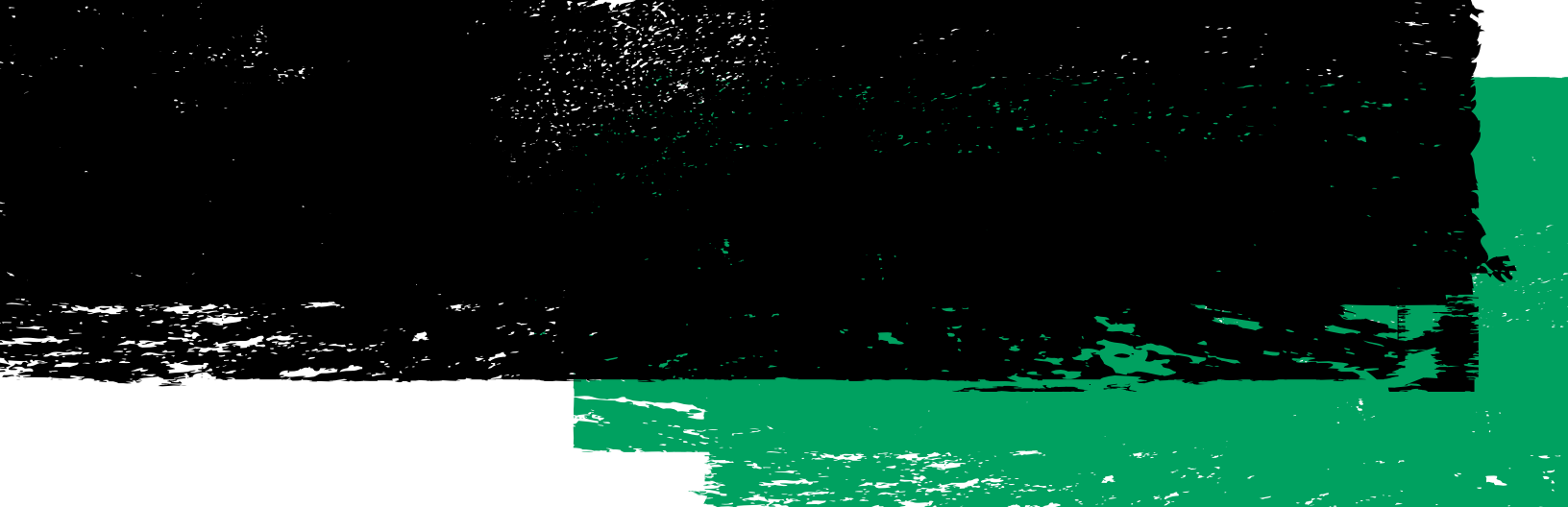


TrendsWatch

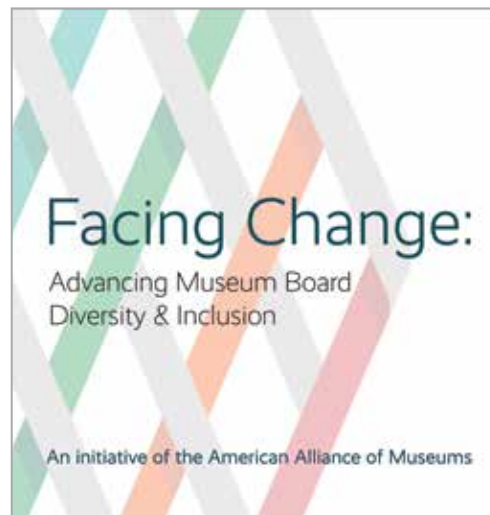
NAVIGATING A DISRUPTED FUTURE



Center for the Future
of Museums



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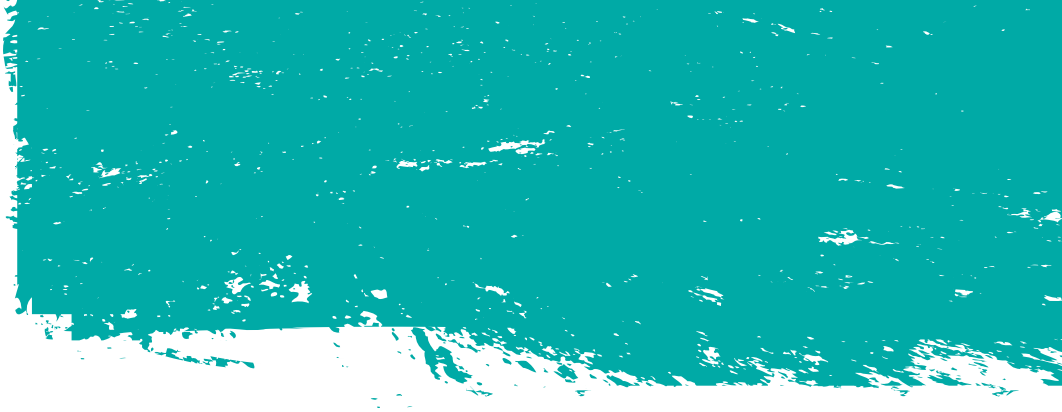


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Introduction

In a normal year, *TrendsWatch* explores the impact emerging forces of change may have on museums in the next decade or longer. Some, such as demographic shifts, affect all museums in the present. Others, such as the rise of blockchain technologies, are just barely visible in the distance.

This is not a normal year. In 2021, museums face rapid, transformative shifts on all fronts.

In response, this edition of *TrendsWatch* focuses on issues museums must attend to *right now*, to minimize harm to their communities and ensure their own survival. In this report I make the case that museums are a vital strand in the complex web of nonprofits that holds together America's patchy infrastructure of education, health, and economic support. As such, they can help protect those most vulnerable to the economic and psychological damage wrought by the pandemic. Having profited from inequitable systems, museums have an obligation to help repair the damage of hundreds of years of racial oppression. Higher education is taking a major beating, and academic museums can help colleges and universities weather the storm. Finally, to ensure their own survival, museums must quickly become more efficient and effective, which means confronting the digital reckoning many have long delayed.

“It's going to be a wild ride.”

—Taron Egerton, in the role of Elton John, *Rocketman*

This will be a precarious year. While some museums will survive relatively intact, some will close their doors permanently, and others will emerge from the pandemic as smaller organizations with leaner ambitions. Many staff have been laid off or furloughed, and some will be forced to leave the field, either for now or forever. Despite this bleak picture, our field can emerge from this crisis stronger, wiser, and more resilient. By supporting their staff, museums will remain poised to rebound. Through the part they play in helping society respond to the pandemic, museums will demonstrate their power and relevance. By helping to build a more just and equitable world, museums will establish their role in creating a better future. And this service will make the strongest possible case to government, foundations, and communities for support of America's museums.

This is going to be difficult, stress-filled work. To help you cope with this stress, I would like to offer that in the face of massive short-term uncertainty, it can help to contemplate the very long term. (I keep a one-hundred-million-year-old fossil clam on my desk to maintain this perspective.) The earliest known museum was created by Sumerian Princess Ennigaldi-Nanna sometime

around 554 BCE. Two-and-a-half millennia later, museums are still with us, having survived the rise and fall of entire civilizations. I'm confident they will be around in the year 3000 as well. They may look and feel and act very differently than today's institutions—but they will be from clear and recognizable descendants.

I believe the most powerful thing museums can do to ensure their survival—as individual organizations and as a field—is to adopt the tools of strategic foresight. Since it was launched by the Alliance in 2009, the Center for the Future of Museums has been teaching museum people how to envision the future, and equipping museums with reports, tools, and training to help them integrate foresight into their planning. I hope you are mining this wealth of content, which can be found at bit.ly/futureofmuseums. Please—pillage the site, make these resources your own, and use them to chart a safe path through the present storm.

My goal for this year's report is to buoy your spirits while you confront the challenges that face museums in the coming year. I hope the questions and frameworks in each chapter provide an entry point into tackling tough topics and difficult decisions. But remember, when this work becomes overwhelming, that you need to make time to take care of yourself and others as well. When the news flooding your feeds becomes too oppressive, take a break and disconnect from the present. Tell yourself some stories about how the future could be better—and remember you have the power to help those stories come true. You've got this, museum people.

Yours from the future,



Elizabeth Merritt

Vice President of Strategic Foresight
Founding Director, Center for the Future of Museums
American Alliance of Museums



Elizabeth Merritt masked up and working from home.

How to Use This Report

This edition of *TrendsWatch* presents five critical issues that face museums and their communities in 2021. The format is designed to be practical and immediately actionable, providing a scaffold for discussions and decision-making by the museum's staff, board, and stakeholders. Each chapter:

- ❖ Introduces the **issue**
- ❖ Suggests **critical questions** for museums
- ❖ Describes the **challenge**
- ❖ Summarizes how society, and museums, are **responding**
- ❖ Presents a **framework for action**
- ❖ Documents **examples** of museums tackling these issues
- ❖ Provides additional **resources**

We know that each download of *TrendsWatch* is shared, on average, with ten other readers. This year, please double down on that practice. Share the report with:

- ❖ Everyone on the museum's board, staff, and volunteer corps, to provide a starting point for tackling these difficult topics.
- ❖ Funders, to support a conversation about how they can sustain the museum—and how you, in turn, can help them achieve their goals.
- ❖ Journalists, to help them do a better job of reporting about your museum and the field as a whole.
- ❖ Local leaders and government officials, to help them grasp the scope of the potential damage to museums in the coming year, how that in turn will damage communities, and how financial relief can mitigate that harm.

Here are some suggestions for how to use the report with board and staff:

- ❖ Share a printout of the report in a breakroom, or a digital copy in a workspace online, and encourage staff to annotate with questions, observations about how it resonates with their experience, and ideas about how what the museum might do.
- ❖ Dedicate a board meeting to discussing the five issues presented here, or parcel them out as agenda items across a series of meetings.
- ❖ Use individual chapters as the basis for a deep dive with staff into issues of concern to your museum.
- ❖ Use the critical questions to guide discussions.
- ❖ Use the last chapter, "Strategic Foresight," to retool your organization's planning—building a flexible, resilient practice that will pilot your organization through the shifting currents of 2021 and beyond.

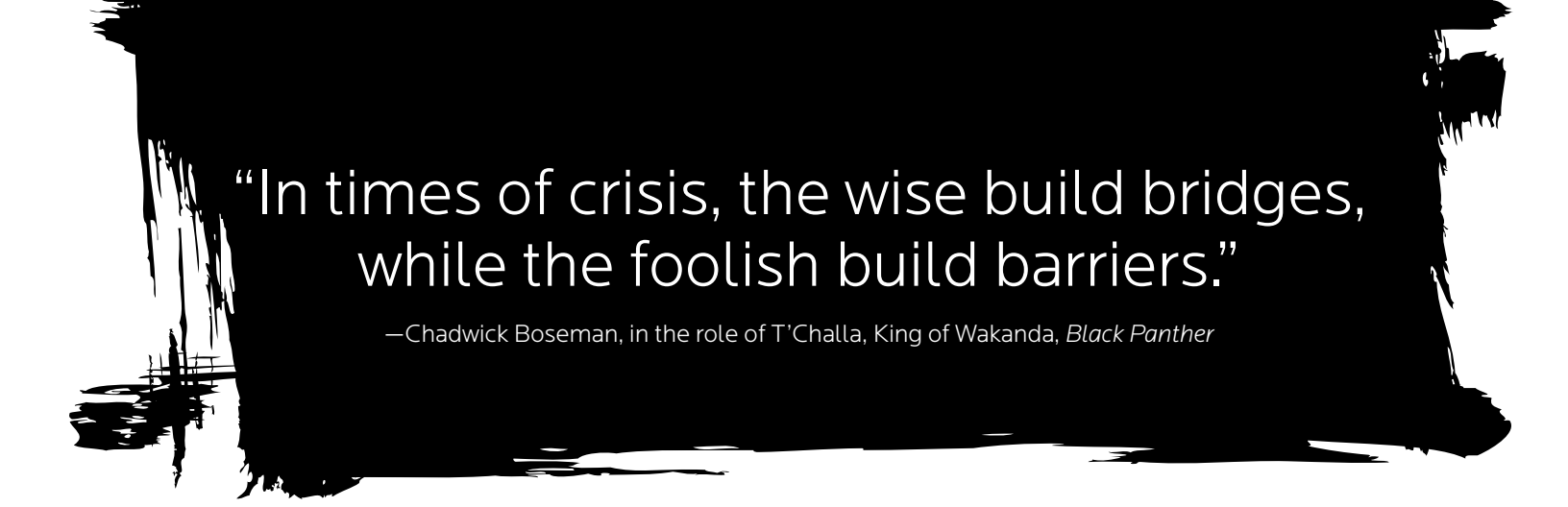
DON'T leave this report to languish on a digital shelf. Think of it as a museum PFD (Personal Futurist Device)—it can't help you stay afloat if it's left in the closet at home.

I look forward to connecting with you in the coming year to explore these topics more deeply. Please share your thoughts and questions by:

- ❖ Tagging @futureofmuseums on **Twitter**.
- ❖ Posting on [Museum Junction](#), the Alliance's discussion forum.
- ❖ [Submitting ideas](#) for guest posts to the [CFM blog](#).
- ❖ Emailing me at emerritt@aam-us.org

My colleagues and I are available to support your work via speaking engagements, workshops, moderating discussions, and consulting. For more information on those services and to request our help, visit [Alliance Advisors and Speakers Bureau](#) on the AAM website.

2021 Trends



“In times of crisis, the wise build bridges,
while the foolish build barriers.”

—Chadwick Boseman, in the role of T’Challa, King of Wakanda, *Black Panther*

Closing the Gap:

Redressing systemic inequalities of wealth and power

Wealth inequality has been [increasing in the US for the past fifty years](#), built on structures that restrict access to assets and power, and [inflict the costs of our economic systems on marginalized communities](#). The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to widen that gap while wreaking disproportionate damage on people already disadvantaged by society’s core systems. Museums, as prestigious public institutions, are being called to account for their role in profiting from and perpetuating these inequalities. But museums often struggle to respond appropriately to these legitimate demands. Many are unsure where to begin, while others are castigated for taking well-intentioned steps that seem inappropriate or out-of-touch. Despite the challenges posed by the current crisis, this is an opportunity for museums to act as leaders in society, demonstrating how organizations can transform themselves by applying social justice values to their own work, and by using their influence to increase the power and authority of others.

