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Museums for All Evaluation

# Making Museums Financially Accessible

January 20, 2025

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## Executive Summary

Museums for All is a nationwide initiative dedicated to removing financial barriers to cultural institution access. Administered by the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) through a cooperative agreement with the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the initiative requires participating institutions to offer reduced admission to all visitors with a SNAP EBT card. At present, there are over 1,200 institutions participating in Museums for All, which is represented in all 50 US states, the District of Columbia, and the US Virgin Islands. By offering reduced rates on a year-round basis, the initiative seeks to help low-income families become regular museum-goers and build lifelong museum habits.

Knology was commissioned to evaluate the Museums for All program. Through a questionnaire administered to all participants, case studies of individual institutions, and a review of previously collected data, our aim was to provide a holistic understanding of the program and its institutional impacts. A particular goal of our study was to examine participants' inviting and welcoming practices. In keeping with research (e.g., Dawson, 2014) showing how hidden biases make members of historically and persistently excluded groups feel unwelcome at public institutions, learning about these practices is critical to Museums for All's long-term success. By looking at how participants were inviting and welcoming potential Museums for All visitors to their respective institutions, we sought to help participants learn about each other's practices in ways that would improve implementation of their own programs.

The evidence we gathered through this evaluation indicates that Museums for All is a highly regarded, successful initiative. Calling it *"an amazing program"* they are *"proud to be part of,"* participating professionals are incredibly enthusiastic about Museums for All. Many compared it favorably to other programs aimed at reducing financial entry barriers and indicated that Museums for All had helped them increase attendance, diversify their audiences, and serve a broader spectrum of individuals within their communities. Feedback from participants indicates that those eligible for entry via Museums for All have been *"very excited to use it,"* and that the broader community response has been strongly positive; as one participant put it, most are simply *"glad to know it exists."* In addition to facilitating progress toward their diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) goals, participants also found that Museums for All has improved perceptions of trustworthiness and helped *"bring money in the door."* Moreover, regardless of their size, location, or type, participating institutions have found Museums for All *"very simple"* to implement. Few have encountered any significant capacity challenges; as one participant said, Museums for All *"has a lot of benefits and still doesn't overtax the staff."*

Along with these general successes, evaluation findings point to a number of persistent challenges that institutions participating in Museums for All have encountered. While successful in inviting and welcoming eligible visitors, accomplishing their institutional goals, and improving perceptions of trustworthiness, participants reported difficulties in establishing partnerships, raising awareness about Museums for All, and finding funders or sponsors to offset some of the costs associated with their programs. Participants also

signaled the need for staff and volunteer training resources—for example, a “*DEAI course*” that would help participants communicate with Museums for All visitors “*in the most equitable and accessible way.*” To help participants overcome these various obstacles, we recommend that ACM invest in the creation of additional resources related to funding, training, partnership formation, and program promotion.

Beyond this, we recommend that both ACM and participating institutions consider using the theory of change that has emerged from our evaluation. Based on the analyses of both questionnaire and case study data, this hypothetical theory of change highlights potential cause-and-effect relationships between individual elements of Museums for All implementations and charts a path between actions and outcomes that may help participants conceptualize their own implementations systemically. This systemic understanding of Museums for All can help participating institutions approach their implementation of the program more strategically, attending to the web of causal relationships rather than one element at a time. In this way, the proposed theory of change can help new members of the initiative plot a path to success while also helping existing members overcome the obstacles they might be encountering. Along with the other information offered in this report, our proposed theory of change is geared toward helping Museums for All deepen its impacts and build on its successes for years to come.



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# Introduction

Museums for All is a nationwide initiative dedicated to removing financial barriers to cultural institution access. Administered by the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) through a cooperative agreement with the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the initiative is open to all museums and requires participating institutions to offer reduced-price admission (ranging from free to \$3.00<sup>1</sup>) to all visitors with a SNAP EBT card. These reduced rates are available year-round during all normal operating hours and exist to help low-income families become regular museum-goers and build lifelong museum habits.

Since the launch of the initiative in 2014/15, Museums for All has grown significantly. Between 2017 and 2023, the number of cultural institutions participating in the initiative increased from 228 to over 1,200. During that same period of time, the number of visitors served through the initiative increased from nearly 1 million to more than 6 million. At present, the initiative is represented in all 50 US states, along with the District of Columbia and the US Virgin Islands.

Knology was commissioned to evaluate the Museums for All program. In addition to determining the extent to which the findings of an earlier evaluation (Cohn, 2018) apply to the broader range of organizations that have joined the initiative since 2017, our goal was to provide a holistic understanding of the program and its institutional impacts. A particular focus of our study was participants' inviting and welcoming practices. In keeping with research (e.g., Dawson, 2014) showing how hidden biases make members of historically and persistently excluded groups feel unwelcome at public institutions, our aim in examining what participating institutions are doing (or not doing) to create more inviting and welcoming environments was to facilitate inter-institutional learning in ways that would help participants improve implementation of their own programs. The following questions have guided our evaluation:

- What does the implementation of Museums for All look like at participating institutions (including practices for encouraging visits from SNAP EBT card holders, actions taken to make visits welcoming, institutions' participation goals, and obstacles these institutions have encountered)?;
- How has Museums for All affected participating institutions' capacities for inviting and welcoming SNAP EBT card holders?;
- How has Museums for All affected participating institutions in areas beyond community engagement and outreach?; *and*
- How can Museums for All better support participating institutions in their attempts to be more inviting and welcoming?

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<sup>1</sup> As of January, 2025, participating institutions will be able to charge up to \$5.00.

# Evaluative Process

## Review and Discovery

Our evaluation of Museums for All began with a review of existing program data—including chat logs and scripts from monthly Museums for All “hangouts,” open-ended responses from the 2018 evaluation, open-ended comments from quarterly reporting, and existing recommendations and best practices available on the Museums for All website. When analyzing this data, our goals were threefold: (1) to determine which data were most relevant to our evaluation; (2) to generate initial hypotheses about program implementation across sites; (3) to develop close-ended questionnaire items and follow-up interview questions.

## Institutional Questionnaire

Findings from the evaluation’s first phase informed the development of a questionnaire administered to participating institutions. The questionnaire provided respondents an opportunity to provide feedback on how participating in Museums for All has benefited them and on areas where the initiative could be improved. Our goals with this instrument were to collect data that both reflected themes from the Review and Discovery analysis and addressed previously unexplored topics—including cultural institutions’ trust-building efforts and their attempts to create welcoming environments. To learn about trust perceptions, we adapted a trustworthiness framework previously used in studies involving the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and ACM (and that are widespread in the recent trust literature; e.g., Malle & Ullman, 2021).

Different sections of the questionnaire asked respondents to estimate how much success they had in connection with:

- *Inviting* (i.e., reaching potential visitors);
- *Welcoming* (i.e., creating a welcoming environment);
- Achieving *goals* for participating in Museums for All;
- Overcoming *obstacles* to implementation;
- Developing changes in *partnerships* and sponsorships; *and*
- Shifting public *perceptions* of their institution.

Within each of these six modules, respondents were asked to rate their success with a number of specific approaches, strategies, goals, obstacles, changes, and perceptions (see Appendix B for the full questionnaire). For each module, respondents identified whether each item applied to them—for example, if they had made use of a particular strategy or if they encountered a particular obstacle. As the questionnaire was designed to capture a broad range of implementation approaches, not all items were applicable to each and every institution. For those that were applicable, respondents moved a slider to indicate the extent of their success. Respondents answered based on their implementation experiences and in keeping with their own definition of success. For the perceptions module, we asked respondents to gauge the success of their trust-building efforts through a trustworthiness framework used in prior studies with ACM and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

## Case Studies

To learn about the initiative's implementation and its impact on participating institutions, we conducted case studies of three different sites. To select these sites, we first reviewed the Review and Discovery data, identifying organizations that appeared to be highly active (for example, those that had commented frequently about multiple aspects of the initiative in their annual reporting). We then looked at participants' federal 990 forms from 2022 (as not all had released their 2023 forms at the time of review) and broke institutions into three groups: 1) large (revenue of \$5 million or more); 2) medium (revenue between \$1 and \$5 million); 3) small (revenue below \$1 million). To ensure that our studies encompassed a broad range of sites, three or four institutions of varying type and geographic locations in each of the three groups were then presented to the ACM team. After collaboratively developing a ranking order for contacting these institutions with ACM, we then reached out to those we had identified and received confirmation from one institution in each group.

As with the institutional questionnaire, these case studies were informed by findings from the Review and Discovery phase and involved a number of different data collection methods—including staff interviews, website analysis, content analysis of marketing materials / social media communications, reviews of existing visitor data and relevant evaluation studies, and photographs and videos of related visitor services or exhibits.



# Review & Discovery Phase Results

Through our review of existing program data, we identified a number of key themes in participants' Museums for All programs. This chapter summarizes key findings related to each of these themes, using direct evidence to highlight the experiences of specific institutions (for additional examples, see Appendix A).

## Inviting

Institutions extended invitations to potential and existing Museums for All visitors to participate in several ways, including: (1) by working with community organizations to spread the word; (2) by relying on frontline staff to inform visitors; (3) by promoting the program through their websites, social media channels, printed materials, and advertisements in the community (among other practices). Some examples of these practices—and their impacts—are included below.

- *"We have seen a large increase in participants using the Museums for All Program. Our staff has been vocally telling visitors about the program and we have posted a sign with the reduced admission price that is more visible for visitors."*
- *"We did an ad campaign with our city bus system to place ads inside the buses, which increased our Museums for All attendance from 117 last year to 161! (same quarter comparison)."*

## Welcoming

Beyond inviting visitors, participating institutions also welcomed them in several ways, including: (1) offering discounted or free admission for revenue generating programs such as memberships, camps, and parties; (2) providing discounted or free admission to special events or exhibitions; (3) developing new programming or content; and (4) facilitating staff trainings on anti-bias, inclusion, and (in a few cases) the Museums for All program itself. Of these four practices, the first two were much more common than the last two. Some examples of them—and their impacts—are included below.

- *"We expanded our Museums for All discount to our winter lighting event and received much encouraging feedback from individuals who would not have been able to visit the event otherwise."*
- *"Now, more than 1/3 of our Museums for All participants ultimately apply for a 'Warm Welcome' membership (90%) discount program. The biggest motivator is that this program gets early application to our summer camp scholarships. This year, all summer camp scholarships came from Warm Welcome and all but one of those families were first Museums for All families."*

## Goals

Comments from participating institutions point to two overarching aims these institutions are working toward: (1) increasing the number of participants over time; and (2) making

themselves more accessible to and inclusive of a broader community. Statements testifying to these aims—and progress toward them—are included below.

- *“Our numbers may seem small but they are increasing each reporting period and we couldn't be more happy!! Word is getting out!!”*
- *“It is affirming to note that over 13% of our visitors are now taking advantage of the reduced admission rate offered through the Museums for All program. That instills confidence that we are successfully addressing barriers to participation and serving a broad spectrum of our community.”*

## Most Common Barriers

Participating institutions reported a number of barriers to program implementation. Three of the most common barriers were: (1) difficulties getting visitors to use Museums for All (along with a lack of understanding as to why visitors are not using the program); (2) difficulties reaching the target population; and (3) difficulties tracking Museums for All usage (on account of eligible visitors using other free/reduced admission offers, always-free or suggested-donation policies, or point-of-sale systems). Statements testifying to these barriers are included below.

- *“I have had a number of inquiries regarding the Museums 4 All admission, but no takers for this period. The low numbers we currently have of M4A visitors is making me consider proposing a free admission, rather than the current \$3/family, for Museums for All eligible families. Any stats or follow up ideas on this would be appreciated.”*
- *“We have added four free days for ACM visitors throughout the year. We still struggle advertising it as we have few visitors even on that day. We have tried to reach out to the local social services departments as well with no luck. We really want our Museums for All discount to be used more often and help those who need it. Please let us know any other ideas to help us spread the word better. ”*
- *“We continue to advertise our participation in the Museums for All Program. We suspect that the lack of visitors identifying as qualifying under the Museums for All program is likely due to the fact that the [institution's] admission is a suggested donation only. Visitors can simply choose not to donate without having to identify as part of the MFA program and show their EBT card.”*

## Less Common Barriers

A few institutions pointed to additional barriers. These included: (1) lack of clarity as to who qualifies as a Museums for All visitor; (2) holding spaces for Museums for All visitors when there are frequent no-shows; (3) difficulties garnering full institutional buy-in for the program; (4) non-permissible uses of the program by visitors; (5) enabling Museums for All visitors to purchase tickets online; and (6) community members who did not qualify for the program feeling it was unfair or inequitable. Statements testifying to these barriers are included below.

- *“We had a difficult time with the [city] Museums for All program (which we didn't participate in) and confusion from visitors. Although our Museums for All program is overall better (all year long, free admission, etc.), [city] residents who receive WIC or*

*other benefits other than EBT (and therefore weren't able to use the traditional Museums for All offering) were very upset and confused. The fact that the programs have the same name was particularly problematic."*

- *"We are starting to see a bit of abuse with the program. There are parents using their kids' EBT cards that are no longer active. Parents using the kid's EBT card without them being present. I also had a few adults use 3 kids' EBT cards to get a large group of people in under the discount. This is an amazing program to help those who are struggling but cases like this could ruin it for all."*

## Alternative Admission Programs

Participating institutions indicated that they operate Museums for All alongside other free or reduced-price access programs. At times, participating institutions have extolled the advantages of Museums for All. At others, they have considered their other programs more successful. The statements below highlight some of the comparative successes and challenges of Museums for All.

- *"We have a different program (that we're still running) that allows folks to get free memberships, but a lot of folks have been excited about the Museums for All program because they want to contribute what they \*can\* while not paying more than they can afford."*
- *"We also offered a Pay What You Want Week from August 7-13 where visitors get to pay their own admission price. Thus, there were some instances where the Museums for All discount wasn't applied due to the visitors taking advantage of the cheaper option."*

## Additional Audiences Targeted

Participating institutions said that they leverage Museums for All to invite and welcome a number of related (but not entirely overlapping) audiences, including: people with disabilities, schools, WIC recipients, Spanish speakers, natural disaster victims, teens, and foster families. Examples of these practices are included below.

- *"We hosted a group of adults from...an organization that works with adults living with mental illness to help them integrate into society and live a more independent life. We walked them through the process of getting their tickets and gave them a tour. Hopefully, they will now have the confidence to return to the Museum on their own."*
- *"[We] created a flier in English and Spanish advertising Museums for All and made them available at local festivals this past summer."*
- *"The Museums for All Program has allowed us to expand our opportunities for foster children to visit with their biological parents here at the museum without causing a financial burden for any of the parties involved. We even have extended hours twice a month now just for this purpose, and without the Museums For All Program, I am sure we would see much lower attendance, if any at all on those special days for visitation."*

## Partnerships

Some institutions leveraged Museums for All to create new partnerships or deepen existing ones with a range of organizations, including government agencies, schools, other museums, businesses, and foundations. At times, they brought multiple partners together

through this work. Partners supported the program by spreading the word, providing funding, arranging group visits, and co-facilitating programs. Examples of participating institutions' partnerships—along with the benefits they conferred—are included below.

- *"The Museum is partnering with a number of agencies to spread the Museums for All word. Our partners include the [City] Housing Authority, [County] Family Success Administration and [County] WIC. These agencies are distributing M4A flyers, bookmarks and displaying posters in the lobbies of their offices."*
- *"We started a great partnership with the [area] Food Collective and hosted one of their resource fairs, allowing Museums for All to connect with many service providers in [area] and gaining more access to people who qualify. We also printed cards that these service providers can give to clients to help them know which museums are participating."*

## Funding

Some participating institutions received financial support for their Museums for All initiative, or for other free-access programs. Some funding supported free access outside of Museums for All, though the institutions believe these programs also captured Museums for All visitors.

Institutions received support for a range of activities connected to Museums for All (admission, training, advertisements, etc.). Some institutions incorporated Museums for All into larger funding requests. For others, the challenge of financing Museums for All was a barrier to fully supporting the program through training and advertising. Examples of these different situations are included below.

- *"The Museum received two special grants from [company] and [Foundation] that provided free admission for all visitors for the month of August connected to an exhibition featuring a BIPOC artist. For the whole summer, children plus one adult received free admission to [state] museums provided by [state] Humanities. We had wonderful visitation during these periods but therefore had no requests specifically for Museums for All admission."*
- *"We have been so pleased with the continued response of our visitors using the Museums for All admissions and now have members donating their unused free guest passes to support the program as well as grant funding."*
- *"We are seeing an uptick this summer for Museums for All. We currently offer it as free admission. We haven't been able to secure a sponsorship for this, so may adjust this to a reduced cost if we aren't able to find funding."*

## Public Perceptions

Institutions reported that Museums for All contributed to positive public perceptions of the institution. The perceptions were evident in press coverage, feedback from visitors who did not use the program but expressed gratitude to the museum for providing the service, and open support provided by public figures and local government agencies. A few institutions reported increased overall attendance that they attributed to Museums for All. Examples of these perceptions and impacts are included below.

