

WILLIAMS
COLLEGE
MUSEUM
OF ART

Moving Forward

September 2020-August 2025

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FOREWORD

Pamela Franks, Class of 1956 Director, Williams College Museum of Art

The staff of the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) began work on this strategic plan in 2019. We anticipated an objective look at the current status of the Museum and welcomed the opportunity to explore all things possible for the future. We did not anticipate the extent to which world events would shift the ground under our feet as we began our journey to the launch of this plan. The associated challenges, opportunities, and revelations focused and deepened our thinking about what is most essential in our work and in our lives. It is with heartfelt gratitude to all who persevered through distress and uncertainty that I present WCMA's 2020–2025 strategic plan, *Moving Forward*.

The development of a strategic plan was not my first initiative when I arrived as the newly appointed director of the Museum in September 2018. After a whirlwind orientation provided by my thoughtful Museum and College colleagues, work began on immediate needs that required an all-hands-on-deck effort on the part of the entire WCMA staff. Together we accomplished a great deal. Between my arrival and the summer of 2019, when strategic planning began in earnest, we had completed the bulk of work necessary for reaccreditation from the American Alliance of Museums, achieved greater staff diversity upon filling a historically high number of vacant positions, relocated and inventoried the bulk of the Museum's collection, and completed a renovation project. I approached this work with confidence that addressing immediate needs, and doing so with generous support from the College, would position us well for our eventual immersion in the strategic planning process.

The fall 2019 start date for immersive strategic planning was fortuitous because it coincided with the College's planning process, which included a focus on the future of the arts at Williams. As our respective planning processes evolved, we were inspired by a shared commitment to fully realizing the potential of the college art museum to a liberal arts education, nurturing the cross-disciplinary arts, and increasing collaborations as a partner and leader within the cultural ecosystem. While we anticipated that the College's planning process would influence our efforts, we did not foresee the two world events that would greatly impact our process and, more meaningfully, our thinking.

In early spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the Museum to close its doors. With little time to think through the ramifications and without knowing when we would return to the Museum, we began working remotely. We curtailed our traditional programming for an unknown stretch of time and faced a surge in the technical, pedagogical, and communications work required to increase remote engagement. Confronting a future that seemed uncertain for us and catastrophic for many cultural institutions, we homed in on defining our unique and essential contributions to the College and regional communities, to our stakeholders near and far, and to the future of art museums.

The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and the ensuing protests nationwide drew us into deeper discussions of the Museum's values and potential and created a heightened sense of urgency relative to actions in support of the fight against racism. What had been, upon reflection, a rather academic approach to changes we knew were needed in the areas of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access became a more visceral commitment to taking a critical look at our own institution and becoming agents of progressive change. We affirmed our staunch commitment to anti-racism and developed a specific action plan that was posted on the WCMA website in June 2020. Those actions as well as goals reflecting the value we place on diversity, equity, inclusion, and access are incorporated into each mission-critical area described in this plan.

Developing action plans with a greater focus on individual and institutional responsibilities in the near term became paramount as our longer-term strategic planning continued. We agreed that our greatest contribution to progressive change over the next few years could best be achieved by optimizing our current strengths and legacy as a teaching museum committed to preparing future leaders. Concurrently, consensus evolved for expanding our understanding of and outreach to the audiences we have yet to engage and being a stronger partner in the cultural ecosystem. The WCMA mission and vision statements were refined to reflect the synthesis of our collective thinking.

With the mission and vision statements in mind, we identified the functional areas in which we saw the greatest opportunity to build strength on strength in pursuit of our mission. These seven areas, underpinned by high-priority goals for the next five years, comprise our strategic plan. The strategic priorities were developed with a clear understanding that we cannot simply add time, space, and resources to meet our goals; we must demonstrate discipline by not continuing work that is no longer a priority. On an annual basis, a separate implementation plan for the fiscal year will be developed during the budget planning process. This tool will document the person(s) responsible for each action, funding sources, deadline dates, and evaluation processes. This year-by-year approach allows for adaptations to the action plan that a review of our progress and changes in internal or external factors may make prudent.

