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ADVISORY
BOARD
for the ARTS

Transforming Arts Organizations Worldwide

Organizational Structures for Museum Interpretation

October 2023 -January 2024

Research Methodology

Research Question

How are museums structuring their team around interpretation and what are the processes established to facilitate that work?

To investigate this question, we conducted the following research:



Secondary research to gather:

- Job descriptions for museum interpreters
- Museum interpretation guidelines
- 990 financial information



Interviews with 13 organizations

- Museum representatives
- Members from the Association for Art Museum Interpretation

Our interviews covered the following topics:

- General organizational structure and where the interpretation department/team lives
- Leadership and personnel involved in interpretation
- Interpretation workflows and cross-departmental collaborations
- Interpretation content, plans and guidelines
- Best practices and advice for setting up an interpretation team

Research Participants- Museums

Cultural institutions



Cincinnati Art Museum
Cincinnati, OH, USA



Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, MI, USA

de Young \
Legion of Honor
fine arts museums
of san francisco

Fine Arts Museums of San
Francisco
San Francisco, CA, USA

Fowler
MUSEUM AT UCLA

Fowler Museum at UCLA
Los Angeles, CA, USA



Georgia O'Keeffe Museum
Santa Fe, NM, USA



M+ West Kowloon
Hong Kong, CHN

MFABoston

Museum of Fine Arts Boston
Boston, MA, USA



Portland Museum of Art
Portland, ME, USA



Royal Ontario Museum
Toronto, ON, CAN

RIJKS MUSEUM

Rijksmuseum
Amsterdam, NL



SFMOMA
San Francisco, CA, USA



Southern Vermont Arts Center
Manchester, VT, USA



UCCA Center for Contemporary Art
Beijing/Shanghai/Beidaihe, China

Interpretation Expert



The [Association for Art Museum Interpretation](#) is a professional network and membership-based organization for museum interpreters across the globe.

They provide online resources and organize an annual 2-day conference bringing together over 60 museum interpretation leaders to share their best practices and experiences.

We spoke with Jennifer Foley, AAMI's current Board President and Swarupa Anila, former Board President.

Key Takeaways

1. Preparing institutions for investments in interpretation

- **Interpretation as a practice needs structural buy-in:** For interpretation to be an accepted practice and process, it first needs director-level support. Creating a new interpretation process implies change, and the staff leading these transitions need the support and authority of the Director to do their work.
- **It is critical to set a baseline of understanding around interpretation:** For staff to adopt interpretation into their workflows, it is imperative they understand interpretation as the bridge between curatorial and education, what content falls under its purview and the kinds of qualifications and responsibilities needed to make this work successful.
- **It takes time to embed interpretation processes and build trust across teams:** As the work of interpretation revolves around close collaborations with different teams and notably curators, it is important to take the time to build practices into existing work cycles and build trust in the process and outcomes.

2. Structuring interpretation teams and staff

- **At first, it's good to place interpretation within an existing team before creating a dedicated department:** When starting interpretation work at an organization it is helpful to place its new leadership and staff within an existing department to build off existing work cycles, habits and relationships between teams before establishing a stand-alone department.
- **Museums tend to build out their interpretation teams starting with director roles:** Often interpretation work starts at organizations with a single director-level position managing the strategic vision and tactical implementation. As teams grow, most museums hire for managerial content experts and interpretation specialists followed by more coordinator level positions. Content editors are also important to this work and should be considered, as well as evaluators.
- **Interpretation demands close collaboration across teams:** Regardless of where interpretation staff live within the organization, it is important that they work closely across departments and therefore when hiring for interpretation staff there are a number of qualifications and responsibilities to consider.

Key Takeaways

3. Interpretation processes and best practices

- **Curators and interpreters lead the charge with interpretation plans:** After exhibitions have been selected, curators and interpreters work together to develop the interpretation plan that must include the priority audiences, core exhibition messages and target visitor outcomes. The interpretation plan acts as a project roadmap.
- **It is important to be mindful and transparent in the editing process:** Curators usually manage the first round of label writing followed by edits from the interpretation staff. In the editing and reviewing processes it is critical to be sensitive to how content changes are positioned in the lens of serving visitor needs first.
- **The introduction of visitor research and evaluations can help push for interpretation:** Testing, prototyping and going out to communities to understand what audiences want to hear versus what organizations want to say supports the interpretation process and democratizing knowledge ownership. Over time, evaluations should become part of interpretation processes alongside planning to inform design and experience outcomes.

4. Current trends and areas for expansion in interpretation

- **Working with community advisors supports perspective diversity and inclusion:** Many museums work with either ad-hoc project groups or standing community committees to support on specific exhibitions, especially where the expertise and lived experiences of curators may be lacking. These interactions can also take the form of community label-writing, which further promotes the vision of shared authority and diverse perspectives in the galleries.
- **There are opportunities to further align marketing to interpretation messages:** Interpretation can serve in an advisory capacity to marketing, making suggestions on social media and web content to focus on specific exhibition assets, as well as stories and core messages. This is also an opportunity to bring marketing into the exhibition planning process earlier on, to share the vision and make sure they align and understand the core visitor outcomes.
- **Many museums want to bridge the gap with education and docent content:** Currently, education programs and docent tours are usually managed separately from interpretation with some minimal involvement from curatorial. This more siloed approach can cause certain concerns around pedagogical consistency and alignment. Many museums want to integrate education more formally in the interpretation planning process.

Report Outline



1

**Preparing
institutions for
investments in
interpretation**



2

**Structuring
interpretation
teams and staff**



3

**Interpretation
processes and
best practices**



4

**Current trends
and areas for
expansions in
interpretation**

Section Outline



1

Preparing institutions for investments in interpretation

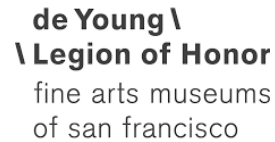
- Securing director-level support
- Communicating the principles of interpretation
- Committing resources and staff
- Socializing the role of interpretation and embedding practices
- Validating interpretation processes with evaluations

Securing Leadership Support For Interpretation

Leadership support is critical to...

- ✓ Facilitate **institutional buy-in**
- ✓ **Manage the impact of functional changes** brought on by new interpretation staff and practices
- ✓ Imbue interpretation staff with the **authority to pursue their work** and collaborate across teams
- ✓ Secure the **resources needed** for this work (i.e., staff, budgets etc.)

Leadership decisions that demonstrate support and help embed interpretation across the organization



Creating leadership positions

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (FAMSF) used to manage their interpretation through the support of academic consultants. In June 2022 they hired their inaugural Director of Interpretation to institutionalize and elevate the work with its own team. This changed the optics of interpretation as a core part of the museum's strategic plan.



Positioning interpretation internally

At M+, the museum's director intentionally placed the learning teams within the curatorial department to position both interpretation and curatorial work at an equal hierarchical level. The concept is that both curators and interpreters are essential content creators. This also avoids the traditional dichotomies differentiating the two departments.



Committing dedicated departments and budgets

At Portland Museum of Art, interpretation used to report to the art and curatorial division. Now the Museum split interpretation into its own division, in combination with their learning and community teams. This structural shift was critical to the prioritization and professionalization of education and interpretation. Interpretation has also been vested with its own budgets.



Why building teams, taking the time to embed processes and nurture relationships is worth the effort?

Certain organizations started their interpretation work with external agencies and consultants, which can be helpful in initial ideation and process development. However, interpretation is best managed by internal teams who are more familiar with the whole organization and collection. Therefore, it truly is worth the investment in resources and time to build out interpretation teams, provide them with embedded work processes and build relationships across departments.

Communicating the Principles of Interpretation

When your organization is ready to commit to interpretation and is considering how to structure the relevant teams and processes, it is critical to first ensure everyone is aligned on and understands the principles of interpretation. It is also important to be clear about what falls under the purview of interpretation.

Interpretive planners are experts in developing the learning environment and shaping content for visitor experiences



- ✓ Creates multiple pathways for understanding
- ✓ Encourages audiences of varying backgrounds to make relevant connections between art, ideas, and their lived experience.
- ✓ Practices socially, intellectually, and physically accessible and inclusive interpretive strategies onsite, offsite, and online.
- ✓ Creates learning opportunities that invite visitors to shift previously held views and expectations
- ✓ Utilizes collaboration, curiosity-driven experimentation, rigorous evaluation, reflection, and skill building, to create meaningful interpretive experiences.

Content typically included in Interpretation...

- Gallery labels
- Other gallery content like timelines, maps etc.
- Audio guides, videos, digital content
- Interactive stations and tools
- Feedback kiosks

Content NOT typically part of Interpretation...

- Publications
- Social media and marketing content
- Web content
- Docent trainings/ tours
- Education programs

Note: In some institutions, interpretation staff act as consultants for social media web content

Clearly Defining the Roles and Qualifications of Interpretation Staff

Another critical piece to empowering the work of interpretation at an institutional level is to clearly define what is meant by interpretation, the role interpretation staff across teams and the kinds of skills and qualifications you hire for in those positions.

Two considerations for the role of the interpretation team



Interpretation should be understood apart from education and not seen as a subset of education. Education is more about formal learning that involves program development and facilitation for groups. Interpretation is part of free choice learning and involves content creation in collaboration with other departments.

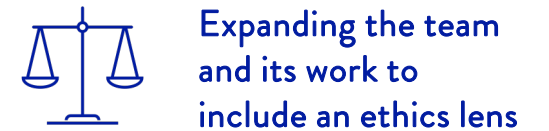


Interpretation should be understood as a bridge between curatorial and education. Interpreters act as liaisons making curatorial content more visitor focused and accessible for learning purposes. The relationship between interpreters and curators is more intimate than that of educators and curators.

Two considerations for qualifications of your interpretation staff



When considering the team to hire for interpretation work it can be helpful to hire members of the team with artistic backgrounds or more traditional museum experiences, to increase their legitimacy with colleagues in different departments, especially curatorial.