Critical Questions for Museums:

1. Who has your organization taken assets/power from?
2. Whose assets/power have you reinforced or amplified?
3. How do your operations support or challenge structural inequalities in society?

4. What are practical, realistic ways your organization can share/give/return assets and power with those who are excluded?

The Challenge

Wealth inequality is one of the most daunting challenges facing the United States today. One percent of the population now holds well over a third of the nation’s wealth, while the bottom 90 percent holds less than a quarter. This gap is the result of a pernicious feedback loop of inequity in education, housing, our legal system, job opportunities, health care, and political power—to name a few. In addition to being a social justice issue in and of itself, economists, historians, and policy experts warn that escalating inequality can lead to [social and economic instability](#), and some feel it poses a significant [threat to our democratic system](#).

And this wealth gap is profoundly skewed by race. In 2019, the average wealth of white families was [eight times greater](#) than that of Black families. If current trends persist, it would take Black families [228 years](#) to reach the level of average wealth held by white families in 2013. This gap was seeded by 246 years of chattel slavery, and perpetuated by social, economic, and political systems that hobble the ability of Black Americans to create and accumulate wealth.

The resulting inequity also leaves communities of color more vulnerable to disaster and disruption. Black and Indigenous Americans have [experienced the highest death tolls](#) from COVID-19, and are [suffering disproportionately](#) in wage and job losses. The median decline in the net worth of Black families during the 2008 financial crisis was twice that of white families, and it seems likely the COVID-19 financial collapse will [increase the racial wealth gap](#) as well.

The Response

In Society

The root causes of income inequality and the racial wealth gap are deeply embedded in the history and culture of the United States. That being so, any effective, lasting solutions must fundamentally change how these systems work—but the systems are profoundly resistant to change. Laws and courts picked up where slavery

left off, funneling people of color into jail and [creating a source of forced labor](#). Now decades of efforts to reform the criminal justice system, with minimal results, have escalated into calls to defund or even abolish the police. Formal redlining (denying mortgages to people, mostly people of color in urban areas) is now illegal, but [“reverse redlining”](#) (predatory lending in low-income neighborhoods) forms just as effective a barrier to the accumulation of family wealth. Since efforts to level the playing field through laws and regulations have failed to repair the financial damage to generations of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, there are growing calls for economic reparations, but there is little agreement on who would be paid, how much they would be paid, and where the money would come from.

[Proposals for individual payments](#) to descendants of enslaved people range from 4.7 to seventeen trillion dollars paid out to roughly thirty million individuals.



Phillips@THEARC hosted the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Washington's "BIG Teen Give Back" event in 2018. Photo courtesy of The Phillips Collection.

Compensation might also take the form of vouchers for medical insurance or college, or access to a trust fund to finance a business or a home. Another approach would be long-term investments in education, housing, and businesses that help Black families accumulate wealth. Some steps towards government reparations have been made in the past year. In 2019, Evanston, Illinois, implemented the world's first [government-funded slavery reparations program](#) (funded by a new municipal tax on marijuana). In 2020, [California passed a law](#) creating a "Task Force to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans." Despite this progress, public support for either of these approaches remains low. In a [recent poll](#) by Data for Progress, only 26 percent of respondents said they would support "policies designed to reduce racial wealth gaps caused by slavery and Jim Crow, such as offering compensation or tax benefits to the descendants of slaves," while 47 percent said they would oppose.

Recognizing this resistance, some proposals focus on strategies that would be applied equally to all Americans but yield disproportionate benefits to the economically disadvantaged. This "race-blind" approach might make them more palatable to the general public (particularly the white public) and more likely to garner support. A leading contender in this category is the creation of investment accounts for every infant born in the US, which would provide them with capital for education, property, or starting a business when they come of age. These so-called [baby bonds](#) are touted as a relatively cheap, race-neutral way of closing the racial wealth gap.

While the ultimate solutions to inequality need to be embedded in national systems, that reform may well take decades. Meanwhile, some individuals and organizations are taking steps of their own to redress specific damages. In September 2020, former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg announced his philanthropic foundation would [give one hundred million dollars](#)

The Valentine Museum in Richmond, Virginia, ran a competition in 2020 with the Metropolitan Business League to select a local, Black-owned operator for its café. Photo credit: Visual Appeal LLC.

The Main Course: A Valentine Museum Restaurant Competition

CONGRATULATIONS WINNER !

The Main Course: A Valentine Museum Restaurant Competition: A Richmond Region Wide search to find the next food vendor and restaurant tenant for the Valentine Museum.

The winner will enjoy 2 years rent free occupying the space as a cafe owner and preferred caterer for the museum + more!



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Ms. Bee's Juice Bar



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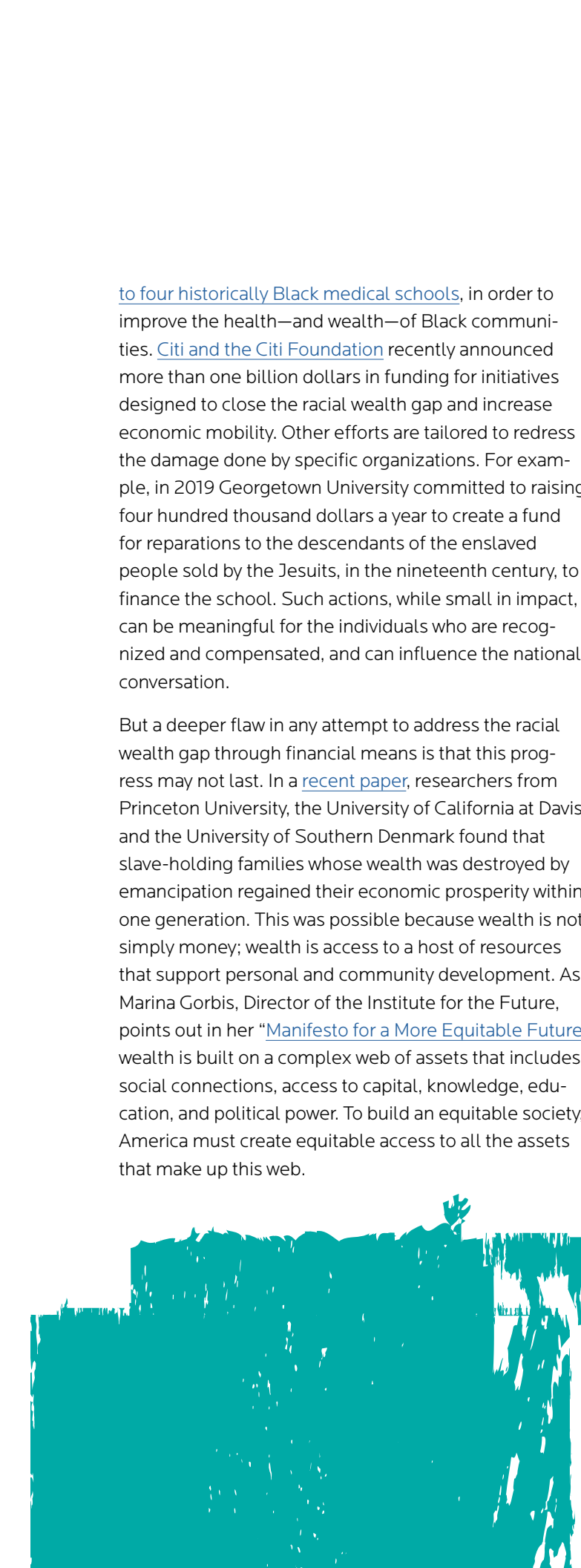


**BLACK RESTAURANT
EXPERIENCE**



**the
valentine**

For information contact: mshort@themblog.org



to four historically Black medical schools, in order to improve the health—and wealth—of Black communities. [Citi and the Citi Foundation](#) recently announced more than one billion dollars in funding for initiatives designed to close the racial wealth gap and increase economic mobility. Other efforts are tailored to redress the damage done by specific organizations. For example, in 2019 Georgetown University committed to raising four hundred thousand dollars a year to create a fund for reparations to the descendants of the enslaved people sold by the Jesuits, in the nineteenth century, to finance the school. Such actions, while small in impact, can be meaningful for the individuals who are recognized and compensated, and can influence the national conversation.

But a deeper flaw in any attempt to address the racial wealth gap through financial means is that this progress may not last. In a [recent paper](#), researchers from Princeton University, the University of California at Davis, and the University of Southern Denmark found that slave-holding families whose wealth was destroyed by emancipation regained their economic prosperity within one generation. This was possible because wealth is not simply money; wealth is access to a host of resources that support personal and community development. As Marina Gorbis, Director of the Institute for the Future, points out in her "[Manifesto for a More Equitable Future](#)," wealth is built on a complex web of assets that includes social connections, access to capital, knowledge, education, and political power. To build an equitable society, America must create equitable access to all the assets that make up this web.

In Museums

Museums, collectively, have abundant resources, and many museums have significant assets of their own. All museums have the power to influence public opinion, through their status as trusted sources of information. This being so, there are several ways that museums can take action to redress inequities of wealth and power—both internally, in how they manage their own operations, and externally, in how they interact with the world.

Inward Action

Some museums begin their equity and inclusion work with training for the staff and board on unconscious bias and cultural competence. However, if you consider that the turnover rate in the nonprofit field as a whole is [19 percent](#), and that boards commonly impose term limits, it becomes clear that DEAI training can't be a one-time fix—it has to be part of the ongoing process of staff onboarding and development. And in any case, you can't simply train your way out of 450 years of racism. The lessons from that training must be embedded into the very fabric of museums' operations, policies, and culture.

These operations and policies range from how museums structure and hire for positions, to their compensation, working conditions, and the overall internal culture with respect to power and authority. Unquestioned assumptions about the qualifications needed for a given job (particularly jobs of higher status and pay) disadvantage applicants with less access to traditional systems of training and credentialing. Assumptions about wealth may result in systems that exclude people who can't afford to take unpaid internships, float debt for museum purchases on personal credit cards, or pay for their own professional development. Attempts to achieve more diversity in staff by simply hiring more people of color often fail when these employees are expected to behave exactly like (white) colleagues in order to fit in. For this

reason, just doing “pipeline” diversity work is a proven way to fail at achieving real progress in racial equity.

The challenge for museums to address diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion in their own operations has become even [more fraught due to the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Even museums deeply committed to DEAI may struggle to continue this work while trying to survive the financial stress created by closure and loss of income from fundraisers, rentals, and events. During the first three months of the pandemic, over [40 percent of museums laid off or furloughed staff](#), and [by October 2020](#) only half those staff had been brought back to work. Because most museums were closed to the public for some time, staff working frontline activities such as admissions and retail, facilities maintenance, and security—[low-paid positions that often employ the highest proportion of people of color in museums](#)—were disproportionately affected. As Andrew Plumley, AAM’s Director of Inclusion, [has pointed out](#), “When we take into account the massive [racial leadership gap](#) within the museum field, and the well-known fact that people of color are [overrepresented in the lowest-wage](#) work within the field (and most likely to be without insurance and paid sick leave), it becomes apparent that letting equity and inclusion ‘slip’ now...will have devastating effects on our most vulnerable populations.”

Outward Action

The museum sector often thinks about equity in terms of access to exhibits and educational programs, and increasingly to digital assets like documentation and images of collections as well. But museums also control immensely powerful intangible assets: notably reputation, reach, and networks of influence. Museums [can use these assets to help build individual and community wealth](#) in ways that redress historic inequities. For example, they can use their spaces, knowledge, authority, and reputations to:

- ❖ Help individuals build their educational credentials through training and certification.
- ❖ Equalize access to political and regulatory power.
- ❖ Create an accessible infrastructure of economic exchange for artists, craftspeople, and other creators.

Museums have significant financial power as well. All museums shape the world in some way through the money they spend on day-to-day operations, and can engage in reparative practice through thoughtful attention to how they spread this operational wealth. A museum can choose to give preference to local-, BIPOC-, or women-owned firms for contracting, or [design its food service around values of health or environmental impact](#). It can partner with businesses and community organizations in ways that support their growth and amplify their impact. And because these daily operational impacts are often hyper-local, even a small museum can have a significant influence on its local community.

In addition to their purchasing power, some museums have significant financial capital as well, and that capital can be used as a force for good. Ten years ago, the Rockefeller Foundation coined the term “[impact investing](#)” to refer to the practice of investing endowments in a way that creates positive social or environmental change. Now impact investing is a 250-billion-dollar market. It encompasses socially responsible investing (screening out investments that do active harm), mission-related investing (which both advances the mission and yields a competitive, reliable financial return), and program-related investing (which foregrounds mission-related impact and can accept a higher level of financial risk). We are also beginning to see a push for “[restorative investing](#)” specifically focused on dismantling existing wealth structures, democratizing capital, strengthening local businesses, and [prioritizing racial inclusion and diversity](#). And for those concerned about the duty of endowment managers to support their museums—note that well-managed impact investing yields financial returns [just as robust](#) as traditional investment portfolios.



At the Oakland Museum of California, programming created through community partnerships resonates with a culturally and racially diverse audience. Photo courtesy of the Oakland Museum of California.

Finding the Right Approach

There is no one set of actions that is appropriate and realistic for all museums, but waiting for a perfect solution only impedes progress. Focusing on incremental improvement is a valid and effective approach to building equity in the world.

