
KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Some Questions a Potential Art Museum Director Should Ask

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CENTER
FOR CURATORIAL
LEADERSHIP

FOREWORD

The Center for Curatorial Leadership (CCL) was founded to give curators the skills to take on leadership positions in art museums. Ten years ago, when we welcomed the first class of Fellows, I had no idea that so many would take on museum directorships; to date, almost one-quarter of the graduates of the program serve in these roles, and two years after completing the program, 87% have been promoted to more senior positions.

The CCL curriculum has been shaped by our convictions about what curators need to learn in order to take on greater responsibility in their institutions; we designed the program to include not just management instruction, but also moral leadership, mentorships and residencies with leading museum directors from around the globe, and a diversity mentoring initiative in which the Fellows seek to bring new constituencies into the curatorial field. However, I began to sense that the Fellows, who were sought after often by virtue of having participated in the program, were under-prepared for the speed, intensity, and pressure of being recruited for top-level jobs.

Kimerly Rorschach, a CCL Trustee and distinguished museum director herself, has put together a booklet of advice, [Know Before You Go](#), not just for CCL alumni, but for anyone in the field who is engaged in a job search for a top-level position. In reading her suggestions, I begin to feel we could all benefit from having these questions about fiscal responsibility, governance, reporting, and accountability present in our minds, no matter what job we do. If we can take responsibility for knowing the answers to her questions, we will be able to do our jobs better and more responsibly.

We hope that this will be the first of many booklets that CCL produces on topics that emerge as important to our program, to the field, and to good non-profit governance in general. I am proud to mark our tenth anniversary with this debut volume.

Elizabeth W. Easton
Director and Co-founder
Center for Curatorial Leadership

Kimerly Rorschach

Trustee, Center for Curatorial Leadership
Illsley Ball Nordstrom Director and
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When seriously considering a position or position offer, a candidate should ask detailed questions about these issues. All museums have ongoing challenges, so it is important to develop a clear understanding of the museum's strengths and weaknesses, including which areas are well managed and which areas need attention.

The candidate will then be better able to ascertain whether the job is a good fit, which issues are most urgent, and how best to assemble and manage a senior leadership team. While art issues are of course paramount, it is assumed that the candidate has the most knowledge and experience in this area, so the focus here is on other matters.

I have been an art museum director for over twenty years in institutions both small and large across three different cities. In my experience, the secret to success is to think as strategically as possible at all times, and always to keep in mind the unique context of the particular museum one is leading. I have also seen a number of art museum

directors fail to succeed for many reasons, but quite often related to these two key points. All art museums have aspects in common, but in many ways they are more different from each other than we might assume.

This booklet, which began as a one-page list of questions, is an attempt to help those considering a first directorship to understand those differences and ascertain whether their personal strengths, experiences, and interests are well suited to a particular position. When considering a leadership role, this discernment is as critical as any other asset you will bring to the job. There is much you will not know before you accept a directorship, but my hope is that this booklet will help you be as prepared as possible to lead your museum successfully.

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“Knowing the answers to essential questions – such as those outlined in this publication – would certainly help a first-time director in his or her preparedness and success.”

—Agnes Gund, Co-founder and Chair, Center for Curatorial Leadership

Agnes Gund, Co-founder and Chair, Center for Curatorial Leadership, speaks with Naomi Beckwith (CCL 2017), Marilyn and Larry Fields Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, during her fellowship in New York City.

GENERAL FINANCIAL HEALTH OF ORGANIZATION

What is the museum's operating budget?

What portion of the budget is devoted to debt service?

What are the major revenue sources and major expense categories?

If the museum receives public support, what are the attendant political issues?

How much revenue is relatively stable year-over-year (e.g. endowment income, public or parent university support) versus annual revenue that must be secured every year?

Has the budget grown or shrunk significantly over the past five years?

What factors are in play regarding budget trends?

SIZE, PERFORMANCE, MANAGEMENT, AND DRAW OF ENDOWMENT

What is the size of the museum's endowment relative to the operating budget?

How much unrestricted operating support does it provide annually, versus restricted support and acquisition funding?

How is the endowment managed?

What is the draw, and is it unsustainably high?





“Good governance is key to the health of our museums. Directors must come prepared to tackle immediate challenges and prepare for those on the horizon.”

—Elizabeth Easton, Director and Co-founder, Center for Curatorial Leadership

The 2015 Center for Curatorial Leadership Fellows at the Getty Leadership Institute in Los Angeles, California.

CAMPAIGN HISTORY

What were the museum's recent fundraising campaigns?

Were they successful?

What campaigns are currently in progress or planned for the future? (Often a museum waits until a director is in place to begin a campaign, but trustees will have specific ideas about what is needed.)

