

OUR VIEW



FROM HERE

VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF
MUSEUMS IN ONTARIO

A report produced as a Master of Museum Studies Capstone project
through a partnership between the Ontario Museum Association and the
Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto.



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF INFORMATION

Association
des musées
de l'Ontario



Ontario
Museum
Association

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Authored By:

Faith Peter, Isabella Springett,
Van Gonzales



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The authors of this report, the Ontario Museum Association, and other stakeholders acknowledge that the land on which they gather, reflect, and work is the traditional and enduring territory of Indigenous nations. We have centred this report in Toronto, the traditional territory of the Wendat, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Anishinaabeg, including the Chippewas and the Mississaugas of the Credit. We are treaty people under the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, a treaty that represents a commitment to sharing and protecting the land in the spirit of peace and mutual care. Our work extends beyond Toronto, recognizing the entirety of Kanadario (Ontario), home to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people who have cared for these territories since time immemorial and who continue to contribute to the strength of Ontario and all communities across the province.

We understand that acknowledging traditional territories is only a starting point. It is a gesture that must be followed by ongoing efforts to learn, reflect, and act. As students preparing to enter a sector shaped by colonial histories, we are committed to understanding the responsibilities that come with this work. We recognize that museums have played a role in perpetuating harm, and we seek to be part of a future that centres Indigenous voices, honours Indigenous sovereignty, and supports meaningful partnerships grounded in reciprocity and respect.

We express our gratitude to the Indigenous artists, cultural workers, and community leaders whose contributions continue to shape the museum field in Ontario and beyond. We invite readers of this report to reflect on their own relationships with land and institutions and to join us in committing to a future where Indigenous presence is not only acknowledged but also upheld.



LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Our project team is made up of three Master of Museum Studies (MMSt) students in the Museum Studies Capstone Project course at the University of Toronto. We are emerging professionals who are deeply invested in the museum sector, both in its present realities and its future possibilities. We are in this field because we believe in the transformative power of arts, culture, and heritage. To us, museums are not just spaces that hold objects; they are spaces that hold stories that must be preserved, remembered, and shared.

We were excited to take on this project, which was developed as a partnership between the Ontario Museum Association (OMA) and the Master of Museum Studies (MMSt) program. Created as part of the 25th anniversary of May is Museum Month, this project was designed to explore the future of Ontario's museum sector through dialogue and collaboration.

As MMSt students, we were honoured to carry this work forward, to listen closely, reflect deeply, and contribute to a larger conversation already in motion. We believe in the value of community and the importance of coming together, not only to celebrate stories and achievements but also to learn from and confront difficult histories. Museums, along with galleries, libraries, archives, and many other cultural institutions, play a critical role in this process. By fostering dialogue and inclusivity, these spaces can help us reflect, grow, and collectively shape a more just and thoughtful future.

As we embark on this project, we are committed to contributing to the ongoing, incredible work being done in the sector. We recognize that meaningful change happens when diverse voices are heard and valued. Through this Capstone Project, we aim to contribute to the conversations that will help museums evolve into spaces of deeper engagement, representation, and shared learning.

OUR TEAM



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Van Gonzales is a Master of Museum Studies student at the University of Toronto and holds a Bachelor of Arts Education from the University of Regina. His work centres on equity, representation, and arts education. Van has led initiatives with the RCMP Heritage Centre, Hart House, and student groups like MUSSA and MPOC.

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Our View From Here reflects the grounded perspectives of those entering and working within the museum field in Ontario. Developed as a partnership between the Master of Museum Studies program and the Ontario Museum Association for *May is Museum Month*, this report brings together insights from over 70 participants, including students, Emerging Museum Professionals (EMPs), community leaders, and cultural workers. These insights were gathered through an open survey and seven consultation sessions, held both in person and online.

The report captures the conversations we heard, the values that echoed across groups, and the visions people are already working toward. We offer these reflections on shared hopes and persistent challenges from where we stand as students, listeners, and colleagues in the sector.

This report is a contribution to an ongoing conversation and an invitation to reflect, respond, and continue building toward a museum sector grounded in care, equity, and community.

AT A GLANCE

WHO WE HEARD FROM

STUDENTS

Participants enrolled in museology programs across Ontario, including Masters and graduate-level certificate programs. Their perspectives reflect both academic learning and early professional experiences.

EMERGING MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS (EMPS)

Primarily reached through personal connections, the Group of Ontario Museum Professionals (GOEMP), and Museum Professionals of Colour (MPOC) networks, this group included individuals in the early stages of their museum and cultural careers, navigating challenges of entry-level work and sector precarity.

COMMUNITY-CENTRED ORGANIZATIONS

This diverse group included staff and leaders from grassroots collectives, small museums, and community archives. Participants were united by a commitment to local relevance, public service, and community-driven approaches.

MUSEUM NETWORK CONTRIBUTORS

This category included members of the Ontario Museum Association's Board of Directors and representatives from the Regional Museum Network (RMN) of Ontario. Their input brings sector-wide insights and institutional perspectives grounded in policy, funding, and governance experience.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS

In addition to the consultation sessions, we gathered insights through a survey. Anonymous survey contributions expanded the scope of the project, offering perspectives from a wide range of professionals, students, and volunteers engaged in museum and cultural work.

WHERE WE'RE AT

The museum sector in Ontario stands at a crossroads. Shaped by shifting social expectations, financial instability, and the ongoing work of reconciliation, it is both under pressure and full of possibility. As students, community members, and professionals shared their experiences, a portrait emerged of a sector with deep passion and deep cracks.

Many institutions face persistent funding challenges, workforce precarity, and outdated leadership structures. Others are experimenting

with new models of community engagement, cultural governance, and care. These tensions define the current cultural landscape: one where the desire for change is palpable, but the path forward remains uneven.

