

Texas Association of Museums White Paper
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LOOKING FOR LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Initial Insights from the Texas Association of
Museums' Finding Alternative Futures 2 Cohort



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Looking for the Light at the End of the Tunnel: Initial insights from the Texas Association of Museum's Finding Alternative Futures 2 Cohort

Executive Summary

The Texas Association of Museums, Experience Alchemists, and ExposeYourMuseum have been studying what the Finding Alternative Futures 2 (FAF 2) cohort have been telling us about their progress in the program thus far and the themes that are arising for them as they work with the instructors and mentors to chart a sustainable future for their organization. What are their big takeaways?

- Digital transformation isn't really "digital". It's about how we work together.
- It seems counterintuitive in the midst of a pandemic, but strategy and goal setting are more important than ever.
- Understanding online audiences and how they differ from onsite ones is critical.
- Though the pandemic has caused upset for the whole sector, small organizations continue to struggle the most.

Introduction

Eighteen months into this unprecedented period of history, we wanted to provide the museum community with a snapshot of what we're learning from the FAF2 program and more specifically, anonymized insights from the participants in the program. The cohort has completed modules in: Online Public Programming, Operational Capacity and Continuity, and Community Engagement, and has been working with the FAF2 coaches to understand how the opportunities of the moment can be best harnessed to build resilient organizations in Texas.

"In addition to the Annual Meeting, Professional Development, and Networking Activities, TAM is involved in Special Projects designed to strengthen Texas museums through long-term engagements such as the capacity-building project Finding Alternative Futures funded by the Houston Endowment and Summerlee Foundation and Finding Alternative Futures 2 funded by the Houston Endowment. Building on the successful first phase of the project, FAF2 includes online learning modules and resources that will be repackaged to have a broader impact within the museum community. The courses are accessed via Google Classroom for the current participants and portions will then be represented both synchronously and asynchronously through hybrid programming after the end of the current phase."

Alex Freeman

How are we all doing?

If you're feeling a bit blue, you're not alone. LaPlacaCohen, in collaboration with Slover Linett and Yancey Consulting, has just released the second wave of findings from their national Culture Track survey of Americans views on culture. Download *"Culture + Community in a Time of Transformation"* here.¹

Americans are reporting higher levels of sadness, anxiety, and disconnection (or perhaps because of them) than ever. But one of the more hopeful findings of their survey is that Americans are also reporting feeling that arts and cultural organizations are more important than ever in these strange times which the report authors call "Our New 'Hybrid' Normal".

[block quote] "Amidst field-wide closures, the pandemic has ushered in an influx of digital experimentation. This has opened the door for arts organizations to consider new "hybrid" approaches, where digital and physical realms could coexist and enrich cultural experiences. However, varying levels of digital participation present both opportunities and challenges for the cultural sector around issues of accessibility and monetization."

CultureTrack

These are still unsettled times, as museums continue to grapple with the hybrid nature of museum engagement in 2021 and beyond. It is in this context that this paper is offered up as a snapshot of how the Texas museums in the FAF2 cohort are faring halfway through the program, and what insights they have reached that may be of broader interest to the TAM

community and beyond. These findings are necessarily incomplete, but we believe that they are useful indicators of the state of the field at a critical time.

Learnings:

Digital transformation isn't really "digital"

The pivot to digital engagement that many museums undertook in the early days of the pandemic as an emergency measure is now over a year old. Learning how to operate in the digital realm has been an adventure, to be sure, but for many of the participants, the most important lessons thus far have had less to do with software and more to do with mindset. Most of these skills and attitudes being developed in FAF2 are not solely digital, though we're applying them to digital efforts. MIT's Sloan School and Deloitte published a report called, *"Strategy, not Technology, Drives Digital Transformation: Becoming a Digitally Mature Enterprise"*.²

MIT and Deloitte surveyed 4,800 organizations recently about their state of digital adoption and adaptation. One of their key findings was that digitally maturing organizations are, *"more comfortable taking risks than their less digitally mature peers. To make their organizations less risk averse, business leaders have to embrace failure as a prerequisite for success. They must also address the likelihood that employees may be just as risk averse as their managers and will need support to become bolder."*

So digital maturity and comfort in taking risks go hand in hand. Now there's nothing digital about risk taking, it's a mindset. In fact, the report's main conclusion was that digital transformation has a lot less to do with technologies than it does with strategy and mindset, *"The strength of digital technologies ... doesn't lie in the technologies individually. Instead, it stems from how companies integrate them to transform their businesses and how they work."* The pandemic has made learning to come to grips with digital technologies a necessity, or as one participant put it, *"We have really gotten a technological kick in the pants the last couple of years."* This has resulted in many museums jumping into online engagement and demonstrating how the institutions most willing to take the risk are the ones best poised to benefit from digital technologies.

