
Building Knowledge Networks to Increase Accessibility in Cultural Institutions

A Project Access White Paper
Art Beyond Sight



**PROJECT
ACCESS**

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Abstract

While museums and cultural institutions have had a clear legal obligation to make their programs, services, and facilities accessible to people with disabilities for decades, educational and professional development opportunities for staff working in the realm of accessibility and inclusion are limited. Access staff may feel isolated within their own institutions, often finding themselves in the position of monitoring and even clashing with colleagues, and may lack resources to stay abreast of evolving best practices, needs, and developments in the field.

By building networks of mutual support, museum professionals and people who have experience with disability can share resources and knowledge, and serve as agents for progressive change to ensure that cultural institutions are welcoming places for all. Founded as an informal working group in the 1990s, New York City's Museum Access Consortium (MAC) has evolved into an established association of hundreds of museum professionals, advocates, and people with disabilities working to advance and promote accessibility in cultural institutions of all types through education and professional development. Using MAC as a case study, this article traces the consortium's development, offers guidance on forming peer networks, and examines the benefits of such inter-institutional collaboration.

The issue: A lack of opportunities for learning about accessibility in museums

According to the 2011 American Community Survey, over 37 million Americans, or 12 percent of the United States population, identify as having a disability. For those over the age of sixty-five, the percentage is much higher, at nearly 37 percent. Without a doubt, people with disabilities comprise a significant and growing percentage of the visiting public for America's museums and cultural institutions. As Baby Boomers age, the percentage of Americans over the age of sixty-five continues to increase; the Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics estimates that by 2030, 20 percent of the American population will be over the age of 65. As public educational institutions, museums and cultural institutions have a legal and ethical requirement to ensure that their programs, services, and facilities are accessible, welcoming, and inclusive places for people of all abilities.

Many museums designate a staff person to oversee accessibility and compliance with federal codes such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. This individual often has multiple other responsibilities in addition to their role as the access coordinator – in education, visitor services, exhibition design, and more – and most have no formal training in the requirements

for legal compliance. Access coordinators can frequently feel isolated, as they are often solitary advocates for considering the perspectives and needs of people with disabilities in the development of programs, exhibitions, events, and materials. In addition, their criteria for success may be somewhat unique within their institutions, with equality and inclusion on par with aesthetics, historic fidelity, or dazzling technological experiences. It is not uncommon for these staff to feel like the “access police”, constantly monitoring the work of colleagues in other departments to identify instances where discriminatory conditions may inadvertently arise. Relationships may even feel antagonistic – grappling with graphic designers over font sizes, curators over language, and exhibition designers over seating and case heights.

Every aspect of a cultural institution’s operations, from the website to the wall labels to the washrooms, can affect whether the experiences it offers are inclusive and accessible for a diverse public. Whenever possible, cultural institutions should engage people with disabilities and user-experts directly in planning, implementing, and evaluating programs and services for accessibility. In addition, it is essential for museum staff to engage in ongoing professional development to stay abreast of new developments, evolving best practices, and emerging needs in the realm

of accessibility. Access is never finished, and there are no one-size-fits-all solutions, particularly in the realm of cultural experiences and work environments. Museums and cultural institutions must continually invest in staff education and capacity-building in order to fulfill their legal responsibilities and institutional missions vis-a-vis accessibility.

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Despite the universal legal requirement for cultural institutions to welcome people with disabilities, most graduate programs in Museum Studies or related fields offer little foundation or formal training in accessibility. In addition, large professional organizations such as the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), the National Art Educators Association (NAEA), and the Association of Science and Technology Centers (ASTC), offer few options for professionals seeking additional training in access and inclusion. At AAM’s Annual Meeting in 2012, only three out of 155 conference sessions, or fewer than two percent, were devoted to accessibility and inclusion. At the 2012 NAEA National Convention, only eight sessions were listed in the “Special Needs in Art Education” track, out of more than 1,000 sessions offered. The ASTC 2012 Annual Conference offered only one session, out of more than 100, that was devoted to accessibility. A notable exception is the Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability (LEAD). LEAD is a conference hosted annually by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts since 2000, devoted entirely to promoting accessibility in arts and cultural organizations for people with disabilities and older adults. LEAD also operates a cultural arts access listserv, founded in 2003, to keep members connected at a distance and enable them to continually share challenges and resources. However, the LEAD conference is relatively small, serving only a few hundred individuals annually.