What follows are not definitive answers, but grounded insights. They reflect where the sector is today and the hopes people hold for where it could go next.

WHAT WE HEARD



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SHOULD BE A PRIORITY, NOT A PERFORMANCE

Museums must move beyond transactional engagement and static authority to become embedded, responsive institutions rooted in care, shared power, and sustained community relationships.

FUNDING MODELS NEED REFORM

Short-term and project-based grants continue to undermine institutional stability. Participants called for more sustainable, ethical, and values-aligned funding strategies that support both small organizations and long-term workforce wellbeing.

RECOGNITION AND CAREER SUSTAINABILITY MATTER

Museum workers, especially early-career professionals, feel undervalued, underpaid, and stuck. There is a pressing need for formal mentorship, clear pathways to leadership, and systemic support for growth.

THIS IS A FIELD THAT DESERVES TO BE SEEN

There is an urgent need to strengthen professional identity within the museum sector. Participants called for national standards, institutionalized mentorship, and a collective shift toward treating museum practice as skilled, essential work.

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE MUST EVOLVE

Hierarchical, slow-moving structures hinder progress on inclusion and decolonization. Participants stressed the importance of shared authority, participatory governance, and institutional transparency.



The following insights represent recurring themes that surfaced across a wide range of consultation sessions. While each group brought its own perspectives, shaped by region, role, lived experience, and relationship to institutions, many of the same questions, frustrations, and hopes echoed across conversations.

These insights reflect a collective call to action. They capture our view of what museums could become when they are more equitable, transparent, and community-driven. Some reflect long-standing challenges that participants are still navigating, while others point to new directions already being explored.

Taken together, these contributions highlight both the urgency of change and the energy already moving within the sector. They are not only critiques but commitments offered in the spirit of shaping a more responsive, inclusive, and resilient museum landscape in Ontario.



OUR VIEW FROM HERE

COMMUNITIES SHAPING THE FUTURE OF MUSEUMS



This section explores how museums can build deeper, more equitable relationships with the communities they serve by prioritizing accessibility, reciprocal partnerships, and long-term commitments to inclusion and decolonization. Across consultations, we heard consistently: communities should be recognized not as passive audiences but as active experts who shape museum practice.

This vision aligns with growing calls for change across the sector. Increasingly, Provincial and Territorial Museums Associations (PTMAs) are calling for a reimagined relationship between museums and their communities. *Reconsidering Museums*, a report by the Alberta Museums Association, urges institutions to move away from traditional notions of expert authority and instead embrace community-led knowledge.^[14] Nationally, the

Canadian Museums Association's (CMA) *Moved to Action* report outlines a new standard for community engagement, one that upholds the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and that centres shared authority, Indigenous sovereignty, and sustained trust-building.^[2] This momentum is echoed at municipal levels as well, with the *What We Heard* report for the City of Toronto's Culture Plan calling for a shift beyond transactional relationships toward "reciprocal and relational"^[12] models of community partnership.

Throughout our consultations, participants emphasized that museums must shift from being institutions that simply educate to being embedded, responsive parts of the communities they serve. They voiced the need for institutions to listen deeply, act collaboratively, and evolve in step with the people around them.

“The structures in museums have stayed the same, and it just doesn’t make any sense. Communities are changing. Museums must step back and ask, ‘What do people actually need from us?’”

— EMP consultation

CREATING TRULY WELCOMING SPACES

Accessibility emerged as a major theme, with participants stressing that genuine accessibility includes cultural, financial, and emotional dimensions beyond physical entry. Many described museums as places where they feel unwelcome or perceived as intimidating and elitist.

These reflections echo *Reconsidering Museums*, which identifies financial, intellectual, and cultural accessibility as essential considerations for truly inclusive museum practice.^[14] Participants strongly advocated for inclusive admission models, such as free or pay-what-you-can entry, that remove assumptions and judgment from the museum experience. Initiatives like the Royal Ontario Museum's (ROM) free nights ([Third Tuesday Night Free](#)) and the Art Gallery of Ontario's (AGO) [Under-25 Free Annual Pass](#) were celebrated as examples of what's possible when institutions prioritize access. At the same time, participants acknowledged that these programs are largely made possible by the significant financial and structural resources of major institutions. There was a strong call to develop sustainable models that allow smaller and less-resourced museums to offer similar opportunities in their communities.

Participants also emphasized the need for museums to engage beyond their physical walls and become vital third spaces—a concept describing informal, welcoming places that invite community members to connect, build relationships, and exchange ideas outside of home or work environments. They shared enthusiasm for mobile museums, outdoor exhibitions, and community-based pop-ups, especially in underserved neighbourhoods.

“It’s not just about physically getting in the door. It’s about whether I feel I belong there, whether it’s a space for me.”
— EMP consultation

This reimagining of museums as embedded, responsive, and place-based reflects a growing belief that accessibility is no longer a checklist item but an ongoing process rooted in listening, flexibility, and mutual care.

“I received a grant and built an outdoor amphitheatre. Now, we host theatre performances and live music. My goal is to make our museum as lively and welcoming as the local mall on weekends. Somewhere, people naturally gather and feel connected.”
— Museum network contributors consultation



SHIFTING POWER THROUGH SHARED AUTHORITY AND ETHICAL PARTNERSHIPS

Participants urged museums to abandon transactional engagement models in favour of sustained, reciprocal relationships. Shared authority became a central theme in the discussions, underscoring the need to value lived experience and community knowledge equally alongside institutional expertise. This aligns directly with the “Nothing About Us Without Us”^[6] principle originating from disability rights activism, emphasizing that communities must lead work directly affecting them, as highlighted in both *Moved to Action*^[2] and *Reconsidering Museums*.^[14]

Community organizations highlighted the need for tangible support, including fair compensation, free or subsidized space, and decision-making power, moving from extractive relationships to genuinely equitable collaboration.

