Museums are not mysteries, nor are those most closely associated with them the keepers of mysteries. Museums are, or at least ought be, rationally organized institutions directed toward articulable purposes—-institutions that, at their most excellent, both can and do accomplish those purposes with maximum effect and with minimum waste. What follows—immodest insofar as it attempts to define institutional excellence in more precise terms than has previously been attempted among museums—is a proposed framework within which any museum might be examined in its entirety and assessed for its overall quality in a demonstrably objective way.

Underlying this proposal is the premise (which may certainly be disputed by many) that a museum may be judged as better or worse independently of whether one considers its purpose to be beneficial or malign, its subject matter to be significant or trivial, or its communal role to be useful or redundant. Just as the physical well-being of an individual may be evaluated separately from a consideration of that individual's morals, politics, or taste, so may an institution's organizational well-being be evaluated separately.

Also underlying the proposal are four other and somewhat overlapping premises with which most of those responsible for the funding, leadership,
governance, and operation of museums (hereinafter referred to collectively as “museum people”) might agree: First, notwithstanding whatever difficulty they may have in articulating the basis on which they make such distinctions, museum people have a gut sense that all museums are not of equal quality, that some museums are better than others. At issue here is not mere personal preference, but an instinctive sense that—in common with every other human activity—not everybody is just as good as everybody else at operating a museum. If such variability were not the case, museum people might spare themselves considerable effort. Grant making could be simplified to an entitlement-like formula. Accreditation and assessment could be phased out as no longer serving any practical purpose. Program evaluation would become superfluous. Manifestly, however, those most familiar with museums do not believe that all museums are equally good. Their customary behavior points to precisely the opposite conclusion: that they believe some museums to be better than others. How else could the museum field’s incessant efforts at self-improvement, through training, meetings, courses of study, publications, and other means, be justified unless those efforts were premised on the notion that there were such things as “better” and “worse” museums and also were motivated by a determination to see museums made more “better” and less “worse”?

Second, notwithstanding their distinctive emphasis on the artifacts and specimens they preserve, study, and interpret, museums are not fundamentally different from other organizations of the not-for-profit sector. Like them, their quality is ultimately judged by the public service they provide, not by the economic results they achieve. There is, accordingly, no apparent reason why museums may not be examined and evaluated in ways that are closely akin to those that have been developed for other parts of this sector. Within the past decade, there has been substantial evolution in the evaluative techniques available to not-for-profit organizations. The museum community has thus far been slow to adopt these for its own use.

Third, notwithstanding the belief of those who work in museums that the work they do is of intrinsic value, the establishment and operation of a museum is not an end in itself but is only justifiable by the museum’s dedication to one or more public purposes. This posits that the answer to the question, Why is your community better off because it has a museum? must necessarily be something more than, Because otherwise it wouldn’t. Museums matter only to the extent that they are perceived to provide the
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communities they serve with something of value beyond their own mere existence.

Fourth, notwithstanding that those who govern museums may sometimes believe that their primary duty is institutional preservation, the success or failure of a museum is directly related not to its survival but the degree to which it is able to accomplish its purpose. In a not-for-profit organization, survival does not necessarily equate with success. As Peter F. Drucker has ruefully observed in this regard, not-for-profit organizations are at a disadvantage in comparison with for-profit organizations. "In the business world, the market puts you out of your misery by not buying your products."

**COMPARED WITH WHAT?**

The comedian Henny Youngman used to respond to the question, "How's your wife?" with the counterquestion, "Compared with whom?" Behind this quip lay an idea articulated by David Hume some two centuries earlier: that such evaluative words as "good" or "bad" are not meaningful in themselves but only acquire their meaning in a comparative context. As Hume wrote in his essay *Of the Standard of Taste*, "By comparison alone we fix the epithets of praise or blame, and learn how to assign the due degree of each." Can the merits of any one museum then be measured simply by comparing it directly with another?

Experience suggests not. As every museum person knows, museums are so extraordinarily varied in their origin, discipline, scale, governance, structure, collections, sources of funding, endowment, staffing, facilities, and community setting that meaningful comparisons between one and another are rarely possible. That a particular big-city art museum is better attended or more richly endowed, has a larger facility, or is open for longer hours than a particular small-town history museum might be demonstrated by a series of one-on-one comparisons. To determine which on an allover basis is the "better" museum might require something else entirely.

The "something else entirely" proposed here is the composition of a model (albeit highly abstracted) not-for-profit organization that might be used as a standard of comparison, not only by museums of every discipline and scale but by other not-for-profit entities as well. To the extent that museum people could agree upon the criteria that would be essential to com-
pose this model and the relative weight that each included criterion ought be assigned, there would thus be available a means by which any two or more museums might be indirectly compared by first measuring them against a common standard and then comparing the resulting measurements.

