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Looking Beyond What We've Done Before

Minding Potential Blind Spots in Diversifying
United States Museums

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Looking Beyond What We've Done Before: Minding Potential Blind Spots in Diversifying United States Museums

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Abstract: This article explores the research question, what potential blind spots should the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) help U.S. museums mind in their pursuit of access, diversity, equity, and inclusion (A DEI)? The aim of this article is to articulate potential areas of importance that could undermine US museums' A DEI efforts if ignored. If managed strategically and with focus, museum accreditation, boards, and staff can become agents to museums' pursuit of A DEI. Furthermore, given that museum staffs are so heavily female, future research should investigate the question, to what extent do women experience pay equity with their male colleagues? Similarly, research should explore, to what extent do Black, Indigenous, and museum staff of color enjoy pay equity with their White colleagues. In addition, museums would benefit from a study that answers the question, what attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions do museum boards and staff hold about A DEI and its importance?

Keywords: Access, Accreditation, Boards, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Museums, Staff

Introduction

As one of the most generous funders of arts and culture in the United States, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation seeks to strengthen, promote, and defend the centrality of the humanities and the arts to human flourishing and to the well-being of diverse, fair, and democratic societies. By the end of 2018, the foundation's endowment totaled \$6.5 billion. In addition, the foundation's annual grantmaking totaled \$316 million (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation 2020). In 2015, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation funded the Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey. Although the study did not assess the level of ability or sexual identity diversity among US art museums' staff, or include non-art museums, it revealed noteworthy results regarding the gender and race of art museums' staff nationally. For example, approximately "72% of staff identified as White, and 28% represent historically marginalized and oppressed racial groups" (Schonfeld, Westermann, and Sweeney 2015, 3). Given that the US population is 62 percent White, the overrepresentation of this racial group among museum staff remains concerning. However, significant variation in demographic diversity across different types of art museum employment exists. "White staff dominate the job categories most closely associated with the intellectual and educational mission of art museums. In a subset of positions, 84% identified as White, 6% Asian, 4% Black, 3% LatinX, and 3% Two or More Races" (Schonfeld, Westermann, and Sweeney 2015, 3). With the exception of the Asian demographic, which is 5 percent of the US population, these statistics do not represent the racial diversity of the US population in the twenty-first century.

In terms of gender, "60% of staff identified as female, while 40% identified as male." Most positions in museums are highly gender specific. For example, "facilities, preparators/handlers, exhibition design and construction, IT, and security are heavily male identified positions." "Rights/Reproductions and museum leadership (more inclusive than the director) are equally staffed by male and female employees. Seven other jobs, including curators, conservators, educators, and leadership, are more heavily-weighted towards females." Given that art museum staff mostly identified as female, art museums should investigate the extent to which women

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experience pay equity with their male colleagues, as well as the level of management at which art museums primarily employ women. Similarly, future research could also explore the question of the extent to which Black, Indigenous, and art museums' staff of color enjoy pay equity with their White colleagues and the level at which art museums primarily employ racially diverse staff. In addition, a study assessing whether these demographic results remain true across all museums would benefit the sector.

Nevertheless, in response to the realization of the pervasiveness of the “diversity” problem in art museums, the Ford and Walton Family Foundations jointly gave \$6 million to fund the “Diversifying Art Museum Leadership Initiative.” Although this investment in diversifying art museums is commendable, and previous research has determined that initiatives of this nature have the ability to effectively recruit, develop, and retain diverse individuals in Arts Management (Cuyler 2015), this initiative is not dissimilar to previous diversity programs in the cultural sector such as Americans for the Arts' Diversity in Arts Leadership Internship, Getty's Multicultural Undergraduate Internship Program, or the Cultural & Ethnic Arts Executive Leadership Program (Adams 1992; Davies and Shaw 2013; Jung 2015; Ng, Ware, and Greenberg 2017). To assess the impact of the \$6 million investment in diversifying art museums' staff, Westermann, Schonfeld, and Sweeney (2019) conducted a follow-up survey. Key among the findings are that “(1) gender remains majority female; art museum leadership positions have grown 5% more female in the last four years, (2) in curatorial roles, management positions are about 15% more male than non-management roles, (3) art museum staff have become more racially and ethnically diverse over the last four years, (4) and among intellectual leadership positions, education and curatorial departments have grown more racially diverse, while conservation and art museum leadership have not changed” (Westermann, Schonfeld, and Sweeney 2019, 6). These developments show meaningful progress. However, once art museums meet their goal of the full gender and racial diversification of staff, then what? Does this mean that museums will automatically become more accessible, equitable, inclusive, and creatively just? Will museums then have the ability to better serve their entire communities?