The Museum will celebrate its centennial anniversary in 2026. The centennial year will be a time to acknowledge and celebrate the WCMA thread that is woven throughout the worlds of arts leadership, museum theory and practice, art history as an academic discipline, interdisciplinary scholarship and programming, and thriving artistic practice. Implementation of the goals presented in this strategic plan will build a solid bridge to a future in which WCMA can extend its legacy as a college museum at the forefront of museum practice.

Mission

The Williams College Museum of Art creates and inspires exceptional experiences with art that are integral to a liberal arts education, lifelong learning, and human connection.

Vision

The Williams College Museum of Art creates and inspires exceptional opportunities for students, faculty, and the public to have meaningful experiences with art. The Museum is a partner in nurturing the cross-disciplinary arts in support of a liberal arts education; advancing the academic and experiential preparation of arts leaders; enriching the cultural ecosystem; engaging artists; and creating a shared learning community that spurs new thinking, creative making, and responsible action. The stewardship, growth, critical study, interpretation, and accessibility of the Museum's distinctive collection is paramount to the institution's sustained relevance as a catalytic teaching museum and a leader in the future of the arts.

Acknowledgments

It has been a true privilege to explore WCMA's legacy, strengths, and potential with those who care for it so deeply. Above all, I am grateful to the WCMA staff for persevering under the weight of world events and personal responsibilities that were ever present during our deliberations. The urgency of acting in support of anti-racism and responding to the pandemic demanded our immediate attention, and affirmed the importance of considering our future work in a broader context that includes progressive advocacy. One outcome of our collective work was agreement that we must leverage the privilege and support we enjoy as a museum and college community in ways that expand our inclusive and diverse circle of stakeholders. As we look forward to WCMA's centennial in 2026, we envision a planning process enriched by what we learn from new constituencies engaged through our work over the next five years.

Our ability to build on the strength of the Museum is grounded in our practice to reflect, learn, and refine what we do, and dependent on our commitment to engaging an ever-expanding community of stakeholders. We are indebted to the following groups for helping create a responsive roadmap that will guide and inspire us *moving forward*:

The WCMA staff, including undergraduate and graduate student interns, participated throughout the strategic planning process, sharing insights that only they could provide into the daily work required to sustain the Museum's vibrant program. The members of this group are respected within their professions, and valued as friends and community members who share their passion for art in ways that inspire and unite.

The WCMA Director's Strategic Plan Working Group guided the planning process from one milestone to the next. They organized and archived the initial "state-of-WCMA" meetings, staffed mission and vision development workshops, gathered benchmarking data from peer institutions, created and edited narrative drafts, facilitated outreach to stakeholders, and developed the Implementation Plan format.

The WCMA Senior Leadership Team made essential contributions throughout the process. The team members presented the “state-of-WCMA” sessions; synthesized stakeholder input and transformed it into the seven areas of strategic potential; provided ongoing consultation regarding process; and led staff development of the Implementation Plan.

The WCMA Action Item Development Team developed the five-year museum-wide action items that transcend departmentally based divisions of labor. The action items will inform annual decision making about planned activities associated with each goal.

Colleagues from across the Williams faculty and administration offered valuable feedback at multiple stages of planning. We are especially grateful for input and partnership from the provost and colleagues in the Art Department and the Graduate Program in Art. And our heartfelt thanks to members of WCMA’s Visiting Committee and Collections Council, who offered thoughtful questions and commentary during the development of the plan, and supported the Museum and staff in many ways big and small throughout the process.

STRATEGIC PLAN

WCMA's strategic plan centers on seven mission-critical areas of strength and potential.

Teaching and Learning With Art

Background

The Museum has a strong practice of integrating art into the Williams College liberal arts curriculum and discourse outside of the classroom. Collection- and exhibition-based teaching and learning add vibrancy to the College's pedagogical innovation, interdisciplinarity, and scholarship and offer opportunities for the college community and general public to observe, analyze, explore, and question in shared learning environments both physical and virtual. Committed to involving all visitors with art and artists that reflect a diverse range of human experience, the Museum mines its collection in new ways, makes strategic acquisitions, enhances collection data, creates digital images and tools, fosters new pedagogies, and opens itself to learning opportunities that lead to new modes of participation and engagement. Building on the strengths of the Museum and its collection as a catalyst for teaching and learning is at the very heart of our aspiration to unlock the full potential of the college art museum, including serving as a public-facing force for progressive change.

