

Comments on academic museums and the AAM Accreditation process

While the exclusivity of Accreditation as it now stands (ca. 3-4% of the entire museum population holds this distinction) strongly pronounces the rigor of the program and process, it also reveals a seldom recognized fact: entirely too many museums do not participate. Clearly, it is not the case that many participate and are turned down, but rather that the vast majority of museums in the U.S. don't apply for a variety of reasons. We laud the AAM for recognizing this fact and for opening the accreditation process for critique. This is in the best spirit of our nation's democratic values, inclusivity, and power to reinvent ourselves as circumstances allow.

As AAM's new leadership is fully aware, the current process is laborious and untenable for many museums, including a large percentage that are located on our nation's campuses. They simply do not have the staff time to undertake a 12 to 14 month self-study that is currently required and to run their vital and often distinguished programs at the same time. Nor do they have the time to compose the many operating documents--most of which are, in reality, standardized--with the level of detail required by AAM. This situation is only going to worsen in light of the current economic downturn.

With specific reference to academic museums, we have determined that there are parent institutions that discourage this pursuit because it is perceived as redundant to the university/college's own accreditation. While the accreditation of the academy's museum can be seen as an endorsement of the quality of its programming, the process does not address in explicit ways, how the museum serves the parent organization's core mission. It has also shown itself as setting up seemingly irreconcilable conflicts between the museum and academy, particularly in regard to the perceived and actual ownership of collections and their disposition. This has, unfortunately, become increasingly apparent in the actions of such institutions as Fisk, Randolph College, and Brandeis.

While the Association of College and University Museums and Galleries (ACUMG) strongly endorses the highest national standards for accreditation and does not, under any circumstances, want AAM to dilute such standards, we feel that these can be achieved more expeditiously and democratically than the current accreditation process allows and that the process could contain a limited number of supplementary options for a limited number of unique classes of museums, including museums anchored in academic institutions.

Some have suggested, *but we do not recommend*, a tiered, or qualitative approach (A, B, C levels of Accreditation) to make the process more inclusive. This would simply marginalize smaller museums even more and open them to pronounced negative scrutiny by their supporters and parent organizations. Furthermore, it diminishes the high national standards expected by AAM and fully endorsed by the ACUMG.

The following is our attempt to address accreditation in some of its particulars, with attention to the process as seen by academic museums. It represents a consensus of

opinion shared by responding members of ACUMG and as edited and compiled by the ACUMG's president and board. Thank you for this opportunity to share our perspectives and forgive our bluntness in this regard: as this is conveyed via document and interview with a third party, we want you not only to hear our perspectives and commitment to high standards of accreditation, but also to sense our frustrations with the current process and requirements.

The ACUMG recommends the following:

I. Documentation:

With the exception of the Mission Statement and the Strategic Plan, all other documentation required for accreditation is, or can be, standardized. At the outset of the accreditation process, a much more extensive packet of materials could be provided to applying institutions that would give them a complete matrix for the process. For example, rather than including the AAM *Code of Ethics* Statement and requiring the applying institution to write their own, they might simply be required to officially endorse the AAM code. Along these lines, a general *Collections Management Policy* might be included that would require only specific adjustments to each institution's circumstances. The same could be done with the *Conflict of Interest* statement and the *Personnel Policy*: at academic museums the policy of the university or college should be sufficient. A supplement to these could be provided that addresses issues specific to, for example, collections and staff collecting, but in most cases, the general approach to interest conflicts found in university/college policies cover this and more. Using prepared and pre-existing documents would allow museums seeking accreditation to spend that time on other aspects of the self-study that need their attention.

We also recommend that multiple approaches to strategic planning--in the form of clear outlines or examples--be provided at the outset of the application process. One case in point: a strategic plan presented in accreditation materials by an ACUMG museum was dismissed by AAM staff reviewers as inadequate because its structure didn't meet AAM requirements. This was despite the fact that that particular strategic plan played a central role in the doubling of the museum's staff, budget, program and endowment in four years. Other institutions that write "academic plans" for their programs (the equivalent of their strategic plan) were turned down until they simply renamed the same documents "strategic plans." To summarize, currently the AAM requires 'boilerplate' documents such as *Collections Management Policies*, *Code of Ethics*, etc. to be self-composed while the strategic plan, which can have some considerable creativity and address specific audiences, is reviewed with inflexibility and disallows varied approaches to planning and creatively engaging stakeholders. As it concerns academic museums, AAM must come to terms with the fact that our boards are advisory and our strategic plans require more extensive narratives and need to serve a more

inspirational role than the bullet-point documentation currently required by AAM and presumably useful to trustee-run museums.

II. Peer Mentor and Visiting Committee:

We recommend that, at the outset, a peer mentor be assigned by AAM in consultation with the applying institution's leadership to assist in its preparation for subsequent Visiting Committee and Accreditation Board review. This move would be relatively inexpensive and would greatly streamline the process and feasibly eliminate the time consuming and frustrating "back and forth" currently required. It would also give the applying institution an advocate "in the know" during the preliminary review process that takes place on the staff level at AAM. A peer mentor can explain eccentricities during this review process as a neutral third party.

In reference to the Visiting Committee, the extended lag time between the submission of the Self-Study to AAM, its review and response, and the Visiting Committee's arrival, adds another workload to the applying institution, which must thoroughly review and update materials previously submitted. It would be helpful to address this in light of the AAM's desire to greatly increase participation in the accreditation program. Those of us in ACUMG who serve as peer reviewers are committed to our participation and offer our services as peer mentors, should AAM wish to pursue this new approach.