“We don’t pretend to be authorities on someone else’s history. Real shared authority means stepping back and genuinely letting communities lead.”
— Community-centred consultation

Participants stressed that this shift must be embedded structurally. Community engagement cannot depend on the goodwill of a single staff member; it must be resourced, valued, and sustained at the institutional level.

“A lot of good work relies on one committed person. When they leave, the relationship often leaves with them. Museums must institutionalize relationships, not just individualize them.”

— EMP consultation



MEANINGFUL DECOLONIZATION AND REPRESENTATION

Decolonization has long been identified as a critical need in the museum sector, most notably in the CMA's *Moved to Action* report, which calls for continuous, community-led engagement, repatriation, and a transfer of authority to Indigenous communities.^[2] Participants in our consultations echoed this urgency and stressed that while the conversation around decolonization is not new, implementation remains slow and inconsistent. Still, participants acknowledged that many individuals within the sector are pushing for meaningful change, often working against structural resistance from within.

Participants urged museums to boldly confront difficult histories and actively support social justice initiatives. Neutrality was not seen as a safe or ethical position. Museums must fundamentally shift their approach to community engagement. Without meaningful structural change, museums risk perpetuating the very exclusions they aim to overcome.

“We do have a plan in mind. But when we are making stuff, we are making sure that we are sharing authority, making sure that we are acting as a platform for these stories to be told as opposed to the authority on these stories.”

— Community-centred consultation

“Museums have upheld colonial narratives for too long. If they want relevance for the next 25 years, they need to actively dismantle those systems. That means genuinely giving up power, not just sharing the stage.”

— Community-centred consultation

FUNDING AS A FOUNDATION FOR CHANGE



Across consultations, participants shared a clear and urgent message: funding is not just a logistical concern but a foundational force that shapes what museums can be, who they can serve, and how they engage with their communities. They emphasized that without stable, ethical, and equitable funding, the sector cannot deliver on its social, educational, or community-oriented promises. Participants especially underscored how current funding models, centred on short-term projects, competitive grants, legacy institutions, and a lack of sustainable operational funding, leave smaller, community-led organizations in constant precarity, despite the depth and value of their work.

This call for systemic reform aligns with a growing body of sectoral research. *Reconsidering Museums* outlines how community-serving

institutions are sidelined by funding systems that prioritize prestige over relevance.^[14] The Canadian Museum Association's (CMA) *Government Support for Museums* report highlights how the Museums Assistance Program (MAP), Canada's primary federal funding mechanism, remains overly limited in both scope and eligibility, especially for organizations without full-time staff.^[8] Similarly, the CMA's *Moved to Action* report calls for long-term, Indigenous-led funding streams that go beyond project-based grants to support sustainable reconciliation initiatives.^[2] These calls echo across national consultations, including the Government of Canada's *What We Heard: Renewal of the Canadian Museum Policy* report, which notes a widespread desire for funding mechanisms that reflect contemporary museum practices and community expectations.^[1]

Funding isn't just about keeping the lights on, it determines what kind of relationships we can build, how long we can build them for, and whether that work is extractive or transformative."

— Community-centred consultation



SHORT-TERM MODELS AND LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES

A recurring theme across all sessions was the destabilizing effect of short-term, project-based funding. As noted in the *Government Support for Museums* report, Canada's federal funding remains "project-based, restrictive in scope, and insufficient to support long-term institutional sustainability,"^[8] particularly for smaller museums that do not meet MAP's eligibility criteria. Participants noted that short-term funding not only weakens internal capacity but also erodes trust with communities who are often asked to participate in projects that disappear after a few months. This instability forces many to focus on deliverables over impact and on funding over mission. Museums are in need of sustainable, predictable operational funding.

Participants emphasized that while short-term grants are common, they often do not account for the operational realities of running a museum. Core functions like staff wages, conservation, collections care, and community programming frequently go underfunded because grants are tied to specific projects rather than institutional health.

"As always, financial support is key... If we have the support of municipal and provincial governments, it goes a long way to boost our financial and community support."

— Museum network contributors consultation

"We can launch something great, but we can rarely afford to maintain it."

— Community-centred consultation

CHALLENGING DISTRIBUTION AND POWER IMBALANCES

Participants also pointed to the structural inequities in how funds are distributed. Large institutions benefit from legacy relationships with government agencies, private donors, and corporate sponsors, often receiving significant operational funding and media attention. In contrast, smaller museums and grassroots organizations must continuously justify their existence to access even minimal support.

"Museums remain deeply elitist institutions that continue to cater to wealthy donors, corporate sponsors, and a predominantly white, upper-class audience; meanwhile, smaller, local cultural organizations are stepping up in ways that many large institutions are failing to."

— EMP consultation

This imbalance was described not just as a financial issue but as a question of narrative control and visibility. Well-resourced institutions are often the ones shaping the dominant stories in the sector. Participants advocated for greater redistribution of resources, calling on larger institutions to share space, mentorship, and funding opportunities with smaller community organizations.

Several consultation participants suggested innovative models for sharing power and resources: collaborative grant writing, mentorship networks, and shared infrastructure agreements that link large institutions with grassroots partners in equitable ways.

These kinds of partnerships are already being piloted by some [Arts Service Organizations \(ASOs\)](#), across Ontario, which the *Mass Culture* ASO report identifies as crucial intermediaries in helping redistribute resources and build sector-wide capacity.^[11] For instance, one ASO developed a rotating mentorship and exhibition model where large museums provide curatorial support and space for emerging racialized artists showcased by smaller organizations.^[11] Participants echoed this call, advocating for funding structures that incentivize and resource this kind of reciprocal collaboration, rather than reinforcing hierarchies that prioritize institutional prestige over public impact.

