

Chicago's Field Museum reorganizes amid money woes (Update)

July 5 2013, by Tammy Webber



In this May 9, 2013 photo, Richard Lariviere, president and CEO of Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, poses with Sue, the towering tyrannosaurus rex that greets visitors to the museum. The museum, one of the world's pre-eminent research centers with a 25 million-piece collection of plants and animals used to examine everything from genetics to climate change, is facing budget problems that is forcing it to cut research staff. Lariviere says the museum is poised to recover financially within two years. But some scientists say the cuts in its research operations will be significant. (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green)

Matt von Konrat is animated as he talks about a plant specimen pulled from the vast botanical collection at the Field Museum of Natural History. Documentation shows it was collected in 1996 in a Colombian rainforest and tested for compounds that might be used to treat HIV, AIDS or cancer.

"Imagine if you made some amazing drug discovery," von Konrat says, sweeping an arm toward cabinets holding some of his department's more than 3 million specimens, including ones collected by famed navigator Capt. James Cook in the 1770s. "You would know exactly where (the plant) came from and its exact identity" so you could find it again.

Best known for impressive public displays such as Sue, the towering Tyrannosaurus rex that greets visitors in the lobby of its Lake Michigan campus, the Field Museum's larger mission always has been behind-the-scenes research on its 25 million-piece—and growing—collection of birds, mammals, fish, plants, fossils and artifacts. Field scientists travel the globe to retrieve specimens that could produce medicines, document the effects of climate change or explain the secrets of genetics.

But the 120-year-old museum, founded during the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and named for department store magnate Marshall Field, now is setting the scientific world abuzz for another reason.

Faced with almost \$170 million in debt, the museum is cutting next year's research budget 20 percent, including by shrinking its science staff and merging departments.

"It's one of the great natural history museums of the world and has been for a very long time ... but it's on the verge of not being so important," said Michael Donohue, curator of the botany department at Yale University's Peabody Museum.

Since the beginning of the year, the museum's anthropology, botany, geology and zoology departments have been merged into a single unit, and by the end of the year, its science staff likely will have been cut to 152, down from 170 earlier this year. That includes the loss of six of 27 curators, with two others still considering whether to leave.



In this June 12, 2013 photo, volunteers remove the feathers of birds as they prepare specimens for the bird skeleton collection at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History with a great blue heron in the foreground. The Field's collection of birds is the fourth-largest in the world with over 500,000 specimens. The museum, one of the world's pre-eminent research centers, is facing budget problems that is forcing it to cut research staff. Field President Richard Lariviere says the museum is poised to recover financially within two years. But some scientists say the cuts in its research operations will be significant. (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green)

The museum's financial problems stem from a decision over a decade ago to issue \$90 million in bonds for construction projects that included a subterranean storage center for much of its collection. The museum's board assumed it could raise enough money through a capital campaign to keep the museum on solid footing.

But when that didn't happen, it had to begin dipping into its endowment. Finally, in December, the museum announced that it would cut \$5 million from its budget—\$3 million of that from the science program—and would try to raise its endowment by \$100 million.



In this June 12, 2013 photo, Christine Niezgoda collections manager for the flowering plant collection in the botany department at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, shows examples of the museum's plant collection that includes start to finish specimens of plant material that are used in the making of Panama hats. The museum, one of the world's pre-eminent research centers, is facing budget problems that is forcing it to cut research staff. Field President Richard Lariviere says the museum is poised to recover financially within two

years. But some scientists say the cuts in its research operations will be significant. (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green)



In this June 12, 2013 photo, Ben Marks, manager of the bird collection at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, holds an identification tag of one of the museum's collection of great horned owls, in Chicago. The Field's collection of birds is the fourth-largest in the world with over 500,000 specimens. The museum, one of the world's pre-eminent research centers, is facing budget problems that is forcing it to cut research staff. Field President Richard Lariviere says the museum is poised to recover financially within two years. But some scientists say the cuts in its research operations will be significant. (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green)

Richard Lariviere, who took over as Field president in October, said the museum's troubles, though real, are overstated, and the museum will emerge stronger within two years.

"We have financial challenges, but ... we're in very good shape," he said.

But others say it's doubtful the institution can sustain the same level of scientific inquiry or stage the most innovative exhibits.



In this June 12, 2013 photo, Jamie Kelly, anthropology collections manager at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, stands in the museum's newest archival underground storage facility. There are over 1.5 million pieces in the Collections Resource Center, including 30,000-50,000 pieces from the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition that were used to start the anthropological collection. The museum, one of the world's pre-eminent research centers, is facing budget problems that is forcing it to cut research staff. Field President Richard Lariviere says the museum is poised to recover financially within two years. But some scientists say the cuts in its research operations will be significant. (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green)

"A good reputation and a good, quality program take decades to build, but it's taken just six months" to damage both, said Mark Westneat, a

22-year Field veteran who was chairman of the former zoology department and whose research focuses on threats to coral reefs.

"I love this place, but there has been a needless ripping apart and disrespecting what I have loved over the years," said Westneat, who's negotiating with a university to move his laboratory there.



In this June 12, 2013 photo, Ben Marks, manager of the bird collection at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, shows part of the museum's collection of great horned owls. The Field's collection of birds is the fourth-largest in the world with over 500,000 specimens. The museum, one of the world's pre-eminent research centers, is facing budget problems that is forcing it to cut research staff. Field President Richard Lariviere says the museum is poised to recover financially within two years. But some scientists say the cuts in its research operations will be significant. (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green)

In the past, Field scientists used a decades-old collection of peregrine

falcon eggs to draw a direct correlation between the use of DDT and thinning eggshells, leading to the pesticide's ban. They've helped indigenous communities in Ecuador reclaim land damaged by oil drilling.

Donohue, the Peabody curator, said museums and universities rely on each other's research to make scientific discoveries and advancements.



In this June 12, 2013 photo, Matt von Konrat, curator of the botanical collection at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, shows examples of the museum's plant collection that includes about 3 million specimens from around the world, including some collected in the 1770s by Captain Cook. The museum, one of the world's pre-eminent research centers, is facing budget problems that is forcing it to cut research staff. Field President Richard Lariviere says the museum is poised to recover financially within two years. But some scientists say the cuts in its research operations will be significant. (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green)

"To suddenly lose (scientists from) an important institution like the Field hurts the overall effort," including such things as mapping where specimens are found, Donohue said.

Carroll Joynes, co-founder of the University of Chicago's Cultural Policy Center, said all museums must take risks to stay fresh, but the Field took a big financial gamble.

"Then if it does not come true, you're caught in a horrible expense bind," said Joynes, adding that he believes the museum is now in good hands.

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