

ITC Academic Assessment

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Overview

A review team of Dr. Daniel Gelo, Dean of UTSA's COLFA, Dr. Mac West, President, Informal Learning Experiences, and Mr. Charlie Walter, Director of Baylor University's Mayborn Museum, reviewed past ITC studies and news/web reports, and spent three days touring the ITC facility, talking with staff, advisors, university faculty, leaders and other stakeholders to gain an understanding of the current issues facing ITC. This report includes the review team's observations and an assessment of ITC's current situation, as well as the team's thoughts about possible next steps. This is an assessment with recommendations, not a strategic plan. There are many complex issues facing ITC. The review team's recommendations are based on the review noted above through the lenses of the team's collective experience in museum leadership and university administration.

ITC has an important mission, that of conveying the remarkable ethnic and cultural composition of Texas, but it is trapped in a paradigm related to its historic building and exhibits. Museums must change to remain viable and drive visitation, and ITC has changed little in the past decades from the standpoint of visitor experience. Its Festivals are its major strength. The few days of each year when the festivals are active attract a greater attendance than the regular exhibits do for the *entire year*. The institution is stymied by multiple past studies and myriad changes at UTSA. The community is leery of providing increased support because of rumors of funding cuts and closure. Staff members are confused and one staff member described the ups and downs of their current situation as causing "PTSD."

There is a viable future for ITC and it involves moving away from its current configuration and mindset. It is an important asset to UTSA and is increasingly recognized and acknowledged as such. ITC can take positive steps to own its future without being an increased liability to the university. The museum director is a capable leader who is praised by community members for the changes she has brought and her deep understanding of cultural issues. The following observations and recommendations will need her leadership as decisions are made, changes take place, and next steps are determined and realized.

ITC Strengths

ITC Mission: *The Institute of Texan Cultures gives voice to the experiences of people from across the globe who call Texas home, providing insight into the past, present, and future.*

ITC has traditionally been effective at the kind of academic cultural research and public programming that other museums aspire to; this work is valuable and potentially path-breaking for the museum field and the realization of the university's ambitions for public service and community engagement. ITC breaks the stereotype of the "typical" Texan and aims to celebrate the diversity of origins and cultures of all Texans.

The Institute is well regarded by those who are engaged, (e.g., participants in the sessions), and gets good reviews on TripAdvisor and Yelp – anonymous public comments.

The Director: Angelica is very well regarded as the voice (and person) of the Institute in the community. Her being named to the SA Women’s Hall of Fame is good evidence of the position the Institute occupies in at least part of the SA community.

Service to area schools: ITC is an important resource to area educators. School visits to ITC are healthy (see comparison to Baylor’s Mayborn Museum below) showing its value in the K-12 education community. For many of these young students, this is their first UTSA experience.

ITC Festivals are the most visible and participated in activity of the organization. The five days on which these festivals are held out-perform ITC general museum admissions for the entire year – in total.

A strong contingent of volunteers makes ITC’s programs come to life.

ITC is located near the heart of the city in Hemisfair Park. Its proximity to the convention center and area hotels is envious.

ITC’s public face makes the archives more visible and accessible to the community.

Weaknesses

A significant weakness of ITC is low public visitation, which also has been negatively down-trending for several years. This comes from both low general box office admissions and a very low membership. A comparison of ITC with Baylor University’s Mayborn Museum is below (note: The Mayborn Museum is located in McLennan County with a total population of 250,000, compared to 2,700,000 of San Antonio):

	ITC	Mayborn Museum
Adults	5,304	40,356
Junior	1,643	32,167
Senior	2,856	4,511
School / Group Tours	25,861	21,154
Military	855	770
Total	35,749	98,958
Members	145	2,470

Comparison of Public Paid Attendance (FY 2018)

The attendance and participation data provided is inconsistent, making year-to-year and institutional comparisons and documentation of uncertain value. For example, the 2018 Zip Code report and the Attendance and Outreach FY18, while independently useful, show different total numbers.

The low number of members is of considerable concern. This suggests and inadequate description of membership benefits to current visitors as well as on the website even though classes are clearly indicated.

The Institute suffers from an aging infrastructure, the 50-year-old facility, and, most importantly the out-of-date exhibits, both in terms of content and presentation techniques.

Opportunities

The statistics of the number of UTSA faculty and students that utilize the Institute and its cultural resources are a strong argument for ongoing statutory budget support. The Director should make a much more concerted effort to share this data with university leadership. The use of the institute as a teaching facility expands somewhat into a research resource for both faculty and students.

With careful budget model adjustment and program planning, these academic scholarly activities could be increased to more firmly anchor the institute in the life of the University. For example, seed support for UTSA faculty work using the ITC cultural resources / collection.

There are ways in which the UTSA academic colleges, particularly COLFA and CoEHD, can partner with ITC, for example providing staffing and content for the numerous school tours.

The recent ITC Exhibit Master Plan has created an exciting vision for a renewed visitor experience that can be the center of a Development plan, and should be incorporated into the recommended strategic plan. It accommodates elements of the limitations of current building organization and most importantly suggests some interesting new ways to enhance the visitor experience that will increase community engagement and philanthropy.

Threats

Budget stress is caused in a large part by the possible loss of future state funding

There is potential for major facility maintenance and upgrade issues that could force closure to the public and/or threaten archives and collections for unknown times.

There is an increasing wide variety of leisure options in San Antonio.

