

# Professional Practices for Academic Museums & Galleries

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Leading Academic Museums &  
Galleries in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
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## INTRODUCTION

This document, prepared and approved by the Board of Directors of the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries (AAMG), with considerable advice from academic museum professionals nationwide, aims to assist academic museum<sup>1</sup> staff and volunteers as well as those members of their parent organizations responsible for their success. These codified best practices draw from those of other museum organizations—American Alliance of Museums (AAM), Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), and Association of Art Museum Curators (AAMC)—and are aligned with the categories currently used by AAM to better guide museums on the path to national accreditation or reaccreditation. Museums or museum directors that are members of any of the above are also charged to uphold the professional practices of those associations. *We are deeply grateful to Max Marmor and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation for their support toward the printing and dissemination of this document.*

While all museums are educational in purpose, academic museums are unique in their mission to teach and train succeeding generations of students. Their primary purpose is to support the mission of their parent institutions. As learning laboratories, they advance research and student achievement. They build cross-cultural understanding; create cross-departmental and interdisciplinary teaching opportunities; strengthen analytical thinking and creativity; offer real-world work experiences; model inclusion and access; and further civic responsibility in their efforts to improve the lives of people in their communities. As object-based centers of research and teaching, they sustain on-campus learning. They often serve as the front doors of their universities, connecting town and gown, the academy and the public.

AAMG encourages museum directors, their academic supervisors, university administrators, trustees, and advisory boards to support and affirm these professional practices in their museums. By embodying excellence in their profession, academic museum staff can better serve the mission and goals of their parent institutions and their communities at large. They will be better informed to care for and interpret their collections, which represent our natural and cultural heritage, and better equipped to address the challenges facing our institutions of higher education, our society, and the world. In doing so, they will be recognized as essential partners in the enterprise of higher education.

Jill Hartz  
President, AAMG (2011-17)

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<sup>1</sup> The word “museum” is used interchangeably for museums, galleries, and collections. Similarly, “university” references universities as well as colleges.

# MISSION & STRATEGIC PLANNING

## ***Mission***

A museum's mission statement is its core document. The mission guides the daily activities of its staff and the allocation of its resources. The museum mission should explicitly support the mission of its parent institution and, if it also functions as the off-campus community museum, it should affirm its service to the off-campus constituents and community in which it resides.

The mission statement should clearly articulate why the museum exists and how the mission is used to guide decisions about policies, priorities, actions, and responsibilities. The mission statement should be succinct and easily remembered by staff, volunteers, and university administrators. It should be approved by the university's governing authority and the museum's advisory board. The mission should be reviewed every 5-10 years for relevance.

As further assistance, AAM states the following:

All museums are expected to have a formally stated and approved mission that states what the museum does, for whom and why. A museum's mission statement is the primary benchmark against which to evaluate the museum's performance. One of the two core questions underlying any assessment of compliance with national standards is: How well does the museum achieve its stated mission and goals? This emphasis acknowledges an effective and replicable practice: Museums that use clearly delineated mission statements to guide their activities and decisions are more likely to function effectively.

A clearly delineated mission statement guides museum activities and decisions by describing the purpose of a museum—its reason for existence. It defines the museum's unique identity and purpose, and provides a distinct focus for the institution. A mission statement articulates the museum's understanding of its role and responsibility to the public and its collections and reflects the environment in which it exists. Activities of the museum should support, directly or indirectly, the mission.<sup>2</sup>

## ***Institutional Plan***

The museum's mission guides all aspects of its institutional plan. In turn, the plan articulates the museum's guiding principles, vision, and values and supports the ways in which the museum responds to challenges and changes in its operational environment. Approved by its governing authority and recommended to the director by its advisory board, the plan should offer a 3-5-year road map that aims to further both the university's strategic plan and the museum's mission and priorities. While inspirational and aspirational in nature, the plan should identify achievable goals, both short-term and long-range. By developing the plan in support of the university's strategic objectives, the museum may more easily leverage resources that make it valued by and valuable to the university and its constituents, both on- and off-campus. The plan should be reviewed regularly, revised as appropriate, and used as a staff performance assessment tool.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/mission-and-planning>

All museum staff, as well as representatives of its constituencies and stakeholders, should provide input for the plan and be kept apprised of its development. Benchmarking often proves useful in determining goals and measurements that can be used to assess its implementation. Whenever possible, the parent institution and advisory board should help to advance the plan and allocate resources toward its success.

The plan should include and prioritize all relevant aspects of a museum's operations, from its physical plant, professional development, and evaluation practices to its collections, exhibitions, and educational goals. In all operations, the museum should be guided by integrity, inclusiveness, and excellence.

As further assistance, AAM states the following:

As evidence of its institutional planning, museums should have documentation of the planning process (e.g., committee lists, meeting minutes, planning schedules) and a current, comprehensive, timely and formal institutional plan that includes both strategic and operational elements. Each museum's written institutional plan should include a multiyear and an operational plan, a combination of the two or the functional equivalent.

