

**Research Question:**

What can we learn from peer institutions about the value and process of museum accreditation?

**Research Topics:**

For those that have gone through accreditation, we explored their...

- Motivations for accreditation
- Accreditation process
- Resource requirements
- Required changes to achieve accreditation
- Perceived value of accreditation

For those who have decided not to go through accreditation, we explored their...

- Motivations for not pursuing accreditation
- Sentiment around the need for accreditation
- Relationship with parent academic institution

**Participating Museums:**

- Colby College Museum of Art
- Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center- Vassar College
- Middlebury College Museum of Art
- Mead Art Museum- Amherst College
- Smith College Museum of Art
- Mount Holyoke College Museum of Art
- Tang Teaching Museum - Skidmore College

**Outline of document:**

1. [Overall advantages for going through museum accreditation \(PROS\)](#)
2. [Some caveats to the accreditation process \(CONS\)](#)
3. [Understanding what it takes to go through the accreditation process](#)
4. [Before embarking on accreditation- some big picture questions and considerations](#)
5. [Perspectives from non-accredited museums](#)
6. [Additional recommendations and food for thought](#)

1. Overall advantages for going through museum accreditation (PROS)

- **Museum accreditation can catalyze major decisions and strategies internally:** University and college affiliated museums found that the accreditation process provided them with the leverage they needed to negotiate with core administration for major works, process changes and investment (e.g., changing reporting protocols, storage renovations, legitimacy for expansions, more staffing etc.).
- **Accreditation is a recognized process:** Colleges themselves go through a comparable accreditation process - so accreditation is bona fides within higher education and is a value that is understood.
- **Museum accreditation is one of the core “seals of approval” within the wider museum community:** In addition to a complete facilities report, accreditation provides museums with the recognition that they have achieved a certain standard of best practices for the field.
- **Accreditation facilitates exchanges with other museums, such as securing loans:** With the seal of approval from accreditation, smaller museums especially (who may not be known at a wider national or international level) felt they were in a better position to secure loans from other museums.
- **Museum accreditation is a valuable moment/process in which to learn about internal policies and realign with national best practices:** Going through the rigorous process of accreditation and/or re-accreditation has allowed many museums and new directors to learn about their institutions and assess their policies in a reflective way. This is a unique opportunity to take a step back and have those critical conversations about how things are being done.
- **Accreditation can also help secure grants:** Gaining accreditation emphasizes the professionalism of a museum and how it is run and managed, and demonstrates best practices and national standards; this in turn can help secure grants especially from government and federal agencies like NEA and IMLS.

2. Some caveats to the accreditation process (CONS)

- Finding time to **write the required self study is among the hardest pieces** to the accreditation process and often/should fall to the Director.
  - Both the initial accreditation and re-accreditation processes **represent a heavy lift for staff**. Accreditation is labor intensive.
  - **Once museums go through the accreditation it can be difficult to not continue the renewals**, so organizations are essentially locked into a repeat cyclical process every 10-15 years.
  - Many museums feel it is **worse losing accreditation than never being accredited**.
  - Accreditation ideally serves as a series of guidelines, but it can also represent **operating parameters that potentially hinder the full autonomy of how a museum can engage with their collection** and audiences.
  - **Museum accreditation may be better suited to standard museum models** - and not as adapted to academic-affiliated museums with different challenges and models of operations.
  - While the accreditation process supports good museum governance, it may not be an impetus for innovation. **Museums should therefore continue their own independent work to push innovation and interpretation**.
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3. Understanding what it takes to go through the AAM accreditation process

**Timeline**

- **Plan for at least a year of work to prepare for the accreditation process:** Throughout our conversations almost everyone aligns on the timeline of this process. Collecting, reviewing and amending core documents and getting the approval from governing boards etc. takes several



months in anticipation of the site visit. One must build out at least a year to get everything done and to complete the required self-study.

- **Once the process starts, museums must be prepared for aggressive review timelines:** When a decision to be granted accreditation or reaccreditation is tabled, organizations have a specific often aggressive timeline in order to get the final approval for the elements that were considered insufficient. They are required to provide interim reports to demonstrate commitment to addressing the identified issues.
- **Preparing for the peer review process:** The peer review comprises a 2-day visit, where reviewers talk to every member of the staff and key stakeholders. For academic museums reviewers also meet with the provost, the chair of the visiting committee, the advisory committee, and members of the faculty who are close teaching partners. Scheduling these meetings and preparing for the site visit requires a heavy lift from coordinating staff. In some cases, this task is delegated to a special projects manager.