Beyond its use as a means of comparison, such a model might serve as a diagnostic tool to indicate in what ways a museum that measures as only passable or worse could be made into a better institution. It could also provide a means of measuring an institution's performance over time. As such, it might be a useful supplement to the several assessment programs offered by the American Association of Museums (AAM), with the additional advantage that it could, optionally, be self-administered.

Inevitably, some museum people will disagree with the criteria chosen for the proposed model and/or with the relative weights these have been assigned. That should not invalidate the basic scheme. An infinity of alternative models employing different criteria might serve equally well, so long as those rested on some reasonable premises and their criteria were consistently applied.

Other museum people may take the position that museums—because, perhaps, of their infinite variety—are ultimately incommensurable. Because museums cannot be compared, these people would argue, they also cannot be evaluated in any truly comparative way. Museums ought be appreciated and valued for the unique things they are. They ought not to be dragged into an essentially degrading and meaningless competition with one another.

Given the ever-growing scrutiny under which the not-for-profit sector now finds itself, that appears to be a dangerous position. It can only undermine confidence in the museum community as a whole to argue that there are no objective standards by which the operation of a museum can be judged and that those who are called upon to fund museums must accept purely as a matter of faith that they are being operated properly. Every museum is unique, but so too is every person, every Persian kitten, and every pineapple soufflé, and all may find themselves, from time to time and for one or another reason, required to stand up and be judged. If no such time should ever come for museums, fine. But if it should, then it would arguably be better if the museum community already had in place some mechanism for judgment of its own design than if it had to submit to whatever device some less-knowledgeable group of judges was able to cobble together.
ORGANIZATION-WIDE QUALITY

SOME CRITERIA OF GOOD

By what criteria then might museum people recognize a “good” museum? Not surprisingly, they are just those same criteria that one would expect to find in highly regarded public-service organizations of every kind throughout the not-for-profit sector. Such organizations are purposive (they have a clear sense of what purposes external to themselves they are seeking to accomplish), capable (command the means required to accomplish those purposes), effective (are demonstrably able to accomplish the purposes they seek to accomplish), and efficient (are able to accomplish those purposes in a maximally economic way).

What may be at once apparent is that the sequence in which these criteria are stated—purposiveness, capability, effectiveness, and efficiency—is precisely the same sequence of considerations through which a not-for-profit organization might best be methodically evaluated. Each criterion is thus a hurdle that must be cleared before the next one is addressed. If an organization is unable to define what it seeks to accomplish, any further inquiry into its merit may be moot. There will never be a way to know whether it has accomplished its purpose and, per se, it can never be an effective organization. Likewise, if an organization can clearly define what it seeks to accomplish but cannot command the means to do so, any further inquiry into its effectiveness or efficiency would again be moot. Lacking means, it cannot accomplish anything. If an organization can both clearly define what it seeks to accomplish and command the required means to do so, but nevertheless—for whatever reason—is chronically unable to accomplish its purposes, it must still be deemed to have failed. Under those circumstances, any inquiry into whether it is or is not an efficient organization would be wholly irrelevant.

Less apparent is that the level within an organization at which each of these criteria—purposiveness, capability, effectiveness, and efficiency—is customarily addressed moves generally downward as this sequence moves forward. Overarching questions of purpose are quintessentially those that must be addressed by an organization’s governing authority. Assembling the required resources to carry out the organization’s designated purposes is most often a task shared by the governing authority and senior staff. The day-to-day effectiveness of a not-for-profit organization is most frequently
a staff concern, subject only to periodic review by the governing authority. As much or even more, the case may be the same with respect to questions of efficiency, which principally involve staff and which the governing authority may address only infrequently.

This analysis in turn suggests that the remedies for organizational deficiencies that relate to the first and second criteria in this sequence (lack of purposiveness and/or lack of capability) may require a more fundamental organizational adjustment than would the remedies for those that relate to the third and fourth (ineffectiveness and/or inefficiency). To instill purposiveness into an otherwise purposeless not-for-profit organization may require a profound change within its governing authority. By contrast, to introduce greater efficiency into an otherwise less efficient organization may in many cases require little more than an improved management, expanded training, and/or the occasional use of consultants. The scheme proposed here reflects this distinction by assigning a substantially greater weight to the combined criteria of purposiveness and capability than it does to those of effectiveness and efficiency.

WHAT WEIGHS WHAT?

