

## A Primer on Institutional Planning or What We Do, Why We Do It, and How We Know We're Doing It Well



I work at a university — the University of Oregon — that's the U.S. national home of track and field, so let's just imagine that we're competitive runners, on Hayward Field, ready for the whistle to blow. We're clearly at the starting line (of course, it's taken a

lot of preparation to get here), and we know what we have to do. We need to run the path set before us and finish as quickly as possible. If we're successful, we medal and keep practicing to be even faster, so we can medal again. If we didn't medal and want to do better, we'll need to rethink our training and strategy and try it again, or transfer what we've learned to a different race, or....

Institutional, or strategic planning is a lot like this. We set goals based on our history, resources, and aspirations. We get others to help us, inspire us, and keep us strong. We identify what we think we can accomplish and by when—and the steps that help us reach those goals—and we evaluate the results and may even decide to change course based on new challenges and opportunities.

As an Accreditation Commissioner for the American Alliance of Museums, I've discovered that institutional planning is one of the hardest things to get right. Accreditation requires this planning document for a good reason: it tells us how thoughtful the museum is in all areas of its operations and how everyone works together to achieve its goals.

### INSTITUTIONAL PLANNING REQUIRES:

- Determining how the museum will use (and build) its resources to fulfilling its mission and that of its parent institution;
- Understanding and engaging its diverse communities in identifying its goals and attaining them;
- Prioritizing its programs (collections, curatorial, education, facility, etc.) in response to its resources and community needs and interests;
- Evaluating success or failure;
- Affirming professional standards of museum practice (including access and inclusion); and
- Be both aspirational and sustainable.

### WHAT SHOULD BE IN AN INSTITUTIONAL PLAN?

Let's assume this is the only document someone might read to learn about your museum. Here are content areas you might wish to include:

**Mission and Constituencies:** Who are you? Who do you serve? Sometimes, museums just have a mission statement, while at other times, they might have more, including a Belief, Vision, Core Values, etc. All of those are useful to put in here. How do you prioritize your audiences? How were they involved in preparing this plan (focus groups, questionnaires, advisory boards, sharing drafts, etc.)?

**Governance:** Who do you report to? Do you have an advisory board? The institutional plan has to be signed by your governing authority (for accreditation purposes) so it's good to know they've participated in its creation.

**History/Background:** What should we know to understand what you are doing or want to do, the choices you're making? Internally, you might ask: How do you know where you're going, if you don't know where you've been?

**Time Period & Check-ins:** You need to decide how many years your plan should cover. Most plans are three to five years, dependent on whether you are in a climate of change or if things mostly stay the same. Also determine how often you are going to assess how your plan is doing. Is it every month, term, or twice a year? The more time you spend between check-ins, the less likely the plan will be a living document that directs your museum's activities. Unfortunately, it's not unusual to find a museum that only looks at its plan during performance review time and finds that it hasn't actually done what's in it.

**Goals, Point People, Resources, Timeline, and Evaluation:** An institutional plan is realistic and aspirational. It doesn't need to say that you open the doors every day or put on exhibitions. It needs to call out specific goals that are critical to the mission, audiences, and sustainability of your museum and its parent institution. Too many goals can be overwhelming, especially if the director is responsible for most of them. Too few means that not everyone in your organization will have a stake in their success.

## KEY STRATEGIES

**Collections:** does the museum collect, preserve, study, exhibit, and interpret the collection for the benefit of the university curriculum?

**Research & Publications:** does the museum make the collections accessible for research, teaching, and programs.

**Funding & Development:** does the university allocate funds for staff, operations, and facility maintenance?

**Communications & Marketing:** are communications proactive, direct, honest, transparent, and inclusive?

**Visitor Experience:** does the museum provide consistently high-quality programs and customer service?

**Facilities:** does the museum perform effective and efficient maintenance?

**Risk Management:** does the museum implement preventative measures for minimizing risk the collection, human life, and the facility?

**Management & Governance:** does the museum have strong, competent leadership that supports standards of excellence and serve as informed advocates of the museum?

**Human Resources:** does the museum employ and train competent staff and volunteers?

**Ethics, Academic & Professional Standards:** do the museum's employees and volunteers adhere to the highest academic, ethical, and professional standards of the university and ICOM?

You might also ask yourself how your museum will be a better museum if you achieve your goals and prioritize them by potential impact. Through staff retreats, surveys, and focus groups, you can often arrive at those goals that are shared across the organization. You'll then need to decide who will be point person to make sure they're being done, assessing progress, and communicating with others. You'll also need to decide if you have the resources to address the goal or if it can only be done if additional resources are raised. Both can be part of a plan but need to be identified accordingly. For each goal, in addition to noting the point person and resources, you'll need to identify what can be done when to reach your goal, and how success will be evaluated.

Much strategic planning is common sense and both visionary and painstaking work. If you don't do it, your museum won't flourish or you won't be taking advantage of new opportunities. Once you've drafted your plan, review it as a draft with your staff, volunteers, faculty, students, and administrators, donors, and other interested parties. Institutional plans can be primary vehicle for cultivation, so use the opportunity to actually further your goals. In addition to the planning model provided here, you can check the American Alliance of Museum's website for advice or ask other museums for their plans and use those as templates. Every plan is different, just as every museum is different, and when drafted thoughtfully with as much input from as many people you serve as possible, your institutional plan will set you on the path to success.



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