

2011 Professional Development Survey

Museums Association of Saskatchewan

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24 November 2011



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Introduction

From 6 October to 24 November 2011, the Museums Association of Saskatchewan conducted a survey to aid in the planning and evaluation of its professional development activities. The survey contained six questions. The first three questions asked respondents to select their preferred options from a range of choices; the last three were designed to solicit open-ended responses.

The survey was publicized with repeated ads in the MAS e-newsletter, on the MAS website, and at regional network meetings. MAS's Professional Development Coordinator, Dan Holbrow, initiated, designed, and analyzed the survey. This report summarizes his findings.

At the end of the survey period, MAS had received 41 responses. Nine of these responses were mailed in on survey forms; the remaining 32 were processed online using the SurveyMonkey tool. The sample size is insufficient for a high degree of confidence in its quantitative findings.¹ It is anticipated that with greater member awareness and more lead time, future professional development surveys can achieve a higher response rate. Nevertheless, responses offer important qualitative feedback about MAS's learning opportunities, and are sufficient to offer some rough quantitative insights into member professional development preferences.

¹ For most figures, the margin of error is 10% to 15%, with 95% confidence.

Findings

Preferred Learning Activities

The survey asked respondents to identify the two or three MAS professional development programs they were most likely to participate in. The options provided were:

Certificate Program. This refers to MAS's Certificate Program in Community Museum Studies, a series of entry-level courses designed to provide the basic skills needed to operate a small community museum.

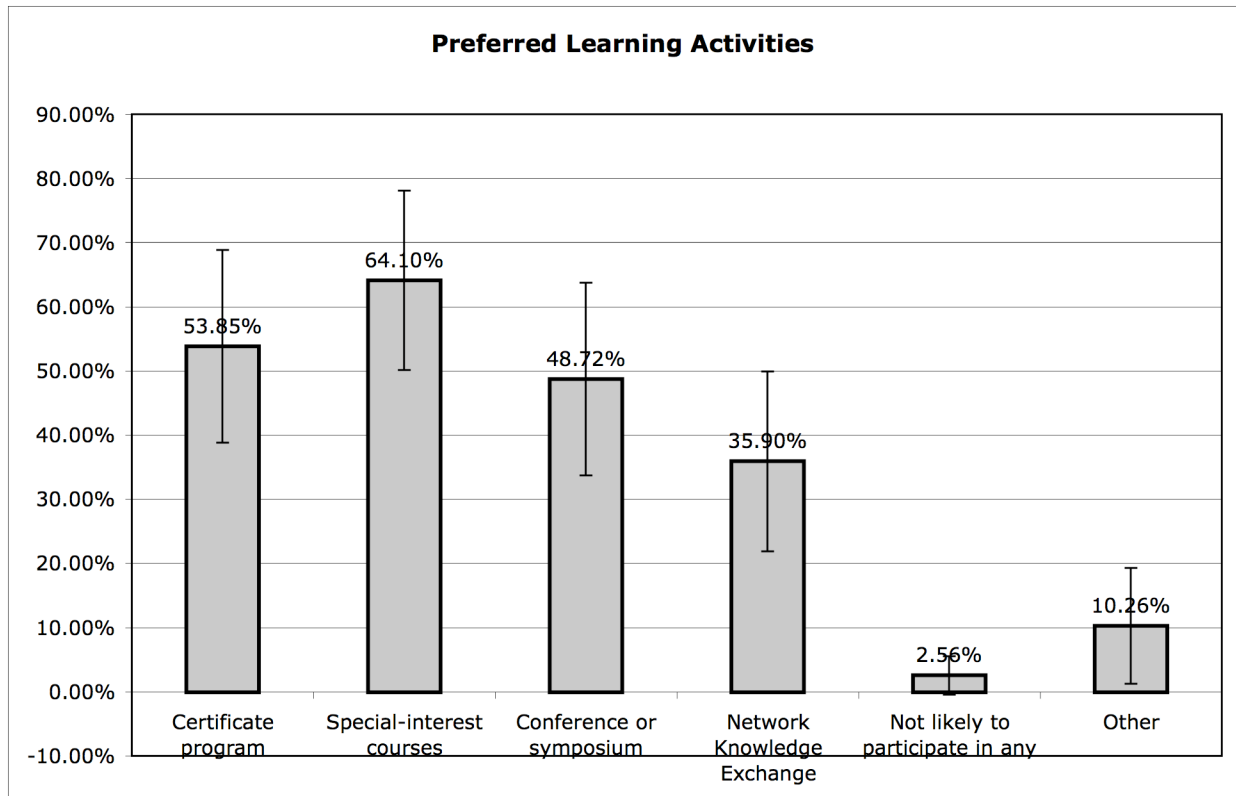
Special-interest Courses. These courses are offered at the request of MAS's Special Interest Groups (SIGs), and provide mid- to advanced-level training on specialized topics for museum professionals.