For example: A large museum with a business model built on the wealth and power of a small group of individuals can't suddenly transform itself into a community-supported, democratically governed institution. Its business model is—to be candid—built on exclusivity, on trading reputation and access for money. The governing authorities of such institutions are white because white people hold the vast majority of wealth in this country. Divorcing board service from giving, or conducting a wholesale transfer of power to people of color, would collapse its financial models. However, there are realistic, practical steps that even a museum reliant on the support of wealthy individuals and corporations can take in the short term, while also advancing incremental, long-term

change. They can reform their own internal systems to create an inclusive work environment, and, with those systems in place, institute policies for recruitment, hiring, and compensation that result in a more diverse staff. Boards of trustees can pay particular attention to hiring Black and Indigenous people for leadership positions, even if this means widening the search beyond the pool of candidates holding comparable positions (a near-necessity given that the people holding those comparable positions are, for now, overwhelmingly white). They can use their economic power to build the wealth of others through their financial investments; through who the museum does business with; and in how the museum conscientiously promotes the reputations (and therefore economic clout) of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, women, and other historically underrecognized artists.

Museum Examples:

The Phillips Collection, in Washington, DC, has taken a multi-dimensional approach to advancing racial equity. Its board of trustees formed a Diversity Advisory Committee to examine the composition of the board and create a plan for greater representation and inclusion in governance. It created the position of Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) and launched a paid internship and fellowship program to diversify its talent pipeline. The museum partnered with the Town Hall Education Arts Recreation Campus to create an outpost in the (majority Black, low-income) seventh and eighth wards of DC. Its staff self-organized an anti-racist working group. Overall, as the museum's CDO Makeba Clay wrote on the Alliance blog, "we are committed to investing in our colleagues and communities of color, in their stories, in their art, and in their creative labor."

The Oakland Museum of California has met and sustained its goal for people of color to comprise 40 percent of its board of trustees. In 2013, it established a community engagement committee that helped design training for trustees on equity and inclusion. As one of fifty museums participating in AAM's [Facing Change](#) initiative, it is creating a diversity and equity plan and has set a goal of recruiting at least two new trustees of color. The museum implemented new processes for recruiting, hiring, and compensation designed to reduce bias and promote equity, and offers training around equity and inclusion for all museum staff, including all-staff trainings and customized workshops for specific functions. The museum also prioritizes community partnerships that result in programming which resonates with a culturally and racially diverse audience.

A small museum with few staff and limited financial resources may focus on putting itself in the service of its community, with particular attention to groups that have been previously sidelined or silenced. Operating on lean resources to begin with, small organizations can often be nimbler and more responsive than their larger brethren.

A Framework for Action

Museum boards, directors, and staff can ask the following questions across functions and areas of practice:

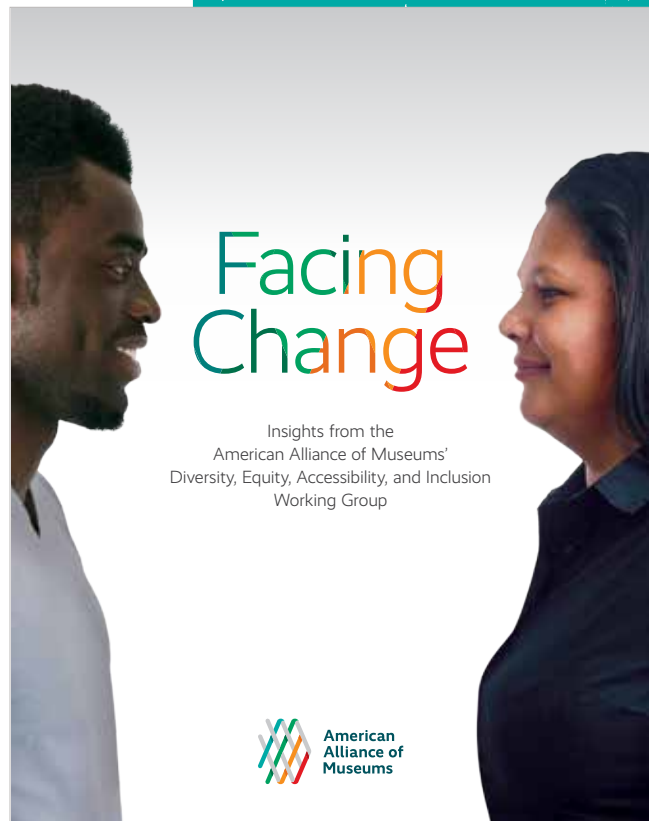
Internal Operations

- ❖ Does the museum have an institution-wide diversity plan?
- ❖ Does the museum include DEAI training in onboarding of new staff and board members, as well as providing an ongoing program of training for all members of the staff and governing authority?
- ❖ Does the museum prioritize racial equity in its decision-making and policy-making apparatus?
- ❖ How do the museum's collections, exhibitions, and research reflect marginalized communities?
- ❖ What values guide the investment of the museum's financial assets?
- ❖ Are the museum's systems of recruitment, training, and employment equitable and inclusive? For example, does the museum:
 - Offer only paid internships?
 - Write job requirements based on skills rather than academic credentials?
 - Abstain from asking applicants to disclose salary history?
 - Abstain from asking applicants to disclose criminal history?

- Require that more than one Black, Indigenous, or other person of color be interviewed for any position?
- Pay a living wage for all positions, taking into account local costs of living?

External Operations

- ❖ Who does the museum do business with (in contracting and purchasing) and partner with (on programs, initiatives, and collaborations)?
- ❖ How does the museum work to change attitudes of visitors or the general public toward race and equity?
- ❖ How does the museum deploy its tangible and intangible assets to help Black, Indigenous, and other people of color—as individuals and communities—build their own assets and wealth?
- ❖ If, in the worst case, the museum decides it needs to close permanently, how could it disperse remaining assets, including collections, in a way that both secures their preservation and increases the equity of access? Are there collections that might be transferred to historically under-resourced community, ethnic, or cultural museums for which they have particular affinity and significance?



Resources

- [Facing Change: Insights from AAM's DEAI Working Group](#) (American Alliance of Museums, 2018). This report was produced by AAM's Working Group on Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI), which was composed of twenty museum professionals, representing a variety of disciplines, organizational sizes and types, and perspectives. The report examines the characteristics of effective museum inclusion practices and considers what steps the field can take to promote DEAI.
- [Racial Equity and Inclusion Plan Primer](#) (American Alliance of Museums, 2020). Guidance on advancing racial and ethnic diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion on museum boards.
- [The Competitive Advantage of Racial Equity](#) (Policy Link, 2017). This paper shares research revealing opportunities to create shared value by promoting racial equity at every point in a company's value chain.
- [Why Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Matter for Nonprofits](#) (National Council of Nonprofits). This collection of resources is designed for nonprofits to use to examine internal biases and adopt practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in their work, in their employment practices, in their boardrooms, and in their communications.
- [Universal Basic Assets: A manifesto for a more equitable future](#) (Institute for the Future, 2017). This framework identifies a fundamental set of resources every person needs access to, from financial security and housing to healthcare and education, and offers actionable tools for designing policies and mechanisms for widening access to such resources.

Digital Awakening:

Essential technologies for pandemic survival and future success

When museums across the country began shutting their doors during the COVID-19 pandemic, it quickly became clear that those which had invested in digital platforms and content were pre-adapted to engage with the public and with staff under the circumstances. In some cases, such digital engagement was essential to fulfilling their core responsibilities—for example, supporting college instruction or providing access for researchers. But other initiatives, although welcomed by a public desperate for distraction, did not have a clear place in museum strategy in the long-term. Furthermore, even though museums were starved for income, there were few examples of how digital engagement could be used to replace or supplement revenue tied to physically interacting with the museum—admissions, space rentals, events, and onsite sales.

The field faces a long hard slog before the pandemic fades and attendance income rebounds. Smart investments in digital practice may help sustain museums during the hard times to come and position them to rebound as the pandemic passes. But even before the COVID crisis, museums struggled with how and when to integrate digital technologies into their work. Now they have less capital to invest, a smaller margin for error, and a lower tolerance for risk. How can museums make wise choices about adopting or maintaining digital technology that will help them survive in the short term and thrive in the coming decade?

Critical Questions for Museums

- ❖ In the short term, how can digital solutions help the museum survive the financial crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- ❖ In the long term, which digital solutions can fuel lasting improvements in the museum's mission delivery and financial success?
- ❖ How can the museum assess which digital investments will be sustainable in the long run?
- ❖ What best practices can guide the museum's adoption of digital technologies?

“When digital transformation is done right, it’s like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly, but when done wrong, all you have is a really fast caterpillar.”

— [George Westerman](#), Research Scientist, MIT Sloan Initiative on the Digital Economy



The San Diego Natural History Museum produces a [“Career Spotlight”](#) video series, for which Education Specialist Rosie Bell interviewed Botany Collections Manager Layla Aerne Hains. Photo credit: Christine Griffith, courtesy of the San Diego Natural History Museum.

The Challenge

As science fiction writer Sir Arthur C. Clarke famously said, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” Digital technology creates whole worlds from the ones and zeros of code, and in the past half-century we’ve lived through continuous cycles of digital going from magic to mundane, before leaping ahead again into semi-miraculous territory.

In addition to the speed with which it is displacing older technologies, digital technology is also remarkable for the breadth of its applications. Previous technological disruptions often reshaped the world around one area of practice: steam-powered factories displacing handcrafting, vaccines conquering fatal disease. Digital technology, however, is transforming every area of practice: making, teaching, seeing, sharing, thinking. It’s difficult to even talk about “digital” as a coherent issue when it spans everything from sending an email to creating an [artificial-intelligence-powered interactive simulacrum of Salvador Dali](#).

Confronted by the rapid pace and enormous breadth of digital evolution, museums have struggled with when to supplement or replace older technologies with their digital kin. Most museums have taken a conservative approach, waiting to see which applications (e.g., websites) turn out to be a necessary part of doing business. This patience has often paid off, as late adopters could take advantage of turnkey applications accessible to museums that lack in-house digital expertise. This is a totally valid approach in normal times—especially as most museums don’t have the resources, or the risk tolerance, to be digital innovators.

But the financial crisis sparked by the pandemic may not allow museums the luxury of time. The razor-thin financial margins of the coming year will make decisions about digital adoption both more urgent and more fraught. Some digital processes could be crucial to a museum’s survival—for example, online reservation software that helps limit attendance to safety-compliant levels. Other initiatives, such as launching a content channel, may seem successful in the short term but lack



clear payback. The public has a seemingly boundless appetite for videos, online courses, and online games, but museums can't continue to feed that desire without a corresponding financial plan.

In the coming year, museums are going to have to make critical decisions about digital “investment”—what, how, and how much—with little room for error. These calculations will be complicated by the fact that the payback from investments in productivity and efficiency (e.g., reducing the number of steps to complete a website transaction) may be more subtle than, but just as important as, direct earned revenue (such as paid subscriptions). That being so, it's worth reviewing some

emerging best practices for museum adoption of digital technologies:

Setting Digital Priorities

Any digital initiative should have clear goals tied to the museum's mission and business strategy. A museum's investments in digital tools should be clearly linked to its greatest needs, whether those are supporting the daily work of staff, improving communications and marketing, enhancing the visitor experience, or optimizing business operations. Flashier public-facing applications may attract more grant funding than behind-the-scenes processes, but that support may not cover the true long-term costs of the project. Conversely, digital work that

The Corning Museum of Glass maintains a popular YouTube channel, with recent hits like a [“Bring the Heat”](#) demo with artist George Kennard, which attracted sixty-five thousand views. (Shown here: a pre-pandemic demo by Kennard). Photo courtesy of the Corning Museum of Glass.



optimizes functions like marketing or fundraising may require the museum's own capital to launch—a worthwhile investment in the museum's long-term sustainability. Investments in digital should be guided by the museum's needs and the long-term return on investment of any given initiative.

The Relationship Between Digital and Analog Content

Since the advent of the internet, museums have been dogged by the fear that if they offered their content online, people would no longer want to visit the physical museum. To the contrary, experience so far suggests that online content only whets the appetite for seeing the real thing. (A case in point: the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam links its soaring attendance to its [generous sharing of digital content](#).) But it is increasingly clear that digital can do more than replicate the built museum—it is a realm in and of itself. Any content—a newsletter, catalog, or a whole exhibition—can be born digital. It can mirror or supplement its real-world counterpart, or exist sui generis. This being so, museums need to consider what content will be digital-first (released directly into new media channels) or even digital-only.

Museums can start this assessment by weighing the respective benefits and disadvantages of the digital and physical realms. For example, printing collections and exhibit catalogs is often expensive and unprofitable—digital catalogs can provide accessible, affordable alternatives, with the added ability to update content. Online exhibitions can present materials too fragile for display, or bring together collections that cannot be united in the real world via loans. As digital consumption of content swells in relation to in-person visits, that shift will reshape museums' staffing, funding, and priorities. To balance the allocation of resources, museums should establish an overarching approach to content, both analog and digital, that builds on the strengths of each medium.

Digital in the Org Chart

Digital isn't a function, like exhibit design, or financial management, or marketing. It's a tool that can be used to accomplish any of these things, and many more. Yet museums have often approached digital work as something that can be siloed into an existing department. This can have unintended consequences, as where digital staff live has a big impact on their goals and work. Digital departments created as a subset of collections, exhibitions, education, or marketing all behave very differently, and generally align their work to the goals of their home division. Digital elevated to its own, co-equal place in the organizational chart often results in innovative, boundary-pushing work. But independence without authority comes with its own risks. Some museums have created successful standalone digital “labs” only to downsize or eliminate them as “nonessential” during times of fiscal crisis. Other digital ventures have become victims of their own success, hamstrung by growing expectations that they earn their keep with outside contracts, leaving little time for them to do the internal innovation they originally were founded to provide. Overall, the most successful digital initiatives are those that have been slotted into the top of the organizational chart, with the head of digital reporting directly to the museum's director/CEO.

