstalled in the fall 2005 (Walters Art Museum, 2003, p. 2). The 2006 Annual Report notes significant influence the purchase of the 100 West Centre Street property from the Maryland Historical Society:

This unanticipated opportunity has since been the catalyst for a series of Board-directed strategic conversations, addressing potential future expansion opportunities against the backdrop of our audience-centered mission and our increasing engagement in regional, national, and international collaborations. And as that purchase was unfolding, initial steps were being taken with elected leadership in Baltimore City and Baltimore County that would lead to the announcement, in late May, that on October 1, 2006 the Walters would eliminate its general admission fee. This dramatic initiative has already had a profound impact on how we view and respond to our audiences, both real and potential, and doubtless it will help to shape the public mission of the Walters for years to come. (p. 3)

While the new property and the governments’ encouragement influenced the museum’s decision to eliminate its charge, Joy Heyrman, Director of
Development for the Walters, said that it was discussed around the board table in 2001 when they were opening the renovated building (personal communication, January 31, 2011). She stated,

I think there was a philosophical conflict that our director, longstanding director; he has been here at the museum since 1985, but director since 1995 looking at the mission statement which is to you know bring art and people together for enjoyment, discovery and learning, looking at the testamentary language of our donor Henry Walters who said who gave the gifts for the benefit of the public and really seeing that it is in conflict with the idea of putting up a of putting any barrier to public access to the museum and its collection, which they own, we don't. (personal communication, January 31, 2011)

The Walters view themselves as the stewards of the artworks, not the owners. However, at that point, the board “had a lot of trepidation about it [eliminating the charge]” (Joy Heyrman, personal communication, January 31, 2011). The board wanted to see the result of the renovation, so the discussion of eliminating the charge was tabled until 2005.

In 2005, the museum’s leadership was in conversation with the deputy mayor in the city administration, and the government official suggested that the city may be able to increase the museum’s grant in order to make the museum free (Joy Heyrman, personal communication, January 31, 2011). This partnership was done in conjunction with the Baltimore Museum of Art. The 2007 Annual Report states, “The permanent collections of our two great museums were once again available to all visitors free of charge, as they both had been until a generation ago” (p. 3). The special partnership with Baltimore City and Baltimore County is recognized as a major inspiration for the change, as Heyrman states,
“it had percolated in the staff and in the governance of the museum but what really put it in place was the city encouraging it” (personal communication, January 31, 2011).

Financial Implications

The major three-year grant from Baltimore City and Baltimore County supported the initial policy change. Initially, the grant was for $800,000 per museum over three years. Baltimore County continued the grant an additional year, giving $100,000 (Joy Heyrman, personal communication, January 31, 2011).

However, the museum understood that the change in the admission policy would have greater financial implications beyond the loss in revenue from admission charges, which was approximately $250,000 or 1.3 percent of the museum’s operating budget. The museum looked at other models that had made the change to understand the financial impact (Joy Heyrman, personal communication, January 31, 2011). The staff looked at the Cincinnati Museum of Art and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Cincinnati was an important resource for the Walters because at the time, the development director, Jill Barry, came from Cincinnati and had good data (Joy Heyrman, personal communication, January 31, 2011). When looking at the other museums, they look specifically at the diminution in membership revenue. Heyrman states:

[W]e know that at the lower levels of membership at least people are benefit driven. We knew that there would be obviously admission revenue
that we had had for sort of general admission to the museum, not special exhibition tickets, was going to go away so that was a certain number. (personal communication, January 31, 2011)

This led the museum to use different messaging strategies for its memberships. For the lower levels of membership, the museum tried taking a philanthropic tone, stressing that membership helps make free admission possible (Joy Heyrman, personal communication, January 31, 2011). Heyrman said the upper category members already had a “more philanthropic impulse to begin with” and that since the change in 2006, the museum has seen a 38 percent increase in contributions to upper levels of membership ($250 and above) (personal communication, January 31, 2011). However, for membership level below that, they’ve seen a 28 percent decrease. Heyrman stressed that it is hard to determine how the economic downturn has affected these numbers:

So it’s hard to extract what was the macro environment of the big world versus people just saying, No, I do this because I get a benefit from it and if I don’t have to pay for that benefit all the better. (personal communication, January 31, 2011)