Conference or Symposium. MAS has periodically organized conferences and symposia on specialized topics.

Network Knowledge Exchange. This program offers a training course to each of MAS's eleven regional museum networks. Each year, the topic is chosen in consultation with network representatives.

Not likely to participate in any.

Other. Respondents who selected this option were given the opportunity to specify the other activity they were referring to.



Overall, respondents indicated a high level of interest in MAS educational programs. Only one of 39 respondents to this question indicated that she or he was unlikely to participate in any of our learning activities.

Special-interest programs enjoyed the highest level of support, with 64% of respondents indicating a likelihood of their participating in these programs. The Certificate Program was also popular, at 53%. This indicates a high level of member interest in our core educational programs.

The Network Knowledge Exchange had the lowest level of support, at 36%. However, it is important to recognize that not all museums belong to a regional network. The networks are primarily forums for small, seasonal rural museums, and not every such museum is currently a member of a regional network. Thus, the level of support is likely to be higher for eligible members.

Responses in the "Other" category were varied and sometimes difficult to understand. Among them were a request for a grant-writing workshop, a complaint about the expense of traveling to workshops, and a request for a workshop on cataloguing collections.

Preferred Delivery Method

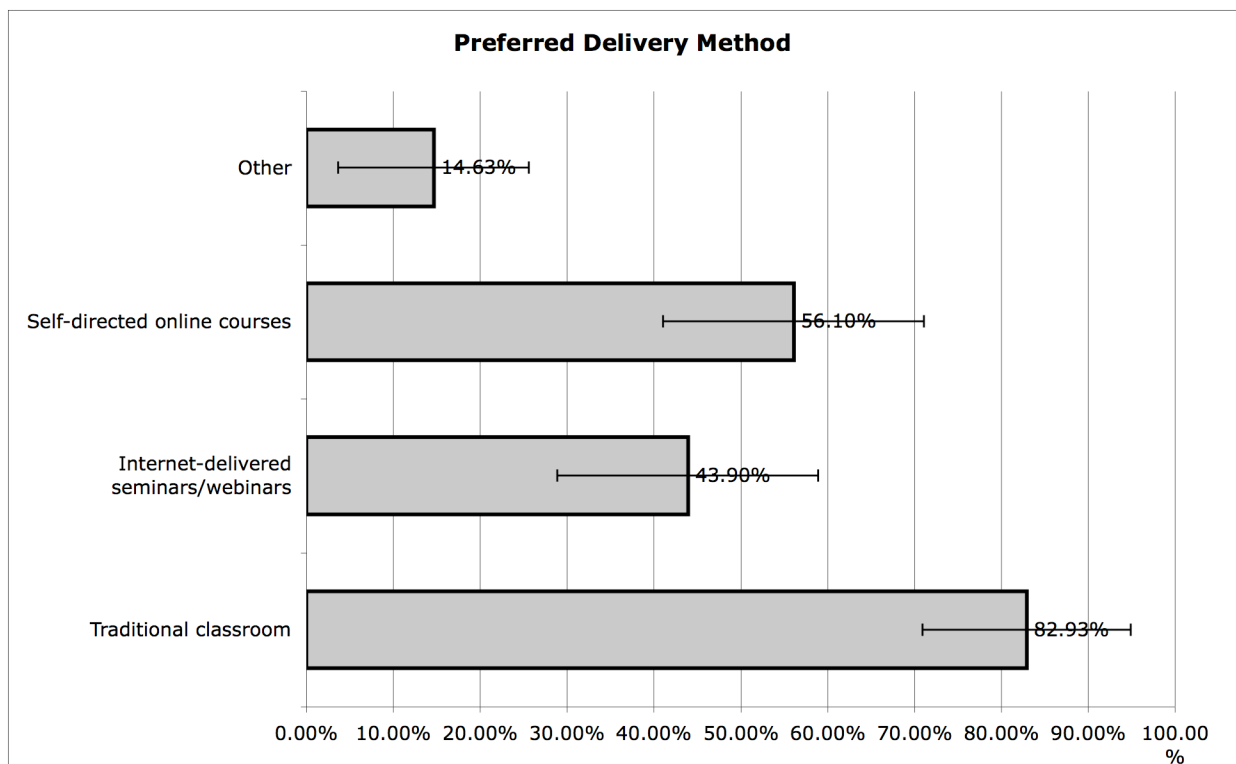
The survey also asked respondents their top one to three choices for training delivery. There were 39 responses to this question. Options offered respondents included:

