



Delaware Art Museum Strategic Plan

Summary

Over its 108-year history, the Delaware Art Museum has been many things to many people: a beloved institution founded by the local community; the home of unique collections tied to Delaware artists and collectors, including Howard Pyle, John Sloan, and the world-renowned Bancroft Collection of Pre-Raphaelite Art; and a center for art education. Despite many successes and achievements—including popular programs, increasing attendance, highly praised exhibitions, and pioneering scholarship—the Museum has struggled to achieve its full potential in two critical areas: financial stability and relevance to our local community, which the Museum defines as Delaware with a focus in the Greater Brandywine Valley.

These struggles are not unique to the Delaware Art Museum. Museums of all sizes are grappling with local relevance and financial sustainability. We looked at other museum strategic planning processes for inspiration, but ultimately, our strategic planning process evolved from staff discussions as well as donor and Member focus groups.

Months of exhaustive discussion made clear that the Museum needs to increase programmatic impact and financial resources; however, that wasn't the whole story. The Museum was missing the mark in subtle ways that cannot be quantified and plugged into a graph. After several in-depth focus groups with our supporters, it became clear that—while many of our Members, donors, and volunteers are pleased with our programs and exhibitions—the Museum is not a central part of the community and people's lives. Simply put, we were not impacting enough lives through our work. Moreover, some of the Museum's donors stated that the Museum is not one of their top local charities, in part because of the Museum's past public financial struggles.

Changing these perceptions will be challenging and will take time. However, we are already making excellent progress changing hearts and minds. The Museum has already begun to address our visibility and relevance in earnest and we are working on a two-step process to reach financial sustainability. The first step, and what this strategic plan focuses on, is increasing the Museum's relevancy and value to the communities in Wilmington and its surrounding area. The second step, which is currently underway, is embarking on a significant campaign that will bring decades of lasting financial security.

The Process

The Museum's staff started the strategic planning process in early 2017 by asking ourselves a question: "What is the Museum's value to our audiences?" After months of debates and discussions, the strategic planning leadership team—comprised of senior level staff and a handful of board members—narrowed in on a key challenge. Historically, the Museum has served people connected to the collection first, and the community second. While art will always be at the center of our mission, the team decided that we must be equally committed to our role

as a community resource and we need to become an accessible, inclusive, and creative center that serves our diverse community and acts as a catalyst for the City of Wilmington and the region.

To achieve this broad directive, the entire Museum staff broke into four cross-departmental teams to address complex questions: What are the needs of Wilmington’s diverse communities and how can we meaningfully connect with them through art? How can we provide an exceptional guest experience that inspires visitors and generates value? How can we strengthen relationships with our donors and provide better stewardship? How do we ensure our programs, exhibitions, and collections care are exceptional? In addition, what can we do to make our day-to-day operations more efficient and responsive?

The four cross-departmental teams deliberated on these issues during the summer of 2017. Through their hard work, the Museum adopted a strategic vision to become:

- Committed to excellence – nationally recognized for the quality of our collections and programs and for advancing innovation in all art disciplines.
- A vital hub – a vibrant, bustling space activated by the collections and programs where artists, educators, and community groups come together on equal terms to engage in cultural and civic discourse around art.
- Civically engaged – bringing art into the lives of the community in ways that support their interests.
- Welcoming and inclusive – understanding who our audience is and then meeting their unique needs.
- Financially sustainable – securing the Museum’s future with a strong endowment and responsible resource management.

In addition to guiding the Museum toward this new vision, the four cross-departmental teams devised a list of specific, actionable projects that will move the Museum’s vision forward. Much progress has already been made in the last several years on these goals and—although COVID-19 has altered how we work—we remain confident that we will achieve all of our goals included in the strategic direction’s five core areas, listed above and described in depth in the Goals and Objectives section, over the next several years.

Foundation statements:

Our Mission: The mission of the Museum is “to connect people to art, offering an inclusive and essential community resource that through its collections, exhibitions, and programs, generates creative energy that sustains, enriches, empowers, and inspires.”

Our Impact Statement: Through inclusive and relevant exhibitions programs and collections, the Museum enables people in Delaware, with a focus in the Greater Brandywine Valley, to value how art can inspire individuals, bring people together, and foster greater quality of life in the community.

Goals and Objectives:

The Strategic Plan yielded five broad organizational goals that support the Mission and Impact Statement. The vision will become a reality through the implementation of an Action Plan—a series of objectives and specific tasks that create a roadmap for achieving the goals. The Action Plan was developed primarily by Museum staff and identifies how, together with the board, they will address each of the strategic goals.

Uphold our commitment to excellence

Background: The Museum is proud to have world-class collections that rival museums in cities 10 times the size of Wilmington. Over the next several years, we will strive to be nationally recognized for the quality of our collections and programs and for advancing innovation in all art disciplines.

- Expand, promote, and care for the Museum’s collections.
 - Complete Collections Accessibility Plan, thereby making all 12,500 works of art in the Museum’s collection publically accessible online by 2019.
 - Research and share compelling stories about the Museum’s collection with our community and supporters, as well as academic audiences.
 - Secure funding for major initiatives like exhibitions, conservation projects, collection accessibility, digital archives, and Museum-wide reinstallation
 - Increase digital accessibility of archival collections.
 - Engage contemporary artists to activate historical collections for new audiences
- Launch a high caliber performance series that both introduces existing audiences to new art forms and invites new audiences to engage with the Museum.
- Complete reinterpretation and reinstallation of the Museum’s main floor permanent collection galleries.

