

Teen School Groups at the National Museum of American History

Background

Recently the National Museum of American History has begun to take a close look at audiences that have not been studied in detail in the past. One of these is the classes of teenaged students that arrive unscheduled, usually in buses. These groups are very numerous in spring, in particular. Although the number has been estimated in the past, exact figures are not available. In discussing how better to serve these young visitors, NMAH requested that the Office of Policy and Analysis do some preliminary investigation into the make-up and activities of these school groups. This brief study had three components: Observation of teen school groups, identification of some key factors influencing their visit, feedback from the students regarding the most popular items that they encountered in the museum.

Observations of teen school groups

Key factors influencing the visit of teen school groups

Through observation of the groups and discussions with teachers, chaperones, and students, the study team identified several factors that seemed to have an important influence on the nature of their visit to NMAH. The range of these factors was determined by interviewing a convenience sample of teachers and chaperones of 43 groups over a five-day period between mid-March and mid-April.

Grade level

Single grades

3 rd grade	1
7 th grade	2
8 th grade	15
9 th grade	3
10 th grade	1
11 th grade	1
12 th grade	4

Total: 27

Mixed grades

Middle school	4
Junior High	1
High school	6
Church groups	3
Other (Close-up)	1
Total:	15

Number of students overall

Average size of group: 67 kids

one-quarter between 10 and 30 kids

one-quarter between 30 and 50 kids

one-quarter between 50 and 80 kids

one-quarter over 80 kids

Ratio of adults to kids

Average ratio: 1 adult to 5 kids
one-half: 1 adult to 10 or more kids
one half: 1 adult to 3-5 kids

Size of visiting clusters

Whole group together 3
Kids only: pairs of kids 6
3 to 6 kids 5
Kids with adults: 5 kids or less with adult 16
6 kids or more with adult 9

Degree of control

Strict control 14
Semi-control 3
Freedom 25

Agenda for the visit

self-directed/ no agenda 22
adult directed 6
list of things to see/find 4
food/bathroom first 4
specific exhibits to see 2
thematic (leadership) 2

Time scheduled at NMAH

Average time: 1 hour 45 minutes
one hour or less 13
one to two hours 11
two to three hours 12
three hours or more 7

Day of the Washington trip

First day 14 out of 1 days in DC-- 6; out of 2-- 1; out of 3 or 4-- 4; out of 5 or 6-- 3
Second day 12 out of 2 days in DC—1; out of 3-- 3; out of 4—6; out of 5 or 6-- 2
Third day 8 out of 3 days in DC—3; out of 4—2; out of 5—2;
Fourth day 2 out of 4 days in DC—1; out of 5-- 1
Fifth day 2 out of 5 days in DC—1; out of 6-- 1
Sixth day 2 out of 6 days in DC—1; out of 7-- 1
Seventh day 1 out of 10 days in DC

On the only day of their DC visit: 6
In the first half of their DC visit: 16
In the second half of their DC visit: 19

Comments

Wayfinding

Took photo near George; entered Walls, stopped at laundry and then up escalator. Error: back down and to cafeteria.

Main complaint is map would have helped them find things. Saw First Ladies.

"We've spent our time trying to find these things and the museum map does not help!"

What's in the museum

Cluster reassembles in main hall every half hour. Class comes every year. Each pair has a My-SI map. Teacher used web to make list of high points in advance, and reports it was too difficult - not concise enough. NGA website was much better for that.

Teacher came ahead on Friday to check it out and prepare to lecture to the group as a whole.

Spent lots of time looking for Ruby Slippers.

Guide gives info and tells them what the main things are, then groups go off, return and guide asks where they have been. Trip scribe assigned.

Parent asked if there was a pamphlet that could be given to kids about "important historical stuff."

Accompanied one group to First Ladies where boys groaned and teacher suggested regrouping by gender. Everyone went back to Flag, regrouped and started again. Girls to First Ladies, boys to Presidency.

The students came as a break to find a historical event or person about which to write. They wondered why there wasn't a computer which a search function of where to find things.

Boy group didn't know what was in NMAH/ girl group in food line just remembered Julia Child.