- *"The local NBC Affiliate did a great story on the program."*
- *"There is considerable appreciation of this program by individuals using it and the community at-large."*



## Institutional Questionnaire Results

A total of 374 participating institutions completed the questionnaire—29% of the 1,278 total institutions participating in Museums for All. Respondents represented a wide variety of institution types, including historical societies, children's museums, art museums, science & technology centers, botanical gardens, natural history museums, zoos, aquariums, and planetariums (see Figure 1). Compared to the overall landscape of cultural institutions across the US, both science and technology centers and zoos and aquariums are slightly overrepresented in this sample. Respondents spanned all Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) regions, which group states with cultural similarities and shared economic activities. In keeping with Museums for All's growth in recent years, most respondents joined the initiative after 2018. The vast majority of respondents offer other free or reduced-price admission options in addition to Museums for All, including free days, Blue Star, and military discounts. Only 11 indicated that they did not offer any such options. Another 11 said that they are free to all visitors.

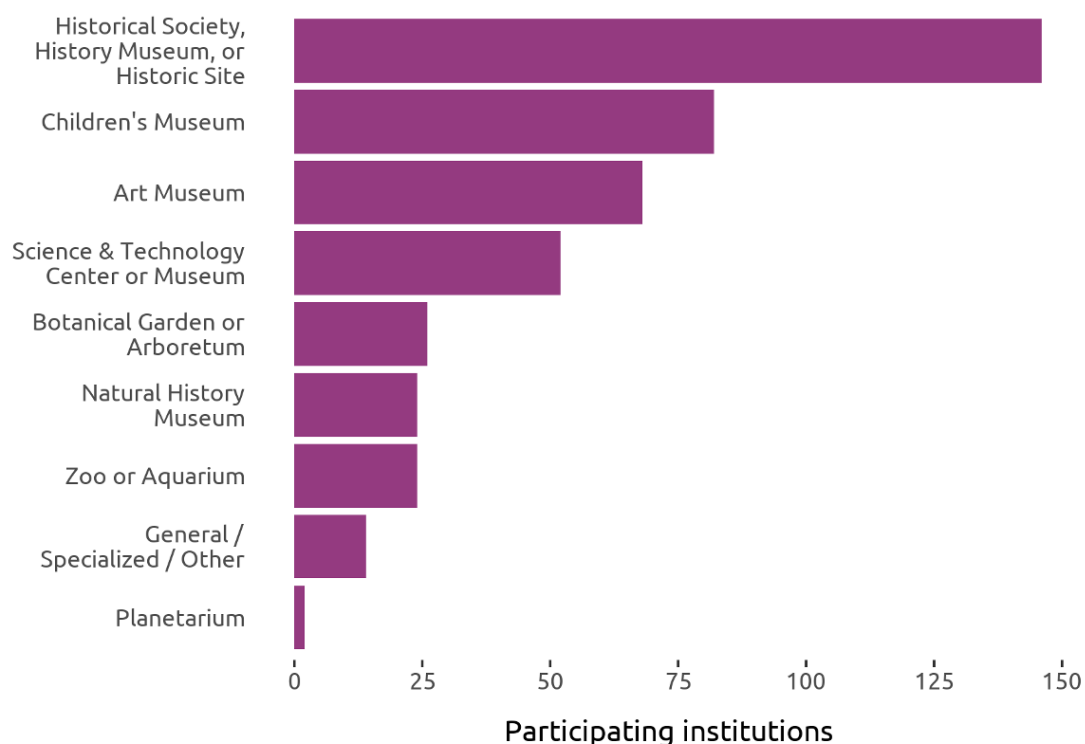


Figure 1. Survey respondents by institution type.

Note. "General / Specialized / Other" includes institutions selecting multiple options or the "Other" option.

Responses to the questionnaire were analyzed to identify patterns in implementation and impacts across the broad range of institutions participating in Museums for All.



## General Results

The results described below pertain to broader patterns in participating institutions' responses to the questionnaire. We found that responses to individual items within each module (except "Challenges") were highly correlated, allowing us to examine responses to the module as a whole rather than focusing on individual statements. To create module-level summary scores for each respondent, we averaged the success ratings of all statements within each module (omitting any items which the respondent marked as not applicable). The distribution of these summary scores for each of the modules which could be summarized ("Goals," "Inviting," "Partnerships," "Perceptions," and "Welcoming") are depicted below in Figure 2. As success ratings for "Challenges" were not as strongly correlated with one another, they were not converted into summary scores and are not included in the figure. All participating institutions had their own sets of difficulties, and there is no single behavior one might call "overcoming challenges."

Overall, respondents indicated that their Museums for All programs were fairly successful in actively inviting and welcoming eligible visitors, in achieving their goals, and in shifting public perceptions of their institutions. A summary of their overall success ratings is depicted in Figure 2 below. These results are presented as a series of box and whisker plots, which are useful for displaying the range of values in a dataset (Field et al., 2022). In this figure, the boxes indicate the "center of gravity" of scores for each module—that is, the range in which half of all values fell. The vertical line indicates the median. The horizontal lines show the range in which most values outside the "center of gravity" fell, and dots indicate outliers—that is, responses that fell outside the pattern for each module.

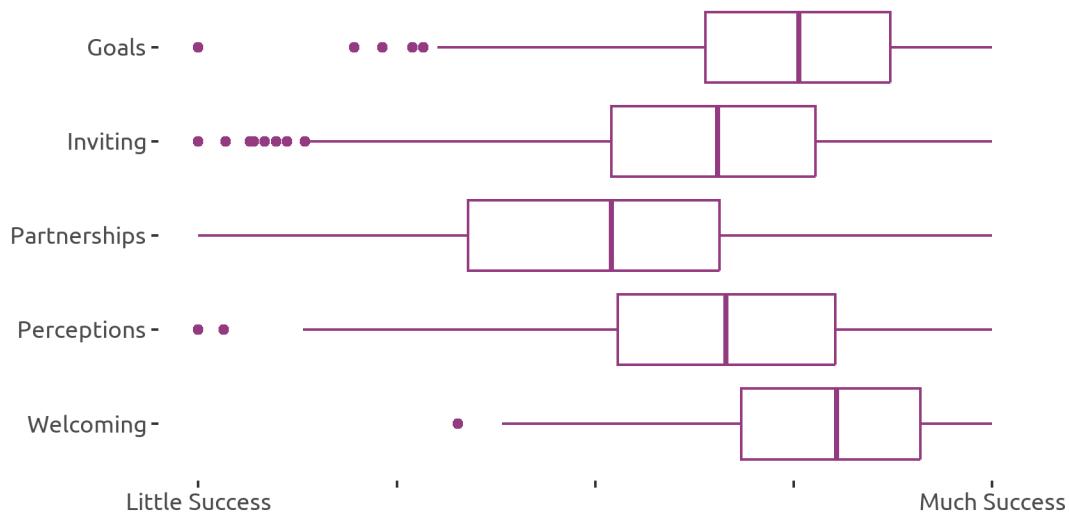


Figure 2. Summary of participating institutions' reported success across aspects of Museums for All implementation.

As can be seen, almost all summary scores for welcoming, inviting, goals, and perceptions were toward the right end of the scale, indicating a moderate degree of success. With regard to partnership development, responses were more widely distributed—ranging from largely unsuccessful to highly successful.

## Results for Individual Modules

Rates of success were reported on a scale from 0 (little success) to 1 (much success).

Generally speaking, responses to the questionnaire indicate that participating institutions were fairly successful with all of the approaches, strategies, and practices they have made use of. Though some of these have not been attempted as universally as others, when attempted, they led to positive outcomes more often than not.

However, it is important to point out that none of the strategies and practices participating institutions made use of were unequivocally successful. Though generally successful, participants' responses also indicate that more can be done in terms of inviting, being welcoming, achieving their goals, transforming perceptions, and forging partnerships.

### Inviting

Participating institutions were moderately successful in reaching out to potential visitors. This was true regardless of the marketing approach they used; the average success rating across all strategies used was 0.64.

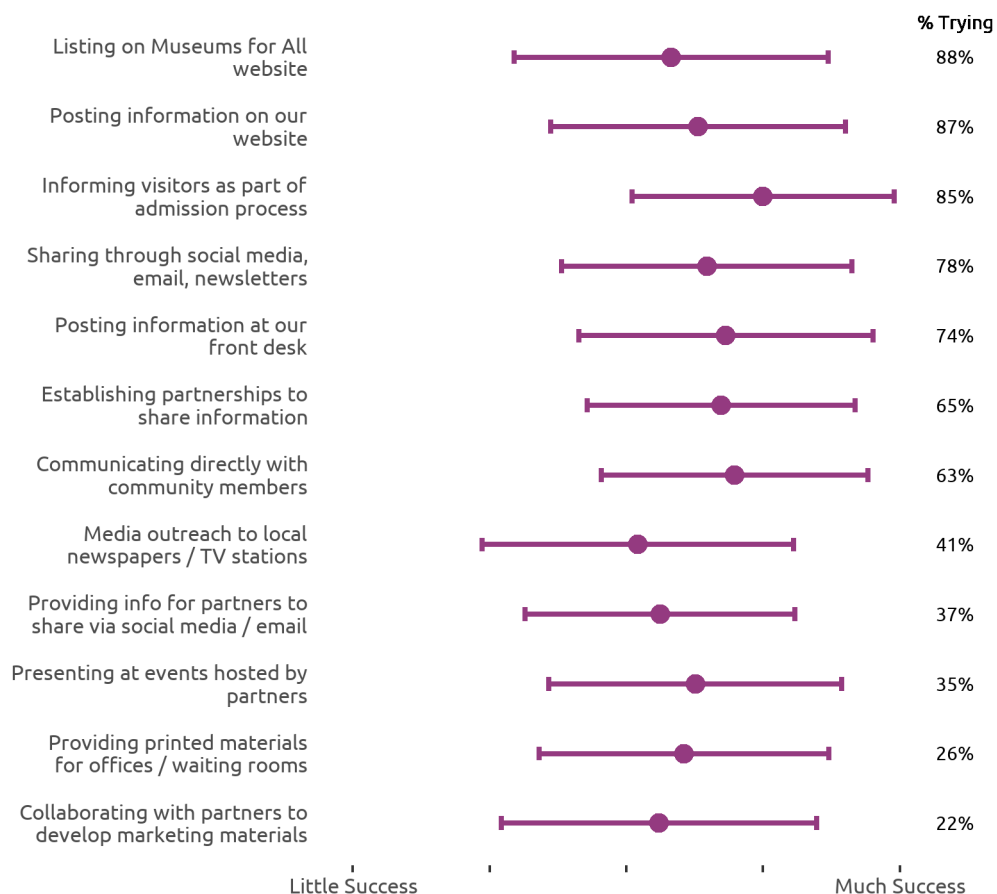


Figure 3. Participating institutions' inviting practices: Frequency and reported success.

Note: Points indicate means, whiskers indicate standard deviations.

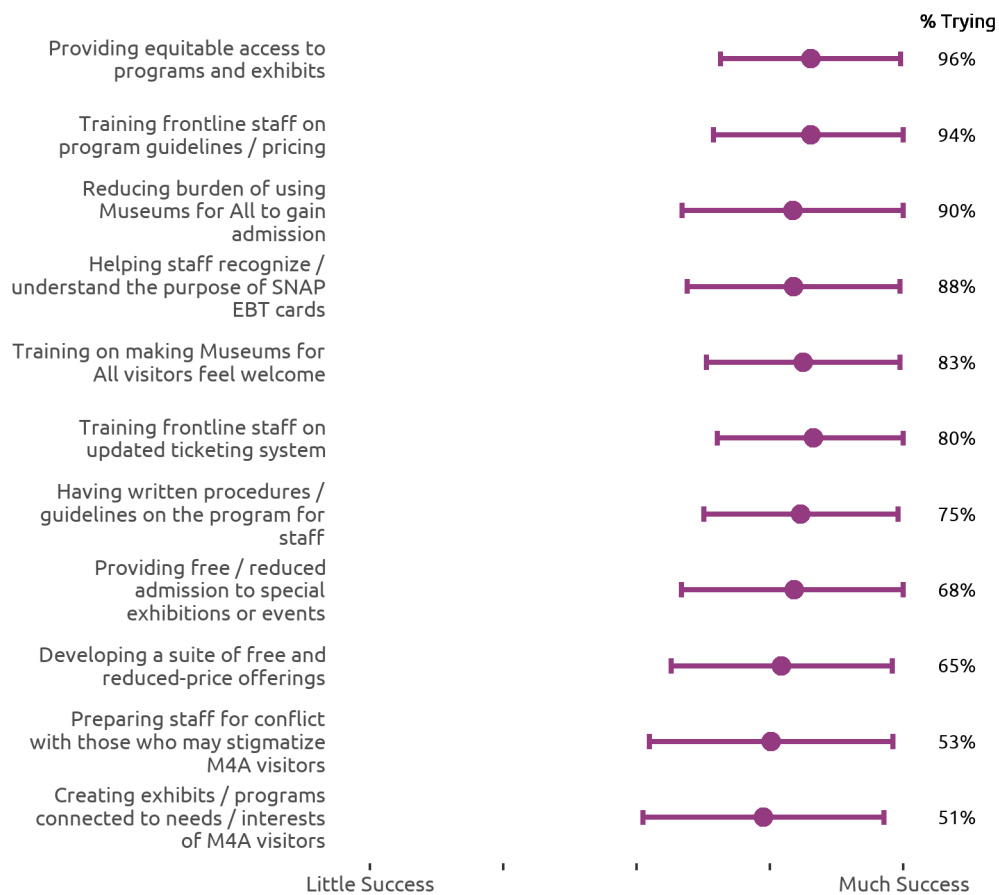
Few institutions made use of all of the approaches included in the questionnaire. Most respondents indicated that they had made use of the invitational practices recommended on the Museums for All website—that is, listing their institution on the Museums for All website (88%), posting information about the initiative on their own website (87%), informing visitors about the initiative as part of the admission process (85%), and sharing information about Museums for All via digital communications (78%) and at their front desks (74%). A slightly smaller percentage indicated that they had attempted to establish relations with other organizations (65%) or to communicate directly with community members experiencing economic hardship (63%)—even though those that did utilize these practices met with some of the highest rates of success reported in this module. This suggests that those institutions with the capacity to share information about Museums for All with community groups, schools, other cultural institutions, or low-income individuals and families themselves would benefit from doing so.

Beyond the 12 strategies listed here, respondents also indicated that they had conducted community outreach with additional types of partners (for example, libraries), that they had used a door sticker provided by Museums for All, and that they had attended outreach events not hosted by partner organizations. Several participating institutions also indicated that information about the program in their community spread mainly through word of mouth by visitors rather than explicit efforts by the institution itself.

## Welcoming

Among all of the strategies and practices contained within the questionnaire, participating institutions reported the greatest amount of success with those connected to welcoming. Regardless of the approach they took to creating a welcoming environment for low-income visitors, respondents generally met with moderately high degrees of success. The average success rating across all strategies used was 0.79.

Some of the most commonly used strategies were also those with the highest reported rates of success. For example, at least 90% of respondents indicated that they had provided equitable access to programs and exhibits, trained frontline staff on program guidelines and pricing, and reduced the burden of using Museums for All; those institutions who made use of these strategies reported a success rate at or above the rating for the entire module. However, several less commonly used approaches also proved successful—including training frontline staff on updated ticketing systems (0.83), having a written set of procedures and guidelines providing guidance to staff on how Museums for All works (0.81), and providing free or reduced admission to special exhibitions or events (0.80).



**Figure 4.** Participating institutions' inviting practices: Frequency and reported success.

Note: Points indicate means, whiskers indicate standard deviations.

Even those strategies that were among the least utilized met with a fair amount of success. For example, nearly half of all respondents did not see the creation of exhibits and programs connected to the needs and interests of Museums for All visitors as part of a strategy for creating a welcoming environment for these visitors. But in roughly 75% of all cases, those that did were successful with this approach. Similarly, only slightly more than half of respondents said that they had prepared staff to manage and resolve conflicts with general visitors who might stigmatize Museums for All visitors. But again, those that did reported a success rate of around 75%. The same is true with regard to the development of other free and reduced-price offerings.

Multiple write-in responses mentioned offering a reduced-price membership to visitors qualifying for Museums for All. A few also mentioned providing Museums for All visitors an alternative to showing their SNAP EBT card at the door (for example, allowing them to call ahead or simply taking their word for it).

## Goals

Participating institutions encountered moderate success in achieving their initiative-related goals. The overall success rating for the module was 0.74.

