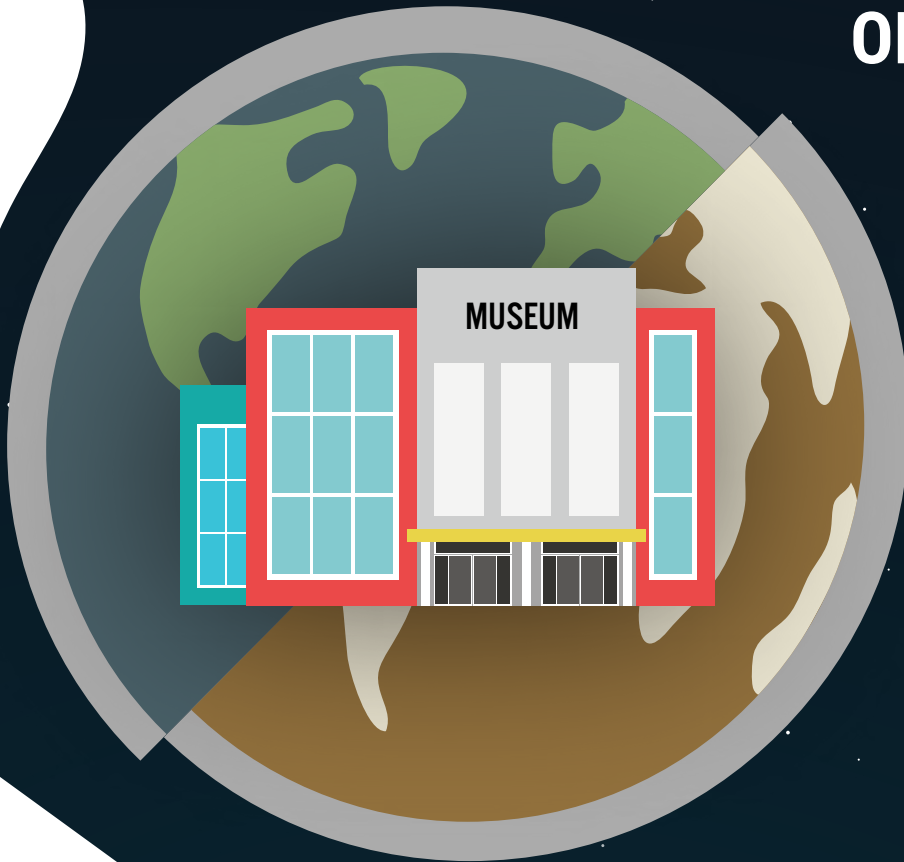


Museums in a Changing World:

Audience Trends | Impact | Trust

INSIGHTS FROM THE ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS



AUTUMN 2024



WilkeningConsulting

audience research | knowledge curation

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“[Museum] experiences have challenged me to honor the complexity of experience, to acknowledge that context/perspective dramatically shapes understanding, and that we are all more similar than different. I would love to see museums facilitate dialogue and experiences that foster empathy and related-ness with the ‘other.’ Social media echo chambers and political tribalism desperately needs a counterpoint, where seeking to understand the other is prioritized and celebrated.”

Source: 2024 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers (AAM + Wilkening Consulting)

Quoted respondents are represented with an avatar that generally matches their demographic profile.

Every day, millions of people engage with museums and museum content



Why do they choose to spend their time visiting museums?

What impact have museums had that makes so many value them?

Why do they trust what museums share ... and what threatens that trust?

We are going to explore how audience research in the United States is helping museums answer some of these questions while also gain a better understanding of diverse visitor values and attitudes.



This work is critical so we can prepare for an increasingly uncertain future.

Much of what we will share is positive and hopeful ... but challenges are growing.



TODAY'S DISCUSSION:



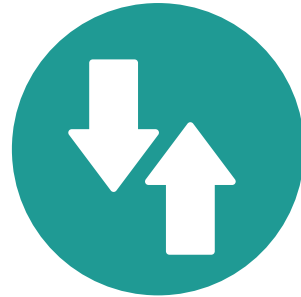
CONFLICTING WORLDVIEWS & POLARIZATION



TRUST AND SKEPTICISM



TOOLS TO HELP



CONFLICTING WORLDVIEWS & POLARIZATION

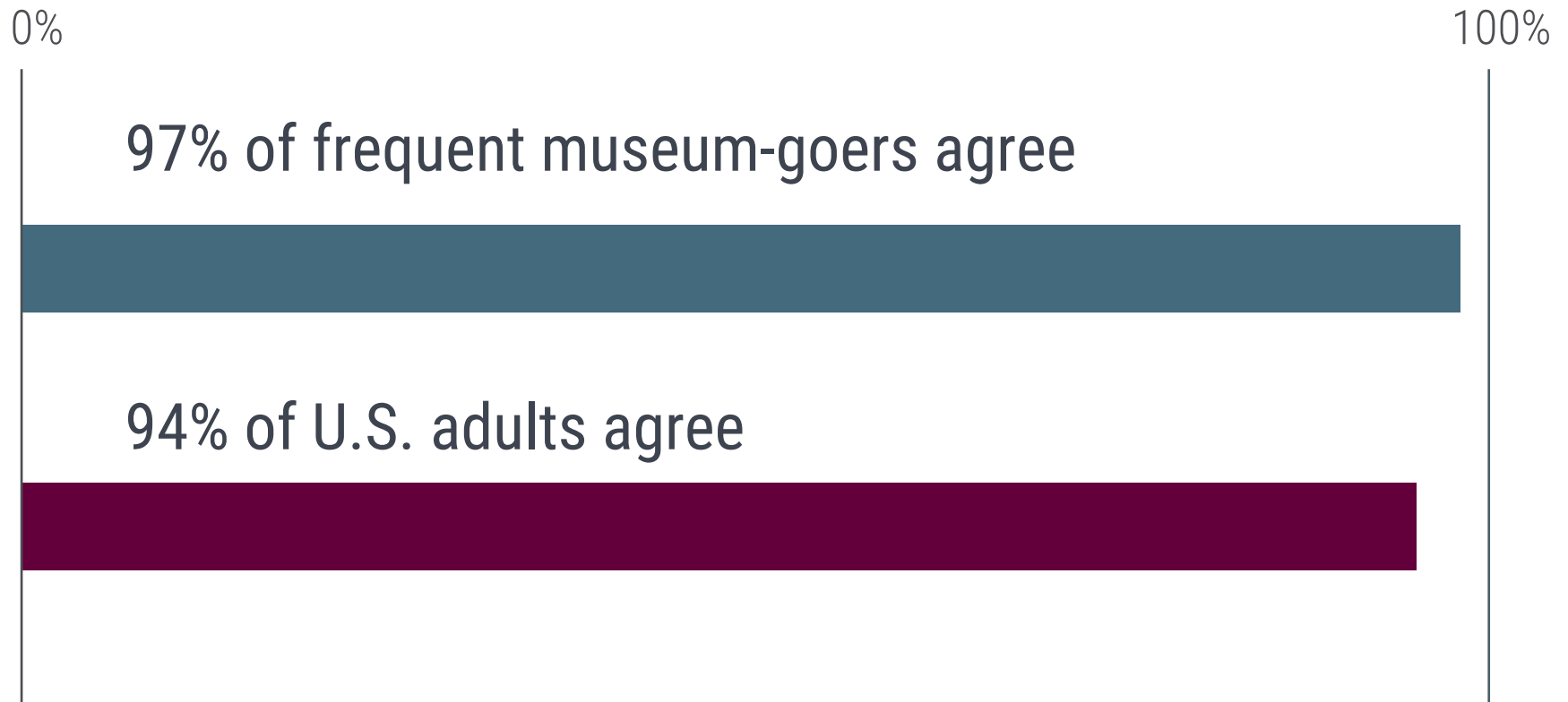
Most people want museums to do good,
hard work that benefits us individually, our
families, our communities, and our society.



Here are
some examples:



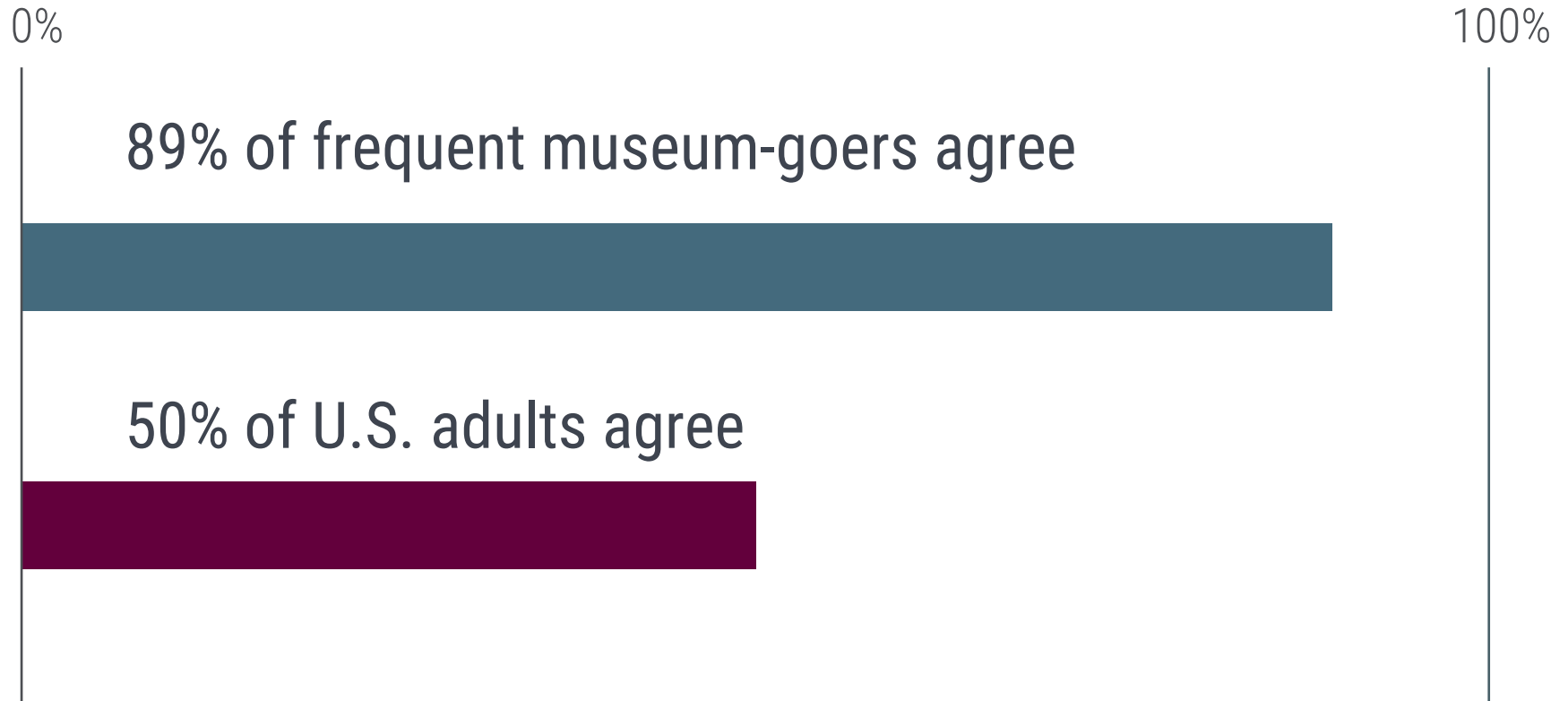
Museums are places that support health and wellbeing



Source: 2022 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers and Broader Population Sampling (AAM + Wilkening Consulting)