“There are all these people already doing the work; instead of starting something new, why aren’t you supporting and platforming them?”

— Community-centred consultation



REIMAGINING ETHICAL AND TRANSPARENT FUNDING MODELS

Alongside calls for structural change, participants expressed frustration over the ethical implications of current funding sources. Corporate sponsorships from oil and gas companies and other extractive industries were frequently cited as being misaligned with museums’ public mandates.

Yet, many acknowledged the difficulty of turning away from these sources without viable alternatives. Participants stressed the need for increased and consistent government funding to reduce this dependence and for greater transparency around how funds are sourced and allocated. This sentiment is echoed in the CMA’s *Government Support for Museums*, which calls for more sustained, unrestricted investments tied to values-based accountability.¹⁸¹

Despite these challenges, participants shared moments of hope. Several spoke about securing municipal or federal grants that enabled long-term projects, community hiring, or new staff positions, which offer a glimpse of what becomes possible when funding is aligned with purpose.

Throughout the consultations, it became clear that funding is not just a resource; it is a reflection of institutional priorities and a foundation for meaningful change. It shapes who museums can serve, who they can empower, and what futures they can imagine. To build a stronger, more just cultural sector, museums must treat funding not as a constraint to work around but as a tool to be reimagined intentionally, transparently, and in alignment with community values.

“In this future, museums would be financially independent of industries that exploit people and the planet, they would be sustained by ethical public funding, cooperative models, and community-driven investments.”

— Survey respondent

“We got a grant to work with a community group that had never collaborated with a museum before. It wasn’t just about the project, it was about building a real relationship. And that wouldn’t have been possible without that funding.”

— EMP consultation

SUSTAINING THE PEOPLE WHO SUSTAIN THE SECTOR



People enter the museum field because they believe in its potential to connect communities, preserve cultural memory, and inspire change. But across consultations, we heard that this deep sense of purpose often collides with a sector that is underfunded, overstretched, and unable to provide basic stability to its workforce. Museums cannot serve communities if they fail to support the people who run them.

Participants emphasized that without sustainable employment, fair compensation, and long-term institutional support, museums will continue to lose the very people who give them meaning. This concern is echoed across sectoral reports. The Canadian Museum Association's (CMA) *Workplace Diversity Survey* documents sharp disparities in wages and

advancement opportunities, especially for racialized, 2SLGBTQI+, and disabled museum workers.^[12] It also highlights the overrepresentation of women in precarious and lower-paid roles, particularly in frontline and education departments.

This sense of frustration is deeply familiar to emerging museum professionals (EMPs), many of whom have written candidly about the precarity and exhaustion they face. GOEMP, a platform created by and for EMPs, has documented these challenges in blogs like *How to Support EMPs*,^[9] *Making the Most Out of Our Unpaid Labour*,^[10] and *Diversity, Mentorship & the Sense of Belonging*.^[15] These accounts reflect the disconnect between the field's values and its employment realities and the emotional toll that it takes.

“People come to the sector because they believe in the work, but we lose a lot of really good people simply because they can’t afford to stay. You can’t live and do this work.”

— Museum network contributors consultation

PAY GAPS, PASSION, AND PRECARITY

Participants described a sector in which museum workers are expected to do high-skill, public-facing work, often requiring advanced degrees, with minimal compensation. Frontline, education, and programming roles were identified as the most undervalued despite being essential to public service and engagement.

“Worker rights and fair pay need to be a baseline. Museums must take care of the people who run them, not just the collections.”

— Survey respondent

Participants consistently raised concerns about the lack of full-time, long-term employment. Short-term contracts, grant-funded roles, and unpaid internships dominate the early stages of museum careers, leaving many workers feeling stuck in place.

“It feels like we’re all fighting for the same contract jobs. I just want to stop being ‘emerging’ and start building a real career.”

— Student consultation

“YCW is great, but it’s become a crutch. We need strategic planning, not just stop-gap hiring.”

— EMP consultation

Participants also spoke to the regional disparities in job access. The sector’s over concentration in major urban centres exacerbates inequity, forcing those in rural or remote communities to choose between relocation, underemployment, or leaving the field.

“I’d love to move back home and be near my family, but there aren’t any museum jobs there. That’s just the reality.”

— Student consultation

This widespread precarity not only impacts individuals, but it also erodes the field’s collective capacity. The International Research Alliance on Public Funding for Museums’ (IRAPFM) global report, *Decrease in Public Funding: A Worldwide Answer from Museums*, warns that without stable staffing, museums cannot offer consistent services or build meaningful relationships with their communities.^[5] The lack of strategic investment in people is leading to burnout among the sector’s next generation, often before their careers can fully begin.

RETHINKING WHAT SUPPORT LOOKS LIKE

Participants emphasized that building sustainable careers requires more than just salaries. Museums must create work environments that respect employees’ time, caregiving responsibilities, and long-term aspirations.

“I worked at a site where we couldn’t pay much, but the director found ways to keep people. He let me adjust my school schedule, gave people time to care for their families, and made flexibility the default. That’s why people stayed.”

— EMP consultation

Others called for professional development, mentorship, and succession planning, especially for younger or racialized staff who are often brought in to diversify an institution but are not supported in building careers.

The *What We Heard* report for the City of Toronto Culture Plan similarly calls for employment practices that include flexibility, capacity building, and mental health supports, emphasizing that working conditions must be part of any conversation about sector sustainability.^[11]



“There are great people in the sector, but they’re stuck at entry level. And when the institution doesn’t back their work, they burn out and leave. It’s not just about hiring, it’s about building a future with people.”

