

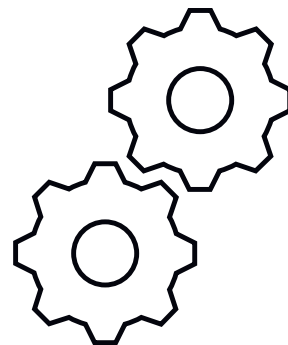
Museum Public Programs and the Pandemic in Virginia

Virginia Association
of Museums
Leadership and
Advocacy Fellowship
Sally Meyer
2020-2021

Methodology Note

There are several factors that impact the data presented in this report.

- This survey was distributed through various museum professional associations, most notably the Virginia Association of Museums in order to reach the broadest possible base of responses.
- Due to the pandemic and the nature of museum work, responses were most likely limited to institutions that have the resources, time, and staff to submit a survey.
- Responses were received between January 27, 2021 and April 27, 2021, during which state and federal regulations and recommendations changed regularly, likely impacting response content
- All quotes and data presented in this report were pulled from “Public Programs and the Pandemic” survey of Virginia museums unless otherwise indicated.



Identity and Bias Note

As a white, cis-gender, straight woman in a field dominated by people with similar identities, I am aware that my experience and perspective can impact this data and how it is interpreted. In order to ensure this data is useful for museum professionals and inclusive of many different perspectives, I took several steps listed below.

1. The survey questions were reviewed and edited by Dale Hall, Customer Research Specialist at the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation
2. Survey questions were also reviewed by additional museum professionals and educators for clarity
3. Every effort was taken to publicize the survey to Virginia museums of all types, sizes, and topics including publishing on national and local message boards
4. Responses were anonymous, and any potentially identifying information has been removed for this report
5. This report has been reviewed for clarity by museum professionals and educators prior to publication



Introduction

In March of 2020, museums, businesses, and institutions all over the United States closed their doors to attempt to slow the spread of COVID-19, a deadly virus that was spreading rapidly in the United States. The first confirmed case in Virginia was reported on March 7, 2020 in Fort Belvoir. As of May 27, 2021 the Virginia Department of Health reported 674,439 positive cases of COVID-19 and 11,152 deaths in the Commonwealth of Virginia.* While compiling information and trying to make meaning out of this time period, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that this crisis fundamentally changed our communities and our lives.

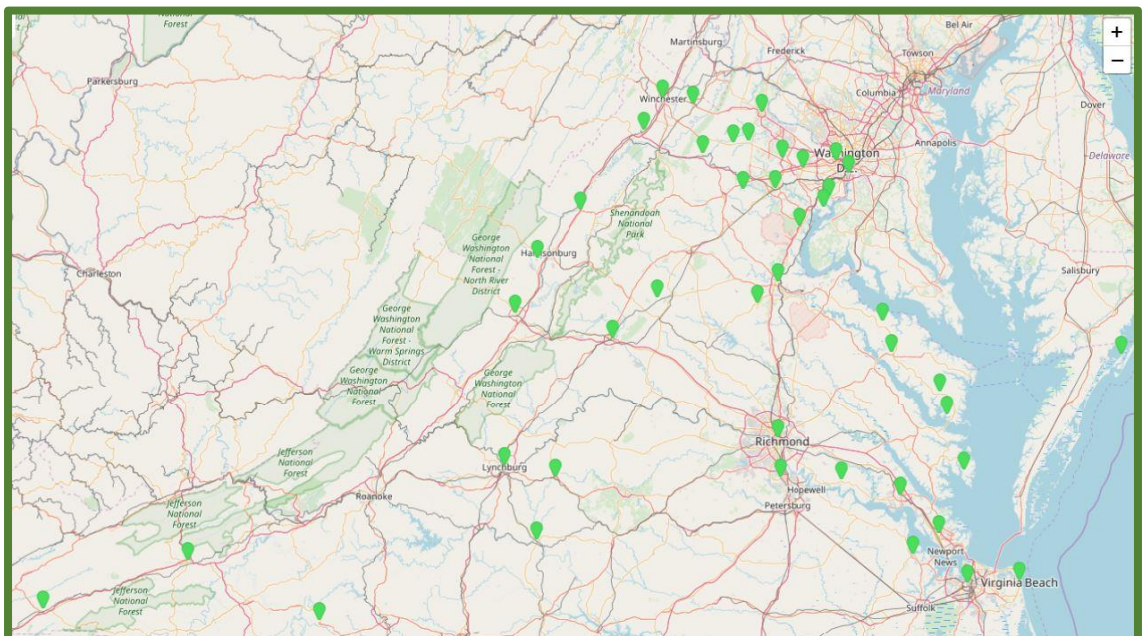
Despite the widespread fear, uncertainty, and isolation experienced by residents across the Commonwealth, museums began to move. Museum educators took programs online, provided opportunities for members of their communities to connect, gathered resources for teachers and students, attended webinars to learn from each other, realigned budgets and revenue goals, and made it work wherever and however possible.

