

ALLIANCE REFERENCE GUIDE

Developing a Mission Statement

This guide aims to help a museum develop and refine its mission statement, the foundation on which a museum's operations and impact stand. This guide will explain the purpose and importance of a mission statement, provide some examples of them and identify considerations for creating or revising one. It reflects national standards and is in line with the requirements of the Alliance's Core Documents Verification and Accreditation programs.

What It Is

1

A mission statement is the beating heart of a museum. It articulates the museum's educational focus and purpose and its role and responsibility to the public and its collections. Some museums choose to also develop vision and value statements as a way of extending the concepts expressed in the mission statement. These are different but related guiding documents for the museum: mission is purpose; vision is future; and values are beliefs.

Why It Is Important

A mission statement drives everything the museum does; vision, policy-making, planning and operations are all extensions of a museum's mission. The mission gives the governing authority a foundation from which it can strategize. The governing authority sets the museum's strategic direction through the mission, which impacts the policies and plans influencing staff actions and behaviors.

What to Consider

Museums are encouraged to take the time to explore their circumstances and articulate them accurately in their mission and other policies and plans. Each of the museum's official documents should speak to one another consistently and comprehensively to support mission. Therefore, it is important that policies and planning be integrated in order to be effective.

Anatomy of a Mission Statement

There are as many different ways to create mission statements as there are museums. That should be the case, as each museum has its own distinct history, community and set of challenges. Typically, a mission statement explains the museum's purpose and reason for existing. Sometimes, it will address audience and impact. A museum may look to other mission statements as a helpful starting point for drafting and discussing its own, but in order to create a strong foundation for everything the museum does, mission must be specific to each museum.

A good mission statement leans toward societal impact rather than simply an explanation of operations, “transitioning from being *about* something to being *for* someone.” –Stephen Weil (*Daedalus*, 1999).

Here are a few examples of mission statements from accredited museums:

» **Museum of Science, Boston**

The Museum's mission is to play a leading role in transforming the nation's relationship with science and technology.

» **Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum**

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum advances creative thinking by connecting today's artists with individuals and communities in unexpected and stimulating ways.

» **Missouri History Museum**

The Missouri History Museum seeks to deepen the understanding of past choices, present circumstances, and future possibilities; strengthen the bonds of the community; and facilitate solutions to common problems.

Where to Begin

Creating or reviewing a mission statement is not easy, but it can be a stimulating and enlightening process. Missions may evolve as the museum does and therefore need to be reviewed from time to time. Most importantly, missions must be practiced; mission statements are only useful if they are being realized every day.

A museum reviewing its mission statement might consider reasons for review and how long it has been since the mission was changed. A mission statement is usually revisited or revised when change arises (e.g., institutional planning, applying for accreditation, shift in audiences served). Since it can evolve over time, it is important for it to be nimble enough to bend and move with change.

While this process can vary from museum to museum, here are some steps to take in revising a mission statement:

- » *Create a review team and outline the review process.* Museums might consider who will be involved and how they will contribute to the review. This team can consist of people from different functions of the museum. Many times, the team incorporates members of the governing authority and staff, but a smaller group is usually more productive than a larger one. Greater feedback is encouraged, but the team's responsibility is to facilitate the process, identify key stakeholders and use feedback to shape what will eventually become the mission. Those leading the review must ensure that the development and end result are effective. The team should be authorized by the governing authority and report to the governing authority.
- » *Do research.* Museums may find it helpful to do research on the origins and history of the museum to explore how purpose has evolved over time.
- » *Look at the current mission statement.* Missions do not always need to change, but it is important to recognize when they have to. The strengths and weaknesses of the current statement can be considered in order to determine what types of revisions are required. Does it need just a few tweaks or a complete rewrite?
- » *Get feedback.* While the mission statement review team will lead the process, feedback from other stakeholders is essential. Broad input from board, volunteers, staff and other stakeholders can push thinking to explore why the museum is a vital part of its community. It is wise to capture this feedback verbatim. Input from many people can build excitement and passion, which a mission statement should reflect.

