

American Association for Museum Volunteers

DEAI (Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion) Definitions and Best Practices for Volunteer Programs

Introduction

Museum volunteer programs are necessarily going through an evolution. The consideration of diversity, equity, access, and inclusion is essential to making volunteer programs more innovative, sustainable, representative, and impactful.

As representatives of museum volunteer managers, we have come together to create this toolkit to help you navigate DEAI work.

- Objectives of the DEAI Toolkit:
 - To assist people at all levels of experience and understanding in how to integrate DEAI in the context of a volunteer program by providing resources and tools to help with this work.
 - To diversify museum volunteer corps and make them more representative of the communities we serve, as historically volunteer corps are mostly homogenous.
 - To increase the comfort levels of our guests so they can see themselves in the stories we tell and are fully represented by our volunteers. Guests should feel welcomed and be empowered stakeholders in the museum mission and vision.
 - To encourage organizations and volunteer departments to embrace DEAI practices. When DEAI is incorporated, museum volunteer work improves because there are no limits on who is participating, more points of view are considered and heard, and innovation and creativity can thrive.
 - To expand the reach and connection of volunteers to the communities that museums serve. It is important they are included in discussions of DEAI.
- Setting Expectations for DEAI Work:
 - This is a working document that is subject to change. DEAI practices are dynamic and constantly evolving. These four concepts are all connected and sometimes overlap.
 - Every volunteer program and museum is unique. This document includes a set of guiding principles. You may not be able to accomplish all of them, but you can still find success. It is important to do as much as you can and strive to always continue to work toward *more* diversity, inclusivity, accessibility, and equity.
 - DEAI is a practice. Education is ongoing, so strive to continue to make change even if it doesn't reach perfection.
 - Sometimes the right thing to do is harder and takes longer. Don't be discouraged. Find venues for support among your peers.
 - Institutional change and buy in is ultimately essential for long term success and sustainability.

Diversity

Diversity Definition

[From the American Alliance of Museums \(AAM\)](#): “Diversity is all the ways that people are different and the same at the individual and group levels. Even when people appear the same, they are different. Organizational diversity requires examining and questioning the makeup of a group to ensure that multiple perspectives are represented.”

What Does this Mean for Museum Volunteerism?

To embrace diversity for a museum volunteer program, individual volunteers should represent a wide sphere of different attributes and backgrounds. Staff who interact and work with volunteers should also be diverse and represent multiple perspectives and unique traits.

FAQ

Q: How do I get the existing group of volunteers better diversity training?

A: If you can afford to bring in a professional consultant, do so. Work with your development team to figure out ways to secure funds for a consultant and/or formal training. If you cannot hire a consultant or pay for additional training, take advantage of free resources, like the ones listed below. Keep the conversation regular and frequent to keep volunteer training front of mind and to address changing needs and goals. Also make sure to add a diversity training element to your onboarding of new volunteers.

Q: How do you introduce new, diverse volunteers into an existing volunteer corp?

A: Focus volunteer training on creating an inclusive environment. This encourages a welcoming volunteer culture and also helps create a safe and inclusive environment for your visitors. Make sure your recruitment resources and outlets are also diverse.

Q: How do I get mostly white volunteers to talk about race?

A: Practice and training are critical towards making talking about race part of the routine for white volunteers. Volunteer managers should also seek out opportunities to learn and grow so they can model this behavior. Provide consistent language for volunteers to use when talking about certain content. Also provide resources to understand why particular language is being used. Consistency here allows for accountability with volunteers.

Q: What do I do if my volunteer corps is not diverse?

A: Your volunteer corps is not permanent. Don't let a lack of diversity in your current program stop you from striving towards it in the future. It will be a slow process, so do not settle for token representation. Tokenism is practicing the minimum level of diversity to only prevent criticism and give the appearance that a diverse group of voices are being heard. Start with

researching the diversity in your community and start to take some of the actionable items listed below.

Q: How do I recruit a corps of volunteers that is reflective of the community in which my organization exists?

A: Improving access is critical towards recruiting a diverse volunteer corp. Offer opportunities to volunteer outside of traditional business hours and create opportunities to volunteer that allow for a variety of skills and abilities. Diversify your approach to recruitment. Practice reciprocal relationships with community partners -- relationships that benefit both parties, with support flowing both ways. Also seek to diversify your outreach and recruiting (don't rely solely on your existing avenues for recruitment).

Q: How quickly do I need to make diversity changes?