This report represents a small window into what this individual and collective effort involved and what it accomplished. It includes data on respondents, information on loss of staff due to the pandemic with comparison to national data, how museums shifted public programming models and examples of successful (and less successful) programs with rationale provided by respondents.

It is clear from the last 18 months that museums are essential to their stakeholders and communities no matter their size, budget, and audience. Recording and remembering this period will be essential for advocating for ourselves and our work into the future. It is also essential that we record the lessons learned as museums face a world more vulnerable to widespread crisis than ever before.

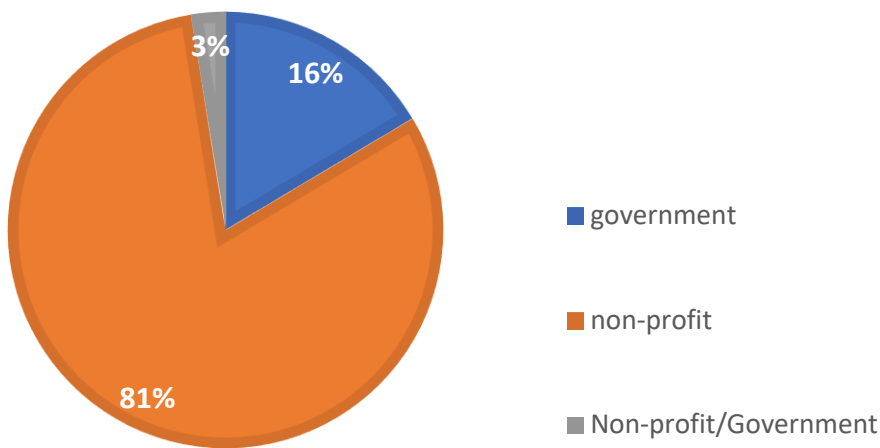
Approximate Locations of Respondents

Respondents represented institutions in all regions of the Commonwealth including the Coastal Plain/Tidewater, Piedmont, the Blue Ridge and Shenandoah Valley, and Southwest Virginia.



*Virginia COVID-19 Cases and Deaths <https://www.virginia.gov/coronavirus/>

ORGANIZATION TYPES

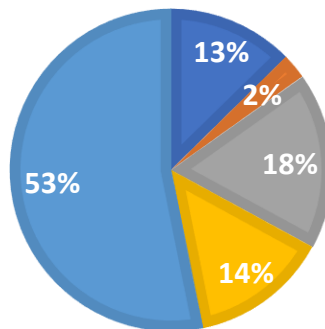


No respondents represent for-profit institutions. Most respondents self-identified as non-profits or government institutions.



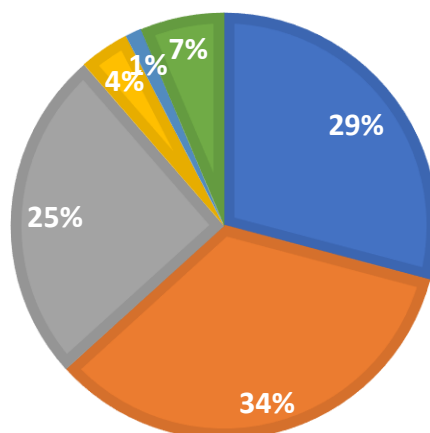
ORGANIZATION FUNDING

- Mix of private and public
- Predominantly federally funded
- Predominantly locality or city funded
- Predominantly state/commonwealth funded
- Privately funded