Throughout the course of FAF 2, participants have been challenged to take the lessons and reflect on how their organizations have addressed the ways they work together and how they might work differently in the future.

[block quote] "It certainly has changed my thinking. As a volunteer, not an employee and not a board member, my involvement may not be the same as some. I'm now thinking a lot about what we learned ... We also have shifted the way we work a bit...I am now far more connected and collaborative with that group of people than I ever have been, and I'm positive that has to do with FAF2."

-FAF2 participant

Strategy and goal setting are more important than ever

One of the most troubling aspects of the pandemic has been how it has upset everyone's ability to predict and plan for the future. The time-honored long-term planning that cultural organizations have engaged in has been replaced with various versions of "Will we still be open next month?" But that doesn't mean that strategy is useless. Quite the opposite, actually, though that strategic planning will look different than it used to. In a recent report by McKinsey, "*Getting ahead of the next stage of the coronavirus crisis*"³ the authors suggest that organizations need to embrace new models of planning that emphasize big picture thinking, something museums are well-suited to do. "*The point isn't to develop detailed plans but rather to figure out your broad direction of travel—the big thematic idea around which you can form a strategic response. In a world full of uncertainty, you have to stand for a goal that will matter above all else. This big idea will bring coherence and determination to your evolving tactical response.*"

Despite the pressure to do *something* in the face of buildings closing and revenues falling, FAF 2 participants found that the crisis actually reinforced the importance of good strategy. Knowing what to do (and what *not* to do) to reach your goals became critically important in 2020-21. One participant summed up the challenge thus, "*We are lucky to have just completed a strategic plan that gives us an umbrella look at where we want to go but lacks in detailing where we are. With a small staff that is already at capacity, it will be challenging to find the resources to conduct an audit.*"

"[The FAF 2 instructors] directed us to think about issues of governance we may not have considered before, and also pushed us to think about our goals, our audience, and our purpose. I believe we need this guidance if we are going to continue to make our museum relevant and functional in the future."

FAF2 participant

Understanding online audiences is critical

In a recent article in *Museum Management and Curatorship*, "*Heritage in lockdown*"⁴ researchers surveyed 83 UK and US museums' digital offering during the pandemic, looking for indicators of successful engagement. One of their primary recommendations for improvement in practice was, "*Developing collaboration strategies at a local level or beyond to enhance the resilience both of institutions and audiences.*" In a study of Korean museums and audiences "*Changes and Challenges in Museum Management after the COVID-19 Pandemic*"⁵, the authors found that museums that had worked most closely with their audiences had found their relationship transformed. They report that "*One of the most significant changes they introduced was considering their users as internal, rather than external, stakeholders. For promoting museum products, encouraging users to participate makes them strong supporters who are more active across online platforms and engage and motivate new users, thereby configuring the network effects.*"

Understanding audiences and the importance of actively engaging with them in new ways was a theme that many FAF 2 participants shared. Here are just a few of the comments on audiences:

- *“Don’t just make stuff digital: The importance of talking to and listening to online audiences.”*
- *“Don’t assume we know, or understand, who is visiting just from the analytics we get from stats, or what the online visitors do when they are on our site.”*
- *“We need to talk with all of our stakeholders about our understandings (motivations, needs, wants) of our online visitors.”*
- *“‘[L]istening’ and getting input from potential audiences is key.”*
- *“They are not who I thought they were, we have a MUCH bigger potential audience than I first anticipated.”*
- *“Reinforces my thinking that we need to get outside the building.”*
- *“Realize the importance of online visitors and how different they are than our members”*