A: You want to start this work right away, but remember to be realistic in your recruiting process given your resources and capacity. Remember that authentic DEAI work takes time!

Actionable Items

- Institute a values statement for your department that emphasizes diversity.
 - Establish a DEAI Taskforce comprised of management, cross-departmental representation, and a diverse selection of candidates from your staff.
 - Examples of value statements:
 - “Strive for the museum’s volunteer workforce and staff to be a diverse pool of talents, professional experiences, personalities, and backgrounds united by a shared set of values.”
 - “We believe our strength lies in differences, not in similarities.”
 - “Diversity is an integral part of who we are. We value others for their unique contribution, ideas, background and culture.”
 - Use this statement across the board in job postings, your volunteer handbook, and use it as a guiding principle in administrative and programming initiatives.
- Set clear expectations of how you want your volunteers to act and what values are important to your organization.
 - Introduce a diversity statement within your volunteer agreement for volunteers to sign and read.
 - Include a diversity statement in your volunteer interview/onboarding process to set clear expectations and allow volunteers to self-select out. Examples include:
 - “We require that you are willing and able to work with diverse groups of children, adults, staff, and fellow volunteers.”
 - “You can expect to work in a friendly, open and diverse environment while being treated respectfully and courteously.”
- Introduce a dismissal policy for volunteers unwilling to uphold institutional values.
- Introduce diversity awareness training for staff and volunteers.
- Create opportunities for volunteers to engage with management and leadership.

Resources and Further Reading

- [Creating a diverse volunteer workforce - Museums Association](#)
- [Museums Have a Docent Problem](#)
- [How to Promote Diversity and Inclusion at Your Volunteer Organization](#)
- Smith, Clint. *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*. Little, Brown and Company, 2021.
 -  Virtual Book Talk - How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning With the History ...

Equity

Equity Definition

[From the American Alliance of Museums \(AAM\)](#): “Equity is the fair and just treatment of all members of a community. Equity requires commitment to strategic priorities, resources, respect, and civility, as well as ongoing action and assessment of progress toward achieving specified goals.”

What Does this Mean for Museum Volunteerism?

Embracing equity for a museum volunteer program involves questioning what people and stories are excluded and choosing to disrupt that cycle. While diversity, access, and inclusion may be primarily internal facing concerns, equity additionally demands an awareness and acknowledgment of external forces – the conditions of historically marginalized communities, exclusionary practices, economic barriers, etc.

As a leader working with volunteers, it is important to acknowledge the following to create a more equitable program:

- Listening and valuing the needs of community stakeholders.
- Creating reciprocal relationships to enact change.
- Acknowledge shortcomings of your organization.
- Recognizing regional and national inequalities.

FAQ

Q: How can I start the process to disrupt inequitable systems in my sphere of influence at my museum?

A: First, listen. Identify what you do not know and seek out opportunities to learn from marginalized groups. Then, accept what you hear and the feedback you receive. Speak out when you see inequities and amplify voices and platforms; use your resources to support underrepresented people.

Q: Should I be encouraging early career individuals to volunteer or take an unpaid internship as a way to gain job experience?

A: In short, no. In pursuit of a more equitable career field, AAMV advocates for interns to be compensated for their labor. We advocate for empowered volunteerism, and individuals who feel coerced into giving their time for free as a means to gain employment are not empowered in their volunteerism.

Q: What’s the difference between equity vs equality in docent-led tours?

A: Get comfortable with an *equitable* division of content instead of simply an *equal* division as a form of correcting past interpretive shortcomings. Reinforce the importance of equitable

content with your volunteer cohort, and provide resources to help them understand the rationale behind interpretive policies and changes.

Q: What is the relationship between economics, equity, and volunteerism?

A: While there are many different complex ways that economics, equity, and volunteerism intersect, three ways we have identified as being particularly important for volunteer managers are:

- 1) The economics of the volunteer department itself and how (and where) it spends its budgeted money.
- 2) The systemic economic barriers faced by current and potential volunteers.
- 3) The replacement of paid labor with volunteers.

We attempt to address these and other considerations in our actionable items and further reading.

