

Increasing Attendance at the Grinnell Historical Museum

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Commentary from the Research Director

Since I began archiving reports produced as part of my Practicing Anthropology course publicly, I have found it useful to provide brief commentary on the strength of the research and data presentation. The reports produced as part of this course are first and foremost part of a learning experience, and often represent the first major research students have undertaken. As such, things don't always go as planned. Sometimes this is due to poor time management or planning, fear of talking to others, data mismanagement, or some other factor affecting the students' success. Just as often it is due to factors beyond the students' control. Key informants or clients don't return messages, it rains on the days when street intercept interviewing is planned, the IRB requires multiple revisions before approval, or the research population proves harder to reach than expected.

In the case of this project, Increasing Attendance at the Grinnell Historical Museum, my assessment is that the research team did a good job collecting, processing and presenting the data. I believe that their findings are fair given their data. Given time constraints, we used a convenience sample rather than a random sample, along with interviewing a set of key informants. As a result, the findings cannot be guaranteed to represent the Grinnell population as a whole. However, they do represent those persons with whom the researchers spoke, and there was a fairly high degree of agreement among those on several issues. My main recommendation would have been for the report to provide just a bit more detail, particularly providing a voice to some of the key informants.

Executive Summary:

The Grinnell Historical Museum is a nonprofit organization that seeks to promote Grinnell community history, gather objects of historic value, and to preserve them for cultural and educational purposes for present and future generations. In recent years, the museum has faced a declining numbers of visitors. The purpose of this research was to determine how to increase attendance at the museum. We composed a list of recommendations that we feel can increase attendance while still being affordable and feasible for the museum.

We conducted semi-structured interviews of Grinnell community members and Grinnell College students. We also interviewed eight key informants with particular knowledge of the Grinnell community, the Grinnell Historical Museum, or museums in general. In addition to interviews, we wrote literature reviews that provided and confirmed many ideas for increasing attendance at small town house museums. Our research indicated that the most frequently suggested solutions by interviewed community members and college students were: host more events, advertise more, and partner with local community organizations. Our literature reviews, interviews with key informants, and participant observation also influenced three further suggestions that could constitute steps to implementing the first three. The final two suggestions (paid memberships and internships during the school year) are going to be absolutely essential in supporting and financing the other recommendations we have provided.

Recommendations:

Based on our research, our recommendations are:

- Host more events
 - Concerts
 - Teas/meals
 - Lectures/talks
 - Holiday events
 - Historical demonstrations
- Increase advertising
 - Increase social media presence
 - Poster on the Grinnell College campus and downtown
 - Publish features in the *Grinnell Herald Register* and *Scarlet and Black*
- Partner with community organizations
 - Grinnell-Newburg School District
 - Grinnell Area Arts Council
 - Grinnell Chamber of Commerce
 - Jewel Box Bank
- Means to accomplishing aforementioned recommendations:
 - Create an education collection
 - Implement a paid membership program
 - Obtain a student intern throughout the year

Introduction:

The Grinnell Historical Museum (GHM) is a local nonprofit organization that seeks to increase the study of the history of the Grinnell community and surrounding area and preserve historical objects for future generations. It is located in a Victorian house on Broad Street in Grinnell and is currently outfitted with objects from that time period.

In recent years, the Grinnell Historical Museum has been unable to fulfill the mission of their museum due to declining numbers of visitors. Ideas such as profiling Grinnell Civil War veterans in the *Grinnell Herald Register* and annual visits by the local elementary school's third graders temporarily boost numbers, but have not created a lasting change in attendance. Issues with attendance also affect the number of volunteers (docents), who often quit because they are bored with having few tours to lead. The museum wanted us to specifically focus on the Grinnell community town members over college students.

This semester, we questioned why community members do not visit the museum and explored more permanent solutions for raising community member attendance at the museum.