An ideal organization—one that qualified for the highest possible grades with respect to the criteria of purposiveness, capability, effectiveness, and efficiency—would be awarded a total of 100 points, made up of a maximum of 35 points for purposiveness, 30 points for capability, 25 points for effectiveness, and 10 points for efficiency. For its overall evaluation, an organization awarded a total of 91–100 points would be rated first-class, one awarded 71–90 points would be rated passable, one awarded 61–70 points would be rated marginal, and one awarded 60 points or less would be rated a failure.

Concerning the rationale through which these numbers and ratings have been calculated, it should be evident that, as a consequence of the 35 points assigned to the criterion of purposiveness, an organization fundamentally lacking in purpose could never be rated as more than marginal. In practice, such an organization would have to be deemed less than marginal, that is, a failure, because—as a corollary to its purposelessness—it could not be awarded any of the possible 25 points for effectiveness (that being defined as the ability to accomplish a proposed purpose). A highly purposive or-
organization that was unable to command the resources required to accomplish its purpose—thereby suffering a loss of 30 points—would be, its high purpose notwithstanding, similarly rated; at best it would be marginal. In practice, the lack of resources would cripple its effectiveness, and the loss of those points as well would (as in the case above) reduce its status to failure.

Lack of effectiveness and lack of efficiency—even taken together and at their most extreme (25 points for the former, 10 points for the latter)—would reduce an otherwise top-rated organization to a marginal status but not necessarily to outright failure. These deficiencies might be more readily cured by the governing authority already in place than could a lack of purpose or lack of capability. Some relatively minor adjustment might bring such an organization at least up to the passable level. Least damaging, because most readily corrected, would be a lack of efficiency. At worst, inefficiency might prevent an organization that was exemplary in all other respects from being rated first-class.

On a practical level, these criteria do not form so neat a set of watertight compartments as the foregoing might suggest. A deficiency in one criterion would most likely create reciprocal deficiencies with respect to others. The public perception that a given not-for-profit organization was deficient in defining a fundamental purpose might ultimately reduce the resources made available to it, thus adversely affecting its capability. The public perception that the organization was ineffective could have a similar impact; so might the public perception that the organization was wasteful, that is, not efficient. Conversely, a clearer projection of purpose, a better demonstration of effectiveness, or greater evidence of efficiency might each serve to increase the flow of resources to an organization, with a consequent increase in its capability. Among museums, as among organizations of every kind, rarely is there only one thing right or wrong at a time. Virtues, like defects, tend to come in clusters.

PURPOSIVENESS

As the appendix to The Board Members Book, his 1985 guide to the governance of not-for-profit organizations, Brian O’Connell composed a set of make-believe minutes for a make-believe board meeting of a make-believe and thoroughly dysfunctional not-for-profit organization. These culminated with the report of the board’s evaluation committee: “Any organization
made up of such bright people, who are so dedicated and who have worked so hard, must be doing a great deal of good.”

If we were to conceive of the degree of purposiveness to be found in museums as occupying a spectrum, then this kind of organization would certainly lie at the nether end. Infused with the earnest enthusiasm and benevolent aspirations of a largely amateur board and staff, what such a museum principally seeks to accomplish is to keep that board and staff feeling good. In this, its purpose is basically social, not museological. Whatever success it may have as a kind of cultural country club for those who cluster around it (and who may even provide its ongoing financial support), its purposiveness in museological terms must be ranked at or near zero.

Though O’Connell’s “feel-good” organization is imaginary, in practice some museums may still be encountered where institutional purposes are expressed so ambiguously that these all-too-real museums must also be consigned to the lower end of this spectrum. Ambiguity is inevitably fatal to the excellence of a museum or other not-for-profit organization, for several reasons. First, it undermines accountability. If it is not clear what an organization is seeking to accomplish, then nobody can be held accountable for its failure to do so. There is simply no test by which an observer can determine whether or not resources have been applied for their intended purposes. Second, there are no means by which the effectiveness of such an ambiguously purposed organization can be evaluated. Supporters of the organization can claim that whatever outcomes were achieved were deliberate and constituted success. Detractors of the organization may equally well claim that those outcomes were purely accidental and constituted failure.

Museum people are frequently reluctant to acknowledge that feel-good organizations and organizations of ambiguous purpose are more likely to be encountered in the museum field than nearly anywhere else in the not-for-profit sector. Hospitals, schools, social-service agencies, and community improvement groups are generally established to meet a perceived need. Museums, by contrast, are frequently self-initiated. No more than a single individual with the necessary determination and means is required to establish a museum and start it operating. That such a museum will ever serve any purpose beyond providing gratification to its creator is not a given. Some do, but many do not.

