

# MUSEUMS AND COMMUNITY: PERCEPTIONS AND ENGAGEMENT

## A 2024 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY

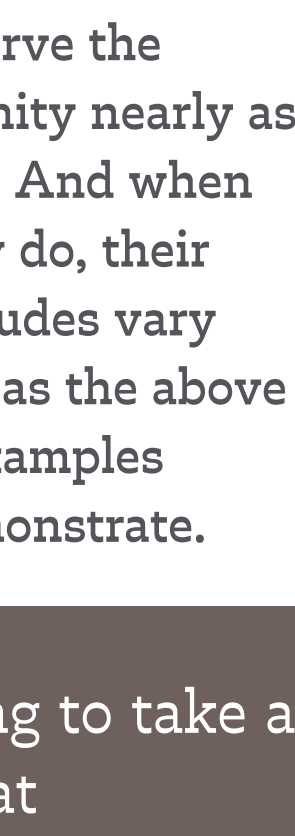
*"The museum helps create community."*



*"A museum is NOT a part of a the local community! Its context is historical and global."*



*"The museum should have more programs and exhibits that address important issues and topics in my community."*

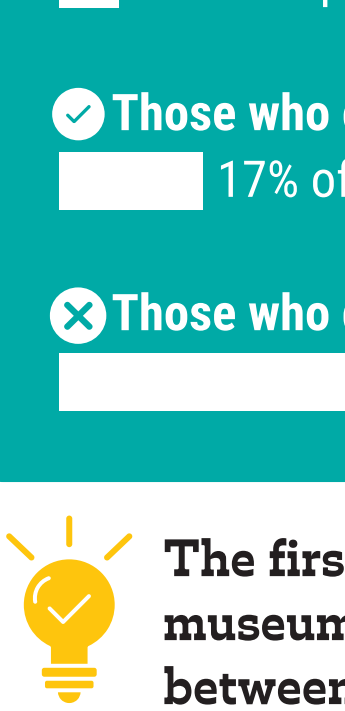


Many of us who work in the museum field think a lot about how we serve the community. Typically, we are thinking about our geographic community (though there can also be communities of interest that are not geographically based).




Frequent museum-goers, however, don't explicitly think about how museums serve the community nearly as much. And when they do, their attitudes vary widely, as the above examples demonstrate.

In this Data Story, we are going to take a look at how the perception that museums connect people to community appears to affect engagement and visitation. We'll also explore the variety of perceptions museum-goers have about community engagement.



In the 2024 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, we asked respondents two questions that had community-oriented answers. For both questions, respondents were thinking of museums in general, and could choose as many answers as they liked.

**1 What inspires you to make a return visit to a specific museum?**

18% of respondents chose "to feel connected to my community and/or support a community organization."

**2 When you think of an ideal museum visit, what do you want to experience?**

17% chose "greater connection to others/more a part of my community."

**We then sorted respondents into three categories:**

- Those who chose BOTH community-oriented answers: 7% of respondents
- Those who chose ONE of the answers (but not both): 17% of respondents
- Those who did not choose EITHER answer: 76% of respondents

The first, most obvious, conclusion is that most museum-goers are not expressing a strong connection between museums and community.

So, overall, there is a bit of a disconnect between what we think about a lot as practitioners ... and the perceptions of most visitors.

But when we compare these three different categories of respondents, things get a bit more interesting.

### Museums connect us to community!

*"This is an exceptional museum ... such an asset to our community."*

*"I love the museum and everything you do for the community."*




While only 7% of respondents chose both community answer choices, these respondents were unquestionably the most engaged museum-goers. They:

- Visit museums much more frequently than other respondents
- Have more motivations for visiting
- Are much more likely to identify as curious
- Are most likely to think museums are doing a "great job"
- Are much more enthusiastic about imaginative learning
- Are much more likely to want museums to cultivate hope among visitors
- Are 50% more likely to hold inclusive attitudes
- And are significantly more likely to be under 40 without minor children (and significantly less likely to be 60 or older)

Respondents who chose one or the other of the two community-oriented answers, 17% of respondents overall, also skewed these ways. They simply didn't veer from the norm as much as those that chose both the answers.

### Not thinking about museums and community

Over three-quarters of respondents didn't choose either answer, but compared to their community-oriented peers, they were significantly less engaged with museums. They:

- Visit less frequently
- Are not quite as strongly motivated
- And are generally not as enthusiastic about a lot of the other things we were assessing, such as imaginative learning, hope, and inclusion

This doesn't mean they are negative museum-goers. Not at all! For the most part, they are engaged, frequent museum-goers.

This is more about comparison. The individuals who think museums connect us to community are just even more enthusiastic about museums.




