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Selecting the Ideal Museum Director

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Selecting the Ideal Director

Selecting the ideal director is the most important responsibility of the museum board. The best directors strengthen the institution, motivate the staff, energize the collections, encourage the board and change the community. The wrong choice is usually evident shortly after the director begins but ends after a year or two of angst, board disaffection, staff defection and loss of attendance and funding.

And there are less egregious cases of museums that have selected directors who were “just not the right fit” or examples of newly selected directors who, while effective in the previous positions, did not exceed the expectations of the board, staff and the community in their new positions.

Clearly, the selection process is rife with challenges. The museum profession is abundant with leaders of talent, professionalism and dedication. In my experience, there exists an ideal director for each museum and the following selection process will help to insure a successful outcome.

Searches often involve people with complex personalities. There is no formula that will guarantee, scientifically, that the ideal candidate will be selected. However, the board and the selection committee can take steps to help assure that the search is successful, that a superior individual is chosen as a director, and that the director's tenure is distinguished by measurable success. Each museum offers its own challenges.

The director who is effective at one institution may not be effective at others. The challenges of one museum may require a director with a particular skill set that is wasted and not useful in another. Even among collecting institutions, funding structure, the strength of the board and staff, the state and size of the collections, the condition of the building, and competition are all factors that determine the skill sets required of the director.

There are three key elements to ensuring that the museum will find an ideal director: analysis, assessment, and evaluation.

Analysis

It is important for the board to develop as many quantitative measurements as possible for evaluating a potential director so that it can make an informed choice, based on a “quantitative screen” as well as chemistry and personality. But how does one develop such a quantitative screen?

If the museum has been engaged in a strategic planning process, it will be clear about its mission and program. The mission and program are then translated into a "position charter" for any candidate to react to and be judged against. For example, one of our clients, a prestigious general museum, had recently completed a five year strategic plan that confirmed its mission as a museum dedicated to "art, science and education." The plan described eight objectives that, if accomplished, would assure that the museum would realize its mission. Furthermore, upon investigation of how the museum applied its resources, it was clear that its plans and actions were in harmony. Figure 1, based on the museum's financial statements, describes how the museum applied its resources in pursuit of its mission. The most effective director to lead this institution would be one who, no matter what his or her background and expertise, could show allegiance to all three planks of the mission. This position would require a director who could continue the museum on its tripartite mission.

A museum's strategic plan will also describe the challenges of the institution and, since the director will have ultimate operating responsibility for meeting those challenges, a description of the ideal, effective director will be revealed. A museum about to embark on a fund raising and new-construction venture would benefit from a director who has been through such a project successfully. A strategic direction to enhance the profile of the institution in the community points to a director with exceptional communication and public-oriented skills; a direction toward building the contemporary European collection may point toward the curator/scholar who has proven ability to work with collectors and who possesses that extraordinarily developed "eye." The position charter describes the challenges of the institution and, thus, the requirements for the directorship

Assessment

Assessing the array of requirements against the experienced candidate's skills, successes, and specific career goals helps the board to define the ideal director. Undoubtedly, specific functional expertise can always be located to support the director: a project manager and capital campaign consultant for the building project; an experienced public relations spokesperson; a chief curator for contemporary European art.

But ultimately, it must be the director who, understanding the strategic direction of the museum, embraces it and has the skills to lead. But what if the institution does not have a strategic plan? Or if the plan was written simply to satisfy a funding source or a grant application and has been only a permanent and untouched fixture on the director's credenza? In many institutions where directors have enjoyed long tenures (over ten years), the museum's direction and strategy have become an extension of the director's vision. How does a board, short of engaging in a lengthy strategic-planning process, develop a position charter for the new director? How do its members develop a list of priorities of objectives that a new director must buy into, accomplish, and ultimately be measured on?

There are a number of metrics or diagnostics that can be utilized to help describe the best and most effective director. First, although finding a director is the board's most important responsibility, the board must realize that it is but one group of stakeholders and that other stakeholders should have a part in the process. What are the museum's major funders, private and public, looking for in the museum and therefore in the next director?

What is the staff's point of view? Ask the visitor, the press, the other cultural institutions, and other professionals. Also, this is the time for board leadership to take a cold, hard look at its strengths, weaknesses, and challenges. What kind of director would best help the board that does not fund raise, or that needs renewed leadership, or that must diversify?

Finally, an examination of much of the readily available quantitative data is useful in determining what kind of director will be most effective. Figure 2 shows the annual funding for an \$8-million urban art museum compared with an average of its peer group. It is clear that this museum is too dependent on government funding and therefore too vulnerable. The next director must be someone able to raise more private foundation and corporate funding and, equally importantly, be able to work effectively with government agencies to assure the funding levels at least cover the short term.

Museums with collections are usually dedicated to increasing those collections. But what if the museum is not in a position to do so? Figure 3 reveals another institution that, because of a lack of acquisition income, does not compete with its peers in collecting. Clearly, a director who wishes to spend his or her time buying art and whose skill and contacts are in this area would be unhappy and unfulfilled at this museum and perhaps more satisfied and fulfilled at one of the other institutions represented by this chart.

Utilizing these diagnostics, quantitative and evaluative, the board may then determine both a "position charter" and a detailed list of traits, experiences, and proven capabilities it seeks in its new director. Communicating that list to a candidate and evaluating candidates based on that charter will ensure that the search will end with an effective director.

There are three other simple steps that a board can take to assure that their choice in a director is ideal for their museum:

Check References -Not only should written references be checked, but detailed, comprehensive conversations should be had with those who have managed and worked with and for the potential candidate. And check college degrees and publications. When possible, visit the potential candidate's current institution and get a feel of how the person interacts with guards, visitors, etc.

