NEW YORK

Awakening a Sense of Wonder and Curiosity

An Interview with Ellen V. Futter,
President, American Museum of Natural History

EDITORS' NOTE *Ellen Futter has been President of the American Museum of Natural History since November 1993, and she previously served for 13 years as President of Barnard College. She is a Director of a number of for-profit and nonprofit organizations, a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and a member of the Executive Committee of NYC & Company. The recipient of the National Institute of Social Sciences' Gold Medal Award and numerous honorary degrees, Futter graduated magna cum laude from Barnard College and earned her JD degree from Columbia University Law School.*

Ellen V. Futter

INSTITUTION BRIEF *The American Museum of Natural History (www.amnh.org) is a nonprofit educational corporation, chartered in 1869. It is a member of the University of the State of New York and is accredited by the American Association of Museums. With a mission "to discover, interpret, and disseminate – through scientific research and education – knowledge about human cultures, the natural world, and the universe," the museum facilities consist of 45 permanent exhibition halls housed in 25 interconnected buildings, including the Rose Center for Earth and Space and the Hayden Planetarium, totaling 1.6 million square feet on an 18-acre campus on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.*

Have you been happy with the strength of the museum's brand?

The answer is a resounding yes. The museum just concluded a particularly successful year, and we measure that by a number of different things, but certainly attendance is one. We had 400,000 more visitors than in 2000, the year we opened the Rose Center for Earth and Space. We've also seen a very substantial increase in the number of international visitors. We are rated by the Zagat Survey family guide as the number-one family destination in the New York metropolitan area and the number-three family destination in the entire United States, behind the larger, commercial attractions, Disney's Magic Kingdom and Epcot Center. We've recently admitted our first class of students to our newly formed Richard Gilder Graduate School. We are the first American museum authorized to grant PhDs. About a half million schoolchildren visited in school groups this year, and we are training nearly 7,000 science teachers a year, both on-site and online. So this has been an extremely active time for us, and we've had enormously successful exhibitions during the same period, including *Mythic Creatures: Dragons, Unicorns, and Mermaids*; *Water: H_2O=Life*; and *The Horse*, all of which also travel nationally and internationally. And we've had enormously successful fundraising. So yes, I think our "brand" is very strong.

What types of work are you doing with the educational community?

We work to maintain formal linkages and relationships with schools, which involves training teachers, preparing teaching materials – often associated with our exhibitions – and empowering students in the process of discovery. Everything we do is keyed to the education standards. We spearheaded the Urban Advantage program, where we're working with seven other cultural institutions across the five boroughs of New York City. The program supports students in successfully completing the eighth-grade exit project, which is a requirement for eighth graders here to be promoted. In the process, we're training thousands of New York seventh- and eighth-grade teachers and students, working with hundreds of schools, and sending free passes home to families so that parents, caregivers, and siblings also can visit the museum. So that's the formal side of our work with schools. Separate from those efforts, there are other, less formal aspects to our educational offerings, which come through exhibitions and a broad array of public programs that support them, which include everything from lectures, debates, and performances, to families working in our Discovery Room. It's a rich and broad educational program that is geared to appeal to our highly diverse audience.

Do you see enough of an effort being made to bring interest back to science and math in schools?

We face a crisis in this country in education generally, but especially in science education, and we have not sufficiently empowered teachers in the teaching of science. Many who are teaching science today have not received full training in the sciences and may not have majored in it or received graduate training in it, which makes updated teacher training particularly important. Schools aren't always able to bring science alive in the classroom by making it the great detective story that it really is. It's an active, exciting enterprise that involves pursuing clues and evidence, and testing and piecing together theories through the scientific process. Too often, classroom science is about textbooks and memorization. Yet science engages people in what are often the most important topics, including human health, the survival of this planet, and innovation and technology. We have a growing shortage of scientists and a tremendous amount of work to do in this country, with not a minute to spare in rethinking how we present science education, encouraging a real commitment to it, and making it exciting for students, teachers, and families. As a country, we need to be competitive and secure, and if young people haven't been trained or engaged in these areas, we will be sorely inhibited in doing so, and our young people may well find themselves closed out of job opportunities and even the colleges of their choice.

Some talk about U.S. competitiveness being lost and moving to emerging markets. Are we in a position where the United States may no longer be thought of as a world leader?

We are at a very important moment in our country's history. We are in the throes of deciding, by the investments we elect to make or not make, whether we are going to lead in the future. Investments are needed in our infrastructure, national security, and environment in order to ensure our economic vitality. Education is very important to all of these, and science education in particular is critical. We can't innovate successfully if we don't have enough scientists and people who are really adept at applying the latest technology to challenges in biology, medicine, the energy crisis, and other areas of the economy. We're going to need these young people to be well trained and prepared to lead. We don't want to outsource innovation, and we must be at the table when major issues of our globe and our country are being tackled. We have to be there – it's just critical. ●