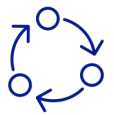


Beyond considering teams with artistic and museum experiences, certain museums have expanded their search to include staff with an ethics background to further diversify the perspectives on their team and enhance the ethics of their interpretation practices.

Committing Time to Embed Processes and Build Trust Across Teams

At the Start, Take the Time To Metabolize the Process

Establishing a new interpretive team implies a certain amount of procedural change. Identifying existing inefficiencies and demonstrating how new staff will help is critical to legitimizing interpretation work.



Taking time in the design process to secure buy-in and adoption of interpretation processes

- Before changing workflows to accommodate new interpretation practices, it is helpful to look at the existing lifecycles in your institution to identify how interpretation can be best embedded
- This careful planning can make it easier for staff to adapt to the new workflows and embrace new ways of developing exhibition content.
- It is also important to anticipated push back and take the time to address concerns and socialize interpretation work



Why it is helpful to link new interpretation processes to other lifecycles?

It is easier for staff across departments to metabolize and adapt to the new way of creating interpretation content if those new processes are linked to existing ways of working and therefore; not a complete departure from current practices.

Maintain Ongoing Relationship Building with Curators

To ensure effective collaborations between different content creators and especially with curators, it is critical to take the time to build trust and establish a sense of shared ownership and support.



Continually taking time to build and maintain relationships of trust with curators

- At the Cincinnati Art Museum, interpretation is handled by the Director of Learning and Interpretation, in full collaboration with the curatorial team.
- To promote effective collaborations, efforts were made to create 1-1 relationships with curators, focusing on trust building and mutual respect.
- Trust building ensures interpretation edits are well received and understood as the voice of the museum with a more visitor focused lens



Why building relationships with curators is critical to interpretation?

Working with curators requires figuring out how to build a spirit of collaboration and find compromises in which both teams recognize they are serving the audience first. It's important to challenge curators to not get too in the weeds.

Section Outline



2

Structuring interpretation teams and staff

- Models for where interpretation lives in organizational structure
- Leadership and staff managing interpretation
- Cross-departmental collaborations
- Current team sizes, and ideal expansion of staff

Different Approaches to Positioning Interpretation Structurally

General Takeaways

- Interpretation staff work **closely with curators and educators**, more than educators and curators work together.
- **Interpretation is cross-functional and collaborative** and can live in different departments.
- Regardless of where interpretation lives, leadership and staff **must have the authority to recommend content changes**.
- Requires **effective work process and relationships across teams**.



Most common model: Interpretation within Education/ Learning

- Interpretation is positioned as the bridge between curatorial content and programming
- Curators already have existing relationships and processes for working with educators developing programs from exhibitions
- It is therefore easy to adapt those workflow processes and cadences to the new interpretation team and build similar relationships of collaboration with curators
- Considering interpretation staff usually combine artistic and education expertise, education is a natural place for them to live within the organizational structure.



Eventual Goal: Standalone Department

- It's helpful to start by placing interpretation in existing departments to gain leverage and build relationships and processes with other teams
- As the program matures, having a standalone department further emphasizes the importance of this work at an intuitional level and gives staff more authority over processes
- Dedicated resources such as staff and budgets enhances the quality of interpretive work and innovative practices- as well as evaluation opportunities
- Dedicated budgets also reduce potential friction of using other departments' resources



We also heard of two less common models...



Interpretation within Curatorial/ Exhibition

- Positioned more as content creators – akin to curatorial content with a visitor lens



Interpretation within Marketing/ Communications

- Positioned more as content editors- funneling all written content with a visitor lens

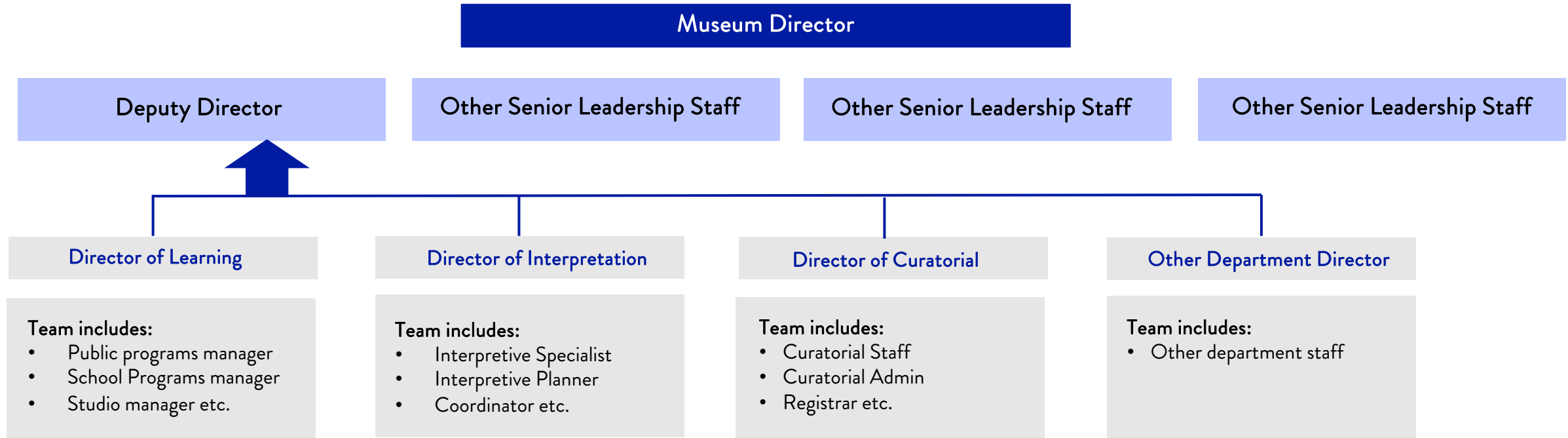
Most Common Model for Structuring Interpretation Teams



Implications of this model

- While this model benefits from the natural symbiosis between interpretation and public engagement, there are limitations notably around parity and support.
- If the Head of Interpretation is not at the same seniority level as the Head of Curatorial this can undermine their work and make it easier for curatorial staff to ignore interpretation recommendations and changes.
- In this model, the Director of Learning & Engagement as part of the senior leadership team has to be the person to advocate for interpretation.

Empowering Interpretation Through Revised Team Structures



Implications of this model

- In this model, Learning and Interpretation are separated out as two separate functions, with their own directors.
- Separating Learning from Interpretation acknowledges the unique sets of skills and knowledge required for those roles, while keeping them under the same division maintains the connections and coherence of working in tandem.
- The interpretation director is also placed at the same seniority levels as the director of curatorial, thereby validating the importance of interpretation as a core activity and priority for the institution.

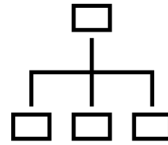
Interpretation Staff Work Across the Organization

Most organizations operate with a one-person interpretation team who works collaboratively across many departments.

Interpretation Team Core Collaborators

Content Development

- Involved in exhibition planning
- Defining exhibition message
- Writing and reviewing labels, content etc.

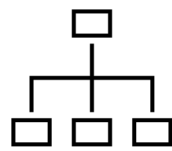


Curatorial

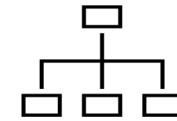
Note: some museums have cross-departmental teams for specific projects and exhibitions, including staff from education, marketing and curatorial that are involved throughout the exhibition planning and design process

Design Features & Experiences

- Creating exhibition design
- Stations, graphics, other gallery features
- Developing audio, video, digital content



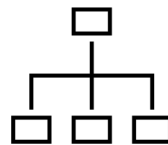
Exhibition Design



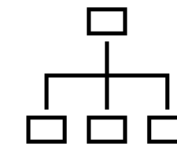
Digital

Programs & Communications

- Connecting exhibition to programming
- Creating communication plan
- Consulting on exhibition promotion



Education



Marketing & Communications

Scope of Leadership and Staff Responsibilities

Based on the size of your interpretation staff and the differentiation of responsibilities, here are a few core roles we heard of to manage interpretation. In smaller teams, most of these responsibilities and roles are combined and often fall under the Director of Interpretation until more staff are hired to build up the team.



Director of Interpretation

Attends director-level meetings to drive interpretation strategies and vision. Acts as the liaison between education and curatorial teams. Attends early planning meetings and helps guide directions of exhibitions with a focus on core visitor outcomes and equity.

Most organizations start their interpretation work with a director-level position who will manage all aspects of the work, collaborations and orchestrations with other departments.



Interpretation Planners/Specialists

Attends regular exhibition meetings with curators to develop the interpretation plan with core messages for visitors. Selects the interpretation techniques with exhibition and graphic designers, digital etc. Writes and reviews interpretive texts.

The second hire to support the director role, is usually the interpretation planner-to support as content expert and writer.



Project Management/ Coordinators

Project management for multiple exhibitions. Supports planning of cross-departmental meetings. Manages and oversees execution of project goals and milestones. Connects with external partners for community input.



Content Editors

Arriving at the final stages of content development after labels and other related content and audios have gone through approval from curators and interpreters. Can liaise with communication staff for final copy editing and other web texts.

Current Team Sizes, and Future Aspirations

Majority of organizations right now have a team of 1 with a director level position managing interpretation in collaboration with curators, exhibition design and digital teams. There are a few organizations that have more built out teams. Here are a few examples we heard...



Expanding the team to delineate responsibilities

Current team:

- The DIA team includes the Director of Interpretive Engagement and two interpretive planners

Expanding the team:

- The DIA hopes to add an interpretive specialist in the next fiscal year.
- The interpretive planners would then manage more complex projects and the interpretive specialist would work on smaller exhibitions and gallery rotations, gallery projects etc.