Recruiting and Sustaining Digital Staff

With the possible exception of development staff (perennially in short supply and high demand), skilled digital staff have the most flexibility to take jobs outside the museum field, even outside the nonprofit field, and usually at higher pay. Many of the leading digital museum professionals in the past two decades took their nonprofit jobs at less than market rate in return for the opportunity to do interesting, creative work. But over time, the field has lost many of these early digital leaders to the lure of better pay in the private sector, or because their museum employers did not reliably support their work. To sustain digital integration, much less innovation, museums need to think carefully about how to create realistic position descriptions, offer competitive salaries, and provide a supportive operating environment. For

some museums, contracting with outside firms for digital services may be more affordable and more flexible. Those museums that can bring digital in-house may create more opportunities for serendipitous integration, collaboration, and innovation across departments.

Balancing the Budget

In the coming year, many museums are going to make deep budget cuts merely to survive. In their quest to reduce spending, there is a particular risk that some museums may cut funding to digital operations just when they could be of most use in supporting their goals and contributing to the bottom line. Even pre-pandemic, several highly respected digital initiatives fell victim to museum budget deficits. This may be because, as the “new kids on the block,” digital departments have less political power within the museum. It may also reflect a lack of widespread understanding of the purpose and role of digital initiatives, or because digital has been approached as an add-on, rather than integrated into operations. In such circumstances, cutting digital initiatives may be easier than downsizing traditional departments, but that doesn’t mean it is the best option. Any cuts should take into account the role that a given function, including digital operations, can play in supporting the museum in the short term and positioning it to rebound.

The Response

In Society

The pandemic has finally convinced managers that [tele-work is real work](#), and that employees can collaborate productively without gathering in the (physical) office. In the long run, this could have significant ripple effects, from gutting traditional business districts to accelerating migration from cities to suburbs and small towns. One immediate effect has been to firmly establish the necessity of digital tools to support communications, collaboration, and project management. Basic digital fluency for office workers may now include a dozen or more applications and platforms.



The Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden offers “[ZOOM calls](#)” with animals, fees from which are supporting the zoo during pandemic closure. Shown here: Goat-2-Meeting. Image courtesy of the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden.

Many small businesses have survived pandemic closures so far by accelerating digital adoption. Restaurants pivoted to delivery apps; retailers switched to online sales and curbside pickup; and gyms, yoga studios, and sports clubs built revenue around Zoom classes and personal instruction. [Etsy](#)—the online sales platform for makers—experienced a surge in early 2020, as a record number of artists and crafters set up online “shops” to replace their lost physical markets (or lost jobs).

As the school year started in fall 2020, nearly [three-quarters of the largest school districts](#) in the US chose online-only instruction, with most of the rest opting for a hybrid of virtual and in-person instruction. The transition has been imperfect, to say the least, placing huge stress on teachers, parents, and students, and amplifying the existing inequities in primary education. That said, the current vast experiment in online learning will have lasting effects on the education system. As with restaurants, offices, and businesses, schools will resume many aspects of “normal” as the pandemic passes, but many will retain their digital practices as well.

In Museums

When the pandemic struck, museums around the globe quickly began pumping out vast amounts of digital content: social media challenges, virtual tours, programs, school curricula, dance parties, cocktail hours, and more. This was awesome in many ways: it provided much-needed relief to people trapped at home, in need of human connection (or a way to distract the kids for a few minutes). Digital engagement was a way for museum staff to help in the crisis, to apply their skills as a cadre of cultural first responders. And digital projects provided meaningful work for some front-line staff who might have otherwise been at risk of being furloughed or laid off.

Given the collapse of most forms of earned income (admissions, rentals, programs, and events), museums began experimenting with digital substitutes: virtual galas, paid online programming, online stores. Some zoos offered paid Zoom appearances by charismatic animals. (You can book Fiona the Hippo, star of the Cincinnati Zoo, at the rate of 750 dollars for fifteen minutes.) In some cases, museums have sustained revenue by tying free content to membership, pitches for contributions, or underwriting by funders.

As museums reopened, many implemented online ticketing systems to help limit attendance and reduce staff interactions at the point of entry. Beyond this, companies are offering all kinds of digital services to help implement pandemic precautions, from retrofitting digital interactives for touch-free operation to providing digital membership cards.

We don't know yet whether the current demand for digital content will persist once the pandemic wanes. A year or more of digital immersion for work, play, and school may create a pan-digital version of “Zoom fatigue,” resulting in a sharp drop in the demand for digital content and experiences when people feel safe to venture out again. Likewise, a long-term trend towards remote work, online shopping, and virtual instruction may in time leave people hungry for in-person, place-based social experiences, fueling the rebound of traditional museum income streams. Museums should factor these possibilities into their planning for online content production. In any case, as with retail, business, and education, the pandemic will have a permanent effect on the digital behavior of museums. Projections of the proportion of US museums that may close permanently due to the pandemic range from 7 to over 30 percent. Many of those that survive may do so through their savvy use of digital technologies to sustain their audiences, members, and income.

A Framework for Action

Museums can take the following approach to ensure they deploy digital technology appropriately for the short-term survival and long-term success of the organization:

- ❖ Train leadership in an integrated approach to digital. The potential and challenges of digital technology need to be understood at the highest levels if the museum is to make wise decisions about digital adoption.

- ❖ Create a cross-departmental team to assess needs and potential solutions. Digital can touch every aspect of museum operations. Bringing diverse perspectives to bear will help the museum identify and prioritize the most essential digital solutions.
- ❖ Provide training to inform the creation of a digital strategy. Some of the most powerful applications of digital are far from intuitive, and teams may overlook the potential of technologies they do not understand. Not everyone has to become adept at data analytics or designing user interfaces, but decisionmakers should share a general understanding of what the major digital technologies are and what they can do.
- ❖ Bring the right people on board. For some museums, this may mean hiring one or more specialists to lead digital initiatives. For others, it may mean selecting outside contractors who can become long-term partners for this work.
- ❖ Make the person in charge of digital part of the leadership team, reporting to the CEO or equivalent.
- ❖ When refreshing the museum's strategic plan, apply digital strategy across the board, rather than segregating it into one project or goal.

When faced with specific decisions about adopting digital technologies, museums can scaffold the discussion as follows:

- ❖ Categorize digital technology decisions by purpose, for example:
 - Communications (internal, external)
 - Engagement
 - Content delivery
 - Business applications
- ❖ For each category, identify:
 - What are the museum's critical needs in each area for the coming year?
 - What are the opportunities for improvement?
- ❖ For each potential digital project, assess:
 - What capital would it take to plan, implement, launch?
 - What are the potential benefits, including how it will contribute to the financial bottom line?
 - What ongoing expertise will be needed to implement and maintain the system, and will this require training, new staff, new contracts?
 - What will it cost to maintain the system over time?
- ❖ In addition, in the coming year, ask:
 - Could this digital project or application increase the museum's chances of surviving the pandemic financial crisis?
 - Will this digital project or application contribute to the long-term success of the museum, even after the pandemic fades?

Museum Examples

The **San Diego Natural History Museum** decided to remain closed to the public throughout 2020, even after local regulations would have allowed it to reopen. Museum leadership felt this was the safest decision for staff and public, and would give staff time to concentrate on research, conservation, and **servicing their community online**. Education staff shifted to producing digital resources for schools, aftercare programs, and other caregivers. The museum deployed pre-recorded and live programming to replace traditional school visits and help students experience nature and meet its scientists. Its social media pivoted from attracting visitors to helping local residents explore and enjoy the outdoors.

In 2019, **The Corning Museum of Glass** began to examine how to **monetize its YouTube channel** through advertising revenue. Having grown its subscription numbers to over 160 thousand (reflecting a 20 percent increase in the first half of the year), the museum projected six-figure revenue in 2020. The **success of this project** was grounded in the high-quality content the museum had been publishing to YouTube since it launched the channel in 2007, and in dedicating one-and-a-half staff positions to content production and channel management.

The **Norman Rockwell Museum** in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, uses data from its e-commerce platform to create highly effective **targeted marketing campaigns**. In 2014, working with the data insights company DigiWorks, the museum identified offerings likely to appeal to existing buyers and used A/B testing to refine its content and messaging. The resulting algorithm combines demographic data about a new customer with historical data from other customers to create tailored recommendations for subsequent purchases. As a result, the museum increased the number of second-time purchasers by 150 percent and revenue by nearly 50 percent over the previous year.

As [Brendan Ciecko](#) has documented on the Alliance blog, during the pandemic many museums have implemented **virtual memberships or virtual membership benefits**. The **National Steinbeck Center** offers a virtual membership for thirty dollars per year that includes access to the museum's private archival collection, behind the scenes tours, and more. The **Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh** are offering [members-only digital events](#), which add new benefits to becoming a member even when the museum is physically closed. **Seattle Museum of Art** offers members online "Conversations with Curators," while the [Virginia Museum of Fine Arts](#) implemented "Cocktails with the Curator" virtual sessions for "Friends Circle" members and higher. **The Exploratorium** in San Francisco, as part of its "May is for Members" initiative last year, offered exclusive access to online content and a discount at its online store.

Resources

- [The Digital Awakening: The global pandemic has demonstrated the need for a digital-first approach to online engagement](#) (Nik Honeysett, *Museum*, November/December 2020). This article makes the case that museums need to prioritize digital work in order to increase and diversify their online audiences.
- [Digital Readiness and Innovation in Museums: A Baseline National Survey](#) (Knight Foundation, 2020). This report, commissioned by the Knight Foundation, presents data collected prior to the spread of COVID-19. The publication summarizes the state of digital innovation in the field prior to the crisis, and identifies challenges and opportunities for using digital strategies to build resilience in the sector.
- [Playbook: Re-opening Museums & Cultural Attractions: Succeeding in the Post-COVID Era with Thoughtful Digital Tools](#) (Cuseum, 2020). This playbook explores challenges, changing consumer expectations, and new digital tools and conveniences driven by COVID-19. Free digital download.

“The peoples of the earth are one family.”

—Ruth Fulton Benedict, American anthropologist and folklorist

Who Gets Left Behind?

Caring for the vulnerable in a time of crisis

The year 2020 was terrible for pretty much everyone, but certain groups have been especially vulnerable to the damage wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Black, Indigenous, and other people of color fell ill and died at a far greater rate than their white counterparts, and suffer disproportionate economic damage from layoffs and business closures. People over the age of fifty-five are at heightened risk for serious outcomes, both from the disease and from the negative consequences of social isolation, as family and friends seek to protect them by staying away. [Domestic violence](#) has increased during this crisis, and the pandemic makes it more difficult for people suffering from abuse to seek help. People with disabilities face new barriers to accessing critical care and medical supplies. Families experiencing food insecurity have been cut off from already fragile pipelines of support, and school closures mean students do not receive subsidized meals (or [dental care](#)). The national pivot to online learning for K-12 students has exposed the vulnerabilities of families without access to childcare, connected devices, and reliable high-speed internet.

Hopefully the US will learn from these failures and rebuild our systems in forms that are more equitable and resilient. Meanwhile, it's incumbent on all sectors—government, private, and nonprofit—to create an ad hoc safety net for people falling through the gaping cracks in our current systems of care.

Critical Questions for Museums

- ❖ What groups in your community are suffering disproportionately from the pandemic?
- ❖ Do you have existing relationships with these communities on which you can build?
- ❖ How are the museum's own actions affecting at-risk individuals?
- ❖ How can the museum use its resources to help support the vulnerable and ensure that “no one gets left behind”?

The Challenge

Many of the core functions of American society (e.g., education, health care, safety services) barely work for marginalized peoples at the best of times. To maximize private profit and minimize government costs, our nation tends to offload the costs of systems onto vulnerable communities, depending on the nonprofit sector or inadequate public infrastructure to meet essential needs. Health insurance is tied to employment, school takes the place of a public system of childcare, food pantries help support people who are not paid a living wage. Government relief often prioritizes screening out the unworthy or ineligible, rather than on maximizing reach to people in need. The pandemic has exposed the fundamental weakness of this patchwork approach.



The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society is one of twenty-eight public gardens participating in the [Urban Agriculture Resilience Program](#), created by the US Botanic Garden and American Public Gardens to sustain urban agriculture and community food growing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo credit: Pennsylvania Horticultural Society.

The current crisis has also revealed vulnerabilities in what might appear to be more robust, integrated approaches to care. For example, schools are effectively the primary social service agencies for children, delivering free and reduced meal programs that provide lunches to nearly thirty million children each day, and providing access to health and wellness resources. Pre-pandemic, this was an effective and efficient way to reach children in need. But tight linkages mean that one disruption (such as closure of schools) has [disastrous ripple effects](#).

If there is any upside to the past year, it may be that the pandemic has demonstrated how leaving the most vulnerable of society exposed eventually hurts everyone, even those who are usually buffered from harm. Viruses and financial collapse can't be redlined, and left unchecked they will eventually undermine the safety

“Ohana means family. Family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten.”

—Lilo & Stitch

and security of all. If only out of self-interest, America may shift, at last, from trying to contain and ignore the weakness of our systems to addressing their fundamental flaws.



During the pandemic, the Louisiana Children's Museum in New Orleans has given classes from the city's Langston Hughes Academy exclusive use of its buildings and grounds. Photo courtesy of the Louisiana Children's Museum.

The Response

In Society

Disasters can inspire people to be their best selves, and the news has been filled with stories of individuals and organizations pitching in with creative solutions to help their communities. Many schools set up grab-and-go meals sites for their students, or [repurposed school buses](#) to deliver food. Doctors and therapists adopted [telemedicine systems](#) to deliver noncritical care and [counseling](#). [World Central Kitchen](#), a disaster relief nonprofit founded in 2010 by Chef José Andrés, organized the staffs of thousands of shuttered restaurants and kitchens to feed vulnerable communities and medical professionals on the front lines. For instance, while [Indian Country](#) was suffering some of the highest death rates of the pandemic, the project provided four thousand boxes of food a day for distribution in the [Navajo Nation](#).