DEBT, REPAYMENT, AND RATIOS

How much debt does the museum have?

How is the debt secured?

Is any debt secured by planned gifts?

What are the repayment plans?

Are there revenue streams dedicated to repayment?

Is debt service a burden on the operating budget?

What is the museum's ratio of debt to assets?

Has the collection been used as collateral for debt?

ONGOING LEGAL ISSUES

Is the museum currently involved in any legal disputes, or has it been recently?

How is the museum's legal work handled (by inside or outside counsel, board members working pro bono, etc.)?

Judith Dolkart (CCL 2013), now the Mary Stripp and R. Crosby Kemper Director at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, participates in Columbia Business School coursework during the Center for Curatorial Leadership fellowship.



BOARD GOVERNANCE AND SUCCESSION

What are the board terms and term limits?

How are these observed?

How large is the board?

How well does it represent the community?

How is diversity and inclusion in the board being addressed?

What is the plan for board leadership succession?

How often do the leadership positions change?

What is the process for these changes, and how is the director involved?

What are the giving requirements?

STRATEGIC ISSUES AND PLANNING

What major strategic issues is the museum currently facing?

Does the museum have a strategic plan?

What is the recent history of strategic planning, and where in the cycle is the museum? (Strategic planning will often be an early task for a new director, but cannot be undertaken until some knowledge and experience of the institution is gained.)

COLLECTION ISSUES:

Conservation, Storage, Pending and Potential Claims, Cataloguing, and Inventory

What is the size and character of the museum's collection, and how is it physically cared for?

If there are conservators on staff, how do they prioritize work, and what is the backlog?

If there are no staff conservators, how is conservation for the collection and exhibitions handled?

What is the size and condition of the museum's storage facilities, and are they adequate for the collection and its projected growth?

Does a lot of deaccessioning need to be done?

(Cont.) **COLLECTION ISSUES:** Conservation, Storage, Pending and Potential Claims, Cataloguing, and Inventory

How often is the collection inventoried, and how is inventory control achieved?

How does the museum guard against inside theft?

What are the pending and potential claims regarding antiquities, Native American works, Nazi-era provenance, etc.?

Is provenance research ongoing, and is the museum being duly diligent when it comes to the collection and new acquisitions?

What has been the overall strategy and history of the museum's collection development, and are there any areas of concern?

2016 Center for Curatorial Leadership Fellows Susan Fisher, Vera Grant, Reto Thuring, and Doryun Chong participate in a Columbia Business School small group exercise.



STAFF ISSUES:

Compensation and Benefits, Pension Issues, Diversity, and Inclusion

How do compensation and benefits compare with those offered by other nonprofits in the area?

How do they compare relative to businesses in general in the market, including competitive areas such as finance, operations, facilities, security, and marketing?

What is the difference in salary between the highest- and the lowest-paid employee?

What retirement plan does the museum offer? Is it a defined contribution plan or a defined benefit plan? Are there any issues with a legacy pension plan, which could be underfunded?

Has the museum made changes to its retirement plan recently? Do changes need to be made?

How will the local and national debates about minimum wage, last-minute schedule changes for hourly employees, and overtime levels affect the museum's practices and budget?

How diverse is the staff, and how inclusive are the hiring practices?

Is any portion of the staff unionized, and what are the issues there?

Valerie Purdie-Greenaway, Director of the Laboratory of Intergroup Relations and the Social Mind at Columbia University and Adjunct Associate Professor of Business at Columbia Business School, leads a course on teams with the 2016 Center for Curatorial Leadership Fellows.



PHYSICAL PLANT ISSUES

How many buildings/
facilities does the museum
occupy, including office,
storage, and other
supporting activities?

Are the facilities owned
or leased?

Where are all facilities
located and how are staff
allocated between them?
Are facilities fully climate
controlled?

Are facilities fully
accessible?

What are the deferred
maintenance issues?

How expensive are they,
and how urgently must
they be addressed?

TECHNOLOGY ISSUES

What are the major issues facing the museum regarding technology?

How is technology integrated into the galleries?

How are the museum's website and mobile applications managed and supported?

What systems are used to manage donor and membership information, customer relationship management and ticketing, collection inventory, exhibition design, business and financial systems, and other key functions?

How does the museum preserve time-based media art in the collection and plan ahead for obsolete technologies?

How does the museum collect and analyze data?

How does the museum plan and fund technology updates and new system implementations? What are the thorny technology issues?

SPECIAL UNIVERSITY ISSUES:

Governance, University Leadership Succession, Teaching Opportunities and Expectations, Other Campus Collections, Structure, and Finances

GOVERNANCE

To whom does the museum director report?

What is the museum director's status relative to the faculty and other high-level administrators?