In the absence of abundant opportunities for training and professional development in accessibility specifically in the museum field, how can organizations continue to build their capacity to effectively serve individuals with disabilities? Through interagency collaboration, cultural institutions, individuals who have disabilities, and disability service providers can form networks of mutual support that leverage limited resources in order to create opportunities for museum staff to learn and share

knowledge. MAC is one example of a grassroots network that has evolved to fill the accessibility void within the museum field.

Case study: MAC fosters collaboration and addresses the need for professional development in accessibility

In the mid-1990s a small group of museum professionals started meeting informally to discuss topics related to accessibility. Over time, they formed the Museum Access Consortium, a volunteer-led association dedicated specifically to improving accessibility for people with disabilities within cultural institutions. Today MAC is comprised of staff from more than 100 New York area museums and institutions, as well as members of the disability community. MAC seeks to enable people with disabilities to access cultural facilities of all types, and takes as a basic tenet that increasing accessibility for people with disabilities increases accessibility for everyone. The association defines accessibility broadly, to include architectural, physical, programmatic, communication, attitudinal, technological, and other forms of access.

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MAC organizes free meetings, programs, and workshops on topics related to accessibility in museums and cultural institutions, inviting experts with personal and professional experience with disability to offer instruction on a wide range of topics. Workshops have included “Experiencing Art Museums with a Visual Disability,” “Unlimited by Design,” “Programming for People with Dementia and Their Caregivers,” “Perspectives on Autism,” and “Welcoming Families with Disabilities: Parents Speak Out,” among others. Speakers have included clinicians, legal experts, exhibit designers, individuals with disabilities and their family members, and museum educators and directors, most of whom have participated on a volunteer basis or with funds provided by host institutions and partners of MAC. Workshop attendees come from a broad range of institutions, from art and science museums to historic sites, zoos and botanical gardens, performance spaces, museum studies programs, service providers, advocacy organizations, and more.

For almost twenty years, a volunteer steering committee has overseen the planning of MAC events, which are made possible through in-kind donations and support from member organizations. Partner institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art have donated accessible spaces for meetings, IT services, and accommodations such as sign-language interpretation and CART. MAC’s fiscal sponsor, City Access New York, a non-profit organization with a related mission of promoting community-based access for people with disabilities, has provided new programmatic opportunities, institutional guidance, and technological support.

By linking together accessibility personnel from multiple museums, cultural institutions, and disability organizations, MAC helps to address the isolation staff may experience at their home institutions and seeks to respond to and engage museum professionals at all levels. Colleagues from the museum field can share challenges, resources, and solutions, and work collaboratively with individuals and professionals from the disability community to improve institutional accessibility across their area.

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either improve programs that are already in existence or pilot new ones. A January 2011 workshop focused on developing programs for visitors with dementia and their caregivers with examples from major art museums. The information provided by the workshop contributed to the launch of new programming for this audience at several museums, including the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the Jewish Museum, and the Intrepid Sea, Air, and Space Museum. In the fall of 2011 and spring of 2012, MAC hosted a series of workshops dedicated to improving the experiences of visitors who have autism. As a direct result, the Central Park Zoo launched its first program designed specifically for children with autism spectrum disorders and their families. In both of these examples, personnel from drastically different sites were able to use and adapt techniques and effective practices highlighted in the workshops and apply them to their own unique settings.

Digital communications and social media have opened virtual forums for the sharing of ideas and resources based around common interests, expanding the impact of MAC's workshops. MAC regularly documents its programs with recordings, which are then archived and shared online in multiple accessible formats: videos are captioned, photographs are tagged with descriptive labels, and audio recordings are transcribed. Through sharing these workshops online, the impact of MAC has had a ripple effect,

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with colleagues in the museum and disability fields reaching out from across the United States and around the world with questions and input related to topics ranging from universal exhibit design to accessible technology and program evaluation.