The pandemic has made access to reliable, fast internet connectivity more critical than ever, but a [quarter of Americans](#) don't have high-speed internet access at home—that number rises to [one-third](#) in rural communities. As schools transitioned to digital instruction, many students were stymied by slow connections and lack of reliable access. [Public libraries](#) stepped up to address these needs in a variety of ways, including strengthening their Wi-Fi so it extends beyond their buildings and leaving it on at night, providing areas for people to sit and work outside, offering mobile hotspots for checkout,

distributing hotspots to homeless encampments, and dispatching library vehicles as mobile hotspots for high-need areas.

While these are stop-gap solutions to weak systems that require long-term change, they are real, meaningful, and necessary actions to help vulnerable communities in a time of crisis. And successful interventions may be models for better systems in the future.

In Museums

Inward Action

Many museum staff and volunteers belong to high-risk or vulnerable populations. Furloughs, layoffs, and salary freezes are particularly hard on staff working in low-wage jobs, and impose additional financial stress on the many entry-level museum professionals still paying off student debt. [Eighty percent](#) of those who have died from COVID-19 in the US have been over the age of sixty-five. Museum volunteers typically skew older than staff, and more often fall into the high-risk category based on age. In light of these facts, museums may well ask volunteers to stay away for now, even those eager to return to work. While this distancing may reduce the chance of exposure to COVID-19, it can also increase social isolation, which poses a risk to mental and physical health as well.

As they plan their pandemic response, museums should give particular attention to protecting vulnerable staff and volunteers. For example:

- ❖ Check with the museum's health insurance and retirement providers about any financial, legal, and mental and physical wellness services they offer—such as wellness programs, employee assistance programs, financial planning, etc.—and make sure employees are aware of resources.
- ❖ Offer paid sick leave and emergency family medical leave. [Educate employees](#) about the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and other federal legislation enacted to support workers.
- ❖ Adopt [practices that can reduce employee stress](#). For example, be generous and flexible in updating



policies and practices, offer solutions that meet individual needs, over-communicate about important news and decisions, and formally measure how people are doing throughout the crisis.

- ❖ Implement voluntary or mandatory pay cuts that protect the most financially vulnerable by avoiding, delaying, or minimizing the need for furloughs or layoffs. (These cuts might be concentrated in the highest-paid positions in order to shield low-wage workers.)
- ❖ Continue to pay workers whose roles center on the physical museum even while the museum is closed, switching them over to behind-the-scenes work such as collections inventory or digitization and transcription.
- ❖ Explore what can be done to support staff who are furloughed or laid off. For furloughed workers, this might include maintaining health insurance; for staff who are laid off, the museum might subsidize COBRA payments for some period of time.
- ❖ Create an [emergency relief fund](#), or encourage and support staff who wish to create a mutual aid fund to assist colleagues who are in need.
- ❖ Build a culture of connection through frequent check-ins, and combat isolation by organizing opportunities for virtual socializing, both for staff and volunteers.

Outward Action

By thinking broadly and creatively, museums can deploy their resources to serve vulnerable populations. This may be as straightforward as offering free admission to health care workers, or taking traditional museum programs online to make them accessible to people who are unable to get to the museum. Other examples may involve pushing the boundaries of traditional practice.

For example, museums can:

- ❖ Create or enlarge gardens on their grounds, and [donate produce](#) to local food banks or [flowers to local hospitals and nursing homes](#).
- ❖ Take a page from libraries and make museum Wi-Fi accessible outside the building to neighbors and students.
- ❖ Supply low-income students with [laptops, Wi-Fi, and portable hotspots](#) to facilitate access to the museum's virtual programs.
- ❖ Provide quiet study areas with strong, reliable internet connection for students engaged in virtual learning who need a safe, supportive place outside their homes.

Top and bottom: The Philbrook Museum of Art's multifaceted COVID-19 response provides food, funds, and emotional support to the Tulsa community. Images courtesy of the Philbrook Museum of Art.



Museum Examples

In 2020, the [National WWI Museum and Memorial](#) and [Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum](#), reassigned frontline staff to digitization projects while their organizations were closed to the public due to the pandemic. At Cooper Hewitt, a core group that included staff from visitor experience, education, the store, and the audiovisual department worked on adding image descriptions to the museum's collection of over 210 thousand images. The WWI Museum created a cross-departmental team with the goal of fully transcribing the museum's digitized collection of letters, diaries, and journals.

Staff at several museums have created mutual aid funds to assist colleagues in financial distress. The fundraising efforts by staff at the [Brooklyn Museum](#) raised over seventy-three thousand dollars, at time of writing, towards a goal of eighty thousand, including donations from the museum's Director and Chief Operating Officer. Staff at the [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#), have shared [documents and resources](#) to help others start their own mutual aid funds.

The [Philbrook Museum of Art](#) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, has deployed a number of strategies to support its community during the pandemic, including: contributing 10 percent of all membership dollars to the Tulsa Area COVID-19 Response Fund, seeding a large "Victory Garden" and donating the produce to area food banks, and launching an emergency response online marketplace to help local artists sell their work (the artists keep 100 percent of the proceeds).

In June 2020, when many food pantries in New York were closed by the pandemic, the [Queens Museum](#) partnered with other local nonprofits to create the Together We Can Food Pantry, distributing food from the museum's parking lot. As of November, the museum had fed over 9,650 families from surrounding neighborhoods. The [Atlanta History Center](#) converted its historic gardens to food crops, donating over nine hundred pounds of produce to food-insecure families through the volunteer-run nonprofit Concrete Jungle.

During COVID closure, the [Louisiana Children's Museum](#) in New Orleans made its building and grounds available to Langston Hughes Academy, a local FirstLine charter school whose student population is 98 percent Black, with 74 percent eligible for free lunch. While the museum was closed to the public due to the pandemic, preschool and kindergarten classes had exclusive access to the museum's brand-new building on eight-and-a-half acres, with amenities including exhibits, a literacy center, education rooms, sensory gardens, a labyrinth, a floating classroom, a courtyard, and an events lawn. Costs for janitorial services, facilities and exhibits maintenance, and educational support were supported with a grant from a local foundation.



Love Beyond Walls, which operates the [Dignity Museum](#) in Atlanta, launched the [Love Sinks In](#) campaign to make portable handwashing stations accessible to homeless people around the country during the pandemic. Photo courtesy of Love Beyond Walls.

- ❖ Make the museum's indoor and outdoor space available to schools serving at-risk students, for use as classrooms or to fill other needs.
- ❖ Donate [protective equipment and supplies](#) to health-care workers and vulnerable individuals.

A Framework for Action

Museum boards, directors, and staff can ask the following questions to help identify what the museum can do to protect vulnerable groups during the pandemic and ensuing recovery.

Internal Operations

Many museums are having to balance their desire to support and retain staff with their responsibility to ensure the survival of the museum and to be good stewards of the assets it holds in trust for the public. The process is made even more difficult by the extreme uncertainty about how long the pandemic will persist, and the duration of the resulting financial recession. In creating a framework for these critical decisions, the museum can consider:

- ❖ Which of its internal constituents, staff and volunteer, are particularly vulnerable during the current crisis, whether due to race, gender, age, or individual circumstances?
- ❖ Can some of these vulnerabilities be addressed through the creation or expansion of programs, services, or benefits?
- ❖ What are the critical, minimum functions that must continue in order for the museum to survive and care for its collections during lockdown, and how long could the museum support those functions absent financial relief or recovery?
- ❖ How can the museum minimize the need for furloughs or layoffs? What resources can the museum devote to alleviating harm to staff, while make responsible decisions regarding its own long-term survival?

External Operations

Museums are likewise balancing their desire to support their staff and sustain their operations with their responsibility to the public they serve. In creating a framework

for these critical decisions, the museum can consider:

- ❖ What are the simplest, most affordable ways the museum can make existing programs and services more accessible during COVID-19?
- ❖ How can the museum lower or eliminate economic barriers to programs and services that could help vulnerable communities meet challenges posed by the pandemic?
- ❖ What groups could the museum partner with to meet community needs (i.e., health care providers, schools, and nonprofit social service organizations)?

Resources

- [Policies to Support Workers During the Coronavirus Pandemic](#) (National Partnership for Women and Families, National Employment Law Project). This guide recommends specific policies and practices that employers can implement quickly to support the safety and stability of their workforce. The policies are meant to help the most impacted workers within a business—particularly hourly workers paid low wages and those with caregiving responsibilities or health conditions that make them more vulnerable to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).
- [Working Remotely During COVID-19: Your Mental Health and Well-being](#) (American Psychiatric Association). This resource from the American Psychiatric Association's Center for Workplace Mental Health includes practical tips for individuals taking care of their own mental health and well-being, and recommendations for what managers and HR professionals can do to support employees.
- [How to Start a Mutual Aid Fund](#) (Staff from the [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#)). Documents and resources on starting a mutual aid fund, including meeting agendas, outreach scripts, and a disbursement tracker.



Photo courtesy of the Louisiana Children's Museum.

“The Internet will save higher education, but it may kill your alma mater.”

—John Katzman, education entrepreneur

COVID On Campus:

How the pandemic is reshaping higher education

Higher education has been struggling with disruptions for the past decade: declining enrollment, rising tuition and student debt, increasing dependence on low-paid adjunct faculty and graduate student labor, rising competition from online degree-granting institutions, and erosion of the perceived value of a college education, to name a few. One result has been a wave of [mergers and closures](#), with more expected to come. On top of these trends, we now add the profound disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic: colleges and universities grapple with whether and when to allow students to return to campus, how to transition to online instruction, how to reconfigure campus to support distancing and quarantine, and how to confront lost income and unexpected costs.

These current challenges to higher education impact museums at several levels. Academic museums are struggling to adapt to the conditions on their campuses, navigating closures, reopenings, and restrictions on access. Local economies dependent on institutions of higher education are hurting, and the non-academic museums in these communities will suffer as well. Every museum in the country serves populations that include students who, their college plans disrupted, are navigating an [unexpected gap year](#) or attending virtual classes from home. And long-term shifts in higher education could transform the pipeline for training and recruiting the next generation of museum professionals.

Critical Questions for Museums

For academic museums and galleries:

- ❖ What role can the museum play in supporting online instruction and contributing to a safe, fulfilling on-campus experience during the pandemic?
- ❖ How can the museum continue to support students, researchers, and instructors who rely on the museum for opportunities and resources?
- ❖ How will the museum prioritize its audiences (e.g., student, faculty, and public) in the face of constrained resources?
- ❖ What role can the museum play in supporting the surrounding community?
- ❖ What are the short- and long-term financial implications of the pandemic for the museum's parent organization, and how will that affect the museum's own financial stability?

For museums in communities where local colleges and universities are major economic drivers:

- ❖ How will the status of the area's colleges and universities affect the local economy?
- ❖ How might that impact the museum's finances?

For all museums:

- ❖ How can the museum support young people whose college or graduate studies have been interrupted by the pandemic?

- ❖ Will the current challenges facing higher education result in long-term change that disrupts the traditional path to museum employment, and how might that affect efforts to increase racial diversity in the museum sector?

The Challenge

Economic Damage to Higher Education

Education matters more than ever as a path to upward economic mobility, but student debt has climbed to levels that hobble some young people entering the workforce, especially [women](#) and [people of color](#). All but the best-endowed colleges and universities rely on tuition and housing to fund their operations, but [enrollment](#) nationwide has declined by over 10 percent in the

past decade. The rise of effective, online institutions that offer credible degrees at a lower cost has increased the pressure on traditional residential schools to [update aging campuses](#) and [add amenities](#), spending that in turn drives tuition even higher. Currently, faced with the prospect of a college experience profoundly different from what they expected, some students are choosing to defer enrollment during the pandemic, while others argue they should not have to pay full tuition. Many colleges and universities depend on international students, who tend to pay full freight for their education (at out-of-state prices), and [foreign enrollment](#) had already been dropping, in part because of tighter US immigration policies, visa delays, and the overall political climate. On top of that, now many international students are unwilling or

The Georgia Museum of Art has offered its parking garage as an open-air classroom for studio art classes at the University of Georgia. Shown here: Professor Libby Hatmaker teaches a drawing class. Photo courtesy of the Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia.





The Nasher Museum collaborated with Duke Arts and Duke Health to present RESIST COVID / TAKE 6!, an outdoor exhibition and public awareness campaign by artist Carrie Mae Weems which emphasizes the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color. Photo by J. Caldwell, courtesy of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.

unable to study in the US because the country has done such a poor job containing COVID-19.

Cumulatively, the economic impact of the pandemic on colleges, universities, and their surrounding communities has been enormous. Institutions that have modest endowments or are heavily dependent on revenue from housing, athletics, and medical campuses have been particularly hard hit. In April, the [American Council on Education](#) predicted that enrollment in 2020-21 could drop by 15 percent, creating a revenue loss of twenty-three billion dollars, with the [cancellation of fall sports](#) projected to lead to another billion in losses. Government support of state universities had already been gradually declining for decades, and the pandemic has accelerated that trend. [State budget shortfalls](#) in 2020 resulted in funding cuts for public colleges and universities, presaging deeper cuts to come. [Projections suggest that some states](#) could experience revenue declines of 20 percent or more in 2021. [Moody's Analytics](#) estimates that these shortfalls through 2022 could amount to 434 billion dollars, with forty-six states unable to cover the deficits with accumulated savings.

Impact on Academic Museums

Clearly, higher education will be battered by the time the pandemic recedes, and it would be hard to overestimate the collateral damage this will inflict, both on society as a

whole and on museums in particular. Over twenty-seven hundred academic museums and galleries are distributed throughout America's four thousand colleges and universities, ranging from institutions with hundreds of staff and multi-million-dollar endowments to galleries with one full-time curator and minimal budget. So far, many of these museums have been insulated from the initial financial impact of the pandemic for several reasons. Academic museums typically receive about half their support from their academic parent organizations, most of which did not make immediate deep cuts to their budgets, and many have independent financial resources as well. About three-quarters have their own (typically small) endowments, and a quarter have separately incorporated support organizations. In the long term, however, academic museums are vulnerable. They are rarely seen as central to the college or university's core mission, and while they devote considerable resources to supporting teaching and learning, they do not generate enrollment and tuition dollars. For this reason, college and university museums and galleries are often seen by administrators as expenses rather than as assets.