Acknowledging the need to deepen their efforts in the work beyond diversity to include access, equity, and inclusion, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM 2019b) constituted a working group of professionals who had previously expressed a commitment to this work. This is critical because with the mission to “champion museums and nurture excellence in partnership with our members and allies,” AAM serves as the major service arts organization for museums in the United States (AAM 2020). Thus, museums of all types have empowered AAM to lead the sector. According to American Alliance of Museum (2019b, p. 4), the working group study yielded five critical insights, including: “(1) every museum professional must do personal work to face unconscious bias (Swensen and Guttormsen 2020), (2) debate on definitions must not hinder progress, (3) inclusion is central to the effectiveness and sustainability of museums, (4) systemic change is vital to long-term, genuine progress, and (5) empowered, inclusive leadership is essential at all levels of an organization” (Coffee 2008; Egholk and Jensen 2016; Kinsley 2016; Taylor 2017; Vermeulen et al. 2019). Although I agree, in whole or in part with these findings, museums should note a few blind spots if they intend to meaningfully address the enduring issues of access, diversity, equity, and inclusion (A DEI), which have prevented them from maximizing their relevance to the communities in which they exist to serve.

First, although debate about the definitions of A DEI need not linger unconstructively, museums could benefit greatly from building a sector wide consensus on A DEI. Indeed, the US cultural sector has yet to develop a consensus about what exactly these terms mean. In a recent study, Brown and Brais (2018) asked focus group participants to define diversity, equity, and inclusion. Participants provided wide-ranging definitions of these constructs, which made for rich interpretations but little congruence in understanding the terms' actual meanings and what these terms could mean for enhancing the practice of A DEI in museums. Therefore, for the purposes of this article, I define A DEI as follows.

- Access is the removal of all barriers to participation in art museums. To achieve access, museums have to interrogate all of the potential barriers and hurdles one faces when attempting to participate in and consume the culture provided by museums. Some of these barriers include price, time, transportation, or even psychological barriers such as the fear of not belonging.
- Diversity is a qualitative and/or quantitative assessment of human difference, which one could deem as a number of demographic characteristics and qualities, and the intersections of these social identities. Without such an assessment, as shown in BoardSource (2017), Schonfeld, Westermann, and Sweeney (2015), and Westermann, Schonfeld, and Sweeney (2019), museums would have difficulty conceptualizing empirically based goals and honestly measuring progress in attaining those goals.
- Equity goes further than equality by assessing and providing the intervention(s) historically marginalized and oppressed groups need to succeed in society. Furthermore, cultural equity is the preservation of all cultural practices and traditions in all types of museums through the equitable distribution of financial resources.
- Inclusion, as the counter to exclusion, means to create community through a sense of belonging. To do this effectively, museums need to do a great deal of critical listening to become more inclusive for historically marginalized and oppressed groups in US society.

In addition to adopting these definitions, museums could benefit from thinking about how these constructs lead to what Banks (2017) described as “creative justice.” Second, staff tend to design diversity programs reactively, which assume that diverse candidates lack the professional credentials, experience, and competencies to make meaningful contributions to museums (Cuyler 2013; Cuyler, Durrer, and Nisbett 2020; Heidelberg 2019).