With its new philanthropic tone, Heyrman suggests that the Walters is more like public radio by appealing to the audience’s philanthropic spirit:

During those fund drives and sprinkled throughout the year, the message comes across the airwaves just like the news and information and music that you like to hear on public radio making the connection that if you like this we need your support...and it’s provided by your support. Think about a museum and the different channels of communication that we have to connect with people you know. When they walk through the door, we welcome them. How do we make sure that they also know that it is through their support at whatever level? (personal communication, January 31, 2011)
Heyrman emphasizes that it is through support at all levels that this policy is sustainable, and that must be communicated broadly. However, Heyrman admits that the museum has been “slow on the uptake of putting that whole structure in place” for lower levels of membership (personal communication, January 31, 2011). They have taken some steps to communicate the importance of individual support, such as putting the ‘free message’ on the website, printed materials, and on the contribution boxes at both entrances. The boxes, which read “Help Keep the Walters Free,” collect about $500 a week in contributions (Joy Heyrman, personal communication, January 31, 2011).

Like many other museums, the Walters was impacted by the economic downturn. Its endowment, which accounts for about one quarter of the museum’s operating budget, lost more than 30 percent of its value between the winters of 2008 and 2009 (Walters Art Museum, 2009, p. 3). Additional cuts in operational support from the City of Baltimore and the Maryland State Arts Council put additional financial pressure on the museum. The final financial force is the conclusion of the initial three-year grant. However, in its 2009 Annual Report, the museum cites its strong position with renovated galleries, consistent attendance, debt-free status and committed leadership as reasons to be hopeful (Walters Art Museum, 2009, p. 3). The museum states, “Moreover, despite these enormous challenges, we remain fully committed to maintain the highly successful free admission policy that we began in 2006” (p. 3).
To maintain free admission, the museum is seeking sustainable funding solutions. The board has identified three key areas to grow the museum’s endowment. One of those areas is access—maintaining free access for all (“Endowment,” n.d.). The museum argues to keep the museum free and open to the public permanently, an additional $500,000 annually in income from an endowment is required (“Maintaining Free Access for All,” n.d.). This figure is approximately 3.5 percent of the forecasted Fiscal Year 2012 budget.

**Audience Impact**

The Walters stated that the goal of eliminating its admission charge was to provide “greater service to our regional community, in fulfillment of our mission ‘to bring art and people together for enjoyment, discovery, and learning’” (Walters Art Museum, 2007, p. 3). In order to provide greater service and strengthen its position as community resource, the Walters knew it had to increase its marketing and programming. Free admission at the Walters and Baltimore Museum of Art was ushered in during Free Fall Baltimore in October and November of 2006. Free Fall Baltimore, hosted by the Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts, offers an array of free live music, dance, and theatre performances, art exhibits, film showings, and more.

During the first free month, the Walters experienced increased attendance with 21,523 visitors—the second highest October attendance in the past 5 years and an 80 percent increase from October 2005 (Baltimore Museum of Art and
The Walters Art Museum, 2007). Between October 1, 2006 and March 31, 2006, the museum posted impressive numbers with an increase of 38 percent in total attendance. First-time visitors made up 43 percent of admissions, an increase from a 36 percent average. Museum diversity also increased to 18 percent, almost doubling from the Spring 2005. The 2007 Annual Report notes that African-American participation at the museum had tripled (p. 3). Moreover, the museum posted a staggering 400 percent increase in children and family art activities (Baltimore Museum of Art and The Walters Art Museum, 2007). The Walters identifies these increases as evidence as the museum becoming “a family destination” and more closely “reflecting the demographic reality of our region” (Walters Art Museum, 2007, p. 3).

While the free admission policy is credited for increased attendance and diversity, the Walters made a very focused effort to build its programming in 2001 (Joy Heyrman, personal communication, January 31, 2011). Heyrman describes their efforts to making the museum family friendly:

We created a department within our education division for children and family programming. We started to really look at…what kind of offerings were there. We had a family arts center that opened up as part of this renovation. We put a lot of different materials in place that people could use for self-guided touring with kids. (personal communication, January 31, 2011)

The museum was responding to focus groups conducted in the late 1990s, where it found that the public felt demoralized by the museum (Joy Heyrman, personal communication, January 31, 2011). Before eliminating the admission charge, the museum had already put in place educational programming to
address the needs of the community. Since that time, the Walters found that about half of the people who visit the museum take part in some kind of education activity or program (Joy Heyrman, personal communication, January 31, 2011).