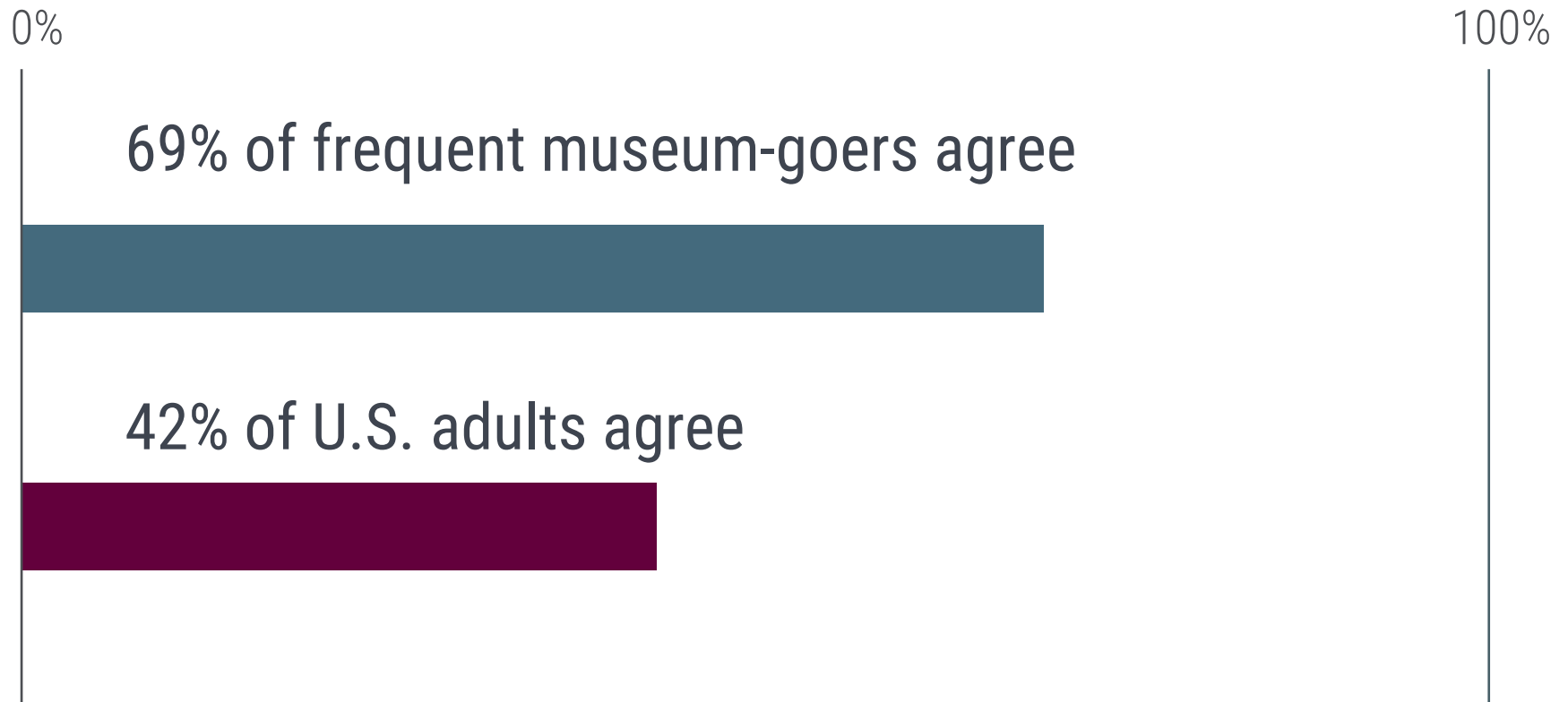
Museums are places that
deepen knowledge



Source: 2023 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers and Broader Population Sampling (AAM + Wilkening Consulting)



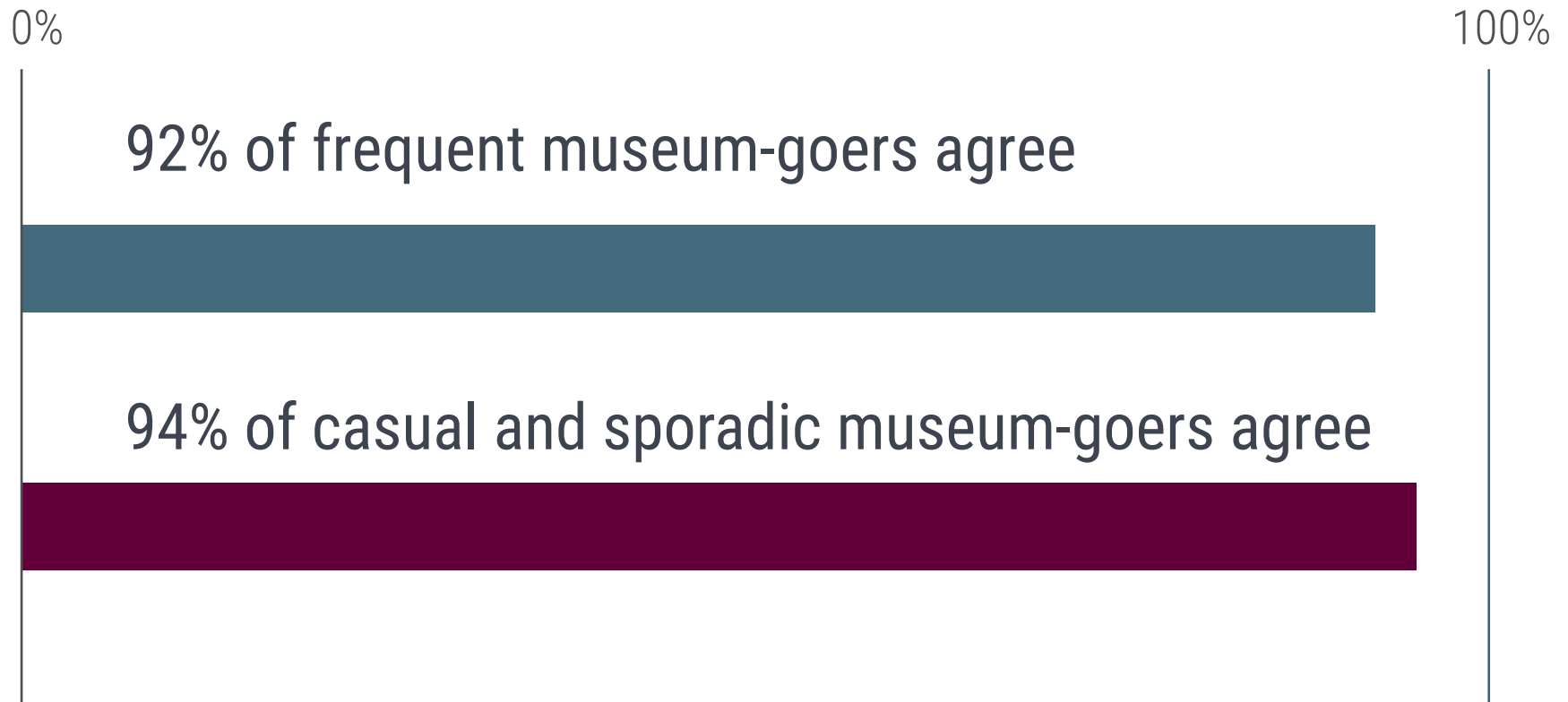
Museums are places that cultivate curiosity