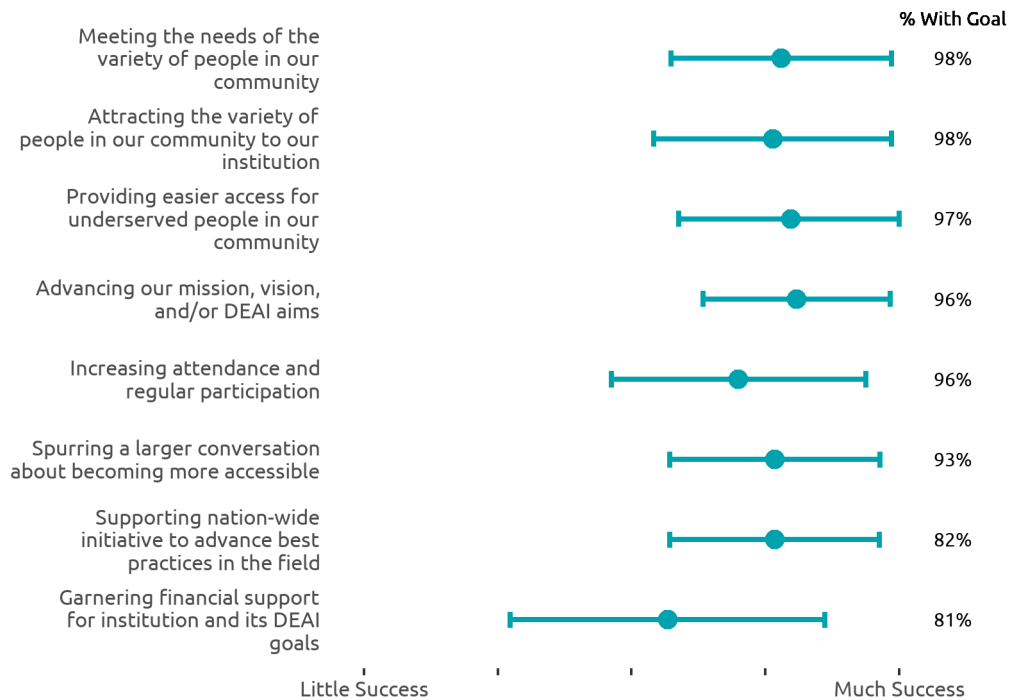


Figure 5. Participating institutions' goals for participation: Frequency and reported success.

Note: Points indicate means, whiskers indicate standard deviations.

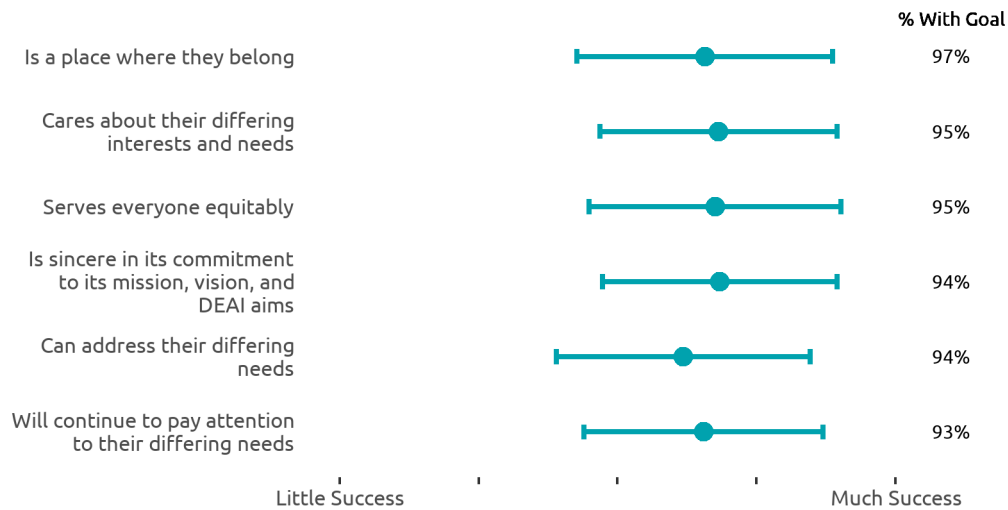
Over three-quarters of respondents considered each of the eight goals listed above to be relevant to their participation in Museums for All. "Supporting a nation-wide initiative to advance best practices throughout the field" and "garnering financial support for the institution and its DEAI goals" were least commonly indicated as goals for participation but were still seen as applicable by over 80% of participating institutions. Garnering financial support was the only goal within the module that did not receive at least a moderately high success rating (0.57).

## Perceptions

Respondents rated their success in shifting public perceptions of their institutions in connection with six different dimensions of trust:

- **Belonging**—how attracted and connected individuals feel to the institution;
- **Integrity**—how equitably the institution is perceived to apply its principles;
- **Benevolence**—how much compassion, empathy, and care the institution is perceived to demonstrate;
- **Sincerity**—how honestly the institution is perceived to conduct itself;
- **Competence**—how capable and skillful the institution is perceived to be; and
- **Reliability**—how dependable the institution is perceived to be.

Respondents reported a fair amount of success with their trust-building efforts. Over 90% of respondents held all of these six dimensions as goals, and ratings were similar across all dimensions—with an overall average of 0.66.



**Figure 6.** Participating institutions' estimates of public trust perceptions: Frequency and reported success.

**Note:** Points indicate means, whiskers indicate standard deviations. For each statement shown above, respondents were asked how successful they were in "convincing all segments of the population" because of their participation in Museums for All.

These results indicate that while participating institutions see Museums for All as helping them build trust with their audiences, they also believe that no single initiative can transform public perceptions of trustworthiness. The fact that respondents reported lower success rates with this than on other modules underscores their own humility—that is, the recognition that running a Museums for All program will not help them effectively address all of their trust-related concerns. Participating institutions did not necessarily think their audiences regarded them as extremely benevolent, equitable, sincere, competent, or reliable. But they did think Museums for All helped them move in the right direction across these different components of trust.

Along with this, it is important to point out that the questions asked in this module set relatively high thresholds for success—as can be seen in phrases such as "all segments of the community" and "serves everyone equitably." The fact that respondents reported fair-to-middling success despite these high thresholds similarly underscores the progress they are making toward their trust-building goals.

## Partnerships

Responses to our questionnaire indicate that participating institutions do not widely see Museums for All as being part of the way they connect to partners. Though most respondents reported that they had tried at least one of the five practices listed below, nearly half selected "haven't tried this" for each. Moreover, those that utilized these practices did not generally encounter much success in changing their partnerships on account of their participation in Museums for All. Success varied widely here; the average rating across all items was 0.50.

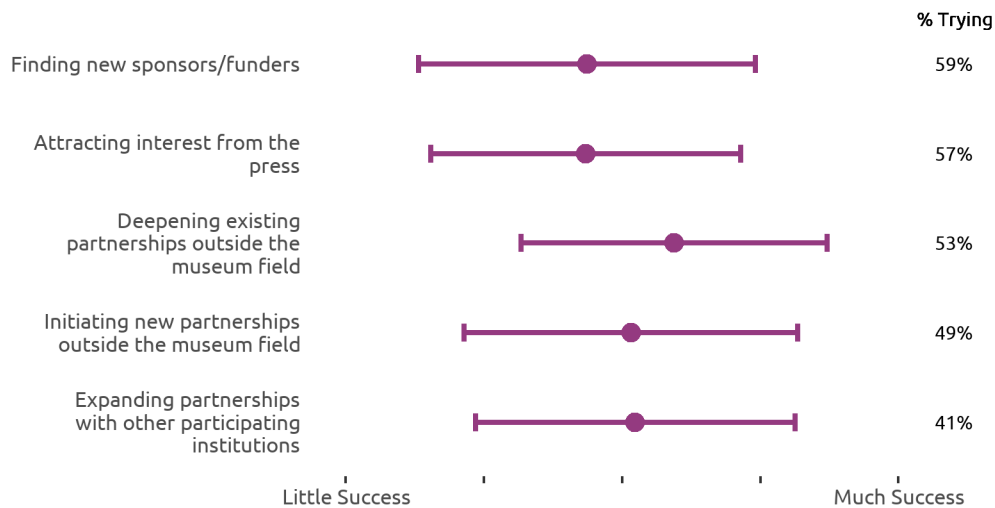


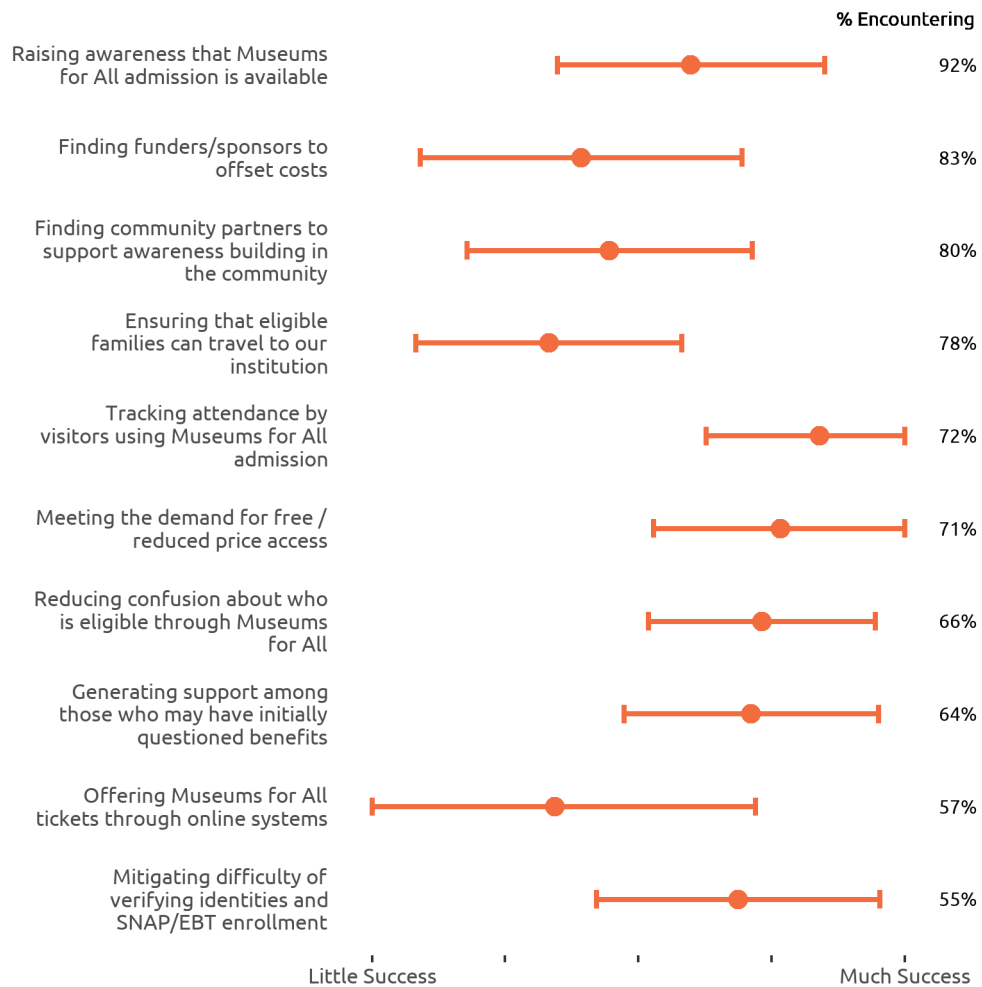
Figure 7. Partnership efforts pursued by institutions as part of their participation in Museums for All: Frequency and reported success.

Note: Points indicate means, whiskers indicate standard deviations.

## Challenges

As noted above, this module was the only one that could not be described by a single summary variable. If an institution solved a particular challenge, this did not mean they figured out how to solve other challenges. In other words, respondents' experiences with obstacles were somewhat akin to a game of "Whack-a-Mole." As such, with regard to obstacles, responses to individual items can only be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Responses varied both in terms of the most commonly encountered challenges and in terms of those challenges participating institutions were able to successfully resolve. For example, 72% of respondents indicated that they had faced challenges attempting to track attendance by using Museums for All admission, and most reported a moderate amount of success (0.84) overcoming this challenge. By contrast, only 56% of respondents said that "providing Museums for All visitors with the ability to buy tickets in advance through online systems" was a challenge they had encountered, but those who did were largely unsuccessful (0.34) in resolving it.



**Figure 8. Challenges encountered by participating institutions: Frequency and reported success overcoming challenges.**

Note: Points indicate means, whiskers indicate standard deviations.

Some challenges appear to be particularly difficult to overcome. For example, 83% of respondents indicated that they had experienced difficulties trying to find funders or sponsors to offset the costs of free or reduced-price admissions and memberships. But the low success rate reported for this challenge (0.39) suggests that participating institutions were generally not able to find a solution. Similarly, though more than three-quarters of respondents indicated that they saw “finding community partners to support Museums for All awareness-building” and “ensuring that eligible families could travel to our institution” as challenges, relatively few reported they had successfully overcome these challenges.



## Program Utilization

In terms of program utilization, the data collected through questionnaire responses indicates that Museums for All is meeting with mixed results.

Table 1. Utilization of Museums for All.

Utilization	n
Under-utilized: We wish more people would use this benefit	205
Just right	131
Over-utilized: We cannot keep up with demand	21
Unsure / can't track utilization	14
Did not respond	3

On the one hand, the fact that very few participating institutions ( $n = 21$ ) indicated that their programs were over-utilized—that is, that they could not keep up with demand—is a promising finding, as it undercuts the widespread assumption that participating institutions offering free or reduced-cost admission will be overwhelmed in ways that make them unable to meet the needs of all visitors requesting such access.

On the other hand, the fact that almost two-thirds of respondents said they wished that more people would make use of their program points to some of the challenges participating institutions have faced. For these respondents, it appears that Museums for All is not succeeding to the extent it could.



## Case Study Results

To learn about specific experiences of Museums for All, we conducted case studies of three different institutions:

- A small museum located in the southeastern US that operates within a municipal government;
- A medium-sized science center located outside a small city in the Pacific Northwest; *and*
- A large Midwestern museum that encompasses three separate institutions.

The first two institutions joined Museums for All in 2021, while the third has been part of the initiative since 2018. To gather data about their experiences, we spoke with multiple staff members at each institution. Information about the questions we asked interviewees can be found in Appendix D.

Analysis of case study data was conducted in accordance with Stake's (2006) protocol for multiple case study analysis.

For each case study, we discuss the institution's overall goals, their reasons for joining the initiative, their experiences implementing Museums for All, and the impacts this has had—both on the community and for the institution. Each study concludes with a discussion of the institution's future plans and interviewees thoughts as to how Museums for All could better meet their needs moving forward.

The three case studies are descriptive in nature and reflect neither our independent assessment of the program nor our interpretation of its successes and challenges within local contexts. Instead, the case studies present narratives of each institution's experience of Museums for All in interviewees' own words—using direct quotes to foreground their perspectives and opinions.

This chapter concludes with a cross-site analysis highlighting common themes across the three institutions' experiences of Museums for All.

## Case Study #1

At the time of our interviews, this institution was in the midst of recovering from a natural disaster that had recently devastated the region. One interviewee described their present status as a *“transitional period,”* noting that the need to prioritize the rebuilding and reopening of their facilities had presented certain *“logistical challenges”* to launching and implementing their Museums for All program.

### Key Institutional Goals

Community engagement is one of the museum’s key goals. For much of its history, the museum functioned like *“a private country club”* for volunteers and those who established it—so much so that many community members and visitors assumed it was a *“private house.”* Despite the fact the museum is owned and run by the municipality, it had traditionally lacked any signs identifying it as a public site, as fears that these would *“ruin the appeal”* of the building prevented the site from becoming anything more than a *“historic property to those in the know.”* While maintaining a focus on historic preservation, the museum’s new leadership is also implementing changes that help the site serve as a *“community gathering space.”*

In keeping with its efforts to *“provide a broader scope of services to the community,”* the museum has begun forging relationships with local and regional partners and hosting outreach events designed to welcome those *“who are not the traditional museum visitors.”* Specific targets of these community engagement efforts include local Latino and Indigenous communities—whose presence within the area has largely been excluded from the *“Anglo-American history that...has dominated the museum’s narrative.”* To engage these communities, the museum is prioritizing *“linguistic inclusion”* by putting up signs in both English and Spanish.