Something else that museum people are frequently reluctant to acknowledge is the degree to which museums may evolve into what Philip M. Nowlen has called “federations of self-interest.” In such institutions, the
professional satisfaction and advancement of the staff may—in the absence of strong governance—in time overwhelm any external focus as the museum’s dominant (if unstated) purpose. So long as the staff is able to procure some means of support, such museums may continue in this mode indefinitely. In terms of purposiveness, these too must be rated at the bottom of the spectrum.

If a lack of purpose, ambiguity, and a propensity toward self-interest are the hallmarks of museums that rank at the lower end of this spectrum, what might we expect to find in those at the upper end? Some of the attributes one might expect to find in museums that measure most successfully (at the 35-point level) against this criterion of purposiveness would be:

*Purpose* (necessarily plural) that embrace (in whatever proportions) all three of the museological imperatives of preservation, scholarship, and object-based public programming (through interpretive exhibitions and otherwise). Though museums may have purposes beyond these (to increase tourism, to serve as a community center, to perpetuate the memory of a founder, to reflect a government’s benevolence), a narrower array of purpose will not do. An organization that only preserves may be a good archive; one that engages primarily in scholarship may be a good academic center; one that concerns itself all but exclusively with public programs—even object-based public programs—may be a good art or natural-history center; but they are all inadequate as museums.

*Purpose* that are expressed in sufficiently concrete and time-bound ways that they can serve as a basis for accountability. These are something less than the grand (and perhaps ultimately elusive) aspirations of mission; they nestle inside mission and consist of attainable objectives. They look to results rather than to distant horizons. Ideally, purposes ought to be expressed in terms of the concrete outcomes sought rather than—as has been more traditional—of programmatic outputs (“to present exhibitions of”) or of communal needs (“to bridge the existing gap between”). Moreover, the outcomes sought should be potentially observable. Museums need not confine themselves to seeking quantifiable results, which are not always possible or even desirable, but some evidence of accomplishment beyond the good faith or enthusiasm of the staff is necessary if the museum is to be judged (as this scheme contemplates) on its effectiveness as well as its purposiveness.

*Purpose* that can reasonably be expected to be achieved with the current resources that the museum has or anticipates to be available. Unless
there is some realistic fit between a museum's aspiration and its capability, the likelihood is that the museum's available energies will be largely consumed by fund-raising rather than programmatic considerations. Just as survival is not the measure of the good museum, neither is growth. By concentrating on the use of current resources, a museum can achieve what Regina Herzlinger has called "intergenerational equity"—neither sacrificing its utility to future generations by spending down its accumulated resources on the present one nor, conversely, setting aside a disproportionate share of its current income to benefit future generations at the cost of the present one. 7

And *purposes* that are demonstrably reflected in the museum's actual programming and, like well-made rules, can be projected clearly, are consistent with one another, and can be maintained with relative constancy over time. 8

Beyond this, the museum that aspires to first-class rank will supplement its clearly projected purposes with an equally clear definition of the successful accomplishment of those purposes. As Richard F. Larkin has pointed out, the failure or inability to define what might be considered success has long been a persistent problem across the entire range of not-for-profit organizations. 9 The question is not simply of what outcomes the organization hopes to produce, but among how many people, in what area, over what time period, and to what degree.

An inability to define successful performance is akin to a lack or ambiguity of purpose. It defeats accountability. Absent some means to determine what would constitute a successful performance, no organization can fail. Moreover, in the absence of some definition of success, no organization may ever be considered to be either fully grown or adequately funded. Whereas the community might be best served by a mature and stable organization, the failure or inability of an organization to define a successful level of performance may set it on a path of insatiable need and ill-considered growth. The first-class museum will define for itself how much is enough.

Those who cannot accept the first premise of this proposal—that the merit of a museum may be judged independently of what one thinks of the beneficence, importance, or necessity of what it seeks to accomplish—may wish to impose additional tests in determining how the 35 points allotted to purposiveness are to be awarded. Indeed, at one extreme, they might choose to make what they consider the correctness (or incorrectness) of a museum's purpose the principal factor in the allocation of these points. Thus approached, and no matter what its excellence otherwise, a museum that
advocated a particular cause—that took a stance, for example, on an issue such as capital punishment, the moderate use of alcohol, abortion, or polygamy—could never be rated as more than a marginal institution by an evaluator who disagreed with its position.