— EMP consultation

A CALL FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGE

This is not just a staffing problem; it is a structural one. Participants called on institutions and funders to move beyond short-term solutions and toward a deeper reimagining of how museums value and support their workforce.

“You can’t talk about community building or decolonization or public service if you can’t even keep staff for more than a year.”

— Community-centred consultation

This work cannot be sustained without the people who make it possible. Museums must begin with care, not only for what they hold but for those who hold it all together.



STRENGTHENING THE MUSEUM PROFESSION

Across consultations, participants highlighted a deeper challenge facing the museum sector, not just underfunding or precarious employment, but a lack of recognition for museum work itself. Despite the complexity and value of what museums offer, the field continues to struggle for legitimacy in the eyes of the public, policymakers, and even funders. This professional identity crisis has far-reaching implications. Without clear standards, protections, and coordinated advocacy, museums remain vulnerable.



***“People still think
we’re just volunteers
who like old things.
They don’t see
museum work as a
profession, and that
hurts all of us.”***

***— Student
consultation***



SETTING STANDARDS AND RAISING THE BAR

This invisibility has real consequences. During economic downturns, museums are frequently among the first to be deemed non-essential. Participants argued that the sector must sharpen its collective voice, not only to secure funding but to establish museum work as skilled, public-facing labour deserving of sustainable support.

A few participants pointed to the [British Columbia Museums Association \(BCMA\)](#) as a promising example of how to shift this narrative. The BCMA, alongside the [First Peoples Cultural](#)

[Council](#), has advocated for a national museum accreditation framework.^[9] The goal is to set consistent national standards around governance, collections care, and public engagement while also aligning with Indigenous-led accountability practices and the [United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#) principles. Participants noted that this model could help distinguish the profession, support funding advocacy, and reframe museums as legitimate civic infrastructure.

“If we had national standards, we’d have something to stand on when we go to funders or the government and say: this is what good museum work looks like.”

— Museum network contributors consultation

MENTORSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL PATHWAYS: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Participants emphasized that museums must embody their values internally, not just advocate for them externally. This includes treating mentorship, professional development, and career advancement as essential, ongoing responsibilities. Programs like the [Museum Professionals of Colour \(MPOC\)](#)'s Mentorship and Networking Programs at the University of Toronto,^[13] initiated by students of colour for students of colour, are promising models. These programs provide crucial, peer-led support to early-career professionals navigating the sector as racialized or underrepresented voices, fostering a sense of community and belonging.^[15]

GOEMP has highlighted the importance of mentorship, interdisciplinary education, and paid experience through blog posts such as *How to Support EMPs*,^[9] *Making the Most Out of Our Unpaid Labour*,^[10] and *Diversity, Mentorship & the Sense of Belonging*.^[15] These reflections emphasize that building long-term careers in museums requires more than personal resilience; it requires structural support.

However, participants also noted that such initiatives often depend on the unpaid efforts of passionate individuals rather than being meaningfully supported and sustained by institutions themselves.

“We have amazing mentors in this sector, but it’s always just one person carrying the load. What happens when they leave?”

— EMP consultation

Participants in our consultations echoed this, stressing that the responsibility for mentorship and professional development should not fall solely on EMPs. Instead, academic programs and large institutions must actively create structures, such as shared coursework, cross-program mentorship, and paid placements, that bridge the gap between theory and practice and prepare professionals for leadership, not just entry-level roles.

“Better integration between the [college, university and certificate] programs would be amazing. You need the theory, but you also need a way in.”

— Student consultation

***“We need a system
that says this is real
work. These are real
careers. This is a field
that matters.”***
— EMP consultation



ADVOCACY AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Advocacy is not just about public relations; it's about building the internal infrastructure of a profession. As the CMA's *Government Support for Museums* report notes, national accreditation frameworks in countries like the UK and France have helped standardize museum practices, raise public trust, and align funding with professional quality.^[8] In Canada, participants called for a similarly bold move, one that would link funding, standards, and legitimacy in a way that supports both institutions and their workers.

Without professional recognition and structural support, museums will continue to lose talent, credibility, and public engagement. But with national standards, mentorship infrastructures, and strong, collective advocacy, the sector has an opportunity to reset its narrative, one that honours the people behind the work and ensures they're recognized, protected, and supported.

LEADERSHIP FOR A CHANGING SECTOR

Across consultations, participants spoke of institutional leadership not as a bureaucratic necessity but as a make-or-break force for the future of museums. Leadership defines how museums operate, who they serve, and whether their values are matched by their practices. Yet throughout this project, we heard a recurring message: museum leadership is out of step with its workforce, with its communities, and with the moment.



“You can have all the statements and strategic plans you want, but if leadership doesn’t actually believe in change, nothing moves.”