Another way the museum is seeking to become *“more inclusive”* and *“accessible to all”* is by working toward ADA compliance. Recently, staff ordered signs in Braille. To make the museum more physically accessible, they are also looking to build *“additional closer parking spaces”* and install lights throughout the property. Even though these changes may *“make the private residential neighbors next to us upset,”* the museum’s leadership view them as an important step toward transforming the site into a place that truly supports *“the surrounding areas that we purport to serve.”*

### Joining Museums for All

The museum’s desire to become a *“community gathering space”* played directly into their decision to join the initiative. Noting that the museum *“does not have that many visitors in general,”* upon learning about Museums for All, staff predicted that joining this would result in *“an additional source of visitors who might come to the museum.”* In addition to *“bring[ing] more people”* to the site, staff believed that joining Museums for All would make visiting *“more affordable”*—particularly among *“lower-income families”* in the area. Though the museum offers free parking, the cost of admission *“isn’t really feasible for many people,”* and

this, staff said, constitutes the primary reason visitorship has *“always been a struggle for the museum.”*

Museum staff also believed that joining the initiative would hasten progress toward their DEAL goals. By helping break down financial entry barriers, they imagined they would be able to *“increase the number of people who can utilize this property for their own needs and their own methods”*—whether that be *“Indigenous peoples for ceremonies,”* visitors who *“want a cultural element to their vacation,”* or *“lifelong learners who want to give back and become volunteers.”* Addressing the needs of these various groups, staff believed, would help integrate the museum into the community and promote a *“sense of belonging and place-building”* among local SNAP and WIC recipients. On a broader level, staff envisioned participation as something that would help them contribute to *“reducing the overall racial segregation”* present throughout the surrounding area.

## Implementation

### Program Description

Through the museum’s program, all visitors who are SNAP or WIC recipients (along with up to three other individuals in their party) receive free access to the site and all of its exhibits. The museum also offers guided tours of the area’s surrounding natural environments, which are a primary draw for visitors. These tours are not available at a reduced rate through Museums for All.

According to staff, implementation of the program was *“very simple,”* requiring only *“a little sign and a little training.”* Information about Museums for All is displayed on the institution’s website and at its ticket counter—where it exists as part of a notice listing all of the different opportunities for free or reduced admission (including North American Reciprocal Museum Association members, active duty military, veterans, and teachers).

To track Museums for All admissions, the museum created a separate button in their attendance tracking system. Doing this has improved the museum’s ability to record and report utilization data. In particular, it has given them the opportunity to map utilization by zip code—which allows staff to determine if they are *“actually reaching those low-income communities”* the program is designed to serve.

### Inviting Practices

Shortly after joining the initiative in 2021, the museum put out a press release and a social media post about Museums for All. Since then, staff have primarily promoted the initiative through in-person outreach. Whenever attending local fairs or festivals, they distribute Museums for All bookmarks (based on resources available on the ACM website) in both English and Spanish—particularly in *“low-income neighborhoods”* and the area’s *“large and very diverse Latino communities.”* Bookmarks are also distributed via local libraries, and according to staff, these are a very common way people learn about the program.

Partnerships also play a role in the museum’s promotional efforts. Through its connection with local libraries, staff have created a *“pass system”* that offers library patrons an additional means of gaining access to the Museums for All program. Other community organizations also sometimes share information about the program through their own networks. On one

occasion, a staff member at the local recreation center who had just learned about Museums for All took a picture of a bookmark and added it to social media as *“Story of the Day.”*

## Welcoming Practices

Interviewees indicated that most visitors *“already have knowledge of the program”* before coming to the museum. Because of this, staff at the ticket counter rarely have to inform visitors about the program; as one interviewee said, *“they let us know, instead of the other way around.”*

As part of an effort to create a barrier-free admissions process, staff do not ask Museums for All visitors to present their IDs or provide proof of eligibility. *“We just take their word for it,”* one interviewee explained, adding that when visitors enter and say *“Oh, we have four for Museums for All,”* staff simply *“press the Museums for All button”* and give them their wristbands. Explaining this practice, one interviewee said that *“we’re pretty trusting, [and] don’t want to turn anyone away.”*

This practice of *“not interrogating”* Museums for All visitors also aligns with the institution’s broader DEAI goals. Given that the museum is a taxpayer-funded, government-run facility, asking visitors to present their photo IDs *“could be threatening and unwelcoming to people,”* one interviewee said. Moreover, as a segment of the local population is undocumented, asking for government documents would detract from the museum’s goal of expanding access for all. Given this, staff have decided that the best way to reduce barriers to access is by *“just taking people’s word for it.”*

## Impacts

### General Feedback

All of the museum staff we spoke with praised the program’s ease of implementation. *“There’s not many challenges to it,”* one interviewee said, enthusing over *“how simple it is to incorporate”* into the museum’s day-to-day operations. Interviewees believed that Museums for All was having a positive impact on their institution, their staff, and their community. In what follows, we delve into each of these specific impacts.

### Benefits to the Institution

Interviewees agreed that the program was effective in *“getting more visitors to the museum”* and said that as a result of their participation, families are *“becoming aware of the programs that we have here.”*

Beyond these positive impacts, interviewees said that there was a *“definite economic benefit”* to participating in Museums for All. Explaining this, one interviewee remarked on how *“many people [who] didn’t know the museum existed...find us through the Museums for All website.”* After traveling to the museum and accessing its exhibits through the initiative, some of these visitors decide to *“take a \$5 tour, because you get admission for free”*—or to spend money in the gift shop. Thus, even though the program offers free admittance to SNAP and WIC recipients, it offers the museum an additional means of revenue generation.

Along with these institutional benefits, interviewees also credited Museums for All with expanding their personal awareness of governmental assistance programs. Before participating in Museums for All, one interviewee shared, *“I didn’t know the difference between SNAP and WIC.”* With this expanded awareness also came a knowledge of how to effectively destigmatize use of these programs. One interviewee said that *“the biggest thing”* they learned from participating in Museums for All was how to create an admissions process that was a *“normal everyday transaction”* and did not result in SNAP and WIC recipients *“feeling ashamed”* or like *“they don’t belong.”* By joining the initiative, staff discovered ways of ensuring that Museums for All visitors were treated *“like any other visitor.”*

## Benefits to the Community

Interviewees agreed that the community’s response to the program has been incredibly positive. When those receiving SNAP or WIC benefits learn about the program, staff said, their response is typically along the lines of *“Oh, wow, that’s great!”* Those ineligible for free admission have at times been confused as to what SNAP and WIC are, but they have not criticized the initiative. As one interviewee explained, *“We’ve never had any negative reaction.”*

On a broader level, staff also found that their participation in Museums for All was contributing to the creation of a more inclusive, equitable community. By becoming part of the initiative, they were able to help other local cultural institutions learn about Museums for All, and one of these—the largest in the area—ended up joining *“because they saw that we did it.”* As this suggests, the museum’s participation resulted in a broader awareness of financial barriers that prevent all community members from having equitable access to local educational and recreational resources and encouraged other organizations to take concrete steps toward removing these barriers. Along similar lines, staff also said that Museums for All is helping community members become *“more culturally aware.”*

## Impacts on Perceptions of Trustworthiness

Though staff perceived numerous personal, institutional, and communal benefits to participating in Museums for All, they were unsure as to the extent to which the initiative had transformed public perceptions of their institution’s trustworthiness. On the positive side, they agreed that joining the initiative had helped create *“a sense of welcoming”* among community members that had previously lacked the financial means to take advantage of the museum’s offerings. They credited the initiative with *“open[ing] the door to engaging those new communities”* and with helping them get a *“foot in the door for working towards DEAL goals and initiatives we’re trying to implement.”*

At the same time, however, interviewees stressed that much more needs to be done in order to build trust with the community. Some of this is entirely outside of the initiative’s scope. One interviewee identified physical access barriers—namely, the museum’s location *“in a suburban area with limited parking that you need a car to drive to”*—as an obstacle to building trust with all members of the community. This interviewee also said that in order to become a fully trustworthy institution, the museum would also need to change the content of their exhibits—some aspects of which are *“not really relevant to people’s lives.”* Trust would likely only be gained, this interviewee continued, when the museum began listening to community members and acting on their feedback.

Along with barriers related to physical access and the cultural relevance of their exhibits and programs, staff wondered if their communications about Museums for All were sufficient. Despite their outreach efforts, one interviewee felt that *“we haven’t been marketing it too well”* and was unsure of the extent to which their promotional campaign had convinced all members of the community that the museum was sincere in its commitment to its vision, mission, and DEAI aims. When combined with the fact that some programs *“still cost money”* and are *“not really affordable for most people,”* this interviewee felt that the aforementioned limiting factors may be hindering the museum’s efforts to be seen as a trustworthy institution in the eyes of all community members.

## Challenges & Barriers

Interviewees agreed that their Museums for All program had resulted in tangible benefits for both the community and their institution. Despite this, they also drew attention to a number of implementation challenges. The most significant of these had to do with their outreach efforts. One interviewee felt that staff were *“not being as active in its promotion as we should be for the importance of the program.”* *“We haven’t really taken [Museums for All] to its full potential of really advertising and marketing,”* they continued, noting that a more concerted communications campaign might have helped bring even more visitors to the museum.

But staff were unsure of their ability to undertake such a campaign. As one interviewee explained, much of their time and energy in the last few years had gone toward recovering from the natural disaster that devastated the area—and forced the museum (along with several other local cultural organizations) to close its doors for a prolonged period of time. The traumatic nature of this event was one of the reasons, said one interviewee, that the museum’s engagement efforts had *“fallen by the wayside.”*

On top of this, the museum’s staff have *“a lot of plates to keep spinning in the air”*; in addition to their official responsibilities, many also *“assist kind of where [we’re] needed in other regards.”* At times, this has made it difficult to determine the relative importance of Museums for All in light of other programs designed to reduce financial access barriers. As one interviewee noted, *“we offer a lot of ways people could get into the museum for free, so should [Museums for All] be more important than the others?”*

Interviewees also pointed out two challenges related to promotional materials provided by Museums for All leadership. First, as their building is both small and historic, interviewees said that finding a place to display information about Museums for All proved difficult. They thought that having an official sign or sticker about the program would help *“actually explain what [Museums for All] is”* to visitors and also lead to *“better training [of] the staff to ask people”* if they are eligible for admission. Second, interviewees said that the Spanish language version of the bookmarks they were sent contained *“some words that aren’t common”*—including *“really academic words”* such as *“asequibles.”* Though there are three native Spanish speakers employed at the museum, all of them had to *“look up the word,”* which is prominently displayed on the bookmark.

A final barrier to implementing the program has to do with the museum’s status as a government-owned and government-run facility. Whenever seeking to make a change to their admissions procedures, the museum needs formal approval from the municipal

council, which “sets all the prices and everything.” At times, one interviewee said, it can be “challenging to get something in front of [the] council for them to approve or deny it.” When council members are skeptical of a particular idea, museum staff have to present evidence in favor of it—for example, evidence on “why SNAP [is] important.”

## Looking Ahead

Interviewees said that while they were pleased with “the amount of visitors that come from Museums for All,” they were also looking for ways to expand on their program. At present, expanding their outreach and promotional efforts is a key goal. One interviewee said that “finding other ways to market the program” was something they wanted to address in the future.

Toward that end, interviewees recommended that Museums for All create and distribute a “standardized sticker” that can easily be placed on front doors or glass counters. “I think that’d be a big help,” one interviewee said, adding that “I definitely want a better sign.”<sup>2</sup> This interviewee also said that it would be helpful to have information about Museums for All that could be displayed on a TV monitor (which the museum hopes to install soon).

Beyond requesting additional promotional materials, interviewees also thought it would be helpful to have more information about different kinds of governmental assistance programs and how they factor into Museums for All’s eligibility criteria. “I think there could be more in terms of like, the difference between SNAP and WIC,” one interviewee shared. On certain occasions, visitors who receive assistance through the second of these programs have asked if they qualify for admittance through Museums for All, and these interactions have sometimes been “awkward.” To avoid situations where staff “have to interrogate this user of WIC who might be insecure about being on WIC,” this interviewee suggested that Museums for All provide a “toolkit” or some other resource with information about different governmental assistance cards and their uses.

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<sup>2</sup> Materials such as these may already be provided by ACM. In the open-ended portion of our questionnaire, several respondents indicated that they used a door sticker provided through the initiative. If these stickers are still available, it may be that this individual interviewee was simply unaware of their existence.



## Case Study #2

Interviewees at this site said that their institution was located *“on a mountaintop,”* and described it as *“the only place”* in the surrounding area that provides visitors with *“immersive”* experiences *“out in the woods.”*

### Key Institutional Goals

Interviewees said that expanding access to wildlife and wild places was one of the institution’s top priorities. Though they are located in a *“green area,”* interviewees identified a *“massive deficit”* in local residents’ exposure to nature, adding that the outdoors is *“not something people get to experience very much.”* Through their programming and outreach efforts, staff are striving to reduce this deficit and transform their institution into a place where *“anyone that wants to come up and learn about nature and experience wildlife can.”*

Conservation education is also a key part of the institution’s mission, interviewees explained. One said that by *“helping people connect to the natural world around them,”* the institution seeks to deepen awareness of how important different wildlife species (even those regarded as *“gross”* or that have a *“nasty rap”*) are to the world. In addition to becoming more informed about the natural world, an interviewee said that visitors to the institution are encouraged to understand some of the *“actionable changes they can make in their lives to help protect the ecosystem.”*

Interviewees saw these efforts as intrinsically tied to the institution’s DEAI goals. *“Nature is something that shouldn’t ever be gatekept,”* one declared, underscoring the institution’s efforts to *“make sure that everyone in the community feels like this is an accessible and welcoming meeting space.”* When working to *“make connections”* and *“extend a broader welcome,”* interviewees said they are especially interested in facilitating access for *“folks who otherwise would have a hard time visiting”*—including *“communities of color,”* those who identify as queer or transgender, people with disabilities, *“lower-income visitors,”* and anyone else who might feel that their institution is *“a little out of reach for them.”* Highlighting the importance of their DEAI work for the institution’s overall mission, one interviewee said that *“you can’t educate the general public if you’re only educating certain groups.”*

### Joining Museums for All

Interviewees said that their institution’s decision to join Museums for All was motivated by a belief that the initiative could *“further that mission”* of helping *“anyone and everyone...experience nature.”* Prior to becoming part of Museums for All, the institution had experimented with other kinds of *“free admission option[s]”*—including a *“family pass”* prospective visitors could obtain from local libraries. Though these passes were *“very popular,”* according to interviewees, their use was neither practical nor equitable. Some visitors used their passes multiple times, which necessitated the creation of a *“waiting list”* and led to situations where *“it was sometimes literally months or more”* before families were able to take advantage of the program.

Beyond this, interviewees said that the library pass system *“wasn’t always getting to the people who needed it the most.”* Upon realizing these difficulties, the institution *“took a break”* from the program; one interviewee described how they started looking for *“a more targeted way to improve access for folks who would otherwise have a hard time affording admission.”* After learning about Museums for All, leadership decided to join the initiative—which, as one interviewee put it, *“just really made sense.”*

## Implementation

### Program Description

Upon joining the initiative in the spring of 2021, the institution began offering free access to SNAP cardholders. Since then, their program has expanded to include WIC and Medicaid recipients; during the COVID-19 pandemic, the institution also offered Museums for All access to school children enrolled in Pandemic EBT (P-EBT).

At present, staff are considering expanding access to local youth-mentoring organizations—specifically those that do *“one-on-one”* work with children. If implemented, those children who enter the museum with their mentors will gain admittance through Museums for All simply by flashing a badge from their organization. Working with a local Hispanic-serving nonprofit, the institution is also discussing the creation of a pass that gives undocumented individuals (who *“don’t have food stamp cards”* and thus cannot present proof of their low-income status) the opportunity to benefit from Museums for All.