Evaluation Methods:

Before conducting interviews, one research method utilized by the research team was writing literature reviews. They provided local and relevant examples of other house museums, the problems they face, and how they solve them. The literature reviews confirmed many of the ideas we heard from our key informants and semi-structured interviews, providing further evidence for the validity of our recommendations.

In addition to our literature reviews, we used participant observation as a tool to increase our understanding of how the museum functions. We attended a Grinnell Historical Museum board meeting, which provided us with knowledge of how decisions are made at the museum as well as what sort of solutions were most likely to be implemented. We also participated in a museum tour, which gave us information about the layout of the museum and how it functions on a daily basis.

Our research population included twenty Grinnell community members, ten Grinnell college students, and eight key informants. The twenty community members represent the main demographic the museum

is interested in and therefore formed the largest portion of our population. We intercepted community members in public spaces downtown and conducted semi-structured interviews with any adults willing to speak to us. The interview guide used for this population is attached as Appendix A.

We also interviewed ten Grinnell College students because they are temporary community members that make up nearly 2,000 people out of Grinnell's population. In addition, we found that nine out of ten of the students interviewed had never been to the Grinnell Historical Museum, demonstrating this group of people to be an underutilized potential visiting population. We approached students at the Spencer Grill (a central location on the Grinnell College Campus) and conducted semi-structured interviews with students willing to speak with us. We used the same interview guide as with the Grinnell community members, and it is attached as Appendix A.

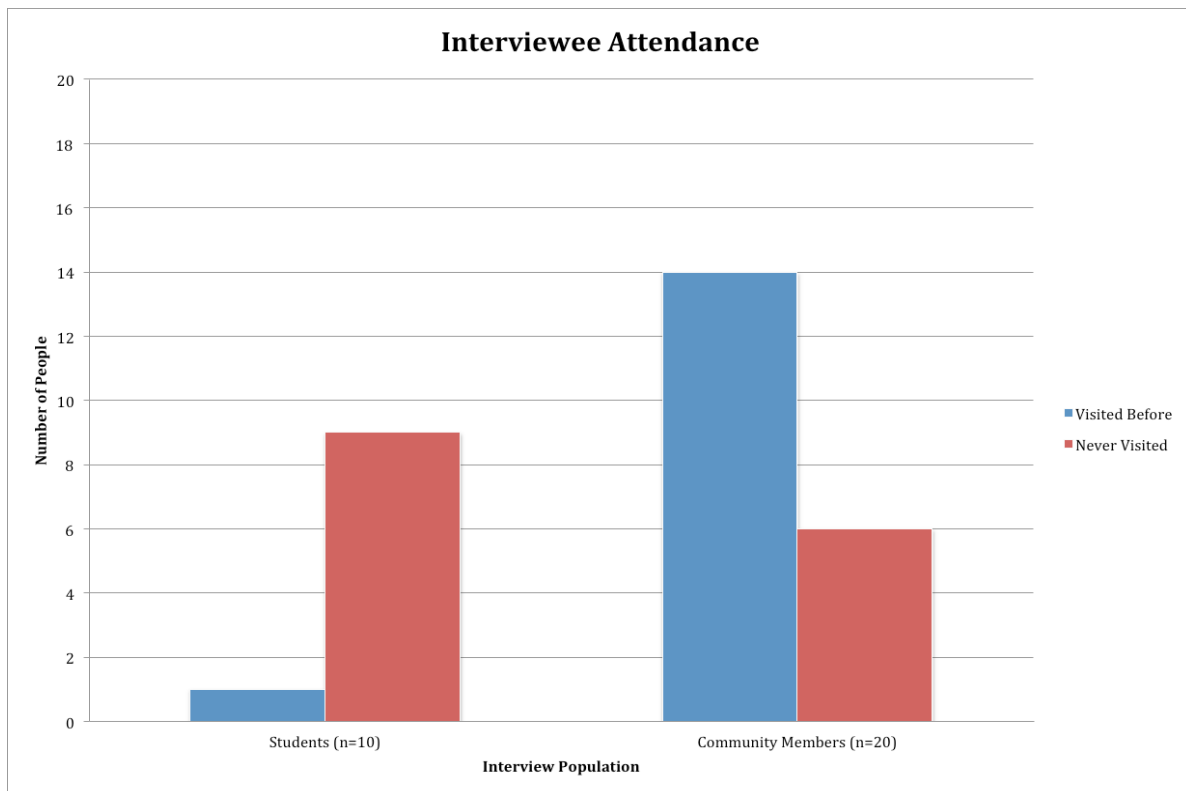
Our key informants provided valuable perspectives on the Grinnell Historical Museum's attendance challenge. We conducted interviews with eight people with particular knowledge on subjects relevant to our research such as the Grinnell Community, the Grinnell Historical Museum, or museums in general. We sent emails to the key informants, scheduled a meeting time, and conducted unstructured interviews. The flexible format of the interviews allowed the key informant to steer the direction of the interview toward their specific ideas, and also left the research team free to ask questions unique to the key informant's knowledge base. One example of a key informant is Kent Mick, a history teacher at Grinnell High School. He was comfortable with us mentioning his identity and hoped this project might result in the museum and high school partnering with one another, as will be discussed later in this report. He also provided ideas for events that might interest younger visitors such as concerts.

