

## ALLIANCE ACTIVITY GUIDE

# Mission Activity

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A museum's mission is its yardstick for accountability and everything the museum does is measured against it. A mission statement articulates the museum's educational focus and purpose, and its role and responsibility to the public and its collections. It gives the governing authority a foundation from which it can strategize. Ideally, the mission is consulted every time action is taken or a decision is made. This activity guide helps a museum understand and demonstrate how well staff and governing authority know its mission.

## Museum Assessment Program

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Since 1981, the Museum Assessment Program (MAP) has helped museums strengthen operations, plan for the future and meet national standards through self-study and peer review. Supported through a cooperative agreement between the Alliance and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, MAP helps museums do one or more of the following: prioritize goals; plan for the future; strengthen communications between staff, board and other constituents; and build credibility with potential funders and donors.

Part of the MAP process includes a self-study questionnaire, which uses questions and activities to provoke exploration. The activities provide museums with the opportunity to assess the knowledge about its operations in action. The activities are designed to be conducted as group exercises in order to stimulate dialogue about issues and challenges that the museum faces. MAP participants assemble an assessment team to work through all of the activities and self-study questions. Museums not participating in MAP may find it helpful to create a team of appropriate participants for each activity.

This activity is one of many designed by MAP as part of the self-study process. It ranks highly with program participants and has been used in over 2,000 assessments.

# Characteristics of an Effective Mission Statement

From *Museum Mission Statements: Building a Distinct Identity*, page 13:

An effective mission statement reflects the strategic thinking of the organization's leader to define an appropriate role for the institution. The mission statement reveals the organization's understanding of the environment in which it exists, the relevance and appropriateness of the role it has selected for itself, and its relationships to its constituencies and communities. A well crafted mission statement is a key governance and management tool.

A good mission conveys:

- » how the organization uniquely relates to the various facets of its public and communities
- » how it enhances the well-being of others and improves the quality of life
- » who benefits from the result of its work
- » what service it provides

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## Materials

- » Notepads and pens or pencils
- » Copies of your mission statement, if you have one

## Participants

Suggested participants include a range of different level staff, volunteers, members of the governing authority and stakeholders.

## Part 1: Staff

If you have no written mission statement, have the participants walk through the museum and ask staff to describe in their own words the museum's purpose, its reason for existence and whom it serves. Record the responses. Convene the group to discuss the responses.

If you have a long-standing, recently approved or recently revised mission statement, have the group walk through the museum and ask staff to paraphrase the mission statement. Do they know where to find

a written copy? Ask how they see their jobs reflected in the statement. How does what they do help fulfill the mission? Record all responses. Have the group meet to discuss the responses.

During the discussion, consider the following:

- » Are you effectively communicating your mission internally?
- » Do staff and governing authority have consistent views of mission or do they vary widely? What are the implications?
- » How might you improve internal communication if you are not satisfied with how familiar staff and governing authority are with the mission?

## Part 2: Governing Authority

If you have a governing authority that can be involved in this activity, ask them the same questions you used in Part 1. Then have the group meet to discuss the responses as above.

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During discussion, consider the following, in addition to those considerations listed above:

- » Does your mission statement demonstrate these characteristics? If not, is this a problem, or is it meeting your needs at this time?
- » What might make your mission statement more effective?
- » How would you go about incorporating the characteristics into your mission statement?

## Part 3: The Effective Mission Statement

Convene a group of staff and members of the governing authority to compare your mission statement with the “Characteristics of an Effective Mission Statement” found on page 2 this activity guide. This group can be the original participants or other staff, volunteers, members of the governing authority or stakeholders. Have each person compare the mission statement to the characteristics. Have the group discuss similarities and differences, and how the mission statement is being used as a management and governance tool.

## Core Documents Verification

The [Core Documents Verification](#) program verifies that an institution has an educational mission and policies and procedures in place that reflect standard practices of professional museums, as articulated in *National Standards and Best Practice for U.S. Museums* and used in the Accreditation program. A mission statement is one of five core documents that are fundamental for basic professional museum operations. Use this Alliance activity guide to help your museum develop or strengthen its mission and its understanding of mission. For more on mission, please see the Alliance's reference guide on this topic.

## Standards

The Alliance's standards address "big picture" issues about how museums operate. For the most part, they define broad outcomes that can be achieved in many different ways and are flexible enough to accommodate a diverse museum field. These standards can be achieved in tandem with standards issued by other organizations that address aspects of museum operations or the museum profession.

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### **Adhering to standards is achievable by all types of museums.**

Standards provide a common language that enables museums to self-regulate, demonstrate professionalism and increase accountability. Policy-makers, media, philanthropic organizations, donors and members of the public use standards to assess a museum's performance and evaluate its worthiness to receive public support and trust. Simply stated by Elizabeth Merritt in *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*, "Standards are fundamental to being a good museum, a responsible nonprofit and a well-run business."

Having a strong mission statement helps museums adhere to standards. For more on standards, visit the Alliance's website at [www.aam-us.org](http://www.aam-us.org).

## Where to Find Out More

The [Museum Assessment Program](#) (MAP) helps small and mid-sized museums strengthen operations, plan for the future and meet national standards through self-study and a site visit from a peer reviewer. IMLS-funded MAP grants are non-competitive and provide \$4,000 of consultative resources and services to participating museums. For more information, visit [www.aam-us.org](http://www.aam-us.org).

- » [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. It includes a full outline of the standards, including the overarching Characteristics of Excellence for U.S. Museums and the seven areas of performance they address. 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 for all museum members](#).

- » [Museum Mission Statements: Building a Distinct Identity](#), edited by Gail Anderson (AAM Press, 1998)

This book provides step-by-step guidance in writing or evaluating a museum mission statement and how to use it effectively. Generously supplemented with 79 outstanding mission statements from a wide variety of museums, the report is useful to museums of any size or type.

- » [Sample Documents](#)

The Information Center's sample document collection is a unique and 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 members can request sample documents from the Information Center in order to stimulate a conversation about issues and challenges facing the museum and to explore how different museums approach different 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.