Upon entering the site, visitors immediately learn that the possession of a SNAP, EBT, or Medicaid card *“will get free admission”* for themselves and up to three other people. One interviewee described the program as a *“household name,”* adding that upon entering the site, *“we let people know that we participate in this initiative called Museums for All.”* Information about the institution’s program is also made available online; according to one interviewee, *“that’s how a lot of people are finding out about it.”* Whenever visitors make use of the program, staff *“hit the Museums for All button,”* and a ticket is printed that *“just shows free admission.”* As the institution *“does not really have separate exhibits that are ticketed separately,”* one interviewee explained, Museums for All visitors *“have access to the full site.”*

### Inviting Practices

Many visitors only learn that they qualify for free admission *“as they’re getting out of their cars,”* and because of this, interviewees said they advertise the program *“as much as possible.”*

Tabling is a common inviting practice, interviewees agreed. When participating in community events, staff set up a display table that includes information about the program. *“We really want to make sure that if someone looks at our table,”* one interviewee explained, *“they know that there’s an opportunity for something to do with their family”* that is affordable. *“We let the sign really speak for itself,”* one interviewee noted, explaining that *“we don’t want to make assumptions about someone’s financial state.”* Instead of *“prod[ding]”* people, one interviewee explained, their strategy is to let them *“come up and talk to us and ask questions.”* Those who are curious about Museums for All learn that this is one of several *“alternative admission routes”* open to visitors, and they can also avail themselves of *“group discounts”* or *“public*

*library passes.” According to one interviewee, tabling at community events has been “a really good way to spread [the] word” about Museums for All. Every time they do this, “at least one or two groups” who see their sign immediately respond with comments such as “Oh, that’s perfect. We’ll come visit on that.”*

Interviewees said that staff also routinely share information about the program through formal communication channels. Language about Museums for All and other reduced or free admission options is commonly included when staff post information about upcoming programs in community calendars, and staff also distribute flyers and postcards about the program. On top of this, the institution’s yearly magazine and monthly newsletters also contain “*little advertisement[s]*” that inform readers about the program. Staff also promote Museums for All via social media, though this is a less routine practice. Explaining this, one interviewee said that “*by the time people have followed our social media, they normally know quite a bit about us, and that’s not necessarily the demographic we’re trying to pass new information to.*”

Interviewees also said that partnerships are critical to the institution’s outreach efforts. Upon joining Museums for All, leadership published a “*joint press release*” with several other local institutions that were part of the initiative. To spread awareness among the large contingent of Spanish speakers that reside in the area, the institution partnered with an organization that did “*a bunch of Spanish interpretation of our signage and some of our marketing.*”

Other inviting practices are more informal. One interviewee mentioned that they sometimes talk to people about the program while “*at the grocery store.*” Staff have also shared information directly with local transitional housing agencies and other government offices that work with low-income families. Interestingly, staff said they have not advertised the program to their local SNAP office, because—as one interviewee said—“*people have been finding it really well on their own so far.*” According to multiple interviewees, information about the program often spreads through word of mouth. “*I’ve had people just say to me, ‘oh, and I heard that if we have a food stamp card, it’s free,’*” one interviewee shared. Echoing this, another interviewee said that “*we do get calls pretty regularly from folks who heard through the grapevine that [Museums for All] is a thing and just want to confirm that it’s still an option.*”

## **Welcoming Practices**

Interviewees stressed the importance of treating Museums for All visitors “*like everyone else,*” and highlighted several practices designed to help this group feel welcome at their institution.

Their chief goal is to engage with these visitors in ways that “*don’t necessarily call attention to the fact that they’re on SNAP.*” To prevent visitors from feeling ashamed about not being able to afford admission, interviewees said they “*don’t ask a lot of questions*” at the ticket counter. When visitors indicate that they would like to make use of Museums for All, they refrain from scrutinizing these requests, and from “*making them verbally explain a whole bunch of stuff in front of a line [of people].*”

One interviewee described a typical ticket counter interaction with Museums for All visitors as follows:

*So people will look at [our Museums for All sign] and go, "Oh, what's this," and I say "Yeah, so we're a participant in a national initiative called Museums for All, which is about improving access to educational attractions. And so anyone with a valid SNAP EBT card from any state can visit our center and get free admission for up to four people. And you just come in and show that, you show your card in our visitor center to get that rate..." Then...if they seem like they're interested in more information, I'll follow up by saying, "You know, this can be used as many times as you want, there's no restriction on how many times you visit this way, and that's available anytime during our regular public hours."*

Describing the trusting, open nature of their admissions process, one interviewee discussed how

*Even a kid can come up here with their babysitter or their care worker and we'll let them in. We are not...going to nitpick...Even if someone said, "I left my food stamp card at home," I am not going to sit here and be like, "Well, then I guess you need to go home and get it." If you're here and you want to see nature and you want to be part of this, I'm not going to question it.*

Interviewees said that they “really pride ourselves on” practices such as these and indicated that they are part of the institution’s culture. As part of their onboarding procedures, for example, new staff and volunteers are presented an orientation packet that includes a “list of do’s and don’ts” tied to Museums for All. Among other things, this packet explicitly informs employees not to make any comments if a Museums for All visitor makes a purchase in the gift shop—and to let these visitors freely “go around and do their thing.” Interviewees said that their training efforts have never met with any resistance internally and that the process of educating new staff and volunteers on how to make Museums for All visitors “feel as welcome as anyone else” has proceeded “very smoothly.”

## Impacts

### General Feedback

Interviewees said that they have been “really pleased” with Museums for All and that the initiative is “doing exactly what we wanted [it] to do.” From an admissions standpoint, they found the program “really pretty straightforward” and appreciated how implementing it required “very little additional input from us.” “It’s simple for visitors, [and] it’s simple for us,” one interviewee said. Along similar lines, another interviewee described the program as “just one of those things we were able to wind up and let it go and do its thing.” Interviewees also appreciated how the initiative’s leaders were “respectful of our time and energy in terms of what information they’re asking us to provide as participants.”

Since joining the initiative, Museums for All visitors have consistently accounted for “about eight to ten percent” of the institution’s total admissions. Interviewees said this was “a number that is really nice for us.” “It’s big enough to be having some real impact,” one explained, and “not quite so huge that it’s overwhelming [us] and creating massive traffic jams.”

Whenever changes in the program’s eligibility criteria are made, volunteers are trained with a “little reference sheet”; one interviewee said that staff “pick it up quite quickly,” which makes it possible to “track exactly how many people are coming in on that.”

## Benefits to the Institution

Interviewees said that Museums for All had been beneficial for their institution in many different ways.

First and foremost, they agreed that participating in Museums for All had helped them make progress toward *“broader efforts”* tied to becoming a more equitable, inclusive, accessible institution. When discussing why *“this program is paying off,”* one interviewee credited Museums for All with helping them *“hit another demographic of people that maybe never would have set foot on our property.”* Agreeing with this, another said that *“Museums for All has been a great way for us to give more access to those who would not normally be able to experience this.”* A third said that when community members see information about Museums for All in their official communications, it helps them realize that DEAI is *“not something that we’re sort of doing on the side,”* but something that the institution is *“passionate about”* and committed to as a matter of general policy and practice.

Interviewees also said that Museums for All is helping the institution cultivate new audiences and expand the reach of their programs and exhibits. By creating a no-cost admissions option, interviewees said they had simultaneously improved access to numerous groups. One interviewee described how Museums for All had created *“expanded options”* for people with intellectual disabilities—who *“at least two-thirds of the time are enrolled in SNAP.”* This interviewee also said their institution is *“definitely get[ting] more visitors of color as a result”* of participating. Between 2022 and 2023, the institution doubled the amount of people visiting through their Museums for All program; while numbers for 2024 have not been tabulated yet, one interviewee said they expect that *“it’s continued to just increase.”*

Interviewees agreed that the progress they made toward their DEAI goals did not come at the expense of other efforts or programs. One interviewee called Museums for All an example of a *“passive improvement”*—that is, something that *“has a lot of benefits and still doesn’t overtax the staff.”* While launching their program required a considerable amount of effort *“up front,”* once set up, they described Museums for All as something *“you can kind of wind up and let go.”* *“It’s a good reminder,”* they concluded, *“that not all improvements in the [DEAI] area have to be this gigantic, multi-person thing that requires your attention all the time.”*

Interviewees also reported that the institution had benefited economically from participation in Museums for All. Immediately after joining the initiative, some of the institution’s leaders *“got nervous,”* and asked, *“Are we going to lose money?”* But by granting free access, one interviewee explained, visitors were *“freed up to purchase a little something,”* and often bought gift shop items or contributed to the institution’s donation jar. After leaving, they often *“told their friends”* about their experiences, and many of those friends subsequently became visitors. In all of these ways, one interviewee said, Museums for All visitors *“end up paying for themselves.”* As they noted, though the institution’s leaders still occasionally *“worry about giving away things for free,”* the numbers clearly show that *“we’re not losing money.”* Indeed, after reviewing their annual expenses, this interviewee found that *“our finances are doing just fine,”* adding that *“we have not seen a dent in that at all.”*

Interviewees also indicated that Museums for All had been helpful from a funding standpoint. Prior to joining the initiative, one interviewee explained, the institution *“hadn’t really utilized grants.”* Given that so many education-based grants are *“about equity and*

*inclusion,” they feel that staff are now better positioned to find and compete for these. Another interviewee said Museums for All had given staff “some good numbers” to “trot out” whenever applying for grant funding. Agreeing with this, a third interviewee said that the program was a “wonderful talking point” when approaching prospective funders and “has been absolutely wonderful as something put on our grants.”*

Interviewees agreed that one of the things that has made Museums for All “a really incredible experience” is the opportunities for partnership and collaboration it has opened up. “We are connecting more with some of the other organizations in our community,” said one interviewee, noting that “there’s conversation happening” regularly with these organizations—specifically those with their own Museums for All programs. Yielding ideas for “community projects” and “collective grant-writing,” these conversations have allowed all Museums for All partners within the area to discuss “how we together as a community of museums...[can] make a better world for the people living in our community.” All of this “has been quite a delight,” said an interviewee who found that one of the biggest benefits of Museums of All was “expanding into other areas that aren’t even about the admissions anymore. It’s more about relationships,” they added.

## Benefits to the Community

According to interviewees, community members appreciated the opportunity to visit the institution through its Museums for All program. “We’ve had people personally thank us for having that available,” one interviewee said. Another said that when discussing Museums for All at community events, the reaction to learning about the initiative is generally along the lines of “Oh, I can afford that, that’s awesome!”

Public perceptions of the institution’s Museums for All program also appear to be strongly positive, interviewees said. While noting that the process of building community support has been an “uphill climb” for some institutions, one interviewee said that “we haven’t really had to deal with that honestly.” In three years of running the program, this interviewee said they could recall only one instance in which a person complained about Museums for All. When explaining the lack of pushback, they pointed to the fact that their institution is *not* located in a place “where there’s not a lot of misinformation abounding about things like public welfare programs.” “The only comments we get,” another interviewee said, “is how amazing it is that we are that inclusive.”

Through their partnerships with other local organizations with Museums for All programs, interviewees felt they were making their entire community more equitable, accessible, and inclusive. Speaking to the power of these partnerships, one interviewee enthused about how the process of collaborating with other organizations “just makes the community feel welcoming and diverse and incredible.” By spreading information about their own efforts and “all the different areas in town” where people can go and “use Museums for All,” this interviewee felt that they were helping “make the entire community feel more inclusive and more powerful.”

Interviewees also thought that Museums for All had helped make their community more informed—particularly in connection with conversation-related topics. “You’re seeing a light in people’s eyes,” one interviewee said, sharing how engaging with new audiences had provided them with clear evidence that “we are making a difference” and that “what we’re doing is



*working.*” Agreeing with this, another interviewee credited Museums for All with *“helping further that mission”* of helping give visitors *“a whole new way of looking at what’s around them and their place in the middle of it all.”*

## Perceptions of Trustworthiness

Interviewees thought that Museums for All was contributing to shifts in perceptions of the institution’s trustworthiness. When explaining why this was the case, interviewees pointed to the *“broadness”* of the program, highlighting how Museums for All is *“more than just a token gesture.”* One interviewee stressed *“how unconditional it is compared to a lot of [other] free admission options,”* explaining that Museums for All was sending a *“pretty big signal”*—one that was *“defying expectations”* of how cultural institutions operate and *“fighting back against this notion that we have to be really stingy with our free admission.”* Agreeing with this, another interviewee talked about how being part of *“a national network”* of institutions *“really lends that sense of credibility”* with audiences.

Also important in building trust, interviewees explained, was the fact that Museums for All is *“part of our identity.”* Highlighting the institution’s extensive promotional efforts, one interviewee said that having Museums for All *“really baked into our core marketing”* was *“really build[ing] trust”* with communities. By helping demonstrate to the public that the institution *“really cared”* and wanted its policies to *“match the values that we have about community and accessibility for everyone,”* they continued, Museums for All was *“add[ing] this level of trustworthiness”* to their work.

At the same time, interviewees agreed that Museums for All could not singlehandedly alter public perceptions of the institution’s trustworthiness. Though the initiative is a *“big gesture”* and offers free admission to *“a significant portion of the population,”* interviewees said that Museums for All was *“not all-encompassing.”* *“It doesn’t give access to every single person that could use it,”* one interviewee observed, adding that *“there’s a lot of people who could really use these things that fall just outside of eligibility for SNAP”*—including a *“middle range of individuals”* who are neither *“low income”* nor *“higher class.”* This in-between group *“really can’t afford to always think about doing all these fun extra activities with their children,”* one interviewee explained. Though the institution is *“trying to fill all the gaps,”* interviewees said that they *“[didn’t] know how to include...this middle group of folks.”*

Interviewees also described accessibility needs that are *“separate from what Museums for All is offering.”* The most pressing of these have to do with physical accessibility. Given its location *“outside on a mountaintop,”* one interviewee stressed, the institution *“continues to face barriers with individuals in terms of physical mobility issues.”* Though Museums for All can improve access for those who are *“physically able to get up”* to the institution, another interviewee added, other measures need to be taken to help community members *“physically navigate our site.”* These challenges, interviewees explained, underscore the fact that Museums for All is *“just one piece of what should be a much bigger effort.”* As one interviewee said: *“One thing all by itself is not going to be enough to convince someone that we’re doing the absolute best we can in that area.”*

Interviewees also believed that gaining the public’s full trust would require them to alter the content of their current offerings. Beyond simply extending a *“broad invitation”* to the community, interviewees signaled a need to create *“culturally specific programming”* and

events that were *“a little more tailored to individual groups.”* Though interviewees thought their institution had made significant strides in this direction (for example, by hosting “queer nights” and partnering with nonprofit organizations that exist for *“anyone that has a barrier to being out in nature”*), they also emphasized the need to do more to show particular community groups—including people of color and those who *“don’t speak English natively”*—that *“they will be able to get their needs met up here and feel welcome.”*

## Challenges & Barriers

Despite their extensive outreach efforts, interviewees indicated that they sometimes face challenges in connecting with their intended audiences. After acknowledging that many of their Museums for All visitors only learn about the program *“as they’re getting out of their cars,”* one interviewee identified this phenomenon as *“something that we’re actively trying to change.”* Yet marketing the program to those who *“might not think they could afford to come”* poses a significant challenge, they said. *“I think spreading the word is honestly our biggest barrier at this point,”* one interviewee explained. Expanding on this, they discussed how

*We got into public, and a lot of people have never heard of us. And [we’re] trying to sort out who in the community hasn’t heard about us, and doesn’t know we’re a resource, and why...Where has our marketing skipped them, [and] what are those gaps? [There’s a] sort of fear of, “Okay, well, if we’re marketing here, here, and here, is that reaching the target public that we are hoping sees this marketing?” And I think we do a lot of great marketing. But at the same time, I’m not sure that those groups are the full spectrum of who would benefit from Museums for All. And so trying to find those populations and those communities that might not know a bunch about the [institution] but would definitely qualify for Museums for All...and then marketing towards them, I think is one of our big goals in the coming year. It’s definitely an obstacle that’s looming over us.*

Echoing this point, another interviewee said that despite the improvements they have made since joining Museums for All, they *“[didn’t] think that it’s well-known enough in the community for it to be making an influence at that level yet.”*

In connection with communication-related challenges, interviewees pointed to difficulties in forging partnerships as a barrier to their outreach efforts. *“For a long time,”* one interviewee explained, *“we didn’t do a lot of partnering with other organizations locally,”* as an *“other people come to us”* mentality dominated the institution’s thinking on collaborations. Despite the fact that staff are *“doing a lot more of getting out in the community,”* this interviewee believed that much more remained to be done in this regard. For example, when discussing *“next steps”* in their Museums for All program, they expressed an interest in creating a *“community access pass”* system with *“organizations that we know are doing really good targeted equity work in the community.”* But doing this, they noted, was predicated on building relationships *“that we don’t have yet.”* Though staff want to engage in *“more intensive collaboration with other museums,”* the prospects for this are *“limited by the challenges of getting all those people together”*—and are contingent on *“developing relationships with certain other organizations that we don’t have much contact with yet.”*



## Looking Ahead

Interviewees said they were *“very pleased with the level of support”* they had received from ACM and praised the project’s leadership team for being *“very available and very willing to help.”* They particularly appreciated the group website set up for the initiative and said they used this *“as kind of a little discussion forum”* for asking others about their experiences and operations. To build on this virtual support system, one interviewee suggested that having an in-person Museums for All conference would be helpful, as this would provide an additional opportunity *“for people to talk and share their experiences.”*

To resolve some of their communications-related challenges, interviewees also wondered if there was a Museums for All *“marketing package”* they could obtain. An interviewee who felt their institution could help improve awareness of the initiative by creating *“more of a scheduled social media boost”* thought it would help if this package contained *“different posts”* for specific occasions—for example, a *“Museums for All month.”* When it comes to social media, they said that their reaction is often along the lines of *“Oh my God, I don’t have the time to make this post or to do this or that.”* Given this, having a *“pre-done social media package”* that contained *“some branded materials”* would be *“great to help,”* they said.

