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Preserving and Providing Access to Washington Women’s History

In 2004, the Washington State Legislature drew attention to the “many landmark achievements in Washington state during the last several decades, and earlier, in achieving innumerable substantial improvements in legal rights and broad opportunities for women and girls.”¹ Among other accomplishments, Washington women gained the right to vote in 1910, nearly a decade before women in most other states. The Legislature noted that these achievements span many spheres of life, including business, government, education, sports, and health.

The Legislature found, however, that “there has been no systematic effort to compile this landmark history ... much [of which] is scattered and fragmented.... Thus, without an intentional effort, this critical history might become lost to history forever.”²

To focus attention on “how and why Washington has become such a major leader”³ in women’s rights and opportunities, the Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to develop recommendations for the creation of a center or information network devoted to Washington women’s history.⁴

The Institute conducted a survey, contacted similar organizations in Washington and other

Summary

The 2004 Washington State Legislature directed the Institute to make recommendations regarding the development of a state women’s history organization. To solicit a range of views, the Institute convened an advisory group of experts, surveyed the public, and researched the workings of similar organizations across the country.

Based on these consultations, the Institute recommends creation of a women’s history consortium with the Washington State Historical Society as the host organization. This strategy would build on existing strengths in Washington’s historical organizations, and would be a cost-effective alternative to building a new facility.

Initially, the consortium would focus on compiling and disseminating online information about materials involving Washington women’s history. As part of this effort, the consortium could identify significant gaps in existing collections.

¹ SSB 6568, Section 1, Laws of 2004.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ SSB 6568, Section 2(1).

states, and convened a group of experts. These efforts produced a clear consensus among those consulted: Washington should create a women's history consortium with the Washington State Historical Society (WSHS) as the host organization. The consortium would be a partnership of existing organizations focused on a common purpose. This arrangement was selected as a cost-efficient alternative to building a physical center.

This consortium would have two implementation phases. In the first phase, activities would include the following:

- Compiling and providing public access to information about existing materials and gaps in current collections related to Washington women's history;
- Establishing partnerships, raising funds, and developing long-range plans; and
- Reporting these plans to the legislature after one year.

Activities in the second phase would be dependent on these plans.

The rationale for these recommendations follows. Details regarding the structure, goals, and implementation of the consortium are presented in Appendix B.

Soliciting Views: Experts, the Public, and Other Organizations

An advisory group of experts was convened. The members included representatives from Washington museums, colleges and

universities, historical societies, the State Archives, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the State Library, and local historians. Appendix A provides a list of these individuals.

The Institute also surveyed individuals and organizations. Appendix C describes the survey methodology, the detailed results, and a copy of the survey.

To learn about similar efforts, we reviewed five entities:

- Center for Columbia River History (partnership of the WSHS, Portland State University, and Washington State University)
- Women and Social Movements in the United States (State University of New York, Binghamton)
- The Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture (Duke University's Special Collections Library)
- Museum of the American West (Los Angeles, California)
- New York State Archives (program of New York's Department of Education)

A summary of these organizations' structures, scopes, staffing, and budgets is provided in Appendix D.

We asked these experts and citizens about operational priorities for an organization dedicated to women's history in Washington and for potential ways to organize and structure this entity. A summary of views follows.

Setting Priorities

The 2004 legislation outlined multiple purposes for a Washington women’s history organization, directing the Institute to develop recommendations covering the following:

- Collecting, preserving, and providing public access to historically valuable records and artifacts pertaining to Washington women’s history;
- Developing a general outline of the location and accessibility of existing records and artifacts;
- Encouraging citizens with historically significant records and artifacts to make their items accessible, including provisions for making donations to public collections;
- Encouraging development of educational programs and displays for K–12 students as well as colleges and universities;
- Promoting the collection of oral histories; and
- Encouraging research about this history.⁵

Advisory group members agree with the value of these activities but caution that priorities would need to be set for the first stage. The group strongly recommends that a comprehensive catalog of existing resources is compiled before collecting new material. With a comprehensive list of already accessible historical materials, a better informed and more specific acquisitions plan—one focused on filling in gaps rather than duplicating previous efforts—can be developed.

Exhibit 1 summarizes information about historical materials compiled from the Institute’s survey.

Exhibit 1
**Washington Women’s History Materials:
Survey Findings**

The small budget and short timeline for this study precluded compiling a comprehensive catalog of materials. To gain preliminary information, however, we asked survey respondents to identify items they have, as well as topic areas and historical periods inadequately represented in current collections.

Identified Materials. Materials identified by respondents date from 1787 to 2004. The majority of items (55 percent) are publicly available. Half the materials reported are in one of five cities: Seattle, Olympia, Spokane, Tacoma, and Lacey.

Areas Not Well-Represented. Survey respondents identified an array of historical periods and topics not well-represented in publicly accessible collections in Washington State. The most commonly mentioned areas include the following:

- Minority and Native American women;
- Oral histories;
- Women’s movements, including the 1970s ERA campaign, suffrage, and homesteading;
- Health care, especially public health issues and nursing programs;
- Private papers, diaries, letters, and other items from “everyday women”; and
- Women in non-traditional occupations.