Refining existing roles and hiring coordinating staff

Past roles:

- In 2019 a dedicated role to interpretation was created- this person managed all aspects of the interpretation process and content

Shifting roles and responsibilities:

- PMA is currently in the process of hiring for a new position that would be more of a producer/coordinator role
- The existing position for interpretation would become more managerial, focused on creating unity across the whole institution
- This new role would act as the liaison with other departments and set larger interpretation goals

Other considerations to build out team expertise with design experience

- In some museums interpretation is framed in a more content-production lens with a focus on creating more unique media content in galleries
- In these cases, there seems to be a desire to move away from pure content production and realign with more holistic interpretation practices
- When considering staff competencies, many museums are looking for expertise in designing learning environments to promote more cohesive interpretive gallery spaces

Section Outline



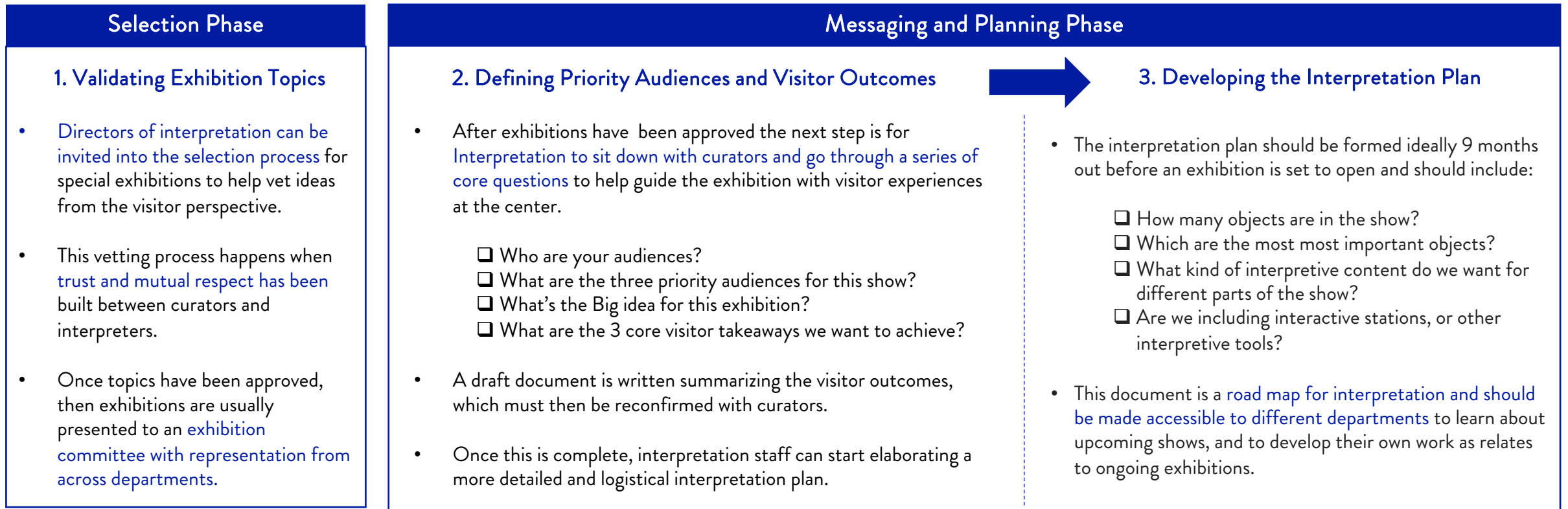
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**Interpretation
processes and
best practices**

- Processes for reviewing and vetting exhibition programs
- Once programming is selected, cadence of meetings for exhibition planning
- Crafting the exhibition plan and sharing core messages
- Teams involved at different stages
- Label writing processes
- Evaluation of interpretive content and tools

Interpretation Planning Process

Museums have varying ways of validating and planning for exhibitions, but here are a few common steps to those processes in collaboration with interpretation staff.

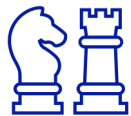


How to begin implementing interpretation processes at your institution?

Many museums iron out their interpretation processes for special exhibitions first, before adapting those working methods to revising their larger permanent collection displays. Starting with exhibition processes not only helps embed work practices with staff but can also help secure the budgets needed for larger collection rehangs and reinterpretation.

Considerations for Teams that Manage Strategies Versus Implementation

Some museums we spoke with intentionally create different project-related teams composed of various staff members and leadership to manage and support on higher-level strategic planning and the more tactical implementation of exhibitions.



Department leadership managing high-level exhibition strategies and visions



Cross-Departmental Exhibition Tactical Teams

The Rijksmuseum set up a **pre-content high level strategy team** to determine the storylines and target audiences for upcoming projects.

These strategy meetings usually start 2-3 years before an exhibition is set to open and include **department heads involved in high level planning**.

The **pre-content team meets about 3-4 times for 3-4 hour chunks** to brainstorm and write the project plan for the exhibition that the project team then takes and operationalizes.

Once all exhibitions have been approved for a cycle, cross-departmental **project teams are set up to manage the operations of special projects and exhibitions**.

These teams include:

- 1 person from Education
- 1 person from Marketing
- 1 person from Curatorial

Project teams are responsible for developing all the content related to special exhibitions, including labels, audio guides etc.

Label Writing Processes, and Who is Generally Involved When

Across our interviews, there are different staff involved in label writing and reviewing content at different stages. Here are a few common trends we heard for engaging staff and community members in label content.



Core writers and editors

- **Curators and interpretation staff** typically write the actual content for interpretive labels and content. Interpreters and curators may also be asked to edit web text brought to them by the communications team around exhibitions.
- **In-house editors** to do a final edit before sending labels to publications if museums have editors on staff.
- **Marketing and communication staff** might also be involved in translations and editing of texts for organizations that work with bilingual content.



Text ownership and prioritization

- **Curators** typically write the first drafts for labels as they are the closest to the exhibition content.
- **Interpretation staff** might do the first drafts for other non-label gallery content such as video scripts, response stations, etc.
- **Curators** typically manage the exhibition catalog without interpretation edits.
- **Text hierarchies** can help determine which content is a priority and needs to be reviewed by interpretation while other content can go straight to publication.



Bringing in community voices

- **Community advisory groups** bring in their own perspectives on exhibitions and can support by helping frame ideas and write labels.
- **Community relationships** should involve compensation to avoid feeling exploitative. At the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, they pay their community advisors \$200/hour for their contributions.
- **1:1 conversations** with prospective advisors can also help ensure they would be a good fit for the group prior to their commitment.

Managing the Sensitivities of the Editing Process

The editing process can be a sensitive topic for content writers, especially curators who may feel close to the scholarly content they have researched and developed. It is therefore critical for interpreters to consider these sentiments when editing label content produced by other departments.

Curatorial Drafts

Curators typically write labels in the initial first round as they are the closest to the exhibition content and research.

They should refer to the co-created interpretation plan to keep the big messages and visitor outcomes in mind.

Note: Guest curators and consultants can be brought in at this stage to support on label writing and to help frame content from their perspectives.

Interpretation Edits

Interpreters usually come in for a first round of editing to review curators' first drafts.

Here the interpretation team makes edits and suggestions to **ensure texts are more visitor friendly and visitor-focused.**

Note: Interpreters typically don't edit exhibition catalogs as they are more academic by nature, and not designed for the general public in the gallery.

Curators and Interpreters Agree on Edits

Interpreters and curators come together to review the suggested edits and to align on the changes made.

This is a critical stage where interpreters **must explain and position their changes** in an equity and visitor focused lens.

Curators can decline some of the edits, but if trust has been built, they should respect and understand the interpreters' suggestions.

Note: Interpreters may also edit labels written by community members. It is best practice to ask for their approval, but also important to be transparent about what can and cannot be changed.

Final review and publication

For museums that have in-house editors, they are often the final stage of label routing before sending content to publication.

Editors might also be involved in editing exhibition catalogs with curators.

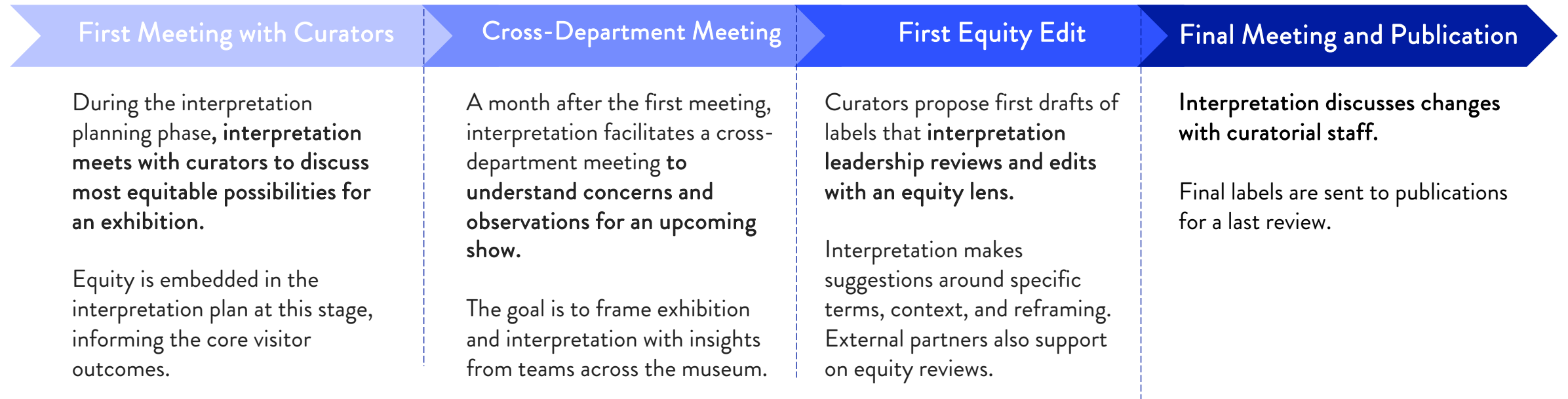


Why embedding interpretation into your museum's DNA is important?