Although powerful arguments can be offered both for and against the imposition of such ideological tests in evaluating institutions, this is not the place to rehearse those. Suffice it to say that the scheme here proposed is flexible enough either to accommodate or to exclude such tests. In some instances they might be considered permissible and/or appropriate (determining the recipients of one’s own private philanthropy). In others (allocation of public funds) they might not.

CAPABILITY

The highest purposes notwithstanding, nothing can be accomplished in a museum without the means and the determination to do so. Purposiveness and capability are the twin pillars by which the successful museum is supported.

We tend to think of resources as interchangeable, but in fact it is far more practicable to convert fiscal resources into facilities, collections, and staff than is the converse. Accordingly, one of the most immediately evident hallmarks of the successful museum will be that it regularly has in hand the fiscal resources required to accomplish its purposes on an ongoing and sustainable basis. Unpalatable as some may find the thought, money does matter in museums. The measure is not “how much” in absolute terms—but how much in relation to need.

In rare instances, this fiscal underpinning may be supplied by an endowment that, judiciously managed, permits an annual draw adequate to meet a museum’s basic expenses. In other instances, governmentally related museums may receive some annual and reasonably predictable appropriation through which to meet those expenses. Most often, however, a museum will have to raise some substantial portion of the funds to meet its basic expenses through voluntary contributions, membership campaigns, and other external means. As many commentators have pointed out, the alternative—to try to earn the required funds through admissions, shop sales, and other auxiliary activities—poses the very real danger that marketing considerations may dilute or even overwhelm considerations of purpose. Whatever may be gained in terms of one may concurrently be lost in terms of the other.
For most museums, then, the excellence that may accrue through the availability of fiscal resources is directly linked to two other aspects of capability: the goodwill of potential supporters and a leadership and governance structure that is sufficiently dynamic to convert that goodwill into a steady stream of contributions, volunteer services, and other forms of support. In tandem with such tangible resources as facilities, collections, and staff, the intangibles of goodwill, dynamic leadership, and wise governance as manifested in the ability to motivate support must also be considered among those resources that, taken in their totality, provide a museum with the capability to carry out its purposes.

Two very different competencies may be required for the successful operation of a museum: that of accomplishing the museum’s mission-derived purposes and that of converting the public’s goodwill into actual support. This difference has not always been clearly articulated in discussing the operation of nonprofit organizations. Drucker uses the same word, “customers,” to refer both to those who attend the museum (the clients, or recipients of its services) and those who support it by donating money, property, or time. An organization can only succeed, he argues, if customers of both sorts are satisfied with and value what they receive from the organization.10

In many privately funded museums, at least—and the case is possibly similar for other kinds of nonprofit organizations—there is the difficulty that what visitors seek may be altogether different from what donors hope to receive. Visitors may be seeking some combination of edification and entertainment. The interests of contributors or donors, by contrast, may be related to the establishment or maintenance of a web of social and/or business connections, the achievement of status, and/or the opportunity to participate in a range of what might be considered glamorous activities.11

Some may find these conflicting expectations regrettable. Others may simply accept them as the realistic price of maintaining a private organization. What appears clear, however, is that capability must first and foremost depend upon the ongoing availability of fiscal resources. When those resources cannot be provided through endowment or regular government support, they can only be engendered by, first, the cultivation and maintenance of goodwill and, second, the leadership and management skills necessary to convert that goodwill into regular support.

Beyond these, what other resources might be considered critical in evaluating a museum’s capability? Intuition suggests that either its collection or
its facility might be of next importance, but analysis suggests otherwise. Given sufficient funds and the proper leadership and governance, a museum can acquire collections and a facility with relative ease over time. Not so readily acquirable, and more critical by far, would be the presence of a stable and well-motivated staff of demonstrated managerial and technical competence. Only through such competence can the capability latent in the museum’s resources—a sound fiscal base, goodwill, dynamic leadership, and wise governance—be translated into actual museological achievements.

Museums perceived as successful will customarily contain a dazzling variety of managerial skills within their upper-management levels. To a remarkable degree, these required skills do not differ from museums of one discipline to another. They do, however, differ with respect to scale, complexity in general being directly proportional to the relative size of budget and/or staff. To be highly ranked for this aspect of capability, the non-subject-matter areas in which a museum’s management would need to demonstrate competence would include strategic and tactical planning, budgeting and other aspects of financial planning and control, operations, development, human resources, facilities preservation and management, public relations, service delivery, marketing, legal affairs, and information technologies.