Traditional classroom. This is currently MAS’s primary mode of course delivery.

Internet-delivered seminars/webinars.

Self-directed Online Courses. MAS is currently working to add e-learning options to its course offerings.

Other. Respondents who selected this option were able to specify another preferred delivery method.

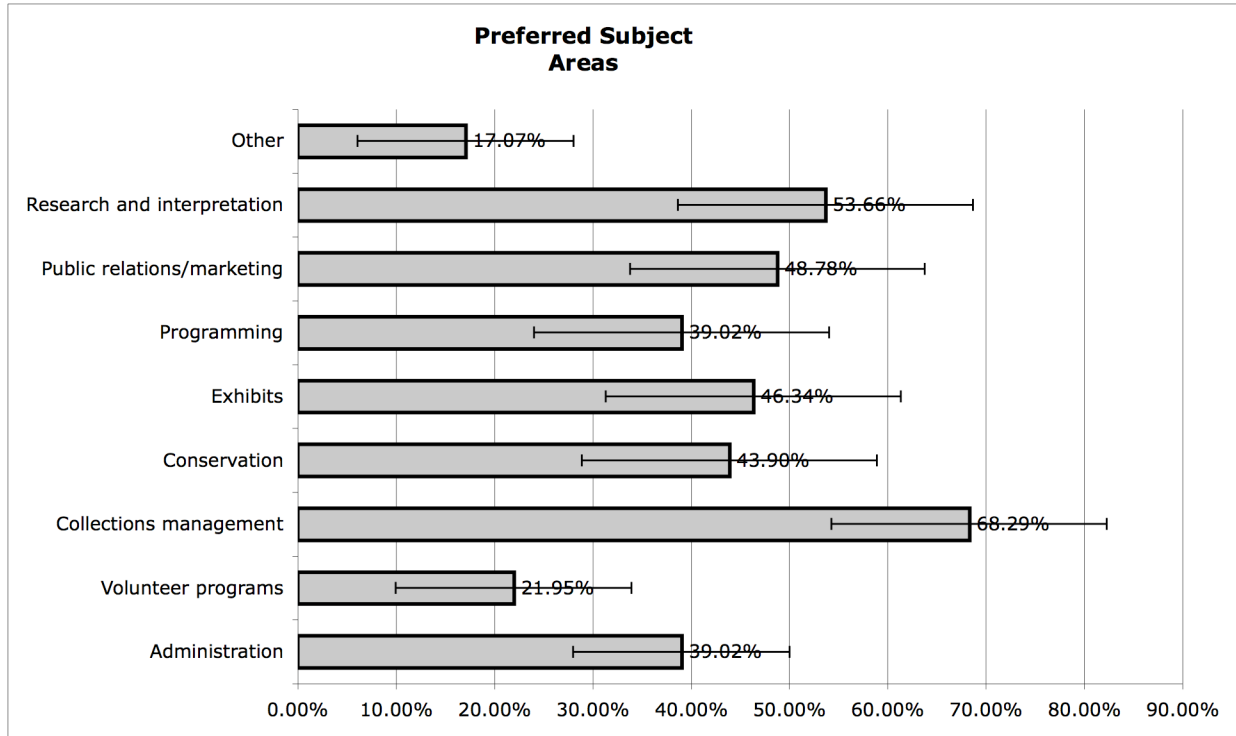


As the chart shows, there is still a high demand for traditional in-person classroom learning among MAS members. However, it is important to note that difficulty in accessing training due to the time and expense of travel is among the most common complaints about our professional development programs. Support for online training is relatively high, and could improve access to training opportunities for MAS members. The lower support for webinars as a delivery method could indicate a lack of familiarity with the medium and/or a lack of necessary infrastructure (e.g., broadband internet access).

