

MUSEUMS MOVING FORWARD



MMF and MASS Action Convening: Curation, Care, and Collections: Part 1

August 9, 2022

ATTENDEES: 65

1–2 PM EST

I. INTRODUCTION AND GROUP AGREEMENTS

Mass Action and Museum Moving Forward's partnership is predicated on our shared belief that museum educators, curators, and staff more broadly need to work in closer communion to collectively advance a field-wide culture shift. We believe in pooling resources, networks, and knowledge to produce research, data analysis, cross-sector community, and professional development opportunities that are widely available to the field to ultimately advance the core goal of making a more equitable, accessible, diverse, and inclusive museum spaces.

Today's session is meant to be a check-in, or temperature check, on the subject of direct care, in advance of our upcoming September 13th session with invited speakers.

II. BREAKOUT ROOMS

Prompts:

- How do you experience care in the museum?
- What kind of care do you believe is needed for museums?

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- What does action-oriented care mean to you?

Care and Fear

- Protest is a radical form of care and should be viewed as such. It should be seen as an opportunity to help the staff, not as a source of conflict.
- Why the reluctance to embrace staff care?
 - Cultures of fear and insufficiency (there's not enough money to make changes to programming and salaries, etc.), especially when unions enter the picture
 - Overprotection: attitude of senior management is that staff "doesn't need to know", thus there is little engagement or transparency in budget formation.
 - Senior management understands how precarious finances are and feel attacked by staff protests.
 - The systems are interlinked: all the biases and inequity is "baked in". Institutions are unsure if their systems will function without bias and inequity — no alternative paths or cultural models to follow.
 - Is this a revisiting of Affirmative Action? Must prevent *this* conversation from future drop-off
- Slowing down: current timeline is not sustainable
 - Take/be given some time & space to imagine things differently

Collective Care

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- Acknowledge that we as museum staff exist in society and need to protect *each other*.
- Make connections across the field.
- Collaboration - the systems that currently organize museums do not inherently support collaboration!
- “Culture of scarcity” - but we understand that abundance is helpful for everyone and our collections... how are we shifting our mentality to recognize and act on that?
- Labor falls disproportionately on women - and those that care

Care and Money

- More progressive transparency is needed. Would be helpful to explain the details of budget creation and why it’s necessary.
- If everyone were paid a living wage, there would be fewer issues.
 - Fair compensation and equitable pay are needed
- Not asking for much (e.g. snacks at meetings) but must be careful of asking for too little — over ask to get “enough.”
- There are generous institutions but also some that hoard funds.
- As you move up the ranks and become knowledgeable of how the system works, you learn what to ask for and how to negotiate.

Care and Policy

- Remove the “clubbiness” of Trustee selection with an open call for Trustees.

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- Need family-friendly policies, especially in cases where there are several museum employees of child-bearing age.
- Need to have conversations across institutional hierarchies about what care means. How do different levels experience care?
- A common vocabulary would ensure that everyone understands what is being discussed.
- We see museums being largely reactive, not proactive - our museums need to start acting on these things, not just talking about them
- Pay rates, chronic understaffing, the disparity in kinds of art being collected, endowment sources, priority being given to donors
- Take responsibility: Museums acknowledge histories; we owe it to our visitors – and how do we use this to make ourselves better
- We could be looking to the future more as institutions
- Advocacy - from our institutions (not us as individuals)

III. DISCUSSION

Ideas and themes raised in small group discussions

- Vacation time is care
- A mentorship is a form of care
- Inward-Facing Care vs. Outward-Facing Care
 - Implementing staff care vs. giving the appearance of staff care
- Passive Care vs. Active Care

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- Care is active, concern is passive. Taking Care demonstrates care.
- Power Dynamics and Empathy
 - Empathy drops as power increases. Thus, mid-level staff provides the most care
 - Our structures are based on harm: conquest, pillaging, colonization. But we must work within the system of power that we have.
- Community
 - Once you have a collective buy-in by staff, a collective unit, you can work together to bring about change.
 - This is a Community of Care; we are resources for each other.
- How to care for the people who care for our collections?
 - There is a difference between individual tactics for caring (e.g., relationship building) and systemic care (e.g., instilling care principles in DEAI and general staff policies).
- Being inclusive requires advance planning. Prioritize the focus and build in sufficient time to alleviate the burden on the staff.

IV. NEXT STEPS

- We will continue this conversation at the next Convening on Tuesday, September 13th.