Goals

- Build on a strong existing curricular program of Williams faculty teaching with the collection, fully engaging across all departments. Deepen curricular partnerships with the College's art department and the Williams Graduate Program in the History of Art.
- Actively engage with new and growing areas of the curriculum and foster increasingly diverse directions of inquiry.
- Involve every Williams student with the Museum.
- Develop progressive pedagogical practices with robust training opportunities for students, museum staff, and others to learn to teach with art both in person and remotely.
- Open new possibilities for individual learning experiences through careful attention to interpretive programs and visitor experience.
- Grow and manage digital resources, tools, and support for teaching with art.
- Invite feedback from students, faculty, and visitors; actively evaluate teaching and learning; and engage stakeholders in ongoing pedagogical and interpretive innovation.

Mining and Diversifying the Collection

Background

Our excellent and growing collection of more than 14,000 works spans histories, cultures, and media. We embrace our responsibility to research works from our global collection and to appropriately interpret and honor individual histories, cultures, and identities. We recognize the importance of understanding and being open about our institutional history, including the violence and injustice associated with some objects under our care. Transparent and collaborative curatorial and interpretation practices, an openness to ongoing learning, and action-oriented public programming are central to being an active partner in anti-racism work. Collection growth and refinement will focus on the acquisition of work by artists from underrepresented groups.

A top priority is to rethink the display of the collection and to show more of it. Simultaneously, special exhibitions will spur new research; provide historical, thematic, and topical context; lift the voices of unheard and underheard peoples of all backgrounds; and help interpret art and artists for students and other visitors. Throughout, we strive to make the collection accessible, in person and online, for teaching, learning, scholarship, creative engagement, and general enjoyment.

Continued diligence in collection care, conservation, and stewardship will ensure access to the collections for future generations. It is critical that we regularly evaluate opportunities and outcomes with a focus on preserving the works of art in our care; identifying potential works for deaccessioning; following best practices for sustainable exhibition design and programming; finding opportunities for collaboration with existing and new partners; striking an appropriate balance between collection-based and loan-intensive exhibitions; and allowing flexibility and adaptation as we reach out to engage and learn from new audiences.

Goals

- Show more of the collection; rethink and activate its presentation.
- Prioritize making the collection accessible, both digitally and physically.
- Thoroughly update collection development strategy with clear plans to build and refine holdings, including a commitment to prudent deaccessioning, which will lay the groundwork for acquisition priorities during the centennial period.
- Anticipate long-term collection growth and increased collection usage and adapt storage solutions accordingly.
- Create and implement an evaluation plan for collection display, temporary exhibitions, programming, and use of spaces.

- Refine collection conservation plan, seeking related educational opportunities.
- Develop a flagship program of temporary exhibitions that is a vibrant energizing force for the Museum and provides illuminating context for the collection.
- Champion innovative approaches to animating collections and exhibitions by fully integrating teaching, learning, interpretation, new scholarship, and programming with collection installations and temporary exhibitions.

Nurturing the Cross-Disciplinary Arts

Background

A sampling of the many vibrant art forms pursued at Williams includes studio art, music, theater, dance, and the literary arts. Although each makes a significant contribution, collectively and cross-disciplinarily their impact on campus life could be transformative. It could be for WCMA too. This is a moment when art museums are increasingly turning to the animating potential of the live arts and are changing museum practice to embrace contemporary artists' frequent crossing of traditional boundaries. It is more evident than ever that, in combination, different art forms speak to, reinforce, and amplify one another—greatly expanding the possibilities for artists and museums alike. Moreover, they foster a community of makers and all others who fall under their spell.

The Museum is poised to play a pivotal role in establishing a nexus of the arts at Williams. The effort could not be more timely, as the College has made it a strategic priority to highlight the vitality of the arts institution-wide, enhance access to them both physically and virtually, and transform how they are experienced. With ever deeper campus partnerships and the continued care and growth of our collection, our programs will capture and increase the tremendous energy around and across the arts at Williams.

Goals

- Collaborate extensively to realize the College's campus-wide strategic vision for the arts.
- Partner with contemporary artists across disciplines to spark engagement with the Museum, spur new ideas about art and society, and activate the collection.
- Make arts programming that brings people and communities together in participatory ways through collaborative projects across the arts.
- Develop vision, process, and staffing for art on campus beyond the museum; further explore placing art outside our walls in direct dialogue with existing constituencies and new partners.