Notable among the “Other” suggestions were two requests for mailed material. One suggested that course workbooks be sent out in advance of the course to allow participants to prepare. Another asked for mailout packages specifically for those who are “not handy with a computer,” which supports MAS staff members’ perceptions that computer use is an obstacle to e-learning for some members.

Preferred Subject Areas

In this question, members were asked to choose three to five subject areas that MAS training should focus on. The following table summarizes the results.



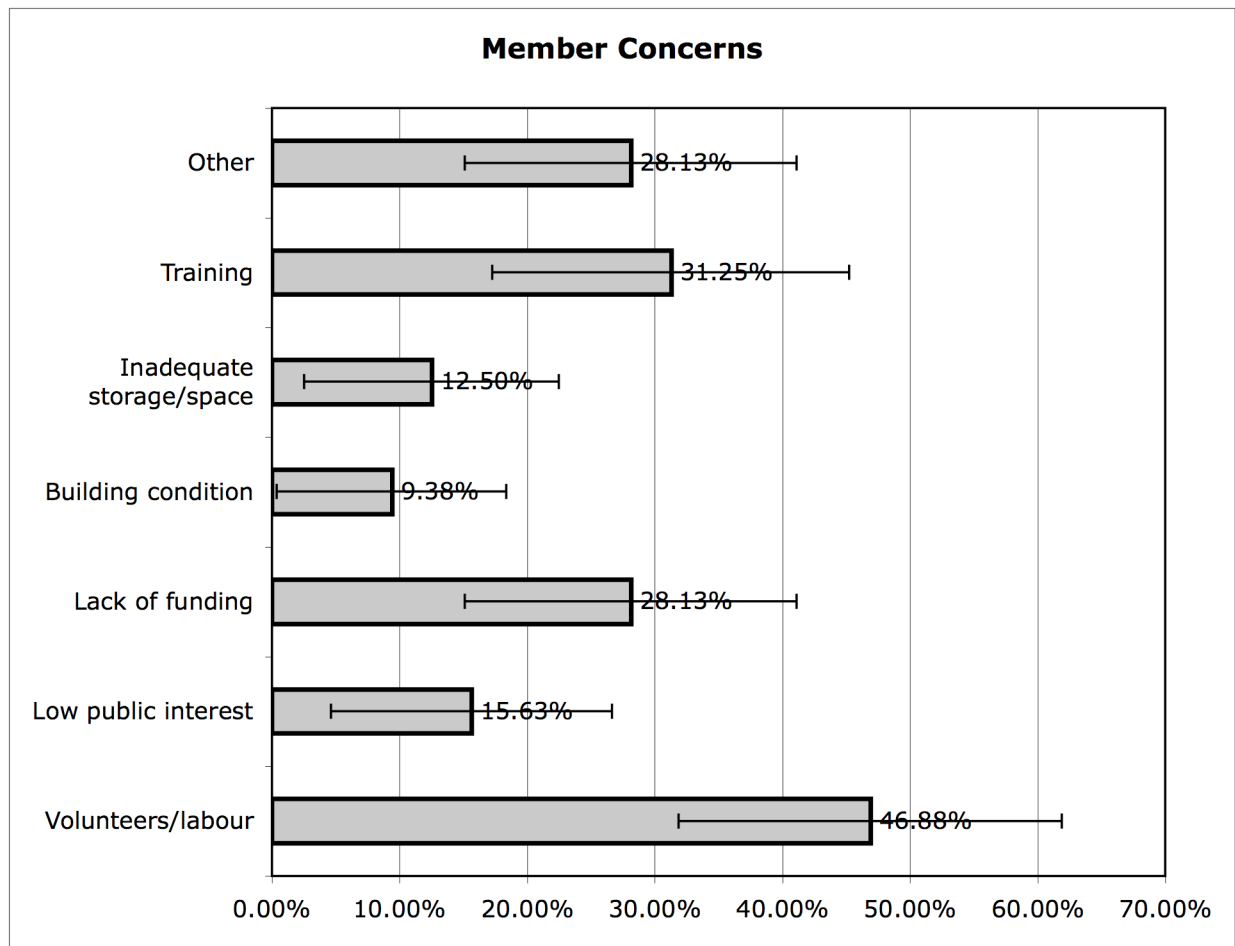
Most topic areas fell around the 40%-50% range for respondent interest. Responses indicated a notable level of interest in collections management training. Interest in training for museum administration is slightly lower, which may indicate that respondents already feel competent to administer museums, that respondents don't take on an administrative role in their museums, that other training for administrative tasks exists, or that members are simply uninterested in training for administrative tasks.