Actionable Items

- Commit to doing the research on audience demographics and the communities you are (or are not) serving in your area.
- Prioritize supporting Black, Indigenous, and POC-owned businesses when considering your department's annual budget and expenditures.
- Partner with schools from historically marginalized communities to create student volunteer programs.
- Consider if prerequisites are actually necessary for volunteering with your organization, and instead offer training for interested parties to learn skill sets involved.
- Participate in implicit bias training and work to identify and eliminate bias from your recruitment, onboarding, and training processes.
- Remove monetary barriers that might prevent or limit the ability of individuals from marginalized groups from volunteering. For example:
 - Provide discounted parking to volunteers or other transportation benefits.
 - Offer gift shop and café discounts, free admission tickets, or memberships.
- Provide professional development opportunities that benefit volunteers both within and outside of your organization.
 - Host internal leadership conferences for your volunteers to gain content knowledge, skills, and experience.
 - Start volunteer peer mentoring programs.
 - Host social and community building opportunities for volunteers within your program.
- Create flexible onboarding and scheduling opportunities.
 - Examples:
 - Shorten volunteer commitments.
 - Offer one-day or done-in-a-day volunteering opportunities through corporate sponsorships.
 - Create leave policies where volunteers can go inactive without having to retake training.

- Be transparent and thoughtful in the creation of volunteer applications.
 - Examples:
 - Provide online applications and paper applications.
 - Examine existing policies related to background checks, identification requirements, and education backgrounds.
 - Provide the option for single-day volunteering.
 - Set clear volunteer expectations before, during, and after onboarding.
 - This may include values, duties, responsibilities, job descriptions, scheduling information.
- Extend field-related privileges to volunteers, particularly to support early career individuals. Examples include:
 - Access to research libraries.
 - Access to postings for internships and job openings.
 - Partner with other organizations to establish reciprocal free admissions for volunteers.
 - Extend museum or AAM membership access with volunteers.
- Within your scope of influence, develop equitable content and interpretation materials.
- While volunteer roles should be enriching and impactful, volunteer responsibilities should not substantially overlap with the responsibilities of paid positions.

Resources and Further Reading

- [Inclusion and Race Equity in Volunteerism - Engaging BIPOC and immigrant communities in nonprofit and government volunteer programs](#)
- [Co-Creating Racial Equity in Volunteer Engagement](#)
- [Equity Concerns Lead to a Mass-Firing of Museum Volunteers](#)
- [What Is White Privilege, Really? | Learning for Justice](#)
- [Demystifying the “Safe Space” | American Federation of Teachers](#)
- [Co-Creating Racial Equity in Volunteer Engagement](#)
- [Are You Guilty of Equity Offset? – Nonprofit AF](#)
- [MASS Action](#) Toolkit for Equity
- Milner, H. Richard. *RAC(e)Ing to Class: Confronting Poverty and Race in Schools and Classrooms*. Harvard Education Press, 2015.
- Procter, Alice. *The Whole Picture: the Colonial Story of the Art in Our Museums & Why We Need to Talk about It*. London: Cassell, 2021.

Accessibility

Accessibility Definition

[From the American Alliance of Museums \(AAM\)](#): “Accessibility is giving equitable access to everyone along the continuum of human ability and experience. Accessibility encompasses the broader meanings of compliance and refers to how organizations make space for the characteristics that each person brings.”

What Does this Mean for Museum Volunteerism?

The goal is to provide independence, access, and consideration for everyone. Traditionally we have built our environments and systems to exclude certain people, and a focus on accessibility breaks down those barriers when it comes to shared experiences. Accessibility remodels the traditional way of thinking about space, interactions, and decisions.

FAQ

Q: Where should your accessibility policies and practices live?

A: This information should be easy to find on your website and in all volunteer documentation, including in position descriptions, handbooks, signage, volunteer website portals, etc. Transparency and communication of accessibility resources is paramount.

Q: I am at a historic site with inaccessible structures/landscape. How do I make the site accessible for volunteers when we can't alter the landscape?

A: While the ADA does have exclusions for historic sites, it's important to advocate for the installation of accessible accommodations. These can be installed creatively and without disrupting core features, such as utilizing back entrances, elevators hidden in closets, and other similar approaches. You should also advocate for centering accessibility in newly created spaces. Consider Universal Design as a means to meet multiple needs, and utilize design choices that can improve accessibility. Beyond infrastructure, strive to promote a wide variety of volunteering that takes into account different abilities.

Q: What can I do to provide “reasonable accommodations” for my volunteers with different needs and to make the accommodations easily enacted by staff?

A: Create flexible policies and procedures preemptively so that the act of accommodating a volunteer with needs will be easier and more straightforward. The principles of Universal Design promote the awareness and consideration for people with different needs and usage preferences, including disability, age, gender, and cultural differences.