The role that museum boards play in hiring racially diverse staff, current racially privileged staff’s resistance to art museums’ ADEI efforts, and accreditation’s potential dissonance with ADEI are the final three blind spots that I will explore in this article. Therefore, this article will explore the research question, what potential blind spots should the AAM help museums to mind in their pursuit of ADEI? Thus, the sole aim of this article is to articulate potential areas of importance that could undermine art museums’ ADEI efforts if ignored.

Blind Spots: Museum Accreditation, Boards, and Staff

Unlike performing arts service arts organizations such as DanceUSA, the League of American Orchestras, OPERAAmerica, and Theatre Communications group, museums have the power of accreditation through AAM to encourage and suggest the adoption of collectively approved and valued practices. “Core Standards for Museums (formerly called the Characteristics of Excellence) are the umbrella standards for all museums that are developed through an inclusive fieldwide dialogue (American Alliance of Museums 2019a). Although the Core Standards for Museums are not “prescriptive” but broad, they are outcome-oriented statements that are adaptable and expected of museums of all types and sizes. Each museum fulfills the Core Standards in different ways based on its discipline, type, budget, governance structure, and other unique circumstances.

Seven groupings of the Core Standards exist and are as follows: “(1) Public Trust and Accountability, (2) Mission and Planning, (3) Leadership and Organizational Structure, (4) Collections Stewardship, (5) Education and Interpretation, (6) Financial Stability, and (7) Facilities and Risk Management.” Examining these groupings, one might easily ask where ADEI fits and how a museum demonstrates its practice of the Core Standards with an ADEI framing? Of these seven groupings, five have language that resonates with ADEI. The

following bulleted list of standards and their accompanying grouping either explicitly or implicitly speak to ADEI:

1. “The museum identifies the communities it serves and makes appropriate decisions in how it serves them (1).”
2. “The museum strives to be inclusive and offers opportunities for diverse participation (1).”
3. “The museum demonstrates a commitment to providing the public with physical and intellectual access to the museum and its resources (1).”
4. “The museum understands the characteristics and needs of its existing and potential audiences and uses this understanding to inform its interpretation (5).”
5. “The museum demonstrates a commitment to providing the public with physical and intellectual access to the museum and its resources (7).”

Given that so few standards within the seven groupings either explicitly or implicitly speak to ADEI, what would happen if a museum had to choose between practicing a standard that would advance their collections but not their ADEI efforts? Would the museum choose the perceived and potential notoriety that would come from advancing their collection? For example, according to a recent survey, 85 percent of artists featured in permanent collections are White, and 87 percent are men (Topaz et al. 2019). Or would the museum choose their ADEI work over the presumed notoriety of a major artist even if he happened to identify as White, cisgender male, and straight? Although museums should not see these decisions as mutually exclusive, AAM and museums should not ignore the potential dissonances that may arise between practicing a Core Standard and ADEI. AAM should act more intentionally in helping museums to manage these seemingly incompatible practices. Not anticipating this blind spot could seriously undermine ADEI’s progress in museums. Furthermore, AAM and museums should consider the potential a Core Standard on ADEI would hold for the US museum sector.

Museum Boards

According to Ostrower (2014), 91 percent of cultural organizations’ board members identify as White, whereas 4 percent identify as African American, 2 percent as LatinX, and 3 percent as “other.” Nearly half of the museum boards, 46 percent, identified as White (BoardSource 2017). One can easily understand this when contextualized with wealth, and a discussion about who holds most of the wealth in US society. Indeed, US museums are notorious for recruiting wealthy White board members (Pogrebin, Harris, and Bowley 2019). This practice clearly limits museums’ boards’ ability to become more accessible, diverse, equitable, inclusive, and creatively just. In the US, most Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) have not owned wealth at the same rate as White people. This has limited the possibility of most BIPOC ever receiving an invitation to serve on a museum’s board.