The very low level of interest in training on volunteer programs is striking, especially in light of the high level of member concern about volunteers in their museums (see *Member Concerns and Suggestions* below). One possible explanation is that members simply don't see a lack of volunteers as a problem that can be addressed through professional development.

Suggested topics in the "Other" category included museums on the web, copyright for museums, ecomuseums, museum libraries, knowledge resourcing, and greening the museum. Also included were a suggestion that training focus on current museum practices that can be implemented on smaller budgets with easy-to-access supplies, and a suggestion that MAS communication needs to be more prompt.

Member Concerns and Suggestions

Question 4 asked respondents to identify the main difficulties or obstacles facing them in their museum work. The purpose of this question was to identify member concerns that they may not currently perceive as problems that could be addressed through education or professional development. Responses were analyzed, recurring themes identified, and results tabulated as summarized below.



Members have identified human resources, funding, and professional development as the most significant constraints on their success. Taking the building condition and inadequate storage/space categories together as facilities-related concerns, facilities (at 22% respondents expressing concern) are nearly as significant as training or funding (each at around 30%). “Other” responses were highly varied, though two respondents expressed a desire for peer-to-peer networking and two more expressed career-related concerns (one looking to “break in” to the museum industry, another expressing frustration over limited opportunities for advancement).

Most striking here is the high level of concern about volunteers and labour availability, which represented by far the most frequently raised concern. As noted earlier, this seems to contradict earlier responses indicating volunteers as a relatively low-interest area for professional development. Based on these results, it seems likely that, while members certainly view a lack of

volunteer labour as a key obstacle to their success, they do not view training on volunteer management or recruiting as a solution to this problem.

Question 5 asked respondents to identify Professional Development opportunities MAS could offer that would benefit respondents and their museums. Question 6 asked for any other comments or suggestions about MAS Professional Development programs. As question 5 was interpreted quite broadly, responses have been analyzed together with responses from question 6 as general qualitative data about MAS programs.

For both questions, a large number of respondents (>25%) chose not to answer the question. This is likely due to the more onerous nature of open-ended questions, which require respondents to formulate their own response and enter it manually, and flagging interest as they approached the end of the survey.