If the pandemic persists through 2021 or beyond, eventually all academic museums, whatever their financial model, will be deeply affected by the decisions their parent organizations make in order to survive. For example:

- ❖ Many academic museums rely on faculty and work-study students to perform critical functions, and draw on centralized services for cleaning, maintenance, and security. As colleges and universities trim budgets, and staff, in order to survive the coming year, how will those cuts affect the museum's operations?
- ❖ Credible sources forecast that COVID-19 precautions will need to continue [well into 2021](#) (and [possibly beyond](#)). If that proves true, colleges may continue to restrict whether students return to campus and what they can do when they return, while local regulations may restrict public visitation and school trips. How will this affect the ability of academic museums to secure grants for programming and attract government or private support? Faced with extended closure, will these museums need to retrain, and redeploy, staff who can't perform their usual functions?
- ❖ In the face of extreme financial stress, will colleges and universities withdraw critical financial support from academic museums?
- ❖ Will colleges and universities look to collections as sources of budget relief, either selling items from the collections to generate income, or downsizing, eliminating or transferring collections (such as biological research material) that are expensive to maintain?
- ❖ If a college or university merges, or closes, what will happen to its campus museums, and to those museums' collections?

Impact on Communities

Academia's response to the pandemic is also having a tremendous impact on surrounding cities and towns. As of July, [58 percent of small businesses](#) in the US were concerned they might close permanently, and the National League of Cities called for [five hundred billion dollars in federal relief](#) to stave off financial collapse. The damage is particularly acute in "college towns," where student spending and school-associated events are primary drivers of the local economy. Inevitably, this economic damage will affect independent private nonprofit museums in the area as well. State and local

governments are experiencing their own budget crises due to lower income and property tax revenue. If the financial crisis of 2008 is any guide, this will result in less government funding for public nonprofit museums, and may endanger government museums as well. Layoffs and closures of local businesses will create economic hardships that may decrease discretionary spending by families, and prompt local foundations to shift their giving away from arts and culture and toward support for COVID-19 relief and basic human services.

The pandemic is disrupting not only the college experience of current students, but potentially the long-term educational and economic prospects of this and future generations as well. Shifts from in-person to online instruction will disadvantage those with less access to digital equipment and connectivity, and deepen the inequities faced by students of color, from rural areas, and from poorer households. Students who choose a gap year will need meaningful work and learning experiences (either virtual or low-risk in-person opportunities). Students who are enrolled online may need safe, quiet places to study that are equipped with high-speed internet connections. These students would also benefit from face-to-face access to mentors and to fellow students, both for academic and social support. Museums on or off campus can play a role in filling these emerging needs.



The Trout Gallery at Dickinson College adapted its curatorial seminar for remote learning by providing digitized resources as well as mailing supplies and reference materials to students. Photo courtesy of the Trout Gallery of Dickinson College.

Looking Ahead

The forces shaping higher education are acting so rapidly, and with such impact, that the outcomes are highly uncertain. These uncertainties in turn suggest many ways in which the current crisis could profoundly reshape academia and academic museums. This being so, it is worth considering potential long-term implications of pandemic disruptions to higher education:

- ❖ If the pandemic accelerates the adoption of virtual instruction in traditional academia, will that also decrease the emphasis on face-to-face, on-campus learning? Given the reluctance of many students to pay full tuition for less than the traditional college experience, will some choose to enroll in more affordable, born-digital degree programs instead? Both trends could [accelerate the demise](#) of institutions that were already in precarious condition, thus closing, or orphaning, any associated museums.
- ❖ Conversely, will campus amenities (including museums) be more important than ever to distinguish face-to-face from online universities, adding value that helps justify the high cost of a place-based degree?
- ❖ If the pandemic accelerates the growth of affordable online degree programs, including museum studies, will that increase the diversity of the pool of potential museum professionals? The cost of attending college and graduate school, at present, is a primary reason why people of color are underrepresented among professional museum staff in the US.
- ❖ Conversely, if the pandemic leads colleges and students to emphasize fields such as public health, political science, and economics in preference to arts and humanities, as some have speculated, will museums that continue to hire for traditional academic credentials have a smaller pool of potential applicants from which to choose? A smaller labor pool might drive up salaries, making an entry-level wage more practical for recent graduates with modest financial means.

The Response

In Society

On March 6, 2020, the [University of Washington](#) canceled in-person classes and announced that students would complete their coursework and exams remotely.

[Oxy Arts of Occidental College](#) in Los Angeles has made its space available to the community during the pandemic for events, meetings, programs, and as a distribution hub for food and school supplies. Photo by Ian Byers-Gamber, courtesy of Oxy Arts.



Over the following weeks, colleges and universities across the country followed suit. In September 2020, figures from the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) showed that, as the academic year began, only 27 percent of US universities and colleges planned to conduct classes entirely or primarily in person, 21 percent offered a mix of online and in-person instruction, and 44 percent implemented fully or primarily virtual instruction.

Colleges that have continued to offer on-campus instruction have deployed a variety of strategies to create a safe environment for students, faculty, and other employees, including mandatory testing, contact tracing, quarantine, limited social gatherings and athletic training, and mandated [tracking apps](#). Some are bringing only a portion of the student body back each semester. Despite these precautions, a poll in August showed that one-third of students [did not feel safe returning to campus](#). And in fact, many colleges that welcomed students back in the fall [quickly reversed course](#) after outbreaks of COVID-19, transitioning to entirely online classes and, in some cases, sending students home. Futurist Bryan Alexander has forecast more such [“toggle terms”](#) as colleges cope with local resurgences of COVID-19. Some colleges [have already made deep cuts](#) to tenured and non-tenured faculty, [laid off or furloughed staff](#), frozen or decreased wages, cut benefits, instituted hiring freezes, and halted construction projects. Such actions are likely to accelerate in 2021 as the full impact of the pandemic on academic budgets becomes clear.

In Museums

Early in the pandemic, as campuses began to close, many academic museums and galleries deployed staff and resources to support the transition to online teaching—providing digital resources for classes that would normally use the galleries or collections for instruction, mounting [virtual exhibitions](#), and developing [remote internships and educational opportunities](#) for students. On campuses that resumed on-campus instruction in the fall, museums adapted to COVID restrictions by limiting entry to designated faculty and students for coursework or research, issuing timed ticketing to limit crowding, and creating or emphasizing outdoor installations.

With the financial support of their parent organizations, many academic museums have been able to avoid layoffs and continue to offer paid work-study and internship positions. Many museums already offer [college students taking “gap years”](#) opportunities for work experience, job shadowing, community outreach, and training. During the pandemic, these opportunities have expanded to encompass virtual experiences as well.

Anticipating the potential for increased pressure on colleges to raise operating funds through selling museum collections, the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries has stepped up the work of the [Task Force for the Protection of University Collections](#), which was created in 2009 in response to the proposed closure of the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University. The primary charge of the task force is to serve as an advocate of, and resource for, college and university museums whose collections are under threat.

A Framework for Action

Museums can consider:

- ❖ How can the museum continue to add value to the student experience during the pandemic, while the college or university has gone partially or entirely virtual, or restricted on-campus activities?
- ❖ How can the museum continue to support students, researchers, and instructors who rely on the museum for opportunities and resources? Can the museum help address needs created by the pandemic, such as faculty or students whose school-age children are learning remotely from home?
- ❖ Can the museum collaborate with the college or university’s libraries, which are wrestling with many of the same issues, and may have content management systems (e.g., [LibGuides](#)) that support integrating content into courses?
- ❖ What local communities and businesses will be particularly damaged by a drop in shopping, consumption, or spending from students? Is there anything the museum can do to mitigate that harm, through contracts, partnerships, or fundraising, for example?

Museum Examples

The **Bowdoin Museum of Art** closed its doors in March, as the college sent students home and switched to online instruction. When the college welcomed students back in the fall, access to the museum was severely restricted, driven by the college's COVID-alert status. While the museum remained closed to the public, it dedicated two staff to work with faculty and develop remote resources for students. This enabled the museum to launch e-packets, a new content delivery system organized by course, to give students and faculty access to a plethora of information about collection objects featured in any given remote course. The museum reassigned other staff to projects that they deemed would have long-term benefit to museum users, notably photo and video documentation of the collections.

While the **Georgia Museum of Art at the University of Georgia** was closed to the public for five months due to the pandemic, it increased the frequency of its Yoga in the Galleries and Morning Mindfulness programs and moved them online. After reopening (with timed tickets, hand sanitizer, masks, and social distancing) it tackled ways to replace some of the traditional social activities unavailable to students isolated in their dorm rooms. The museum worked with its student association to spread its annual Student Nights out over a longer period, create socially distanced scavenger hunts through the galleries, and provide "to-go" art-making kits. It also hosted an outdoor dance performance, made its covered parking area available for use by studio art classes from the neighboring Lamar Dodd School of Art, and provided indoor and outdoor practice space for students from the Hugh Hodgson School of Music.

In May 2020, graduate students enrolled in Museums Activism and Social Issues, a course in the Museum Professions program at Seton Hall University, [curated an online exhibition](#) designed to help fellow students and other members of their community cope with stress related to COVID-19, addressing topics like mental health, self-care, education, food insecurity, job insecurity, social media, and dealing with the future.

- ❖ How can the museum (academic or not) support students in its community who are taking their classes online, far from campus?
- ❖ Similarly, how can the museum support students taking an unexpected pandemic gap year who are in search of meaningful work and learning experiences?
- ❖ For students planning a museum career, how can the museum provide virtual internships or other credentialing in place of typical "pipeline" experiences that are not available during the pandemic?

Resources

- [List of College Reopening Models](#) (The Chronicle of Higher Education). Compiled in partnership with Davidson College's College Crisis Initiative, tracking reopening models of nearly three thousand institutions.
- [COVID-19 Resources](#) (Association of Academic Museums and Galleries). See especially a [link to a Google spreadsheet](#) where academic museums are sharing information on their status and COVID-response.
- Imagining the pandemic continues into 2023: [part 1](#), [part 2](#), [part 3](#) (Bryan Alexander, 2020). Futurist Bryan Alexander explores the conditions that might lead the COVID-19 pandemic to linger for years, and how society in general and higher education in particular might evolve in response to this ongoing crisis.

Strategic Foresight: How to survive an era of uncertainty

2020 was truly a “syndemic” year—shaped by multiple cataclysms, including a global pandemic, wildfires on the West Coast that burned over 5.8 million acres, six major hurricanes, and [even a plague of locusts](#). On top of these disasters, we faced a long overdue—but still painful—reckoning with the long-term blight of racism. While it might seem like epic bad luck to face so many crises at once, in fact these were not independent events—they are deeply entangled with each other and stem from forces that will continue to reshape the world in coming decades. Responding to these disruptions will not be a matter of finding solutions and moving on. It will require fundamental shifts in how we assess risk, navigate uncertainty, and create strategies that can succeed no matter what transpires. The discipline known as “strategic foresight” is designed for exactly this situation—it is a mindset and methodology that helps us manage uncertainty and prepare flexible, adaptive responses.

“Inconceivable!
You keep using
that word. I
do not think it
means what you
think it means.”

—Mandy Patinkin, in the role of Inigo Montoya, *The Princess Bride*

Critical Questions for Museums

- ❖ What are the most significant forces of change shaping the museum sector in the coming year and the coming decade?
- ❖ What challenges face the field as a whole?
- ❖ What is any given museum’s profile of risk: what trends and disruptions could threaten its ability to survive?
- ❖ What strategies could contribute to museums’ success in coming years, regardless how circumstances play out?

The Challenge

One of the most frequent pandemic lamentations last year was that “no one saw it coming!” But that’s not true. Experts had long known that a global pandemic was not only likely, but inevitable at some point. Indeed, one of the first forecasting exercises led by the Center for the Future of Museums, back in 2009, recruited museums to participate in a simulation created by the Institute for the Future that featured a global pandemic.* More recently, the Obama administration chartered a [Pandemic Prediction and Forecasting Science and Technology Working Group](#) that highlighted the threat of emerging infectious disease. In fact, pandemics are not the only “unforeseen” but predictable disruptions. For instance, at some point in the next century there will be a [major earthquake](#) along one or more of the fault lines on the West Coast. Security experts think it also highly likely that the US will experience a [cyberattack](#) in coming decades that could bring down significant portions of critical infrastructure—communications, electoral system, the internet, or the power grid.

*That’s as close as I’m going to come to saying “I told you so.”

Some examples of disruptions that will happen (not whether, but when and where) in the next decade:

“Natural” disasters related to climate change

- ❖ Pandemic disease
- ❖ Wildfire
- ❖ Water stress
- ❖ Severe storms
- ❖ Extreme heat
- ❖ Extreme rain
- ❖ Sea level rise
- ❖ Spread of invasive species

Economic

- ❖ Financial crisis sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic
- ❖ Widening wealth gap and decrease in economic mobility

Social/cultural disruptions

- ❖ Mass global and internal migration, including climate-driven displacement of entire communities
- ❖ Civil rights protests—nonviolent or potentially violent
- ❖ Nationalist/nativist movements—nonviolent or potentially violent

Political disruptions

- ❖ Challenges to functional democratic processes

Technological crises

- ❖ Dramatic rise in cybercrime, ransomware, and data theft
- ❖ Continued displacement of labor through automation and AI
- ❖ Growing digital divide accelerating economic and educational inequality

These disruptions will be layered on top of an existing landscape of change—trends that have been reshaping culture, economics, technology, our political systems, and our environment. Perhaps the most significant of these disruptive trends is climate change. All told, somewhere between [four and thirteen million people](#) in the US will be displaced by climate change by 2100. Many US museums are located in communities that face rising sea levels, flooding, fires, heat, or drought. In the face of these changes, some communities may shrink, pick up stakes and [relocate](#), or redesign their infrastructure (at great expense) to cope with these challenges. Few museums are prepared to adapt to the scope and pace of these changes. But the work of most museums is, necessarily, long term—preserving cultural and scientific heritage for the next generation, serving their community and helping it thrive. So museums perforce need to spend time planning for uncertain futures, or all the good work they do day-to-day will be at risk.