Yet “64% of museum directors reported dissatisfaction with their board’s racial diversity, 43% with their age diversity, and 24% with their gender diversity” (BoardSource 2017, 9). Although “57% of museum directors have agreed that it is important to increase their board’s diversity, only 10% of museums reported that the board has developed a detailed plan of action to become more diverse” (BoardSource 2017, 9). If museum directors and board chairs believe that board diversity and inclusion are important to advancing their missions, why have so many failed to prioritize strategic action steps to achieve ADEI? Some practitioners might argue that museums do not know how to move forward or how to make such a plan. However, the Cleveland Museum of Art’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion plan (Cleveland Museum of Art 2018) is just one model that museums could use to inform their own plans. Furthermore, museums have not incentivized the need for change regarding board recruitment and wealth

despite protests related to the inclusion of certain individuals on certain high-profile museum boards (Pogrebin, Harris, and Bowley 2019). Although AAM is still exploring this problem, they have successfully procured \$4 million in funding from the Andrew W. Mellon, Alice L. Walton, and Ford Foundations to fund the “Facing Change: Advancing Museum Board & Diversity & Inclusion” initiative. Considering that almost “half of museum boards are all White, and that museum directors and board chairs have expressed frustration with their boards’ diversity,” museums have made little progress.

If boards persist in not addressing their ADEI issues, and the trend continues that more racially diverse staff emerge owing to the “Diversifying Art Museum Leadership Initiative,” how might a board lacking racial diversity respond to the possibility of hiring a person of color as the director of the museum? Although AAM has somewhat begun to address this potential blind spot, it still remains a blind spot because AAM only has the capacity to serve so many museums at a time through this initiative. For the first round of applications, AAM selected museums from Chicago, Houston, Jackson, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Oakland-San Francisco to participate in the program. Because AAM will likely roll this initiative out slowly until they can scale it up, museums stand to lose a great deal of cultural, human, and social capital that could come from engaging more BIPOC on their boards.

Museum Staff

Although studies have shown that, historically, museums’ staff lacked racial diversity (Davies and Shaw 2013; Jung 2015; Ng, Ware, and Greenberg 2017; Schonfeld, Westermann, and Sweeney 2015), museums have recently shown steady progress toward becoming more racially diverse (Westermann, Schonfeld, and Sweeney 2019). Yet critical concerns remain unaddressed relative to ADEI in museums, one of which is unconscious racial bias among museum staff (AAM 2019b). I contend that the current political environment in the US has encouraged a “scarcity mentality,” with regard to opportunities. This has intensified the “us” against “them” attitude of many privileged groups, specifically those of European descent. Over the last four years, US society has witnessed how White fragility, White privilege, and White rage have come together to form a powerful trifecta that has negatively impacted some museums’ ADEI efforts. For example, in 2016, even though Schonfeld, Westermann, and Sweeney (2015) clearly demonstrated that a lack of racial diversity existed among art museums’ staff, a white woman sued the Getty for discrimination and violation of her civil rights because they rejected her application to participate in an internship program designed for racially underrepresented interns (Voon 2016). Without the full participation of staff privileged by their social identities, ADEI work will fail in museums (Heidelberg 2019). Nevertheless, museums should not underestimate the critical and sustained work needed to achieve ADEI. They must also view staff as key stakeholders in achieving ADEI. If museums continue to succeed in identifying, developing, and recruiting BIPOC staff, how will it impact their retention if museums maintain unaddressed toxic cultures hostile to racially diverse individuals?

