



Your Guide to the 2005 Accreditation Program Changes

This guide explains what changed, how, and why; how the new standards will be applied and how museums currently in an accreditation review will be affected; how to get copies of the documents described; and an overview of the revision process.

I. What changed...and why?

On January 1, 2005, a revised set of *Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum*, *Accreditation Commission Expectations*, *Core Questions*, and eligibility criteria, went into effect. These documents are the framework of the Accreditation Program and collectively regarded as the “standards for accreditation.” A completely revised *Self-Study Questionnaire* that aligns with these changes will go into use in early spring.

These revisions reflect a decade or more of evolution in the standards that society applies to nonprofits, and that museums bring to bear on themselves. Standards in the museum field continually evolve to reflect changing expectations among the field, the public, funders, and policy makers. The revised Accreditation documents reflect changes in how society and the museum field regard issues such as public accountability, community engagement, and measuring achievement. They also incorporate ten years of Accreditation Commission observations regarding factors that are key to a museum’s success.

Almost all of the changes made to the *Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum* and to the *Expectations* reflect the way the Commission is already making decisions—the revisions bring these documents up-to-date with the Commission’s thinking.

The March/April 2005 issue of *Museum News* will include a feature article on how museum standards in general have changed over the last ten years and how the new *Characteristics* and *Expectations* reflect this.

II. How did the documents change?

A. Some key changes you will see throughout all the new and revised documents are an increased:

- emphasis on nonprofit accountability and public trust
- emphasis on community engagement and diversity/inclusiveness
- emphasis on planning and sustainability—and alignment of mission, goals/plans, and resources
- emphasis on museums defining and measuring their own achievement—the need to engage in ongoing assessment of operations and programs, and to make meaningful use of those results
- focus on how museums fulfill their public service role by making their resources intellectually and physically accessible
- accommodation of the increasingly complex partnerships and governance structures in which many of the museums operate today

B. Summary of the changes made to each document:

1. Eligibility Criteria

These are the minimum operational criteria for participation in the Accreditation Program.

The significant changes are:

- Elimination of a minimum institutional budget requirement. Replaced with: “have the financial resources sufficient to operate the museum effectively”
- Addition of the requirement that the museum “carry out the above functions primarily at a physical facility/site” (i.e., virtual museums are not eligible at this time)
- The staffing requirement used to be “have paid professional staff (at least one full-time person) with museum knowledge and experience, delegated authority for day-to-day operations...”. This was split into two criteria to separate the issues of delegated authority and museum experience. Now an eligible museum must:
 - have at least one paid professional staff with museum knowledge and experience
 - have a full-time director to whom authority is delegated for day-to-day operations

The remaining changes were minor edits and reformatting.

2. Two Core Questions

These guide every accreditation review.

To reinforce the program’s flexibility and contextual approach to assessing museums of various types and ranges of resources, the underlined phrase was added to the existing two core questions:

1. How well does the museum achieve its stated mission and goals?
2. How well does the museum’s performance meet standards and best practices as they are generally understood in the museum field, as appropriate to its circumstances?

3. Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum

The *Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum* is a list of statements describing the attributes of a professionally-run, high-functioning museum. (Each characteristic is a broadly stated *outcome* for a museum to achieve—and each museum, depending on its particular type, resources, collections, mission, etc., will achieve this outcome in its own way.) This document is the backbone of the Accreditation Program: the *Self-Study Questionnaire*, the Visiting Committee’s site visit and report, and the Commission’s decision are all structured around it.

The new *Characteristics* replaces the version in use since 1995. A chart in Section VI (below) compares the 2005 and 1995 versions side by side (note that the individual bullets are re-ordered for a one-to-one comparison).

New sections were added to the *Characteristics* and existing ones were expanded.

The key changes to the *Characteristics* summarized in II.A, above, are reflected throughout the 38 characteristics. A few examples of specific changes that support these new emphases include:

- Adding a new section called Public Trust and Accountability, with eight characteristics;
- Planning was elevated to a section header (joining Mission);
- The section on governance was expanded to encompass broader issues and renamed Leadership & Organizational Structure;
- Collections Stewardship was expanded substantially beyond management and care of collections to include issues of use, access, research, and planning.

4. Accreditation Commission *Expectations*

The *Expectations* are based on, and complement, the *Characteristics*. The Commission began issuing them in 1999 to provide more detail and guidance for museums about how it interprets and applies the *Characteristics*. *Expectations* typically cover:

- Why the Commission considers a topic to be important
- The relevant *Characteristics* and required documents
- What, specifically, it looks for in assessing a museum against the *Expectation*
- How the museum provides evidence of meeting the *Expectation*
- How the *Expectation* is applied in particular situations (e.g., university museums, museums that are part of a larger parent organization)

All *Expectations* were revised to align with the new *Characteristics*; and to be more specific. They provide additional assistance in areas where museums consistently have problems in the accreditation process. Many include new or expanded glossaries. Specific changes include:

Governance: This is a new *Expectation*. It accommodates the increasingly complex partnerships and governance structures evidenced by many of the museums in the programs today. It also addresses the need for on-going support from a parent organization, eliminating the need for a separate expectation on resolution of permanence (see below).