Does this create any issues with status or credibility?

If the museum director does not serve on a dean's council, faculty governance body, or other such entity, how is he or she kept abreast of major issues affecting the university?

UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION

How long has the university president been serving, and what is his or her expected tenure going forward? (Ask the same questions about the provost or the person to whom the museum director reports.)

**TEACHING OPPORTUNITIES
& EXPECTATIONS**

**Is the museum director
expected to teach?
Forbidden to teach?**

**What are the advantages
and disadvantages of
teaching or not teaching?**

**Is the director a member
of the art and/or art history
departments?**

OTHER CAMPUS COLLECTIONS

**Does the university have
other campus collections
and/or museums?**

**What is the status of the
museum the candidate
would lead vis-à-vis the
other campus museums?**

**How do they compare in
terms of funding, reporting
status, and director status?**

**Is there clarity regarding
the distinct missions of the
various campus museums?**

Rebecca Rabinow (CCL 2013), now Director of The Menil Collection, participates in Columbia Business School coursework during the Center for Curatorial Leadership fellowship.



(Cont.) SPECIAL UNIVERSITY ISSUES

STRUCTURE & FINANCES

What is the legal/operational structure of the museum?

Is the museum part of the university or a separate 501(c)(3)? (The latter is unlikely, but possible.)

How is the museum's budget developed, monitored, and characterized relative to other university entities?

What is the university's overall financial condition?

What are its greatest challenges and opportunities?

How does the museum support the university's overall mission? (This last point should be well understood and articulated.)

2017 Center for Curatorial Leadership Fellows Sophie Hackett and Emily Hanna in conversation during a visit to the Whitney Museum of American Art.





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MISSION

The Center for Curatorial Leadership (CCL) trains curators to assume leadership positions in museums in the rapidly evolving cultural climate of the 21st century. CCL identifies individuals who have the potential to become leaders and helps them shape themselves into professionals who not only take charge of the art in their care but are also capable of assuming the leadership responsibilities essential to high performance in today's art museums. CCL believes that there need be no contradiction between these two sets of obligations—indeed, that there must not be.

WHO WE ARE

Founded in 2007 by Agnes Gund and Elizabeth Easton, CCL is located in New York City and runs programs at home and in other cities, drawing upon the diverse resources of museums and academic institutions across the United States. It has transformed the model for developing leaders in art museums with a singular program that involves a combination of teaching and doing, including mentorships with top museum directors and exposure to a wide network of trustees, philanthropists, business leaders, and innovators. Throughout the five-month fellowship, CCL gives curators the tools to manage teams, connect with diverse audiences, mentor emerging professionals, and understand the finances and inner workings of their organizations. As a result, CCL graduates are able to effect change at the institutional level, leading technology initiatives, fundraising campaigns, audience development programs, and strategic planning. In 2014, CCL expanded the arc of training provided by the core fellowship, launching new programs designed specifically for art history doctoral candidates and international curators of modern and contemporary art.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Rorschach joined the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) as the Illsley Ball Nordstrom Director and CEO in 2012. She led SAM's development of a strategic plan that builds on the achievements of SAM's massive 2007 expansion, which resulted in three unique sites for SAM: downtown's flagship Museum, the Asian Art Museum in Volunteer Park, and the Olympic Sculpture Park located on the waterfront. During her tenure, the museum has organized major exhibitions and important acquisitions have been added to SAM's global collection. Most recently, in collaboration with the Fondation Pierre Bergé-Yves Saint Laurent in Paris, Rorschach was instrumental in organizing SAM's exhibition *Yves Saint Laurent: The Perfection of Style*, in 2016. Recent and upcoming major exhibitions include a presentation of Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series*; *Seeing Nature: Landscape Masterworks from the Paul G. Allen Family Collection*; *Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors* (organized by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden); and a major Andrew Wyeth retrospective.

Prior to SAM, Rorschach served as the Mary D.B.T. and James H. Semans Director of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Under

her direction, the Nasher Museum opened to the public in 2005 and quickly built a dynamic program focusing on modern and contemporary art and service to the university and broader community, and attained a reputation as a leading university art museum. Rorschach established the museum as the cornerstone for the arts at Duke. She chaired Duke's Council on the Arts, working to promote the arts as one of five priorities in the university's strategic plan.

In previous roles, Rorschach was the Dana Feitler Director of the University of Chicago's David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art for 10 years and has held curatorial positions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia.

Rorschach is a past president of the Association of Art Museum Directors. In addition, she is a Trustee with the American Federation of Arts, New York, and serves on the Board of Trustees for the Center for Curatorial Leadership.

Rorschach was a Fulbright Scholar, holds a Ph.D. in art history from Yale University and earned a B.A. from Brandeis University.



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