

2008

NEW HAMPSHIRE LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
CHALLENGE FINAL REPORT—PRESENTED BY THE
FINLAY FOUNDATION

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Table of Contents

Pg. 2.	<i>Synopsis</i>
Pg. 3	<i>Methodology</i>
Pg. 4	<i>Participation</i>
Pg. 4	<i>Success Stories</i>
Pg. 6	<i>Results</i>
Pg. 7	<i>Winners</i>
Pg. 8	<i>Conclusion</i>

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Synopsis

On December 18, 2008, the Finlay Foundation awarded a total of \$97,500 to nine New Hampshire cultural institutions in the culmination of the foundation's Library and Museum Challenge. Together, these organizations, alongside more than 90 other libraries, museums and historical societies across the state, signed up nearly 32,000 new members over the course of 2008. The result was a challenge that many administrators confided helped breathe new life and visitors into their organizations – one that saw membership rolls among the 51 libraries that took part rise by an average of 85.6 percent.

The motivation behind the Challenge was simple: in an age when technology, the job market, and demands on personal lives impact the time and interest Americans are willing invest in their museums and libraries, there is a heightened need for these institutions to provide both relevance and continued quality to patrons.

News accounts and trend analysis show young Americans more than ever turning to the convenience of the Internet as their tool of choice for research and homework; more Americans than ever favoring their credit cards over their library cards to buy books or download them off of their computers; and more college students than ever, offered the prospect of higher wages and greater stability, choosing business, law, and medicine over a track in the cultural sector.

The Challenge was the idea of Robert and Karin Finlay, whose foundation each year supports an array of forward-thinking cultural and educational initiatives aimed at sparking civic and community involvement. Mr. Finlay, a Milford, NH-based businessman and philanthropist has long believed that the best way to motivate and promote positive change is by providing incentives to innovate and offer new solutions.

As passionate supporters of local libraries, museums and historical societies, Mr. and Mrs. Finlay saw an urgency to help these community institutions stay afloat. They viewed these institutions as essential to providing visitors the tools they need as citizens, as students of art and literature, and as the torch-bearers of New Hampshire's proud democratic tradition.

With consultation from Dr. Anne-Imelda Radice, Director of the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the oversight of NH State Librarian Michael York and NH Historical Society Executive Director Bill Veillette, the Finlay Foundation in December 2007 announced the kickoff of the 2008 NH Library and Museum Challenge.

The Challenge was launched with two goals in mind: to help build a sustainable future for cultural institutions across New Hampshire, and to nurture an environment where learners of all ages and backgrounds walked out of their libraries, museums and historical societies both enriched and eager to return. The top-placing library, museum and historical society would each receive a \$25,000 prize.

Methodology

Recognizing the distinctiveness of each community and institution, the Challenge's framework was kept deliberately open-ended and evaluation deliberately simple. Over the course of the year, participating institutions would submit short forms laying out their approaches for recruitment and their progress in the form of increased or decreased membership numbers.

The Foundation believed strongly in not adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to the Challenge, and instead allowing institutions and administrators to recognize their own strengths, to innovate and to develop their own models for success. The hope would be that the models developed over this Challenge could then be adopted as best practices for other institutions looking to grow, both regionally and nationally. Participants received a list of their counterparts in the competition and were encouraged to contact one another and share and compare approaches.

Results, meanwhile, were determined by cross-tabulating percentage increases with actual number increases in membership, so as not to penalize any towns based on their populations.

For instance, it would have been easier for towns with smaller populations to score higher in the percentage ranking, since any jump in membership was likely to more profoundly affect that measure. Conversely, towns and cities which began with large populations and healthy enrollments may not have fared as well, since there was not as much room to grow. The Dorchester Historical Society, for example, saw membership jump from 12 to 112 members, an increase of 833 percent, while membership at the Davis Public Library in Stoddard leapt from 153 to 490, or 220.26 percent – enough to easily lead the library category of the competition.

At the same time, the Davis number-increase didn't approach the numbers coming from the Portsmouth Public Library, which handed out some 2,346 new library cards in 2008 – but whose membership (now 17,446) only climbed 15.54 percent comparatively.

The result was a tabulation process that averaged an organization's rankings in both the percentage and numbers categories – a measure that simply but effectively, transparently and fairly, was able to compare results and make allowances for disparity in size. If an organization finished 10th in number increase and 5th in percentage increase, its final aggregate would be 7.5 – a number likely to place it near the top of the rankings.

Participation

In all, exactly 100 institutions from around the state took part in the Challenge, an encouraging number, given the newness of the competition and a relatively low-key publicity campaign.