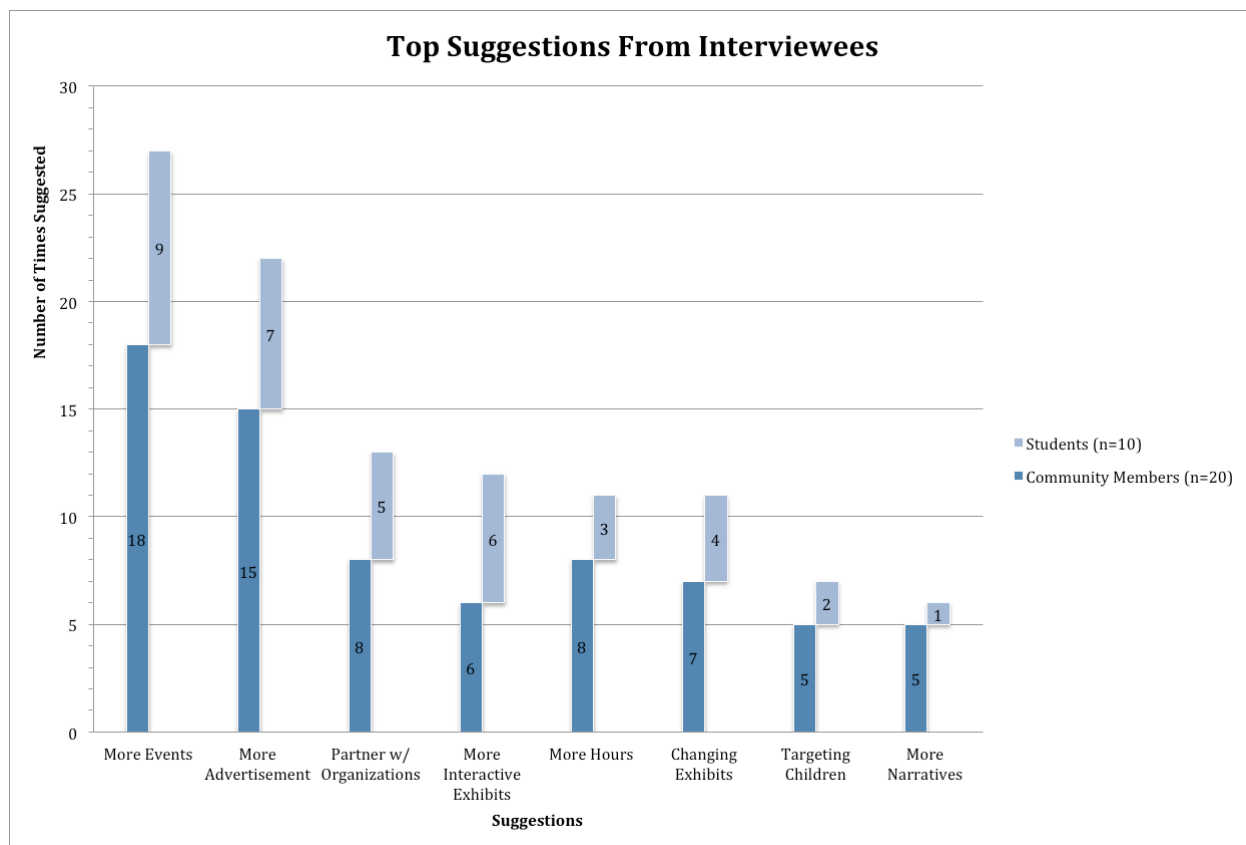
While reading through the notes from our interviews, we identified frequently mentioned solutions. We then coded whether or not each solution was present in each of the interviews. We also took the suggestions provided by our key informants and our literature reviews into account when formulating our suggestions.