- » *Refine the mission.* The team can use the feedback collected to start drafting the statement. Drafts can go to stakeholders to refine the mission, making it more succinct and powerful over time. However, writing the mission cannot become the mission. It is important that museums strike the fine balance between getting the necessary input needed to create a strong mission, and moving forward to acknowledging, believing and living the mission.
- » *Consider also writing vision and value statements at this time.*
- » *Send the final draft of the mission statement to the board for formal approval.* This can be accompanied by an explanation of the process and the decisions made throughout.
- » *Integrate the new mission statement into planning efforts, policies, documents and publications.* At this point, it would be prudent for the museum to consider documents needing revision in order to reflect this new mission. Those documents can be revised as needed and distributed to key stakeholders.

Core Documents Verification

4

The [Core Documents Verification](#) program verifies that an institution has an educational mission and the policies and procedures in place that reflect standard practices of professional museums, as articulated in *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums* and used in the Accreditation program.

A mission statement is one of five core documents that are fundamental for basic professional museum operations and embody core museum practices. Listed below are required elements of a mission statement for museums participating in the program.

Mission Statement Required Elements

- » Educational in scope
- » Describes the institution's unique purpose/focus/role
- » Is approved by the governing authority



Where to Find Out More

- » [*National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*](#), edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt (AAM Press, 2008)

This guide is an essential reference work for the museum community, presenting the ideals that should be upheld by every museum striving to maintain excellence in its operations. An introductory section explains how virtually anyone associated with museums will find the book valuable, from trustees to staff to funders and the media. It is followed by a full outline of the standards, including the overarching Characteristics of Excellence for U.S. Museums and the seven areas of performance they address. Throughout the book is commentary by Elizabeth E. Merritt, director of the Alliance's Center for the Future of Museums. This publication is available as a free PDF for all museum members.

- » [*Museum Mission Statements: Building a Distinct Identity*](#), edited by Gail Anderson (AAM Press, 1998)

This book provides step-by-step guidance in writing or evaluating a museum mission statement and how to use it effectively. Generously supplemented with 79 outstanding mission statements from a wide variety of museums, the report is useful to museums of any size or type.

- » [*Small Museum Toolkit*](#) by Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler (AltaMira Press, 2011)

This collection of six books serves as a launching point for small museum staff to pursue best practices and meet museum standards. These brief volumes address governance, financial management, human resources, audience relations, interpretation and stewardship for small museums and historic sites. Book One addresses mission.

- » [Sample Documents](#)

The Information Center's sample document collection is a unique and valuable resource for Tier 3 member museums. The collection contains more than 1,000 samples of policies, plans and forms from museums of all types and sizes, most of which were written by accredited museums. Tier 3 museum members can request sample documents from the Information Center in order to stimulate a conversation about issues and challenges facing the museum and to explore how different museums approach different issues. Using the sample documents should not replace the process of joining staff, governing authority and stakeholders in fruitful and thoughtful planning and policy-making.



Standards

The Alliance’s standards address “big picture” issues about how museums operate. For the most part, they define broad outcomes that can be achieved in many different ways and are flexible enough to accommodate a diverse museum field. These standards can be achieved in tandem with standards issued by other organizations that address aspects of museum operations or the museum profession.

Adhering to standards is achievable by all types of museums.

Standards provide a common language that enables museums to self-regulate, demonstrate professionalism and increase accountability. Policy-makers, media, philanthropic organizations, donors and members of the public use standards to assess a museum’s performance and evaluate its worthiness to receive public support and trust. Simply stated by Elizabeth Merritt in *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*, “Standards are fundamental to being a good museum, a responsible nonprofit and a well-run business.”

Having a strong mission statement helps museums adhere to standards. For more on standards, visit the Alliance’s website at www.aam-us.org.