Continued planning for Hemisfair Park that does not include the institute as a signal attraction can impact access, parking, etc.

Specific Recommendations

1. ITC should remain in Academic Affairs, which links it more directly to the educational mission of UTSA, and can facilitate bridge building across campus departments (see strategic plan considerations below).
2. There are many opportunities for ITC to increase its academic connection to the university – after all, one element that distinguishes ITC from other museums is that it is part of the university – with unique access to university faculty, staff and students. ITC can bridge directly to UTSA's academic departments for education and research opportunities, offering students the opportunity to engage the public through their academic work and for faculty to utilize ITC's unique environment for ongoing research in education, cultural studies, psychology, and the arts. ITC has incredible assets and community relationships that can support this work.

3. UTSA's Library system is an invaluable partner and can be engaged further to help in these efforts. The Library has expertise in the administration of academic collections, is a model in creating a student experience centered around inquiry through collection resources, and in budgetary management of multiple funding sources, including philanthropy. Increased administrative connections to the Libraries could offer ITC useful guidance.
4. UTSA has prioritized on-going statutory funding for ITC through the legislative process. ITC needs to take the lead in creating its own future, not sitting back and waiting for the university to solve all of its problems. An entrepreneurial business model should be developed within the parameters of the university's Incentivized Resource Management budget model, with UTSA coordination around fundraising and facilities maintenance efforts being a priority, and other operational issues being handled routinely by ITC staff. ITC staff should, for example, develop a contingency plan for the museum's budget should be developed immediately considering possible state budget cuts of 0%, 25%, 50%, or 100%, and work with UTSA Facilities to develop a prioritized list of deferred maintenance needs and associated cost estimates.
5. Visitation to museums is driven by having a dynamic visitor experience and a marketing budget and social media presence to increase awareness and interest. ITC's recent (2017) exhibit masterplan is a huge step in the right direction. It is critical to ITC's future that this plan be carried through and that ITC enhance its important role of providing a place for intellectual dialogue about cultural issues facing our country. It is now up to the director to rally support around that vision. Consider implementing the exhibit masterplan incrementally. Small initial steps can lead to increased momentum as new exhibit areas come online. Many museums also utilize a vibrant traveling exhibits program to support an increased visitor experience. At some future tipping point, there will need to be enough new and engaging experiences so that community members will consider membership to be a real value and public visitation will increase.
6. ITC must step up and provide the leadership to more deeply connect the institution to the community and create a viable plan, see below, to assure university administrators positive growth and movement. ITC has several advisory boards (Community Advisory Board and Faculty Advisory Board are listed on the website; the Development Board is not) made up of individuals who care deeply about the institution. ITC should move its most ardent supporters into a new Board of Advocates. ITC must generate more community support in terms of fundraising to meet its operating budget goals and address the need for capital investment in new exhibits and building improvements. ITC should not passively wait for funding to materialize from the University but clearly state that being an advocate requires making ITC a priority in giving. This economic strategy must be coordinated with and endorsed by the UTSA Development Office.
7. Strategic Planning. Many issues arose during the three-day review which are best addressed in a strategic plan, which is outside the scope of this assessment, with timelines and action steps the university can use to gauge progress. Here we make recommendations regarding areas to be included in the five-year plan which should be the next step in the redevelopment of the ITC. This plan should be staff driven, though an outside facilitator and advisors from both the

university and the museum field would help to organize and inform the process. The plan should include specific action steps to reach its goals, linked directly to staff performance reviews to assure movement. This plan will facilitate decision making and give UTSA administrators a tool to assure movement and growth. Some specific items the review team recommends be addressed in the strategic plan include:

- Concerning Exhibits: The 2017 Exhibition Master Plan developed by The Museum Practice is an excellent starting point for the modernization of the exhibits and the entire visitor experience. It opens the ITC to be a place of interesting intellectual dialogue. Might it be possible to use the current political conversations about the Mexican border to have meetings/presentations/etc. about cross-border movements and the situation in Texas now and in the past? This extends the reach of the museum beyond its principal geography, but that is OK if it is truly a state museum.
 - Academic linkages: Reestablish an academic research function in the museum (this office could retain title of Institute) for creation of new knowledge; hire a PhD scholar in history, anthropology, or folklore to head and coordinate staffing in collaboration with an academic college. Staffing the research office could come from rotating faculty from UTSA on one-year project-based joint appointments; forge agreement for steady rotation between Museum and relevant colleges and departments. Look for opportunities to increase academic connections between the ITC and the relevant UTSA academic departments. With modest investment there can be formal dual appointments and research programs. Tie the Museum through formal agreement with the UTSA undergraduate minor in Museum Studies and the PHD in Cultural Production (actual title pending) now in development
 - Statewide or Local Mission. ITC's statewide mission derived from it as a focal point of Hemisphere in 1968. Whether it is truly a state museum is very questionable. Most museums serve a local or regional audience. ITC should focus on building its visitor experience and marketing itself as the presentation of San Antonio's, and south-central Texas's ethnic history and current composition. Once local visitor numbers rise, thinking more broadly may make sense at that time. Making the case for state funding may trump this argument. If statewide, reestablish a statewide mission and advisory council; get members with clout from throughout the state; preserve, but build beyond, the local support network
8. Consider renaming the organization as the Museum of Texan Cultures with the research-intensive Institute of Texan Cultures as a unit of the museum.