OPERATING STAFF SIZE

- 0-5 employees
- 6-20 employees
- 21-50 employees
- 51-75 employees
- 75-100 employees
- 101+ employees



88% of respondents are small-medium institutions with 0-50 employees

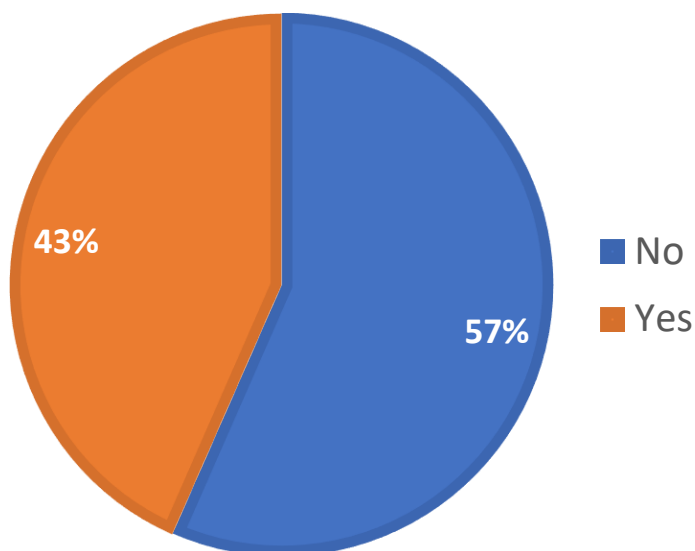
The impact on staffing....

- In November of 2020, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) reported that museums were “losing millions while operating on slim reserves”*
- They surveyed museum directors and found that 53% of responding museums have had to furlough or lay off staff
- Museums most frequently listed the following positions “being affected by the layoffs:” *
 - Frontline—68%
 - Education—40%
 - Security/maintenance—29%
 - Collections staff—26%

These are unsettling numbers to say the least. The future of museums is brighter than it was when the above statistics were published in October 2020. As Elizabeth Merritt states in a recent AAM blog post, by the end of April 2021 “70 percent of US museums had reopened to the public.”**

What does this mean for Virginia?

HAVE YOU LOST PROGRAMMING STAFF DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?



- Less than half of respondents have lost staff due to the pandemic. This paints a slightly brighter picture than AAM’s data.
- The loss of staff, no matter how minor has difficult and heavy repercussions.
 - Our friends and colleagues are unemployed and looking for jobs where there are very few
 - If Virginia museums mirror the national data, we face losing a generation of frontline and education staff (representing, in general, the youngest and newest professionals) who are more likely to leave the field for good.

*National Snapshot of COVID-19 Impact on US Museums, AAM and Wilkening Consulting. October 15-28, 2020 <<https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/AAMCOVID-19SnapshotSurvey-1.pdf>>

**“The next COVID scenario: Delta Force,” Elizabeth Merritt. June 17, 2021. Center for the Future of Museums <<https://www.aam-us.org/2021/06/17/the-next-covid-scenario-delta-force/>>

Survey responses indicate that employee and staff burnout are likely to affect Virginia museums...



Yes, we lost staff due to the pandemic.

“we are not able to do nearly as much as we did last year”

“...we were able to bring back one interpreter to their normal hours. This still adds extra burden since that is one a part-time position doing 2 persons worth of programs.”

“Exhibiting staffing and programs essentially halved”

“Not necessarily [impacted]. We have an incredible team who is typically all hands-on deck.”

“Furloughed part time staff have been lost, challenging our ability to offer the scope of programming we had done pre-COVID. But it has caused us to rethink whether it's time for a change anyway...”

No, we did not lose program staff

“We haven't lost programming staff, but we did lose communications staff, and since everything digital in our organization flows through them and since everything is digital...”

“Programs have proceeded largely as normal.”

“We didn't lose program staff but lost other staff from the education department. Those duties have now been distributed to those of us that are left. As things approach normal it means there aren't enough hours in the day to do everything that needs to get done.”

