

ALLIANCE REFERENCE GUIDE

Developing an Institutional Plan

This guide aims to help museums develop their institutional plan, a core document supporting sustainability and mission. While the end result is a plan, the primary goals of this guide are to explain the importance of institutional planning, offer considerations for the process of planning and outline steps to begin planning. It reflects national standards and outlines elements of an institutional plan that are in line with the requirements of the Alliance's Core Documents Verification and Accreditation programs.

What It Is

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An institutional plan (sometimes called a strategic plan or a long-range plan) is a document that guides the museum's acquisition, growth and allocation of resources. It is generally multi-year and has measurable goals and methods by which the museum evaluates success. It includes prioritized action steps, establishes timelines and assigns responsibilities for implementing the plan. It also assesses and addresses resources needed to see the plan to fruition. It is often supplemented by an implementation or an operating plan that puts the decisions made in the institutional plan into practice. Implementation plans address day-to-day operations or one specific operational area, such as collections, business, development or education. An institutional plan should be current (up-to-date) and aligned with mission.

Why It Is Important

Finding the time to plan is a difficult but fundamental task. Since resources are finite and communities evolve, museums engage in planning to be sustainable and relevant. An institutional plan integrates and focuses operations in order to meet mission and the needs of its audience and community.

What to Consider

- » *The process of creating and implementing a plan is far more important and beneficial to the museum than the actual plan itself.* The plan may seem like the end result, but in actuality, the end result is what is achieved through using and updating the plan.
- » *There are many different ways to plan.* Each museum has its own set of challenges, which requires thoughtfulness in planning. Museums are encouraged to take time to explore their circumstances and articulate them accurately in their plans.
- » *Planning should be integrated in order to be effective.* Each of the museum's official documents should speak to one another consistently and comprehensively to support the museum's mission.

*"If planning is well integrated into the museum, it becomes the way you do your work, not something you do on top of your work. What is important is that you make it a priority." Elizabeth E. Merritt (*Secrets of Institutional Planning*, 2007)*

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Anatomy of an Institutional Plan

Planning is a continuous but fruitful process that properly distributes resources in order to accomplish goals. It is important to nurture a culture of frequent, current and thoughtful planning.

There is no one, perfect template for any document. As the museum field is so diverse, each of the museum's documents should be influenced by its history, community, collections and governance. Each museum's planning documents will look different depending on its strengths, weaknesses and goals. Institutional plans should be mission-based and comprehensive, integrating other types of plans (e.g., development plans, interpretive plans, collections plans) into overall planning and setting prioritized and realistic goals. Here are some common elements of an institutional plan:

Introduction

It can be helpful to begin both the planning process and the written plan with a review of the institution's background. Not everyone in the planning process starts at the same point, and reiterating mission, documenting the history of the museum and its culture and working through vision and core values as a team can provide a strong foundation for the planning process.



Overview of Planning Process

Providing some background on how the plan was developed, who was involved and what challenges and opportunities came to light, will give context for the decisions and action steps that follow. It is important that museums create transparency in the process and document the planning process. When museums undergo subsequent planning, they can extend this process rather than recreating it.

Overview of Operations and Programs

This is an assessment of all of the museum's projects and programs. To help make strategic choices about the museum's focus, prioritize goals, allocate resources as necessary and create a baseline for measuring progress, museums should identify strengths and weaknesses.

Organizational Chart

This summary of human resources can help museums align strategic goals with staffing. For instance, if a goal is to ramp up education programs, an organizational chart might reveal lack of staff capacity.

Other Planning Documents

Institutional planning needs to be comprehensive, taking into consideration all of the museum's operations. Museums will often have several planning documents that get

integrated or referenced in the institutional plan. It is important that these plans be consistent and cohesive throughout the entire planning process.

Goals, Strategies, Action Steps

This section outlines what the museum is going to do, who is going to do what, when it is going to happen, how much it will cost and how it will be funded. Museums must be specific about the measurable end products (goals) and the means (action steps) and methods (strategies) for achieving them. It is important to assess, identify and plan to secure resources—both human and financial—needed to implement the plan. A timeline will delineate when things will rollout so that these goals are coordinated and integrated.

Measures of Success

Evaluation helps museums decide when a plan needs to be updated, when strategies need to change or when priorities shift. It is important to discuss this during the planning process so that those using the institutional plan know how to define and measure success.

Updating and Monitoring the Plan

A plan has specific, time-bound goals, but the need for a plan does not disappear after the past plan is completed. Using action items as part of staff's yearly work plans and regular review and assessment of the plan and the museum's progress can help encourage a culture of planning.

