



Discussion Guide

Excellence & Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums

It is hoped that this guide stimulates conversation, leads to policy decisions, and promotes the implementation of actions that are both current and pertinent to the group involved. These actions should be informed by a current reading of the 1992 AAM policy document Excellence & Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums (E&E).

E&E was created to encourage a broader understanding of the role of museums in society, embracing both the excellence and care of the collection and the educational benefit to its diverse audiences. The report identifies ten recommendations and associated ideas for implementation. We suggest using the E&E document as the discussion framework, selecting ideas most pertinent to the participants and the time available for discussion. A suggested discussion planning guide follows.

A Definition Discussion:

Below is the introductory paragraph to E&E.

“Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums, is a landmark policy document and the first major report on the educational role of museums ever issued by the American Association of Museums in 1991. The title links two concepts—excellence and equity. By giving these concepts equal value, this report invites museums to take pride in their tradition as stewards of excellence and to embrace the cultural diversity of our nation as they foster their tremendous educational potential. Both elements—excellence and equity—must be embedded in everything we do if museums are to serve a rapidly changing world in a meaningful way.”

Discussion 1:

Take some time to define: excellence, equity, and education in the context of the group’s current circumstances, aspirations, and institutional need. Keep the question of the definition open throughout the discussion to further refine the agreed meaning. Evaluate proposed action steps against the agreed upon definition and be prepared to adjust these steps as the definition evolves throughout the discussion. This conversation of definitions will inform the rest of the discussion.

Background:

“This report was adopted as a policy statement by the American Association of Museums Board of Directors in May 1991. It reflects the work of the 25 member AAM Task Force on Museum Education, which was created by AAM president Joel N. Bloom in September 1989 and charged with describing the critical issues in museum education, recommending action to strengthen and expand the educational role of museums in today’s world, and outlining an ongoing role for museums, professional associations, and other appropriate organizations to ensure that the task force’s recommendations would be carried out.

Bonnie Pitman chaired the Task Force for three years. The 25 members of the Task Force included a diverse group of museum professionals from art, history, natural history, science and children’s museums, as well as different types of professionals, including directors, curators, educators, foundations, professional museum organizations and the support of the dedicated and talented AAM staff. We willingly engaged in open and challenging discussions about topics that often

touched the core of our beliefs and feelings about the profession. Together, we reached a consensus about the principles and recommendations expressed in this report. These recommendations were reviewed and debated by the AAM Standing Professional Committees, the museum professional organizations and the field at large at a town meeting at AAM. The work of the task force was an outgrowth of the Commission on Museums for a New Century, which in its 1984 report asserted the far-reaching potential of museums as educational institutions. Excellence and Equity laid the foundation for the future reports that provided field leadership including *Mastering Community Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, 2002; and *Facing Change*, 2017.

While many reports gather dust rather than generate change, AAM actively worked to facilitate and implement the imperatives of Excellence and Equity. A new Museum Assessment Program—Public Dimension Assessment, or MAP III— provided an avenue for museums to implement the goals expressed in this report. The AAM Accreditation Commission wrote new guidelines to help museums articulate and integrate the issues, concerns, and methods of public service. In the legislative arena, AAM advocated a broader base of funding for museums as educational institutions. Foundations and national funding agencies prepared new programs to fund museums engaging in the broader public service programs addressed in the report. Within the museum profession, the agendas of regional and national professional meetings reflected a heightened awareness of the ideas expressed in this report. Change happened throughout the profession.

Discussion 2:

1. Is this document still relevant in today's changing world? Schedule a period of collective time for each member of the group to read the document and mark the questions and ideas that they find relevant and wish to discuss further.
2. Organize the rest of the allotted time based on the group's interest in particular parts of the document. Generate an agenda based on available time and specific needs. Use the numbers, ideas and suggestion in the order they were created but only discuss those issues that have been selected for the conversation at hand.

The major categories to work from are:

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| 1. Mission | 5. Interpretation | 9. Professional |
| 2. Audience | 6. Collaboration | Development |
| 3. Learning | 7. Decision Making | 10. Leadership |
| 4. Scholarship | 8. Governance | |

Discussion 3:

1. After a pre-determined length of discussion, generate a brain-stormed list of action steps for each discussed issue.
2. Winnow down the list to a realistic but aspirational action list.
3. Create a procedure to turn this list into a realistic action plan.

Discussion 4:

Is the new action list related to the original aspirations of E&E and if not does that matter to the group? For help in determining that here is a list of the documents, group action, and key findings of the E&E report regarding the educational role of museums.

“The title of Excellence and Equity invites museums to take pride in their tradition as stewards of excellence and to embrace the cultural diversity of our nation as they foster their tremendous educational potential.

Excellence and Equity is based on three key ideas:

The commitment to education as central to museum’s public service must be clearly expressed in every museum’s mission and pivotal to every museum’s activity.

Museums must become more inclusive places that welcome diverse audiences, but first they should reflect our society’s pluralism in every aspect of their operations and programs.

Dynamic, forceful leadership from individuals, institutions, and organizations within and outside in the museum community is the key to fulfilling museums’ potential for public service in the coming century.