#### **Delegating tasks and getting the right people involved**

- **Preliminary review of core documents can determine who can/should help:** A preliminary review of existing core documents and older accreditation documents if applicable (typically done by Museum Director and Administrative Assistant) is important to determine what needs to be revised and refreshed. It is during this first revision of documents that work can be assigned to the appropriate person/teams and determine what needs deeper conversations with the leadership team.
- **Getting people with institutional knowledge involved:** Considering the breadth of documents and institutional knowledge required for the self-study, it is important to get people who have been around for a long time and can support newer staff. This is also essential for re-accreditation as past processes and documents are reviewed and amended.
- **Staff most deeply involved:** By way of staff time and general institutional knowledge, the departments most involved in the accreditation process usually are Collections Management and Education as well as Facilities teams. This work also requires a project manager and the heavy involvement of the Director and Senior Leadership.

**For academic museums, securing buy-in from the college/university administration**

- **Process requires collaboration with the affiliated university/college:** Especially in the context of college/university affiliated museums, it is critical to have the support of the administration in this process and ensuring everyone is committed to the full review and what the outcomes will be. Many museum Directors we spoke with said it was critical to have the support from the Provost and their direct reports.
  - **Accreditation reporting often requires help from multiple departments:** In the context of college/university affiliated museums that may have more complicated budgets based on how they fit into the wider administrative budget, it is necessary to bake in time to get support from financial departments to align budget reporting.
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4. Before embarking on accreditation- some big picture questions and considerations

**1. Decision to seek accreditation is a long-term decision - not just a one off. Are you ready to commit to this process moving forward?**

Once an organization is accredited there is an expectation to maintain this status with re-accreditation every 10 years. It is quite detrimental to lose accreditation and almost unheard of for institutions to decide not to renew the process. Therefore, if you go for accreditation, be prepared to commit to this process moving forward.

**2. Consider your mission and objective and whether accreditation really aligns. Is it critical to your mission and activities to be accredited?**

Accreditation is a long, intensive process and requires cyclical renewals. To go through the process museums must commit staff time and resources. It is therefore important to decide if the benefits and the overall process really align with the museum's current mission and strategies. Some institutions we spoke with questioned whether accreditation is better suited to traditional museums, versus academic museums affiliated to universities and colleges with different forms of engagement activities on campus.

**3. If you decide NOT to go for accreditation, do you have alternative modes for securing loans?**

Many small museums with more limited internal collections rely on loans to be able to put on their exhibitions. While accreditation can legitimize your museum and support the securing of loans from

larger institutions, some of our interviewees proposed looking to other peer museums and professional networks for loans instead, such as local museum consortiums etc.

**4. For academic affiliated museums, does the school administration support the accreditation process and will they help museum staff?**

Since the process of AAM accreditation is labor intensive, requires some financial commitment and ideally involves many internal stakeholders getting involved from both the museum side and the administration side, it is important to ensure you have their approval to go through with this process. Ask the administration if there are considerations you should be aware of and reasons why you maybe shouldn't be pursuing accreditation now?

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**5. Perspectives from non-accredited museums**

- There are **other existing peer groups and network opportunities that are equally more relevant and valuable** - especially to small college museums that have different needs and challenges to non-academic institutions.
- Accreditation is a worthwhile process to check for the health and practices of museums, but **should not be undertaken just to 'check a box'** as the process is labor-intensive and, once committed to, is an ongoing commitment.
- Museums without accreditation that we spoke with **did not face particular roadblocks or hurdles for securing loans**- so even without accreditation, museums have managed to host ambitious loan exhibitions. Museums working predominantly with contemporary living artists also find securing loans is easier and does not require accreditation.
- For academic-affiliated museums that we spoke with, they **don't always feel that securing accreditation will greatly improve or change their relationship with their parent-institution** or help them secure more funding (no guarantee that this will be a key leverage). If however, accreditation would improve the museum's leverage, accreditation is worth the effort.
- Museums without accreditation also **don't feel** that the lack of accreditation **has hindered their financing or securing of funding**.

- Considering the workload required with accreditation and staff capacity, [some museums feel securing accreditation is not where they want to put staff time and they have managed without it.](#)
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6. Additional recommendations and food for thought

- For more recent museums with smaller collections, [starting the accreditation process sooner rather than later can help before the institutions and their collection get much bigger.](#)
- [Having an advisory council](#) to support in the process - ideally from both internal stakeholders and museum experts - is worth establishing.
- Before embarking on the process, [consider where you are in terms of a strategic planning process](#) - ideally your museum should have a strategic plan.
- [Think about catalyst moments - is this the right time for your institution?](#)
  - Are you trying to go for an expansion?
  - Are you embarking on new strategic plans?
  - Do you need more staff and major investment that you could use leverage for?
  - Do you need to assert your role as a museum within the university ecosystem?
- [Consider your mission and how you want to engage with audiences, and students on campus for academic museums. Would accreditation facilitate or hinder some of your activities?](#) Some museums that have not pursued accreditation feel this non-accredited status affords them more freedom to manage their operations, collections independently and not be constrained by wider concerned bodies.