

Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery: A Rubric of Best Practices

By the National Summit on Teaching Slavery

Note: This Technical Leaflet is introduced and contextualized by the article of the same name in this issue. To view the full report, visit <https://digitaldoorway.montpelier.org/engaging-descendant-communities-in-the-interpretation-of-slavery>.

Historian James Oliver Horton wrote, "Slavery was not a sideshow in American history. It was the main event." Museums and historic sites are increasingly seeking to be more inclusive of the history of slavery, but even though they want to integrate their historic narratives and more accurately portray the central theme of slavery in U.S. history, many do not know how to do it in ways that are ethical, meaningful, and effective, with empathy for the enslaved, their descendants, and the learner. Key to the integration of this history is engagement with descendants of enslaved people.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

What is the ideal relationship between descendent communities and institutions that interpret slavery? Historically, the relationship between these two groups is complicated: many institutions have avoided interpreting slavery, often from fear of estranging donors or visitors. While these fears are valid, by not interpreting the lives of the enslaved, institutions fail to tell a complete story. This failure perpetuates historical and ongoing trauma to the descendants of those enslaved there, and to anyone whose ancestors were brought to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade. When institutions shy away from creating relationships with descendants, the failure speaks volumes to the descendant community, especially as these institutions continue to profit from their ancestors' labor and pain.

Including descendants in research and interpretation is contingent upon building a positive relationship with the community. A positive relationship may already exist, but like all relationships, it must be maintained and nurtured so that it will grow. It is important to realize that the community is not a monolith—it includes a wide array of opinions, thoughts, and feelings about what can and should be done. It is also not static; as more genealogy and archival research is done, new people should be brought into the community as they are located or express interest. If no relationship, or a negative relationship, exists, an institution should issue an apology or a statement. It is important to realize that not every descendant (or perhaps not any) will want to work with a particular institution that suppresses their ancestors' pain and trauma. At any institution, it is important to respect and acknowledge descendant communities and approach these interactions with sensitivity, humility, and cultural, social, and emotional awareness.

Descendant communities and institutional partners begin by pre-determining a set of desired goals and outcomes that reflect the highest possible standards. Institutions must not only articulate commitment to these values and outcomes, but also follow through with strategic action. Achieving structural parity ensures that descendants are represented—and empowered—at every level of the organization, from the board to the volunteers. Institutionalizing these practices ensures continuity and longevity, while proactive evaluation supports quality control.

High Standards

4) Exemplary: As a result of significant and ongoing anti-racist training (which includes interpreting difficult history, deconstructing and interrogating white privilege, white supremacy, and systemic racism, and engaging visitors on these subjects), the staff is transparent, truthful, and authentic in all relations and interactions with the descendant community. Interpretation is con-

ceived to emphasize the humanity of the enslaved ancestors and to evoke empathy from visitors.

- 3) Proficient:** All staff have received anti-racist training, and interpretive staff receives ongoing training.
- 2) Developing:** Front-line staff have been trained once.
- 1) Ambivalent:** Select staff have been trained once.
- 0) Unsatisfactory:** No staff have been trained.

Expressed Commitment

4) Exemplary: The institution explicitly expresses values of inclusion and anti-racism. The mission statement and by-laws reflect the presence, values, and interests of descendants. The strategic plan prioritizes engagement, equity, inclusion, and reparative financial investments. An interpretive plan actively seeks and embraces oral histories and expressly values descendent relationships. The institution creates a written memorandum of understanding (MOU) with descendants that clearly outlines commitments and responsibilities, such as shared decision-making authority, asset co-management, and the adequate allocation of resources.

- 3) Proficient:** There has been limited action toward achieving the exemplary model with an informal plan of action, but no institutional self-evaluation.
- 2) Developing:** The institution and descendant community have begun communication regarding commitment, but without a defined plan of action towards an MOU.
- 1) Ambivalent:** Internal discussion about creating an MOU has begun.
- 0) Unsatisfactory:** No effort has been undertaken toward these goals.