In April 2021 the American Alliance of Museum's released results of a survey, "Measuring the Impact of COVID-19 on People in the Museum Field."*

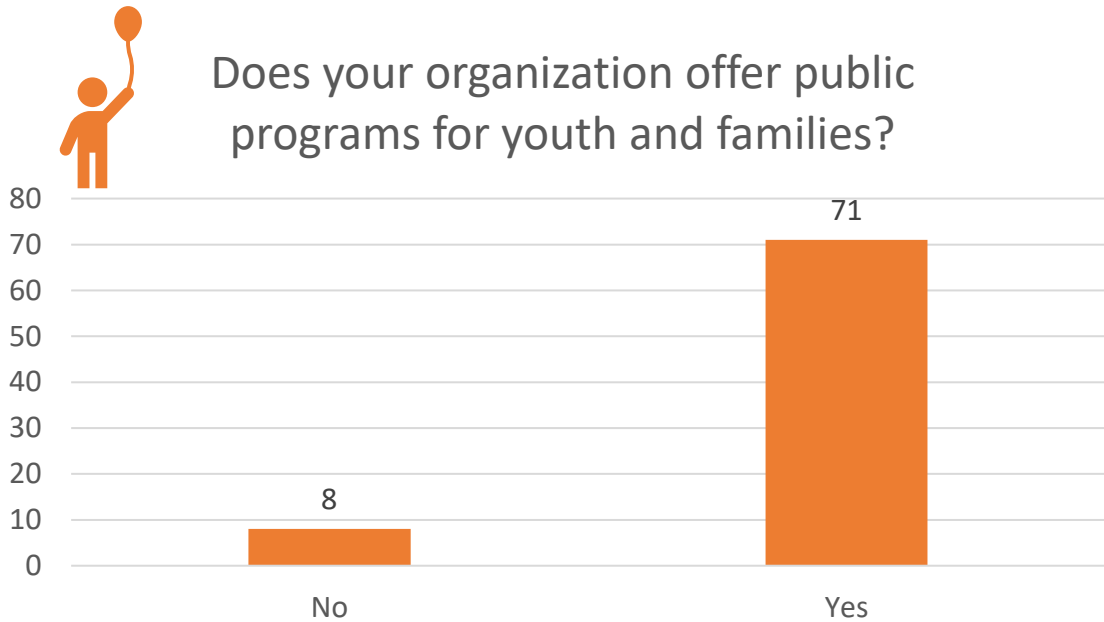
- Respondents (mostly full or part time museum staff), reported that **“the pandemic has taken a significant toll on their mental health and well being—even worse than it has on their financial situation”**
- One fifth of museum staff think it is unlikely they will be working in the museum sector in three years and **cite burnout as a significant barrier to remaining in the field.**
- Additionally, BIPOC respondents reported “higher financial stress and fewer financial resources than white respondents”



*Measuring the Impact of COVID-19 on People in the Museum Field, AAM and Wilkening Consulting. March 9-17, 2021. <<https://www.aam-us.org/2021/04/13/measuring-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-people-in-the-museum-field/>>

Staying Resilient for our Audiences

Despite the challenges of March 2020 through April 2021, museums across the Commonwealth have continued or stepped up their program offerings.

