FIRST ASSIGNMENT

The United States’ museum “system” is unique among developed countries in two significant ways. First, U.S. museums are predominately private entities, a component of the Third Sector of our economy (also known as the private nonprofit or “independent” sector) not, as elsewhere, a component of the First (governmental) Sector.¹ Second, the U.S. government has no equivalent to other countries’ Ministries of Culture: the U.S. has no cabinet-level position equivalent to a Minister of Culture. Accordingly, museum best practices and standards are generally matters of private, rather than public, policy-making.² Those policy determinations rest with museums’ boards of directors (also known as boards of trustees) and with museum service organizations, such as the American Alliance of Museums, which are also private, nonprofit entities. Additionally, data on museums, critical for policy-making, public service, and financial planning, are not gathered in any systematic manner by any governmental agency. For example, answers to questions as fundamental as “How many museums are there in the U.S.?” range from the mid-four figures to as many as 15,000. Despite these distinctions between U.S. museums and museums elsewhere, few – if any – countries have collections of art, historical documents, natural history specimens, manuscripts, and rare books, that are as enormous; important; professionally documented, preserved, and studied; and publicly accessible as those in the U.S.

Nevertheless, sources of information about the U.S. museum world and the related worlds of art, natural history, and special collections (the term for collections of rare books and manuscripts) are scattered, often difficult to track down, and occasionally presented by organizations with distinct political bents. Throughout this semester, we will constantly ask such questions as: “where do these data come from,” “by what authority is that position asserted,” and “says who”?

For your first assignment compile responses to the following concerns or questions:

1. Identify no fewer than five museum service organizations; whom do those organizations serve; what are those organizations’ primary functions?
2. How would you discover whether a given museum operated at a surplus or a deficit in recent fiscal years?
3. How would you know if a contribution of cash, securities, or collections items will generate an income tax deduction for the donor?
4. What was the salary of the director of the Perez Art Museum Miami in the most recent fiscal year for which that information is available?

¹ An insignificant number of U.S. museums are part of the Second (private, for profit) Sector.
² An exception is the Internal Revenue Code, which provides the fundamental rules for museums to qualify for and maintain their charitable, tax-exempt status.