Structural Parity

4) Exemplary: Significant representation at each level has been achieved. Anti-racism training is provided for staff, board, and leadership. The institution reflects and considers all types of diversity (e.g., social, economic, geographic, knowledge, skills), and includes advisory voices.

- 3) Proficient:** Board has structural parity, as described above, at the decision-making level, and there is parity in leadership staff.
- 2) Developing:** Parity at junior staff level.
- 1) Ambivalent:** Parity at advisory level only.
- 0) Unsatisfactory:** Homogeneity in board, senior leadership, supervisors, junior staff, and volunteers.

Institutionalization

4) Exemplary: The institution has established practices that are culturally competent and inclusive of the descendant community. Human Resources staff ensures ongoing diversity training of all staff through annual review. Board members and donors reflect the values of the institution. All practices are inclusive, with multiple opportunities for evaluation. Works closely with

STRUCTURAL PARITY

Exemplary structural parity occurs when members of the descendant community are represented and empowered at every level of the institution – board, senior leadership, supervisors, junior staff, and volunteers. Representation goes beyond tokenism; these positions are invested with power and authority. Additionally, a descendant committee serves as a standing board committee; and targeted internships, mentorship, outreach, and partnerships (HBCUs, African American Studies programs, professional societies, etc.) exist to ensure a continuous, descendant talent/academic pipeline. The history of the enslaved community and the voices of their descendants are fully integrated into all of the institution's materials and programs, including research, preservation, archaeology, and interpretation.

collegial organizations to share insight, inspiration, and resources.

3) Proficient: There is continuing exchange with collegial organizations and implementation of insights gained from this exchange.

2) Developing: Such a process is in development, beginning with reaching out to colleagues at similar institutions.

1) Ambivalent: There is sporadic informal engagement to exchange ideas, but it is inconsistent from one level to another throughout the institution.

0) Unsatisfactory: No attempt at institutionalizing these goals.

Proactive Evaluation

4) Exemplary: There is ongoing, comprehensive, and proactive evaluation of the ways in which descendant communities are being engaged on the board, staff, and community levels, including follow up.

3) Proficient: The PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act) Cycle model begins, with regular attention to and evaluations of these goals.

2) Developing: Annual evaluation of descendant engagement practices.

1) Ambivalent: Less than annual evaluation of these practices.

0) Unsatisfactory: No evaluation.

Building an institutional and personal relationship with descendant communities takes time, and should be done with attentiveness, care, and sensitivity. It is an institution-wide commitment and job, and cannot depend only on one person or one department.

Ensuring structural parity is crucial, as is making sure the descendant community is familiar with multiple people and departments of the institution. Relationships are the foundation on which this work is done, and putting time, effort, and work into them is one of the most important steps an institution can take.

RESEARCH

This portion evaluates the ability of museums, historic sites, and other institutions researching slavery and American history to incorporate the needs and views of the descendant community in multi-disciplinary research processes. The criteria are organized into five categories, which are distinct but also interdependent. They are based on developing measurable goals that will result in the highest level of engagement possible between the institution and the descendant community. All institutions should evaluate their performance in these five key areas.

Sources and Methodology

4) Exemplary: The institution elicits questions of interest from broadly assembled forums of descendants and holds itself accountable to pursuing those questions through research that meets its professional standards of evidence, critically evaluated in the interest of inclusion. Uses a high number and wide variety of different written sources (e.g., letters, diaries, account books, plantation records, wills and other legal documents, census data, newspapers). Narratives include specific African cultural origins of the enslaved and the available evidence of resistance to enslavement to demonstrate human motivations and experiences. Uses sources to “read between the lines” (even documents that are not, on the surface, “about” slavery or enslaved people often contain valuable information). Genealogy, oral history, documents, archaeology, material culture, study of buildings, community research, and outreach are placed on equal footing. In the absence of specific sources, researchers employ comparative analysis to draw conclusions based on surviving evidence from comparable sites and the secondary literature.