Taking the time to train all departments around supporting visitor needs and explaining the role of interpretation in facilitating those outcomes in the physical gallery space, helps position interpretation expertise in the editing process in a way that serves the museum as a whole and therefore avoids any potential tensions with curators and other content creators whose work will be edited and revised.

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco Focuses on Equity in their Interpretation

At the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, equity is a guiding principle for their interpretation. They have therefore baked in equity edits and cross-departmental meetings to inform their work and processes.



The second, cross-departmental meeting is an opportunity to bring together departments that are usually siloed into the early phases of content creation. **They invite members from PR, Access, Youth and Public Programs, Design etc. to share their thoughts and inform, future planning decisions.**

Making the Case for Documentation to Embed Interpretation Practices

When considering how to embed new practices and processes into structural workflows, having consistent documentation can help keep projects on track, build accountability and habit.

Why documentation matters

- ✓ **Formalize the process :** Interpretive documentations helps formalize processes, and build habit and rigor cross all projects.
- ✓ **Ensure accountability:** Interpretation teams should advocate strongly for documentation to ensure the steps for writing, reviewing and publishing get done across all responsible working groups.
- ✓ **Buy-in through co-created documentation:** Project teams including interpreters and curators should be involved in completing exhibition plans together to commit to the shared goals outlined in related documents.
- ✓ **Complete but not complicated:** It is critical to ensure documentation is straightforward and complete for staff to keep track of their progress and targets, without being onerous. More condensed documents can be sufficient for smaller projects.
- ✓ **Sharing content with other departments:** Once documentation reaches a certain degree of maturity documents should be made available for other teams to reference such as visitor services, audience research, marketing etc.

Supportive documents

Template outlines: At the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum they have a two-page form for smaller exhibitions that lists core questions to cover. This document is completed early in the exhibition process with curators and can be tweaked as the project unfolds.

Interpretation plans: The more complete interpretive plan (used for larger scale projects) includes what assets are going to be part of the exhibition, how they contribute to the story line and the methods for interpretation.



How detailed do your interpretation documents needs to be?

As museums work on multiple exhibitions projects at a time with limited interpretation staff, it is important to consider how to alleviate staff work in the planning process. For smaller projects, outlines may be sufficient to get to the core outcomes and visitor goals.

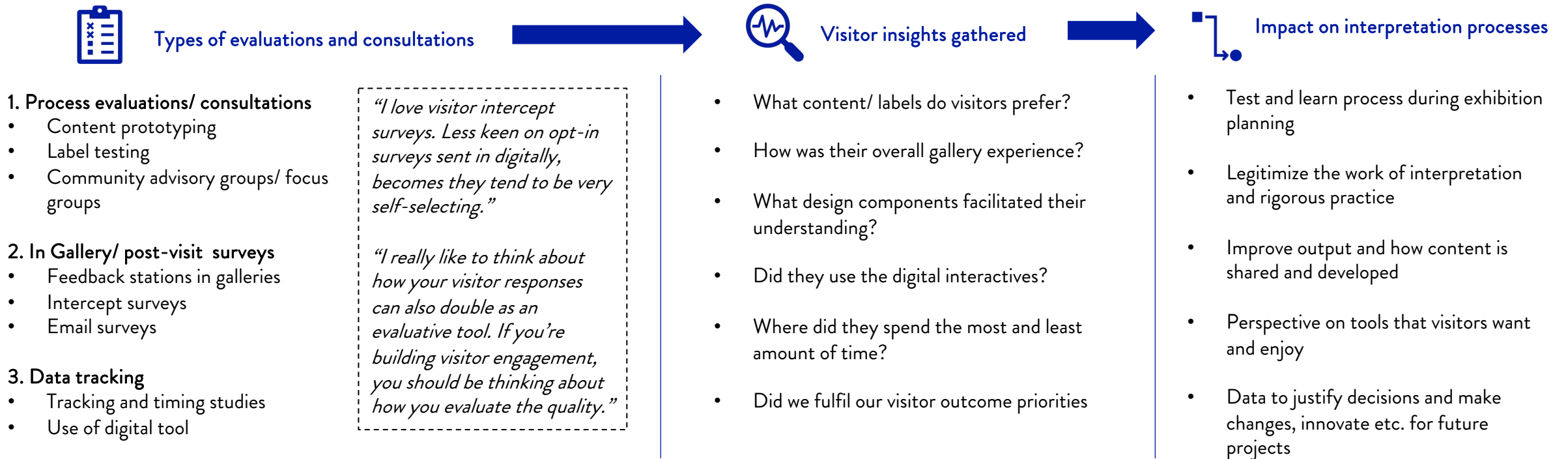


Why sharing documents with other departments is important?

Making interpretation documents accessible to different departments helps align everyone around core exhibition messages and outcomes. Departments like marketing, and education can build their own content and feel more informed and included, which in turn supports buy-in for the interpretation process.

Conducting Evaluations to Validate and Improve Interpretation

As museums implement different interpretation processes and create more content and exhibitions based on those new practices there is an opportunity to evaluate the impact of those efforts to further support interpretation as a core component of the museum's work and visitor experiences.



If time and budgets are limited, where to start your evaluations?

When considering what to evaluate first, it's best to start with testing labels and the writing process to improve on those areas. This can be done during the planning process with community advisory groups already supporting on other aspects of the project. Larger interviews and surveys require more budget and post-exhibition planning.

Section Outline



4

**Current trends and
areas for expansions
in interpretation**

- Practices for involving community input through advisory committees
- Visibly promoting diverse voices with community labels
- Interpretation supporting certain marketing efforts
- Expanding efforts with digital
- Managing consistency with education content as well

Welcoming Community Involvement as Advisors

Community advisors support during the exhibition planning and content development phase. They are brought into the process as content and experience experts.



Who to invite

- Specific cultural/ethnic groups
- Artists, poets
- Scholars, educators, content experts
- General public
- People with specific lived experiences

Example: Some museums intentionally mix scholarly and community advisory groups. These models of mixing groups together can be more idea generative.

Example: At Southern Vermont Art Center (SVAC) they collaborate with artists. These collaborations are interesting but do require more explicit guidelines as artists may be working with art aficionados such as buyers, collectors, curators, and other artists in mind.



Types of groups/frequency

- Guest curators
- Ad-hoc advisory groups
- Standing committees

Example: FAMSF invites interpretation partners when they have exhibitions rooted in local/global lived experiences where community members can share their personal perspectives.

Example: Cincinnati Art Museum has a standing community committee for special exhibitions. Community advocates are identified and invited to join by the community engagement team.



Formats for engagement

- Meeting attendance /focus groups
- Consultation/ feedback
- Label reviews and/or label writing

Example: BMFA hosts 3 advisory meetings, 1 online / 2 in person bringing together a core group of people across all three meetings.

Example: MFA Boston connects with selected community members for their program Table of Voices to elicit feedback on interpretation from multiple perspectives, making the MFA's projects more relevant to and representative of the local community.



Best practices to build connections

- Compensate advisors
- Be clear about advisory role and expectations
- Build opportunities for repeat engagement
- Publish names on labels/ in galleries

Example: FAMSF pays participants for their time at a rate of \$200/hr. Beyond financial compensations they are looking for ways to stay connected, considering reunions, free membership, magazine reflection etc.

Example: Some museums takes the time to conduct 1:1 conversations with people before joining the advisory group to check for compatibility. This is an opportunity to also set expectation on how information will be used, and what can/cannot be changed in the exhibition.

Increasing Community Involvement as Label Writers

Many museums have invited their community advocates to write labels for upcoming exhibitions, thereby directly and visibly placing their voices and perspectives into the exhibition narrative alongside scholarly content. This process is a clear move towards sharing authority and ownership between the museum and their audiences.

Considerations for community label writers

- Asking community members to write labels must come after **time has been spent in learning about the exhibition and building a safe space** and community around the project.
- Community members can be invited to write labels for any piece in the show, but often they are invited to write about objects **related to their lived experiences**.
- Some museums pair and present community labels alongside staff labels for more controversial pieces to **present different viewpoints around complicated topics**.
- It is important to **provide clear guidelines** such as the time given to write labels (deadlines), expected number of labels per writer, length of texts, and terms to use or not use etc. **Some museums also bring in professional writers to support in these efforts**.
- An alternative to asking people to write their own labels (which can be more onerous) is to **record community interviews and use those transcripts to craft community labels**, and then share those texts with the relevant person to get their approval.



- **Selecting topics best suited for community engagement:** Across their exhibitions, staff at the Southern Vermont Arts Center carefully identify and deliberately partner with community members based on relevant and meaningful connections with exhibition content.
- **Clear engagement expectations:** During a past show involving environmental topics, community environmentalists and content experts were invited to learn about the exhibition and develop 1-2 labels each with the support of a local writer who worked in conjunction with the manager of exhibitions and interpretive engagement.
- **Alternative writing options:** The SVAC has also worked with local poets to write exhibition-inspired poems that were integrated into the show in the aim of inviting more interdisciplinary activations.
- **Time and guidance:** At SVAC they give community members about a month to complete their labels. Prior to writing their labels, community members are given boundaries and guidelines to help writers keep the visitor in mind as they develop their texts. This is especially important when working with living artists who may have art aficionados such as buyers, collectors, curators, and other artists in mind.

Connecting More with Marketing Content and Digital

Interpretation Advising On Digital Content

By virtue of working so closely with curators on exhibition content and planning, interpretation staff are ideally positioned to advise marketing on what stories would be suited for social media and what content should be shared and prioritized online.



