

Q&A with Ann Fumarolo

Interviewed by Joelle Seligson

Having been part of the ASTC Equity and Diversity Committee for much of its history, outgoing committee chair Ann Fumarolo has seen the difference equity and diversity initiatives can make. Fumarolo, who serves as president and CEO of Sci-Port: Louisiana's Science Center in Shreveport, spoke to *Dimensions* about the importance of maintaining a diverse staff and engaging audiences of all backgrounds, as well as the work the field still has to take on.

Ann, what is the purpose and the mission of the ASTC Equity and Diversity Committee?

We really believe that in the museum community that, for our visitors to feel comfortable and to feel that they're welcome, we have to have all kinds of people working in the museum. It doesn't have—most of the time people when they think of a science center or a museum, they think of an all-white place that all white people go to. Especially in my community, that's how it's been. We're 51% African American. So we really work hard to make it a very diverse staffing, a very diverse board, so that people come in and can see themselves as scientists or in learning—they can see themselves learning, in an active learning position.

Right. And what are the main initiatives?

One of the big initiatives that ASTC does is they do have [the ASTC Diversity and Leadership Development] Fellows Program where people who are LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender), people from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds, and people with disabilities] can apply and get a free scholarship to come to [the] ASTC [annual conference], and then they really get involved in a group that helps them stay in the community, helps them grow in the science community, ASTC community, and really, hopefully, supports them through their career while they're working in informal science. Luckily, the people who usually apply are at science centers or museums that support equity and diversity, or they wouldn't be helping them do this, but it just has to really take over, that science and informal learning really enriches everybody's life.

And how would you say the work of the committee affects ASTC members in general?

I think that it really does give a richness to the way we look at the things that we're making. All of a sudden, an exhibit—if you can see it through different people's eyes, it's really—it's wonderful. If you can get a focus group together, put an exhibit out there, and then have different nationalities or any kind of a diverse community talk about what they see—it's always different. So it really helps us with our signage. It really helps us to be less interpretive and [let] them interpret exhibits.

And in turn, what can ASTC members do to support your efforts?

Really and truly become aware of it in their science centers or in their museums. And while we always want the best candidate in every division, we also want to really look at what our staff looks like in relation to what our communities look like.

On that note, how do you think the state of equity and diversity in science centers and museums has changed over the last 15 years or so?

I've been involved, I think, 10 or 12 years. I think we've crept up a little, but it's still always an upward fight because science centers—I'm a director of a science center also—we have so many issues that we have to worry about, especially with the economics right now. Lots of us are struggling with funds. It has to become a priority to make this change in your institution, and when so many directors have so many other priorities, it's hard to get it to bubble to the top. But the institutions that have had it bubble to the top have seen great rewards.

And what about for your committee in particular? What progress have you seen the committee make since you've been on board?

The committee's great, but it's been the same ones of us I think for at least the last eight years. And it really is a commitment that they make even more than I make, making sure that when people come to ASTC that they're supported in their fellowship program, and they're always available, all year long, for them to call. So if they have an issue at their science center, we're kind of an intermediary. I've had several people call me and say, "What would you do?" or "Could you help me with this and mentor me through this opportunity that I have?"

So from here, what do you think should be the next steps both for the committee and for the field as a whole?

The committee really has to work at getting more directors on board. It seems like right now it's the same stable group that has always supported ASTC. We really have to find out a way to make it more almost financially—to prove it to them, that

it's great for the institution financially also, because it seems to be what grabs us all, so that it becomes a priority in the institution.

And what about for the field at large?

I think that you see it in all different kinds of museums, from the art museums and everything else, that people want to go where they feel welcome, and you don't feel welcome if none of you are there. And I think that everybody has to really grapple with making it available and homey, or someplace that you feel comfortable going to. So it's always going to become an issue, and it's going to remain a bigger issue as we move on.

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