— Museum network contributors consultation

A CRISIS OF TRUST AND ACCOUNTABILITY

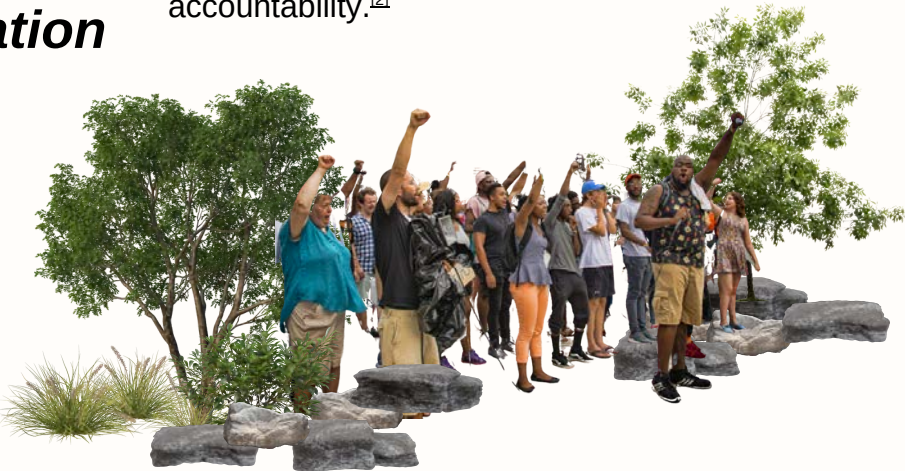
Participants described current leadership models as rigid and outdated, often reinforcing top-down decision-making and exclusivity. Many expressed frustration at museum boards and executive teams composed of the same individuals for decades, leading to what was called a structural bottleneck. Leadership turnover was rare, and opportunities for emerging professionals to take on decision-making roles remained scarce.

Even when leaders publicly commit to decolonization, equity, or sustainability, those commitments often fail to materialize into concrete policies or measurable change. Participants called this disconnect not just disappointing but damaging, as it burdens staff with advocacy that leadership is unwilling to lead.

“Take a risk and do something. You’re probably going to fail, and that’s okay. But the constant delay is exhausting.”
— ***Community-centred consultation***

“There are so many great people working in museums, but they’re stuck at a level where they don’t get to make decisions.”
— ***EMP consultation***

This pattern was also reflected in national research. The Canadian Museum Association’s (CMA) *Moved to Action* report reveals that some boards actively stifle or co-opt staff efforts to implement the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action](#) and [UNDRIP](#), noting that language around reconciliation is often inserted into strategic plans without any meaningful implementation or institutional accountability.^[2]



FUNDING MODELS REFLECT POWER, NOT ALWAYS VALUES

Financial decision-making was another source of frustration. Participants described how the largest institutions, with the most robust endowments and connections to elite donors, are often the slowest to change. In contrast, smaller institutions or grassroots collectives are frequently doing the work of community engagement, decolonization, and equity, often with little support.

This echoes findings in the International Research Alliance on Public Funding for Museums’ (IRAPFM) global report, *Decrease in Public Funding: A Worldwide Answer from Museums*, which warns that financial necessity must not override ethical governance.^[5] Museums must establish clear, transparent guidelines for accepting sponsorships, report publicly on financial decisions, and diversify revenue streams in ways that align with their values, not undermine them.

“Everything has to be super fast. It tends to lend itself to transactional, extractive relationships. And that’s not good for your work or your soul.”
— ***Community-centred consultation***

Participants argued that funding decisions often lack transparency and strategic clarity. Strategic plans, when they exist, are frequently outdated, poorly implemented, or inaccessible. Several emphasized the need for museums to publish their plans, measure progress, and involve staff and communities in defining success.

“There should be transparency. Like, our strategic plan should be public. If we’re meeting it, that should be public.”
— ***EMP consultation***

“Just because you have one queer person, one woman, and one racialized staff doesn’t mean you’ve achieved diversity.”

— Student consultation

FROM PERFORMATIVE INCLUSION TO SHARED AUTHORITY

Despite widespread discourse about diversity and equity, many participants described a lack of diversity at the top of institutions. Boards and executive teams often remain white, affluent, and disconnected from the communities they claim to serve. This imbalance affects everything from collecting practices and exhibition themes to hiring decisions and institutional values.

Reports back this up. The CMA’s *Workplace Diversity Survey* found that while museums often require advanced degrees for senior positions, marginalized groups remain underrepresented in these leadership roles.^[7] The result is a workforce that is highly credentialed but structurally excluded from advancement and influence.

Participants also emphasized that change must be systemic, not dependent on individual champions. Programs, partnerships, and policies driven by one person tend to collapse when that person leaves. A lasting impact requires shared authority, long-term commitments, and leadership models that build community into the foundation of governance.

“They hire someone for a contract because they know they’ll build relationships, but when they leave, it’s like those relationships go with them.”

— Community-centred Consultation





HONESTY IS BETTER THAN FALSE HOPE

Participants called for more institutional honesty about what museums are willing to change and what they are not. While disappointing, a clear ‘no’ was seen as less harmful than a vague ‘maybe’ that leads to broken trust and burnout.

“If you don’t want to change, just say so. At least then we know what we’re working with.”

— Community-Centred Consultation

Several advocated for institutions to stop using the language of change unless they are prepared to do the deep, ongoing work these commitments require. Misleading gestures and performative language lead to what many call institutional amnesia: the tendency for museums to forget or erase the work of previous changemakers, especially when that work was done by staff from marginalized communities.

“We need structures where, if someone leaves, the work doesn’t disappear with them.”

— EMP consultation

LEADERSHIP THAT REFLECTS THE PUBLIC

The future of the museum sector depends on its willingness to transform leadership culture. That means addressing board composition, rethinking hiring and promotion pipelines, embedding equity and accessibility into strategic planning, and recognizing that the museum is not just a space for education; it’s a space of power.

The work is already underway. From Indigenous governance frameworks outlined in the CMA’s *Moved to Action*^[2] report to new participatory board models outlined in the *IRAPFM Decrease in Public Funding: A Worldwide Answer from Museums* report^[5] to the City of Toronto *Culture Plan*,^[12] the model for change exists. But leadership must meet these models with action.

“Museums are not neutral. They never have been. So what are you going to do with the power you have?”

— EMP consultation

This is a moment to move beyond reflection and toward restructuring. The future of museums depends on our ability to act with humility, courage, and integrity and to align our resources with the people and principles we aim to serve.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. But there is a shared ethic of care, responsibility, and imagination that we saw across every consultation, and it deserves to be honoured.