With the increased diversity in its audience, the Walters had also introduced programming targeted to specific ethnic groups. The education department enhanced its partnership with Education Based Latino Outreach (EBLO), an organization that seeks to improve the lives of Hispanic youth and their families through educational opportunities and cultural programs. The museum also works with the Baltimore City Community College Refugee Youth Project. Through multiple visits to the museum and outreach visits from museum educators and teaching artists, refugee children explore their identities and experiences through looking at and talking about art, as well as art making activities (“Community Outreach Programs at the Walters Art Museum,” 2011). Heyrman describes these activities, along with other efforts to be more accessible to the growing Hispanic community, such as translating labels into Spanish, adds “another layer of welcome” on what the museum is already offering.

Summary

Walters Board President William L. Paternotte states, “Free admission eliminates all financial barriers to the achievement of this mission and
demonstrates a commitment to our community—enabling everyone to enjoy these exceptional art museums” (Baltimore Museum of Art and The Walters Art Museum, 2006). In addition to the lack of a financial barrier, one could argue that the preemptive changes in the museum’s educational programming might be a key to the museum’s successful free admission policy. For the Walters, to be accessible included reaching out to underserved populations and making the art relevant to their lives. Financially, the Walters has embraced a philanthropic tone and has remained committed to access even as the economic downturn has taken its toll on the museum. This museum also seeks to build an endowment dedicated to free admission, a move that places the policy at the top of the museum’s priorities.

Conclusion

For these four museums, eliminating admission charges came on the heels of other major institutional change, often in the form of renovations, which had substantial public support, or in the case of the MIA, its split from the other arts organizations. Strong, morally motivated leadership, including the board, directors, and government entities, ushered in the change, but it was done within an environment that called on museums to embrace their public service missions. This is evidenced by the SJMA citation of the AAM publication *Equity and Excellence*. Increased and engaging programming was one of the ways these museums responded to their communities’ needs. However, financial
stability and sustainability was also a priority with this change. The increased services increased the cost of the museums. While calculating the cost of the policy, the museums considered the forfeited revenue, but also the cost of increased programming and marketing. The museums made strategic changes in their development efforts. While increasing their membership benefits, they introduced a more philanthropic tone in their messaging. Additionally, other earned income sources, such as special exhibitions, helped maintain their membership base and drove attendance on a long-term basis.
Chapter 6: Analysis

The purpose of this study was to determine the feasibility of eliminating admission charges in American art museums. Through an extensive literature review and the development of a genealogy of admission charges, the factors influencing museum policy on an organizational and field level were identified. The three themes highlighted through the genealogy were the income/expenses balance, isomorphism within the museum field, and the philosophical stance of museums regarding the public purpose of their institutions.

The case studies have revealed that there is not a singular way to go about eliminating admission charges, and the reasons to eliminate the charges are varied. Financial feasibility is certainly an important factor in a museum’s decision to go free, but often, feasibility is determined by the museum’s institutional values and its sense of its public value. Additional external pressure from the field or competition for attendance also influenced the museum’s decision.

This cross-case analysis examines the feasibility of eliminating charges based on the three influences established in the genealogy. Policy implications will be examined for the museum sector, and recommendations for further research will be given.
Body of discussion

Income/Expenses Balance

Admission charges were instituted in part to compensate for the increasing costs and decreased giving in the 1970s and 1980s. With eliminating their admission charges, the four case study museums forfeited that income and found ways to adapt to the loss in admission revenue, including changes in their membership program, partnership with local governments, and the establishment of endowments to sustain free admission.

It is important for all museums, free or charging, to receive income from multiple sources. This helps museums to compensate should one source of income decrease drastically or unexpectedly. Many of the museums that eliminated their charges did research before the change to determine the potential loss in revenue from admissions and declines in membership. They also sought additional financial support from government, corporations, foundations, and individuals. For the BAM and Walters, the government intervened and provided the additional revenue required to initially eliminate the charges. The government, recognizing the public value of the museum and the free admission policy, was responding to philanthropic failure. However, the government funding was temporary and the museums would need to turn back to their philanthropic base to sustain free admission. The BMA began doing this by first approaching their trustees, former trustees, and other donors that the museum knew would want to fund this particular area (Judy Gibbs, personal communication, March 4,
One of the core attributes of successful fundraising is to understand the desires of a donor and to match those desires to the museum’s strategic goals. The BMA was able to leverage the donors’ interests to replace the loss in revenue from the policy change.