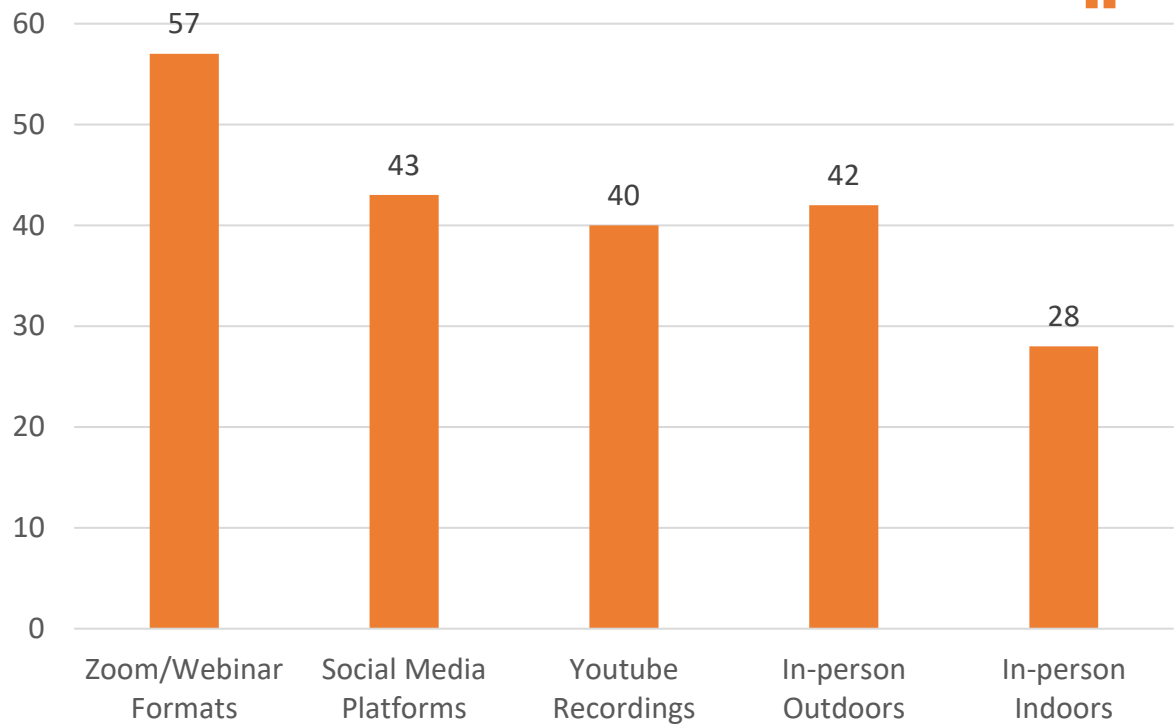


1 respondent—not sure

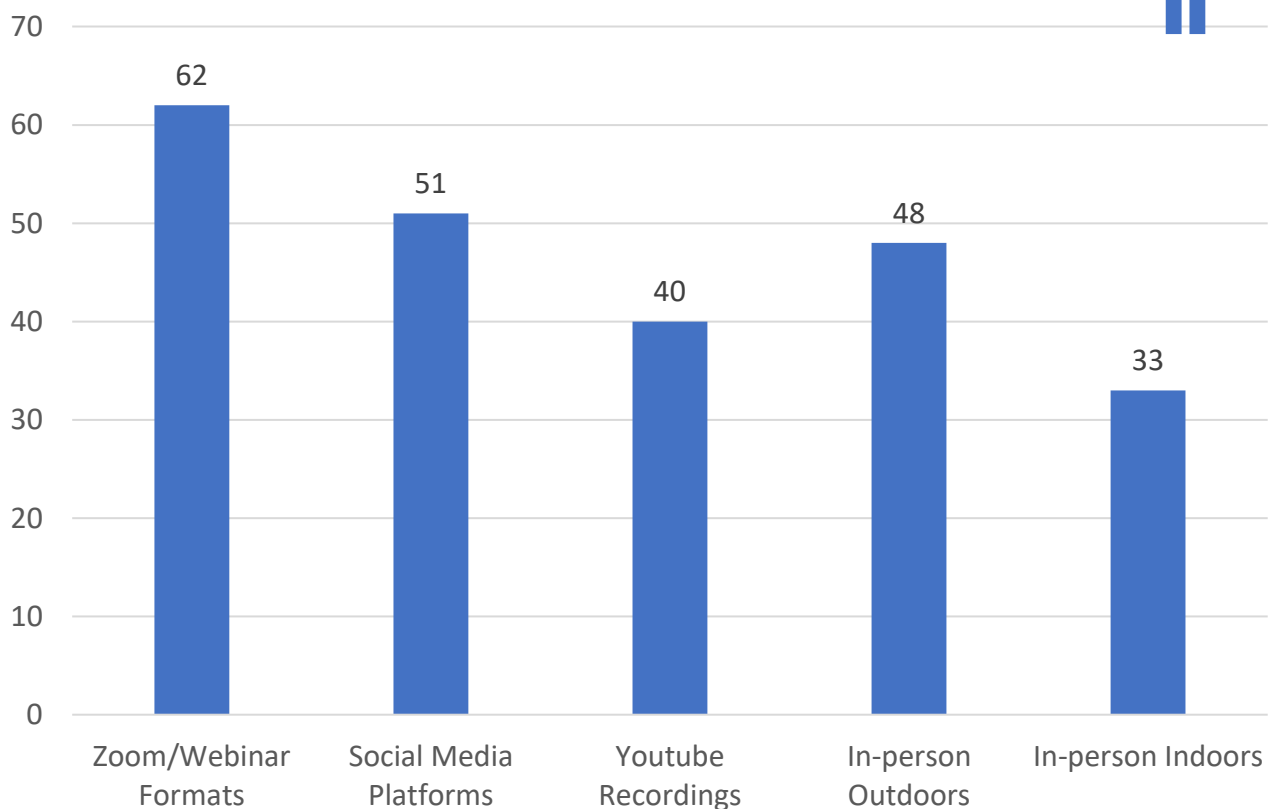


2 respondents—not sure

What spaces/mediums do you currently use to conduct programs for youth and families?



What spaces/medium do you currently use to conduct programs for adults?



How did the pandemic change the spaces/medium you utilize for public programs?



In a word: virtual

“We did not do Zoom/online programs prior to the pandemic”

“We've had to **radically adapt to the digital space** much sooner than we had anticipated.”

“We considered online programming for the first time because of the pandemic”

“We are **completely virtual**”

“We use **more outdoor space** and host **more digital content.**”

“Took our existing lecture series **100% Zoom**”

“**First time using Zoom/webinar format.** Elimination of most indoor programming.”

“We **never had virtual programs before** the pandemic and now all of our programs are virtual.”

“We had to pivot all programming **from heavily in-person to completely virtual with minimum turn around.**”

Comparison to National Data

Cuseum published data collected in January 2021 of over 500 cultural professionals on “The Impact of Virtual Programs on Revenue Generation for Cultural Organizations. Their survey included Art Museums (18%), History Museums & Landmarks (35%) Science Centers & Natural History Museums (11%), Children’s Museums (5%), Parks, Gardens, and Nature Centers (5%), Zoos and Aquariums (4%), and other (22%).

Of the 500+ museum professionals surveyed, 92% said that their institution offers some kind of digital programming. *

Initially, virtual programs were a “stopgap” in order to keep audiences engaged and to share museum resources with the public.

Cuseum concludes that “even as organizations move through the phases of reopening, many are planning to continue virtual programs, both to engage audiences and recover lost revenue from the pandemic era.”* They also suggest three considerations when determining which programs to continue as we reopen and increase in-person offerings.

1. Return on Investment
 - How much revenue does the program generate? What requires the least resources and highest reward?
2. Unique Value
 - Will audiences participate virtually when in-person is an option?
3. Future-Proof Potential