Each museum's planning documents will look different. However, the plan(s) should: be captured in written documents and approved by the governing authority; be based on the mission; be tied to other relevant planning documents (e.g., financial plans, development plans, interpretive plans, collections plans); set priorities helping the museum make choices and allocate available resources; identify how the institution will secure the human and financial resources needed to implement the plan by bringing resources and goals into alignment; be living documents, continually used and updated by the staff and governing authority; establish measurable goals and methods by which the museum will evaluate success; and include action steps, establish timelines and assign responsibility for implementation.<sup>3</sup>

For accreditation purposes, AAM requires the following:

Museums operated by a parent organization for which museum management is not the primary purpose (e.g., a university, or government agency) are expected to have a museum/site-specific planning process and plan, both of which should be linked to the parent organization's planning. The parent organization's planning process and documents should also reflect support for the museum's mission and ensure that museum/site-specific goals can be achieved.<sup>4</sup>

**See Appendix I for more on missions and strategic planning.**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/mission-and-planning>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

# GOVERNANCE, ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE & LEADERSHIP

## *Governance & Organizational Structure*

Academic museums serve faculty, students, and staff throughout the university, and their resources should benefit all within the academy. In support of its unique and broad-reaching services, the museum should function as a discrete unit of its parent institution, and its director should report to the highest academic officer, often the vice president of academic affairs or the provost. Given the museum's capacity for both discipline-based and interdisciplinary learning, personal student growth, faculty research, inclusion, access, and community relations, consideration should be given to aligning the director's position with that of a dean. In smaller institutions, it may be more advisable for the director to report to a dean (in some institutions, an academic dean would serve this purpose), but the director should not report to a department chair as it will be perceived by others within the academy as only being part of that department or school. As a result, conflicts of interest are likely to arise with regard to the museum's mission and use of its resources.

Good governance requires the academic museum to have the following documents:

- mission statement;
- institutional plan;
- articles of incorporation, charter, enabling legislation or other founding document (this may, at times, be found in the minutes of the university's board of trustees)
- documentation regarding the importance of the museum to the parent institution that affirms its commitment to support the museum (e.g., resolution of support passed by parent organization's trustees, memorandum of understanding or management agreement between the parent institution and the museum);
- document delegating operating authority to the museum director (may be a presidential memorandum or found in the parent institution's bylaws and/or board of trustee minutes, and in the formally approved job description of the director); and
- charter and bylaws for any support or advisory group for which the museum is its primary beneficiary.

**See Appendix II for sample documents regarding the parent institution's commitment to the museum and the delegation of authority to the director.**

An academic museum only functions effectively when the governing authority and director respect one another and work well together. It is the responsibility of the museum's governing authority (vice president, provost, or academic dean) to help determine and advance the museum's mission and approve its budget. Working closely with the director, the governing authority approves the museum's institutional plan and leverages resources to fulfill its mission. The governing authority leads the search for a new director and conducts annual performance assessments of the director, assuring that the museum operates ethically (upholds the public trust through ethical and responsible operations) and responsibly in all areas. The governing authority should become knowledgeable about museum practice and support the professional practices of the field, including but not limited to regulations regarding acquiring and deaccessioning objects in the museum's collections. It is the responsibility of the director to provide necessary information about museum practice and ensure that the governing authority is aware of ethical, governance, and operational concerns. In addition, the governing

authority should advocate on behalf of the museum and make available professional expertise at the university for the museum's benefit, including legal, financial, facility, security, and development support.

### ***Advisory Boards***

Academic museums often benefit from having their own advisory boards. Advisory boards are usually composed of university alumni and friends of the museum – including collectors, financial donors, and connectors – who have the capacity to advance the mission, financial sustainability, collections development, and institutional plan of the museum. They may also include faculty, staff, and students interested in learning more about academic museums or whose departments/schools benefit directly from their involvement in the museum. Advisory boards should have written operating papers, approved by the governing authority, that affirm their member responsibilities to legally, ethically, and effectively volunteer on behalf of the museum. There should also be a clear and formal division of responsibilities between the governing authority and any advisory board that supports the museum, whether separately incorporated or operating within the museum or its parent organization.

**See Appendix III for sample advisory board charters and by-laws.**

### ***Staffing***

The director of the museum should be a museum professional with leadership expertise, who is charged with the authority to manage the museum's daily operations. Depending on the size of the museum and its staff and the diversity of its collections, the director may be trained in a curatorial field or in areas such as education, collections, fundraising, marketing, or administration. The director represents the mission of the museum, provides vision, and upholds policies and procedures. Fund-raising acumen, diplomacy, and strategic thinking are all essential skills for the academic museum director.

Universities vary in their classification of professional museum staff. Some curators, directors, and educators have faculty status with tenure, while others have a staff/administrative appointment. AAMG recommends that in recognition of the core teaching (formal or informal) and research responsibilities of these positions, parent institutions seriously consider classifying them as tenurable faculty lines in the same way that many university libraries have faculty positions that do not have formal teaching obligations. When a parent institution employs a "faculty" museum professional, it should clearly define the criteria for evaluation for tenure and promotion, including peer-reviewed exhibitions, catalogs, and other museum-focused publications that demonstrate scholarly productivity and valuable research, writing, and creative work that is often disseminated outside of traditional academic publications.

The governing authority, staff, and volunteers should all have a clear and shared understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Staff at all levels should understand the chain of command. Both the museum and governing authority should support professional development for the museum staff, which, in addition to workshops available on campus, may be conducted as webinars or in-person workshops and conferences organized by museum organizations, non-profits serving museums in some capacity, or companies that serve museums.

Many academic museums take further steps to fulfill their missions as "teaching museums." They offer internships, fellowships, independent study, and volunteer and paid positions for students at the university, who may become emerging museum professionals or benefit from their museum experience in other career paths. Some may offer certificate and masters programs based in their facilities.

**See Appendix IV for samples of staff positions, organizational charts, guest curator MOUs, and director search recommendations.**

# CODE OF ETHICS

The effectiveness of a non-profit institution is directly related to the public's perception of its integrity. That perception is based on the museum's public accountability and transparency in its mission and operations. As a unit of a parent institution, the academic museum must abide by the university's code of ethics and regulations.

