

Project 1c: Popularization Analysis (1000-1500 words)

The Academy's Identity and Commitments:

The Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University is the oldest natural history museum in the Americas. The mission statement determined at its beginnings, in 1812, is very similar to its mission today:

“The gentlemen present agree to form constitute and become a Society for the purpose of occupying their leisure occasionally in each other's company, on subjects of Natural Science interesting and useful to the country and the world, and in modes conducive to the general and individual satisfaction of the members, as well as to the primary object of advancement and diffusion of useful, liberal, human knowledge.”

- Academy of Natural Sciences Constitution, January 1812.¹

“The Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University is dedicated to advancing research, education, and public engagement in biodiversity and environmental science.”

- The Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University Mission Statement, February 2019.²

The Academy has an over 200-year history of dedication to the commitment of advancing and sharing knowledge. In addition to stating this mission, the Academy has further publicized its identity by taking the Pledge of Excellence, through which the Academy pledges its commitment to operating via the core standards set by the American Association of Museums.³ The core standards state a commitment to being a steward of natural and cultural wealth, to advancing knowledge and understanding, and to preserving that inheritance for posterity.⁴ They also state that museums are “organized as a public trust”; they have a commitment to care for collections and manage information to benefit the public. Finally, a page on the Academy's website titled “Where We Stand” states that the Academy delivers “robust, credible

science to the public to help citizens, educators, and policymakers alike make informed decisions about issues that impact our everyday lives.”⁶ So does it? With these parameters outlined, we may now examine some clues to examine if the Academy fulfills these professed commitments ethically.

The Specimen Acquisition and Care:

The Academy welcomes 240,000 museum visitors through its doors and into its exhibits each year.⁶ Upon entering the museum, visitors find themselves among cast dinosaur skeletons with informational plaques. Deeper into the museum, visitors encounter dozens of dioramas that feature taxidermy animals staged in natural positions in the likes of their native habitat. These dioramas enable visitors to see and learn about animals they may otherwise never encounter in their natural habitat. However, how did the Academy acquire these animal specimens that are on display in these public exhibits? Were they acquired ethically?

In a room on second floor of the Academy, there is an exhibit explaining how the dioramas were crafted. It includes a note about how the animals were obtained, which says that many were collected on scientific expeditions, donated, or purchased. It also notes that animals are still collected but they are collected for research and not for display only. This indicates that many of the animals in the dioramas were killed and collected to be put on display only, rather than for science. According to Sabloff who authored a “Scientific Research, Museum Collections, and Rights of Ownership”, the Academy is likely excused for the potentially questionable acquisition of the diorama animals due to their age; they were assembled between 1930 and 1950.^{7,8} Since Sabloff discusses the ethics of accessioning and keeping human remains and cultural material, his guidelines likely provide a conservative stance for maintaining animal remains. Sabloff says that museums don’t have to go back and right wrongs, therefore these acquisitions are excused.

Sabloff also says that if there is doubt, that museums ought to retain material if it is able to be properly cared for. The Academy has demonstrably been true to this commitment of stewardship because there was a recent renovation of two dioramas. Over the last two years, these dioramas were opened after over 80 years of being sealed shut to all. They were

thoroughly cleaned, touched up, and resealed. The animals were sent to a professional taxidermist for care. A new and interactive touch screen accompanies each of these restored dioramas to facilitate observation and understanding of the diorama. The animal specimens in the dioramas are truly ambassadors for the natural world. They are respected and cared for by the Academy.

The Moving Mummy:

In another display, there is an Egyptian mummy, whose presence does not closely align with the biodiversity and environmental focus in the Academy's mission statement. The Academy does not do any anthropological work. In fact, the Academy gave most of its anthropological specimens to the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archeology and Anthropology generations ago and committed to its non-human natural history focus. For whatever reason, this mummy and two others, which are behind-the-scenes, remained.

A few weeks ago, an email was sent out from the head of the Exhibits Department to say that the mummy was being sent to the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archeology and Anthropology. She said acknowledged that displays of humans ought to fit the museum's mission and that University of Pennsylvania's Museum has the expertise to preserve and display human remains properly. Although one may wonder why this did not happen sooner, this move to rehome the human remains aligns with the guidelines presented by Sabloff that say that museums must properly preserve ancient materials in their possession.