To examine and evaluate each of these managerial capabilities may require input from technical specialists. To take but one example, to review the management of human resources in a large museum would by itself be a substantial undertaking. The considerations—always with due regard to issues of diversity and upward mobility—would necessarily range from salary and benefit administration through training and grievance procedures to hiring and promotion practices, including some consideration in each case of whether or not these practices complied with local and national laws and regulations. Without the development of comprehensive checklists in this and other areas, estimates of managerial competence may continue to be more a matter of visceral response than careful investigation.

Staff capability must, of course, extend beyond management. In the successful museum, managerial competencies will be combined with an equally imposing array of skills that may actually vary among museums of different disciplines. In the front rank of those exercising these skills—at least as seen by the public—will be the disciplinary specialists: curators, historians, scientists, and educators. Supporting their efforts will be exhibition and graphic designers, editors, registrars, preparators, conservators, taxi-
dermists, photographers, craftpersons, information and media specialists, librarians, and more. Lending further support will typically be a security force and a building-maintenance staff. The overall assessment of a museum in terms of capability must necessarily include some estimate as to the skills of all these staff members considered as a group.

Still another aspect of capability is the museum’s ability to secure the cooperation of other institutions in obtaining loans, circulating exhibitions, and exchanging expertise. Such cooperation may depend upon the perception that the requesting museum adheres to the standards of conduct and performance prescribed for the field by its various professional associations. At their most extreme, these may require that a nonadhering museum be boycotted with respect to future loans or traveling exhibitions.\(^\text{12}\)

Finally, such an overall assessment must also take into account a museum’s collections and facilities. These are not left to the last because they are least important but, rather, because they are the two aspects of capability whose inadequacies might most easily be remedied. To try to create a fine museum out of nothing more than a good collection or a fine building—a museum with no fiscal support, capable leadership and governance, competent management, or technical ability—is an exercise in futility. By contrast, a museum that has those prerequisites in place ought to be in a position to acquire a collection and/or the necessary facilities. As in the relationship between purposiveness and capability, it is a matter of getting the sequence right, of understanding which hurdle needs to be cleared before the next one can be addressed. It’s like a footrace—the finish line may be the goal, but it cannot be where you start.

EFFECTIVENESS

Although it has been allotted only 25 points, effectiveness is in a sense all that really matters. It is the same sense in which the only real criterion of an airline’s performance is not luggage handling, food service, or staff courtesy but the fact that its aircraft arrive safely at their destinations. A museum, in the end, is worth no more than what it is able to accomplish.

Of the four criteria under discussion—purposiveness, capability, effectiveness, and efficiency—effectiveness appears to be the most difficult to evaluate. As Herzlinger and Robert M. Anthony have written of not-for-profit organizations generally (and the case holds true for museums): “The
absence of a satisfactory, single, overall measure of performance that is comparable to the profit measure is the most serious management control problem in a nonprofit organization. (It is incorrect to say that the absence of the profit motive is the central problem; rather, it is the absence of the profit measure.)

Compounding this problem for museums is the inevitable multiplicity of their purposes and the further complication that their effectiveness in achieving each of their several purposes may require a different means of evaluation. Of the three central museological imperatives—preservation, scholarship, and object-based public programming (through interpretive exhibitions and otherwise)—preservation and scholarship appear to present fewer problems of evaluation than does public programming.

Preservation (which, except in museums with static collections, necessarily includes acquisition as its first step) could, for example, be judged against a museum’s own internal collections-management policy. Of the universe of “stuff” that the museum has identified as important to preserve, what progress has been made in actual acquisitions? Is the museum devoting resources to preservation commensurate with its stated importance among the museum’s purposes? What level of conservation care (as evidenced by, for example, a conservation survey) is being given to the existing collection? Does the museum have an adequate internal capacity for necessary restoration or, absent that, a satisfactory means of outsourcing such work? In what condition is the museum’s climate-control system? Is an adequate pest-control program in place? What disaster plans are in place with respect to the collection? Is there adequate staff training in the handling of collection objects? And more.

Scholarship as well might be judged against a museum’s own expressed intentions. In museums of some disciplines (art museums, for example), scholarship may be pursued principally in connection with collection objects (already owned or contemplated for acquisition) and exhibitions. To the extent that such scholarship is disseminated to the public, it will most likely be in the form of wall labels, gallery handouts, and exhibition catalogs. In museums of other disciplines (larger natural history museums, for example), scholarship may be aimed at producing articles for peer-reviewed journals, monographs, and other professional publications. Whether the staff of such a museum is succeeding in its scholarly efforts can be determined in much the same way (regrettably or not) that colleges and universities today evaluate the scholarly accomplishments of their faculties. In mu-
seums of all disciplines, however, the same “integrity” test as for preservation might be applied. Is the museum devoting resources to scholarship commensurate with the importance assigned to it as one of its purposes? That such resources are available will not, of course, guarantee the effectiveness of the activity, but lack of the necessary resources will almost assuredly doom the activity to failure.