Museums serve the public good. As such, the university museum should demonstrate that it is a good steward of its resources and a good neighbor of its community and region. The museum should be inclusive and offer opportunities for diverse interests and participation, reducing as much as possible, any barriers of access to its programs and facilities.

In addition to complying with the university's code of ethics, the academic museum must codify and formally approve its ethical responsibilities as a museum. While the AAM Code of Ethics or those of another organization may prove useful in developing one's own code of ethics, the museum should not simply adopt another's. The museum's code of ethics must affirm that it puts the public trust above the interests of the university, museum, or any individual. It must affirm that the museum puts the interests of the public ahead of the interests of the institution or of any individual, and it must apply to members of the governing authority, advisory board, staff, and volunteers and be approved by the governing authorities of the museum and the university. The code of ethics may be a completely separate document or it may be included in other museum policy documents. Ethical guidelines specific to areas of the museum's operations may be included in personnel, exhibitions, collections, and other documents. The code of ethics should contain language within it of how it will be implemented and how conflicts or challenges to its mandates will be addressed.

As further assistance, AAM states the following:

Developing and implementing an institutional code of ethics leads to informed oversight and benefits the institution in several ways. It creates internal agreement about which actions are consistent with the institution's mission. It serves as a self-made reference point for institutional choices. It also is a practical and effective tool in risk management—protecting both assets and reputation.

An institutional code of ethics expresses the institution's policies, consistent with the public service it affirms in its mission statement.

Museums are expected to abide by "standards and best practices as they are generally understood in the museum field." Some discipline-specific associations have issued ethics statements or guidelines applicable to their disciplines or members. Museums should adhere to these ethics guidelines if they are: broadly applicable to all museums in that segment of the museum field; non-prescriptive—describing desirable outcomes rather than endorsing particular methods of achieving these outcomes; based when possible on applicable existing, widely accepted principles in the field; developed through a broadly inclusive process that gathers input from museums of relevant disciplines, geographic location, size, governance type and other relevant variables.<sup>5</sup>

**See Appendix V for sample Codes of Ethics.**

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/public-trust>



## FINANCIAL STABILITY & FUND-RAISING

The academic museum must legally, ethically, and responsibly acquire, manage, and allocate its financial resources in ways that advance its mission. It must operate in a fiscally responsible manner that promotes its long-term sustainability.

The role of the governing authority in this regard is to monitor, advise, and support the museum financially. Whenever possible, the parent institution should provide ongoing support for the museum's staff, security, and facility needs. Endowment or other secure funding sources may also provide sustainable support in these areas. Depending on the opportunities for earned income and private support, the parent institution may also be responsible for or contribute to additional budgetary needs, including collections care, off-site storage, supplies, staff professional development, and other general operating needs; public and university-based educational programs; exhibitions; marketing and publications; and visitor services.

Academic museums function best when they have their own development officers, who liaise with the university's central development office but have experience fund-raising for museums. This is because many supporters of museums are not alumni but members of the community, collectors, and supporters of museums, in general. A museum's financial resources include individuals as well as foundations and local, state, and federal grants organizations, such as the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Education.

Unless academic museums are "museum schools" or located within larger colleges, they rarely benefit from an alumni base; rather, alumni must either self-identify as museum supporters or be introduced to the museum through other university development officers. Those at colleges may have greater access to alumni and benefit from organizing their development operations more closely with their institutional advancement office.

AAM offers specific guidelines regarding business and individual donor support that academic museums need to take into consideration in addition to the regulations informing their own university fund-raising. Key among these are that fund-raising initiatives should protect the museum's assets and reputation and be consistent with its mission. At all times, public trust should be foremost, and donors' intent should be maintained.

In addition, AAM states the following:

Not-for-profit, charitable, educational and scientific organizations and those they serve have always benefited from the business sector and the generosity of individual donors. Businesses and individual donors also have benefited from their relationships with the museum community. Through association with museums, businesses seek to positively affect their enterprise by showing their commitment to a not-for-profit's mission, generating goodwill within communities in which they operate and increasing the recognition of their business identity. Through their generosity, donors reaffirm their commitment to the arts, sciences, history and lifelong learning and to creating a stronger and more civil society by making objects and information accessible. In addition, individual donors often have family connections or other close personal relationships with the museums they support.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/financial-stability>

As part of a parent institution, academic museums abide by the fund-raising policies set forth by their governing authority. These may include the types of support the university is willing to accept, levels of endowments and other naming opportunities, gift processing procedures, membership and affiliate organizations, and regulations regarding donor confidentiality. In addition, the museum should affirm that its fund-raising policies address business and individual donor support, and that the museum has the human and financial resources necessary for fulfilling its obligations in any donor relationship. Policies must address conflicts of interest in situations involving business or individual donor opportunities in which a member of the museum's governing authority or staff may have an interest. In such cases, the individual should recuse him/herself from any discussion or action related to the business or donor with which s/he has an association. Parameters regarding the use of the museum's name and logo—and, if appropriate, those of the university—should be clarified in advance, as should the benefits accruing to the donor.

# COLLECTIONS STEWARDSHIP

Academic museums are responsible for the care, research, interpretation, and exhibition of important objects representing human cultures and the natural world from the earliest times to the present. Collections are held in trust for the public and made accessible for the public's benefit. As collections stewards, museums must be in compliance with applicable legal, social, and ethical obligations.

In most cases, academic museums steward their collections on behalf of their university, university foundation, or state, which serves as the legal ownership entity. Occasionally, academic museums hold their own non-profit status or have a foundation separate from the university that retains ownership of the collection. In those situations, the museum has greater control over the management of its collections, including opportunities for acquisitions and challenges associated with deaccessioning.