WHAT'S NEXT

FUNDING THE FUTURE

Without sustainable, predictable operational funding, meaningful change in the museum sector remains out of reach. It's time to move beyond temporary fixes and advocate for a system that supports long-term stability across all types of institutions.

PRIORITIZING PEOPLE, NOT JUST PROGRAMS

Support the labour that makes culture possible through fair wages, long-term career pathways, and mentorship embedded at every level.

REDISTRIBUTING POWER

Create leadership structures that are diverse, accountable, and genuinely responsive to community voices, departing from symbolic gestures or temporary hires.

BACKING COMMITMENTS WITH INFRASTRUCTURE

Stop treating equity, accessibility, and decolonization as values to gesture toward and start treating them as mandates that shape funding, governance, and planning from the outset.

INVESTING IN SMALL AND COMMUNITY-LED INSTITUTIONS

Sustain those already doing transformative work, often on the margins and with limited resources.

ACKNOWLEDGING LIMITATIONS WITH HONESTY

If there is no intention to change, say so. But where there is a will, there must be action, and the will is present in this sector.



“I don’t expect the whole world to change overnight. But I do expect that if you say you care, you should act like it. That’s it. Just act like it.”

— Community-centred consultation



REFLECTIONS FROM THE TEAM

Our journey through this capstone project has been one of learning, collaboration, and deep reflection. As a team of students entering the museum field, we had the opportunity to listen to a wide range of voices (students, professionals, and community leaders), each offering grounded perspectives on where the sector stands and where it could go.

We set out to imagine a bold, transformative future for museums in Ontario but quickly found ourselves pulled back into the realities of the present. Many of our conversations focused less on far-off aspirations and more on immediate barriers. They were not new concerns, but they were deeply felt and widely shared. At first, this repetition left us disheartened. Were we simply repeating what had already been said?

But over time, we realized that repetition is not the same as stagnation. The consistency of these messages reflects a shared, persistent commitment to change. The people we spoke to are not waiting for the future to arrive. They are already building it. They are working to make museums responsive, transparent, and deeply rooted in the communities they serve.

Our reflection as a team also shifted as the project evolved. Early on, we approached this work with the hope of uncovering something

revolutionary. But what we found instead was something perhaps more important: a sector already full of people doing the work, often without recognition, support, or institutional backing. Our role was not to reinvent the conversation but to hold space for it, to listen carefully, and to reflect on what we heard with care and clarity.

In hindsight, we also learned a lot about the process. If we were to do this again, we might have begun by asking participants to envision the future without constraint, to dream first, and then trace the path back to the present. Instead, we often began with the weight of today's issues, which made it difficult to fully imagine new possibilities. Still, even within those constraints, a clear vision emerged. A vision rooted in care, collaboration, and a reimagined sense of public responsibility.

This project has reinforced our belief in the sector's potential and reminded us that change does not always arrive as something new. Sometimes, it comes through persistence in the ideas that would not go away, the values that keep showing up, and the people who continue to advocate for something better.



We're proud to have contributed to this conversation and to have worked alongside so many who are already shaping the future of museums in Ontario. We leave this project not only with new knowledge but with renewed respect for the work already being done and a renewed sense of responsibility to carry it forward.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



ACKNOWLEDGING GAPS

It is important to acknowledge that the direct involvement of Indigenous groups and representatives was not within the scope of this project. This decision was made thoughtfully, recognizing that meaningful settler-Indigenous engagement requires dedicated resources, relationships, and approaches. Given the project's timeframe and resource constraints, initiating such engagement without the proper foundational preparation could have risked insufficient partnership. Instead, the team recommends that future iterations of this work prioritize meaningful dialogue and collaboration with Indigenous communities, ensuring adequate resources, time, and relationship-building frameworks are in place to support authentic and sustained relationships and participation.

More broadly, we recognize that this report and the consultations conducted for it are only a starting point. There are many more perspectives and voices that can and should contribute to these conversations. We recommend that the Ontario Museum Association continue to consult with those whose insights and experiences have not yet been fully represented. Additionally, we acknowledge and appreciate the significant and ongoing work of other professional bodies, such as the Canadian Museums Association, the British Columbia Museums Association, the Alberta Museums Association, and other PTMAs. Their efforts continue to shape a more inclusive and thoughtful approach to the future of museums in Canada.

THANK YOUS

We extend our deepest thanks to the museum professionals, emerging museum professionals, students, cultural leaders, community organizations, and survey participants who generously shared their time, insights, and experiences during our seven consultation sessions. This report would not exist without their openness, thoughtfulness, and commitment to imagining a stronger future for museums in Ontario. To honour our commitment to confidentiality, participants are not named in this report, but their voices and values are at its heart.

We are especially grateful to the Ontario Museum Association (OMA) and the Master of Museum Studies (MMSt) program for making this project possible. Thank you to Sandy Chan and Jessica Fischer for recognizing the need for a project like this and entrusting us with its development. Thank you to Cathy Malloy for guiding us through the early stages and sharing her knowledge and connections across the sector. We also thank Alison Drummond and

Jamie McKenzie-Naish for their ongoing support and for providing space and encouragement to carry out our consultations.

Thank you to the Faculty of Information for the institutional and financial support that made this work possible. Thank you to Cate Alexander for her thoughtful editing and guidance throughout this process. Thank you as well to Dana Murray for her support in the initial stages of the project, particularly in helping us articulate and shape our project's core documents.

Lastly, we owe deep appreciation to our Capstone supervisor, Professor Maggie Hutcheson, whose steady guidance, critical insight, and care grounded this project from beginning to end. This project has been an immense learning experience. As emerging professionals entering the field, we are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to conversations already in motion—and to learn from the people doing this work every day.