Pre-pandemic, museums were only slowly adopting the need for formal planning at all. In the past decade, this lack of timely, comprehensive planning was the deficit most frequently cited by the American Alliance of Museums' Accreditation Commission in its decisions. To help museums meet that challenge, the commission created a [detailed description of good planning](#). But given the speed and scale of disruption in the coming decade, this model may not be enough. Museums need to enhance their planning with “strategic foresight”—a mindset and methodology that helps organizations manage uncertainty and prepare flexible, adaptive responses. Rather than using a plan to guide them through a familiar landscape to a known destination, museums must learn to forge on without knowing what lies ahead, dodging and weaving as new obstacles arise, constantly recalibrating their course towards a preferable future.

The Response: Foresight

The world is changing so quickly that our brains are having trouble keeping up. Humans tend towards “presentism” at the best of times, unconsciously assuming that tomorrow and next year will be more or less like today. But with the world changing so radically, that assumption could well guide an organization right off a strategic cliff. On the other hand, when we humans wrap our heads around how much we don’t know about the immediate future, how many ways it could play out, or how bad the outcomes could be, our ability to think about the future may shut down entirely.

Governments and corporations have been using a proven solution to these challenges for decades: strategic foresight. Strategic foresight is the practice of systematically observing current events and using the findings as a springboard for envisioning potential futures. It is a way to both expand the imagination and compress uncertainties into a manageable number of possibilities. Foresight combats apathy by empowering organizations to envision desirable outcomes and identify what they can do to create their preferred future. In contrast, traditional planning is prone to creating a strong but brittle plan designed around one set of assumptions. Foresight helps organizations create a portfolio of actions to deploy as needed and identify strategies that may succeed in a wide variety of circumstances.

Foresight doesn’t require planners to have perfect crystal balls—just good judgement leavened with a healthy scoop of imagination. In fact, one notable strength of foresight is that it can be accurate even when it is imprecise. Organizations can identify the general nature of a critical disruption while being uncertain about the details of how it will play out. For example, many museums are dependent on local, national, and international tourism, all of which have been shut down by the pandemic. But tourism could have been disrupted by other events as well: political or economic sanctions, collapse of public transportation, rising gas prices, etc. Identifying tourism as a critical vulnerability, museums can devise strategies to deploy when tourism is damaged for any reason.



The Newport Restoration Foundation is using [74 Bridge Street](#) in the historic Point neighborhood of Newport, Rhode Island, to test strategies for mitigation and resiliency in the face of rising sea levels. Photo courtesy of Newport Restoration.

Strategic foresight is a mature and tested methodology, used for decades in government, academia, and industry. Museums can apply successful practices from these sectors to their own work, by mastering four key skills:

Scanning

As William Gibson said, “The future is already here; it’s just not evenly distributed.” Scanning is the process of looking for bits of that distributed future, in the form of news illustrating what is beginning to happen, hinting at what may become common. Scanning identifies and monitors change, anticipates disruptions, and provides the foundation for understanding the implications of what we observe. The goal of scanning is to notice trends that are just beginning, changes in speed or direction of existing trends, and potentially game-changing events. Broad, playful, eclectic reading of news, social media, research reports, and blogs cultivates a general awareness of trends and disruptions in culture, technology, the economy, the environment, and politics.

Exploring Implications

The news items surfaced in scanning—“scanning hits,” in futurist parlance—form the starting points for exploring how a trend or event might shape the future. For example, a futurist reading an article about

In 2016, the pop-up installation [“Mayor’s Office 2061”](#) imagined what it might be like to live and work in Newport, Rhode Island, in a future shaped by climate change. Photo courtesy Jake Dunagan.

“stereolithography” back in the 1980s might have imagined the future implications of affordable, easy-to-operate 3-D printers. Now, living in that future, such printers play a key role in library and museum maker labs, and enable people around the world to replicate or manipulate objects from museum collections. Recently, *The Washington Post* profiled a new trend—parents pooling their funds to hire tutors to provide in-person instruction for small groups of students in private [“pandemic learning pods.”](#) As the author noted, this trend could fuel the rise of homeschooling and accelerating inequities in education. What about the long-term implications—could museums serve as the primary learning site for such pods? How might that role supplement, or supplant, the traditional school field trip in a future in which public schools have fewer resources?

Creating Visions

Strategic foresight envisions the future not as one inevitable thing, but as a range of possibilities. A diagram called the Cone of Plausibility [Figure 1] illustrates this concept by showing the ever-expanding boundaries of the possible as we move forward in time. The key to strategic foresight is realizing that we don’t know where in the cone we will end up. Some futures (towards the center of the cone) seem probable because they build on things that are possible now. Others (towards the edge)



may seem unlikely, as they encompass a world very different from today. But if 2020 illustrated anything, it is how rapidly the cone may expand, and how quickly we can veer towards its outer edges.

To explore a range of possibilities within the cone, planners create scenarios—stories describing a set of distinct, plausible futures that encompass the potential environments the organization may face. Such “stories of the future” prompt planners to imagine each scenario in detail, envision how several forces of change might interact, and explore what they, their community, and their organization might experience. Using scenarios also encourages planners to create a history of this future, explaining how we went from the (real) present to this (fictional) future state.

Scenarios are typically created in sets, within a framework that ensures planners explore a range of

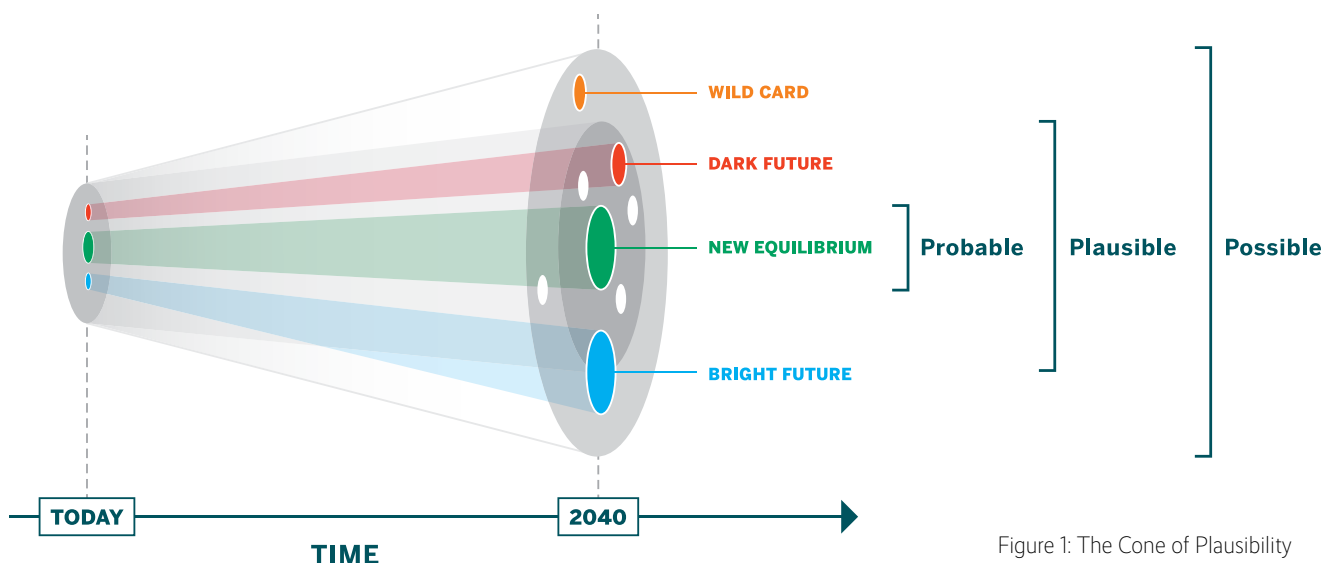


Figure 1: The Cone of Plausibility

possibilities within the cone. For example, the Institute for the Future uses a [framework](#) (initially developed by Jim Dator at the University of Hawaii) consisting of four types of scenarios:

Growth: characterized by abundant and increasing resources. For example, museums might explore a future in which people have more leisure time and discretionary income, students have more choice around their learning environments, and/or there is an increasing demand for immersive digital content.

Constraint: characterized by voluntary or involuntary boundaries. These boundaries could be limitations resulting from scarcity or arising from values and principles. For example, a future in which social contact, tourism, and travel continue to be radically curtailed in the face of the potential for recurring pandemic outbreaks. Or a future in which the US public decides to create a robust public safety net as the basis for mutual wellbeing and prosperity.

Collapse: characterized by the decline or destabilization of existing systems. Despite the name, collapse scenarios are not necessarily dystopian—the failure of a bad system can make way for better alternatives. However, it is disturbingly easy right now to imagine a truly dark future of mass unemployment, hunger, homelessness, increased wealth inequality, and governmental dysfunction. (Indeed, some pundits feel this describes our current probable future.)

Transformation: characterized by a significant and unexpected sideways leap that creates an unfamiliar world. These scenarios are designed to help planners shake up their thinking and question assumptions. For example, museums might think about a future with high unemployment in which the US has instituted a universal basic income, leading many people to search for volunteer opportunities to do meaningful work.

These stories are not meant to be predictions—they are planning tools, compressing innumerable possible futures into a manageable number of alternatives, covering a range of outcomes for the most important

forces of change. By expanding the range of possibilities, they help planners guard against shared assumptions, and avoid either overly optimistic or pessimistic thinking. Per Gibson's observation, elements of these scenarios may end up unequally distributed throughout the world, based on local conditions. The future your museum experiences will most probably contain elements of each of the stories you explore.

Making Choices

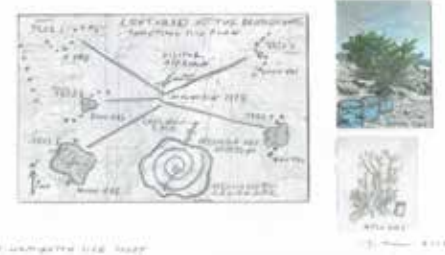
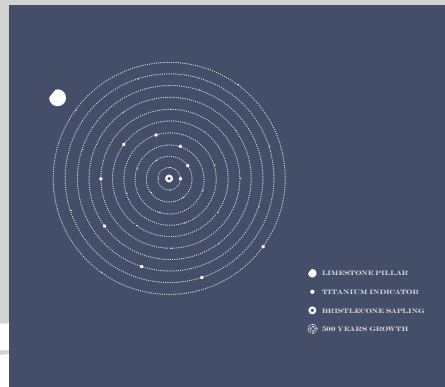
The goal of planning is to help organizations take action, rather than merely being acted on, and to act in ways likely to produce good outcomes. Through the choices they make, museum planners may be able to influence our path through the Cone of Plausibility. They can certainly influence how well their organization adapts to the future it inhabits. By creating plans based on foresight, organizations can prepare for success in the face of uncertainty, by:

- ❖ Devising strategies that may be successful in a wide variety of circumstances.
- ❖ Recognizing inflection points—times in which particular scenarios become more likely—and shifting their response accordingly.
- ❖ Identifying undesirable potential outcomes, and what they can do to make these outcomes less likely.
- ❖ Most importantly: creating a vision for their preferred future—what they want their organization, community, and country to become—and identifying what actions they can take to make that vision come true.

Integrating These Practices into Strategic Planning

Plans based on one anticipated future are brittle and prone to failure if the underlying assumptions turn out to be wrong. Many a strategic plan has met its demise as the economy shifted, popular tastes changed, or new technologies presented unforeseen challenges and opportunities.

By contrast, plans that acknowledge the many ways the world could evolve tend to be resilient. Such plans may include contingencies and back-ups. They are flexible enough to take advantage of serendipity. The habit of



The Nevada Museum of Art and the Long Now Foundation commissioned artist and experimental philosopher Jonathon Keats to create *Centuries of the Bristlecone*, a living calendar which uses a bristlecone pine tree to record time over the course of five thousand years. Photo of Mt. Washington bristlecones by Ian von Coller. Conceptual drawings and renderings by Jonathon Keats.

planning in the context of multiple futures cultivates an organizational culture that is agile, responsive, and skilled at navigating change.

Integrating the skills of strategic foresight into a continual process of planning will help museums use this agility to manage the coming years of intense and rapid change. Rather than “writing a plan” for the next year, museums need to create provisional plans for the coming week, month, year, and five years, while giving some thought to how the world may evolve over the next two decades.

A Framework for Action

The four key elements of strategic foresight—scanning, exploring implications, creating visions, and making choices—can be adopted by museums of any size. While a large museum might dedicate significant time to the process and hire outside expertise, a small museum can make meaningful use of strategic foresight with a modest investment of time on the part of existing staff and volunteers. Regardless of a museum’s size or budget, it can integrate foresight into its planning through these seven steps:

1. Familiarize leadership—board and staff—with the idea of foresight. Build a shared understanding of what foresight is and what it can do for the museum.
2. Embed foresight into the organization via board and staff (assignments), processes (agendas, teams, norms) and systems (planning and evaluation).
3. Establish a standing team (cross-departmental, from all levels of staff) dedicated to strategic foresight—charged with monitoring important trends and uncertainties, leading the creation of scenarios, and identifying opportunities for action.
4. Identify the trends and events that could have the biggest impact on the museum and its community.
5. Consider four distinct scenarios exploring futures that could result from these trends and events—using or adapting existing scenarios created for the field (see resources below) or writing your own. Keep these scenarios alive by modifying them as appropriate to keep up with current events.
6. Craft strategies based on these scenarios: which are likely to be effective under a wide range of circumstances? Which could you implement as it becomes clear what route the future is taking?
7. Implement a continuous process of planning rooted in foresight and revised on a regular basis in response to changes in your environment.