3) Proficient: The institution uses a good number of primary sources from multiple perspectives. Connects with descendants through oral history and research, but does not involve them throughout the research process.

2) Developing: The institution actively uses genealogy to identify its descendant community. Uses only a few primary sources, but interpretation affirms that enslaved people led multifaceted lives. Engages with material culture and/or oral histories of the enslaved.

1) Ambivalent: The institution uses only secondary sources, and does not engage with any primary sources. Interest in engaging descendants around research, but no clear plan.

PROACTIVE EVALUATION

The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle, based on the scientific method and derived originally in the business world, can be widely applied as a form of quality control to continually improve results in many enterprises. The detailed, four-step process tests a change that has been implemented within a real world setting, guiding the thinking process through stages of careful study. A team develops a plan, carries out the test, observes and learns from the consequences, and determines what further modifications should be made to the test, opening the way to further refinements. The cycle can continue indefinitely until the desired standard in process or product is achieved.

0) Unsatisfactory: The institution uses only hearsay and unsubstantiated anecdotes and does not ground interpretation in primary or secondary sources. Interpretation may contain falsehoods about slavery or omit the topic entirely. No attempt to acknowledge descendants or involve them in research.

Multi-Vocality

4) Exemplary: The institution uses sources from multiple perspectives and provides nuanced analysis of the impact of those perspectives. Incorporates the voices of the descendant community into the institutional voice. Recognizes diversity within descendant community voices (local, national, international).

3) Proficient: The institution looks for fresh descendant community voices and encourages new perspectives. Works with board and staff to build institutional platforms for shared authority.

2) Developing: The institution brings in multiple voices, but they are project-specific, with a subtle preference for institutional voice. Not much diversity within the descendant community involvement; reliance on engagement with the same few people.

1) Ambivalent: The institution has articulated that it wants multiple perspectives.

0) Unsatisfactory: The institution ignores descendant voices.

Collaboration

4) Exemplary: The institution assesses community needs before beginning research and conducts ongoing evaluation. Descendant community is part of active research with a partnership in interpretive planning and organizing of exhibits.

3) Proficient: Any member of the descendant community with knowledge to share knows how to contact the institution. The descendant community is involved throughout the research process, but the institution is the final decision maker.

2) Developing: The institution is doing work for descendants, but working towards doing work with them.

1) Ambivalent: The institution is interested in engaging descendants around research but has no active plan.

0) Unsatisfactory: The institution does not acknowledge descendants or attempt to collaborate.

Transparency and Accountability

4) Exemplary: The institution is transparent about the origins and context of the sources used. It reveals and shares research resources and credits the descendant community. The descendant community is well-integrated and known by staff. The institution's work is timely and contributes positively to the field and to the descendant community. The institution acknowledges its own mistakes. The descendant community has access to research.

3) Proficient: The institution reports to the descendant community on a regular basis and has created a succession plan for staff members working with descendants. The descendant community knows the institution and is comfortable visiting.

2) Developing: Measures of accountability are defined but not followed. The institution informs stakeholders and visitors of ongoing research and is beginning to study its history.

1) Ambivalent: The institution has recognized the need for transparency and is open to it, but there are no clear steps.

0) Unsatisfactory: Lack of transparency; the institution does not acknowledge its mistakes.

Accessibility

4) Exemplary: The institution raises public awareness about the body of research. Restorative practice takes place through research, skill, and job training. The public has access to research and objects, with multiple entry points and delivery formats. Information is disseminated to the descendant community and general public; there is communication of research to all levels of staff.

3) Proficient: No digitalization of materials yet, but the public has access in person. The institution invites the descendant community to access its resources through events. Genealogy workshops and public programs engage the descendant community, but don't integrate them.

2) Developing: The institution has developed finding aids and desires to make information more accessible to the descendant community.

1) Ambivalent: Research and resources exist, but access is difficult.

0) Unsatisfactory: The institution purposefully denies access to research, especially for preservation of its reputation.