Fifty-one of the state's 237 public libraries took part, from as far south as Salem to as far north as Bethlehem; while participation among museums was more limited – 14 out of 113 institutions. The largest turnout, percentage-wise, was among historical societies – 35 of the state's 60 organizations, or nearly 60 percent, took part. Institutions ranged in size from the before mentioned Dorchester Historical Society, with its 12 members, to the Manchester City Library – the state's largest – with some 47,629 members. The average size of a library going into the Challenge was 5,323 members. The numbers were significantly smaller for museums and historical societies, given the scopes of their audiences.

Success Stories

The approaches taken to recruit new members were as varied and individualized as the institutions themselves. If there was a commonality, it was the remarkable enthusiasm with which nearly every organization embraced the challenge and sought to innovate.

Strategies for raising visibility and membership ranged from traditional means (raffles, newspaper articles and ads, public service announcements, radio ads, summer reading programs, speaker series, calendars and upgraded membership benefits) to a host of new ideas uniquely catered to learners of all ages and backgrounds.

The Peterborough Historical Society more than doubled its membership (from 321 to 708), in part, after beginning a children's program called History Kids which included a special monthly newsletter with games, crafts and activities exploring local history, as well as free museum admission for the child member and an adult. The Josiah Carpenter Library in Pittsfield,

meanwhile, offered an opportunity to obtain a library card through their website, with one enterprising college student directing visitors to the site through a special Facebook web event. Membership at the Carpenter Library rose nearly 60 percent, from 1,408 to 2,219.

The New England Ski Museum in Franconia used the Challenge as an excuse to build a new membership software database, aimed at keeping track of dues, lapsed memberships, and catalog and internet sales. Administrators there went out and researched how other successful nonprofits manage membership, challenged board members to recruit new visitors, and worked to convert complementary members into dues-paying members.

“Whether the New England Ski Museum wins the challenge grant or not, the change effected by the program has been deep and permanent, and many benefits have already been realized from our participation in the challenge,” wrote museum director Jeff Leich, who saw membership jump 26 percent from 1,376 to 1,730. “In fact, additional dues alone in the challenge period have already increased revenue almost to the amount of the challenge award.”

Other successful approaches included the Salisbury Historical Society’s introduction of a cemetery walk through the Old Baptist Cemetery, where five re-enactors portrayed members of Salisbury’s historic families from the Revolutionary and Civil War periods – an event so popular that it was repeated at Old Home Day. Salisbury’s membership jumped 283 percent from 154 to 591.

While the Laconia Public Library boosted membership through a concerted speaking campaign at area schools, Boys and Girls Clubs, adult education classes and senior communities, the Moultonborough Public Library began a BookStart/ Book Smart program, which gave every child from pre-K to first grade a brand new hardcover book in a library tote bag, complete with an invitation to come to the library and get his or her own library card.

The small town of Stoddard, meanwhile saw the Challenge as an opportunity to redefine its library’s role as both a center of learning and community gathering place. By tripling its staff and hours of service, quadrupling and digitally cataloguing its collections, setting up high-speed Internet access and book clubs for readers of all ages, and perhaps most importantly, launching the Friends of Davis Public Library to help raise funds and purchase passes for regional museums, administrators more than doubled their membership rolls.

“In all honesty, we have, for quite some time, seen a need for change in the status quo of our little library and the initiatives (we instituted) may have taken place anyway,” wrote library

director Amy Kraemer-Preston. “But your challenge has certainly contributed ‘to energizing the cultural workforce’ in our community, and the ripple effects are being felt every week. The Davis Public Library is no longer a forgotten building, but rather, it has come to life and is now a destination for young and old, parents and children, residents and vacationers.”

Results

With so many success stories, determining a winner would have proved a daunting challenge in and of itself, were it not for the formula determined at the launch of the competition. Regardless of the outcome, the vast majority of participants were winners.

Among the 51 participating libraries, 35 increased their rolls by an average of 27 percent (excluding Rollinsford, which opened its doors for the first time and welcomed 1,097 new members), with 12 not submitting final numbers, and three posting decreases. Manchester was among those libraries after having purged its rolls near the start of the Challenge as it migrated to a new automated system. But while Manchester had lost nearly 10,000 members from the purge, it managed to gain 5,505 new members back, in part through its “One Card, Endless Possibilities” program.

Among the 14 museums which took part, 10 increased their membership by an average of 93.26 percent, with two not submitting final numbers and two posting decreases. By far, the biggest gainers in the Challenge, percentage-wise, were historical societies. This is, in large part, due to inherently smaller beginning numbers – averages very easily affected by slight increases or decreases. With that said, among the 35 participating institutions, 32 posted average increases of 190.3 percent, with two not submitting final numbers and one disqualified.

The final gains were hard to ignore. And with this in mind, the Finlay Foundation announced on the day of the awards ceremony that it would be issuing prizes not only to the top three finishers, but to the two runners-up in each category. Second place finishers were each awarded \$5,000 and third place finishers \$2,500.