Q: Who is included within the broad umbrella of accessibility?

A: It can be anyone and everyone, regardless of the limits of the ADA including, but not exclusively, the following:

- Mobility
- Sight
- Hearing
- Neurodivergence
- Poverty and economic status
- All shapes and sizes
- Family and life commitments
- Language
- Transportation
- Age
- Gender
- Identity
- Veteran status
- Immigration status

The broader the definition of who should be considered for accessibility purposes the better. Center the person, not the disability, and defer to the individual about their personal preferences.

Actionable Items

- Make accessibility efforts as visible as possible on your website and in the museum itself.
 - Include ADA requirements, the museum’s accessible pathways, wheelchair availability, and service animal signage.
- Make language pins for volunteers to wear that convey what languages that person speaks.
- Provide training and clear communication to ensure your volunteers are aware of medical equipment locations, emergency exits, and safety procedures.
- Provide accessibility awareness training.
 - Examples:
 - Disability awareness panels
 - Access and inclusion open houses
 - People First Language
 - Neurodiversity awareness
 - Writing for and about people with disabilities
 - Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning
 - Verbal description vs. audio description
- Host basic ASL training for front of house volunteers to greet and welcome visitors.
- Train volunteers, and bring in professionals, to lead touch tours and tactile tours.
- Utilize sensory friendly apps and teach volunteers how to use them.
 - Example:
 - Aira App
- Blend learning environments with onsite and online offerings.
 - Examples:

- Provide written schedules for trainings and events for volunteers who need to know step-by-step plans.
 - Provide paper and pens for volunteers to take notes during learning sessions.
 - Allow volunteers to move at their own pace (no deadlines).
 - Allow volunteers to access training and materials from home.
 - Incorporate all types of learning to meet the diverse needs of the volunteers (visual, audio, tactile, etc).
 - Record all trainings for those who are absent.
 - Make training materials available in a written format, and offer larger print to help with low vision.
 - Add closed captioning to recorded videos.
- Create a sensory map and social narrative for visitors and volunteers with sensory sensitivities or for those who would like to prepare for their visit.
 - Provide sensory details for different available shifts (quieter hours vs louder, busier vs slower).
- Provide a range of weekend/weekday, evening/daytime trainings and shifts.
- Provide offsite or remote volunteer opportunities.
- Provide printed as well as online volunteer applications.
- Offer makeup sessions for trainings, some offered on shift meetings or as needed.
- Try to accommodate volunteer schedules and be flexible with shift starting and ending times.
- Provide computer and wifi access at the museum for volunteers to use.
- Promote non-gendered restrooms.
- Advocate for baby changing stations in all restrooms.
- Give volunteers access to privacy spaces, like wellness rooms, breastfeeding rooms, or a volunteer lounge.
- Be transparent and thoughtful in the creation of volunteer applications.
 - Examples:
 - Asking for availability details.
 - Examine existing policies related to background checks, identification requirements, and education backgrounds.
 - Provide the option for single-day volunteering.
 - Set clear volunteer expectations before, during, and after onboarding. This may include values, duties, responsibilities, job descriptions, and scheduling information.

Resources and Further Reading

- [Americans with Disabilities Act - US Department of Labor](#)
- [Smithsonian Institution Accessibility Office](#)
- [How to add Closed Captions to a video \(2022\)](#)

- [Make All Volunteering as Accessible as Possible: advantages for your program & how to do it](#)
- [Places to Start – Disability & Intersectionality Summit](#)
- [Supporting Volunteerism by People with Disabilities Guidebook | Volunteer Canada](#)
- [What is Universal Design](#)
- [Universal Design Guidelines](#)

Inclusion

Inclusion Definition

[From the American Alliance of Museums \(AAM\)](#): “Inclusion refers to the intentional, ongoing effort to ensure that diverse individuals fully participate in all aspects of organizational work, including decision-making processes. It also refers to the ways that diverse participants are valued as respected members of an organization and/or community.”

What Does this Mean for Museum Volunteerism?

Inclusion must be an active choice made by those in power. Not only are people with diverse backgrounds present, but they are asked for their perspectives, and also given appropriate resources to make recommendations. To create an inclusive environment where people feel comfortable giving different opinions, museums and volunteer programs must support, listen to, and empower volunteers. Transparency and trust are essential to the process of creating an inclusive environment.

FAQ

Q: How do I differentiate between diversity and inclusion?

