

Building Capacity for Sustainability at Museums and Cultural Organizations

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Museums increasingly prioritize sustainability, yet sustainability includes broad goals, can be challenging to define, and can be normatively and politically controversial.

In partnership with the NISE Network, ASU led a fellowship program to build capacity for museums to support sustainability in their local communities.

Over 200 institutions participated in the program. The fellowship program supported museum professionals through activities that included:

- An introduction to sustainability grounded in the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the whole-institution approach from UNESCO;
- Sustainability work in museum contexts;
- Strategies for organizational change;
- Team-based inquiry;
- Project planning, coaching, and peer feedback sessions; and
- An ongoing community of practice.

Whole Institution Approach to Sustainability



Project research explored four questions:

How do museum professionals navigate sustainability?

- Interpretation of sustainability varied with museum size, type, and sociocultural context.
- Fellows recognized the social aspects of sustainability.
- Strategies to address systemic sustainability challenges were complicated by predominant focus on individual learners.

How do museum professionals think about their role in local and global communities?

- Promote awareness of sustainability issues
- Empower visitors to make change
- Make sustainability relevant to local audience and surroundings
- Avoid blame or negative feelings
- Model sustainable behaviors
- Create collaborations and convene stakeholders

What enabled museums to foster sustainable change?

- Community of professionals (other fellows in the program)
- Seeing sustainability as a norm within the field
- Finding flexible ways to communicate sustainability
- Finding small ways to start and build success

What limited success?

- Lack of resources
- Conflicting organizational priorities
- Challenges with internal and external partners

Findings for the four questions are based on participant interviews and observations.

The National Informal STEM Education Network (nisenet.org)

is the ongoing identity of the Nanoscale Informal Science Education Network (NSF #0532536 and #0940143, PI L. Bell, 2005-2017). The NISE Network brings people together to engage in STEM, understand our world, and create a better future for everyone. Building on the knowledge and relationships developed during our years as an NSF Nanoscale Science and Engineering Grantee, the Network collaborates on projects that strengthen and advance informal STEM learning in communities across the US.

"[A broader view of sustainability] really helped me get a better grasp of how deep sustainability can go in a museum setting. I've found myself thinking every day about the little decisions that we can make, or the small things we can tweak, to be a more sustainable institution."

- Participating museum professional



Sustainability Fellows at a 2019 workshop

Learn more and download our sustainability workbook: nisenet.org/sustainability-resources