Loss of membership revenue is a great concern when museums eliminate their admission charges. The motivations of members are complex. As outlined in the literature review, members join to take advantage of membership benefits such as free admission, special events, and discounts, but they also become members to support the cultural institution. Some of the case study museums found that membership initially decreased, but with changes in the benefits, message, and programming, membership rebounded. The MIA, which went free in 1989, has a large membership base of more than 20,000 members. Many museums that charge admission cannot testify to that level of community support. In maintaining its base, the MIA seeks to balance the message of individual membership benefits and a more philanthropic message of community benefit. The museum also actively seeks new members through its innovative “member for a day” program.

Several museums stressed the importance of special exhibitions as a moneymaker and membership driver. Special exhibitions, specifically blockbusters, began in the 1970s when museums discovered the potential of earned income from these shows. Blockbusters continue to be an important part of the exhibition program of many museums as they attract a large number of
visitors, provide an additional incentive for membership, and raise the profile of the museum. Additional income is possible through the commercialization of the exhibition through souvenirs and reproductions.

Identified by the BMA as one of the most sustainable funding mechanisms is an endowment committed to free admission. An endowment continues to provide dividends to support the policy. Its longevity is a strategic tool to leverage support from corporations, foundations, and individuals who would like to see the policy enacted permanently. However, the museums must also be prepared for the next major recession, which will undoubtedly injury these endowments. For example, the Art Institute of Chicago, which recently increased its admission charge by 50 percent to $18, experienced a 25 percent drop in its endowment (Ilnytzky, 2009). How will free museums respond to a similar decrease? When asked if the free admission policy was ever on the table during the 2008 recession, Benrud from the MIA stated, “it’s in stone here…it’s not something that could ever be reversed” (personal communication, February 22, 2011). Citing the long history of free admission, she stated, “it’s just become a part of who we are.” For the BMA, Seitz said that the policy was never considered, “I don’t think it will ever be considered an option. Both the board and the staff are firmly behind making this permanent as permanent can be” (personal communication, March 4, 2011).

The local economy must also be considered while examining the income/expenses balance. With the case study museums being regional
museums, the admissions revenue was a small percentage of the museum’s overall budget. For museums that are more of a tourist destination or what Frey (1998) refers to as “superstar museums,” admissions revenue can comprise as much as 15 percent of their budgets, such is the case at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (McFelter, 2007). Frey (1998) argues, “Superstar art museums are able to exploit fully the economies of scale in reaching out to a large number of people” (p. 118). These superstar museums have precious, rare artwork that a large number of people are willing to pay large amounts of money to see. In contrast, the case study museums face competition from other regional museums, such as the D.C. museums and the San Francisco museums in the cases of the BMA and Walters, and the SJMA, respectively. The competition and their relationships with the surrounding community shift the museums’ strategic orientation towards becoming a community resource.

Ultimately, the museum is vulnerable to its environment. This must be taken into consideration as it can have a significant impact on the museum’s financial stability. This was the case for the SJMA. The SJMA experienced philanthropic failure when it lost a major corporate sponsor and was unable to replace the income. At that critical juncture, the museum’s leadership had the opportunity to place free admission as a priority and seek creative funding solutions or make other necessary cuts to maintain the policy. However, the museum decided to follow the recommendation to return to charging presented by the earned income consultant. The museum, while maintaining its financial
position, suffered significant decreases in its attendance (returning to pre-free attendance rates); this possibly bears witness to the impact charging has on attendance.

Isomorphism within the Field

In the mid to late 20th century, isomorphism within the museum sector manifested itself through the establishment of professional organizations, academic programs, standards and best practices, and shared organizational policies, such as charging admission. Isomorphism is defined by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) as “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (p. 149). Normative pressures are brought about by formal education and professional organizations, and diffused through employee migration between museums. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that people from similar educational backgrounds will approach problems in much the same way, and further socialization on the job reinforces these conformities. The authors state, “Once a set of organizations emerges as a field, a paradox arises: rational actors make their organizations increasingly similar as they try to change them” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, 147). These circumstances played out in museums in the 1970s and 1980s as they became professionalized, were held to a higher level of accountability, and responded to the changing external environment. One of
those responses was to institute admission charges as a source of earned income and to address the philanthropic failure at the time.