Acquisitions should be carefully considered to ensure pertinence to the collection and the museum's ability to care for them. Donations and bequests should, whenever possible, be unrestricted. When accepting donation and bequests, and when purchasing objects and specimens, the museum must confirm provenance and legal ownership, and comply with all laws and regulations. Restrictions by property rights (copyright, patents, trademarks, or trade secrets) or by its very nature (physically hazardous) should be carefully considered and documented. It is the responsibility of the donor to acquire any appraisals for tax purposes.

The museum and the university should have a clear policy regarding gifts of works appropriate to the museum that are offered to other areas of the parent institution. The museum should have first right of refusal for any museum-quality work. In addition, the museum should not be responsible for works not in its collection unless there is a written policy regarding its authority over those works and funds and staffing are provided to the extent necessary to manage and care for those collections. The parent institution is responsible for ensuring that all works owned by the university are covered by an insurance policy and that those premiums are covered by the parent institution. Because the museum is responsible for collections that are frequently used for teaching, it must make every effort to make those collections accessible to faculty, students, and other scholars, without jeopardizing the safety of those works.

Loyalty to the museum is paramount. All museum staff and volunteers should fully disclose any and all conflicts of interest in collecting practices, dealings, and relationships with donors to avoid the perception of special favors. Likewise, no staff or museum volunteer should compete with the museum for the acquisition of an object or specimen for their personal collection. If anyone is a practicing artist, designer, or fabricator, that person should not use the museum to advance their own work.

Like all museums, academic museums are expected to follow best practices in the care, management, research, acquisitions, and interpretation of their collections. These include the following standards noted in AAM's accreditation recommendations:

- The museum owns, exhibits or uses collections that are appropriate to its mission.
- The museum legally, ethically and effectively manages, documents, cares for and uses the collections.
- The museum conducts collections-related research according to appropriate scholarly standards.

- The museum strategically plans for the use and development of its collections.
- The museum, guided by its mission, provides public access to its collections while ensuring their preservation.
- The museum allocates its space and uses its facilities to meet the needs of the collections, audience and staff.
- The museum has appropriate measures in place to ensure the safety and security of people, its collections and/or objects, and the facilities it owns or uses.
- The museum takes appropriate measures to protect itself against potential risk and loss.

The museum collections policy is an essential document that delineates all collections management practices, including accessioning and deaccessioning. It notes documentation and inventory procedures, as well as access, storage, conservation and preservation, risk management, disaster preparedness, copyright and rights of reproduction, research and interpretation, and acquisition funds or endowments. The needs of any collections will vary, and museum collections staff should be knowledgeable in the standards of the types of objects for which they are responsible. In all cases, the museum must provide proper storage and HVAC, maintain accurate and timely documentation, and ensure proper intellectual control.

Collections may include different levels of importance and care, with study collections often available for class use. Other areas of the collection may be identified as loan collections, which may be installed in university buildings and the president's house, or teaching collections available to faculty for use in classroom settings, or research collections with access limited to those performing scientific analysis. If so, the parameters of the program, including inventory, identification of appropriate items and locations and potential fees, should be noted in the collections policy. AAMG also recommends that museums create collections development plans, identifying key areas of growth through gift, bequest, and/or purchase that further the museum's mission and institutional plan.

AAM requires the following with regard to collections stewardship:

- A current, approved, comprehensive collections management policy is in effect and actively used to guide the museum's stewardship of its collections.
- The human resources are sufficient, and the staff have the appropriate education, training and experience to fulfill the museum's stewardship responsibilities and the needs of the collections.
- Staff are delegated responsibility to carry out the collections management policy.
- A system of documentation, records management and inventory is in effect to describe each object and its acquisition (permanent or temporary), current condition and location and movement into, out of and within the museum.
- The museum regularly monitors environmental conditions and takes proactive measures to mitigate the effects of ultraviolet light, fluctuations in temperature and humidity, air pollution, damage, pests and natural disasters on collections.
- An appropriate method for identifying needs and determining priorities for conservation/care is in place.
- Safety and security procedures and plans for collections in the museum's custody are documented, practiced and addressed in the museum's emergency/disaster preparedness plan.
- Regular assessment of, and planning for, collection needs (development, conservation, risk management, etc.) takes place and sufficient financial and human resources are allocated for collections stewardship.

- Collections care policies and procedures for collections on exhibition, in storage, on loan and during travel are appropriate, adequate and documented.
- The scope of a museum's collections stewardship extends to both the physical and intellectual control of its property.
- Ethical considerations of collections stewardship are incorporated into the appropriate museum policies and procedures.
- Considerations regarding future collecting activities are incorporated into institutional plans and other appropriate policy documents.<sup>7</sup>

The following links to AAM standards may also be useful:

- **Standards Regarding Loaning Collections to Non-Museum Entities:**  
<http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/collections-stewardship/loaning-collections>
- **Standards Regarding the Unlawful Appropriation of Objects During the Nazi Era:**  
<http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/collections-stewardship/objects-during-the-nazi-era>
- **Standards Regarding Archaeological Material and Ancient Art:**  
<http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/collections-stewardship/archaeological-material-and-ancient-art>

In addition, the following federal laws may be relevant:

- **U.S. Antiquities Act of 1906<sup>8</sup>**  
Domestic antiquities cannot be removed from lands owned or controlled by the government with the permission of the Secretary of the department who has jurisdiction over the land in question.
- **Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979<sup>9</sup>**  
This expansion of the U.S. Antiquities Act provides for the protection of archaeological materials on federal land.
- **The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966<sup>10</sup>**  
Established the national register and provides for financial assistance for preservation projects and mandatory review of proposed changes to properties on the National Register.
- **The Endangered Species Act<sup>11</sup>**  
Prohibits the importation and exportation, and the sale, trace, or shipment in interstate and foreign commerce, of listed endangered or threatened species, their parts, and products made from them.
- **The Migratory Bird Treaty Act<sup>12</sup>**  
Makes it unlawful to kill, capture, collect, possess, buy, sell, ship, import, or export most migratory game and non-game birds, including their nests or eggs, unless an appropriate federal permit is obtained.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/collections-stewardship>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/history/local-law/anti1906.htm>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/archeology/tools/Laws/ARPA.htm>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.achp.gov/nhpa.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.fws.gov/laws/lawsdigest/ESACT.HTML>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.fws.gov/laws/lawsdigest/migtrea.html>

- **The Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act**<sup>13</sup>  
Makes it unlawful to take bald or golden eagles or to sell, purchase, or barter their parts (including feathers) or products made from them.
- **The African Elephant Conservation Act**<sup>14</sup>  
Eliminates the import and export of raw ivory into and out of the U.S. and restricts movement of worked ivory into and out of the U.S.
- **The National Firearms Act of 1934 and the 1968 Gun Control Act**<sup>15</sup>  
Makes it illegal for any individual or organization to have a machine gun not registered with a permit. A state or federally funded museum can register all firearms under both of these acts legally. Most academic museums that are state funded would qualify. Museums at private universities would not qualify to keep these arms in their collections. Furthermore, directors and curators might want to apply for their “Collectors and Curios and Relics Federal Firearms License” to be able to obtain and curate the museum’s firearm collection.
- **The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990**<sup>16</sup>  
Provides protection of Native American graves and for associated funerary objects and for unassociated funerary objects, sacred objects, and cultural patrimony.

### ***Protecting the Collections***

Academic museums collect, interpret, exhibit, and care for important objects representing human cultures and the natural world from the earliest times to the present. While these objects may be the actual property of the museum, the parent institution, or a university foundation, in all instances the governing authority must follow the museum’s collection policies to ensure that these invaluable educational, cultural, and natural objects are protected, preserved, and not treated as fungible property.

AAM states the following, specifically for academic museums:

- The Accreditation Commission requires museums operating within a parent organization to submit evidence (issued/approved by the parent organization’s governing body) documenting:
  1. the importance of the museum, and the collections in its care, to the parent organization;
  2. the parent organization’s commitment to use its resources to support the museum and its mission, and to protect the museum’s tangible and intangible assets held in the public trust; and
  3. the nature of the parent organization’s support and relationship with the museum.
- This evidence must articulate that the parent:
  1. values the museum as an intellectual and educational resource;
  2. sees the museum and its collections as essential components of what it does;
  3. is committed to the museum’s continued success in fulfilling its mission and meeting its public trust responsibilities, especially with regard to the collection (if one exists); and

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.fws.gov/midwest/MidwestBird/EaglePermits/bagepa.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.fws.gov/international/wildlife-without-borders/multinational-species-conservation-acts-african-elephant.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.atf.gov/rules-and-regulations/national-firearms-act>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/nagpra/>

4. is committed to following AAM and museum field standards, particularly with regard to the museum’s collections, the use of deaccessioning proceeds, and collecting and gift-acceptance policies.
- This evidence can take a variety of forms:
    1. a resolution passed by the parent organization’s governing body;
    2. internal parent organization policy or agreement between the parent and the museum;
    3. section of the parent organization’s bylaws, other organizing or governance documents or policies (i.e., parent organization document that describes its administrative and organizational structure and operations, and how the museum fits into that structure);
    4. a section of the parent organization’s formally approved institutional plan that addresses the museum;
    5. other evidence that shows a history of support from the parent organization (e.g., financial reports) and demonstrates for the Commission that there is a precedent for future regular and stable support;
    6. a resolution stating the parent organization’s commitment that it will **not** consider the museum’s collections as disposable assets.
  - The Commission considers it a best practice, and strongly prefers, for the evidence to be approved by the corpus of the ultimate governing authority, not by an individual representing this governing body, or to whom authority for oversight of the museum has been delegated. The evidence must be a document(s) approved by the parent organization, not just by the museum.<sup>17</sup>

**See Appendix VI for sample collections management documents and statements affirming the parent institution’s support of the museum’s collection and its collections policies.**

### ***University Collections***

Universities have often acquired works of fine and decorative arts, outdoor sculpture, commemorative items, specimens of the natural world, and other objects that require professional care and oversight. Sometimes, the museum is charged with their management, while at other times, a university registrar or archivist manages the collections. On occasion, the university’s facilities management or physical plant department may have responsibility for items not in the museum’s collection and may contact museum personnel on an *ad hoc* basis when questions or issues arise. Many of these objects have come to the university through gifts and bequests; others through “Percent for Art” state and local programs that require a percentage of the budget for new buildings and renovations be allocated to commissioning or purchasing artwork for that location.

Museum professionals are often the only university personnel with the training and experience to care for and manage these collections. It is, however, a rare situation when an academic museum can assume those collections responsibilities without additional funding and staff. Unless university collections are managed professionally by others at the institution, the university should provide the necessary support to ensure that the museum is able to take responsibility for these key assets.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.aam-us.org/docs/default-source/continuum/statements-of-support-ac-policy.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

**See Appendix VII for sample documents for policies and procedures for public art on campus.**

### ***Object Loans***

The museum's collections policies should detail policies and procedures regarding incoming and outgoing loans. It is standard practice for a museum to request loans to support exhibitions, research, and curricula. When the lender is an individual or business, the museum must make sure there are no potential conflicts of interest or an appearance of a conflict and that the lender has legal ownership of the work. In situations where works of art, loaned for an exhibition other than as a fundraiser, may be available for sale, the museum should not accept a commission or serve as a middleman in the process. If a lender is contributing funds for the project, such information should be clearly stated and readily available.