 - Does this program have value beyond the pandemic?

When asked what indicates if a program is successful, Virginia museum professionals provided the following:



Participation numbers

Repeat customers

Increased interest



Engaged audience

Good evaluations

Participants learn something new



Increased donations

Ticket Sales

Funding opportunities

The above indicators of success were reflected in discussion of specific programs as well. Successful programs fulfilled a need during the pandemic, from in-person, limited capacity workshops for youth and students to virtual happy hours for adults.

Participation numbers, repeat customers, and increased interest lagged overall for virtual youth programs. Many respondents cited burnout or zoom fatigue for students who do class online. **In contrast, outdoor and in-person limited participation youth programs were cited as “most successful” by respondents.** Some institutions also received positive feedback on self-guided and scavenger hunt programs. Unsurprisingly, many respondents attribute the repeat customers and good evaluations for in-person programs to parents’ desire to have something outside the house to do to keep children engaged. Social media was another way to access youth and families for programs, resources, and recordings. Physical kits or resources participants had to pick up and/or pay for seemed to have limited success.

Virtual adult program offerings resulted in high participation numbers, engaged audience members, and increased donations or ticket sales. Several respondents cited programs with a “fun” or “lighthearted” element, perhaps relieving the strain and stress of the last 18 months for participants. Virtual tours also had high engagement, especially when targeted to older adults and seniors who were extremely isolated. **In some cases, virtual programs allowed institutions to accommodate more participants than they would have otherwise.** Respondents cited program cost as impacting program success or failure, charging for virtual programs seems to have reduced participation while donation based or “pay-what-you-can” programs have resulted in registrants paying more than the suggested amount. Outdoor or limited in-person programs were also reported to be successful, when participants felt safe to attend.

