The Inclusive and Accessible Museum: Discovering Visitors’ Perceptions of the Forensic Anthropology Lab

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Abstract

This study addresses the accessibility services that the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) offers for those with disabilities and focuses on visitors’ perceptions of the museum’s accessibility in the Forensic Anthropology Lab.

In order to measure perceptions, a questionnaire was developed, tested, and then later administered to the visitors when exiting the Lab. They were handed out randomly to visitors and to the visitors with disabilities that were recruited by the Smithsonian’s Accessibility Program to attend the Lab. After analyzing the data, the hypothesis was supported. However, the difference in subsample sizes made analyses exploratory. This information will help the museum make improvements to its accessibility services and when developing future educational experiences within the museum.

Hypothesis

There are differences in perceptions of the Forensic Anthropology Lab between people who identify as having one or more disabilities and people who do not.

Materials and Methods

Initial research was done to find specific issues on accessibility (see Figure 1). It was decided that perception was the most important to focus on.

A quantitative instrument, in the form of a questionnaire, was developed to measure visitors’ perceptions of the lab. It was based on the models of the SERVQUAL and the study on Inclusion, disability, and informal science (CAISE Access Inquiry Group, 2010).

The instrument was then tested to ensure reliability and validity. After proving so, the project moved to the testing stage where visitors were asked to fill out the questionnaire.

Visitors with disabilities were also recruited to participate in the study asked to fill out the questionnaire.

The research study took place on July 17, July 19-22, July 24, and July 25-28, 2010.

Results

Once the testing period was complete, it was discovered that out of the total sample, 115 people did not indicate a disability and 18 people did indicate one. Because of the disparity in subsample sizes, analyses should be considered exploratory.

Instrument

A principle components analysis with Varimax rotation suggested that the questionnaire used was composed of three factors:

- Comfortable Atmosphere, items 6-8, 12. This factor accounted for 49% of the variance in responses. It had acceptable reliability, with Cronbach’s alpha = .87. This was an indicator of perceptions of visitors’ comfort in the lab and how well the lab met their needs.

- Accessibility of Activities, items 1-5, 11. This factor accounted for 11% of the variance in responses. It had an acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha = .63. This was an indicator of participants’ perceptions of how easy it was for them to find out what to do in the lab and to participate in the activities.

- Staff Attention, items 9, 10, 13. This factor accounted for 7.7% of the variance in responses. It had an acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha = .66. This was an indicator of visitors’ perceptions of the staff and their availability to assist them.

Conclusions

There were no significant differences between people with and without disabilities for Comfortable Atmosphere and Staff Attention. There was a significant difference on Accessibility of Activities, with people with disabilities scoring lower than those without.

For individuals items, people with disabilities reported significantly lower agreement with item 3 (find information easily), item 7 (the lab was designed with people like me in mind), and item 11 (the lab was convenient for me to visit once I was in the museum) and significantly greater agreement with item 10 (I received individual attention in the Lab).

Future Work

Future research should be conducted in other inclusive venues at NMNH, such as the Discovery Room. It would also be beneficial to see this instrument used at other museums. The more exposure and testing this instrument can receive, the more valuable and reliable it will be.

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- To Andy Pekarik for helping develop the project and questionnaire.
- Finally, to Gale Robertson and the staff of the Forensic Anthropology Lab for their great help and support.

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References
