

ALLIANCE REFERENCE GUIDE

Developing a Strategic Institutional Plan

This reference guide aims to help museums develop a strategic institutional plan. A strategic institutional plan is one of the five documents designated as core because they are fundamental for professional museum operations and embody core museum values and practices. The primary goals of this guide are to explain the importance of institutional planning and plans, outline the contents of a strong plan, and provide resources to assist in the creation of the plan. It reflects the standards of the field that all museums should adhere to and aligns with the requirements of the Alliance's [Core Documents Verification](#) and [Accreditation](#) programs.

What It Is

A strategic institutional plan (often referred to as a strategic plan or long-range plan) is a document that is multi-year, aligned with the museum's mission, and contains measurable goals and methods by which the museum can evaluate success. A plan should be current and aligned with the museum's mission. A strong plan includes prioritized action steps, establishes timelines, and assigns responsibilities for implementing the plan. It also assesses and addresses resources needed to see the plan to fruition. It is often supplemented by an implementation or an operating plan that puts the decisions made in the institutional plan into practice.

Why It Is Important

A comprehensive strategic planning process produces a plan that reflects a mutually agreed-upon vision of where a museum is going and what it wants to achieve. It ensures this vision meets the needs of its audiences and community and requires that a museum identify how it will obtain the resources to fulfill this vision. The plan explains the museum's goals and establishes strategies by which it will achieve them; ensures that the museum acquires, develops and allocates its human, financial, and physical resources in a way that advances its mission and sustains its financial viability; and establishes measures by which the museum will assess its achievements.

Required Elements of a Strategic Institutional Plan

Each core document has a set of required elements associated with it that are based on the [Core Standards](#). When writing or revising their strategic institutional plans, museums should ensure that they align with those standards and contain the required elements listed below.

Required Elements of a Strategic Institutional Plan:

- » Current and multi-year
- » Aligned with current mission
- » Includes a summary of the planning process
- » Articulates a strategic vision and goals as well as action steps to achieve them
- » Covers all relevant areas of museum operations
- » Identifies the human and financial resources required to carry out the plan
- » Assigns responsibility for completion of action steps
- » Includes information about how success will be measured and evaluated
- » Bears date approved by the governing authority

Institutions with parent organizations:

- » Plan references and aligns with the strategic plan of the parent organization

Museums meet these requirements in different ways. Some incorporate all of the required elements into one document, while others divide it into a document that lists the broad vision and goals and another one with the implementation information (timelines, assignments of responsibility, resource identification, etc.).

Anatomy of an Institutional Plan

Institutional plans should be mission-based and comprehensive, integrating other types of plans (e.g., development plans, interpretive plans, collections plans) into overall strategic planning and setting prioritized and realistic goals. They rely on an organizational culture of thoughtful, continuous planning that properly distributes resources in order to accomplish goals.

There is no one perfect template for any document. Each of the museum's documents should be influenced by its unique history, community, collections, and governance. Interrelated policies and plans contribute to a cohesive vision and mission. While strategic institutional plans vary in their organization and content, listed below are elements commonly found in these policies.

Introduction

It can be helpful to open the plan with background information on the museum: its mission statement, its vision and values

statements (if it has them), a short organizational history, etc. The plan may have a diverse audience, from the staff to the governing authority to new and existing

stakeholders, so incorporating this information ensures that everyone starts with a basic understanding of the institution's past and present. If the institution has reviewed or changed its mission statement as part of the planning process, that should be indicated. This section may also be where the museum indicates its vision for where it will be at the end of the strategic plan, when it has successfully achieved the goals contained in it. This section may also be where the museum indicates its vision for where it will be at the end of the strategic plan, when it has successfully achieved the goals contained in it.

Overview of Operations, Programs, and Staffing

The museum may include an overview of operational information in its plan, potentially including information about its facilities, key activities and programs, important relationships with parent or other organizations, and a summary of its organizational hierarchy and staffing. Gathering this information may help the planning team to align the work set out in the plan with the organization's capacity and to make strategic choices about the allocation of resources as it works through the planning process. For example, if the museum sets a goal to increase its educational programs, it may need to consider whether its current staffing level and structure can support the new activities.

Overview of the Planning Process

Providing some background on how the plan was developed, who was involved, and what challenges and opportunities came to light will give context for the decisions and action steps that follow. It is important that

museums create a process that is inclusive of all key stakeholders—internal and external—and are transparent about how their thoughts were incorporated.

Other Planning Documents/Information

Institutional planning needs to be comprehensive, taking into consideration all aspects of the museum's operations. Often, the resulting plan will integrate or reference information from other plans that have been created to direct the activities of one department or area (e.g., collections, development, facilities). This helps to create consistency and cohesion in the museum's activities.

Goals, Strategies, and Action Steps

This section, usually the longest in the plan, contains the key information about the museum's goals and the action steps that will allow it to achieve them. It outlines what the museum is going to do, who is going to do what, when it is going to happen, how much it will cost, and how it will be funded. This section can be thought of as a hierarchy that moves from a broad goal to specific action steps and then to implementation information for each step (unless that information is contained in a separate document). For each step, museums must specifically assign responsibility to a person or group, analyze what human and financial resources will be required to complete it, and indicate when it will be completed. If a measure of success is not inherent in each action step, that measure should be indicated as well.

Evaluation and Update Plan

Evaluation helps museums decide when a plan needs to be updated, when strategies need to change, or when priorities should shift. It is useful to explain how and how often the institution will evaluate its progress

against the plan and make any necessary changes. A plan should not be written and then put on the shelf for the three, five, or other number of years it addresses; it should be a living document that is part of a culture of constant planning and evaluation.

Process

The planning process will vary from institution to institution depending on museum size, capacity, stakeholders, available resources, and other factors, but the outcome should be the same: a strategic institutional plan that describes a clear vision for the museum's future as well as the steps required to achieve it.

Keep in mind that:

- » *The process of creating and implementing a plan is as important and beneficial to the museum as the plan itself.* The plan may seem like the end result but, in actuality, the end result is a broad understanding of the museum's understanding of the museum's goals and how it will work to achieve them.
- » *There are many different ways to plan.* Every museum has its own set of challenges which require thoughtfulness in planning. Museums should take time to explore their circumstances and articulate them accurately in their plan.
- » *Planning should be integrated in order to be effective.* Each of the museum's official documents should speak to one another consistently and comprehensively to support the museum's mission.

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

Here are steps in the development of a strategic institutional plan:

- » *Assemble an institutional planning team and establish their responsibility, authority and a timeline for planning.* It is important that a museum first identify the scope of the planning process. This will include identifying who will participate in the planning process and whether the museum will bring in a facilitator to assist in the process or conduct it without outside help.
- » *Consider the audience for the plan.* Thinking about who the plan will be read by will influence how it is written. Museums can choose to provide different versions or pieces of the plan to different audiences. For instance, funders or museum members may only need

the introductory materials and high-level goals, while the staff receives the full document including all of the implementation information.

- » *Collect feedback from internal and external groups.* A key part of the planning process is considering who the museum's internal and external stakeholders are and how they can be asked to share their perspective. Most museums include the governing authority, staff, and volunteers in planning, but institutions should also think about their members, communities, audiences, and other key groups. Different stakeholders can be consulted using different methods depending on the level of input that seems appropriate.
- » *Assess current performance.* Museums may find it helpful to look at internal information (e.g., financial reports, attendance data, surveys) and external information (e.g., financial performance and other data from similar institutions, regional demographics, local tourism data) to assess the museum's situation. Planning team members can also assess the current state of the physical plant, collections storage, exhibits, programs, fundraising, and other areas the plan may need to address.
- » *Use interviews and assessments to help inform the vision and goals.* The information obtained in the previous steps should be brought together and analyzed for recurring trends and themes. These will help the planning team as they begin to shape the overall vision contained in the plan as well as the specific goals. Every museum will handle the process of moving from input to plan differently, but all should emerge with achievable and prioritized goals, strategies, and action steps.
- » *Create timelines, resource analyses, and assignments of responsibility for action steps.* Once the goals are established and action steps elaborated, the steps should be followed up with deadlines, an analysis of the resources required to complete them and where those resources (human and financial) will come from, and metrics for success.
- » *Review and edit the draft plan.* The plan may need several rounds of edits before it is finalized, as drafts should be reviewed and comments solicited from key stakeholder groups. Once feedback has been incorporated and the document is finalized, it should be formally approved by the governing authority. These steps will ensure that the plan has broad buy-in, making it more likely that the work it sets out will be accomplished.
- » *Celebrate, implement, and continuously evaluate.* The hard work that has gone into writing the plan should be recognized when the plan is finalized. Then, the work of implementing it and establishing a system for continuous evaluation should be undertaken.

Where to Find Out More

Content for this reference guide came from *Secrets of Institutional Planning*, edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt and Victoria Garvin, and *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*, edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt.

- » [*National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*](#), edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt (AAM Press, 2008)

This guide is an essential reference work for the museum community, presenting the ideals that should be upheld by every museum striving to maintain excellence in its operations. An introductory section explains how virtually anyone associated with museums will find the book valuable, from trustees to staff to funders and the media. It is followed by a full outline of the standards. Throughout the book is commentary by Elizabeth E. Merritt, director of the Alliance's Center for the Future of Museums. This publication is available as a [free PDF to all museum members](#).

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

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

- » [*DIY Strategic Planning for Small Museums*](#), by Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko (AASLH, 2008)

From the technical leaflet series published by the American Association of State and Local History Organizations, this resource elaborates a do-it-yourself process for strategic planning that is particularly useful for smaller museums but applicable to institutions of all sizes.

- » [*Sample Documents*](#)

AAM's online sample document collection is a valuable resource for Tier 3 member museums. The collection contains more than 1,000 samples of policies, plans and forms from museums of all types and sizes, most of which were written by accredited museums. Tier 3 museum members can use sample documents to stimulate a conversation about issues and challenges facing the museum and to explore how different museums approach issues. Using the sample documents should not replace the process of joining staff, governing authority, and stakeholders in fruitful and thoughtful planning and policy-making.

Core Standards

Having a strategic institutional plan helps museums adhere to standards for mission and planning. Those standards and the other Core Standards for museums are available on the [Alliance's website](#).