Partnering Across the Cultural Ecosystem

Background

WCMA exists within a cultural ecosystem. The Museum's location in the Berkshires places it in a hub for locals and tourists interested in exploring a wide and diverse group of cultural venues offering visual art, music, theater, and dance. As a college art museum that fosters increasingly cross-disciplinary integration of art into the liberal arts curriculum and is particularly active in the preparation of students for careers in the arts, WCMA shares responsibility for the future of the global cultural ecosystem. Optimizing the Museum's contributions at all levels of the ecosystem requires listening, learning, and acting as a collaborative partner.

WCMA is committed to participating as an active learner and leader in the creative communities of which we are a part. Within the College, we will broaden and deepen our relationship with staff, faculty, and students through continued outreach and collaborative project development. Regionally, we see many opportunities to learn from what others are doing and to share resources that will increase our collective strength. We intend that the experiences gained by our students, both on campus and in the larger community, will prepare them to help sustain and positively impact the global world of cultural institutions as professionals, mentors, and enthusiasts.

An essential component of being an impactful member of the cultural ecosystem is the ability to extend our in-person and online work in ways that ensure relevance, sustainability, and impact over time. Accordingly, we will cultivate a learning community that extends into local educational institutions and promotes lifelong learning. By sharing our stories and giving voice to the stories of others, we aim to encourage greater participation and interest in the arts.

Goals

- Practice generous transparency and embrace extreme visibility. Prioritize a highly visual and recognizable presence.
- Tell the Museum's stories in all their layers and with an emphasis on what makes WCMA unique.
- Partner with regional museums and arts organizations to explore connections, complementarity, and cross-promotional opportunities across offerings.
- Extend WCMA initiatives to engage Williams students with the Clark Art Institute, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), and all of the regional arts organizations.
- Program WCMA as a cultural attraction for families.

- Partner with other colleges, schools, and youth services organizations in the region.
- Explore shared infrastructure and staff professional development opportunities with neighboring museums and arts organizations.

Influencing the Future of the Arts

Background

The WCMA of today is fortunate to inherit the Museum's and College's remarkable legacy in the art world, which includes fostering the careers of generations of museum and other arts leaders and inspiring lifelong enthusiasm and support for the arts. The Museum's current challenge is to extend that legacy and advance the field by doing all it can to:

- diversify the field of arts leaders and work to integrate a commitment to equity, inclusion, and accessibility into best museum practice;
- shape developmental opportunities for prospective arts leaders through exposure to all aspects of best museum practice and cultivation of skills required to develop as agents of change;
- involve alumni who are active as artists, museum and cultural professionals, and art enthusiasts in more regular and meaningful interactions with current students and new graduates;
- create experiences with art that inspire lifelong learning and support of the cultural ecosystem;
- share success stories and case studies about academic, student, and public engagement.

WCMA is well positioned to address these challenges. The College attracts students who demonstrate a keen interest in broadening their understanding of the world and developing the knowledge and skills required to have a positive impact on the future. Williams has made great strides in diversifying the student body, faculty, and staff, and this commitment is creating a richer learning environment. Within this context, we are increasing our outreach throughout the College in order to increase and diversify the Museum's learning community of undergraduate students in all disciplines, students in the graduate program in art history, faculty collaborators, staff in the program areas most relevant to our work, and our generous family of alumni. With the benefit of internal partnerships and collaboration, we will create and share experiences that both reflect and inform optimal museum practice. By extending our online and in-person learning community to include regional partners, professional colleagues, and WCMA alumni and enthusiasts from around the world, we can enrich the cultural ecosystem for generations to come.

Goals

- Continue efforts to diversify the museum staff and advisory groups, celebrating a multiplicity of voices while embracing the whole and supporting a full range of staff and alumni mentorship for students and emerging professionals.
- Expose more students of all backgrounds to museums as visitors and potential future professionals.
- Grow signature curricular offerings for museum and arts leadership.
- Develop signature curatorial training opportunities.
- Offer exceptional internships across the museum.
- Act as a convener around future/best practices for museums to help unlock the potential of academic art museums for the future of museums.
- Strengthen and use the exceptional professional network among Williams alumni in museums and the arts more broadly.
- Develop a learning platform for young alumni for volunteering and board leadership in museums and arts organizations.
- Activate fulsome communication to share our work and increase opportunities for dialogue and collaboration with other institutions and to increase influence and visibility globally.