Become a Vital Hub that is inclusive and welcoming to all visitors

Background: the Museum must be a lively, vital hub for the community and the region where people can come together on equal terms to engage in cultural and civic discourse. Over the next two years, the Museum will work on the following Vital Hub action items:

- Improve Museum’s public spaces to make them more welcoming and accessible.
 - Redefine public space to encourage socializing and community use.
 - Increase programming in Museums’ galleries and public spaces, including the Museum Store and Thronson Café.
 - Renovate front entrance and improve Sculpture Garden amenities.
 - Install welcoming installation in Orientation Hallway to explain community-founding origin of Museum.
 - Install clearer directional signage, more internal seating, and more exterior lighting.
 - Improve Wi-Fi speed for visitors.
- Enhance the Museum’s brand and visual presence.
 - Use audience research to create new messaging and rebranding campaign.
 - Update the Museum’s website platform and functionality.
 - Increase visibility through traditional, online, and grassroots marketing efforts.

- Improve access to the Museum for all.
 - Improve public transportation options to and from the Museum.
 - Make Museum hours more compatible with audience needs.
 - In addition to ensuring the Museum is fully ADA compliant, conduct audit reviewing our accessibility for visitors with a variety of disabilities.
 - Evaluate demand for bi-lingual services.
- Provide training and support to ensure all staff embrace exceptional customer service.
 - Retrain frontline and security staff to be more welcoming, and to better understand the Museum’s collections and core values.
 - Research and consider replacing paid security contractors with customer-service focused part-time Museum staff.
 - Re-design Museum Guide (formerly Docent) program and training to be learner-centered and accessible to audiences from different backgrounds.
- Alter programs to better meet audience needs.
 - Continue audience research on core and developing audiences; refine current program offerings to better serve these audience needs.
 - Put together long-range plan to reinterpret galleries to better communicate with defined audiences.
 - Create Museum Ambassador program of greeters/interpreters to welcome and assist guests in galleries.
- Provide exceptional stewardship to all Museum donors and supporters.
 - Solicit feedback and provide regular updates on how gifts were used to ensure that all donors understand the impact of their support.

Become a civically engaged institution that plays an active and relevant role in Wilmington

Background: 21st century museums must abandon the outdated “inside-out” model and deepen relationships with their communities. Becoming civically engaged will increase the Museum’s relevance, and in turn, increase financial support. Over the next two years, the Museum will:

- Diversify Museum to reflect Greater Wilmington community.
 - Create and reinforce culture of inclusiveness with trainings, staff-wide discussion, and appropriate HR policies and procedures.
 - Increase staff and board diversity.
 - Communicate our commitment to collecting and exhibiting work by female artists and artists of color.
- Take a “community-first” approach to developing programs and exhibitions
 - Convene and host community meetings and advisory groups that inform Museum programming and exhibits, initiate collaborations, and support community interests.
 - Establish partnerships with groups and individuals focused on social issues affecting their community, and deepen relationships with current partners aligned with similar themes.
 - Co-lead and support community-wide initiatives, such as 2018 programming marking the 50th anniversary of Wilmington’s 1968 occupation.
 - Collect and display the art of significant regional artists and celebrate local favorites with initiatives like the Distinguished Artists Series.

- Reach more diverse local audiences
 - Conduct baseline demographic studies to determine current visitor breakdown; set percentage increase goals for 2018 and 2019.
 - Hire consultant to conduct rigorous audience research on local communities we hope to engage and attract.
 - Expand opportunities for collaboration and deepen relationships through partnership programs such as the Connected Series and annual community festivals.
 - Develop and present offsite arts programming focused on social issues that reach diverse audiences in targeted zip codes, such as a new Performance Series and artist residencies.
- Encourage staff-wide civic activity to increase networking opportunities and build awareness out in the community
 - Incentivize ALL Museum staff members to partake in civic organizations and programs that drive change in Wilmington.
 - Create a Performance Series focused on social equity themes for diverse audiences.
 - Participate in community-wide initiatives where goals and interests are aligned with the Museum.
- Measure and evaluate progress regularly.
 - Institute Museum-wide evaluation process to measure stated program goals; tweak programs as needed.
 - Regularly survey visitors, Members, community partners, etc. to measure quality of relationships instead of just numbers.

Achieve long-term financial sustainability

Background: It is imperative that the Museum prepare for its future with a strong endowment and responsible resource management. Over the next several years the Museum will:

- Increase the Museum’s endowment to support operations for 30 or more years.
- Reduce annual draw on investments to 5%.
- Focus on ongoing efforts to reduce non-mission critical expenses.
- Increase Membership, number of donors, and earned revenue.

Evaluation

In our fast-moving world, a traditional three to five year strategic plan is obsolete. Priorities change month-to-month, even day-to-day. Therefore, the Delaware Art Museum will need to constantly assess the above vision and course-correct when necessary. To achieve this level of frequent evaluation we will review this document during regular departmental, leadership, staff, and board meetings. We will make adjustments as necessary.

*Created December 2017
Updated July 2020*