Appendix E provides a selected list of materials identified by survey respondents.

⁵ SSB 6568, Section 2(1)(a-i).

Staff at the five organizations reviewed for this study note that marketing and outreach are core functions that should not be overlooked if the public is to learn about opportunities provided by the women's history organization. Developing exhibits early in the project was noted by one individual as critical to building support and credibility for any historical center or network.

Taken together, these findings lead to the Institute's recommendation that the consortium initially focus on compiling and disseminating information about existing women's history collections and identifying gaps.

To raise awareness and support for this undertaking, we also recommend additional activities, including coordinating exhibit sharing and marketing.

Determining Organizational Structure

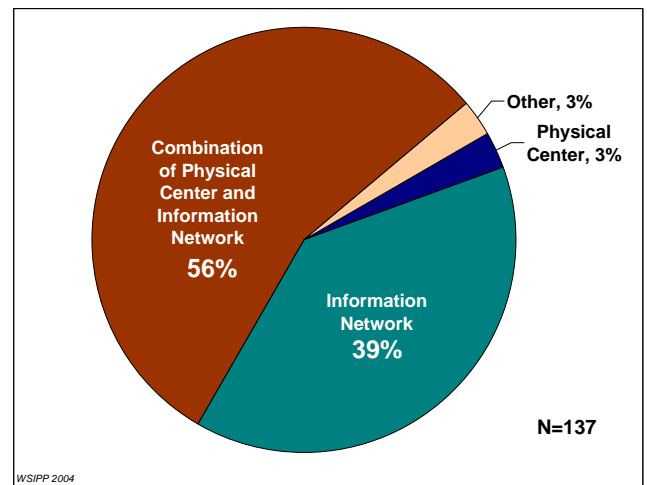
Regarding organizational structure, the Legislature directed the Institute to provide recommendations for a physical center, information network, or a combination of both.⁶ To determine how to structure a women's history organization, we focused our attention on three questions:

- What type of organization is best suited to address the key priorities identified?
- Should a new or existing organization or a consortium participate in this project?
- If an existing organization or consortium is chosen, which organization should lead?

⁶ SSB 6568, Section 2(1).

Type of Organization. There is strong consensus among the advisory group that building a stand-alone physical center is not an efficient use of resources. No member prefers a "brick and mortar" approach, particularly at a time when resources for the state's existing museums and historical societies are scarce. Most survey respondents had similar opinions; only 3 percent preferred a stand-alone physical center, and a majority chose a combination approach (see Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2
Survey Respondents' Preferred Type of Organization



Most advisory group members agree it is important to have space for storage and preservation of historical materials; storage could be coordinated using *existing* space. The advisory group favors an information network that would connect historical organizations from around the state, sharing information about their existing collections and possibly using their physical space for storage and exhibitions.

Staff at the organizations reviewed for this study emphasize extensive use of Internet-based exhibits to provide public access to their materials. Advisory group members also emphasize the growing importance of using the Internet and other electronic technologies to preserve historical artifacts and increase public access. Public opinion as measured by the survey aligns with these sentiments.

We found little support or precedent for creating a stand-alone physical center devoted to women’s history. There is strong support for an online information network. This structure complements the high priority placed on information collection and dissemination.

Expand an Existing Organization or Create a New One? Most advisory group members concur that an effective approach is to establish a consortium, or structured partnership, of museums, historical societies, archives, and other interested parties for essentially the same reason an information network is preferred: creating an entirely new organization is not an efficient use of resources. The group also agrees that involving only a single organization would limit coordination among entities, as well as the scope of the women’s history organization.

Public opinion, as measured by the survey, does not lean strongly toward any of the choices (new, existing, or consortium). The organizations reviewed for this study are part of a larger organization, usually a college or university; two, including the Center for Columbia River History, are consortia. According to staff from these organizations, consortia must be clearly structured—particularly regarding members’ roles and

responsibilities—and regularly monitored to be effective and sustained over time.

Overall, a consortium is believed to be the most efficient structure for a women’s history organization. This consortium should focus on building an information network. The advisory group recommends that the consortium have a separate board of directors to oversee fiscal, operational, policy, and planning activities. The board of directors should be composed of individuals representing a diversity of views, including private citizens, tribes, historians, and educators.

Who Should Lead? Several organizations reviewed for this study are housed in universities, and colleges and universities were most frequently chosen as the preferred organizational base by survey respondents, although by a small margin. Members of the advisory group agree, however, that it is less important where the women’s history consortium is based as long as it has a strong online presence. By establishing a solid network of partner organizations, the consortium could act as a statewide organization from almost anywhere. The advisory group stresses the importance of selecting an organization that has the *capacity*, *interest*, and *commitment* to support the consortium.

Based on the consensus of the advisory committee, the Institute recommends that the Washington State Historical Society lead a consortium devoted to Washington women’s history.