Interviewees also highlighted additional resources for helping improve their institution’s welcoming practices. One said that having access to online training materials—including a *“DEI course”*—could be helpful as something to *“give volunteers”* who run the check in process and the institution’s gift shops. Having a resource *“to make sure they are communicating with families in the most equitable and accessible way,”* this interviewee said, *“would be a really cool resource.”*

Along with this, interviewees also expressed interest in accessing data on the *“visitor end,”* to see *“how Museums for All impacts visitors.”* *“We have to make our own judgments based on feedback we get from people and what we observe,”* one interviewee shared, adding that it would be interesting to see concrete data on how people are responding to the initiative—including *“specific examples or strategies”* on how to fold Museums for All into *“other equity work.”*

## Case Study #3

Interviewees at this site described their institution as a *"multidisciplinary museum,"* and identified themselves as an *"early adopter"* of Museums for All.

### Key Institutional Goals

Interviewees said they were dedicated to making their institution more accessible and inclusive. *"Museums should always be a place where people feel like it's theirs,"* one interviewee said, adding that much of their work revolved around the question, *"how do we make this place a welcoming place for all?"* To answer this question, the institution's leaders have created *"various teams and committees that work on different DEAI issues."* Some of these focus on devising ways to *"be more inclusionary with language"*—for example, by figuring out how to *"do a better job of communicating with folks whose primary language is not English."* Others look to promote the inclusion of minoritized groups, including LGBTQ individuals, *"different religious groups,"* and various *"ethnic cultures."* In its official equity statement, the institution expresses a commitment to building better communities by acknowledging similarities, embracing differences, and working with empathy and equity.

As part of their effort to create a more accessible, inclusive institution, interviewees said they were dedicated to implementing policies and practices that promote belonging and help visitors feel accepted as they are. As an example of their commitment to *"empowering people,"* one interviewee shared how they train staff to interact with families whose children are exhibiting behaviors that might be viewed as disruptive. *"The idea here,"* they explained, is that *"we don't want to shame the parent and be like, 'Your kid is so loud right now.'"* Instead of encouraging these parents to move their children into the museum's *"quiet zones,"* they say, *"Is there anything I can get you?...How can we help you in this moment?"* This approach to crisis situations, this interviewee explained, helps the museum move away from a *"deficit model"* of employee-visitor interactions.

### Joining Museums for All

Prior to joining Museums for All, the institution periodically hosted *"free days."* One interviewee described these days as *"bananas,"* because *"we would have like 4,000 people in four hours."* Another interviewee branded this effort at reducing financial access barriers *"a terrible experience and a nightmare because [we] were so crowded!"* *"It wasn't an equitable experience,"* another interviewee said, noting that because the *"free days"* were *"only one day,"* they were not really open to anyone. *"Some people work Friday evenings,"* they explained, which meant that the program *"wasn't accessible when you needed it to be, necessarily."* Moreover, while some of those who visited the museum on *"free days"* were those *"who felt like they could never come,"* others were paying members. Indeed, after looking at their admissions data, staff discovered that many of their *"free day"* visitors came from *"ZIP codes that are pretty high income."*

Around the time they joined Museums for All, the institution was going through a major renovation, which necessitated a temporary closure of their facilities. This period of relative in-facility inactivity provided leadership an opportunity to evaluate *"different initiatives...to*

*help keep us relevant and active in the community.” As they began “experiment[ing] with new methods” for building new relationships and deepening existing ones, the idea of “extending access through Museums for All came up.” After forging a relationship with the local Jobs and Family Services department, the museum’s leadership began educating themselves about SNAP. Through conversations and research, they learned that “there’s a pretty decent sized population in [our area]...of folks who qualify for things like food stamps and Medicaid.”*

The realization that *“coming to the museum is a lot more difficult”* for *“lower-income folks”* fueled their decision to join Museums for All (which was made before their renovation was complete). As one interviewee explained, their institution joined the initiative out of a desire to *“help...those who can’t afford our standard tickets to feel welcome within the museum and make sure...they are not excluded just because of their circumstances.”* Compared to their earlier attempts to reduce financial access barriers, staff believed upon joining Museums for All that it would help their institution *“be more open and financially accessible for folks whenever it suits them best to come visit.”*

## Implementation

### Program Description

Since joining Museums for All in 2018, the scope of the institution’s program has steadily expanded. Initially, the museum offered admission to SNAP users. Given their pre-existing relationships with *“low-income”* communities that are their *“[next] door neighbors,”* this seemed like an obvious place to start their program. As one interviewee explained, *“we started trying to make sure that our nearest neighbors knew about this program.”*

Interviewees also noted the need to reach out to *“off-the-cliff people”*—that is, those who lose access to SNAP benefits when government agencies *“tighten things off”* or whose income is only slightly above the cutoff point for eligibility. Along with this, interviewees explained that their institution has sought ways to improve access among *“middle-income”* individuals *“for whom museum attendance is a luxury.”* Throughout its participation in Museums for All, the institution has continually sought ways to reach all of the above groups. As their institution is located in an area *“with a lot of hospitals,”* early on in their program, staff looked for ways to expand access to those on medical assistance programs. After hearing from foster families that didn’t qualify for SNAP but whose children were enrolled in Medicaid, the museum decided to *“open the umbrella a bit more,”* and in 2019 added Medicaid recipients to their Museums for All eligibility list.

In addition to making beneficiaries of these national programs eligible for Museums for All admission, more recently, the museum has opened the initiative to those enrolled in WIC (2024) and in local and state-wide assistance programs—including one sponsored by Catholic Charities and another run by a local youth organization. On top of this, to reduce barriers to entry for *“folks who are undocumented”* or otherwise cannot qualify for existing government support programs (though they need support), the museum distributes Museums for All cards to trusted community partners, who then hand these to families. These cards *“act as if they are a SNAP or WIC card.”*

The institution’s Museums for All program gives visitors reduced-cost access to most (but not all) of its exhibits and facilities and includes free parking. To gain access through Museums

for All, visitors simply “show [their] card and [their] ID.” They are also asked to provide their ZIP code (“just like anyone else who comes to the museum,” one interviewee explained). Upon doing this, staff “process the discount for them,” and they receive a ticket that says, “Museums for All.” This can be used for up to ten people in a group and can be used any day that the institution is open (and “as many times as you want,” one interviewee explains). In late 2024, the institution created a system that enables Museums for All guests to complete the same survey paying visitors receive—along with three-program specific questions.

With the passage of time, Museums for All visitors have gained access to more and more of the museum’s offerings. While these visitors have had access to the site’s “three permanent exhibits,” prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, featured exhibits “remained inaccessible” to them. But in the last three years, more and more of the museum has been opened to them; now, both featured exhibits and traveling exhibits also have “Museums for All pricing.” Currently, the institution offers Museums for All admission for up to ten individuals at a rate of two dollars per adult; for special exhibits, prices change based on fees and contracts with the traveling company. Children up to the age of three are admitted free. The site also includes an OMNIMAX installation, though there are no Museums for All discounts available for this.

All told, Museums for All admissions account for between seven and nine percent of the institution’s overall attendance and roughly 20% of its daily “walk-up tickets.” Explaining this, one interviewee said that “if I look at who’s actually bought tickets, one out of five is a Museums for All person.”

### Inviting Practices

To spread word about their Museums for All program, the institution largely works through community partners. Recognizing that they do not always have “the most direct connection to folks who need [access to the program],” interviewees said their outreach efforts typically begin by “find[ing] the organizations in town who are working with these groups that we really want to reach.” Whenever they are in the community, one interviewee said, they talk with funders and organizational representatives about how Museums for All “can help their members.” After being given printed materials such as “newsletter copy and flyers,” these individuals are asked to share information about the program with their constituents—for example, by discussing Museums for All in their own communications.

One interviewee described this approach to outreach as “let[ting] them do the talking for you.” By communicating about the program “through agencies and partners that we work with,” staff are able to expand Museums for All to new audiences. As an example of this, one interviewee discussed how they reached out to local immigrant and refugee communities when hosting a temporary exhibition.

*This was their heritage, and the groups working with them said “we really want them to see this exhibition. But they don’t have some of the documentation that you ask for.” And we said “That’s fine. You know who needs it, can we just print off some cards that say, ‘Museums for All Tickets,’ and give them to you [so] you can distribute them how you need to, and in lieu of one of the other pieces of documentation we’ll just take that card.”*

*"We've done that a couple times with different community groups,"* this interviewee explained, observing that this practice worked well in cases where *"it was just too much of a hassle for them to figure out who had the right documentation and not."*

To be sure, staff do promote Museums for All through their own communication channels. Information about the program is prominently displayed on the institution's website, and *"here and there,"* staff distribute social media posts about Museums for All. In addition to these efforts, the institution has created rack cards that offer details about the program in both English and Spanish, and visitors to the museum can find these and other brochures discussing the program. When promoting special exhibits and events (including the *"theme days"* that are hosted throughout the year), staff often advertise that people in the institution's direct neighborhoods *"can get free tickets."*

But these are not the institution's primary ways of promoting the program. *"There's not a ton of advertising,"* one interviewee explained, adding that many of the institution's promotional efforts take the form of *"word-of-mouth advertis[ing]."* Echoing this, another interviewee said that *"80 to 90 percent of our communication is word of mouth,"* adding that their outreach efforts are *"sneaky"*—*"almost [like] a ninja program."* Staff *"don't go on the news"* or publicize their program through billboards. In addition to *"help[ing] with the blowback,"* interviewees said that this largely private, in-person style of outreach helps ensure that those they are advertising the Museums for All offerings to *"have the right information"* about the program.

Interviewees found these inviting practices to be highly effective. *"A lot of people...are already aware"* of Museums for All prior to their interactions with admissions staff, one interviewee said, adding that the program is *"pretty well-known by most folks who come in."* Because of this, those at the ticket counter generally do not have to provide much information about the program. *"I don't usually describe it to those who aren't asking about it,"* one interviewee said, noting that discussions about Museums for All are usually broached by people who directly ask questions such as *"do you take the SNAP discount?"*

## Welcoming Practices

The guiding principle behind the institution's welcoming practices, one interviewee explained, is that Museums for All visitors *"belong just like anyone else."* Through their partnership with the local Jobs and Family Services office, employees learned that *"there are so many people on food assistance,"* and that *"you can't look at a person and say, 'You're a recipient.'"* Having this knowledge has helped ensure that staff are *"not making judgments about people,"* while also ensuring that conversations between staff and prospective Museums for All visitors are *"not stigmatiz[ing] in any way."* As one interviewee put, their goal is to help WIC and SNAP card holders *"feel welcome without [making] them feel like they have big neon arrows pointed at them [saying] 'Food Assistance Users Here!'"*

The process of ensuring that these visitors' experiences are *"exactly the same as anyone else's"* begins at the ticket counter. Upon showing their card, their ID, and providing their ZIP code, Museums for All visitors receive a ticket that simply reads *"museum admission."* *"There's nothing in their ticket, their interaction, their parking, or anywhere that alerts anyone else...that they're a Museums for All person,"* one interviewee explained, adding that their admissions process is designed to make Museums for All visitors *"feel empowered."* *"I know there's a stigma around it,"* another interviewee said, *"[and] I don't want them to feel any sort of shame*

for having to use [the program].” To prevent feelings of shame, they said that they “act excited” when visitors opt for the Museums for All discount.

*I’m always like, “yeah, absolutely, we can get that discount for you.” I try to have an energy around it, just so that they recognize that we are happy to give that discount. It’s not like a “shame on you, here’s a discount” type thing.*

Interviewees also mentioned how staff “try to meet guests wherever they are.” When interacting with those who “want to be a little bit quieter” about their eligibility for the program, staff refrain from making audible statements such as “Oh my gosh, this is amazing. You have this amazing thing that gives you this discount!” Because Museums for All eligibility is a “touchy subject to ask [about],” when interacting with individuals who appear to be “surprised by our pricing [options],” staff mention the program in tandem with a number of other reduced admission options. Combining their Museums for All pitch with information about how (for example) “if you’re military you get a dollar off” prevents low-income visitors from “feeling like they’re being singled out,” this interviewee added. By “throwing [all these discount options] out there” at once, another interviewee said, staff are able to avoid “uncomfortable” discussions that may lead to insinuations that particular individuals are “poor or anything like that.”

In terms of their admissions policies, interviewees said that “being flexible about [Museums for All] is a big thing for us.” While noting that the program’s rules “technically” require Museums for All visitors to present proof of their eligibility, staff acknowledge that “sometimes things are complicated and messy,” one interviewee said. “When an individual’s card does not match their photo ID, we’re usually okay about that,” they explained. If a visitor says they left their ID in their car, “we’ll just accept it.” In cases like this, another interviewee said, “you kind of have to go with the flow and...trust the guest.”

## Impacts

### General Feedback

Interviewees universally praised Museums for All and had nothing but positive feedback to share about the initiative and its impacts. “This is an important program for us and one we’re proud to be part of,” one interviewee said. “We love Museums for All,” another exclaimed, explaining that the initiative “really intertwines [with] so much of what we do” and was an “anchor” of their accessibility efforts.

Staff have found the program relatively easy to implement. “One of the huge benefits of the program,” one interviewee said, is that it is “really not that hard” to administer. Museums for All can be “absorb[ed] into your normal operations,” they added, “so it’s not actually a burden on anybody.” Another interviewee described Museums for All as a “very concrete and straightforward initiative.” Because of this, interviewees said that their institution was “happy to help expand it anywhere.”

### Benefits to the Institution

Interviewees said that participating in Museums for All facilitated progress toward their DEAI goals “in a huge way.” “It’s certainly helping us diversify our audience...[and] our visitor base,” one interviewee said. Agreeing with this, another interviewee said that Museums for All was



resulting in *“more variety”* among visitors—not just in terms of *“income level”* but also in terms of *“race and family makeup and age.”*

Interviewees also said that Museums for All was *“a great opportunity for some DEAI-focused development for staff.”* Participating in the initiative, they said, had provided an education in how to be welcoming to all visitors, while also providing critical information about the community and *“the population that uses these programs.”* One interviewee credited Museums for All with *“deepening our appreciation and understanding of issues that our community faces.”* *“I don’t know that we thought about food insecurity as a community issue until we started looking into it,”* they shared, adding that they were also *“not sure we really understood the population utilizing food assistance programs before we became part of this network.”* Speaking to how Museums for All helped them *“understand the needs in our community better,”* this interviewee said that the program had impressed upon them the realization that *“we really need to make this as easy as possible”—*that is, that the program *“can’t be one more hurdle that folks have to jump through to access.”*

Others echoed this point. *“There’s so much learning that we get to do from our guests as they come in,”* one interviewee shared, adding that participating in Museums for All has *“destigmatized a lot”* in staff understandings of governmental assistance programs and their users. Based on their experiences and observations, another interviewee said they had always understood programs like SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid as things that *“there is a shame around.”* But upon seeing visitors who have *“no problem”* using the Museums for All program, the interviewee felt that this stigma had *“kind of fade[d].”* *“[This] has been a fascinating thing to experience and learn,”* they shared.