Where to Begin

The planning process will vary from institution to institution and from time to time, but here are some ideas to get members of a museum's governing authority, staff, volunteers and community on-board with the planning process:

- » *Create an institutional planning team and establish their responsibility, authority and a timeline for planning.* It is important that a museum first identify the scope of the planning process. This will include identifying who will participate in the planning process and how and whether a neutral outside facilitator is needed to assist in moving the process along.
- » *Consider the audience for this written plan.* Is it just the board and staff, or does the audience include funders, members of the community, or others? Thinking about who this plan is aimed for will influence how it is written. Museums can choose to abbreviate the institutional plan depending on the audiences. For instance, funders or museum members may get a short, three-page summary of the plan, whereas staff get a full 20-page document with an accompanying implementation plan.
- » *Collect feedback from internal and external groups.* By interviewing board members, staff and volunteers about the history of the museum and their visions, the museum can start shaping the planning process. Other communities can be surveyed to discover their visions for the museum, such as different demographic groups that the museum wants to attract. It may be helpful for the museum to extend an invitation to people who have never visited so that they can give feedback. This insight can be an important starting point for the museum's planning.
- » *Assess current performance.* Museums may find it helpful to look at internal information (e.g., financial reports, attendance data, surveys) and external information (e.g., benchmarking information on financial performance, comparable data from other institutions, demographics, trend data on local tourism) to see where the museum is. Staff, volunteers and board members can tour the current facilities along with key decision-makers to see for themselves the current state of the physical plant, collections storage, exhibits and other areas that the plan may need to address.
- » *Use interviews and performance assessment to help inform goals and a vision for the museum.* The museum should explore strategies and prioritize action steps, taking other types of plans into consideration during this process. They can establish these in a myriad of ways—some museums may find it helpful to create task forces or committees, some may want an “all hands on deck” approach. Every museum's planning process is different from the next, and the most important result is to have achievable and prioritized goals, strategies and action steps.



- » *Establish metrics for success and methods for measuring progress.*
- » *Make sure key stakeholders review and edit the draft plan.* This may take several rounds of edits before it is “final,” but museums can send the draft in rounds to separate groups of stakeholders. Once the plan is seen and edited by key stakeholders, it must be approved by the governing authority. It’s important to know that a plan is never going to be perfect or final. A successful one gets reviewed and revised constantly, depending on changes to goals and priorities.
- » *Celebrate and implement!* All the hard work and thought that has gone into writing the plan should be recognized before making it a reality. Moreover, museums are encouraged to communicate effectively and regularly and make sure board, staff, volunteers and community representatives know at what stage the planning is and what happens next, even if they are not directly involved.

Core Documents Verification

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.

An institutional plan is one of five core documents that are fundamental for basic professional museum operations and embody core museum values and practices. Listed below are elements required for institutional plans from museums participating in the program.

Institutional Plan Required Elements

- » Is current (up to date)
- » Is approved by the governing authority
- » Aligned with current mission
- » Articulates a big-picture vision as well as operational tactics to achieve the vision
- » Covers all relevant areas of museum operations
- » Includes:
 - goals (specific things the museum wants to achieve)
 - action steps (specific assignments to achieve these goals)
 - assignment of responsibility for accomplishing action steps
 - assessment of resources (human and financial) needed to implement the plan
 - how the institution will obtain these resources
 - timeline for implementation
 - priorities
 - evaluation mechanisms and measures of success

Where to Find Out More

Content for this reference guide was pulled from *Secrets of Institutional Planning*, edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt and Victoria Garvin (AAM Press, 2007) and *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*, edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt (AAM Press, 2008).

- » [*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 to all museum members](#).

- » [*Secrets of Institutional Planning*](#), edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt and Victoria Garvin (AAM Press, 2007)

This publication explains how to create a fully integrated plan, involve all relevant stakeholders and interests in the planning process, and ensure that sufficient resources are allocated at strategic times. It features case studies, sample documents and advice from experts.

- » [Museum Assessment Program \(MAP\)](#), American Alliance of Museums

The Alliance offers an Organizational Assessment to help a museum review its entire operation, which can be beneficial to institutional planning. The review covers mission and planning, governance, administration, finance, collections stewardship, interpretation, marketing, public relations, membership and community support.

- » Strategic Planning Manual, Museums Australia

This manual is particularly useful for smaller museums hoping to adopt more professional procedures. It guides museums through a 4-step process, provides examples and includes a glossary of terms.

www.collectionsaustralia.net/sector_info_item/67

- » How to Conduct an Organizational Self-Assessment, National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)



This planning toolkit has 27 articles and a bibliography and reviews different methods for gathering information from internal and external stakeholders. It includes a sample questionnaire to use with the board and staff, sample focus group questions and a sample agenda for a planning retreat. It shares a checklist for evaluating aspects of institutional operations, 10 templates a museum can use to summarize and analyze historical financial data, make future projections in a realistic fashion, and consider questions potential funders may use when reading an organization's plan.

arts.endow.gov/resources/Lessons/index.html

» [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 institutional plan helps museums adhere to standards. For more on standards, visit the Alliance’s website at www.aam-us.org.