It is standard practice for a museum to lend objects from its own collection to other institutions. Again, policies and procedures should be delineated in the collections policy document, which aims to ensure the care and safety of loans and that their use is consistent with the museum's mission. The museum should require a standard AAM general facilities report<sup>18</sup> from the borrowing institution that specifies appropriate facility, security, HVAC, and professional handling.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://aam-us.org/ProductCatalog/Product?ID=891>



## EDUCATION, EXHIBITIONS, & INTERPRETATION

Museums must clearly identify their constituents. First and foremost are the university's students. Additional audiences will likely include faculty and staff, as well as K-12 schools in their city, town, or region; the general public in their area; and, increasingly, on-line audiences. To meet the needs of these diverse constituents, the museum should present stimulating, innovative, and inclusive programs and exhibitions that enhance the academic curriculum, emphasize cross-cultural understanding, provide broad educational experiences, and support collaborative and interdisciplinary opportunities.

University students usually participate in museum learning as part of their courses and extra-curricular activities. To engage the students, key members of the museum may be appointed to liaison with faculty, teaching and encouraging them to use the museum's resources – its collections, exhibitions, public programs, and staff expertise – in their curricula. These designated staff members may be “academic curators” or “museum educators.” Faculty and students whose disciplines fall outside the core areas of the collection and special exhibitions may find significant benefits in working with the museum's staff to strengthen faculty and student research, writing and communications skills, analytical thinking, visual and media literacy, and more. In these ways, the academic museum functions as a learning laboratory. Faculty may also work closely with the museum as **guest curators**<sup>19</sup> and members of advisory committees (e.g., collections, exhibitions, and public programs). Because museums offer practical training and work experiences, in addition to independent study and other academic credit, students may hold internships, fellowships, volunteer or paid positions (including serving as a docent), or be engaged with the museum through student organizations and student museum membership programs.

In addition to supporting the mission and institutional plan of its parent organization, the museum's collections, exhibitions, and educational programs should also support the needs of other important constituencies, which may include K-12 populations and the local/regional community. The museum should be open to recommendations and feedback from its constituencies and rely on the expertise and interests of its curatorial and education staff. It may be useful to plan a four-year exhibition schedule (the normal graduation cycle of an undergraduate), aiming to present a range of cultures, media, ideas, and natural phenomena that in total will impart richness and diversity, as well as the importance of studying and preserving cultural and natural heritage.

### ***Research***

Research plays an important role in academic museums. In addition to supporting faculty and student research, museum staff members should conduct ongoing research specific to the collections, exhibitions, educational programs, and museum practices, as appropriate to their expertise, interests, and professional positions. Research should ensure that the museum is successfully addressing and prioritizing the needs of an increasingly diverse on- and off-campus audience. Evaluation, too, is an essential component of ongoing museum work, allowing for constituency input, thoughtful reflection, strategic planning, prioritization, and re-direction of initiatives. Ongoing visitor/constituency engagement surveys help museums understand their visitor demographics as well as what they are doing well and what they could improve. Research and evaluation are essential partners in strengthening museums and the field as a whole, and staff members should be encouraged to document and share their work with their governing authority as well as other academic museum professionals through publications, on-line communication vehicles, and conferences.

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<sup>19</sup> See [Appendix IV](#) for guidelines regarding guest curators.

Many museums work closely with faculty who teach museum studies. Some museum staff teach courses themselves, others serve as guest lecturers, and others supervise students who are expected to intern for a term or over the summer. Most programs do not prepare students in any significant way for professional positions in museums; rather, they offer historical, theoretical, and practical perspectives on museums and museum work. AAMG encourages museum professionals to re-envision these programs, such that on-site experience and academic studies reinforce one another and make museum studies graduates competitive (with graduates in other academic fields relevant to their future work, e.g., art history, history, science, anthropology, education, marketing, etc.) in their search for museum positions.

AAM offers the following recommendations regarding education, exhibitions, and interpretation:

- The museum clearly states its overall educational goals, philosophy and messages, and demonstrates that its activities are in alignment with them.
- The museum understands the characteristics and needs of its existing and potential audiences and uses this understanding to inform its interpretation.
- The museum's interpretive content is based on appropriate research.
- Museums conducting primary research do so according to scholarly standards.
- The museum uses techniques, technologies and methods appropriate to its educational goals, content, audiences and resources.
- The museum presents accurate and appropriate content for each of its audiences.
- The museum demonstrates consistent high quality in its interpretive activities.
- The museum assesses the effectiveness of its interpretive activities and uses those results to plan and improve its activities.<sup>20</sup>

**See Appendix VIII for samples of exhibition planning and program evaluation.**

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/education-and-interpretation>

## Facilities & Risk Management

Academic museums are usually housed within a building owned by the university, which may or may not have been purpose built. While some museums may have their own facilities staff, others have facilities staff assigned to them from the university's facilities management or physical plant department. Similarly, climate control and security may be managed independently by museum staff or by others at the university. The less control the museum has over its building maintenance, HVAC, and security, the more important it is to communicate best practices to university staff responsible for those areas and to assure that funding is sustained to maintain the highest possible standards.