By far the most difficult area in which to evaluate effectiveness is public programming. Temporary exhibitions, and temporary art exhibitions particularly, constitute possibly the worst case. All too often, such exhibitions have come to be regarded as ends in themselves, with little or no regard for how they might affect visitors. As such they become terminal phenomena to be judged for their originality, thoroughness, aesthetic excellence, or intellectual rigor rather than instrumentality to be evaluated for their impact on a target audience. Although several pioneer researchers (mostly with a grounding in sociology) have sought to break through this barrier over the past two decades, a great deal of resistance among museum people remains to be overcome if this work is to go forward. Too often the survey researcher wanting to investigate the outcome of an exhibition will find the question, “What exactly are you trying to accomplish?” scornfully answered with, “It’s a museum thing. If you have to ask, you just won’t get it.”

“Summative evaluation”—the process of measuring a program’s results by its stated goals and objectives—requires something more forthcoming, something that museums have been slow to furnish. It requires an ability to articulate just what result the public program is intended to accomplish. Vague claims of “educational” intent are simply not enough. This is an area in which museum people need to drill themselves with tougher questions: Why is this exhibition (or other program) being presented? What precisely is the result being sought? How is a visitor intended to be affected by participating in the program? By learning something? Feeling something? Being sensitized to something? Made more curious about something? Motivated to take action about something? Entertained or given pleasure? The answers sought need not be quantifiable, but they do need to be susceptible to survey research and they do need to be discussable. Ambiguity in programmatic purpose is in many ways parallel to ambiguity in institutional purpose. It undermines accountability. If there are no expected outcomes, failure becomes impossible. So does any kind of real evaluation.

It should follow that any museum that is both highly purposed and highly capable ought, per se, to be highly effective as well. Experience suggests,
though, that this is not always the case. In the otherwise purposeful and capable museum that lags in effectiveness, the mode of assessment suggested here might serve as a useful diagnostic tool in understanding where a malfunction is occurring and how it might be corrected. Lacking effectiveness, such a museum can scarcely be more than marginal. By addressing that lack, it could become solidly passable or even aspire to be first class.

EFFICIENCY

Because efficiency is so major a consideration in the operation of for-profit enterprises—a context in which it tends to merge with effectiveness, both ultimately relating to the enterprise's all-critical economic outcome—representatives of the business community first joining the governing boards of not-for-profit organizations sometimes tend to give it an exaggerated importance, perhaps because it is frequently the particular aspect of a not-for-profit organization with which they are most familiar.

Efficiency is not unimportant, and waste cannot be condoned. In a not-for-profit organization, inefficiency does not represent anywhere near so grave a problem as might a failure of purpose, a lack of capability, or an inability to be effective. Of all such malfunctions, it would have the least impact on the organization's operations and is the one that could be most readily corrected. Thus, only 10 points have been allocated to this fourth and last criterion. Also motivating so small an allocation is the need to make sure that aspects of effectiveness (worth 25 points) are not sacrificed in the name of efficiency. The trade-off is intended to be a poor one.

If those outside the not-for-profit organizations sometimes put too much stress on efficiency, those inside these organizations sometimes confuse the fact that they are not in a business (an enterprise the success of which will be defined by an economic outcome) with a belief that they are therefore free of any obligation to be "businesslike" in their day-to-day operation. That belief is more than wrong. Those who work in not-for-profit organizations serve as the stewards of resources entrusted to them to carry out a public purpose. That obligation alone should impose an even greater than average duty to see that those resources are used carefully. Their constant object should be to get the largest possible museological bang from the available bucks or, conversely, to maintain the same museological bang with the expenditure of fewer bucks. The owners/operators of a small business are
fully entitled to squander their own money. The managers of a comparably sized not-for-profit organization have no such privilege.

Unlike questions of effectiveness, which may require evaluators who are reasonably familiar with the practice and subject matter of the museum to be evaluated, questions of efficiency tend to be generic. Whether a particular piece of paper is being handled by too many people; whether a different kind of insurance policy might give greater protection against liability; whether the current HVAC system is optimally efficient; or whether the museum would not be better off leasing than purchasing a particular vehicle—all are matters that can be addressed by management experts with a wide range of experience. Moreover, there are many issues relating to efficiency for which quantitative performance indicators might readily be developed and/or external benchmarks might be already available for use.¹⁴

EVALUATED BY WHOM?