Aligning Interpretation and Marketing Messaging

- **Advising capacity:** Interpretation at the Detroit Institute of Arts makes suggestions based on their deeper understanding of the collection and exhibition assets for the website and social media campaigns.
- **Aligning marketing with exhibition messages:** The current team is focused on aligning marketing, programming and exhibition messaging.

Interpretation Developing their Own Digital Content

Beyond advising marketing on content for promotional purposes, certain museum interpretation teams are managing their own digital content that they may have initiated during Covid and that they decided to continue through a more education and interpretation focused lens. These materials are different in style and purpose to other marketing promotions.



Leveraging Digital for Interpretation and Learning

- **Interpreters with a background in social media:** At the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Director of Interpretation used to manage a lot of the social media before the museum hired for a dedicated social media marketing position.
- **Lessons from Covid:** During the pandemic, the interpretation and learning teams produced their own 3-5min video content to stay connected with audiences and make the collection more accessible.
- **Maintaining a stream of educational digital content:** While the museum has reopened its galleries, the learning team has continued to produce short video content shared on Facebook autonomously from marketing as a separate branch of digital content aimed to instruct more than promote.

Creating More Consistency with Education and Docent Programs

While interpretation handles exhibition and gallery content alongside curators, separate learning and education teams usually manage in-person programs and docent tours. Across a few museums there is a desire to better connect interpretation with education and align the content in galleries with those presented to visiting groups.



Current organization of interpretation and docents

- At the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), Interpretation is situated within Exhibitions and leads interpretive planning and experience development for self-guided exhibition and gallery content alongside curatorial and design teams.
- The Learning & Programs (L&P) department develops in-person programs and facilitated tours for galleries and exhibitions. Interpretation and L&P teams are both part of the Engagement Division.
- Docents are part of the Department of Museum Volunteers (DMV), which is one of the Learning & Programs department teams. Docents are trained through curator-created fact sheets, engagement training, and occasional script support.
- Currently docents are not trained by the Interpretation team.



Creating more consistent exchanges between interpretation, learning and docent teams

- The L&P team and Interpretation teams are creating a new collaborative model of tour development, including reviewing and resetting pedagogical and visitor-centric principles.
- All docent, group tour, school visits, and other engagement activations are being reviewed and updated as part of this process.
- L&P and Curatorial are piloting Interpretation-led gallery tour development and training for upcoming exhibitions. The new trainings will be built around interpretive plans to enhance the visitor experience of an exhibition, rather than transmitting scholarship or delivering information-only content.
- Developing tour trainings around interpretation plans is key to aligning gallery programs with exhibitions' core messages, experiences, and objectives for visitors of diverse cultural, socio-economic, educational and identity backgrounds.
- Interpretation and L&P teams will continue to design trainings to advance the tour and in-person experiences at ROM.



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APPENDIX

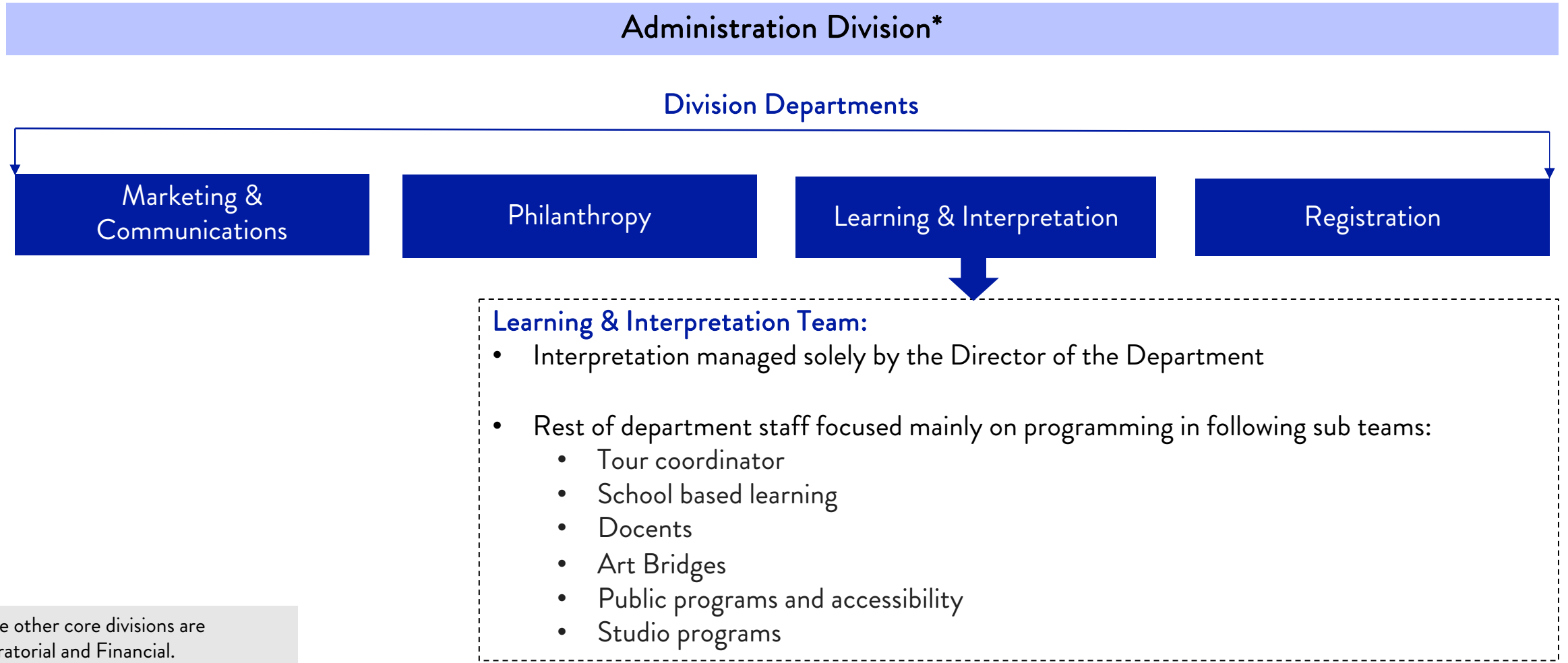
- Section 1- General Museum Information
- Section 2- Org charts and team structures

Research Participant Budget Information

Organization	Location	Reference Documents	Operating Expenses	Operating Income
Cincinnati Art Museum	Cincinnati, OH, USA	IRS 990 Filing 2021-2022	\$19,440,702	\$25,969,744
Detroit Institute of Arts	Detroit, MI, USA	IRS 990 Filing 2021-2022	\$32,260,507	\$79,426,039
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco , SF	San Francisco, CA, USA	IRS 990 Filing 2021-2022	\$44,902,201	\$51,320,559
Fowler Museum at UCLA	Los Angeles, CA, USA	Job Posting for Museum Director	Approximately \$5,5000,000	Undisclosed
Georgia O'Keeffe Museum	Santa Fe, NM, USA	IRS 990 Filing 2021	\$7,843,364	\$16,321,839
M+ West Kowloon	Hong Kong, CHN	Annual Report 2022-2023*	HK\$ 1,464,000,000	HK\$ 867,000,000
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston	Boston, MA, USA	IRS 990 Filing 2021-2022	\$134,496,363	\$148,263,439
Portland Museum of Art	Portland, ME, USA	IRS 990 Filing 2022-2023	\$10,546,501	\$21,796,721
Royal Ontario Museum	Toronto, ON, CAN	Financial Statements 2022-2023	CAN\$85,587,000	CAN\$80,192,000
Rijksmuseum	Amsterdam, NL	Annual Report 2022	€96,700,000	€98,600,000
SFMOMA	San Francisco, CA, USA	IRS 990 Filing 2021-2022	\$85,247,028	\$89,774,720
Southern Vermont Arts Center	Manchester, VT, USA	IRS 990 Filing 2021	\$1,531,775	\$1,500,211
UCCA Center for Contemporary Art	Beijing/Shanghai/Beidaihe, China, CHN	Undisclosed	Undisclosed	Undisclosed

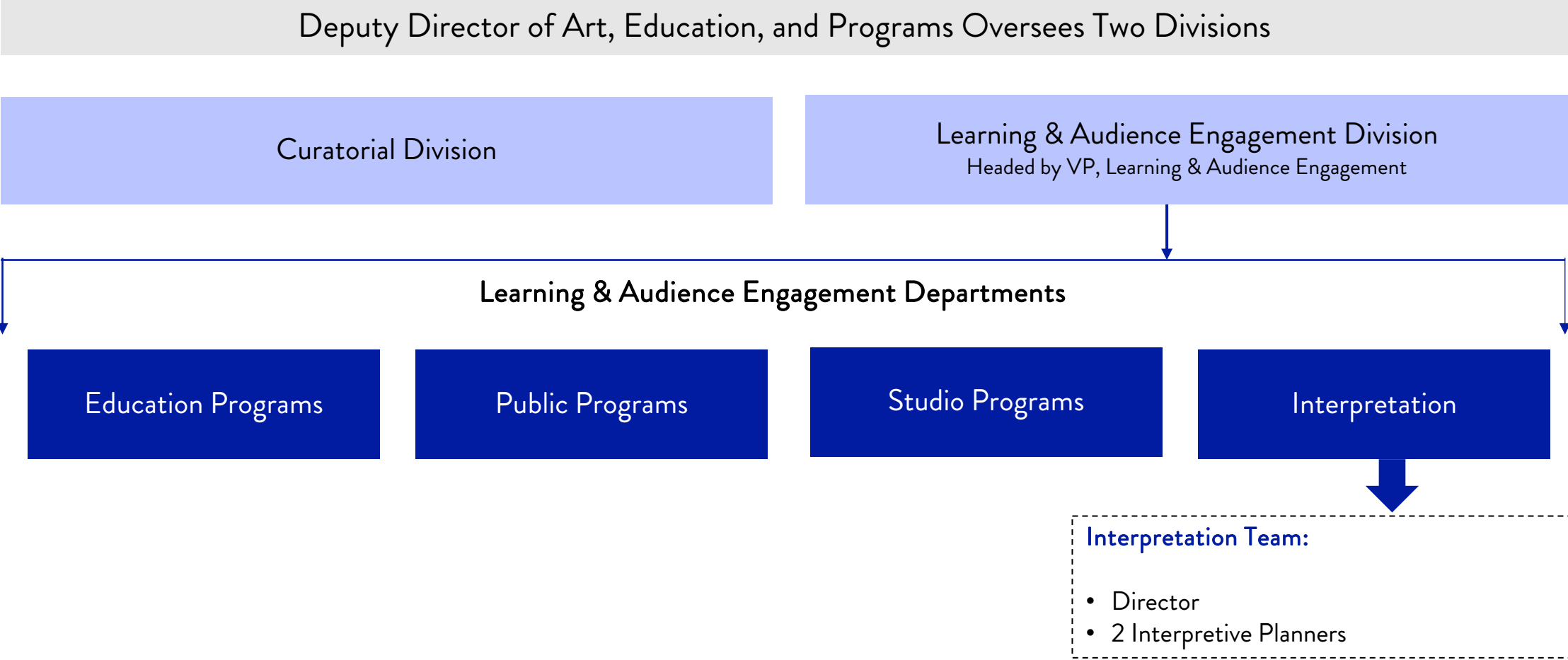
*For M+ West Kowloon, the financial statements cover the entire cultural district, not only the financials for the M+ Museum.