Winners

Library

First Place: The Goffstown Public Library increased its rolls by 45.5 percent, from 3,338 to 4,857 by showing both innovation and enthusiasm that soon became infectious within the community. Ideas included the “Get Carded!” program which included refer-a-friend bookmarks at checkout, video testimonials shown on local access television and YouTube, and even a song written and recorded by a local resident. They also included a teen video project, a ticker on the town’s website and a host of promo materials, from “Curl up with a good book” mugs, to “I got checked out at the Goffstown Public Library” bumper magnets.

Second Place: Howe Library in Hanover, with an increase of 26.97 percent from 6,755 to 8,577 members.

Third Place: Laconia Public Library, with an increase of 24.28 percent from 6,799 to 8,450 members.

Museum

First Place: The Laconia Historical & Museum Society more than doubled its numbers, with membership jumping from 158 to 501 members, or 217 percent. Laconia’s impressive effort included a direct mail campaign through the Chamber of Commerce and school system, a raffle, a challenge to board members to each bring in 10 new members, numerous speaking engagements, a benefit concert, and the launch of a genealogy website for members only.

Second Place: The American Independence Museum in Exeter, with an increase of 225 percent from 84 to 273 members.

Third Place: The Enfield Shaker Museum, with an increase of 111 percent from 279 to 591 members.

Historical Society

First Place: The Lake Winnepesaukee Historical Society saw membership explode by 624 percent from 112 to 811 members, through an energetic campaign that included new brochures, membership gift incentives, e-mail blasts to contacts, a challenge to current members to sign up new members or to purchase gift memberships, publicity at local functions, and a final “30 day push”, including a free membership to anyone who supported the society at fundraising events.

Second Place: The Hampton Falls Historical Society, with an increase of 723 percent from 46 to 379 members.

Third Place: The Salisbury Historical Society, with an increase of 283 percent from 154 to 591 members.

Conclusion

At the announcement of this competition in 2007, Dr. Anne-Imelda Radice, Director of the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services, issued a personal challenge to every librarian in the state to recruit at least 50 new visitors in the coming year to their location. If this could be done, she said, New Hampshire would welcome 34,250 new library patrons within its communities.

With Dr. Radice's words and the Finlay Foundation's strong belief in achieving results through incentives, cultural leaders across New Hampshire responded en masse. Over the course of 2008, 100 institutions statewide recruited 31,847 new members to their rolls and, in turn, planted a seed for years of future growth and development.

“At the time your challenge was published, a core group of people was discussing how the Davis Public Library could become a gathering place, a community center of sorts, where people of all backgrounds could come together for common purpose,” wrote Davis Public Library Director Amy Kraemer-Preston. “This is sorely needed in Stoddard, which has seen rapid growth in recent years, demographic shifts and its share of community conflict. We found that it was the library which had the convening authority to bring groups and individuals together to encourage more social discourse. The Finlay Challenge gave us good reason to aggressively expand our community building activities.”

This was a sentiment repeated many times over by participants excited for a fresh opportunity to make improvements, employ creativity, and offer new programs designed to engage and inspire lifelong learners – participants excited for the opportunity to receive both statewide recognition and an infusion of always-needed capital to their institutions.

The result was a series of programs and ideas that helped reinvigorate dozens of institutions across the state, and that could be easily developed and adapted as “best practices” models for their counterparts both regionally and nationally. It was also, for many, a sense of renewed relevance and connection with the communities they serve.

Given the newness of the Challenge and the relative simplicity of evaluation, it is difficult to predict how lasting much of the progress sparked over this past year will be, or what the future holds for many of these institutions. If the anecdotal evidence and the launch of several multi-year initiatives within communities is any indication, it is that many, indeed, have a bright outlook ahead.

This Challenge served as a validation of four basic ideas:

1. That local institutions statewide are served by dedicated citizens who care deeply about their communities and the legacy they leave to future generations of learners.
2. That both recognition and financial incentive can provide a powerful catalyst for community institutions to innovate and offer patrons a gateway to knowledge, culture and community they cannot find anywhere else.
3. That the public has eagerness both to learn and to support local institutions and, that when engaged, will almost always respond favorably, take pride and become invested.
4. That a challenge of this nature and the ideas it helps spark can be easily adapted to virtually any state with private citizens and institutions willing to invest the time, resources and passion.

“There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office, nor wealth receives the slightest consideration,” Andrew Carnegie once said.

The same can certainly be said for museums and historical societies, the repositories of our state and national stories.

So much of what each of these institutions performs each day is about education; about helping kids and their families get ready for school, and about helping to spark a lifelong love of learning. So much of this Challenge has been about helping to ensure that visitors, young and old, are valued by libraries and museums, and, in turn, value them.

While the future for many of these institutions is still being written, the Finlay Foundation has been proud over this past year to have a hand in sparking their planning, and will be excited to monitor their progress in the months and years ahead.