As a result of this education, staff have learned how to *“fight some of those stereotypes”* associated with people in low-income communities. Highlighting an example of this, one interviewee said they were now asking questions such as, *“is it the museum’s role to...police our guests?”* Instead of enforcing traditional behavioral standards, they continued, the museum’s philosophy now is to allow both children and adults to *“holistically explore”* their space as they wish and not to worry when other visitors *“tattle on [them].”* Another interviewee described this as *“giving access to the building [and] access to programming...on a person’s terms.”*

This DEAI-focused development has also created a situation in which Museums for All is *“really ingrained within our staff.”* On account of the training they receive, staff are *“empowered to make choices”* about ways to spontaneously expand the program. When hosting new featured exhibits, staff sometimes take it upon themselves to proactively *“save back tickets”* under Museums for All. Deeply appreciative of this behavior, one interviewee said that a chief benefit of their program was seeing how *“passionate”* staff were *“about offering this program and making sure that those who need it receive it.”*

Participating in the initiative has also helped the institution engage with other local community organizations. An interviewee who described themselves as the *“first point of contact”* with these organizations shared how Museums for All has *“sort of opened the door to the library’s program.”* As an expansion of their Museums for All program, they now have an *“access initiative”* that offers library visitors *“free, check-out-able museum passes.”* The initiative began as a pilot program in five low-income neighborhoods and has now grown to

encompass all of the public library system's branches. Beyond this, one interviewee shared how when distributing flyers at neighborhood events, they sometimes *"meet new partners"* who are serving similar audiences. *"Some of our exhibits,"* they shared, *"have come out of partnerships from Museums for All."*

Interviews also indicated that the program was economically beneficial to their institution. Before joining the initiative, some institutional leaders worried about the program's economic impacts, believing they would need to find additional funding to offset the anticipated costs of the program. As one interviewee put it, the senior leadership's *"gut reaction"* to Museums for All was along the lines of, *"We can't afford that."* But then a *"mentality switch"* occurred. Those running the program were gradually able to convince senior leaders that Museums for All is something that *"brings money in the door."*

First and foremost, these leaders learned that as *"we're not getting any money from this population now,"* Museums for All needed to be seen not as something that would cause the institution to *"lose \$18 per person,"* but instead, as something that brought *"a bump of \$2"* for every visitor. Secondly, as Museums for All visitors would be coming to the museum during normal business hours, their presence was *"not costing us anything."* Gradually, the program came to be seen as something that was *"not a big deal"* financially—and that actually *"helps with revenue."* In addition to purchasing a reduced-price ticket, visitors often *"buy food"* at the museum while also purchasing items from the gift shop. When considering all of these factors, the institution's leaders realized that Museums for All *"only adds money to us."* This realization has helped the institution move beyond a *"scarcity mindset,"* said one interviewee, adding that as a result, staff now see equity and inclusion as *"an unlimited pie."*

## Benefits to the Community

Those making use of Museums for All have been *"overwhelmingly positive"* about the program, interviewees said. Most low-income visitors, said one interviewee, are *"very grateful that it's even a thing we offer."* *"Very often,"* they continued, *"you'll hear people say [things] like, 'We wouldn't be able to come otherwise.'"* These visitors also appreciate the breadth of the program. When learning about Museums for All, one interviewee shared, they often respond with statements such as *"It's me, it's me! Can I have some more? I want to tell my friends!"* As this suggests, the ability to get *"up to 10 tickets discounted"* at once is part of the reason *"people are very excited to use it."*

This excitement has helped fuel an expansion in Museums for All attendance over time. Museums for All numbers have *"grown incredibly"* in recent years, one interviewee said, adding that *"engagement in the program has really grown"* over the years. *"Guests are still paying [for] full price tickets,"* a third explained, *"and yet, we've seen an increase of guests who are able to come that haven't been able to come before."* Speaking to the growth of their Museums for All program over time, one interviewee described how their institution has *"found these populations that were missing"*—along with *"ways to make our program a little bit more broader, to include more folks."*

The public response to the program has also been strongly positive. One interviewee said that community reactions to Museums for All were usually a mix of *"surprise and delight."* Even those who would not take advantage of the program are *"always glad to know it exists,"* they added. As another put it, upon learning about Museums for All, people *"want to tell*



*everyone.*” They often respond with remarks such as *“Oh, that’s really cool, I know someone in my Sunday school class [who would benefit from it].”*

In the eight years since they had begun running a Museums for All program, one interviewee explained, there had been only two instances where community members *“got into my face”* to complain. One of these individuals eventually became *“a believer in this program,”* they explained, adding that aside from these criticisms, the program has *“not gotten any negative pushback.”* Most have appreciated how Museums for All is expanding the institution’s ability to serve as a learning resource for all community members. As one interviewee said, by bringing in visitors *“who otherwise would not have the opportunity to come in,”* Museums for All is helping people *“see what kind of a role the museum can play in their education and in their community.”*

The institution’s partners have been especially impressed with the program. When sharing information about Museums for All, one interviewee said, the response is generally along the lines of *“That is an amazing program. I didn’t know it existed. Can you send me something that I can share with my constituents?”* Nobody has ever refused to share the museum’s flyers and other printed materials, this interviewee continued, adding that partners are *“always willing to help spread the word about the program.”* Some of these are joining Museums for All themselves. *“We’ve brought a couple local folks along with us,”* they added, highlighting how even those organizations that are *“assertively entrepreneurial”* have been encouraged to add Museums for All pricing options.

In addition to *“convinc[ing] more institutions to join the network,”* interviewees said Museums for All was beneficial on account of the way it encouraged them to take a more community-centered approach to their work. The process of becoming more aware of local organizations that are *“doing good work with populations of need,”* one interviewee said, was teaching staff how their museum could *“be a good partner in that work.”* Many have come away from the program with a new perception of how museums can benefit their communities. *“While many may not consider museums a social service,”* one interviewee said, *“we are absolutely part of that group and that tapestry working to serve populations of need. We have a lot to offer!”*

## Perceptions of Trustworthiness

Interviewees agreed that Museums for All was helping the institution build public trust. The fact that their Museums for All program was of *“longstanding”* nature—and that the institution had *“been doing it consistently and expanding it”*—was something that *“says a lot”* to the public, said one interviewee. *“It’s not just a statement, [but an]...initiative that we’ve operationalized,”* said another, adding that Museums for All helped them build trust with the community by providing *“a very concrete example of how we’re trying to become accessible.”* A third said that the program *“is a way to demonstrate how we...try to meet people wherever they are and serve them in a way that makes sense for them.”*

In addition to building trust with the general public, interviewees thought that participating in Museums for All had increased perceptions of institutional trustworthiness among other cultural organizations. Speaking about how the program is *“help[ing] change folks’ perception of us from a community perspective,”* one interviewee said that because of Museums for All, partners were *“see[ing] us a little bit differently.”* *“It helps our partners know that we have that*

*sincerity,” another said, and “helps us develop that trust.” On the basis of their Museums for All collaborations, this interviewee added, “we’re all trusting each other more.”*

Yet even as the program enhances public assessment of the institution’s trustworthiness, interviewees were uncertain as to the extent of these changes. One of the reasons for this has to do with the fact that the program is *“not super well known or super public.”* While noting that Museums for All was *“very well received”* whenever staff talked about the program, interviewees also said that because *“a lot of our marketing is...word of mouth,” “there’s still some people who may not know about it.”* As one interviewee acknowledged, *“We don’t...shout it from the roofs.”*

Interviewees also wondered if the program was adequately reducing financial access barriers. While believing that Museums for All was helping build a *“perception of income accessibility,”* and *“strongly demonstrate[d] that we are accessible to folks of lower incomes,”* some questioned whether the program was going far enough to alleviate the financial burdens community members are facing. While a two-dollar reduced admission ticket is *“a lot more accessible”* than the cost of general admission, one interviewee said they *“could understand if there were community members who were like, ‘that’s not accessible!’”* Adding to this, they noted that even though the institution’s special exhibits are *“discounted significantly,”* they *“can still be kind of expensive.”*

Along similar lines, other interviewees wondered if the program was building trust among those visitors who *“don’t fit the Museums for All criteria”* because they are *“in a sort of middle-income population.”* *“Folks who are not eligible for it are always happy to hear about it,”* one interviewee said. Nevertheless, some also *“want a program for them[selves],”* and ask questions such as *“what about me?”*

Interviewees also noted that while Museums for All is helping in *“an economic sense,”* it *“doesn’t always get at other challenges that people might be facing.”* When speaking to those needs that *“Museums for All inherently can’t address,”* one interviewee pointed specifically to transportation, explaining how the program *“doesn’t help overcome that kind of barrier.”* Another said they were unsure if Museums for All reduced barriers to access tied to *“race and class and education level and other things.”* On this point, a third interviewee said that the program was *“not...informing the content in our exhibits, necessarily.”* Given these considerations, interviewees felt that Museums for All *“may not convince all parts of the community”* that their institution is trustworthy. Acknowledging this, one interviewee said that *“trust takes a while,”* adding that this was *“okay”* as their institution was *“in it for the long game.”*

## Challenges & Barriers

Despite their general success in running the program, interviewees drew attention to several challenges they had experienced over the years.

Though staff are trying to make their admissions procedures as easy as possible, they still face barriers to doing this—including the lack of a digital purchasing option. *“I feel like that’s one of our welcoming challenges,”* one interviewee said, noting that at present, there is no *“skip the line option.”* Forcing Museums for All visitors to physically get in line and *“show those cards”* could be stigmatizing for some individuals, interviewees explained.

Securing financial support for their program has also proved challenging. *"We haven't been super successful at getting Museums for All funding,"* one interviewee explained. This challenge connects to some of the institution's other difficulties—specifically those around data collection. While asking visitors to *"fill out a form"* would doubtless generate useful data that *"looks good on grants and philanthropic things,"* one interviewee said, it may also create new barriers to program implementation and can potentially expose users to unknown harms. One interviewee described this as the *"push and pull of gatekeeping."* While others may need visitorship data, *"I need to protect the audience,"* they explained.

Transportation was noted as another significant barrier to Museums for All's implementation. The institution's *"biggest ongoing issue,"* one interviewee said, was how to *"get non-drivers to the place."* While Museums for All helps those who are driving and *"can get gas,"* it does not help potential visitors who are *"on the other side of town"* and far from a bus route. Agreeing with this, another interviewee said that as their institution is *"kind of just outside of the city...transportation and getting folks to the museum can be an issue."*

The museum has at times struggled with overutilization. Though staff want to make their program as inclusive as possible, they sometimes find it difficult to accommodate larger groups beyond the *"family circle."* There has also been *"a little bit of internal push and pull,"* one interviewee shared, about where to draw a line on group discounts. When large groups arrive seeking admission through the Museums for All rate, the institution sometimes has to rely on a *"work-around"* to make this happen (e.g., by using existing *"grant money"*). But *"you can't come in and book a group of 30 for two dollars per person,"* they explained, as this is a *"much bigger deal"* for staff, the floor, and the museum's schedule. To clarify this, in late 2024 the institution updated the language on its website and on broadsides.

Related to this, institutional leadership have not had a clear idea of where to set limits on the program's expansion and eligibility criteria. Though they are reluctant to play the role of *"gatekeeper,"* staff recognize that they cannot *"tell the whole world just to come to the museum for two bucks."* As one interviewee explained, *"someone still has to keep the lights on."* While their current practices are *"not hurting our institution,"* there is nevertheless a need to figure out *"where the line is."*

Lastly, interviewees discussed the difficulties of keeping Museums for All moving forward without losing sight of their other initiatives. At times, there is *"competition"* between the program and *"all the other things we have to accomplish,"* one interviewee said. Keeping the focus on this *"as opposed to the 47 other things on our plate,"* they added, is one of the *"biggest barriers"* to implementing the program.

## Looking Ahead

As the institution's Museums for All program continues to grow, interviewees said they were looking forward to offering a Museums for All membership option. Creating this was highly difficult and time consuming; as one interviewee said, guests have been *"asking for this membership for three years."* Plans for developing this have encountered some *"internal pushback"*—both in connection with pricing and ensuring that the institution would not be *"watering down the membership."* Now, having resolved both of these sticking points, interviewees said that they expected the Museums for All membership option to be available

to visitors by early 2025. One advantage of this is that once visitors have a Museums for All membership, they will not have to share their documents every time they come to the front desk. One interviewee highlighted how this would enhance the institution's welcoming practices and move them one step closer to treating Museums for All visitors *"like any of our other [visitors]."*

Staff are also looking forward to obtaining data on visitors' Museums for All experiences. *"We don't survey specifically folks who use Museums for All,"* one interviewee shared. But now, with a new ticketing system in place, they are going to begin *"collecting emails from pretty much everybody."* Staff are hoping that those who use the program will share their emails and then *"participate in our post-visit survey."* So far, the institution has been able to collect *"incredible data"* on Museums for All visitors through this survey.

As they consider ways to further expand Museums for All, interviewees said that it would help if ACM provided their institution with detailed information on different kinds of governmental assistance programs—including *"what they look like in different states or in local formats,"* and *"what their cards look like."* Having this information, one interviewee said, could alleviate confusion when staff members are unfamiliar with a *"particular state's card,"* or when someone presents a card from a program that has been discontinued.<sup>3</sup>

To help them improve their own program, interviewees also thought it would be useful to be able to see *"examples of cool stuff people are trying with [Museums for All]."* Learning more about what other institutions are doing, one said, would help *"spur new ideas"* about how to continue developing their own program. In addition to sharing *"success stories,"* they thought it would help to be able to learn about *"challenges that other members may be encountering"*—along with the solutions they have devised for these.

Lastly, interviewees recommended that the initiative's leaders develop a set of nationwide assets that help individuals learn about all of the different institutions (on a state-by-state basis) that participate in Museums for All. Among other benefits, one interviewee said that creating this list (which could be displayed on the initiative's website) would both *"embolden museums to want to be on that sheet"* and embolden visitors to try different sites out. With regard to the second of these impacts, interviewees thought that sharing data on how many people are making use of Museums for All would prevent potential feelings of embarrassment on the visitor's end.<sup>4</sup> Noting that *"there's still so much shame and generational trauma"* around the use of SNAP, Medicaid, and other governmental assistance programs, one interviewee said that assets such as visitorship statistics would further *"destigmatize Museums for All."*

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3 The initiative does provide participants a handout that includes pictures of each state's EBT card. It is unclear whether the institution was aware of this resource.

4 The Museums for All website includes a list of participating institutions by state and a search tool, as a dashboard that can be used to examine and compare data from individual institutions. The institution may not have been aware of this resource.

## Cross-Site Analysis

Despite differences in their geographical locations, size, the focus of their work, and the duration of their relationship with Museums for All, the three institutions we studied had similar experiences of the initiative. Whether it be their reasons for joining the initiative, the nature of their respective programs, their inviting and welcoming practices, the implementation challenges they faced, the impacts they observed, or the supports they expressed a need for, these three sites had much in common with each other. This section draws attention to these commonalities, tying together overlapping themes from the individual case studies.

### Institutional Goals

Each of the three institutions were committed to making their spaces and programs more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible. In each of the three sites, interviewees discussed their efforts to facilitate access among those *“who are not the traditional museum visitors”* and who *“otherwise would have a hard time visiting.”* For all three sites, the decision to join Museums for All was part of an ongoing attempt to answer the question of *“how do we make this place a welcoming place for all?”*

### Reasons for Joining

In connection with their DEAI efforts, each of the three institutions realized that their current fee structures *“[weren’t] really feasible for many people.”* Their decisions to join Museums for All were driven by a desire to improve access among those who would *“have a hard time affording admission”*—and by a recognition that previous attempts to become *“more affordable”* to lower-income families had not always been successful. In addition to *“bel[ong] more open and financially accessible,”* the institutions we studied believed that joining Museums for All would help keep them *“relevant and active”* within their communities and help create a *“sense of belonging and place-building”* among marginalized populations more generally.

### Implementation

All three institutions had very positive experiences of Museums for All. Interviewees had no criticisms of Museums for All whatsoever and agreed that the initiative was meeting their expectations and facilitating progress toward their goals. They judged Museums for All to be more effective than their previous attempts to reduce financial entry barriers—from both a logistical standpoint and in terms of promoting equity. And regardless of when their institutions joined the initiative, interviewees across all three sites were enthusiastic about the prospects for expanding their respective programs in the months and years to come.

Interviewees were especially appreciative of the plug-and-play nature of Museums for All; across all three sites, those we spoke with enthused over how easy it was to absorb the program into their normal operations. Because Museums for All taxed neither their budgets nor their staffing capacities, all three institutions were able to grow their Museums for All audiences over time—offering entry to an ever-widening circle of visitors that included not

just SNAP and WIC cardholders but also Medicaid recipients, beneficiaries of civic charities, and even those unable to access federal, state, or local assistance programs.

### Inviting Practices

To spread the word about their programs, the three institutions engaged in similar kinds of inviting practices. Utilizing both formal and informal communication channels, they promoted Museums for All through in-person outreach, by distributing printed materials (including flyers, brochures, bookmarks, and newsletters), and through electronic means (including social media messaging, digital press releases, and information shared on their websites).

Much of the in-person outreach the three institutions conducted occurred at community events. Attending local fairs and festivals often gave them direct access to their target audience, and by setting up tables displaying information about Museums for All, they were able to create a stigma-free environment in which people could *“come up and talk to us”* about *“alternative admission routes.”*

Partnerships played a central role in these institutions’ promotional efforts. Working with other community organizations gave them another vehicle for raising awareness about their programs, as partners frequently shared Museums for All information through their own communication channels. Through collaboration, institutions were able to reach community members that would have otherwise been inaccessible to them.

### Welcoming Practices

To help Museums for All visitors feel welcomed, the three institutions made use of a common set of practices. Destigmatization was the root goal of these practices; regardless of the particular techniques they used to extend a welcoming hand to Museums for All visitors, those we interviewed were united in a desire to make these visitors feel *“like everyone else.”* To prevent visitors from feeling ashamed for making use of Museums for All, when speaking with visitors, interviewees incorporated information about the program into a conversation about all of their free or reduced-cost admission options. Instead of being stringent about their programs’ requirements and refusing entry to those unable to provide proof of their eligibility, they chose to take visitors at their word, opting for a flexible, trusting interpretation of the program’s established rules. They were also enthusiastic about offering entry through Museums for All, bringing an *“energy”* to their pitches so that visitors recognized that *“we are happy to give that discount.”*

### Impacts

Across all three sites, interviewees said that the impacts of Museums for All had been entirely beneficial—both for their institutions and for their communities. With regard to the former, interviewees said that participating in Museums for All had facilitated progress toward their DEAI goals by diversifying their visitor bases—both in terms of income level and in connection with race, age, and *“family makeup.”* Interviewees also agreed that participating in the initiative had resulted in concrete economic gains for their respective institutions and credited Museums for All with helping them expand and deepen their partnerships with other community organizations. Perhaps most powerfully, interviewees also said that the



initiative had taught them a great deal about poverty, food insecurity, and the nature of governmental assistance programs.