Cincinnati Art Museum Interpretation Team Structure

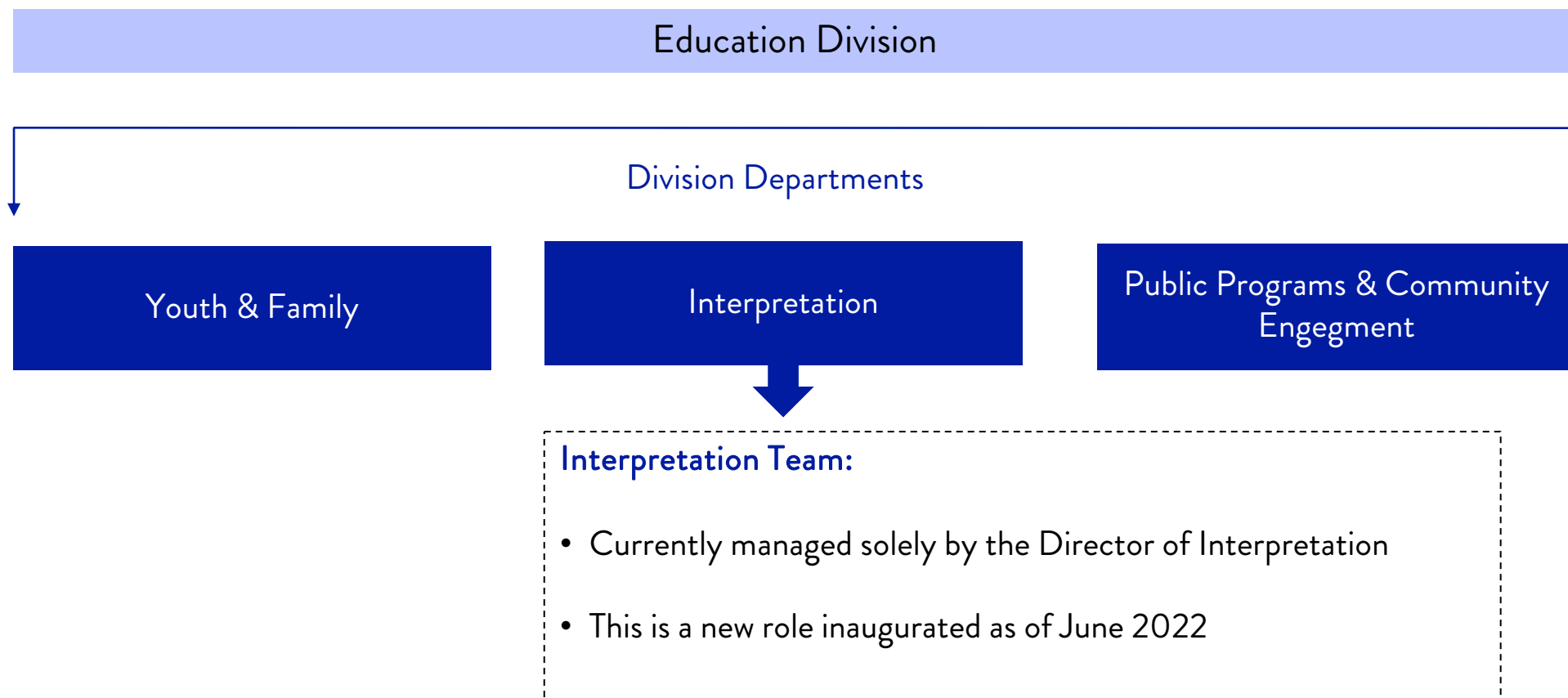


*The other core divisions are Curatorial and Financial.

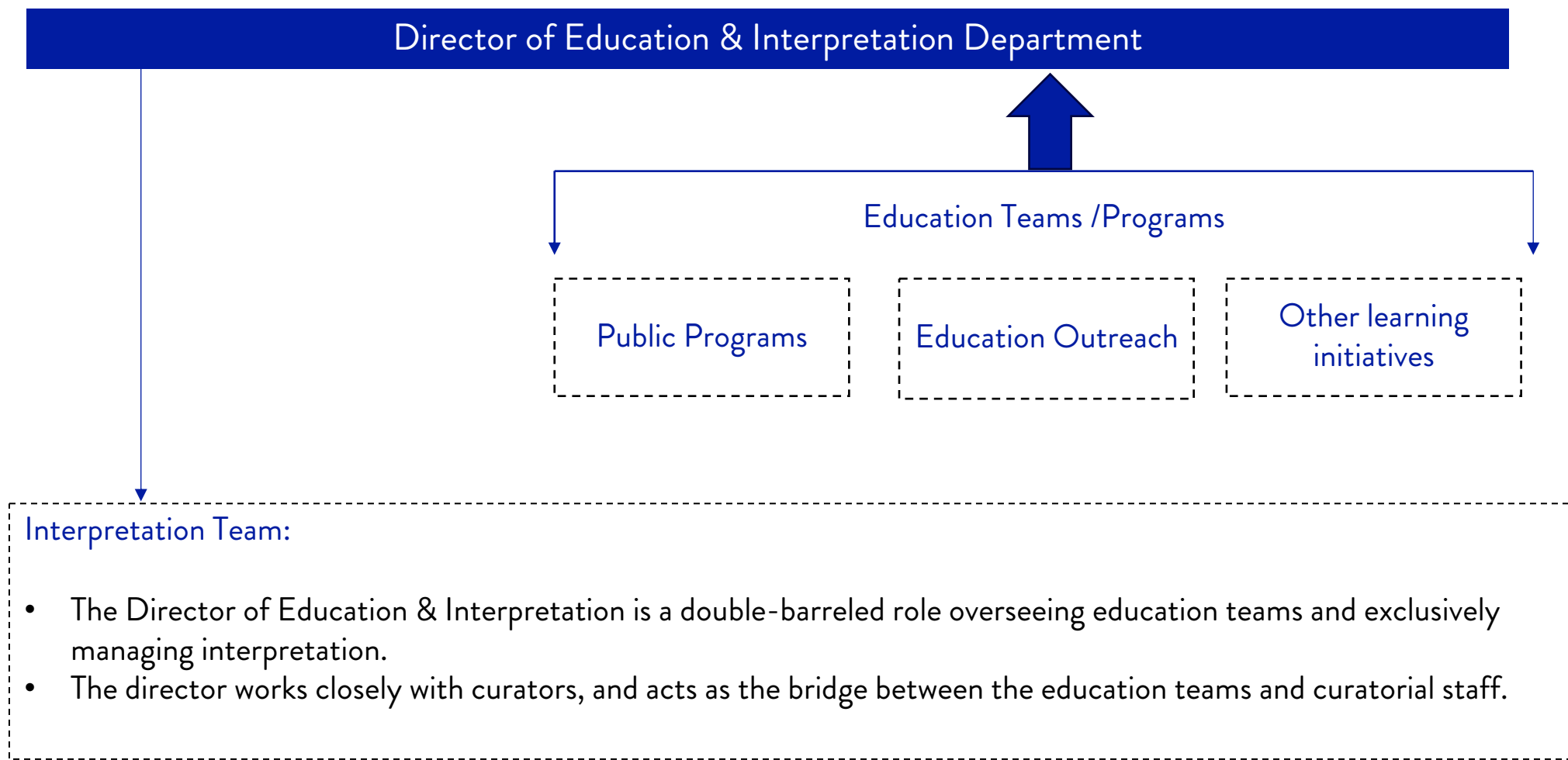
Detroit Institute of Arts Interpretation Team Structure