All interpretation begins in research, and when discussing the history of enslavement, museum and historic site professionals do themselves and visitors a disservice by not involving descendants in research. Without their voices, research lacks depth, humanity, and credibility, and institutions continue to perpetuate the exploitative practices of the past by privileging the perspectives of slave owners. Institutions must consider descendants not as a supplemental part of operations or programs, but as essential knowledge-keepers, experts, and advocates. Institutions can carry great personal meaning for descendants, and when descendants collaborate in research with the institution, those meanings can enrich or re-frame the interpretation.

ACCESSIBILITY

Giving access to research materials and resources to descendants and the general public, given that most primary documents and artifacts held onsite at museums, historic sites, libraries, or other repositories are not circulated or made accessible to the public, unless those records have been digitized (which is expensive and rare). The institution is open and transparent in all things.

representations of enslaved people as multi-dimensional, complex individuals with agency, and with important identities beyond their labor.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, museums and historic sites have sought to be more inclusive of the history of slavery. Even though institutions may desire to integrate their historic narratives and more accurately portray the central theme of slavery in U.S. history, many do not know how. For example, institutions often struggle with interpreting the origins of race-based slavery in the United States, including the founders' use of the social construct of race to

rationalize slavery, or the use of the pseudoscience of eugenics in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to justify racism, discrimination, and segregation. Some institutions are reluctant to address this history, while others are uncertain how to share it in ways that are ethical, meaningful and effective, with empathy for the enslaved, their descendants, and the learner.

Key to the integration of this history is engagement with descendants of enslaved people. Institutions should work to engage descendant communities in the interpretation process. Descendants should be central to the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of all forms of interpretation, from programs to exhibitions. Engagement should be early, often, and ongoing. For many institutions, this is a dramatic change from simply surveying a community at the beginning or asking for feedback at the end. Community engagement for some institutions will be a difficult challenge. Building trust takes time.

INTERPRETATION

In 2018, the Southern Poverty Law Center released its report "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery." The report concludes: "The nation needs an intervention in the ways that we teach and learn about the history of American slavery." While this assessment targets the teaching of slavery in America's schools, it is equally applicable to museums, historic sites, and other cultural institutions.

It is an understatement to say that museums and historic sites have an inadequate record of interpreting slavery and its legacies. Reasons range from outright racism to the more nuanced fact that we, as a nation, do not know how to talk about slavery and its legacies. It was not until the end of the twentieth century that many cultural institutions—even major sites—began acknowledging slavery, while still fewer interpreted it.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, most interpretation of slavery took the "segregationist" approach. Institutions often interpreted the histories of slavery and the enslaved as narratives outside the main interpretive story and focused on single or two-dimensional representations of enslaved men, women, and children, through their labor roles or a simple listing of documented names. Institutions failed to put the narrative of slavery into its proper place at the center of American history, and often failed to provide rep-

Multi-Dimensional Representations of People

4) Exemplary: The institution develops a biography for each known enslaved person, tracing the arc of that person's life with as much detail as possible (recognizing that extensive details are not always available). The institution emphasizes the individual's humanity, not just his or her legal status as a slave. The institution affords each individual a complex identity (looking beyond their labor) and provides an intersectional analysis of their experience (discussing multiple aspects of their identity at the same time, including family members and other relationships).

The institution acknowledges enslaved people's agency: how they shaped their own lives within the

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL REPRESENTATIONS OF PEOPLE

At many institutions, interpretation mentions enslaved people only briefly, while providing extensive and detailed accounts of the lives of the white enslaver class. There should be provisions for making enslaved people visible—if visitors cannot see evidence of slavery, they will not ask questions about it, or pay attention to the message.

information. Alternatively, the institution provides one or more life stories, but the portrayals are one-dimensional and/or without discussion of agency (e.g., an enslaved manservant is discussed only in terms of his relationship with the master).

1) Ambivalent: The institution does not identify individual enslaved people. The enslaved community is referenced only in abstract terms (e.g., “the slaves,” “them”), or only in terms of their relationships to white individuals.

0) Unsatisfactory: The institution refers to enslaved people as “servants” or does not mention them at all.