In terms of community impacts, interviewees across all three sites said that the public reaction to their programs had been strongly positive. Any criticisms of Museums for All have been few and far between, they said, and most community members are simply *“glad to know it exists.”* Partners have been especially supportive of the initiative; in addition to being *“happy to spread the word,”* some have decided to join Museums for All themselves. Through cementing their ties to these organizations, interviewees said that their institutions had begun to take a more community-centered approach to their work. *“While many may not consider museums a social service,”* one said, *“we are absolutely part of that group and that tapestry working to serve populations of need. We have a lot to offer.”*

### Perceptions of Trustworthiness

Across all three sites, interviewees felt that Museums for All was contributing to improved public perceptions of institutional trustworthiness. They said that the *“unconditional”* nature of Museums for All had enabled them to send a *“pretty big signal”* to the community about how their institutions *“really cared”* about decreasing financial access barriers. Their successes in reducing these barriers had helped them create *“a sense of welcoming”* among low-income visitors, and they were *“really build[ing] trust”* with communities.

Despite these encouraging signs, the individuals we spoke with saw Museums for All as just one part of their trust-building efforts and agreed that no single initiative could help their institutions become fully trustworthy. While Museums for All was helping build trust among those receiving assistance through government programs like SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid or through public charities, interviewees noted that *“there’s a lot of [other] people”* who would benefit from free or reduced admissions. Building trust with their communities, interviewees explained, would also require them to tackle other access barriers—including those having to do with transportation and the contents of the programs they offer. Lastly, they noted that despite their outreach efforts, there were *“still some people who may not know about [Museums for All].”*

### Continuing Challenges

Interviews across the three sites we studied revealed a common set of challenges to implementing the program. The most pressing of these pertains to communication and outreach. From a marketing standpoint, all three institutions indicated that they had not yet taken their programs to their *“full potential.”* They agreed that raising awareness about Museums for All was their *“biggest barrier”* and felt that their promotional efforts sometimes fell short of their goals. In particular, they spoke of their difficulties in creating a situation where visitors do not learn about Museums for All only *“as they’re getting out of their cars.”*

Across all three sites, interviewees also drew attention to the challenge of expanding their Museums for All programs without losing sight of other related initiatives. One said that maintaining a consistent focus on Museums for All *“as opposed to the 47 other things on our plate”* was the *“biggest barrier”* to implementation, while another wondered whether Museums for All should *“be more important”* than the other free admissions programs their institution runs. Maintaining a balance between the goals of Museums for All and *“all the*

*other things we have to accomplish*" was sometimes difficult, leading to competing demands and countervailing pressures.

Finally, interviewees across multiple sites highlighted challenges related to data collection. At one site, interviewees said that they often have to make judgments about the program and its impacts based on staff observations or *"feedback we get from people."* At another site, interviewees explained that while they want to gather information about Museums for All visitors, they have struggled to find ways to do this that also prevent these visitors from *"feell[ing] othered."*

## Needed Supports

Across the three sites we studied, interviewees identified three primary supports that would help them expand their Museums for All programs. First, they expressed a need for additional training and promotional materials. Having access to a *"DEAI course"* that could be shared with staff and volunteers, they said, would help improve their welcoming practices by ensuring that all employees are *"communicating with families in the most equitable and accessible way."* Along with this, they agreed that having a *"marketing package"* containing adaptable *"branded materials"* (including pre-made social media posts) would enable them to expand their outreach and advertising efforts.

Second, interviewees said that it would be helpful to receive more data on visitorship and visitor impacts. Having concrete information on how people are responding to their efforts, one interviewee said, would help their institution understand how to fold Museums for All into *"other equity work."* At another site, one interviewee said that as there's *"still so much shame and generational trauma"* around the use of SNAP, Medicaid, and other governmental assistance programs, sharing data about the program's use could *"embolden museums"* to join Museums for All and help destigmatize use of the free and reduced admissions it enables.

Lastly, interviewees discussed the benefits of having more opportunities for in-community sharing and scaling. While many have used the group web site set up as *"a little discussion forum,"* they signaled interest in other places where participants might *"talk and share their experiences"*—for example, an in-person conference. Attending a nationwide gathering, they noted, would give them an opportunity to experiment with *"cool stuff people are trying"* and would reveal solutions to *"challenges that other members may be encountering."*





## Discussion

Evaluation findings indicate that Museums for All is a highly effective initiative. Participating institutions have called it *“an amazing program”*—one they are *“proud”* to be a part of. Joining Museums for All has allowed them to connect with *“populations that were missing”* from their existing audiences. Those eligible for entry through Museums for All have been *“very excited to use it,”* and as such, the initiative has brought an increase in attendance among those *“who otherwise would not have the opportunity to come in.”* This development has shown participants that they are *“successfully addressing barriers to participation and serving a broad spectrum of our community.”* Indeed, many participants said that Museums for All was *“overall better”* than other programs aimed at reducing financial entry barriers, finding that it offers a more effective approach to *“improv[ing] access for folks who would otherwise have a hard time affording admission.”*

## Strengths of the Initiative

Our evaluation suggests that the strength of the initiative has to do with how it:

### Helps institutions achieve their goals

Both questionnaire and case study data show that Museums for All is helping institutions achieve their goals. Questionnaire respondents indicated that the initiative had helped them increase attendance, advance their DEAI aims, improve access to underserved community members, meet their communities’ diverse needs, spur larger conversations about accessibility, and support the advancement of best practices throughout the field. The only goal they struggled with was garnering financial support for program implementation.

Similarly, our case studies found that Museums for All was helping institutions further their missions. Across the three sites, those we spoke with said that their participation in the initiative is helping them *“get more visitors,”* diversifying their audiences, and contributing to the creation of a *“more inclusive and more powerful”* community. Along with these attendance and DEAI goals, interviewees said that Museums for All was helping them build trust with the community and opening the door to new partnerships and funding opportunities. Though they had not been terribly successful in securing new forms of financial support, they said that Museums for All was *“bring[ing] money in the door”* and contributing to their economic sustainability goals.

### Allows for local adaptation and is easy to implement

One of the initiative’s core strengths, participants reported, is that *“there’s not many challenges to it.”* Institutions found that the process of implementing Museums for All was generally *“very simple,”* requiring only *“a little sign and a little training.”* Regardless of their size or location, participating institutions agreed that Museums for All was *“really not that hard”* to administer and found that the program could be *“absorbed”* into their *“normal operations”*

without burdening their human resource capacities. As one participant put it, the initiative *“has a lot of benefits and still doesn’t overtax the staff.”*

Moreover, because Museums for All is *“just one of those things we were able to wind up and let it go and do its thing,”* participants had little difficulty expanding the range of their programs over time. While beginning with a focus on providing access to SNAP EBT cardholders, with the passage of time, many have found ways to offer Museums for All access to other economically insecure community members—including WIC and Medicaid recipients, those who receive assistance through local nonprofit groups, and even undocumented individuals. Participants have been *“happy to help expand it anywhere”* and said that because Museums for All is *“unconditional...compared to a lot of [other] free admission options,”* they have generally been successful in reaching *“the people who need it the most.”*

## **Equips participants with resources and support to overcome challenges**

Regardless of the duration of their relationship with Museums for All, all participating institutions indicated that they had faced challenges implementing their programs. Data from the Review and Discovery phase of our evaluation revealed that the most common challenges participants faced had to do with difficulties in reaching and bringing in their target populations. Some reported *“low numbers”* and indicated that they wanted the program *“to be used more often.”* Responses to our questionnaire indicate that the work of raising awareness—both as individual institutions and in conjunction with community partners—remains one of the most pressing challenges participating institutions are encountering. While efforts to overcome this challenge have not always been successful, data from our case studies indicates that resources provided by ACM have proven beneficial here. For example, by distributing bilingual bookmarks, one institution was able to extend its outreach efforts in ways that effectively spread knowledge of Museums for All.

Participating institutions also felt that other resources and support provided by ACM helped them overcome the challenges they faced. Prior to participating in Museums for All, many institutions indicated a lack of knowledge about different governmental assistance programs—and of the differences between them. They were also unaware of how to interact with SNAP recipients in ways that didn’t leave these visitors *“feeling ashamed.”* On account of Museums for All, they learned how to make low-income visitors feel welcome. One institution who had benefited from ACM’s guidance said they were *“very pleased with the level of support”* provided by the association and praised ACM leadership for being *“very available and very willing to help.”*

## **Opportunities for Growth**

Participating institutions also identified a number of areas where additional resources and support from ACM would prove beneficial. In particular, participants said they would appreciate further guidance from ACM in connection with:

## Financial challenges

Throughout all phases of our evaluation, participating institutions signaled that they had struggled to garner financial support for their programs. A review of existing program data revealed that some participants were unsuccessful in financing Museums for All. Similarly, on the institutional questionnaire, “finding funders or sponsors to offset costs” was the second most commonly identified challenge. Relatively few institutions managed to overcome this obstacle. Lastly, one of the three individual sites we studied also indicated that they *“haven’t been super successful at getting Museums for All funding.”* Given the persistent nature of these difficulties, providing participating institutions with additional funding-related resources and supports on the subject of funding would help contribute to the initiative’s continued growth and expansion.

## Staff and volunteer training

Data from the Review and Discovery phase of our evaluation revealed that some participants periodically facilitate staff trainings on anti-bias, inclusion, and the Museums for All initiative itself. Moreover, three-quarters of those who responded to the institutional questionnaire said that they had created written procedures and guidelines for staff, and slightly more than half said they prepared staff for conflict with individuals who might stigmatize Museums for All visitors. The individuals we interviewed as part of our case studies discussed a variety of internal materials they had created in connection with these trainings—including an orientation packet containing a *“list of do’s and don’ts”* and a *“little resource sheet”* to train staff on their program’s eligibility criteria. Though these efforts were generally effective, participants nevertheless expressed interest in obtaining additional training resources from ACM—including a *“DEAI course”* that would help ensure that all staff and volunteers are *“communicating with families in the most equitable and accessible way.”*

## Partnerships

Another persistent challenge participants faced was establishing and deepening partnerships with other community organizations. On the institutional questionnaire, 80% saw finding community partners as a challenge worth addressing, and relatively few met with success in their partnership-building efforts. Similarly, individuals interviewed at one of our case study sites said that their promotional efforts were contingent on forging relationships with organizations they were currently not in touch with. Given this, by creating and sharing resources on partnership formation, ACM could help participants expand on their inviting practices in ways that would facilitate progress toward their goals.

## Communication strategies

Most of the institutions participating in Museums for All indicated that they had struggled to promote their programs. Findings from the Review and Discovery phase revealed that one of the most common implementation barriers institutions reported was reaching the target population. On the institutional questionnaire, many respondents indicated that they were attempting to communicate information about their programs through social media, emails, and newsletters; around two-thirds said that they communicated directly with community members. These efforts met with moderate amounts of success. In the case studies,

interviewees regularly mentioned how they were *“not being as active”* in the program’s promotion as they would have liked. One said that *“spreading the word is honestly our biggest barrier at this point,”* while another said that there was *“not a ton of advertising”* about their program. To resolve these challenges, participants said they would greatly benefit from a *“marketing package”* containing adaptable promotional materials. In addition to providing these materials, ACM can further support participants’ inviting practices by encouraging them to experiment with new communications strategies—for example, providing information to partners to post on social media or presenting information about Museums for All at partner events.

## Recommendations

Our evaluation of Museums for All points to an emerging theory of change that can be used to facilitate further progress toward the initiative’s goals. Based on the analyses of both questionnaire and case study data, this hypothetical theory of change highlights potential cause-and-effect relationships between individual elements of Museums for All implementations and charts a path between actions and outcomes that may help participants conceptualize their own implementations systemically.

This model is depicted in Figure 9 below. First and foremost, all elements of Museums for All implementations are connected (directly or indirectly). For example, inviting and welcoming practices appear of a piece—related reciprocally. Analyses showed that institutions that succeeded in being welcoming also succeeded in being inviting, and vice versa. Analyses also showed that participating institutions that achieved their goals were those that succeeded in reaching their intended audience and that made Museums for All visitors feel welcome inside their institutions. Furthermore, their success in achieving their goals made them more likely to cultivate partners and funders and to improve perceptions of trustworthiness within the community. The case studies also suggested potential (virtuous) cycles in this emerging theory of change (the dashed lines). Case study participants reported that cultivating partners and funders could positively contribute to an institution’s inviting practices. Similarly, they reported that a public reputation for trustworthiness can prepare Museums for All visitors to feel welcomed. Logic suggests that these are all causal relationships. Future evaluations might focus on confirming causality to the extent that is possible in the field.

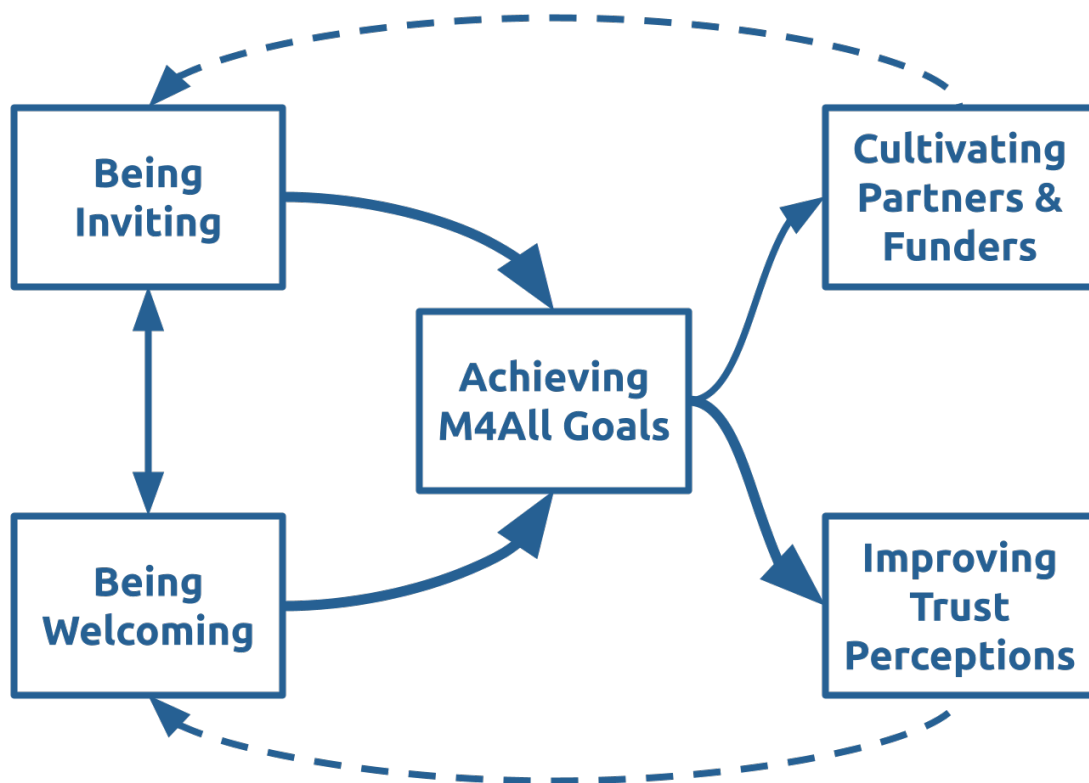


Figure 9. A hypothetical theory of change for Museums for All. The figure shows the intercorrelations between a sequence of summary variables as a path diagram.

In practical terms, this emerging theory of change can help participating institutions plan for success or troubleshoot challenges. For example, in setting their goals for participating in Museums for All, institutions must also plan for promotions and outreach (being inviting) and for creating a welcoming environment. In terms of troubleshooting, institutions that struggle with promotion and outreach efforts might find it expedient to focus on partnership development. By the same token, institutions facing difficulties in creating a welcoming environment might benefit from greater efforts to improve their reputations (perceptions of trustworthiness).

In any case, the systemic conceptualization of Museums for All represented in this emerging theory of change can allow participating institutions to approach their implementation of the program more strategically, attending to the web of causal relationships rather than one element at a time. In this way, this emerging theory of change can help participating institutions reap all possible benefits that Museums for All offers for the target audience and the institutions themselves.



## Conclusion

Findings from this evaluation show that Museums for All is an effective means of making all manner of cultural institutions more financially accessible. Regardless of their size, location, or type, those participating in Museums for All have generally succeeded in connecting with and bringing in visitors unable to afford admission. In the process of diversifying their audiences, they have also become more inviting, welcoming institutions, and they have begun the process of building trust with all segments of their communities. Though much more remains to be done, those participating in the initiative have used the resources provided by Museums for All to develop effective practices and strategies for building new audiences and achieving their institutional goals. As both Museums for All visitors and the community members at large have embraced participants' efforts, the prospects for the initiative's continued growth and expansion in the years to come are very bright.

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