The way that the Guggenheim treated its first Black curator, Chaédria LaBouvier, is a good example of the deeply embedded institutional racism in too many museums that may prevent them from truly becoming safe spaces for BIPOC to work. According to White, “as the first Black woman to curate a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim, the art museum sector highly anticipated LaBouvier’s historic show” (2019, 1). Furthermore, LaBouvier accused the Guggenheim of not extending her the full breadth of what is customary for any curator at a prominent art museum, for example having a panel on the exhibition that excluded the curator. Although the Guggenheim took a predictably defensive stance and disagreed with LaBouvier’s characterization of how the art museum treated her, if they practiced inclusion, they would have used this opportunity to listen critically and learn from this incident to create a more inclusive environment for future guest BIPOC curators.

Museums must consider their role in helping White staff to understand the benefits of working with BIPOC staff. In addition to “unconscious bias training, implicit bias association tests, intercultural competence assessments, cultural competency training, and self-awareness work” (AAM 2019b, 7), what other ways can museums and AAM help their racially privileged staff understand the value it holds for the museums and communities they serve to employ BIPOC staff? If framed appropriately, this is an opportunity that museums can maximize through “on-the-job training, mentoring,” and other means that help people to value people and the lived experiences that they bring to museums. No single person or type of person has all of the cultural competencies and skills needed to effectively manage all museums. The best type of museum is one that understands its community context and employs the people necessary to make it possible for the museum to reach into its community consistently, deeply, meaningfully, and significantly.

Conclusion

To frame this article, I proposed to explore the research question, what potential blind spots should the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) help museums to mind in their pursuit of ADEI? In doing so, I aimed to articulate potential areas of importance that could undermine museums’ ADEI efforts if ignored. I identified museum accreditation, boards, and staff as potential blind spots needing serious minding if museums hope to achieve ADEI.

AAM could use a few strategies to hold these potential blind spots in sharp focus for museums. First, regarding boards, AAM must figure out what to do for most museums while serving a small subset of art museums’ board diversity and inclusion efforts. A webinar on board diversity and inclusion could benefit museums. But AAM must also think strategically about how to incentivize museums to take advantage of this knowledge. AAM could offer discounts to their annual conference for those museums that demonstrate that they have used the webinar to guide their creation of a detailed plan to achieve ADEI. Second, in addition to “unconscious bias training, implicit bias association tests, intercultural competence assessments, cultural competency training, and self-awareness work” (AAM 2019b, 7), AAM could strategically use conferences to guide museums’ staff in understanding why ADEI work matters and how they benefit from it. Follow-up surveys could ask those who attend specific sessions that include this content to describe what they gained from attending the session and how it changed their perceptions of ADEI. This strategy could go a long way toward helping racially privileged museum staff see the value of museums hiring BIPOC museum staff. Finally, AAM should explore the possibility of adding a Core Standard on ADEI. Through a fieldwide dialogue, AAM could seek to articulate the policies and practices it deems most efficacious in achieving ADEI but, of course, with a great deal of flexibility so that museums can easily localize the standard at individual museums.

In terms of future research, given that museum staffs are so heavily female, museums should investigate the research question, to what extent do women experience pay equity with their male colleagues in museums, as well as the level of management at which museums primarily employ women? Similarly, future research should explore the question, to what extent do racially diverse museum staff enjoy pay equity with their White colleagues in museums and the level at which art museums primarily employ them? Another beneficial study assessing, do the demographic results found in Schonfeld, Westermann, and Sweeney (2015, 2018) remain true across all museums? In addition, museums would benefit greatly from a survey study asking, what attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions do museum boards and staff hold about ADEI and its importance? Although it is certainly possible that museum staff and volunteers will espouse the “politically correct” view on ADEI, AAM could use the results of such a study to develop webinars and other trainings that will help museums to better mind and successfully address these crucial blind spots in their pursuit of ADEI.

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addresses the key question: How can the institution of the museum become more inclusive? The journal brings together academics, curators, museum and public administrators, cultural policy makers, and research students to engage in discussions about the historic character and future shape of the museum.

In addition to traditional scholarly papers, this journal invites case studies that take the form of presentations of museum practice—including documentation of organizational curatorial and community outreach practices and exegeses analyzing the effects of those practices.

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