Source: 2023 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers and Broader Population Sampling (AAM + Wilkening Consulting)

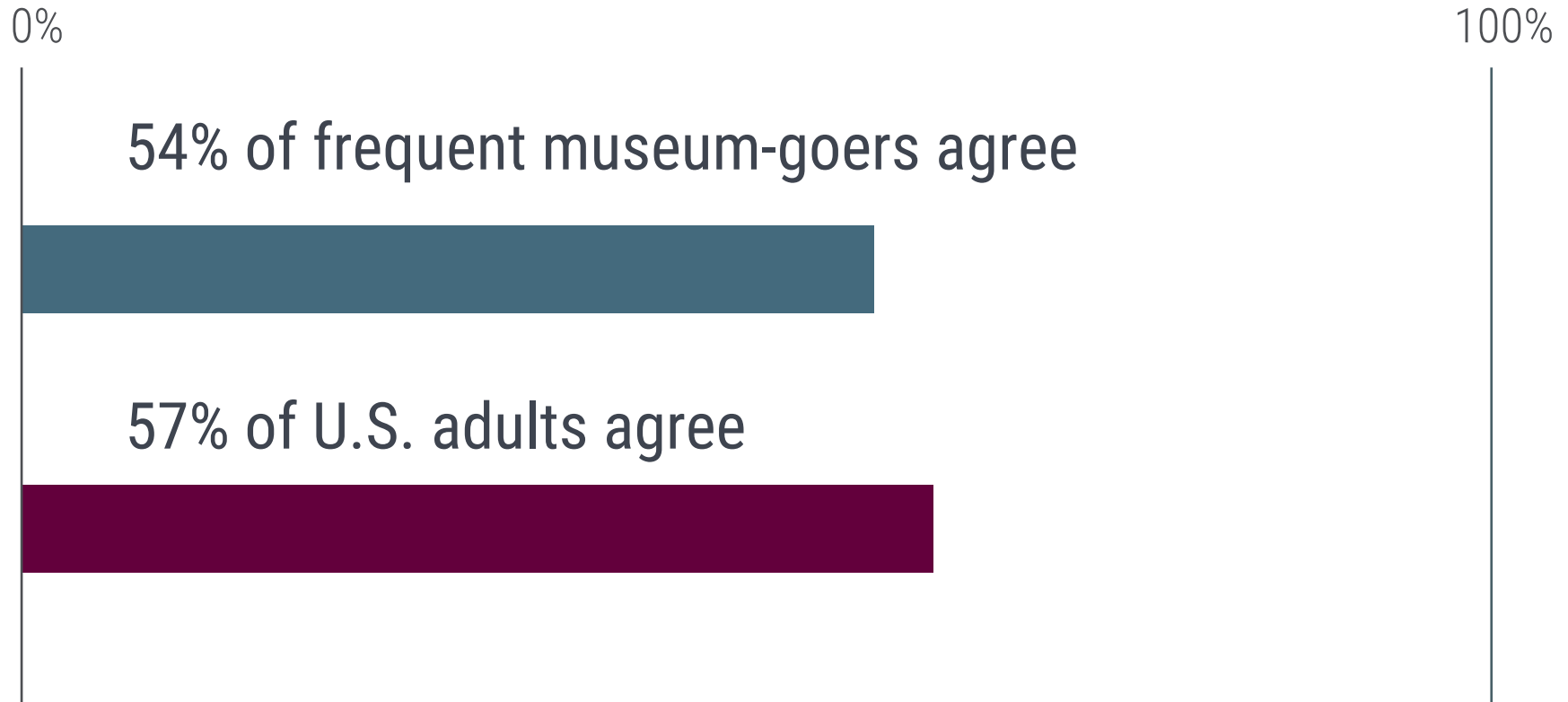


Museums are places that make visitors feel more connected to others