Museum Examples

In 2016, [Catalyzing Newport](#), guided by cultural organizations including the Newport Art Museum, the Rhode Island Historical Society, the International Tennis Hall of Fame, and the Preservation Society of Newport County, commissioned “Mayor’s Office 2061,” a pop-up installation imagining what it might be like to live and work in Newport in the future. Working from a scenario written by futurist Jake Dunagan, designers worked with local museum staff, artists, and students to help the public envision the effects of rising sea levels on their community. This initiative was sponsored by the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities.

In 2019, staff of the [Wardlaw Museum](#) at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland used foresight tools to think about the opening of their new building, work through implications of potential scenarios, and reduce the chance of undesirable outcomes. As Director Katie

Eagleton wrote, “Using playful approaches to think about the future of our work and our museum helped the team see things differently. But even more importantly, it gave us a stronger sense as a team that whatever happened—whether we’d foreseen it or not—we could pull through it with our combined skills and ideas.”

The [Nevada Museum of Art](#) and the Long Now Foundation have commissioned conceptual artist and experimental philosopher Jonathon Keats to create the installation [Centuries of the Bristlecone](#). Sited on Long Now property atop Mount Washington in Nevada, this living calendar uses living bristlecone pines to measure time over the course of five thousand years by overturning stone pillars as they grow. “Through time,” Keats writes, “each bristlecone will bear witness to human activity in the Anthropocene. The meaning of the living calendar will change with the changes we bring to the environment.”

Resources

- [Dispatches from the Future of Museums](#) (Center for the Future of Museums). A free weekly e-newsletter that helps museums with their scanning by presenting a selection of news about culture, technology, the economy, the environment, and policy. Subscribe [here](#).
- [Navigating Uncertain Times: A Scenario Planning Toolkit for the Arts and Culture Sector](#) (The Wallace Foundation, 2020). This [report](#) and [toolkit](#) released by the Wallace Foundation and developed by AEA Consulting are designed to help arts and culture organizations approach planning for a future marked by various uncertainties, including the far-reaching effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, social justice movements, climate change, emerging technologies, and other unforeseen circumstances.
- [What Happens Next?](#) (Institute for the Future, 2020). A set of four post-pandemic scenarios exploring economic growth, health constraints, political collapse, and social transformation.
- [Three Futures of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States January 1, 2022](#) (The Millennium Project, 2020). These scenarios, set in January 2022, explore what forecasters identified as the best possible, worst possible, and most likely state of the pandemic by that time.
- [An event or an era? Resources for social sector decision-making in the context of COVID-19](#) (Monitor Institute by Deloitte, 2020). The report summarizes what we know so far about how the pandemic will play out, identifies critical uncertainties, and provides an excellent overview of using scenarios in general to guide planning.
- [TrendsWatch: The Scenario Edition](#) (American Alliance of Museums, 2018). Presents four stories of potential futures to support museum planning.

Four Scenarios of 2025

Here are four mini-scenarios describing what the post-pandemic world could be like in 2025, with thoughts on how museums might adapt to each. Use these brief sketches as the seeds for longer narratives, building out these futures and envisioning how your museum might respond, and as inspiration for other stories you may want to explore in your planning.



GROWTH

Back to Business as Usual

The US emerged from the pandemic profoundly damaged but with its essential systems and infrastructure largely intact. An effective and well-disseminated vaccine, paired with a national campaign promoting safe behavior, resulted in the COVID-19 virus being effectively suppressed in 2021. While the economy in 2025 has yet to rebound to pre-pandemic levels, robust federal financial relief minimized business closures and buoyed employment through the extended recession. However, the pandemic did leave a permanent mark on the nation. Flight from public to private schools has widened the wealth-based education gap. The normalization of telework and online retail has emptied downtowns. On the upside, the push to improve internet access for poor and rural communities has greatly reduced the digital divide.

In this scenario, museums rebuild their traditional business models with new constraints: international tourism has yet to recover and visitors continue to avoid crowds. Audiences now skew younger, more local, and more frugal. In this stressed economic environment, all traditional revenue sources need to operate at peak efficiency. Museums use tools such as buy-ahead pricing and data analytics to maximize income, and become better at monetizing their digital products and services.



CONSTRAINT

Interdependence

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the fragility of a country whose critical systems—food, transportation, care, city services—fail to support vulnerable communities. Having learned this lesson, in 2021 the new presidential administration created the position of “US Secretary of the Future,” tasked with leading efforts to strengthen American resilience and sustainability. The resulting “New New Deal” pivoted the US away from privatization and back towards robust public funding of essential services—transportation, education, universal health care, and public colleges. The nationally mandated minimum wage is now configured to be a living wage, as determined by local conditions. With additional funding from the federal government, many state colleges and historical land-grant universities are tuition-free.

In this scenario, museums emerge as a stabilizing force, helping communities and economies rebuild from the pandemic and buffering society from the ongoing disruptions of the twenty-first century. Museums receive robust support from local, state, and federal government in recognition of their role as public services; from health providers for measurable contribution to health and well-being; and from individuals, businesses, and funders who value what museums do to sustain their communities. Nearly a third of museums receive funding through their formal role in the public school system, serving as classrooms and instructional providers. Museum income is bolstered by insurance reimbursements for the cost of filling prescriptions for museum visits to foster mental and physical health.



COLLAPSE **Survival Mode**

The global COVID-19 pandemic lasted five long years, fueled in the US by “COVID denialism” marked by wide-spread resistance to vaccination, masks, and social distancing. The resulting waves of infection necessitated an ongoing cycle of lockdown by cities and states. Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine banded together to create the “Northern New England COVID-Free Zone,” with state national guards policing the zone border to enforce testing and quarantine. The EU continues to restrict travel from the US, and inbound international tourism is a meager 10 percent of pre-pandemic levels. Primary schools adopted distance learning on a long-term basis, forcing many parents (overwhelmingly women) to leave the workforce to care for school-age children. The extended economic stress caused 40 percent of small businesses across the nation to close, in turn gutting state and local tax revenues.

In this scenario, 20 percent of US museums closed permanently between 2020 and 2025, and surviving museums have depleted their financial reserves. High unemployment further depressed museum salaries, and many museums shed “unprofitable” parts of their operations (i.e., education, research, object conservation). The most reliable sources of support for museums in 2025 are ultra-wealthy donors, charitable foundations, and major corporations that have prospered despite (or because of) the pandemic.



TRANSFORMATION **Citizen Museology**

Between 2021 and 2025, one in five US jobs were replaced by robots and artificial intelligence as employers invested in pandemic-proof workers. Faced with the need to ameliorate the financial damage of mass unemployment, in 2022 the US implemented a Universal Basic Income sufficient to meet families’ needs for housing and food. As a result, the country experienced a surge in people seeking meaningful unpaid work. Many people, jobless but financially secure, found personal fulfillment through volunteering. The government launched the US Culture Corps in 2023 to channel these volunteers to projects supporting arts, culture, history, and science.

In this scenario, museums are largely staffed by local volunteers who closely reflect the racial and ethnic demographics of their communities. By reducing the overall payroll (which had traditionally comprised up to 70 percent of a museum’s budget), these “citizen museologists” made museums more equitable, more affordable, and more sustainable. Museums devote their remaining salary budget to paying good wages for positions formerly at the bottom of the pay scale. Free admission and free or low-cost programs and services are now the norm, while increased support from volunteers and decreased reliance on earned income has made museums less financially vulnerable in the tepid economy.

Where to Find the Future

Most of the Center for the Future of Museums' content is available for free over the web.

- ❖ **The CFM home page** on the Alliance website includes links to all of our projects and reports, including past editions of *TrendsWatch*.
- ❖ **The CFM Blog** features a mix of essays by CFM's Director, guest posts from people in and around the field, recommended reading and viewing, and commentary on current news. The trends featured in this report will be explored in more depth on the blog throughout 2021.
- ❖ CFM's weekly e-newsletter, "**Dispatches from the Future of Museums**," contains summaries of and links to news items about trends, projections, museum innovations, and tools for the future.
- ❖ **The CFM Twitter** account (@futureofmuseums) features links to news, research, opportunities, and current events.
- ❖ **CFM's Pinterest boards** are devoted to images illustrating the trends we follow, recommended reading and viewing, and glimpses of potential futures.
- ❖ **CFM's Facebook page** shares links and brief commentary on stories related to museums.
- ❖ **CFM's YouTube channel** hosts interviews with museum professionals around the world as well as recordings and screencasts of talks by CFM staff, while our "Favorites" list is a compilation of futures-related videos from a wide variety of sources.
- ❖ **The Alliance Advisors and Speakers Bureau** allows you to book lectures, workshops, and other engagements from CFM and other AAM staff.

About the Author

Elizabeth Merritt is Vice President, Strategic Foresight, and Founding Director of the Center for the Future of Museums at the American Alliance of Museums. While writing this year's report, she contemplated some disruptive events that shaped the course of her life, including:

- ❖ **1969.** Tramping through November sleet in the “Death March” on Washington protesting the Vietnam War. A momentous event which awoke her nine-year-old self to the power of public protest.
- ❖ **1972.** Passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments, leading to the blossoming of athletic opportunities for women. Elizabeth joined the Yale Women's Fencing Team in 1977, her first experience of athletic competence. It stuck. (This is her second year as a member of the US World Veteran's Fencing Team—an honorary status in 2020, due to the pandemic.)
- ❖ **1973.** The OPEC oil embargo. Waiting in long lines to fill the gas tank of the family car (a Humber Super Snipe) impressed on Elizabeth the fact that “natural resources” are limited.
- ❖ **1980.** Hurricane Allen passed over Jamaica, where Elizabeth was working as a diving assistant at Discovery Bay Marine Lab. Her scenarios of a future shaped by more frequent and powerful extreme weather events are colored by the power and violence of that category 4 storm.
- ❖ **1990.** Tim Berners-Lee invents the World Wide Web. While blissfully unaware of this momentous event at the time, Elizabeth cannot imagine doing the work she does today without the ability to romp through the web.
- ❖ **2006.** The one-hundredth anniversary of the American Association of Museums (as it was then known). AAM's planning for this event sparked the creation of the Center for the Future of Museums and Elizabeth's reinvention as a museum futurist.

About Us

The American Alliance of Museums' Center for the Future of Museums (CFM) helps museums explore the cultural, political, and economic challenges facing society and devise strategies to shape a better tomorrow. CFM is a think tank and R&D lab for fostering creativity and helping museums transcend traditional boundaries to serve society in new ways.

The American Alliance of Museums has been bringing museums together since 1906, helping to develop standards and best practices, gathering and sharing knowledge, and providing advocacy on issues of concern to the entire museum community. Representing more than thirty-five thousand individual museum professionals and volunteers, institutions, and corporate partners serving the museum field, the Alliance stands for the broad scope of the museum community.

For more information on CFM and the Alliance, visit aam-us.org.

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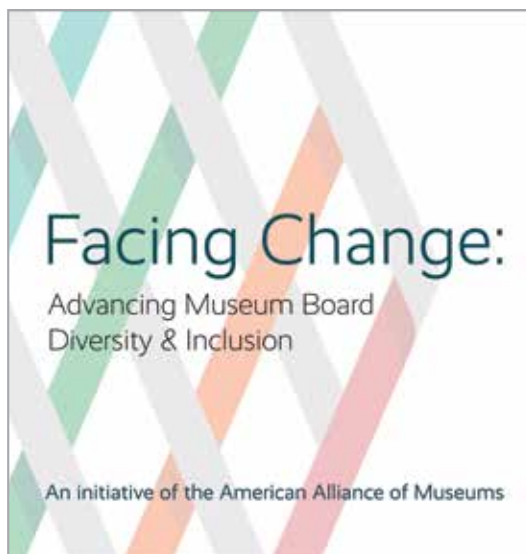
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About Our Corporate and Organizational Partners



Facing Change: Advancing Museum Board Diversity & Inclusion is AAM's field-wide diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) initiative and responds to extensive and multi-year research that underscores the need and desire for change. Facing Change provides the framework, training, and resources for museum leaders and trustees to build inclusive cultures within their institutions' boards that more accurately reflect the communities they serve. Over fifty museums are taking part in this unprecedented national two-year initiative to diversify museum boards and leadership. Participating institutions represent a cross-section of museums of all types and sizes.

Facing Change is generously supported by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Alice L. Walton Foundation, and Ford Foundation.




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“For all of us in the museum community, 2020 brought immeasurable challenges and a host of corresponding changes to adjust to. The research and insights that Elizabeth Merritt and our partners at AAM present in this year’s *TrendsWatch* report is a resource to comprehend this New Normal we find ourselves in, and a guide to plotting a successful path forward. As always, it’s a privilege to support these annual reports; this year it’s a necessity.”

—**Dale Strange**, President & GM, Blackbaud Arts & Cultural

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TREASURES

“I always look forward to reading CFM’s annual *TrendsWatch* report as it provides a window into the world of what concerns museums most. The highlighted trends often provide a spotlight on current perils and exposures and thus potential helpful clues about how we need to modify risk management techniques to better serve the museum community.”

—**Joe Dunn**, President & CEO, Huntington T. Block Insurance Agency, Inc.

Huntington T. Block Insurance manages AAM-recognized insurance programs offering Museum Collections; Exhibitions & Temporary Loans/Fine Art; Property & Casualty; and Trustees/Directors & Officers Liability insurance. Each unique program strives to provide broad coverage at very competitive premiums with service from a knowledgeable and responsive team of risk professionals.



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Help Us Keep an Eye on the Future

TrendsWatch and other Center for the Future of Museums (CFM) activities are supported by American Alliance of Museums member dues and donations. If this report sparked your thinking and you would like to see *TrendsWatch* prosper, please consider supporting the Alliance by joining or making a tax-deductible contribution. For over a decade, CFM has been helping museums explore today's challenges and shape a better tomorrow. We welcome your investment in our shared future.

Support CFM today and help create a better future for museums. Visit aam-us.org/membership or aam-us.org/donate, or call 866-226-2150.

Corporate and foundation support are also welcome. To learn more, contact Eileen Goldspiel, Director of Advancement, at egoldspiel@aam-us.org or 202-218-7702.