APPENDICES: PROJECT BACKGROUND

**ABOUT THE ONTARIO
MUSEUM ASSOCIATION
(OMA)**

The Ontario Museum Association (OMA), established in 1972, is a not-for-profit organization that represents over 700 museums, galleries, and historic sites, along with 11,000 museum professionals and 35,000 volunteers across Ontario. Its mission is to be the leading professional body advancing a strong, collaborative, and inclusive museum sector that contributes to community life and the well-being of Ontarians. The OMA supports excellence, capacity-building, communication, and collaboration among its members while advocating for the societal value of museums. The Association upholds values such as diversity, inclusivity, adaptability, innovation, collaboration, and service excellence. It aims to recommend new funding models, enhance professional skills and knowledge, strengthen the sector's public standing, and ensure its own relevance. The OMA fulfills these goals through its roles as an advocate, convenor, professional body, and thought leader, working to create positive change, foster connections, provide professional development, and promote best practices in the museum field.

MAY IS MUSEUM MONTH

May is Museum Month, launched in 1999, is a province-wide initiative led by the OMA to highlight museums' contributions to community engagement, education, and heritage preservation. The 25th anniversary of this campaign marks a pivotal moment to reflect on the past and plan for the future. In partnership with students from the University of Toronto's Master of Museum Studies (MMSt) program, the OMA initiated a capstone project to produce this forward-thinking discussion report, identifying sector-wide insights, opportunities, and challenges that will shape Ontario museums in the next 25 years.

**FACULTY OF INFORMATION
(ISCHOOL), UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO**

Located in downtown Toronto, the Faculty of Information, commonly known as the iSchool, is a graduate faculty at the University of Toronto that specializes in the study of information and its role in society. Established in 1928, the iSchool has evolved to encompass a broad range of disciplines, including library and information science, archival studies, user experience design, and museum studies. It offers programs such as the Master of Information (MI), the Master of Museum Studies (MMSt), and a PhD in Information Studies. The faculty emphasizes an interdisciplinary approach, integrating theoretical and practical perspectives to prepare students for various information-related professions.

**MASTER OF MUSEUM
STUDIES (MMST) PROGRAM**

The Master of Museum Studies (MMSt) program at the University of Toronto is a professional graduate program that prepares students for careers in museums and related cultural institutions. The curriculum combines academic coursework with practical experience, covering areas such as museum management, curatorship, education, and collections care. Students engage with contemporary issues in the museum field, including digital innovation, community engagement, and cultural policy.

**MUSEUM STUDIES
CAPSTONE PROJECT**

The Museum Studies Capstone Project is a culminating component of the MMSt program, allowing students to apply their knowledge and skills to real-world challenges in the museum sector. Developed in collaboration with faculty and external partners, capstone projects can take various forms, such as exhibitions, research studies, or strategic plans. These projects enable students to work closely with museums, galleries, or cultural organizations, addressing specific needs or exploring innovative approaches. The capstone experience fosters professional development and contributes to the broader museum community.

APPENDICES: METHODOLOGY

TIMELINE OF ENGAGEMENT

PRE-ENGAGEMENT

Oct–Dec 2024

Mapped out key stakeholders, developed outreach strategies, and laid the groundwork for consultations.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Jan–Feb 2025

Facilitated seven consultation sessions and an open survey to gather diverse perspectives from across Ontario's museum and cultural sector.

POST-ENGAGEMENT

Feb–Apr 2025

Transcribed, coded, and analyzed consultation data to identify key themes and draft this report.

PROJECT SCOPE

The project centred consultations in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) while incorporating wider Ontario representation via the Regional Museum Network (RMN), OMA Board, and academic networks. Key goals included:

- Elevating community-driven and innovative practices.
- Engaging emerging professionals and students.
- Capturing the perspectives of community and institutional leaders.

OUT-OF-SCOPE
CONSIDERATIONS

While this report shares key insights and reflections, it does not include binding recommendations.

This project focused specifically on Ontario-based stakeholders and does not reflect national perspectives.

The project did not involve the direct development of new programs or initiatives. Instead, it aimed to surface ideas, themes, and visions that could inspire future action by those in positions to carry it forward.

DATA COLLECTION AND
ANALYSIS METHODS

Between January and February 2025, we conducted seven consultation sessions with participants across Ontario. In total, 70 participants contributed to the consultations.

- **4 virtual sessions** (via Zoom), each lasting approximately 1 to 1.5 hours
 - We used Mentimeter to facilitate discussions and recorded sessions for transcription and analysis.
- **3 in-person sessions** at the George Brown House in Toronto, each approximately 2 hours
 - These sessions included lunch and discussion activities.
 - Conversations were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Sessions used a mix of facilitated discussion, breakout groups, Mentimeter polling, flip charts, sticky notes, and collaborative prompts. All sessions were transcribed and anonymized. To supplement the sessions, we circulated a post-consultation survey to all participants for additional insights. The survey was also shared through various museum networks across Ontario to broaden participation.

All data was analyzed through transcription review, and collaborative coding by the research team. Emerging themes were identified, tagged, and synthesized into 5 core insight areas. Quotes were selected to highlight the tone, ideas, and language shared by participants, with care taken to reflect diverse perspectives and roles.

DATA ANALYSIS TAGS AND
FREQUENCY

During the transcription analysis, we applied thematic codes to identify recurring topics in the conversations. The following numbers reflect how often these themes appeared across the consultation sessions.

Theme	Frequency
Future	258
Present	254
Institutional Structure	201
Relevance	201
Community	149
Advocacy	135
Support	121
Funding	118
Sustainability	94
Leadership	75
Passion/Changemakers	76
Accreditation/Professionalism	64
Security and Stability	69
Job Opportunities	48
Pay	26

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