The role of the visiting committee is seen by several ACUMG peer reviewers as too circumspect to be most effective. That is, it requires unnatural neutrality on the part of the visiting committee and is often compared to the much more desirable assignment as MAP Reviewer, where meaningful dialogue is integral to the program. Since peer reviewers are selected for their specific knowledge and experience, AAM is not fully taking advantage of these individuals when it requires them to simply "be the eyes and ears" of AAM during their visits. If the truth be known, visiting committee members often step over that rigid boundary to expedite the accreditation process by sharing with the museum leadership specific recommendations, for example, to polish or complete particular documents for their review before submission to AAM. In this sense, peer reviewers become advocates and guides for the applicant institution at a very late stage in the process. For this reason, we highly recommend peer mentors be assigned at the beginning of the process, so the visiting committee can more effectively play its semi-final review role.

III. Accreditation Costs are Prohibitive:

It would be a great boost to participation if the AAM found grant funds or developed a long-term foundation relationship to fund both the accreditation and

re-accreditation processes for museums under certain budget levels, and waive the annual dues for the same.

Museums with annual budgets in the low hundred-thousands of dollars cannot afford the process or the maintenance fees. Larger museums could also be asked to pay a little more in the way of annual fees to compensate for any revenue losses. This should not be seen as a burden, but as an opportunity to help all ships rise in the tide.

IV. Accreditation Needs Supplementary Guidelines:

Several issues raised above point out the unique nature of academic museums. Other important distinctions, no doubt, would apply to different categories of museums in AAM. We would like to suggest that the accreditation process not only respect these, but also that it allow for these as a matter of course in our application process. There is no need to have separate application processes, only that the national application process would include some supplementary materials or an alternate section (as in governance) that honor and respect our unique situations. Along with the issues of redundant documentation requirements is the unique nature of our reporting structures and boards. While AAM has offered some flexibility as regards the latter for some of us but not, it has been reported to the ACUMG board, for others, the forms need to be adjusted to clarify the reporting/leadership structures unique to academic museums. As a part of the restructuring of the accreditation process, we would like to have the opportunity to compose for review a brief supplement for academic museums to address such needs.

Because academic museums often have the dual role of serving both the general public and the university, ACUMG recommends that specific requirements for accreditation of academic museums address the very best practices in engaging and satisfying the needs of faculty and students in the museum's exhibitions, programs and collections usage. Leadership in this important area would help strengthen many academic museums within the contexts of their parent institutions and help bring them into alignment with the educational missions of their universities and colleges. This sort of approach to accreditation would be highly valuable to academic museums and their place on their campuses and give AAM an important role to play in strengthening our status where it truly matters: with our core constituency and parent organization.

Clarify and Make Tangible the Benefits of Accreditation:

On the surface, the benefits of Accreditation seem to be limited to bragging rights based on the low participation. While prestige may inspire some, the sheer level of work and costs involved clearly does not inspire the vast majority of the nation's museums to participate.

Many perpetuate the myth that accreditation streamlines and makes more readily accessible loans of artworks and exhibitions from other institutions, but our broad experience shows over and over again that this is not at all the case. Seldom is the issue of accreditation even inquired of by national and particularly international lending institutions. If accreditation played any role at all in this, the vast majority of the nation's museums would be choking for programming and lining up for accreditation.

Others weave the tale that accreditation opens access to greater grant funding. Experience and the low level of participation in the program deny this as well.

As it affects academic museums, **accreditation can be seen as forcing parent organizations to submit in writing their commitment to the perpetuation of museums under their aegis.** What is actually written by university/college trustees in this regard is usually highly circumscribed and offers no real guarantee. Given the bad decisions, litigation and the massive fallout caused by trustee decisions at Fisk University, Randolph College and Brandeis University concerning their collections and museums, few would suggest that accreditation would have changed their actions one iota. The issue of losing its accreditation by the University of Iowa should it have decided to sell an important painting from its collection in 2008 to pay for flood costs was only mentioned in the marginalia and not at all in 2009 when it surfaced again to sell the painting to address the economic downturn.

The complex issue of collections and their ownership and vulnerability at institutions of higher learning is a topic being discussed in detail by the ACUMG, AAM, CAA, Kress Foundation, and AAMD in another form. We anticipate that strong new approaches to this threat to the museums under our care will surface from these conversations, **but in the context of this discussion, accreditation currently does not offer any real protection or pose any real threat to universities and colleges bent on selling off art to compensate for enrollment or economic downturns.** Perhaps, in lieu of requiring some vague statement about their commitment to the perpetuation of their museums, there should be an AAM requirement that academic institutions not, under any circumstances, capitalize their art collections but define them solely as educational materials like those held in their libraries and archival collections. That requirement would help develop a more appropriate perspective, if nothing else.

In conclusion, we would like to recommend that AAM determine where there are inviolable, absolutely fundamental core standards to museum operations that apply without variation to all and maintain high standards in those areas, while allowing for creative approaches to be devised "in the field" of our nation's museums in many other ways. It needs to find ways to address the real time constraints non-profits operate under in establishing accreditation standards, time frames, and time-lags as it currently functions. AAM also needs to allow for

more creativity as it engages peer reviewers. And finally, AAM needs to promote true values and advantages that would come with accreditation for more to participate, and determine how it will manage a much larger application pool when it is successful in this regard.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Board and Membership of the
Association of College and University Museums and Galleries,

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