Findings:

In our results, we discovered the three most suggested solutions from interviewed community members and college students were: host more events, advertise more, and partner with community organizations. Our key informant interviews and literature reviews confirmed the importance of

these suggestions. Below are two graphs; the first quantifies the museum attendance of our community member and student interviewees. We believe this graph demonstrates how underutilized the Grinnell College students are as potential attendees at the museum. The second is the product of our coding for different suggestions. These are the most mentioned solutions from community member and college student interviewees.





Partnering with community organizations:

One of our key informants, Grinnell High School history teacher, Kent Mick, thought hosting concerts or lectures at the Grinnell Historical Museum would be a good way to engage community members. He also believed that a partnership with the high school could be formed through visits to the museum and presentations of education collections in the classroom. Kent stated that he would both be willing to potentially give talks at the museum and incorporate other talks into his class structure (offering extra credit to students who attended lectures). Another key informant familiar with the Grinnell Historical Museum felt that a closer relationship to Grinnell College would be extremely beneficial for both organizations. Specifically, the key informant discussed the idea of having a college student on the board to help inform the museum about college events and possible opportunities for engagement. We feel that this is an excellent way to get young people interested and involved with the museum. We would suggest adding a high school student and/or college student on the board. When we discussed this idea with some of our key informants who were board members, they were reluctant to give such a young members of the board voting power. Our

research team feels that voting power, while not necessary for the position to succeed, would really add a level of importance and reality to the position for these students. We think high school and college students are important populations that, if represented, could help coordinate events with other town events and overall desires. For example, high school students can speak to the needs of younger members of Grinnell as well as families. Their input would facilitate community engagement in new ways while forming stronger bonds between the museum and these educational organizations.

The aforementioned example is just one concept for creating partnerships with other community organizations. The full list of suggested organizations for partnerships includes: Grinnell-Newburg School District, Grinnell Area Arts Council, Grinnell Chamber of Commerce, Grinnell College, and the Jewel Box Bank. The point of these partnerships is for the museum and another organization to work together in a symbiotic relationship that present opportunities along the way. We believe the way to achieve this is to sit down and meet with leadership members from these organizations one-on-one and develop a positive, yet formal, relationship.

Hosting more events:

The most suggested solution from our interviewees was to host more events. Our key informants confirmed that events were an essential part of successful museum programming.

Community members provided a thorough list of the types of events they want from the museum including: concerts, teas/meals, lectures/talks, holiday themed events, and historical demonstrations. The museum has hosted events like these in the past, and our research demonstrates they were successful because an overwhelming amount of our interviewees want them back.

Increase advertising:

Hosting more events and advertising for those events would inherently help to advertise the museum in general. We believe that both the town of Grinnell and Grinnell College campus are vital locations for advertisement. Advertising methods include but are not limited to: social media presence, postering, and published historical features in the *Grinnell Herald Register* and *Scarlet and Black*.