Unsurprisingly, program success is difficult to pin down. One program could be a blockbuster for one institution and flop for another. What is clear, despite the strain and difficulty in navigating the pandemic landscape, Virginia museums exhibited astounding creativity and resilience in the types and scope of programs they offered.

Program Goals and Participation

Overall, respondents indicated that their program goals have not changed due to the pandemic; however, respondents noticed a shift in the below (from most to least reported).

- New methods
 - Virtual programs, moving programs outdoors, social media, etc.
- New audiences
 - Virtual programs open opportunities to reach out to audiences around the country and the world
- Redefining success
 - Reducing financial and participant goals, focusing on engagement and quality of interactions
- Focus on safety
 - Ensuring that participants not only have an enjoyable experience, but are safe from the pandemic

“The mission has not changed, just the methods of meeting it.”

“Our program goals have not changed very much, just the tactics have changed. We still hope to bring people a fun experience, teach them a little something while we're at it, and give them a chance to talk with other folks. “

“The only change was how we interacted with the community, members, donors, and sponsors given that we could not offer programming in-person.”

When asked why visitors participate in programming, responses fell into a few categories (from most to least reported):

- Learning
- Fun
- Accessibility
- Social experiences
- Supporting the museum
- Reputation

Though we may implement new methods in the future, and hope to reach different or broader audiences, the work of museum education remains the same.



Conclusions

At the beginning of this process, I set out to answer the below questions:

- **Have Virginia museums changed their educational programming due to the pandemic? If so, how?**

We are all still reeling from the changes in our daily lives even as we attempt to make meaning out of this time.

Virginia museums have certainly adapted to the pandemic by developing virtual programs, many for the first time. Museums built partnerships, supported schools, students, and assisted isolated families throughout the pandemic. The biggest change was a largescale shift to virtual program offerings, utilizing live webinar and workshop formats, social media interaction, and recording experts and educators. Most respondents now offer programs using Zoom or webinar formats when they previously had not.

- **Are Virginia museums creating or refocusing programming goals (virtual and in person) to help participants cope with the pandemic?**

While goals for programs overall haven't changed, how we focus and go about them has changed for many institutions. Without the ability to have large in-person programs, respondents shifted to produce engaging and interesting programs, reducing their attendance expectations or marking success in different ways. Some seek to reach national and international audiences through virtual platforms, others reduced program capacity and found that the programs were better for employees and participants.

- **What happens when we approach the point where it is safe to be out in the world again, what changes will remain, and what will "go back to the way it was?"**

Return to in-person visitors and programs without masks has seemed to happen rapidly. However, **84% of respondents plan to continue some or all of their virtual program offerings**. While an interesting and exciting change, we have to remember that many institutions are now operating with a smaller staff and attempting to layer back in in-person programs. Additionally, we cannot forget that a crisis mode or an "all hands-on deck" mentality is not sustainable over the long term. While museum educators and program creators exhibited astonishing creativity and flexibility, museums must take a hard look at how to maintain and sustain the success of programs without sacrificing the people that make it happen. Below are some questions to consider when determining next steps for individuals, institutions, and the Virginia museum community:

How do I/we keep the lessons we've learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, while returning to in-person programs and events?

How can I/we care for my/our fellow museum professionals? How can I care for myself?

How will I/we counteract the impact of staff loss for the field? How can I ensure pay equity for employees at my institution so that we can weather future crises?

How can I/we advocate for museum funding and resources? How will I explain the value of Virginia museums to my community, the state, the nation?

Thank you!

Thank you to all the museum professionals and practitioners who took the time to complete this survey and contributed to this report. Special thanks to Felicia Abrams for the time spent reviewing survey questions, guiding the process, and reviewing the results. Thank you to Dale Hall, Customer Research Specialist at the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation. Many thanks to everyone at the Virginia Association of Museums for their work in disseminating the survey and report, in particular Jennifer Thomas, Christina Newton, and Rebecca Guest. Lastly, thank you to the staff at the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley and the Director of Education, Mary Ladrack for their support throughout this fellowship.

2020-2021 Virginia Association of Museums Leadership and Advocacy Fellowship

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I live and work on the homeland of the Monacan and Manahoac peoples and their descendants.