A: Diversity can happen without effort, but inclusion requires an intention; focused on elevating and empowering underrepresented people, histories, stories, and backgrounds.

Q: When are questions about demographics appropriate?

A: Questions about demographics may be appropriate when working to identify groups you aren't serving by evaluating which groups you are serving. You may receive comments or concerns from volunteers when asking demographics questions, so clarity and transparency about your motivations driving these questions is key.

Q: What is the difference between a volunteer culture that is welcoming and one that inspires a sense of belonging?

A: A welcoming culture, in theory, is open to all. Merely being welcoming does not mean that the culture represents or reflects the experiences of everyone, which may be exclusionary or create a “culture of nice” where uncomfortable subjects are not addressed and therefore not resolved. A culture that is merely welcoming does not allow for a sense of ownership among all of its members. We should strive for a culture of belonging for our volunteers – where voices are heard and taken seriously, where inequities are addressed and tackled directly, and where there is a strong sense among all volunteers that they are important, valued, and respected with input and the power to affect change.

Q: How do I create an inclusive environment in my organization's volunteer program?

A: It is important to set firm expectations early on in the process of onboarding. Be transparent about your organization's values at every stage of a volunteer's time with you, from initial outreach to regular training for your most veteran volunteer. If a volunteer is unwilling to meet these expectations, be prepared to let them go.

Actionable Items

- Provide inclusion training about a wide range of needs and affinity groups.
 - Examples:
 - Gender inclusion
 - Family inclusive language
 - LGBTQ+ friendly
 - Disability needs
 - Veterans
 - Dementia/Alzheimer's
 - Neurodivergence
 - Universal Design/ Universal Design for Learning
 - Using multisensory strategies and using tactile graphics
 - Verbal vs. auditory vs. visual description information needs
 - Visitor identity and cultural relativism
 - Managing privilege, unconscious bias, acceptance, respect, and race
- Include preferred pronouns on staff and volunteer name badges and email signatures.
- Provide access to museum resources to show transparency with volunteers.
 - Examples:
 - Board of Trustee or Governors meeting summary reports
 - Volunteer Committee or Association reports
 - Volunteer department offices or break rooms
 - Volunteer handbooks and position descriptions
 - Organizational charts and staff directories
 - Evaluation and survey results
 - Staff presentations
 - Staff and/or volunteer newsletters with museum updates
 - Library or research rooms
 - Computers, tablets and wifi
- If it's appropriate for your organization, institute a volunteer advisory committee.
- Create flexible onboarding and scheduling opportunities.
 - Examples:
 - Shorten minimum volunteer commitments.
 - Offer one-day or done-in-a-day volunteering opportunities.
 - Create leave policies where volunteers can go inactive without having to retake trainings.
- Ask inclusion related questions on annual volunteer surveys.
 - Examples:
 - "For how long have you been volunteering?"

- “How do you ensure inclusive tour content?”
 - “Have you attended a training, talk, field trip, or other volunteer event outside of your regular role in the past year?”
 - “Do you feel you have opportunities to connect with other volunteers?”
 - “Do you feel you are provided adequate resources and training to accommodate your volunteer role?”
 - “Do volunteer events align with your schedule?”
 - “Please rate your interactions with your staff supervisor or supervising department.”
- Schedule regular check-ins and evaluations with volunteers.
- Institute a suggestion box or provide a feedback space at the end of volunteer shifts.
- Be transparent and thoughtful in the creation of volunteer applications. Avoid exclusionary language, and communicate the reasons why certain information is being collected.
 - Examples:
 - Asks for “preferred name” rather than legal name.
 - Ask for personal pronouns.
 - Ask for preferred languages and languages spoken.

Resources and Further Reading

- [Fighting Racism Through Diverse and Inclusive Volunteer Engagement Programming \(Part 1 of 2\)](#)
- [The 1619 Project - The New York Times](#)
- [Family Inclusion Language](#)
- [Recognising Racism in Volunteer Engagement](#)
- [Designing forms for gender diversity and inclusion | by Sabrina Fonseca | UX Collective](#)
- [Tools & Publications | the inluseum](#)
- AAMV Podcast: [How Can We Make Volunteer Programs More Inclusive and Accessible?](#)

General DEAI Resources

- [DEAI Resources | Western Museums Association](#)
- AAM's [Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion](#) Blog
- MURAWSKI, MICHAEL. *Museums as Agents of Change: A Guide to Becoming a Changemaker*. S.I.: AMER ALLIANCE OF MUSEUMS, 2022.