How might an overall organizational quality assessment such as that sketched out here best be performed? The answer will largely depend upon why such an assessment is being made and how it is to be used.

If such assessments were initiated by a museum as a regular part of its management practice, there would be good reason to perform these from inside. Immense amounts of effort (time and cost) might be saved by not having to educate outside evaluators from the ground up concerning the details of organizational operation. Moreover, the process of evaluation could be linked—ideally on a continuing basis—with the organization’s own strategic and tactical planning processes. Through a process of continuing feedback and diagnosis, such a museum might hope to embark on a simultaneous course of continuing improvement.¹⁵

If such an assessment were to be connected to the distribution of public funds or other benefits, however, it is arguable that those who work within an organization lack the objectivity that would ideally be required in making such an assessment. Moreover, given the public scrutiny to which such an assessment might be subject, as well as the many and vastly different criteria and subcriteria involved, an array of outside specialists might be necessary if an organization of any real scale were to be thoroughly evaluated in all of its relevant aspects.
A third possibility might arise if a museum opted for only an occasional—perhaps once every five years—check on itself. The high cost of such an assessment might be mitigated if a pair of museums (located in different parts of the country and in no way competitive with one another) were to appoint task forces composed of board and staff members to evaluate each other’s institutions.

CODA

Some encountering this proposal will agree that museums do vary in excellence and that some museums are clearly better than others, but they will nevertheless object to this system of assessment as an effort to define the undefinable. Quality in museums, they may argue, is like quality in art. As Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart once memorably said of obscenity, “You know it when you see it.”

That argument may or may not be true for art and/or obscenity, but in neither case does it offer useful guidance to the museum in which the leadership, governing authority, and staff members aspire to institutional improvement. By contrast, what is here proposed (and whether or not one is willing to accept the possibility of an overall assessment) is an approach that might help to identify institutional deficiencies and suggest some means by which they could be remedied. It is an approach that might also prove useful in indicating how a weakness with respect to one aspect of an organization might be reflected by reciprocal weaknesses elsewhere and how these might be addressed in a coordinated way.

Much still needs to be done if this skeleton is to be fleshed out into a full-scale scheme of assessment. Like any such scheme, it can only be polished through actual use and accumulated experience. The process needs to be started, though, and preferably too early than too late. As Richard A. Smith, national executive director of the Support Centers of America, observed in 1994, what the not-for-profit field really needs are “methodologies that document what an organization accomplishes (preferably in terms of specific outputs and outcomes) at what total cost.” The question before the museum field is this: Who might better develop such methodologies? Those who know museums best, or those who scarcely know them at all?
NOTES

1. This is the recurring paradox of formalism. If one can conceive of a beautifully made painting of an ugly subject (late Goya, for example), why might one not just as readily conceive of an excellently operated museum dedicated to an odious purpose? Museum work, viewed thus, might be seen as a technology—in essence, a particular way to get things done. Consider the analogy to radio broadcasting, where the quality of a station might be considered wholly apart from either the ideological stance of its management or the content of any particular program.


3. Drucker, 41.


6. To be kept in focus is that the evaluation here proposed is of museums as museums. An institution might, for example, be rated only marginal as a museum but be considered a first-class community center. In some contexts the distinction might not be important. In others—such as the distribution of public funds earmarked for museums (or community centers)—it might be critical.


8. It is a commonplace of the museum literature that the preservation of objects and their use in public programming are to a degree in conflict with one another. For the purposes of this proposal, however, preservation and object-based public programming are not deemed inconsistent purposes. The tension and need to balance between them is simply a given in the operation of museums.


11. According to a survey published in Chronicle of Philanthropy for September 29, 1994 (p. 12), wealthy donors to museums (defined as those with liquid assets of at least $1 million who had contributed $25,000 or more in the preceding three years) were
more than twice as apt (22.7 percent v. 10.8 percent) to be motivated by the social opportunities offered than were wealthy donors to not-for-profit institutions generally. They were also more than twice as likely (19.8 percent v. 8.3 percent) to have come from “old money” with a family tradition of philanthropy. For an analysis of donor motivations in these terms, see Russ Alan Prince, The Seven Faces of Philanthropy (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

12. This, for example, is the policy of the Association of Art Museum Directors with respect to certain breaches of the standards promulgated by its ethics and standards committee and set forth in its publication, Professional Practices for Art Museums.


14. For an extended discussion of the use of performance indicators and benchmarks in museums, see Weil, “Performance Indicators.”

15. Such a linkage between assessment and planning is strongly urged by Drucker, 50–52.