Respondents offered suggestions both for training topics and for changes to our training programs. Topics requested include:

- Programming
- Public awareness and community engagement
- Grants and fundraising
- Copyright
- Advocacy

Suggested changes to our training program include:

- Regularly scheduled courses from September through May
- Offering “mini conference styled info sessions”
- Offering online training (webinars and self-directed learning)
- Offering courses in specific regions
- Make courses more accessible. Some responses offered detailed suggestions (e.g., we should offer more courses in the fall, as staff often cannot attend in spring, when hiring and training staff and preparing exhibits and programs occurs in seasonal museums)
- Conservation and exhibits courses in the Saskatoon region
- Networking for technology-related topics such as QR codes
- Site visits by MAS staff or museum professionals, to listen to concerns of member museums

Communications issues arose in several responses. Several wanted more options for communicating with peers. These included requests for networking opportunities (including online peer networks) and a request for member blogs. Some indicated they did not know whom to contact to have questions answered. One requested earlier delivery of the program calendar, to allow budget planning for professional development. Finally, four responses reflect the mistaken understanding that MAS administers the MGP, which also seems to indicate a communications issue. It is important to note that the issues were not complaints about communications we produce

(comments about the website, for instance, note that it is a useful resource), but seem to reflect members failing to receive our communications.

There seems to be a perception among some small museums that our programs cater to the medium- to large-sized museums. This may be partly a communication issue (a lack of awareness about the proportion of programs designed with small museums in mind), and may also stem partly from the fact that, as in any organization with a diverse membership, not all of our programming is suitable for all of our members. However, it also seems to be the case that some members from small museums do not see themselves as able to implement the ideas offered in our training programs due to lack of resources or expertise.

Conclusions

The small sample size for the survey means that quantitative results should be viewed with some skepticism. Nonetheless, some fairly clear trends emerge. Overall, the survey shows that MAS's current training offerings reflect members' concerns and interests. Core programs, such as the certificate program and special-interest workshops, show a high level of popularity, and there is a broad general interest in topic areas in which MAS offers training.

The apparent lack of support for the Network Knowledge Exchange may simply be due to the high margin of error for the survey. It could also be attributed to a number of respondents not being members of regional networks: approximately 40% of MAS institutional members are not part of a regional network. Future surveys should include demographic information, including network membership. This would allow an accurate calculation of the popularity of the program among eligible participants.

Support for a traditional classroom model of instruction remains high. However, there is also a high level of support for self-directed online learning, and this type of learning has potential to improve access to training. Members frequently cite the difficulty and expense of traveling to our learning opportunities as obstacles to their professional development, and e-learning can help address these concerns.

There is a high level of demand for programming related to collections management. It may be desirable to offer a greater number of opportunities related specifically to this topic area.

Despite a low level of interest in volunteer-related professional development, human resources, especially volunteer resources, remain a major area of concern for MAS members. It is possible that training opportunities (such as MAS's certificate program course in Volunteer Management) could benefit members, but they are unlikely to participate if they do not see professional development as addressing their needs in this area.

The two chief recurring issues are lack of access and lack of communication. MAS makes every effort to offer training opportunities all over the province; nonetheless, resource constraints make it impossible to offer all opportunities in all regions of the province. E-learning offers great promise in addressing this issue.

Communication issues lie beyond the scope of this report, but are of central importance in ensuring MAS's responsiveness to its members, and in obtaining high levels of participation in MAS's programs. MAS also strives to provide relevant, timely communication about its activities, and offers communication both online and through mailouts. Issues seem to arise because many members do not access online information and may experience delays before receiving mailouts. This issue could benefit from further study and planning.

Most of the topics suggested for future learning opportunities (grant writing, copyright, advocacy, programming, community engagement, use of new technology) are topics that MAS either has recently developed (grant writing, advocacy, community engagement) or has slated for development (copyright, programming, use of new technology). In addition, many of the suggested changes to our training programs, including implementing online courses and online peer-to-peer networking opportunities, are currently in development.

Overall, MAS's professional development programming seems to do well in reflecting member needs and concerns.