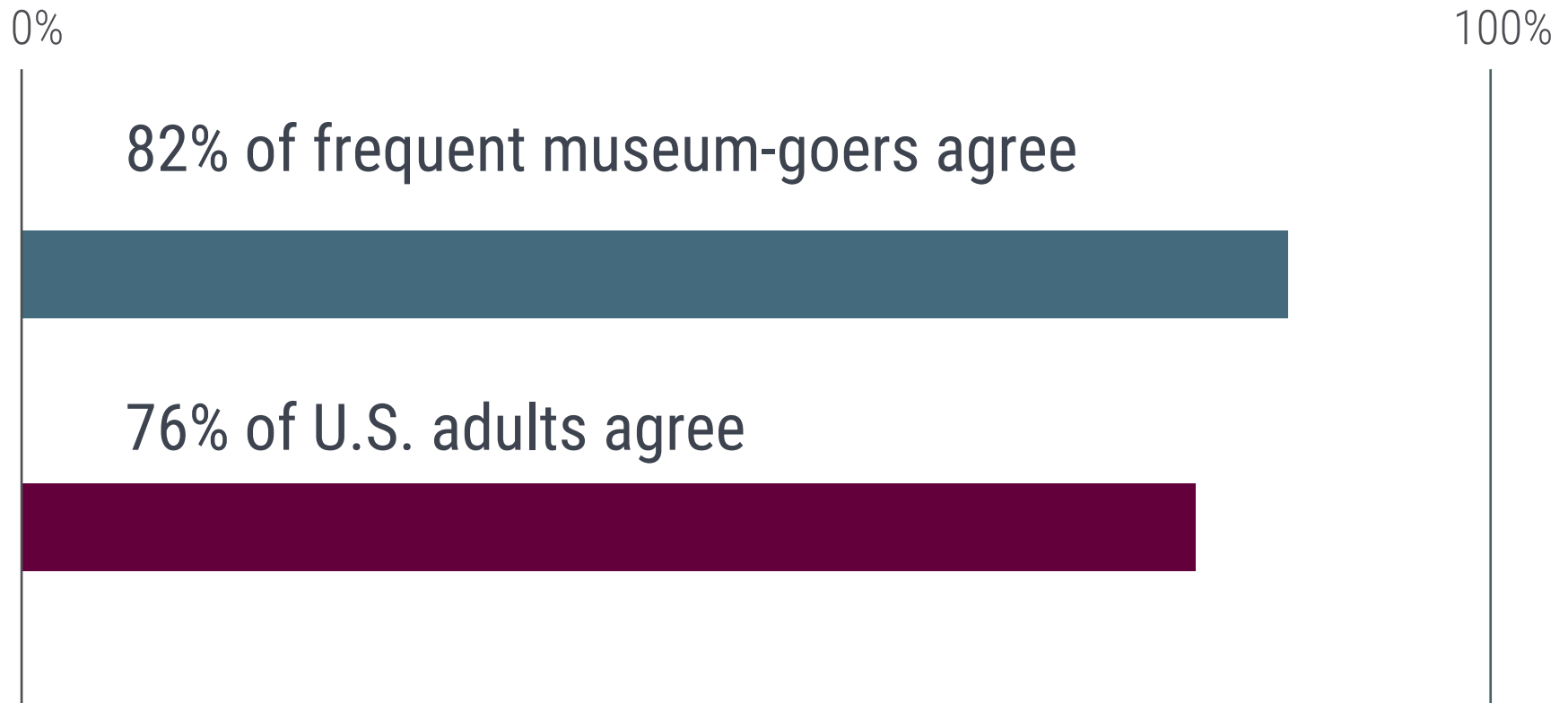
Most people think museums should be active participants in our civil society



Source: 2023 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers and Broader Population Sampling (AAM + Wilkening Consulting)