Understand the Candidate's Motivation -The ideal director is one who is challenged and stretched by the new leadership position. Although not always an indicator, the new position is often in a larger institution as measured by annual budget size, nature of the collection, exhibition schedule, or level of the staff. Make sure the challenge, compensation, and other intangibles (such as quality of life) for the potential candidate and family will keep that person pleased and motivated to succeed.

Manage the Transition- The first few months following the completion of the search can be difficult for the incumbent. The director will be preoccupied with the details of the transition, selling and buying homes, selecting schools for the children, and a new job for the spouse. Members of the search committee and the board chairperson have a responsibility to the new director during this transition to assure that the direction may be successful.

Evaluation

The ideal director is one who brings measurable success to the institution. Attendance is up; quality and morale of the staff has improved; systems are working for, not against, the management; and the foundations are recognizing the quality of the exhibitions with additional grants. By developing a measurable checklist of what the museum expects of its director and by evaluating (and rewarding) the director by utilizing that list, the board will be able to measure its success (in hiring the ideal candidate) and the director's success in his or her new job. That list may then be the basis for a bonus paid to the director as part of a compensation package.

The ideal director may come from another museum or from government or business. He or she may have an orientation toward management or toward programs and aesthetics. By following the above steps, a board can very accurately determine what the characteristics of an ideal director are, recruit that person, and then measure the success of that person's endeavors.

After having gone through the process as described, many museums now enjoy the healthy dynamic relationship that exists between the motivated board and the appropriate director.

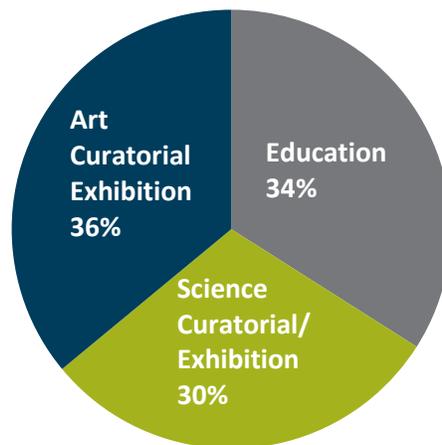
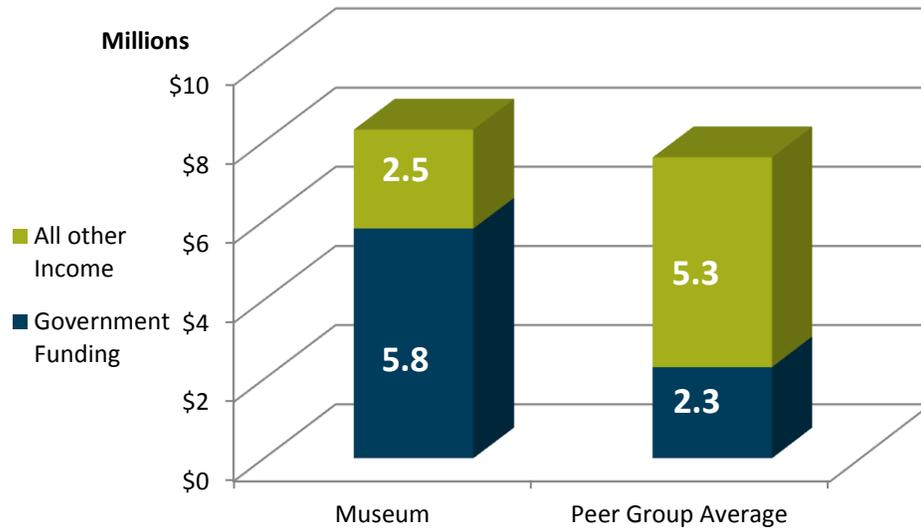


Figure 1. One museum's allocation of resources. The chart is based on the museum's financial statements.



\$8.3M \$7.6M

Figure 2. A comparison of one museum's funding sources compared with the average of a group of peer museums.

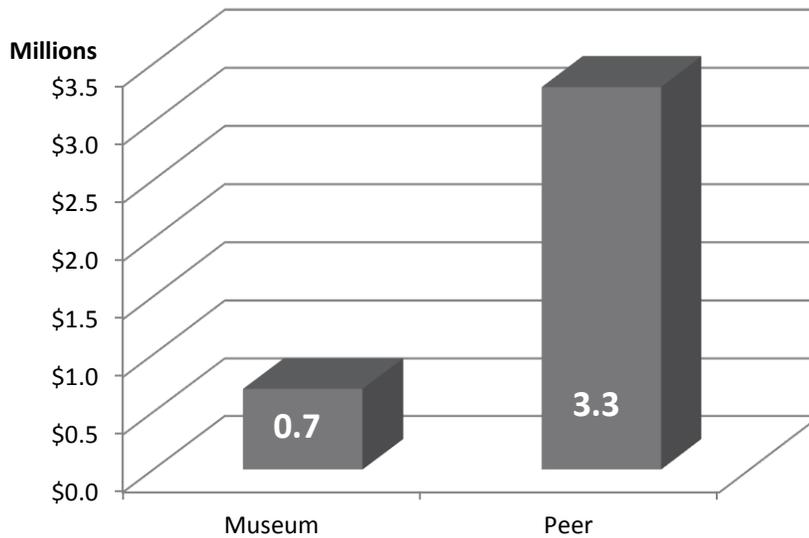


Figure 3. One museum's acquisition budget compared with the average of a group of peer museums.



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