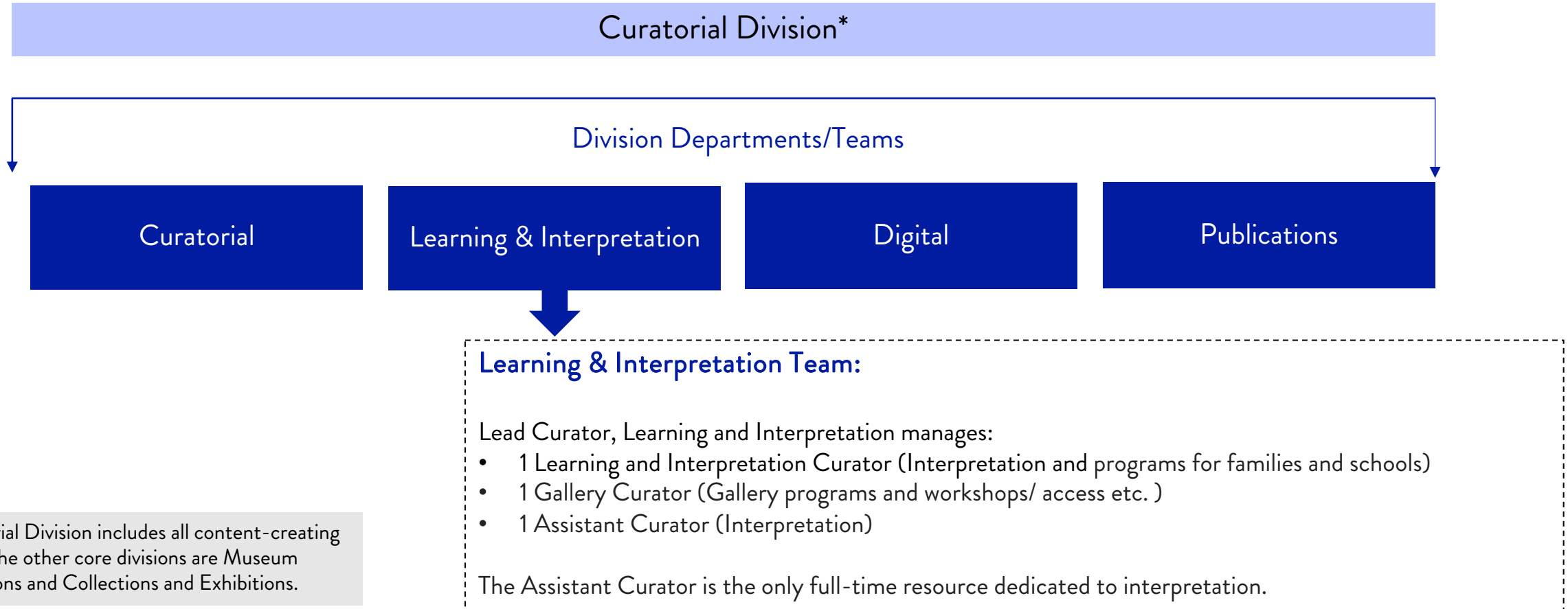
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco Interpretation Team Structure



Fowler Museum at UCLA Interpretation Team Structure

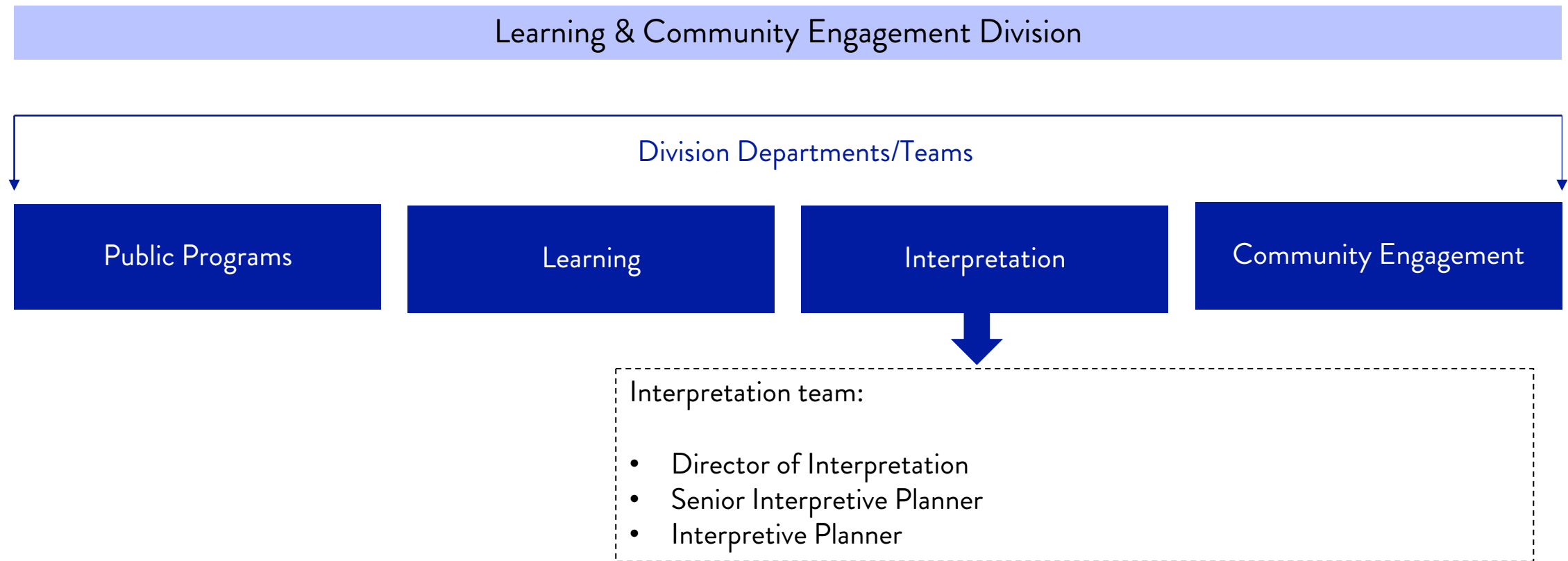


M+ West Kowloon Interpretation Team Structure



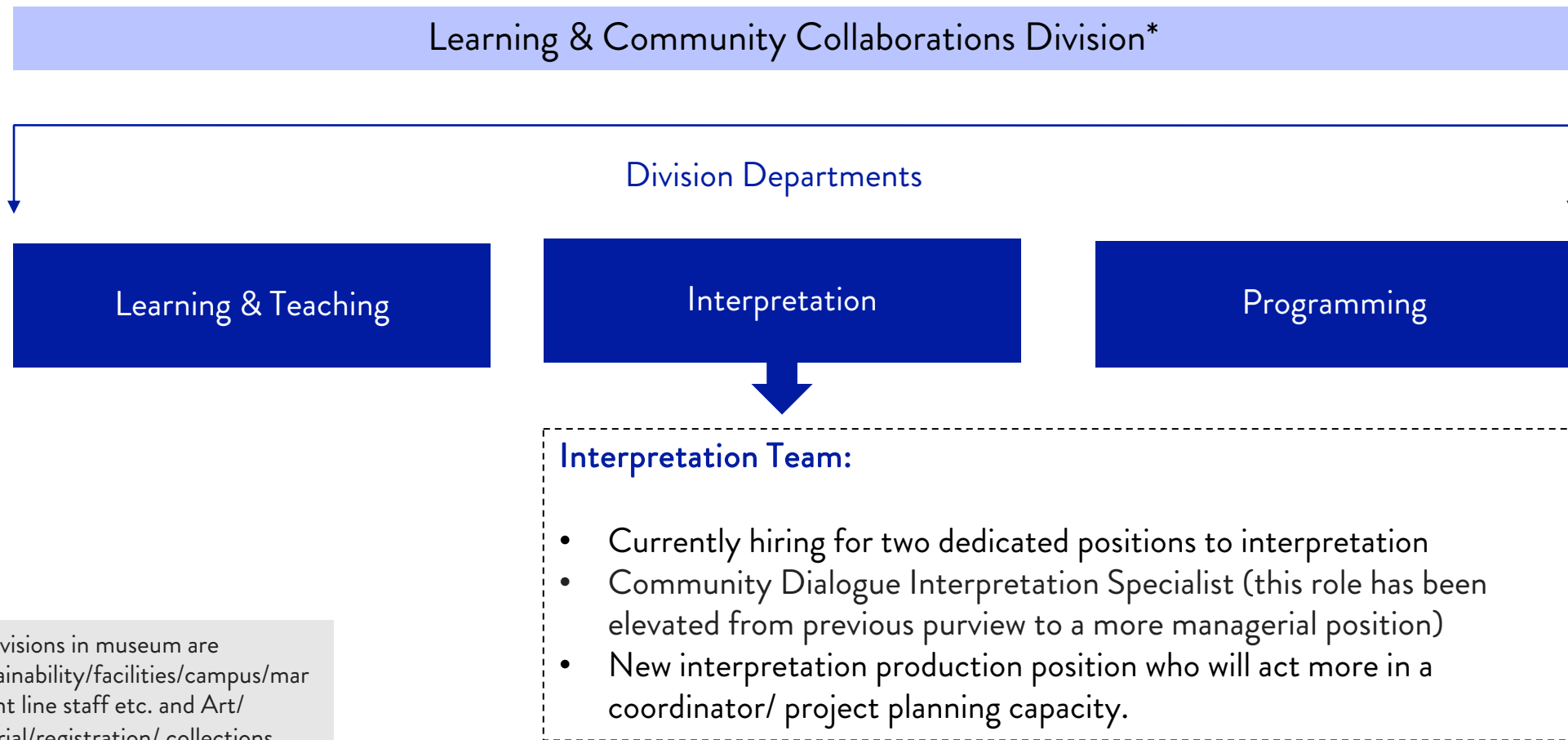
*Curatorial Division includes all content-creating teams. The other core divisions are Museum Operations and Collections and Exhibitions.