While these conditions are leading an increasing number of museums to institute admission charges in the 1980s, many museums do not introduce charges. Within the sector, two acceptable norms appear. A museum may justify charging admission because of the increasing costs caused by the professionalization of the museum and increased educational programming. However, another museum may decide to remain free because of the increasing importance of public value. The development of these two patterns happens simultaneously and become accepted by the field and the public.

The case study museums were responding to a new isomorphism within the sector – the push to become more accessible. This movement, especially in its early stages, was somewhat contrary to the acceptability of charging admission. However, this situation frees museums to select which norm (admission charges or accessibility) they want to gravitate towards and the flexibility to seriously consider local conditions and support.

While this movement is still shifting the orientation of American art museums, the case study museums made a bold proclamation with their elimination of admission charges. This began with the MIA in 1989. While an increasing number of museums were instituting charges in the 1980s, the MIA broke away from the field and reverted to its previously free status. When other museums considered eliminating their charges, they contacted the MIA to collect
data and advice. Ultimately, this speaks to the continual isomorphism within the museum sector, although one cannot underestimate the exceptional actions these museums took to go against the grain. Today, only 37 percent of museums are free at all times or ask for a voluntary donation (American Association of Museums, 2011, p. 1).

*Public Purpose of Museums*

Beginning in the 1960s, but pursued more intensely in the last two decades, museums have been urged to become inclusive organizations with the main purpose of education. In *Excellence and Equity*, the AAM Task Force on Museum Education outlines its ten principles for the museum field with the first being:

> Assert that museums place education—in the broadest sense of the word—at the center of their public service role. Assure that the commitment to serve the public is clearly stated in every museum’s mission and is central to every museum’s activities. (American Association of Museums, 1992)

AAM’s later initiative, America’s Museums: Building Community, said, “The American Association of Museums urges all museums to embrace their responsibility to be active and collaborative civic institutions and to respond to the aspirations and needs of citizens in their communities” (American Association of Museums, 2006).

Led by visionary leaders, the case study museums were inspired by the call to action to become more accessible and increase their public value. Their
views went from internally look to outward focused. One of the main goals of the policy is to better reflect the museum’s community. However, it is not enough to drop admission charges. Further changes to become welcoming, inclusive organizations are essential. For example, the Walters made significant programmatic changes before the policy change. In the case of its outreach to the Hispanic community and refugees, the museum saw an unmet need and engaged these groups in dialogue. Similarly, the MIA saw free admission as the first step of many to become more accessible and user friendly. Before the changes, it was disconnected from its local Whittier neighborhood. Director Maurer saw the admission policy as an opportunity to unite the museum and community, but also stressed that going free alone would not suffice.

Policy Implications

Museums are often divorced from the larger nonprofit sector, although they face similar challenges as they strive to fulfill their missions. Echoing Weisbrod (1988) and Gronbjer (1993), Stephanie Moulton, a professor in public administration, argues, “Nonprofit organizations should seek to align their resource dependencies with the core behaviors (roles) and values that they seek to espouse” (2010, p. 15). Moulton (2010) continues, “Effectiveness is not only survival of the organization, but also survival of the nonprofit purpose and the distinctiveness of the organization” (p. 16). If museums orient themselves to those that have the ability to pay the admission charge, how will those museums
change? Will they continue to exist for a public purpose or instead exist for a select group of private citizens?

Furthermore, as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, what is the art museum’s duty, according to their legal status, to serve not only those that are inclined to visit, but also those that traditionally have not been included in the typical audience profile? Can museums continue to say they serve the public if they are not reaching out to these communities, which are often the communities geographically closest to the museum?

These questions are difficult to answer and challenge the current way many museums think about themselves. Individual museums may be slow to change; thus, change is best driven by academic programs and professional associations. Emerging museum professionals are particularly situated to bring fresh ideas into the museum and challenge current practices. Asserting and publicizing the museum’s public value will be critical as museums compete for public and private dollars. Accountability and consequently, evaluation are important parts of this. Weil (2000) wrote:

[T]he awkward fact still remains that, for a variety of reasons, the museum field has never really agreed—or, at least until recently, has scarcely even sought to agree—on some standard by which the relative worthiness or merit or excellence of its constituent member institutions might be measured. (p. 1)

Currently, the Internal Revenue Service, the regulatory body over charities, evaluates nonprofit organizations based solely on the “public support test.” Under Section 509(a)(1), as a "publicly supported" organization, an
organization must be able to show that normally it either receives at least one-third of its financial support from a combination of the "general public" and public charities and government, or that it receives at least 10 percent from these sources and meets various other tests (e.g., has a broadly representative board of directors, and actively looks for money). If a nonprofit organization fails the public support test for two consecutive years, it will lose its status as a public charity. However, I argue that the public support test is not a sufficient measure of effectiveness or public value.

Museums have often expressed their public value by saying they steward priceless collections. However, the museum’s worth does not begin and end with the resources within its control, including its collection. Worth is not determined by the size of a budget or staff. It is not even determined by attendance figures. Attendance measures are useful, but not sufficient indicators of effectiveness or value. To successfully calculate effectiveness and public value, museums must focus on outcomes (effects and changes that are a result of outputs), not outputs (products or services produced). The Urban Institute (2010) suggests building a common framework to measure nonprofit performance, and offers an Outcome Indicator Chart for the performing arts. A similar chart can be created for art museums and championed by professional associations.
Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this research invite further investigation on several levels. First, further research needs to be done on the effectiveness of free admission policies. Research should look at not only output (number of new visitors, minority visitors, etc.), but also outcomes (increased knowledge of the art, increased appreciation for the arts, increased social bonds in the community, etc.). American art museums should take note of the dilemma in the United Kingdom’s national museums. There has not been sufficient data collection or analysis to determine the impact of the policy. This research can serve two purposes—reinforcement of the museum’s decision to go free and leverage funding from donors.

Briefly presented in this paper are the multiple reasons why people do not visit art museums. More in depth research needs to be done in American art museums on current marketing efforts as well as programming and how these factors affect visitor demographics. Moreover, are there other factors (cost, local competition, distance, social behaviors) that affect audience demographics? How can museums respond to these factors to increase the scope of their reach?

Finally, what are the current and future shifts in audience demographics? The American Association of Museums’ Center for the Future of Museums published a report in 2008 that identified and analyzed the emerging changes that will reshape society and are highly likely to affect museums. One of the most staggering forecasts is that in 2034, the American population will be 46 percent
minority (p. 6). Currently, minorities represent only 9 percent of the core museum audience (p. 6). Museums will need to proactively address these changes in an attempt to remain culturally relevant.

Conclusion

Recently, a graduate student wrote, “In looking towards the future of art museums in American, the question that comes into my mind is, “how can we afford not to charge?” (McFelter, 2006, p. 77). However, I would pose the opposite question, How can museums continue to charge? Museums cannot ignore their legal status as 501(c) (3) charitable organizations, which exists to serve the public. While it is difficult to define “the public,” an examination of the often-perceived elitist culture of art museums would suggest that museums have not become more inclusive places. Fleming (2002) states, “museums have not been democratic, inclusive organizations, but agents of social exclusion, and not by accident but by design” (p. 213). Are admission charges contributing to the “social exclusion” Fleming writes about? A German study, published in the Journal of Cultural Economics (1998), revealed “entrance fees to be the only significant subjective barrier” to attendance. If museums are the one’s instituting entrance fees and these fees are keeping people out of the museum, what does that say about the museum? Are admission fees creating social stratification, contradicting the museum’s mission to serve and educate the public? If so, are
admission charges “costing” the museums more in public image than they gain in earned income?
Figure 1. Art Museum Income Categorization
Figure 2. Pricing Strategy Matrix
References


Hoppe, E. J. (2008). *The Value of a Student and Community Docent Program: A Case Study at the Wexner Center for the Arts* (Published master’s thesis). The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.