### But are there people who don't want museums engaged in community?

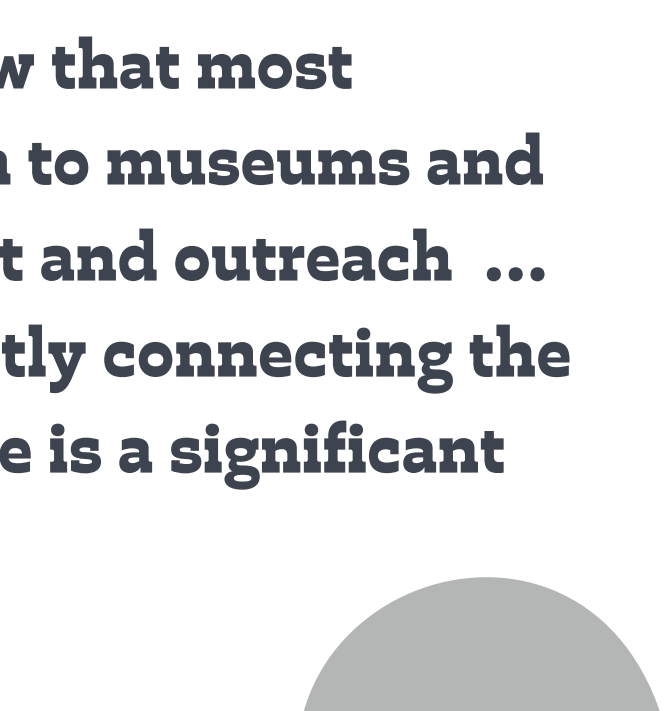

Well, yes, but it is a relatively small percentage. In the 2023 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, when we asked about museums and their role in civic life, we saw about one in five respondents push back and share that they felt this was "political," was "not your job," or that they considered community engagement a distraction from the mission. Some felt "community" was coded language for inclusive efforts.

*"The museum has unfortunately become a community center."*


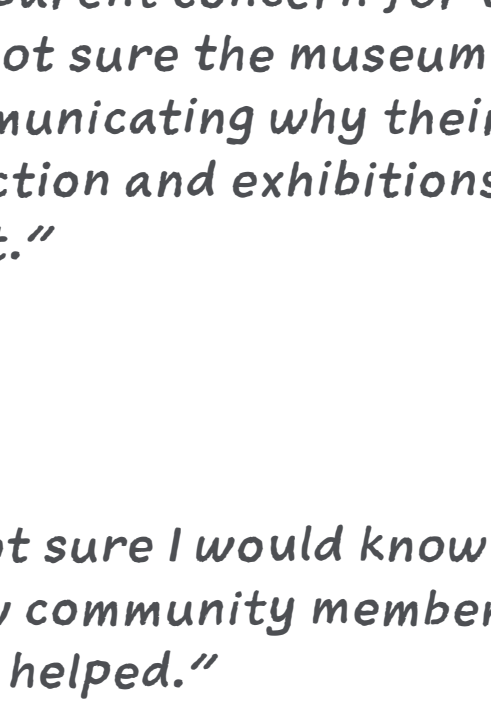

*"Community engagement ... often detracts from the mission. Drop the 'woke' and pick up the painting."*




Additionally, we sometimes see museum-goers express the idea that museums are something that is completely outside of their daily lives (and community), thus supporting their need for respite and escape from the day-to-day grind.

While we acknowledge that respite is something virtually all of us need, it isn't realistic, or even possible, for museums to be fully divorced from contemporary events locally, nationally, and internationally. After all, visitors bring their own life experiences and perspectives into museum spaces ... and view museum content through those lenses. A museum that ignores contemporary events and experiences risks losing its relevancy.

Fortunately, we do know that most museum-goers are open to museums and community engagement and outreach ... they are just not explicitly connecting the two. This suggests there is a significant articulation gap.

*"For all of its apparent concern for the community, I'm not sure the museum is effective at communicating why their permanent collection and exhibitions are so important."*

*"Not sure I would know how community members are helped."*



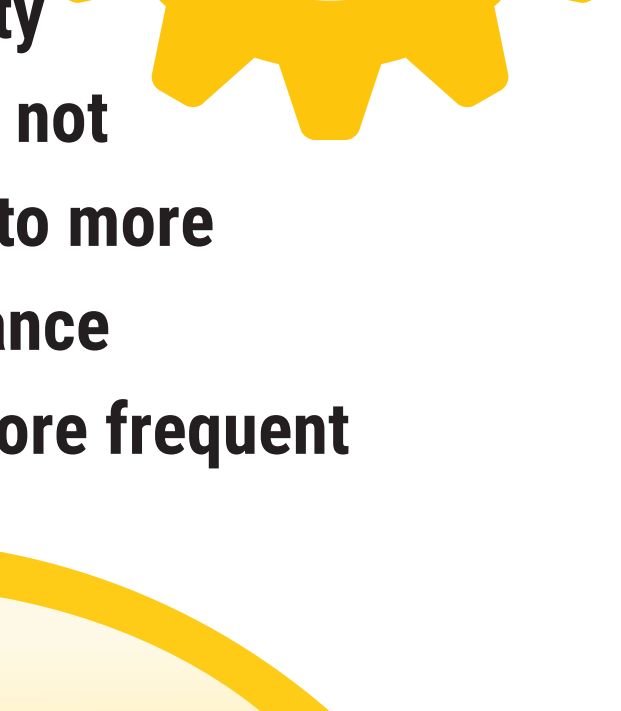

**If we want to be vital community anchors, we need to:**

- Understand how the community wants us to support them as humans and community members
- Do the work effectively
- Communicate broadly how we do it
- And share why it supports the mission and matters to community members; that is, measure the impact

When asked, however, museum-goers do have thoughtful, creative, and mission-based ideas that museums can implement to support their hopes for their community. We'll explore these in a future Data Story.



But there is something great to celebrate here: when museum-goers see their local museums as vital community hubs, engagement increases significantly!



This suggests that community engagement efforts result in not only delivering more impact to more people, but increasing relevance (and visitation) on a much more frequent basis as well.

It's a virtuous circle that helps our communities be more neighborly, thriving, and inclusive places, helps community members learn and grow individually, and helps museums share their missions more effectively.



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Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include:  
 - 2024 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, n = 90,176, 202 museums participating  
 - 2024 Broadier Population Sampling, n = 2,154  
 - 2017 - 2023 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers

\*Data Stories share research about both frequent museum-goers (typically visit multiple museums each year) and the broader population (including casual, sporadic, and non-visitors to museums).

More Data Stories can be found at [wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories](http://wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories).