

# Credit Where Credit is Due

## The Case for Credit Panel Standards

Paul Stavast, Hannah Sharp-Wang

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**Paul Stavast** is Director of the Museum of Peoples and Cultures at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.  
[paul\\_stavast@byu.edu](mailto:paul_stavast@byu.edu)

**Hannah Sharp-Wang** is pursuing an MA degree at Brigham Young University in sociocultural anthropology and a graduate certificate in museum practices. [han.sharp6@gmail.com](mailto:han.sharp6@gmail.com)

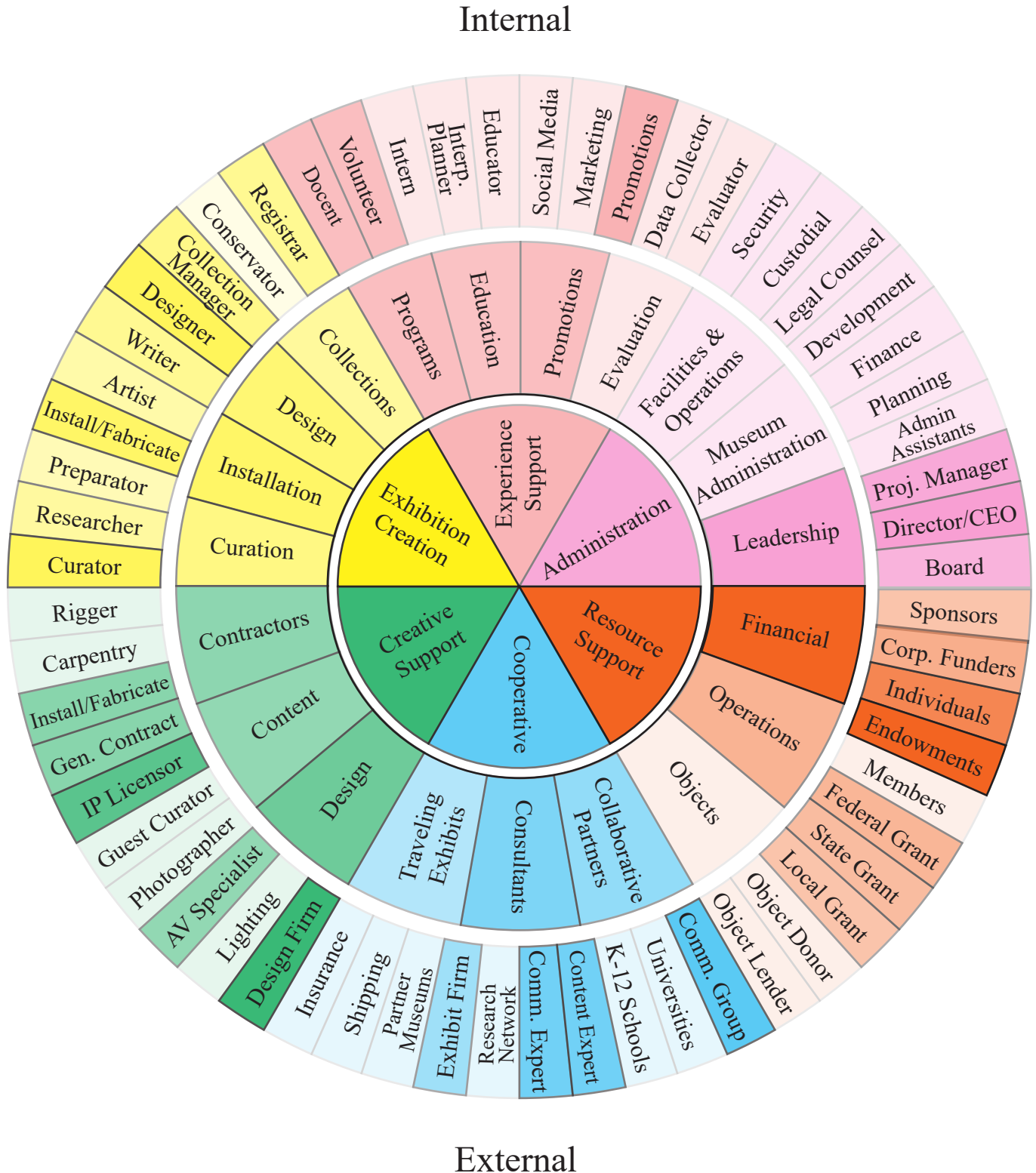
Credit panels are an expected but taken-for-granted element in most exhibitions, yet the American Alliance of Museum's *Standards for Museum Exhibitions and Indicators of Excellence* does not address credit panel content, style, or even their purpose.<sup>1</sup> Because exhibitions are typically an institution's most recognizable public feature, the lack of credit panel standards is particularly striking. In this article, we explore credit panel usage and propose an initial framework for institutions to evaluate their credit panels. We argue that credit panels should be specifically addressed in updated standards as an essential component of an excellent exhibition.

### Credit Panels Literature Review

While museums acknowledge/attribute credit in many ways, in this article we focus on panels that solely give credit to those whose efforts brought about an exhibition and are included as part of an exhibition. We refer to these as credit panels.

Manuals on writing and developing exhibitions often contain extensive discussion on various types of labels. However, when a publication does specifically address credit panels, the brief descriptions lack discussion of what recognition entails or best practices for producing credit panels.<sup>2</sup> For example, writer and educator Beverly Serrell, whose book *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* is a noted standard book in the exhibition field, categorizes credit panels as noninterpretive and covers them in a single paragraph of 70 words.<sup>3</sup> In the 19 years between editions of *Exhibit Labels*, no change was made to the credit panel explanation. Designer and former museum director Tom Klobe, in *Exhibitions: Concept, Planning and Design*, includes an even shorter paragraph on credit panels, which closely mirrors Serrell's description.<sup>4</sup> Several other publications on exhibitions do not even address credit panels, including the first edition of Barry and Gail Dexter Lord's *Manual of Museum Exhibitions* (2002) and its 2014 second edition.<sup>5</sup>

**Fig. 1.** Wheel depicting exhibition roles and related categories on surveyed panels. Color intensity reflects frequency of inclusion.



Both Serrell and Klobe include the following characteristics of credit panels in their description. Panels should:

- recognize the many people involved
- be placed somewhere in the exhibition (Klobe suggests at the end)
- be small
- contribute to staff morale
- help visitors understand the exhibition presentation
- assist with accountability

If these limited characteristics are taken as something like a standard, there are many questions that remain to be addressed. Whose contribution is worthy of recognition? How much contribution results in adding a person to the credits? What layout and formats are best practice? What is the optimal placement for credit panels? Clearly, the field needs a more thorough and unified standard from which to develop best practices. We provide preliminary research on the current state of credit panels to draw attention to this overlooked area and its potential impact on the museum field. We then provide a framework for museums to evaluate their own practices to reflect on what aspects could be improved.

### **Findings: Current State of Credit Panels**

There is no existing systematic research specifically on credit panels. It is possible to find compilations of credit panels as example pieces, but these compilations are self-contributed, likely resulting in a skewed representation.<sup>6</sup> We wondered what we would find “in the wild.” To gather initial anecdotal evidence, we visited 25 institutions in our local area and beyond on recent travels (13 in Utah, six in Washington DC, four in

South Dakota, and one each in Arkansas and Wyoming). We sought out museums of various sizes, collecting areas, and formats (art, historical site, zoo, history, natural history, archaeology). The sample includes 53 different exhibitions from these institutions. We analyzed the content of the panels to see what roles were represented, how many people were represented, whether internal and/or external roles were included, and order of representation.

To visualize our findings, we generated a concentric wheel of positions involved in creating exhibitions (fig. 1, p. 103). The wheel is divided in half between internal roles (upper half) and external roles (lower half). Each half is then subdivided into three sections, with physical contributions on the left and supporting contributions on the right. The three rings progress with the outer ring being more specific and the center the most general. The positions and roles that we include were selected deductively based on lists of museum positions and inductively based on the credit panels in our sample.<sup>7</sup>

The intensity of colors on this wheel represents the frequency with which each of the positions or roles appeared on panels in our survey. For this analysis, we only counted whether or not a credit panel included any of each of the positions/roles. The simple presence of a category was counted rather than how many individuals may have been included in that category.<sup>8</sup> From our observations and the visualization of the wheel, we discovered a number of interesting patterns.

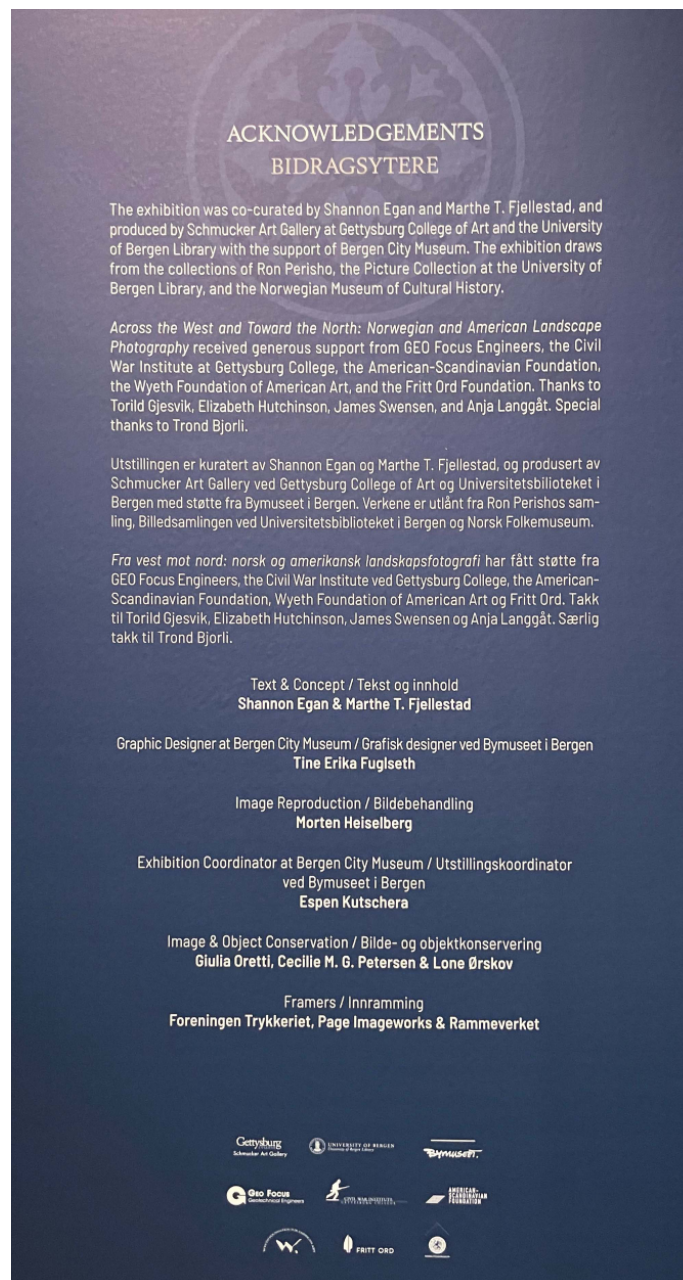
The average number of roles/positions credited per exhibition was 3.4. The highest number of roles credited for a single

exhibition was 15, which included internal and external positions. However, this panel was from an exhibition at an institution with over 400 employees, where it is likely that significantly more than 15 types of roles were necessary to produce the exhibition.

Fifty of the 53 exhibitions included credits for resource support. We found external donors, funders, and sponsors were most likely to be credited, above museum staff. On the internal side, exhibition creators (curators, designers, and installers) were the most common positions to be credited.

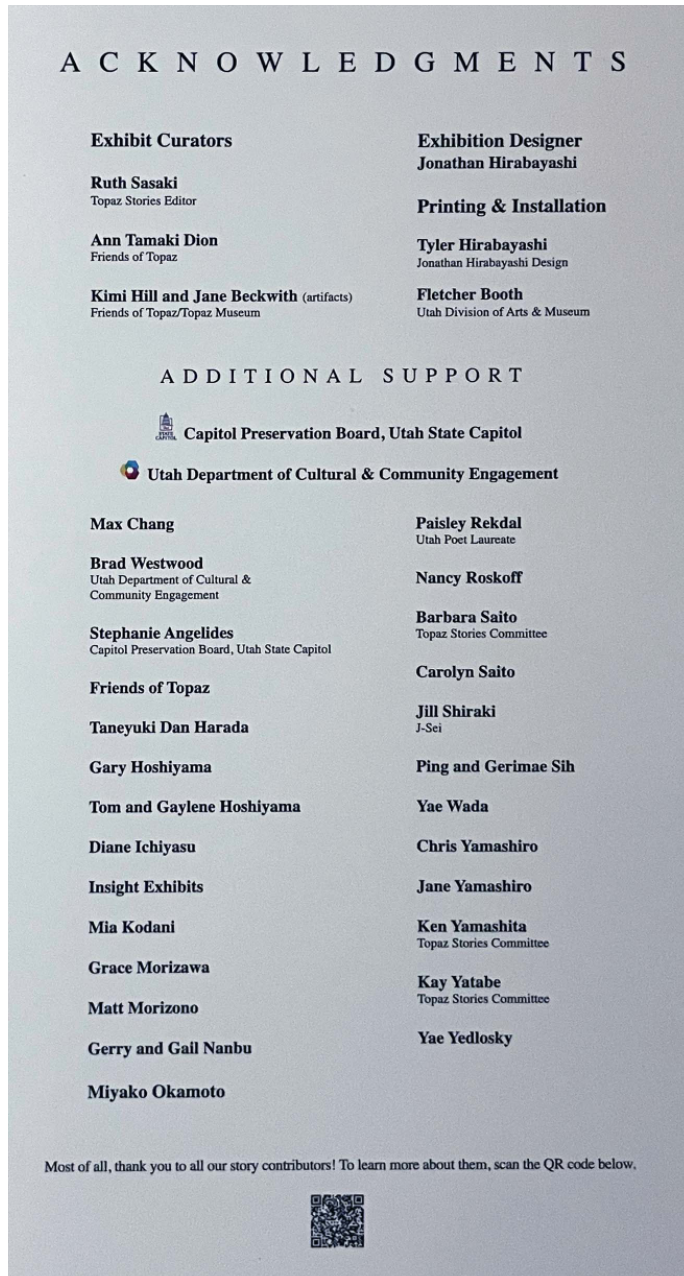
We also found that museums hosting traveling exhibitions often only gave credit to the lending institution as an entity, but not to the individuals at the lending institution who actually created the exhibition. In contrast, **figure 2** shows a credit panel from an international traveling exhibition that notes specific individuals from the originating institutions and recognizes them in two languages. However, none of the traveling exhibition credit panels in our sample identified those who planned, prepared, or installed the exhibition at the hosting institution.

Interestingly, we found that videos included in exhibitions often used best practices for film credits – scrolling credits acknowledging the contributions to the film of curators, community partners, AV support, etc. However, these same exhibitions did not have credit panels acknowledging contributions to the exhibition itself. Even though employees or external support personnel likely worked on both the exhibition and the film, they were only credited for the film.



**Fig. 2.** Credit panel from a traveling exhibition that acknowledges source staff. However, we noted that host institution staff efforts are not acknowledged in the exhibition.





**Fig. 3.** The QR code on this panel provides an option to read brief biographies of survivors and descendants of the Topaz Relocation Center who contributed to the exhibition *Topaz Stories* at the Utah State Capitol Building but were not included on the panel itself.

We noted considerable variation in the length and spacing allotted to credit panels. Some appeared to list a minimal amount of information. Others, like the panel in [figure 3](#), explored options such as QR codes or websites to be more inclusive.

We do not share these findings to suggest that every museum must include each position on the wheel on all credit panels. Rather, we want to provide a glimpse into how credit panels are generally being used. One of our main findings is that credit panels do not follow any standards – there is considerable variation among all the characteristics mentioned above. Because of the wide variation, we do not feel that the field is prepared to discuss what constitutes effective credit panels. We do propose a framework that individual museums could use to evaluate their credit panels to assess areas that should be considered when standards are developed.

### Framework for Evaluating Credit Panels

Borrowing heavily from the concepts presented for evaluating exhibitions in Beverly Serrell’s 2006 book *Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence*, our proposed framework consists of criteria and aspects.<sup>9</sup> As Serrell defines them, “Criteria are the standards by which exhibitions are to be assessed.... Aspects are the building blocks of Criteria. They are defining qualities for a Criterion.”<sup>10</sup> We propose the following four criteria for assessing credit panels. Since every museum has different needs, these criteria are intentionally vague and meant to be adapted to each museum’s unique circumstances.

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**Accurate:** An excellent credit panel presents a true representation of the people and organizations involved in bringing about an exhibition.

**Inclusive/Comprehensive:** An excellent credit panel is inclusive of the variety of efforts made towards an exhibition. All organizational levels and collaborators, internal and external, whose work notably impacted the exhibition are included.

**Visible:** An excellent credit panel is visible and accessible to exhibition patrons as part of the exhibition experience and each person/entity listed is identifiable and not obscured in any manner.

**Just:** An excellent credit panel recognizes actual contributions made

and does not position or rank people above their actual contributions.

To operationalize the criteria, a museum needs to establish and then assess the aspects on which the criteria rely. In our Criteria for Assessing Credit Panels Framework (fig. 4, p. 109), each aspect is scored on a five-point scale.<sup>11</sup> A museum using the framework would evaluate the scores to determine which criteria could be addressed internally. We have intentionally not defined what constitutes significant contributions, reserving that until the broader field addresses credit panels. In the meantime, we feel it best to let each museum determine markers of success for themselves. We anticipate that any future standards will provide specific direction on how to determine significance of contribution and benchmarks of excellence. The impact of such standards will affect more than the exhibition development process.

### **Possible Implications of Field-Wide Standards**

Museums today are dealing with a growing number of significant issues and movements: diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion, unionization efforts, salary/compensation, transparency/accountability. We propose that credit panels are a key area where museums can address concerns of various groups, resolve injustices, and advance positive change in the field. The following are some areas that could be impacted by establishing field-wide standards and more thoroughly assessing credit panels.

**Compensation/Salary:** What are the financial implications for paid and unpaid staff who contributed to an exhibition

but are not included on credit panels? Is it easier to justify low wages for those not recognized? Staff whose names appear on credit panels have something concrete to point to when advocating for higher wages. We noticed that salary pay scales appear to mirror top-billed staff positions.<sup>12</sup> As management, boards, funders, and visitors come face-to-face with the impact of people, and their positions, they may change their decision-making processes, approach funding differently, or even see themselves in a museum career.

**Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:** How do panels, as public facing documents, recognize staff, especially those potentially marginalized due to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, gender, sexuality, etc.? Representation has real-world consequences for staff (wages, promotion potential, work/life balance, etc.) and being present on credit panels is a simple, and effective, method for inclusion.<sup>13</sup>

A deeper analysis of panels may reveal trends of diversity and bias that are not readily visible through other methods. Examining credit panels from exhibitions over a period of years, museums might assess whether the process of developing an exhibition is truly inclusive of a diverse community. This is similar to how analyses of the citation practices of research journals are highlighting previously unrecognized biases.<sup>14</sup>

**Transparency and Accountability:** How does a credit panel provide insight into a museum's decision-making process? Exhibitions are a reflection of the points of view, attitudes, beliefs, etc. of the museums creating and presenting them. In academic

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writing, we cite sources to be transparent with our audience on where our information comes from.<sup>15</sup> Developing standards for effective credit panels could make exhibitions more credible and accountable to the information and messaging that they are presenting.

Further research needs to be done to conclusively show the impact of credit panels on those who contribute to exhibitions and visitors. While this research is not within the purview of this article, we encourage further investigation into the role and impact of credit panels.

## Conclusion

We invite museums to rethink the purpose and implementation of their credit panels. As part of developing effective exhibitions, a more intentional assessment-based approach for producing credit panels is required to ensure contributions are appropriately recognized. The assessment framework is intended as one tool to aid museums as they consider (or reconsider) the impact and consequences of how they acknowledge the contributions of their staff, interns, volunteers, and collaborators.

# Criteria for Assessing Credit Panels Framework

Carefully consider the evidence and rank the panel on a 5-point scale:

- 0 – Not applicable
- 1 – Lacking
- 2 – Needs attention
- 3 – Reasonable attempt
- 5 – Excellent

	SCORE
<b>ASPECTS OF ACCURATE</b>  Names, titles, positions, and functions mentioned reflect actual contributions to the exhibition.	
Names, pronouns, and other identifiers reflect the individual’s preferences.	
Information about funders is present and reflects the true nature of their contribution.	
<b>ASPECTS OF INCLUSIVE/COMPREHENSIVE</b>  All staff (paid or unpaid) who contributed significantly to the exhibition are noted.	
All consultants, collaborators, or partners are represented respectfully and adequately.	
Efforts were made to identify contributors who may have not traditionally been recognized.	
<b>ASPECTS OF VISIBLE</b>  Panel(s) is placed in a location where patrons are likely to engage with the panel.	
Panel is clearly considered a part of the exhibition through placement, layout, graphical elements, or other means.	
Panel font, color, and graphical elements do not obscure those recognized.	
<b>ASPECTS OF JUST</b>  Panel exhibits a clear method that depicts actual contributions to the exhibitions.	
Panel avoids ranking contributors solely for political or prestige purposes.	
Panel includes contributors who left the organization during the course of the project but who still contributed before leaving.	



As this is a relatively narrow focused topic in the museum field, we look forward to more research, discussion and debate, and to the creation of field-wide standards of credit panel excellence. ■

- 1 American Alliance of Museums, *Standards for Museum Exhibitions and Indicators of Excellence*, Developed by the Professional Networks Council of the American Alliance of Museums, last updated 2012, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58fa260a725e25c4f30020f3/t/58ff73ed3e00bea8e746d4ce/1493136367751/2012+Standards+for+Museum++Exhibitions+and+Indicators+of+Excellence.pdf>.
- 2 For a brief discussion of the purposes of panels see: AASLH Contributing, “Beyond Due Diligence: The Importance of Credit Panels” (blog), accessed March 29, 2022, <https://aaslh.org/beyond-due-diligence-the-importance-of-credit-panels/>.
- 3 Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Lanham: Roman and Littlefield, 2015), 31.
- 4 Tom Klobe, *Exhibitions: Concept, Planning and Design* (Washington DC: AAM Press, 2012).
- 5 See Barry Lord and Maria Piacente, eds. *Manual of Museum Exhibitions* (Lanham: Roman and Littlefield, 2014).
- 6 Linda Norris, “The Uncataloged Museum” (blog), October 28, 2016, <http://uncatalogedmuseum.blogspot.com/2016/10/whodunnit-tale-of-missing-credit-label.html>.
- 7 Lord and Piacente, *Manual of Museum Exhibitions*; American Alliance of Museums and New Knowledge Organization Ltd.,

2017 National Museum Salary Survey (Washington DC: American Alliance of Museums and New Knowledge Organization Ltd., 2017), <https://artsandmuseums.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2017-AAM-Salary-Survey.pdf>.

- 8 We note some of the limitations of this data representation. It is not always clear whether a contributor is full-time staff, part-time staff, volunteer, or intern. Their employment status may have been clear to the organization but was not noted on the panel. Each role may have included multiple individuals and each institution determines for themselves how roles are described. As a result, several roles may be combined into a single description, thus hiding the true extent of work performed by a single person.
- 9 Beverly Serrell, *Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2006).
- 10 Serrell, *Judging Exhibitions*, 17.
- 11 See Serrell, *Judging Exhibitions*, for more on the process of conducting this type of evaluation.
- 12 American Alliance of Museums and New Knowledge Organization Ltd., 2017 National Museum Salary Survey.
- 13 Hannah Wang and Savannah Ririe, “Panels of Power,” *Theory and Practice* 4 (2021), <https://articles.themuseumscholar.org/2021/12/09/panels-of-power-exploring-the-role-of-credit-panels-in-museums%ef%bf%bc/>.
- 14 Diana Kwon, “The Rise of Citational Justice: how scholars are making references fairer,” *Nature* 603, (March 22, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-00793-1>.
- 15 We generally believe that knowing who contributors are is a good practice except in cases where it is necessary to protect the identity of certain consultants and contributors.