Mission: Replaces the July 1999 version. Minor edits for clarity and consistency.

Planning: Replaces the March 1999 version. This *Expectation* underwent the most substantial revision because planning remains one of the most frequent reasons the Accreditation Commission tables a museum's accreditation decision. The *Expectation* is now much more specific: a museum's planning is expected to be current comprehensive (covering all relevant aspects of operations), timely (geared to significant events in the museum's lifecycle), and formal (documented and approved by the governing authority). The plan(s) must set priorities, establish measurable goals, action steps, and timelines, address resources, and assign responsibilities.

Code of Ethics: Replaces the November 1999 version. The revision outlines clearly the specific elements that must be in an institutional code of ethics. Issues regarding codes of ethics are another major cause of museums being tabled or otherwise delayed in the accreditation process.

Delegation of Authority: Replaces the March 2000 version. Minor edits for clarity and consistency.

Resolution of Permanence: The *Expectation* on a Resolution of Permanence (issued in March 2000) was eliminated as a stand-alone document, and the topic was folded into the new *Expectation* on Governance.

Collections Stewardship: Replaces the June 2001 version. Minor edits for clarity and consistency.

5. Self-Study Questionnaire

The *Self-Study Questionnaire* was revised to be in alignment with, and support, the new *Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum*. The most notable format change is the conversion of many narrative questions to checkboxes or multiple choice options. Also, it now comes with a comprehensive user's guide that provides detailed guidance on answering specific questions, has an expanded glossary, and offers helpful related resources.

The following are new *required* attachments:

- Table of contents of the governance manual (i.e., reference manual assembled for use by members of the governing authority to assist with orientation, training, and ongoing work)
- Documentation of operational relationships with other organizations integrally connected to the museum's governance or operations (e.g., written memorandum of understanding or other type of formal agreement) (if applicable)
- Repository agreement for objects in custody owned by others (if applicable)

In addition to the required documents that must be submitted with the *Questionnaire*, there is a list of documents to be provided *if available*. These documents are not mandatory, but should be submitted if the museum does have them. They include:

- Samples of tools the museum uses to assess whether it has achieved its goals (e.g., visitor satisfaction surveys, exhibition evaluations, program evaluations, focus group questions/reports, community surveys, financial/other performance indicators, etc.)
- Vision/value statement(s)
- Documentation regarding any internal, non-governing groups that serve in an advisory capacity (e.g., resolution of the board establishing this group, statement of purpose, operating guidelines, etc.)
- Table of Contents of Volunteer Manual
- Collections plan
- Conservation plan
- Interpretive plan or education master plan
- Furnishing plan
- Investment policy
- Annual reports produced within the last three years
- Printed descriptive materials pertaining any membership/donor programs (should include dues and benefits structure for each program)
- Individual donor support policy
- Business support policy
- Completed *RC-AAM Standard Facility Report*

III. How will these new standards be applied? How will my museum be affected?

All of the standards outlined in the revised documents are being applied, and will continue to be applied, to all museums in the program—applicants, museums already in review, or those starting new reviews. Museums currently in review may be asked by the program staff or Commission to provide additional materials that demonstrate how they meet these *Expectations*.

The exceptions to this are the new *Characteristics* related to community engagement and to diversity/inclusiveness:

- The museum identifies the communities it serves, and makes appropriate decisions in how it serves them.
- Regardless of its self-identified community, the museum strives to be a good neighbor in its geographic area.
- The museum strives to be inclusive and offers opportunities for diverse participation.

These characteristics reflect emerging standards in the field, and the Commission has not issued any specific expectations about what they are looking for in these areas. While the Commission will factor community engagement and diversity into their reviews starting in 2005, they will do so in a general way that reflects the fact that the field has not come to consensus on how to assess these issues. Museums will be expected to demonstrate an awareness of the issues and communicate any self-identified goals. The old *Self-Study Questionnaire* captured little information on these topics—museums already in review will not be asked to update their self-study material with additional information in these areas.

If you have any questions about your specific situation, contact the Accreditation Program staff.

IV. How do I get copies of the new documents?

Copies of all documents except the *Self-Study Questionnaire* are available from the Accreditation Program's standards and best practices page on the AAM Web site: www.aam-us.org/accred. The Table of Contents for the new *Self-Study* and a list of the supporting documentation that is submitted with the questionnaire is also available on the Web site. Museums starting an accreditation review this year will automatically receive copies of the revised *Self-Study Questionnaire*; other accredited museums may request free copies from the program staff (202-289-9116). Non-accredited museums or interested individuals can obtain a copy of the *Questionnaire* by purchasing the Accreditation Resource Kit from the AAM Bookstore (available Spring/Summer 2005; see www.aam-us.org/bookstore).