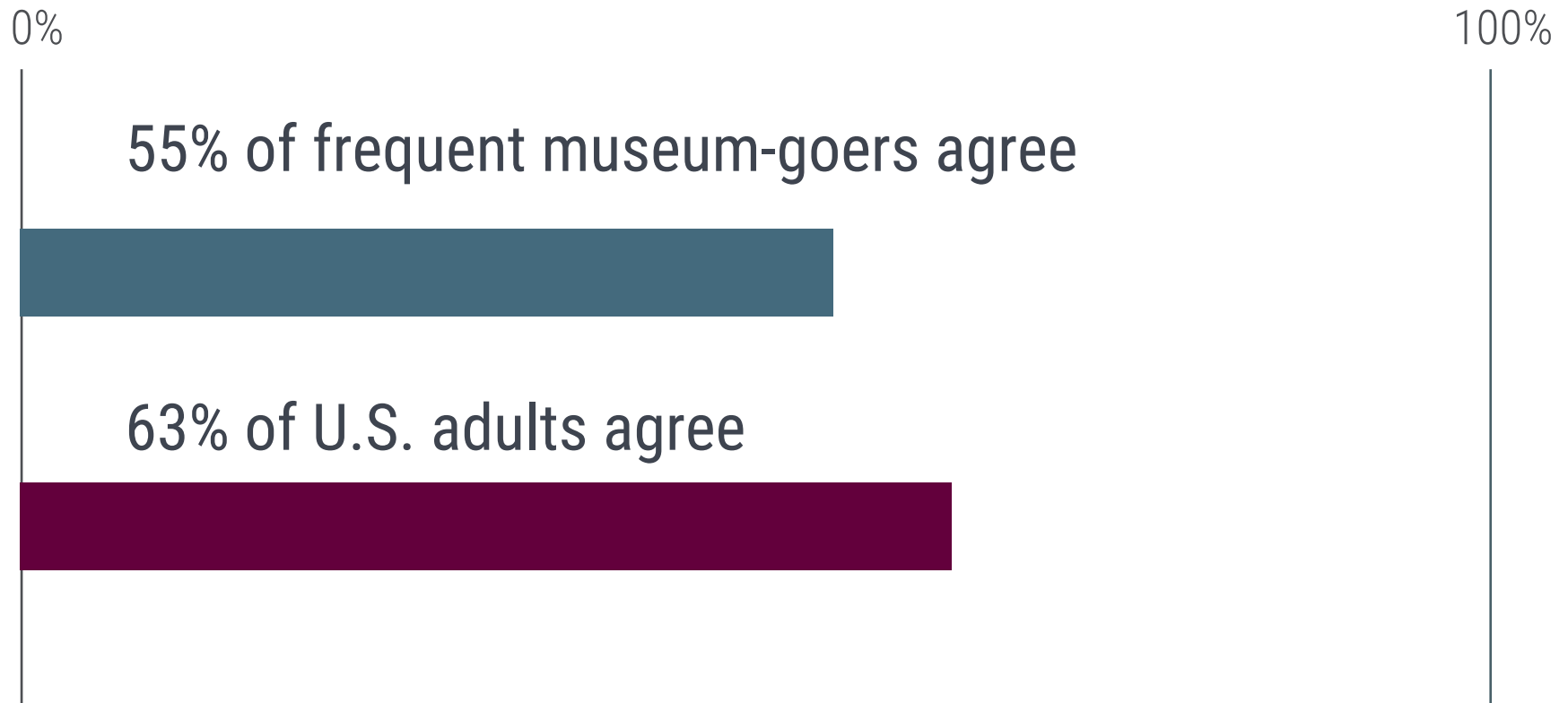


Most people want museums to help us all feel greater connections to humanity





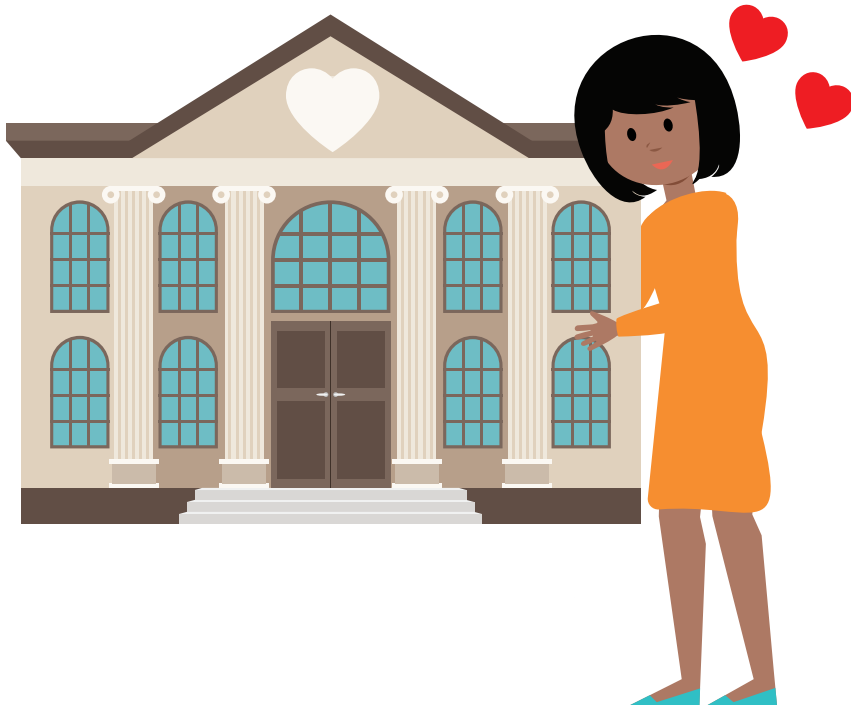
And yes, most people want museums to share inclusive content