Descendant Community Engagement and Collaboration

4) Exemplary: Multiple stakeholders have a voice in the institution’s development and implementation of slavery interpretation. The institution’s engagement with descendant stakeholders is early, frequent, and sustained. The institution shares authority with the descendant community and privileges their perspective when making decisions about slavery interpretation.

3) Proficient: The institution engages and collaborates with different stakeholders consistently. The institution identifies the members of the descendant community as key stakeholders. Members are involved in some decision-making.

2) Developing: The institution has identified key descendant stakeholders and engages/collaborates with them occasionally. Engagement may not be frequent or sustained.

institution of slavery. The institution uses inclusive language that highlights the humanity of enslaved people and encourages visitors to empathize with them.

3) Proficient: The institution presents the life stories of several individuals and emphasizes their agency. There is reference to the humanity and complex identity of those in bondage.

2) Developing: The institution identifies individuals, but provides minimal background information.

1) Ambivalent: The institution’s engagement with descendant stakeholders is infrequent and primarily didactic, not collaborative. The institution identifies the descendant community but does not include members in decision-making.

0) Unsatisfactory: The institution does not engage or collaborate with descendant stakeholders. Interpretation reflects only the institutional voice, not that of the descendant community or any other group.

Institutional Commitment

4) Exemplary: A commitment to slavery interpretation is part of the institution’s strategic plan and mission statement. That vision and mission are communicated to staff, stakeholders, and visitors (this may involve a name change, such as the choice made by the Royall House & Slave Quarters in Medford, Massachusetts). Board and staff members (at all levels, from senior leadership to front-line employees) are involved in the process and receive appropriate training, professional development, or continuing education. The institution consistently dedicates the necessary budgetary resources and staff time to implement more inclusive interpretation. The institution documents, evaluates, and measures its efforts to be more inclusive, and is committed to diversity and inclusion within the board and staff.

3) Proficient: Slavery interpretation is part of the institution’s strategic plan, but is not included as a core part of its mission. The institutional vision is sometimes communicated to visitors. Most board and staff are involved and committed to change. Some budgetary and human resources are dedicated to the effort. The institution documents, evaluates, and measures its efforts to be more inclusive.

2) Developing: The institution has made progress towards greater institutional commitment, with some board and staff members committed to change. Interpretive efforts may be under-resourced (e.g., assigned to only one staff member) or non-central to the organization’s mission.

1) Ambivalent: The institution’s commitment to slavery interpretation is limited or sporadic (e.g., only offering slavery-related programming during Black History Month). Allocates limited resources towards such efforts.

0) Unsatisfactory: The institution’s commitment to inclusive interpretation is perfunctory or nonexistent. The institution allocates no resources for such interpretation, and efforts to improve are met with overt dismissal or hostility.

Interpretive Techniques and Tools

4) Exemplary: The institution provides a rich variety of interpretive techniques to convey the history of slavery and race to visitors. The techniques are aligned with

	EXEMPLARY	PROFICIENT	DEVELOPING	AMBIVALENT	UNSATISFACTORY
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sources and Methodology	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Multi-vocality	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Collaboration	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transparency and Accountability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accessibility	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
RELATIONSHIP BUILDING	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
High Standards	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Expressed Commitment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Structural Parity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Institutionalization	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Proactive Evaluation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
INTERPRETATION	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Multi-Dimensional Representations of People	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Descendant Community Engagement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Institutional Commitment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tools/Interpretive Techniques	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Inclusive and equitable narratives	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

the institution’s mission. Such interpretation is highly visible and adheres to best practices for the development and implementation of each type of interpretation. Each tool is appropriate for the content and the audience, addressing different ages and learning preferences. Interpretation is offered in multiple languages and in accessible formats. The institution evaluates its interpretive tools regularly and uses the results to improve.

3) Proficient: The institution provides a good variety of interpretive tools. The interpretation is consistently aligned with the institution’s mission. The institution conducts some evaluation of its interpretive techniques.