Advancing Infrastructure and Sustainability

Background

The Museum functions with the support of an excellent staff, clear organizational structure, and resources adequate to realize our program. When fully staffed, the Museum has twenty-seven full-time and fifteen part-time employees. Funding from the College comprises a large percentage of the annual budget and is supplemented by dedicated endowment earnings and annual fundraising, including donations and grants. In addition to financial support, a key component of WCMA's strong infrastructure and sustainability is its collaboration with college departments including Human Resources, Development, Communications, Facilities, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Support from the College allows the Museum to focus its efforts on artistic and programmatic excellence in all that we do.

In addition to financial resources, the pursuit of excellence requires a strategic plan to guide daily decision-making, the evolution and improvement of processes that support

cross-fertilization among departments in the Museum and throughout the College, logical workflows, the integration of digital tools and infrastructure, prioritization of sustainable practices, individual and departmental accountability, and effective communication. These foundational aspects of our organization allow us to thoughtfully consider each potential initiative through a holistic lens.

Goals

- Prioritize training and resources to support staff development and success.
- Embrace diversity among our community of colleagues and foster a work culture of respect.
- Build a collaborative teamwork culture.
- Provide effective and appropriate security and safety for the collection, building, staff, and visitors.
- Actively partner with college departments to optimize robust resources while remaining lean and nimble.
- Partner fully with the facilities staff to optimize functioning of Lawrence Hall and the Library Shelving Facility (LSF) at levels as close to museum standards as possible.
- Adopt best practices to reduce the environmental impact of museum activities, working with college initiatives on materials management and sustainability.
- Steward resources in a way that is well-defined, collaborative within the Museum and with the College, and long-term yet responsive to opportunities as they arise.
- Create a digital plan for the Museum. Maintain a strong emphasis on digital infrastructure when developing the larger digital plan.
- Create, implement, and manage a museum-wide internal master calendar/central information hub.
- Develop and manage museum support groups that are complementary, flexible, diverse, and highly program- and mission-driven.

Exploring a New Home for the Museum

Background

The idea for a new home for the Museum is driven by the conditions and programming limitations of Lawrence Hall (the Museum's current home) and by the potential of a new building to support implementation of a forward-thinking vision for the arts at Williams

College. The College and Museum, in agreement that the ambitions and potential for the Museum warrant a new, purpose-built home, were actively considering both a physical site and a programming plan well before the pandemic altered our course. With uncertainty surrounding the ultimate financial impact of COVID-19, the feasibility of a new building is among the unknowns that it would be premature to assess. Fortunately, the process of considering a new museum building, particularly in the context of a future in which cross-disciplinary arts and collaborative approaches to boosting the cultural ecosystem will be a focus, deeply informs our immediate and long-term practice.

Goals

- Complete a rigorous space programming study for the future of the Museum and the arts at Williams in collaboration with the entire museum staff, students, campus partners, and other stakeholders and constituents.

- Understanding that the reality of a new building is uncertain, pursue related goals that will inform both current practice and planning for the future:
 - Envision opportunities a new site and building would afford for collaboration between WCMA, the Clark, and MASS MoCA.
 - Involve and elicit feedback from existing and new audiences during the early stages of site, building, and program development to learn what they want or need from the Museum.
 - In collaboration with the Office of College Relations (OCR), assess possibilities for, and potentially develop and conduct, a capital campaign for the arts at Williams and the museum building project.
 - Ensure a robust planning period to achieve optimal design, fully including back-of-house concerns as well as those more forward facing.
 - Partner with campus colleagues and others to ensure that maximum environmental sustainability thinking informs any future building project.
 - Partner with Office for Information Technology (OIT), library, and academic colleagues who focus on the digital in liberal arts to ensure that a digital humanities perspective fully informs any future building project.
 - Consider building design and program needs in the context of lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic; in addition to space needs for in-person activities, contemplate spaces required to support the development and use of digital tools, remote teaching strategies, and virtual experiences.
 - Plan for full accessibility for all museum visitors and staff in any future building project.