The director should participate in all decisions regarding the re-design, renovation, construction, repair, or capital improvements of the physical plant. The director should approve all planning and implementation of such in order to maintain appropriate museum standards for collections management, programs, and security. When the museum is used by other university or community groups or individuals, the director and appropriate staff should ensure the safety, security, and integrity of the collection, exhibitions, museum programs, and facility. Revenue generated from the rental of the museum should offset direct and indirect costs to the museum.

AAM further states that:

- The museum allocates its space and uses its facilities to meet the needs of the collections, audience, and staff.
- The museum has appropriate measures to ensure the safety and security of people, its collections and/or objects, and the facilities it owns or uses.
- The museum has an effective program for the care and long-term maintenance of its facilities.
- The museum is clean and well-maintained, and provides for the visitors' needs.
- The museum takes appropriate measures to protect itself against potential risk and loss.<sup>21</sup>

Museums care for their resources in trust for the public. It is incumbent upon them to ensure the safety of their staff, visitors, and neighbors; maintain their buildings and grounds; and minimize risk to the collections that they preserve for future generations. Conscious, proactive identification of the risks that could potentially harm people and collections, and appropriate allocation of resources to reduce these risks are vital to museum management.

Minimizing risk to collections, visitors, and staff is predicated on a clear understanding of potential risks and the creation of a comprehensive plan to mitigate them. Regular reviews and updates should be made and clearly articulated with all appropriate museum and university staff. Because the academic museum should prioritize student learning, all efforts should be made to provide access to collections and exhibitions, which may require significant staff resources (collections staff, gallery attendants, security officers, attendants) and flexible time to meet academic program and class needs.

For **facility risk**, staff must ensure that the building is maintained and preventative maintenance accomplished, that spaces are used to the best of their potential in fulfillment of the museum's mission and that the building and its grounds are attractive and accessible to visitors. For museums in historic

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/collections-stewardship>

structures, the preservation needs of the building need to be balanced against risk to people and collections within it.

For the *collections*, minimizing risk includes having an emergency preparedness plan, an integrated pest management plan, procedures for handling and storage of collections (e.g., museums in earthquake and hurricane zones will need to secure collections in storage and on view to avoid possible damage), use of hazardous materials, security of collections, and appropriate insurance.

For *collections and people*, risk management requires a well-trained security force that usually includes video surveillance and a physical presence in the galleries. The security program must have written protocol for staff access to the museum building and specific areas, supervision of students and volunteers, and annual security training and emergency preparedness drills for all staff and volunteers. A knowledgeable visitor services staff is essential. The frontline personnel can welcome and orient visitors to the museum, answer questions about the university and region or direct questions to others, make them feel welcome, and serve as an additional set of eyes. The museum is also expected to comply with university, local, state, and federal laws, codes and regulations and to make sure that those with whom it contracts for its various services are versed in museum practices in their specific areas.

### ***Emergencies and the National Incident Management System (NIMS)***

Academic museums should be or become compliant with NIMS. While every university senior staff member should be or become NIMS compliant and have a comprehensive emergency operations plan (EOP), every museum should have an additional plan that is under the operations command unit as its own support unit, known as a Museum Security and Recovery Unit. This unit would be activated, if a museum facilities and/or artifacts are exposed, threatened, and/or damaged from a disaster. The purpose of the unit is to implement procedures to protect the artifacts from outside looters and prevent further environmental damage. Senior museum officials in charge of collections, security, staff, and facility may need to take the following FEMA Courses:

- 1) ICS-100: Introduction the Incident Command System
- 2) ICS -200: Single Resources and Initial Action Incidents
- 3) ICS-700a: National Incident Management Systems (NIMS)
- 4) ICS-800b: National Response Framework, an Introduction
- 5) ICS-300: Intermediate Incident Command System for Expanding Incidents
- 6) ICS-400: Advanced Incident Command System, Command, and General Staff

The Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation (FAIC) of Historic and Artistic Works offers recommendations in this regard: <http://www.heritageemergency.org/initiatives/alliance-for-response/afr-home/>

**See Appendix IX for samples of emergency preparedness plans and security plans and protocols.**

## RETRENCHMENT OR DOWNSIZING

An academic museum may, at times, be faced with a reduction in its operations due to its financial situation or that of the university. Any budget reductions required by the parent institution should be compatible with reductions in other areas of the university, i.e., the museum should not be singled out for more reductions than other areas. In the case of budget reductions, the museum should focus on its ability to fulfill its mission and serve its community, and take into careful consideration the effect of its actions on its staff, stakeholders, and the collections held in public trust.

### *Collections*

Collections often receive special scrutiny during retrenchment either because of the expense of maintaining them appropriately or because of their potential as financial assets. In considering how to address collections during retrenchment, all parties should recognize that collections are held in trust for the public. A primary responsibility of the museum and governing authority is to safeguard this trust. The museum may determine that it is unable, in the long run, to appropriately care for some parts of its collections. In such cases, the most responsible action may be to deaccession and transfer material to another suitable caretaker in an orderly manner that safeguards the collections and their documentation. Museums may carefully consider whether it is appropriate for the material to remain in the public domain at another museum or nonprofit institution or whether it can responsibly be placed through public sale.

Deaccessioning should never be a fast or simple solution. It may take a great deal of time and other resources to research the material in question, determine its provenance, identify any restrictions on the title, and arrange for an appropriate and safe transfer. In the short run, it may actually require additional expenditures on the part of the museum to conduct the necessary research, prepare the documentation, arrange for disposition, and affect the transfer. Deaccessioning is part of a long-term, thoughtful decision on the part of the museum about how best to fulfill its mission with available resources. It is conducted in accordance with standards and best practices in the field, and with the museum's own code of ethics, collections planning and collections management policies.