2) Developing: The institution provides some variety

of interpretive tools, or a small number of tools that are employed extremely effectively.

1) Ambivalent: The institution provides little variety of interpretive tools. Interpretation is not consistently aligned with the institution’s values or mission, and has low visibility.

0) Unsatisfactory: The institution uses a single type of interpretation that does not meet any other criteria discussed by this rubric.

Inclusive and Equitable Narratives

4) Exemplary: The institution’s primary narrative is inclusive (contains discussion of slavery/enslaved

people) and equitable (the stories of enslaved people are given equal weight to those of the enslavers). The institution presents a multiplicity of perspectives within its primary narrative. The institution addresses slavery, race, and racism as complex concepts and provides local, national, and international context. The institution addresses the contemporary relevance of the history of slavery, race, and racism.

3) Proficient: The institution's primary narrative is mostly integrated to include the stories of enslaved people. The institution includes more than one perspective in its primary narrative. The institution addresses the local, national, and international context of slavery.

2) Developing: The institution presents a substantial narrative about slavery, but on a parallel and separate track, not integrated into the primary narrative. The context of slavery is addressed only briefly.

1) Ambivalent: The institution presents some narrative about slavery, but it is not equitable with or integrated into the primary narrative. The context of slavery is not addressed.

0) Unsatisfactory: Slavery is not part of any narrative at the institution. Only a single story of elite whites is presented.

AUDIENCE

Interpretation does not occur in a vacuum: in order to be effective, all interpretive efforts must take in to account the intended audience. Topics like slavery and race can be sensitive, for very different reasons. The institution recognizes that visitors will have a variety of reactions to the interpretation of slavery and has developed responses to the most common ones. Some visitors may feel defensive at difficult conversations about racism, privilege, and violence. Engagement with such visitors requires care to prevent them from "shutting down." Others may feel frustrated at the way the institution presents slavery. Their perspectives can provide valuable feedback as institutions refine their interpretation in order to reach as many audience members as possible with their desired messages, leaving few unaffected. Understanding and responding to audience needs and concerns can ensure that interpretation is effective and impactful.

Audience

Institutions must respect the fact that some descendants of enslaved peoples will choose not to engage with sites interpreting slavery, for reasons that may include ongoing trauma and anger, as well as general disinterest. Some descendants are not interested in being involved with or visiting a site where their ancestors were held in bondage. This does not mean the institution should not attempt to engage descendants, but instead be aware of different negative or painful reactions that may arise, and be prepared to give people space, as well as to listen and respond to any critiques that may arise.

4) Exemplary: The institution consistently considers different audience perspectives and learning preferences as it develops interpretation. They engage in dialogue with visitors and provides ample opportunities for them to respond. The institution conducts research to identify the needs, interests, perception, and motivations of its audiences, using this information to identify problems and improve accordingly. They also provide audiences a space for reflection and contemplation after engaging with difficult material.

3) Proficient: The institution considers its audiences as it develops interpretation, and staff members are trained in audience awareness. Visitors are given multiple opportunities to provide feedback, and the institution occasionally measures and responds to its audience.

2) Developing: The institution identifies and tries to expand its target audience. Visitors are given a few opportunities to respond. The institution measures audience sporadically.

1) Ambivalent: The institution is aware of its audience demographics but allocates no resources to audience feedback or training interpreters to handle different visitor reactions to slavery interpretation.

0) Unsatisfactory: The institution is indifferent to its audiences' potential for being inspired by richer interpretation, viewing them as merely consumers of the narrative they choose to communicate.

CONCLUSION

The National Summit on Teaching Slavery developed this rubric to provide a framework for understanding and working with the complex topic of slavery at history institutions. As a tool for structuring change and encouraging honest dialogue, the rubric offers concrete and meaningful steps on the path of inclusivity and shared authority and advocates for a more diverse and transparent field. For more information on the summit, contact Christian Cotz, Director of Education and Visitor Engagement at James Madison's Montpelier, at ccotz@montpelier.org.