

Take the Right StEPs

New Program Guides Texas Museums and Sites to Success

Nearly 40 people gathered at the THC's Annual Historic Preservation Conference in April to learn how a new program can help create stronger museums, historic sites, and history organizations. Three recognized leaders in the field discussed the value of participating in the Standards and Excellence Program for History Organizations (StEPs), a new initiative offered through the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH).

Cherie Cook, senior program coordinator for AASLH, began the session by providing an overview of StEPs (www.aaslh.org/steps), a self-study program that assists history organizations with assessing their current operations using performance indicators (basic, good, and better) and rewarding them with certificates for progress. Lest museums be ashamed to admit to their shortcomings, Cook promised, "This entire program is about encouragement, not judgment. We want to encourage history organizations to move closer to meeting national standards."

She went on to explain that standards have long remained an enigma for those in the local history field. When it comes to collections care, for example, museums have traditionally been told they must provide a professional standard of care for the objects. Cook asked the audience, "But what does that mean exactly? How do you know if you're doing it?" A sea of shaking heads and shrugging shoulders signaled that it hasn't always been clear.

With StEPs, history organizations now have a clearly defined framework for recognizing, understanding, and achieving national standards in six key areas of operations—mission, vision, and governance; audience; interpretation; stewardship of collections; stewardship of historic structures and landscapes; and management. The program's workbook offers a series of self-assessment questions, along with three levels of specific performance indicators, to help organizations measure the degree to which they are currently meeting the standards. After identifying areas for improvement, participants can then choose a recommended project to get one step closer to meeting that standard.

"StEPs is really about projects," Cook said. "Projects can be accomplished in increments big or small, but even the smallest of projects can lead to great accomplishments."

It is this sense of accomplishment that has small organizations singing StEPs' praises. Cook explained that many of the participants in the program's pilot phase were amazed at how their organizations were finally able to see themselves moving forward. "It gave them confidence and helped them realize that they



Right: Cherie Cook speaks at the popular StEPs session at the 2010 Annual Historic Preservation Conference. Inset: Dr. Paul Katz leads a tour of Amarillo's Texas Pharmacy Museum.

aren't too small to achieve success," she beamed.

One of those small organizations is the Texas Pharmacy Museum, curated by the second session presenter, Dr. Paul Katz. The museum helped pilot test StEPs in 2008, and was one of the first enrollees when the program officially launched late last year.

Katz, who recently agreed to serve on the StEPs national advisory board, took great care to outline the aspects he values most about the program. The self-study nature of StEPs, along with



the workbook format, allows for flexibility that is missing from other assessment programs, he noted. In particular, the matrix feature of the workbook, which permits organizations to work horizontally (approaching all six standard areas one performance level at a time) or vertically (approaching all three performance levels one standard area at a time) lets organizations customize a system that best fits their organizational capacities and resources.

The workbook's inclusion of suggested projects, case studies, and group discussion questions are noteworthy, said Katz, but he claimed one of its most valuable features is the list of unacceptable practices included in each of the six standards areas. He found this approach easier to digest than a similar list that might be created by an outside observer pointing out the museum's errors or shortcomings. He added that access to printed and online resources, as well as web-based networks, provided a sense of comfort, in that he never felt like he had to start from scratch.

Katz, the sole staff member at his museum, firmly believes that even the smallest history organizations will benefit from participation in StEPs. Although he has yet to determine whether he'll take a vertical or horizontal approach to the program, he confidently stated, "The Texas Pharmacy Museum will be a stronger, better-run institution because of StEPs."

The final speaker was Texas Association of Museums (TAM) executive director Ruth Ann Rugg. As head of the statewide membership organization for

museums, she is in a unique position to receive input from a variety of cultural organizations about their specific needs. According to Rugg, museum representatives report that one of their greatest needs is a method to identify their current set of circumstances and how to use that information to plan for the future.

Rugg added that her primary responsibility is to help the staff, volunteers, and trustees at Texas museums do their jobs more effectively. As such, she and TAM staff are devoted to evaluating the myriad resources available to museums and other cultural institutions. Acting as a filter of sorts, they then provide information exclusively related to the resources that best serve the community.

"Only the good stuff makes it through the filter," she said. "StEPs is out there, and it's good."

In fact, Rugg views the program as beneficial not just for history organizations, but for all museums and cultural organizations. She believes the key to success, however, is open and honest evaluation.

"Denial is often our greatest challenge," she cautioned. "We're in denial about what it is that really keeps us from achieving success."

Rugg added that museums have many options available for learning about standards and creating plans to achieve them; however, remaining unaware of the standards or choosing to ignore them is not one of them.

"We will not budge on high standards in Texas museums," Rugg concluded. ★

This article was written by Carlyn Hammons of the THC's History Programs Division.