Other factors that contribute to the selection of WSHS include its funding structure and mission. As a hybrid entity, WSHS is both a

state agency and a charitable (501 c3) nonprofit organization. WSHS has the capability to raise and spend private funds to supplement state funding. This capability is essential, according to the advisory group, to obtain adequate specialized funding. Additionally, WSHS has a statutory mission focused on history, encompassing a wide variety of materials and topics.⁷

Providing Educational Opportunities

The legislation authorizing this study directed the Institute to incorporate strategies for providing educational opportunities in the recommendations. **Providing online learning opportunities and developing curricula that match statewide learning objectives are preferred strategies.**

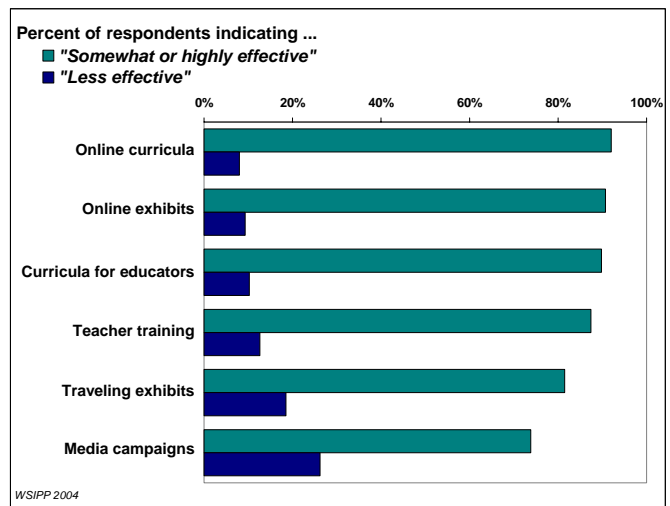
Emphasis on Online, Interpreted Materials.

The advisory group stresses the use of the Internet in providing online access to educational materials. The group also emphasizes the importance of interpreting primary, or “raw,” historical materials⁸ for use in public and K–12 educational displays and online curricula. For these curricula to be effective, teachers must be trained to use primary source material in the classroom. Public opinion based on survey responses also reflects these views (see Exhibit 3).

⁷ The statute reads, in part, that the duties of the state’s historical societies are “[t]o collect, catalog, preserve, and interpret objects, manuscripts, sites, photographs, and other materials illustrative of the cultural, artistic, and natural history of this state.” RCW 27.34.070 1(a).

⁸ Primary sources are original materials that might include a newspaper article, meeting minutes, a position paper from a private organization, correspondence, photographs, or an oral history.

Exhibit 3
Survey Respondents’ Ratings of Strategies to Provide Educational Opportunities



Mirror Statewide K–12 Curriculum. Among individuals consulted for this study, there is widespread interest in integrating the experience of women into the teaching of American history in general. Staff from one of the organizations reviewed for this study noted that the development of detailed state educational objectives in social studies and history make it easier to prepare curricula that match the skills and knowledge schools are required to teach. Advisory group members agree that Washington’s Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) are useful guidelines for that purpose.

Resources

Most individuals consulted for this study recommend that the consortium make use of both public and private funding sources. Staff at organizations reviewed for this study note that “niche museums,” such as one dedicated to the history of Washington women, have difficulty surviving as independent entities because they typically do not generate the broad interest or funding necessary to sustain them.⁹

According to the advisory group, having a sizable, private endowment is preferred as a supplement to state general fund appropriations, with short-term project grants playing a more limited role in funding. Other suggestions include seeking free space (such as using existing exhibition spaces in museums around the state) and clearly defining potential future collection policies, because the scope of collections often dictates the size of the budget.

Staffing. To initiate operations, the consortium needs funding for two full-time equivalent (FTE) staff, according to WSHS. Early staff activities would include organizational development, fundraising, marketing, and database compilation and management. Administrative support could be provided by WSHS staff.

Advisory group members note that field workers—perhaps provided by member organizations of the consortium or graduate students—might be needed to gather detailed information about collections not readily

available. A few suggest that the supervising role of professional historians would help ensure the quality of the consortium’s work. All agree that future funding and staffing levels, as well as private supplemental funding sources, need to be determined after more is known about existing collections.

For startup, the consortium will need state funding for two FTE staff.

Conclusion

The 2004 Washington State Legislature expressed concern about losing valuable materials related to Washington women’s history. The Legislature directed the Institute to develop recommendations for an organization devoted to women’s history. Based primarily on the consensus of an advisory group of experts, the Institute recommends the creation of a women’s history consortium with the Washington State Historical Society as the host organization. As a first step toward preserving and improving access to Washington women’s history materials, the consortium would systematically identify available collections as well as materials at-risk of disappearing.

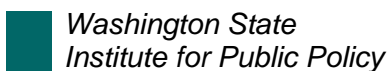
⁹ One staff suggested that, for long-term survival, a women’s history organization needs to be defined in statute and funded through a line item appropriation in the state budget.

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Appendices are available by request or at <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/>.

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The Washington Legislature created the Washington State Institute for Public Policy in 1983. A Board of Directors—representing the legislature, the governor, and public universities—governs the Institute and guides the development of all activities. The Institute's mission is to carry out practical research, at legislative direction, on issues of importance to Washington State.