Leader produced a handout for each museum with good items/locations in museum indicated. Includes "take photo" near item. Locations included polio, PoF, SSB.

Would like "highlights" list for 1 hour visit. Had been to SAL, Walls, First Ladies.

Time pressures

Most of the visit is for eating and shopping. Little time for galleries. They are in-between stops.

Eating and shopping are at the top of their list. After DC off to NYC. Total trip 8 days. Most of the kids headed for cafeteria, others just flopped down to wait for the hour to pass. One girl said that she couldn't see another thing. Several others agreed. "We were really looking for the lobby to rest in."

Favorites

Teacher prepared list of things to find - "scavenger hunt" so that they'd cover whole museum. Also they were to add 5 things that were their favorites. Favorites include: laundry lady, Dolly Madison, Pontiac Grand Prix, Kermit, First Ladies

Talked to several girls as they were waiting to leave. "Musical instruments and the First Ladies were really, really cool." Had visited all the monuments in the morning - lots of in and out of the bus.

Came back because they didn't finish. Highlight for everyone the previous day was Brent Glass asking Latina if she was having a good time. Sorry they did not take photo. Found Celia Cruz "a bit lewd."

Saw teacher with lots of cameras taking photos of groups of kids near WH ceremonial court door. Teacher thought that photos are the most important part of trip and wanted more things like First Ladies cutouts.

On Monday saw Memorials, Peterson House. Kids like "being on our own." Commented on Seinfeld shirt, Pentagon flag, tractors, PoF.

Met near door. Somewhat lost. Appreciated being taken to Ella Fitzgerald.

Teacher visited previously knew of SSB & Polio. Was pleased with some of the hands-on, overheard tours, and Polio cart. Kids liked Polio, Presidential photos, Civil War.

Thought that Kermit was cool as was Seinfeld.

One group (64 Eighth Graders) responded to a follow-up e-mail (out of 11 sent) and came up with this list of their top ten:

- First ladies exhibit
- First cars
- Presidents
- Pentagon flag
- Trains exhibit
- Music history exhibit
- Pop culture
- Brown vs. the Board of Education
- Wars exhibit
- Repairing the flag

Discussion

Planning for and thinking about teen groups should keep four things in mind: [1] the place of NMAH in their visit to Washington, [2] the purpose of the trip, [3] the degree of control imposed on the group by the chaperones and teachers, and [4] the natural predilection of the teens for rapid absorption of information and images.

The place of NMAH in the DC visit powerfully affects energy levels. Groups that arrive in the first few days of the trip are still energized and interested. Those that arrive in the second half of their trip are, in the words of one student “museum-bleary and weary.” Whatever the timing of the visit, the amount of time in NMAH also has an impact on behavior. Several chaperones/teachers noted that NMAH has a reputation for a good cafeteria – larger than NMNH and not as crowded as NASM. The downside is that many include this eating time within the relatively short period of their NMAH stay, so that there is less time to visit galleries.

The purpose of these teen school trips is more social than scholastic. The trip marks an important moment in their lives and is outside of the usual academic format. Within the museum, where most of the groups splinter into smaller social units, the social character of the trip/visit continues to dominate their behavior patterns. The group moves and acts as a group, and when individuals are drawn away, the group tends to pull them back in to the group. Non-social activities, such as reading texts, are thus avoided by the group.

While some teachers and chaperones exert high levels of control, others allow the clusters of teens to freely choose their own path and activities in the museum. These two types of visits are fundamentally different. Students wandering freely could benefit from information provided by the museum during their visit (such as a map listing “Teen Picks” at the Information Desk). Teachers exercising strict control would benefit more from information provided in advance of the visit (such as a website page devoted to suggestions for different age groups).

Finally, teens differ from older generations in the way they like to receive information. The quick-scanning, multi-tasking browsing habits learned through channel surfing, internet use, and other contemporary media experiences lead them to desire rapid-fire perceptual stimulation. Most exhibitions have not been designed with this style of viewing in mind, and thus it is possible for teens to become frustrated by or bored with the much-slower pace of the museum’s presentations.