Corporate Funding:

The Academy received funding from Western Pest, a for-profit pest control company, for their sponsorship of a recent, featured, exhibit, titled "Extreme Bugs". The Western Pest has also been a sponsor of the Academy's annual Bugfest over the last several years. Bugfest is an annual festival at the Academy that celebrates the beautiful, weird, scary, beneficial, and biodiverse aspects of insect life. Therefore, it is questionable to have a company that works to kill bugs sponsor an event that celebrates respect and admiration for bugs.

When a research institution considers accepting funds from an outside source, they must be careful about conflicts of interest. There is potential for the funding to unethically influence the research. In this case, I would argue that this particular concern is not an issue because the Academy's Entomology Department does not conduct research on any pest control related topics**. In this case, the sponsorship probably works as a marketing extension and a credibility booster for Western Pest.

Museums are viewed as trustworthy and credible organizations.⁹ Academic institutions are respected for their virtues as keepers and diffusers of knowledge through collection maintenance and educational programming. They are known as creators of knowledge through rigorous research programs. They provide many intangible goods. Meeting these standards makes them successful. If the Academy were to fail in any of these aspects, the institution's credibility would take a big hit because the researchers have a responsibility to share science and be a trusted informational source for the public.¹⁰

In contrast, for-profit companies such as pest control companies operate on a business model in which they provide a service in exchange for money. To be successful, they must complete the service that they were hired to do: eliminate pests. They do not necessarily have to know or provide accurate information to make them successful. Nor do they have to be virtuous to be successful. In fact, many have information sheets online or products that have critical entomological errors.^{11, 12,13}

Pest control companies are not held to the same standards as natural history museums. Therefore, by sponsoring and associating their brand with the Academy, Western Pest's brand may pick up traits of the Academy's brand in the customer or potential customer's mind. At the same time, the Academy's brand may be affected by the perception of the Western Pest brand. I wonder how the Academy went about vetting and approving Western Pest as a sponsor. At least Western Pest has a section on their website about "Environmentally Friendly Pest Control," where the company states that they are dedicated to environmental sustainability

** Disclosure: I work in this Entomology Department; however, our Entomology Department does not see any of this money.

and stewardship.¹⁴ Nevertheless, to approve the partnership as fully ethical from the Academy's perspective, I would like to see further evidence of Western Pest's stated commitment.

The Academy's research shows that biodiversity is important in maintaining the strongest and healthiest environments. Recent biological research has discovered a steep decline in global insect populations and biodiversity that may result in environmental devastation.¹⁵ The second most important driver of the decline, after habitat loss, is pollution from pesticides and fertilizers.¹⁶ Therefore, unless Western Pest is truly committed to conducting business in the least environmentally damaging way, it might not be appropriate for the Academy, to have this relationship with Western Pest.

Recently, a colleague at the Academy told me that an American pest organization that wanted to film a commercial at the Academy. He said it would start with a family looking at and fearing the big fearsome animals in the dioramas, like the lions and tigers. Then the commercial would twist into revealing true organisms the family ought to be afraid of, insect pests. The colleague said that it raised flags for him. How does this commercial connect with the Academy's mission? It does not appear to connect. It does not "advance research, education, or public engagement in biodiversity or environmental sciences" in any way other than monetary gain. The commercial might achieve the opposite of the Academy's mission through the use of fear. My Academy colleague appears to be rightly concerned. The Academy's recent decisions to rehome the mummy and to approach the commercial pitch with caution demonstrate that the Academy is adhering to its commitment to ethical practices.

References:

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- ⁵ American Association of Museums. Code of Ethics. <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/code-of-ethics-for-museums/>
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- ⁸ The Academy of Natural Sciences website. Dioramas. <https://ansp.org/exhibits/dioramas/>
- ⁹ People Trust Museums More Than Newspapers. Here Is Why That Matters Right Now <https://www.colleendilen.com/2017/04/26/people-trust-museums-more-than-newspapers-here-is-why-that-matters-right-now-data/> via <https://www.impacts-iq.com/naau>
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