MFA Boston Interpretation Team Structure



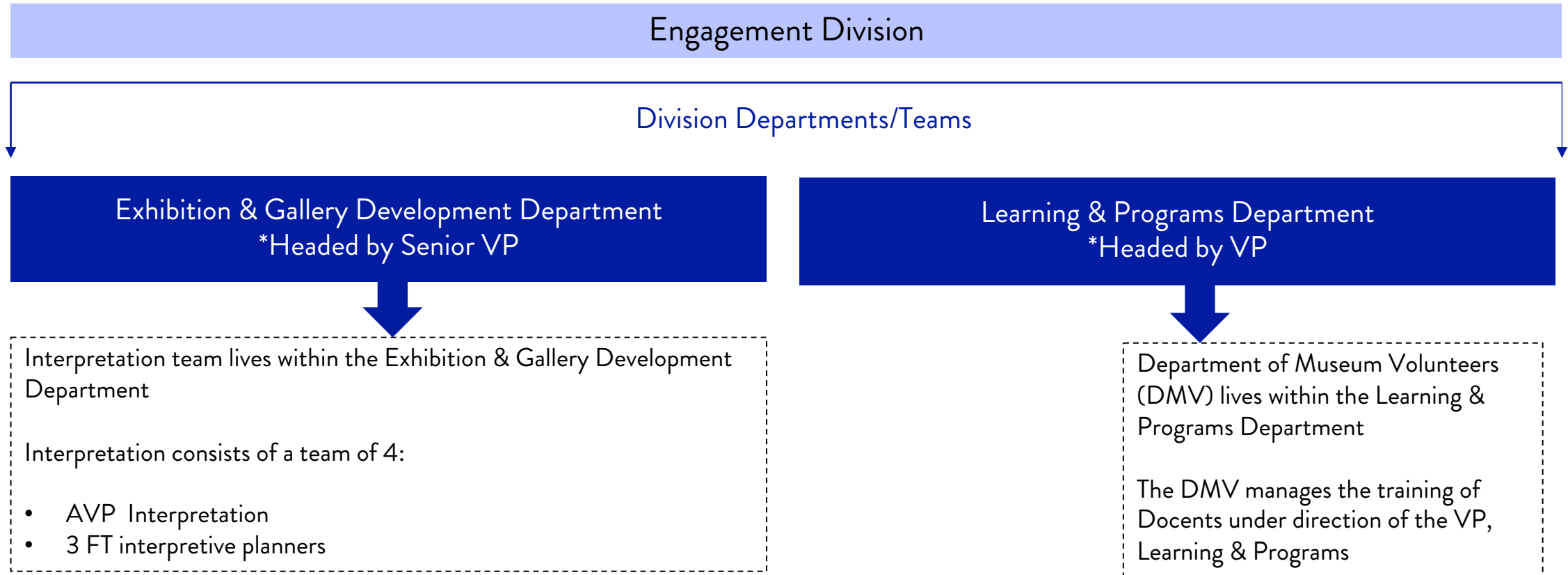


Portland Museum of Art Interpretation Team Structure



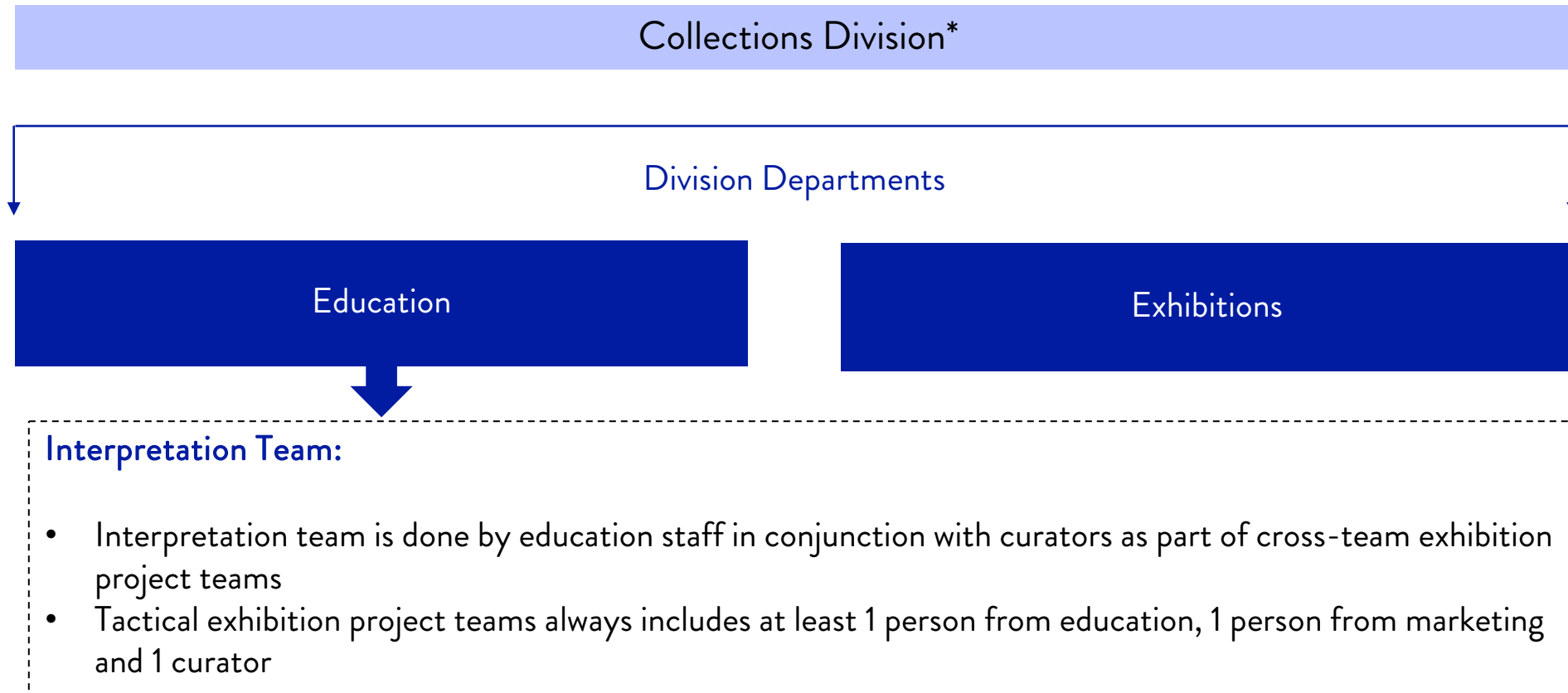
*The other large divisions in museum are Philanthropy/sustainability/facilities/campus/marketing/ comm/front line staff etc. and Art/exhibitions/curatorial/registration/ collections.

Royal Ontario Museum Interpretation Team Structure



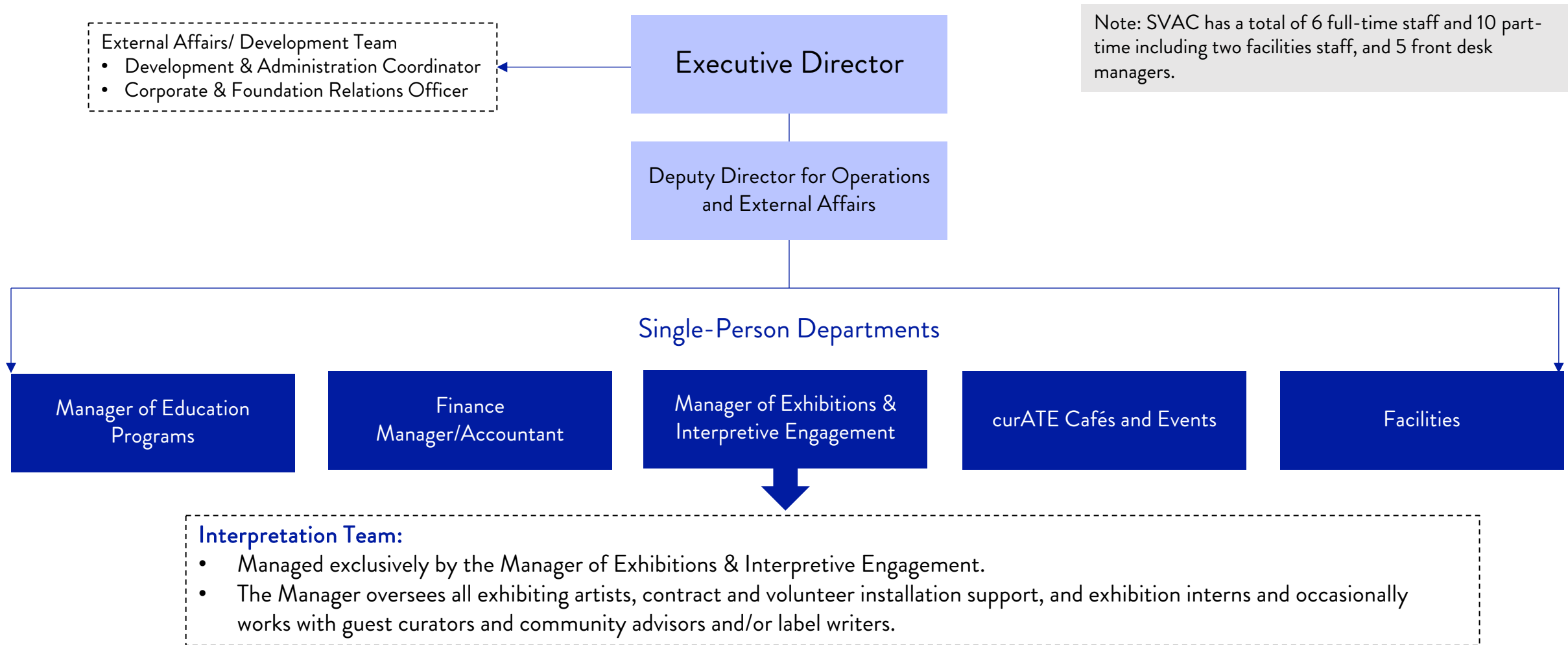
Note: Curatorial reports to the Deputy Director of the Collection and Research Division.

Rijksmuseum Interpretation Team Structure



*Other core divisions are Development and Media, and Business. Access used to be in the Education department, but considering importance of work, Access shifted to its own area directly under the Board council. Diversity and Inclusion also used to be in the Education department and is now a separate function given more autonomy within senior leadership team.

Southern Vermont Arts Center Interpretation Team Structure



UCCA Contemporary Arts Center Interpretation Team Structure

