

The Campus Art Museum and a Better “Next Normal”

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Campus-based art museums have long been compelling and differentiating aspects of Higher Education. They can now also become key allies as colleges and universities work to reestablish their relevance and attractiveness in the post-pandemic “next normal.” Museums can help rebalance relationships with students and regional communities, countering some of the pandemic’s undermining of the campus as a desirable destination. What follows is a guide administrators and museum leaders can use to strengthen their mutual post-pandemic recovery model.

The next normal: Your museum’s contribution to campus and community

Since their inception, museums have been multifaceted contributors to their campuses, and especially in three invaluable ways: improving pedagogy and learning; generating new scholarship; and bridging the campus to the community. While not every museum or campus fully leverages these contributions, the capacity is inherent to the museum structure.

Higher Ed, however, is now facing new threats that call for new solutions, preferably from existing resources. The campus-centric model is currently reeling from (at least) three major Covid-19-exacerbated assaults: the increasingly viable alternative of remote learning; a shrinking pool of students who are not confident in the positive ROI *and* health safety of campus-based learning; and the pressure on “elitist” institutions to address systemic inequality, in particular across the “town/gown” divide. In short, students, families, and communities are reassessing the value—and the values—of college.

As students, faculty, staff, and others reacclimate to campus, museums can become inspiring and safe (and already paid-for) hubs of activity and learning. In time, museums can help reorient the campus-community relationship, becoming not just a welcoming offering, but a purposeful conduit of equity and exchange.

Pivot to more equitably engage your region

Regardless of the quality of your pre-Covid “town/gown” relationship, most schools will now seek even stronger connections to their surrounding communities and geographic regions in order to thrive post-Covid. The campus museum should

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become an effective ally in this effort. Through its art, programming, and proactive outreach and engagement, the museum can be an indispensable partner to K-12 school districts, artists, teachers, and other lifelong learners. In return, the museum and college will gain true partners in building a holistic regional ecosystem.

This mutual exchange can boost your standing locally and throughout your broader geography (e.g., the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Upper Midwest, Gulf Coast, etc.) This is especially relevant for students who might now think more highly of you when it's time to consider college options. Even before Covid-19, less than 40% of 4-year college students lived on campus.¹ Going forward, the portion of students living at home will no doubt increase, driven by the need to save money amid the post-pandemic economic rebuilding, as well as by health concerns. Being the regional school-of-choice may be central to your new business model as students from farther away, and international students in particular, decrease.

Readymade for new modes of teaching

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The race is on to create new modes of effective remote- and place-based learning. This past March, classroom professors became online instructors overnight, though often in name only as hastily converted lessons stumbled in the screen-based environment. Students are demanding that this year's e-courses be better than those produced last Spring.

The museum can become a laboratory for developing and promulgating new ways of inspiring faculty and reaching students. Digitized art collections can immediately help improve the look and richness of online classes, but museums can make greater impact still by exploiting their deep experience with multi-modal teaching and research. The curatorial method² is well suited to the “flipped classroom” and other models necessary to education in the near future. Other modes, such as visual thinking strategies and object-based learning are preparing students to thrive in an image-saturated world. Furthermore, the museum mindset, much like that of artists themselves, is inherently curious, open-minded, and determined.

The museum itself is also ready to host healthfully-spaced learning. While the emergent social and health norms will cause many campus facilities to struggle

1. Robert Kelchen. “A Look at College Students’ Living Arrangements” May 28, 2018 <https://robertkelchen.com/2018/05/28/a-look-at-college-students-living-arrangements/>

2. Unlike the “scientific method” that empirically examines data to confirm a preconceived thesis, the “curatorial method” explores a diversity of inputs that might reveal some new thesis and, just as often, generate new and better questions. Curators look across disciplines—history, anthropology, the physiology of optics, chemistry, philosophy and so on—for relevant insights. This rigorous, open-ended stance allows the practitioner to pursue the concepts or theses that they find most meaningful. This self-directed learning is also a key objective for remote or blended teaching models.

(such as the sports stadium, dormitories, lecture halls, and so on), the museum is already designed for right-sized, human interaction that can easily adapt to evolving health measures. Of course, museums have long offered contemplative one-on-one engagement with art and ideas. Beyond this, flexible gallery and public spaces allow small groups to spread out in one room, perhaps each with a unique work of art to consider as the professor delivers their lesson. Student groups, faculty teams, community clubs, and other small gatherings can also leverage these spaces.

A call to action

Campus and museum leadership should coordinate their reemergence plans, especially over the next five years. These five years, let's call them the "next normal," encompass the inevitable transition from Covid-19 closure, to post-pandemic adjustment, to a new version of the college experience. Museums are primed to reinforce their campuses as relevant, inclusive, responsive, and necessary destinations essential to students'—and the region's—future success.

Always a differentiating aspect of Higher Education, campus museums can now also accelerate the reemergence of the entire college or university toward the next normal. Through art, the curatorial method, gallery spaces, and community engagement, museums can help boost their host institution's relevance and recovery. College administrators and museum leaders should move quickly to create new allied pathways to the next five years.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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