V. What process was used to ensure broad input from the field?

The changes described above were the result of a three-year process. In late 2001 the Commission identified several areas in which it felt it needed to raise the bar for accredited museums, as well as areas where its written standards and expectations needed to be brought into better alignment with its current decision-making. Over the next year and a half the Commission developed a draft set of revised *Characteristics* and staff began developing a complementary new *Self-Study Questionnaire*. In January 2003 the Commission broadly disseminated these drafts to the field for comment. Feedback was solicited from all AAM accredited museums, Visiting Committee members (Accreditation peer reviewers), AAM Standing Professional Committees and Professional Interest Committees, and regional and discipline-specific museum professional organizations. Input was also invited from the field at large via the AAM Web site and Aviso notices. In the next six months over three dozen responses were received; each set of comments was reviewed in detail and helped shape the next set of drafts. After numerous discussions, and refinements, the Accreditation Commission approved the final versions the new program standards and documents at its December 2004 meeting.

VI. Before and After: A comparison of the new and old versions of the Characteristics

| Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum | |
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| New Version (2005) | Previous Version (1995) |
| <p>Public Trust and Accountability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The museum is a good steward of its resources held in the public trust. • The museum identifies the communities it serves, and makes appropriate decisions in how it serves them. • Regardless of its self-identified communities, the museum strives to be a good neighbor in its geographic area. • The museum strives to be inclusive and offers opportunities for diverse participation. • The museum asserts its public service role and places education at the center of that role. • The museum demonstrates a commitment to providing the public with physical and intellectual access to the museum and its resources. • The museum is committed to public accountability and is transparent in its mission and its operations. • The museum complies with local, state, and federal laws, codes, and regulations applicable to its facilities, operations, and administration. | n/a |
| <p>Mission & Planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The museum has a clear understanding of its mission and communicates why it exists and who benefits as a result of its efforts. • All aspects of the museum's operations are integrated and focused on meeting its mission. • The museum's governing authority and staff think and act strategically to acquire, develop, and allocate resources to advance the mission of the museum. • The museum engages in ongoing and reflective institutional planning that includes involvement of its audiences and community. • The museum establishes measures of success and uses them to evaluate and adjust its activities. | <p>Mission</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An accreditable museum has a clear sense of mission and organizes its governing authority, staff, financial resources, collections, public programs, and activities to focus on meeting its formally stated mission. |
| <p>Leadership & Organizational Structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The governance, staff, and volunteer structures and processes effectively advance the museum's mission. • The governing authority, staff, and volunteers have a clear and shared understanding of their roles and responsibilities. • The governing authority, staff, and volunteers legally, ethically, and effectively carry out their responsibilities. • The composition, qualifications, and diversity of the museum's leadership, staff, and volunteers enable it to carry out the museum's mission and goals. • There is a clear and formal division of responsibilities between the governing authority and any group that supports the museum, whether separately incorporated or operating within the museum or its parent organization. | <p>Governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The governance structure and process effectively advance the museum's mission. • The governing authority and staff have a clear and shared understanding of their roles and responsibilities. • There is current and appropriate evidence of planning for the museum's future. |
| <p>Collections Stewardship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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's collections-related research is conducted according to appropriate scholarly standards. • The museum strategically plans for the use and development of its collections. • Guided by its mission, the museum provides public access to its collections while ensuring their preservation. | <p>Collections Stewardship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The collections and/or tangible objects are appropriate to the mission. • The collections are effectively managed, housed, secured, documented, and conserved. |

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| <p>Education and Interpretation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 interpretative 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. | <p>Interpretation and Presentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The museum’s public programs, collections, and exhibitions effectively advance the mission. • The museum’s public programs and exhibitions effectively use ideas, concepts, and objects to provide opportunities for learning and enjoyment. • The museum’s public programs and exhibitions are informed by appropriate research and are effectively presented. • The museum effectively identifies and knows the characteristics of its existing and potential audiences. • The museum effectively involves its audiences in developing public programs and exhibitions. • The museum effectively evaluates its programs and exhibitions. • The museum effectively communicates with the public about its programs and exhibitions. • The museum’s research activities are conducted according to appropriate scholarly standards. |
| <p>Facilities & Risk Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. <p>Financial Stability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The museum legally, ethically, and responsibly acquires, manages, and allocates its financial resources in a way that advances its mission. • The museum operates in a fiscally responsible manner that promotes its long-term sustainability. | <p>Administration and Finance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership is in place to develop and manage plans and processes to assure that the museum acquires, develops, and allocates its resources in a way that advances the museum’s mission and sustains its financial viability. • The museum’s staff have appropriate education, training, and experience. • The Accreditation process is predicated on the expectation that each museum complies with all local, state, and federal laws, codes, and regulations applicable to its facilities, operations, and administration. These laws include, but are not limited to the following: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO); and Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). |