Small organizations struggle the most

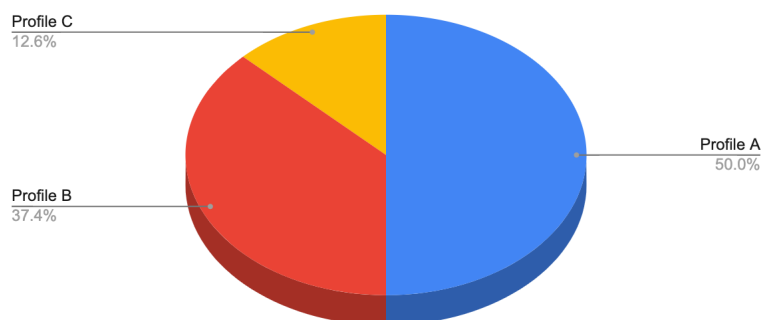
The Texas museum community is very heterogeneous. At one end are a small number of large institutions with substantial endowments and large staffs – Profile C. In the middle are organizations with smaller staffs and smaller coffers, but still some resources – Profile B. And at the other end, almost half of the member organizations in TAM have 0-2 staff members, in many cases being entirely volunteer-led – Profile A.

Profile A - 0 to 2 Full Time Staff 91 or 50%

Profile B - 3 to 20 Full Time Staff 68 or 37.4%

Profile C - 23 or 12.6% 21+ Full Time Staff

TAM Institutional Member Profiles as of 11.1.21 - 182 Total



For these institutions in Profile A, while they appreciated and benefited from the FAF 2 experience, they voiced concerns about how applicable lessons learned were for very small organizations. *“So far it’s reaffirming some lessons we’ve already learned. Unfortunately, I’ve*

found it hard to totally relate to a very small organization.” The resource constraints of small museums are so severe, that even in a small cohort of institutions, the situation for small museums were different enough that finding applicable lessons was a challenge.

[block quote] “As a small independent museum, some of these tasks feel very daunting and a discussion of “how to get started” and how to balance infrastructure needs with other day-to-day demands would have been helpful. I’m not sure we even have enough staff to have “cross-functional teams.” We all work across functions each day! Perhaps a discussion more targeted to small staffs/museums would be helpful.”

-FAF2 participant

This kind of feedback is incredibly helpful to the FAF 2 team and TAM in general as they think about the ongoing needs of the Texas museum community, says Alex Freeman, TAM Executive Director,

“In conceiving the modules for FAF2, we knew that one size does not fit all, but there were topics from our needs assessment that impacted institutions regardless of budget or staff size. The Houston museums we recruited for FAF2 represent a microcosm of the greater museum community in Texas and across the United States. By focusing on relevant topics and working with a diverse group of organization types and sizes, we are beginning to learn what we need to add to the program to provide greater support for smaller museums while thinking of how to increase relevance for larger institutions. The coaches have been instrumental in helping to translate the material while challenging others to advance their ideas and projects. The project is also providing us more direction on where to take a third phase of FAF and what types of supplemental professional development that TAM can build in-house or hire-out to address member needs”

Putting yourself in the audience’s shoes (or Zoom)

A final theme emerged for us as we read the evaluations of the FAF 2 cohort: how much actually doing the coursework online mattered. Aside from the need sector-wide for professional development, there is always room for us to put ourselves in the shoes of the people we’re trying to engage, and FAF 2 has been an opportunity for the participants to not only learn about digital engagement online, but also do so as learners rather than as instructors or designers. They get to *be* the online audience museums are trying to reach, with all the platform hassles, connectivity issues and learning curves of using new software that this entails. As one participant noted, *“It has helped to move me from a general understanding that there is a definite need to develop online capacity in tandem to in person programming, to an idea of what that looks like.”* This kind of direct personal experience will be of critical importance as museums continue to grapple with online engagement, much of which is novel for museum staff, boards, and volunteers.

Conclusion

It's our hope that this interim report will provide some useful and actionable information for our members as they look at 2022 and beyond. At the end of the FAF 2 project, we will compile a final white paper evaluating how the program did and what information participants found most relevant. Until then, we think these themes provide directional guidance for museums wondering how best to navigate the uncharted waters of the late pandemic.

¹ <https://s28475.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CCTT-Key-Findings-from-Wave-2.pdf>

² <https://www2.deloitte.com/xe/en/insights/topics/digital-transformation/digital-transformation-strategy-digitally-mature.html>.

³ <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/getting-ahead-of-the-next-stage-of-the-coronavirus-crisis#>

⁴ <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2020.1810483>

⁵ <https://doi.org/10.3390/joitmc7020148>