Other recommendations:

We wanted to highlight another recommendation community members provided that we felt was feasible and important. Community members wanted the museum to have more interactive and engaging exhibits. We believe this can be accomplished by creating an education collection. The education collection would be separate from any preserved and exhibited artifacts. It could be utilized in outreach at offsite locations such as classrooms where it might function as a traveling exhibit. Ideally, these objects can be touched and withstand travel offsite. We would also like to suggest two more recommendations that were not supported by our interviews, but were heavily supported by our literature reviews. We believe these final two suggestions are highly important because they support the other changes and make them more possible. Our first idea is to implement a paid membership program. A membership program similar to the Bartlett House Museum in Story City, Iowa, where prices of memberships range from \$10 student memberships to lifetime memberships of \$1,000, could be financially beneficial to the GHM. This solution provides more funds to implement some of our other solutions. It also builds affinity between donors and the museum with special member-only events and perks. Our final solution, and the one we would like to emphasize the most is for the museum to obtain a student intern throughout the year. The Center for Careers, Life, and Service can provide details on the process of obtaining a for-credit internship for the college students, allowing them to work fourteen hours a week at the museum during the semester. This inexpensive solution would provide the museum with another set of hands to implement special projects such as the education collection or other of our suggestions for increasing attendance.

Discussion and Conclusions:

Our recommendations were guided by the knowledge that the Grinnell Historical Museum does not have a great deal of extra money or manpower to implement expensive or complicated solutions. We also felt that the population of nearly 2,000 students at Grinnell College should not be ignored, especially in light of our findings that nine out of ten college students interviewed had never been to the museum. The 'other recommendations' are solutions that may enable the GHM to better

implement the previous three solutions and were supported by the literature review. Although our interviews provided many suggestions, such as increasing hours, we feel that the ones we focused on can be implemented with the most ease. We feel that merely increasing the hours of the museum would not do a lot to solve the problem. Instead, this should be a concern that follows other efforts that will increase attendance and branding.

In honing in on these specific steps, we also believe that more change will eventually follow after the initial success of these endeavors.

Our literature reviews, participant observation experience, and interviews lead us to believe that hosting more events, increasing attendance, partnering with local organizations, creating an education collection, implementing a paid membership system, and obtaining year round interns to be promising solutions. If implemented with energy and consistency, we conclude that the six aforementioned solutions have the potential to increase attendance at the Grinnell Historical Museum.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank the Grinnell Historical Museum for their help and cooperation during this project and for making this amazing learning opportunity possible. We are also grateful to our key informants and all community members and college students that took the time to answer our questions and help us develop our solutions. Lastly, we are thankful to Professor Roper for his guidance and helpful ideas throughout the research process.

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Semi-structured Interview Guide: Community Members and College Students

- **Researchers introduce themselves**
- **Introduce the project**
 - **Consent form is read and signed**
 - **“Do you have any questions?” (answer questions)**
- **“Have you ever been to the Grinnell Historical Museum?”**
 - **(Yes):**

- **“How often did/do you visit?”**
 - **“When did/do you visit?”**
 - **(No):**
 - **(move on to next question)**
 - **(Unsure):**
 - **(move on to next question)**

- **“Is there any reason why you cannot currently visit the museum?”**
 - **(as needed) “Could you tell more more about that?”**

- **“What would make visiting the museum more interesting for you?”**
 - **(as needed) “Could you tell me more about that?”**

- **“Are there any ideas you have for how the museum could interact with the community more?”**
 - **(as needed) “Could you tell me more about that?”**

- **“Is there something you’ve seen while visiting another museum or organization that you think could help the Grinnell Historical Museum become more interesting?”**
 - **(as needed) “Could you tell me more about that?”**

- **“Do you have any ideas for how the Grinnell Historical Museum could increase community member attendance?”**

- **“Do you have anything else about the Grinnell Historical Museum you wish to add?”**

- **“Do you have any questions?”**

- **“Thank you for your time. Have a great day!”**