AAMG recognizes that different museum organizations provide different guidelines for the use of deaccessioning funds. Some may be restricted by federal or international law. The Society of Vertebrate Paleontology,<sup>22</sup> for example, stipulates that the "barter, sale, or purchase of scientifically significant vertebrate fossils is not condoned, unless it brings them into or keeps them within a public trust." AAMG recommends that funds from deaccessioning only be used for new collections acquisitions, unless the museum is no longer acquiring objects, in which case such funds may be used for the care of the existing collection. It does, however, recognize that the American Association of State and Local History (AASLH) specifies that history museums can use such funds for acquisition or preservation.

As previously stated, proceeds from the sale of collection objects should not be considered as fungible assets used to sustain the parent institution. AAMG also affirms, along with AAM, AAMD, and AASLH that collections should be "unencumbered," i.e., they cannot be used as a collateral for a loan.

Because collections are vital to the mission of most museums, AAMG urges museums and their parent institutions to examine all possibilities for preserving and making accessible their collections rather than dismantling them.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://vertpaleo.org/the-Society/Governance-Documents/Impending-Public-Auction-of-Vertebrate-Fossils-by.aspx>

The AAMG Task Force on the Protection of University Collections<sup>23</sup> stands ready to help and advise academic museums and their governing authorities when faced with emergencies and financial retrenchment that seriously affects the sustainability of the museum's operations.

AAMG also recommends that academic museums consider the following options in retrenchment and downsizing situations:<sup>24</sup>

### ***Human Resources***

Museums often reduce staff size in response to financial reductions. This may be accomplished by leaving positions temporarily unfilled, eliminating individual positions or eliminating whole departments or program areas. In considering the reduction of staff as a part of retrenchment, museums should consider the short-term and long-term needs of the institution. Leaving a position vacant when a staff member departs is less traumatic than laying off existing staff. It can also, however, leave key positions and vital roles unfilled at a crucial time. Museums must weigh the needs of the staff, the museum, and the institution in choosing a strategy for staff reductions.

Museums should also consider the impact of downsizing on the museum's programs and operations. The museum's mission is accomplished primarily through its staff, but many museums also rely on volunteers and partnerships with other institutions. Staff reductions are planned in light of the overall impact on the museum's mission and activities and as part of an overall strategy for scaling back operations, supplementing paid staff with volunteers or partnerships or other strategies for accomplishing the museum's goals.

### ***Diversification of Funding***

Museums that are part of a college or university or organized under a municipal, county, or state government have additional factors that affect their response to a financial crisis. When parent organizations need to make financial cuts, the museum may be asked to bear a disproportionate portion of the burden. Whenever possible, advocacy efforts on behalf of staff, faculty, and advisory board members should aim to reverse such a situation. It is especially important that museums within larger parent organizations increase their financial stability by cultivating diverse sources of income. Museums that derive significant portions of their income from outside sources are less dependent on funding from their parent organizations. This minimizes the impact of funding cuts from the parent and the likelihood that the parent will see eliminating the museum as an attractive financial strategy.

### ***Membership***

Museums can also develop a separately incorporated friends (membership) organization. A separate not-for-profit support group can provide significant income, serve as an advocate for the museum, and buffer it against sudden organizational changes. A formal memorandum of agreement between the parent organization and the friends group can ensure that the support organization has a voice in any decisions concerning the museum's future. This document should include policies and procedures for fundraising, maintaining and accessing funds, and the election or appointment of representatives who work directly with the museum staff.

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<sup>23</sup> See **Appendix X**.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/financial-stability>

### ***University Operations & the Public Trust***

Another strategy is to embed the museum in the parent organization's operations. A museum that is an integral part of its parent organization is less likely to be an immediate target for financial reductions by the university. By being strongly connected to the community served by the parent institution, reaching out to a broad constituency, attracting new sources of funding, garnering positive publicity and, most of all, being valued by a large number of people, a museum makes itself less vulnerable to cutbacks. An active and engaged constituency will encourage the parent organization to continue its support.

Parent organizations may not have a legal obligation to operate the university museum. The governing authority should be made aware of the possibility of the museum losing accreditation due to changes made as part of retrenchment. AAM, recognizing the public trust inherent in the stewardship of collections held in the public domain, urges parent organizations to consider the following ethical, moral, and practical issues.

First, museums are part of an institution's long-term strategy of civic engagement. Any decisions regarding the future of museums operated by a parent organization should take into account their long-term role in serving the broader public good. While in the short run, cutbacks to a museum may result in financial savings, in the long run they may damage the parent organization's ability to serve its community and reach out to a broad audience.

Second, museums operate in the public interest and hold their collections as a public trust. If the university's governing authority is considering downsizing or closing a museum, it has an ethical obligation to do so in a manner that safeguards the public's interest. The fate of the collections must be carefully considered. Having taken on the obligation of caring for collections, the university must plan to transfer this stewardship to another suitable caretaker in an orderly manner that safeguards the collections and their documentation. The new caretaker should be carefully identified based on its ability to care for the collections and to continue to provide public and scholarly access. As referenced earlier in this standard, this process may require additional resources in the short term and may not be a useful strategy for immediate cost savings.



## Looking for Something?

If you have suggestions for topics and/or sample documents that we might add to AAMG's Professional Practices, please [email communications@aamg-us.org](mailto:communications@aamg-us.org)

Join your colleagues for informative and spirited conversations on museum practice on our listserv:  
<https://groups.io/g/AAMG>

For AAM's best practices, see:  
<http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/standards>