

AAMG Recommendation for Hiring an Academic Museum Director

The following is offered by the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries to university leaders who are in the process of hiring a director for a museum under their authority.

Background

A study recently undertaken by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation found that the success of academic museums fundamentally depends upon the competence of the museum's director to manage highly varied responsibilities. Critical among these are successfully engaging important, but diverse, constituencies in support of the parent institution's mission.

To fulfill the museum's role as a learning center, the director must offer opportunities for research and learning experiences for college and university students as well as for elementary and secondary schools and lifelong learners. At the same time, the director must manage and prioritize the often competing interests of university trustees, administrators, faculty, collectors, donors, and community leaders while maintaining the highest professional standards set by the field. The museum's director, while preferably reporting to a senior academic officer such as the provost, vice president for academic affairs or president, has many agendas to advance and constituencies to manage. Mastering this ecology is critical to the museum's success and calls for a diverse set of skills.

Perhaps most important, the director must be able to help formulate and effectively articulate a mission and vision for the college or university museum that is appropriate for the context—the campus and community in which the museum is located.

Colleges and universities, by definition, embrace a full array of subjects important to the advancement of humankind. The museum director should support and nurture a teaching mission that benefits the university/college as widely as possible. Centering the museum in profound ways within the school's academic enterprise is the fundamental justification for the museum's existence and cost of sustaining it.

To anchor the academic museum within this universal enterprise, it is critical that its director sees her or his role as one of facilitating the exploration and exhibition of ideas. While she or he should have solid academic credentials (M.A. or Ph.D.), the director's own field of expertise may not be the museum's priority. Rather, the director needs to embrace and lead a sustainable interdisciplinary center for the investigation of a wide spectrum of ideas, methodologies, and fields of inquiry relevant to the museum's focus and the college or university's priorities.

Museums are both cultural and business institutions. The museum director must have the experience, interest, and competence to manage what is, from one perspective, a not-for-profit business. It is the rare academic museum that receives all its necessary funding from its host institution. Consequently, the most competitive directorial candidates will combine their academic and curatorial knowledge with excellent business skills. These include budget and personnel management, strategic planning, and fundraising. The director must be skilled at working with the college or university's established development program and find creative ways to raise funds for the museum in partnership with the overall institutional advancement agenda.

Considerations for the Search Committee

College and university museums operate in an environment different from other museums in that they usually do not have their own board of trustees responsible for hiring. Rather, they typically have advisory boards without governing authority. While different schools may have different processes for hiring, the process usually involves a search committee. The search committee is a vetting and recommending body. The hiring decision is appropriately made by the person at the institution to whom the director reports.

Search committees are most successful when their membership reflects the museum's core stakeholders. In addition to faculty and university administration, the search committee may include a university trustee, alumni/ae, major donors, advisory board members, docents, and collectors. Directors of other museums as well as students might also be considered. Depending on the scale of the museum, specialized search firms may be hired to identify the strongest candidates.

It is essential is that the search committee not be entirely composed of university faculty and administrators. Too often, universities and colleges approach the hiring of a museum director by organizing internal search committees, chaired and disproportionately populated by faculty members. The faculty's commitment to, and sense of ownership in, the museum is of course critical. While their academic backgrounds can help to assure the successful candidate's scholarly qualifications, the all-important business and fundraising facet of the enterprise can sometimes be overlooked by faculty. Academic credentials need to be matched by equally strong management, leadership, and fundraising prowess, qualities more essential to university administration than, strictly speaking, to faculty service. The absence of this crucial balance of skills will ultimately undermine the museum's success as a strong, viable, and growing cultural institution on campus.

Qualities of a Successful Academic Museum Director

Search committees should look for candidates skilled in the following:

1. Helping formulate and effectively articulate the mission and vision of the museum to engage support inside and outside the university.
2. Deeply integrating the museum into its parent institution's educational mission by providing tangible opportunities for subject-based and interdisciplinary teaching and original scholarship (based upon its collections, exhibitions, publications, and educational programs).
3. Understanding how, and being willing, to engage faculty from diverse disciplines in integrating the museum into the academic mission.
4. Developing strong partnerships with public schools and other community groups as well as the museum's donor base.
5. Developing and managing operating and project budgets.
6. Hiring, supervising and mentoring museum staff.
7. Leading institutional strategic and business planning.
8. Meeting and prioritizing the needs of diverse internal and external constituencies.

The Association of Academic Museums and Galleries Mission

The **Association of Academic Museums and Galleries** is the leading educational and professional organization for academic museums, galleries, and collections. In recognition of the unique opportunities and challenges of its constituents, the **AAMG** establishes and supports best practices, educational activities and professional development that enable its member organizations to fulfill their educational missions.

The Association of Academic Museums and Galleries stands ready to offer advice and consultation to university and college leaders seeking a helpful framework in which to fill these often singular appointments on their campuses.

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