MAC's volunteer base is its greatest strength, yet funding sources are necessary to enable the organization to build capacity and respond to the need for professional training in museum accessibility. One private grant-making foundation, the FAR Fund, recently took notice of the potential for MAC's ability to make a systemic impact and invited the organization to submit a proposal focused on improving the experiences of museum goers who have autism spectrum disorders. Thanks to this opportunity, MAC was awarded its first sizable grant in 2011, and it is enabling the organization to host a series of twelve workshops over three years on improving accessibility in museums for people who have autism. Demonstrating a real need for education in this area, more than 250 people attended the first four workshops, many of whom subsequently joined MAC. Beyond increasing the number of MAC workshops and members, the FAR Fund grant also supports the implementation and documentation of two demonstration projects for young people on the autism spectrum, at the Museum at Eldridge Street and the New York Transit Museum, respectively. MAC has utilized its network to support the development of both projects and is documenting their progress, as well as the workshops, on a dedicated blog that has drawn attention and inquiries from all over the world. A kernel of funding can go a long way in an already-established network and can open opportunities for an even deeper and broader impact on the museum profession as a whole.

As a dedicated voice that provides opportunities to learn about accessibility in a changing cultural landscape, MAC has helped to educate museum staff, inspire new programs, and elevate expectations for inclusion in museums. The MAC Steering Committee regularly receives inquiries from museum staff outside the Metropolitan New York area regarding the need for similar networks in their areas of the country.

A number of cultural organizations in the greater Boston area recently came together to form Cultural Access New England (CANE) in order to offer free professional development and training opportunities for their local community.

Strategies for building local accessibility networks

With MAC in New York City and CANE in Boston, both efforts are in major cities with a critical mass of cultural institutions that have high standards for accessibility. MAC, for example, has enjoyed the continued support and participation of major cultural organizations such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Queens Museum of Art, but what can be done in smaller cities or rural settings where fewer resources are available? Oftentimes, smaller museums and institutions with limited means find it difficult to access information and stay abreast of evolving trends and advances in the field. By pooling resources and sharing knowledge and best practices through formal or informal networks, accessibility can be within reach for institutions of any size or type. Below are some ideas for starting a network based on the experience of MAC:

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- Utilize the information, people, and resources provided by networks such as MAC, CANE, and LEAD to start your own effort.
- Reach out to people within your region and create a peer group to explore levels of potential interest and engagement, including museum professionals and people with disabilities. Starting a network can be as simple as bringing together a group of colleagues who are committed to meeting with one another to share concerns and challenges.
- Alternately, create your own accessibility group within an already-existing professional organization. Members of the New York City Museum Educators Roundtable, a not-for-profit organization serving museum education professionals, formed an Access Peer Group to provide a support network focused on institutional accessibility and educational programming for people with disabilities.
- Document your own process of learning and share it via your museum's blog or through online publications and at professional conferences to raise the visibility of accessibility in the field as a whole.
- Observe programs at a wide variety of institutions to learn from effective practices and provoke reflection and discussion, and more creative thinking. Invite colleagues to visit and view your programs and offer feedback.
- Develop guidelines, bylaws, and other organizational structures to give your network more continuity and stability as individual participants may change.
- As the network grows, seek out funding opportunities both through in-kind and financial contributions from member organizations, and from public and private sources.

In many cases, the funds that museums contribute to make professional networks possible are minimal compared to what it would cost for each individual institution to organize its own professional development series of similar caliber. Moreover, contributing to and participating in collaborative professional development via a network has the potential for systemic impact across a community of practice, versus individual impact at a single cultural site. Knowledge networks can help realize the vision of connecting museum professionals and people who have experience with disability to serve as agents for progressive change to ensure that cultural institutions are welcoming places for all.

Resources for accessibility in museums and cultural institutions have historically been and will likely continue to be limited. Access coordinators will continue to face challenges and experience isolation as they strive to make their institutions accessible for a diverse and dynamic population that includes people with disabilities and older adults. By forging connections and creating networks of mutual support, institutions can leverage resources, expand their impact, and improve scholarship and attention to the issue of accessibility in the museum field.

It is our hope at MAC that individuals dedicated to accessibility will present at more conferences, establish more networks, and will eventually change the way all museum professionals think about the role of exhibits, programs, and human resources in making our cultural institutions examples of how our society can be inclusive of all individuals.

Resources

Museum Access Consortium: <http://www.cityaccessny.org/mac.php>

City Access New York: <http://www.cityaccessny.org/>

Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability: <http://www.kennedy-center.org/accessibility/education/lead/>

Cultural Access New England: <http://www.ca-ne.org/>

New Jersey Cultural Access Network Project: <http://njtheatrealliance.org/access>

New York City Museum Educators Roundtable: <http://www.nycmer.org/>

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