Zollinger Sweeney, B. (2003). *Student Learning in an Art Museum: A Study of Docent-led Tours and Changes in Docent Training to Improve Visitors’ Experiences* (Published doctoral dissertation). The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.
Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

Date

Name
Address
City, State Zip

Dear <POTENTIAL INTERVIEWEE>:

You are invited to participate in a research project as part of a Masters thesis titled *The Cost of Free Admission: A Comparative Study Examining the Feasibility of Eliminating Museum Admission Charges*, conducted by Sarah Cortell from The Ohio State University’s Arts Policy and Administration program. The purpose of this study is to understand the circumstances surrounding the policy decision to eliminate admission charges in American art museums.

In recent years, several American art museums have eliminated admission charges. Through an extensive literature review, I will construct a genealogy of admission charges in American art museums. Additionally, I seek to determine the factors influencing organizational policy with regard to admission charges and understand the strategic changes American art museums have made to eliminate their admission charges. Through this comparative case study, I will examine three or four museums to understand why and how these museums were able to eliminate their admission charges. This research will be important to the field as museum professionals and policy makers strive to balance mission with money as they set national and organizational policy.

You were selected to participate in this study because of your experience and expertise in the area of <DEPARTMENT> at <MUSEUM>, which eliminated its admission charge. If you decide to participate in this research project, you will be asked to provide relevant organizational materials and participate in a semi-structured interview during the first months of 2011. Interviews will take place at your convenience, via Skype internet phone (lasting approximately one hour) or via e-mail. If you wish, interview questions will be provided beforehand for your consideration. In addition to taking handwritten notes, with your permission, I will use an audio recorder for transcription and validation purposes. You may also be asked to provide follow-up information through phone calls or e-mail.
If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (440) 832-1261 or Cortell.1@osu.edu, or Dr. Margaret J. Wyszomirski at Wyszomirski.1@osu.edu. For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at (800) 678-6251.

Thank you in advance for your interest and consideration. I will contact you shortly to speak about your potential involvement in this study.

Sincerely,

Sarah Cortell
Appendix B: Consent Form

The Cost of Free Admission: A Comparative Study Examining the Feasibility of Eliminating Museum Admission Charges

Sarah Cortell
The Ohio State University
Arts Policy and Administration Program

You are invited to participate in a research project as part of a Masters thesis titled The Cost of Free Admission: A Comparative Study Examining the Feasibility of Eliminating Museum Admission Charges, conducted by Sarah Cortell from The Ohio State University's Arts Policy and Administration program. The purpose of this study is to understand the circumstances surrounding the policy decision to eliminate admission charges in American art museums.

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Any information that is obtained in connection with this study will be carefully and securely maintained. Your consent to participate in this interview, as indicated below, demonstrates your willingness to have your name used in any resulting documents and publications. Your participation is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

I believe the results of this research project will be a great value to the community of art museum professionals. However, I cannot guarantee that you personally will receive any benefits from this research.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (440) 832-1261 or Cortell.1@osu.edu, or Dr. Margaret J. Wyszomirski at Wyszomirski.1@osu.edu. For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at (800) 678-6251.

Please read and initial each of the following statements to indicate your consent:

_____ I consent to the use of audio recording and note taking during my interview.

_____ I consent to my identification as a participant in this study.

_____ I consent to the potential use of quotations from the interview.

_____ I consent to the use of information I provide regarding the organization with which I am associated.

_____ I wish to have the opportunity to review and possibly revise my comments and the information that I provide prior to those data appearing in the final revision of any publications that may result from this study.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty, that you have received a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. You have been given a copy of this letter to keep.
Thank you for your interest and participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Sarah Cortell
Appendix C: Research Instrument, Semi-Structured Interview Form

Semi-Structured Interview

Case Study:
Date:
Location:
Interviewee Details:
Consent? Audio recording? OK to quote? Member check? Thank you?

Description of Interview Content:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding</th>
<th>Q &amp; A</th>
<th>Notes to Self</th>
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<td>Which parties initiated the policy change?</td>
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<td>Why did those parties want to eliminate the admission charge?</td>
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<td>Did you do any type of visitor survey or trial run before eliminating the admission charge?</td>
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<td>After eliminating the charge, did your development strategies change? If so, how?</td>
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<td>How did the policy change affect your audience?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How did the museum change how it marketed itself, its new admission policy, and its programming?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Is there anyone else at the museum that you recommend I speak to regarding the elimination of the admission charge?</td>
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