Source: 2023 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers and Broader Population Sampling (AAM + Wilkening Consulting)

BOTTOM LINE:

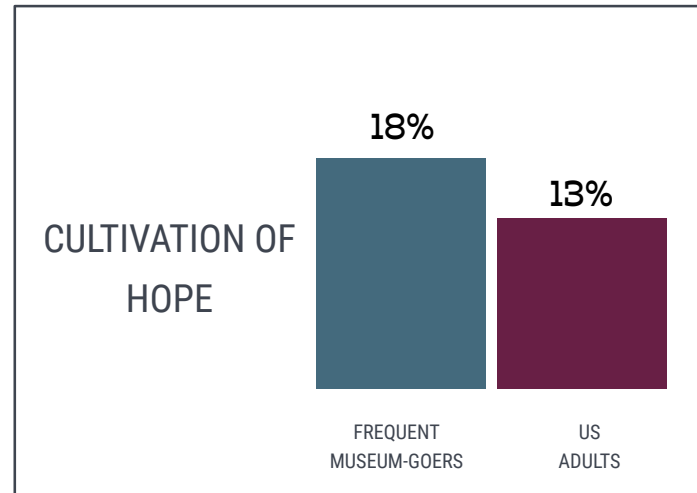
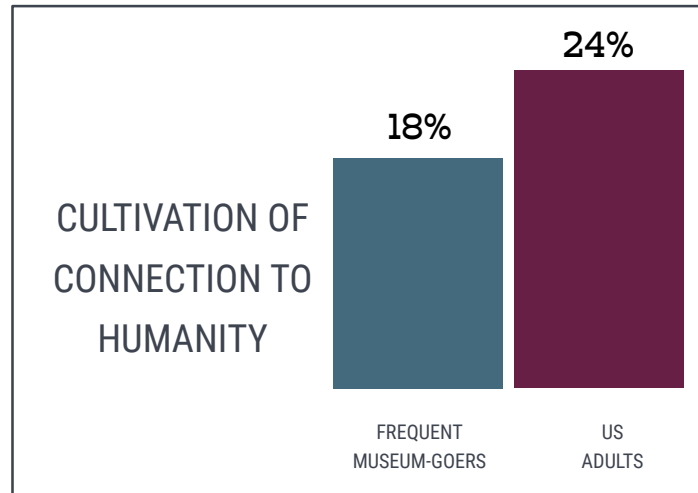
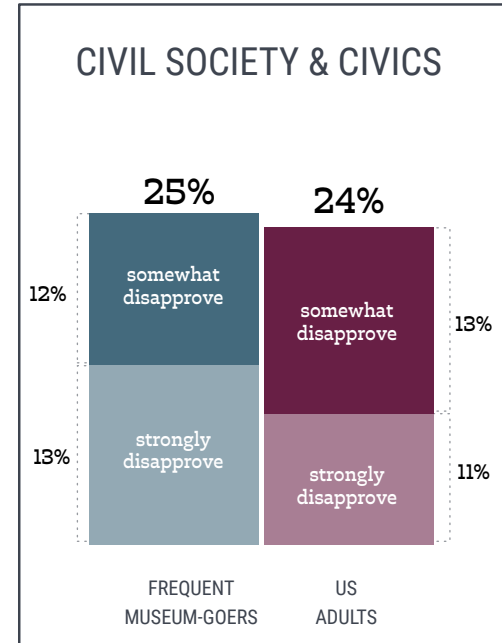
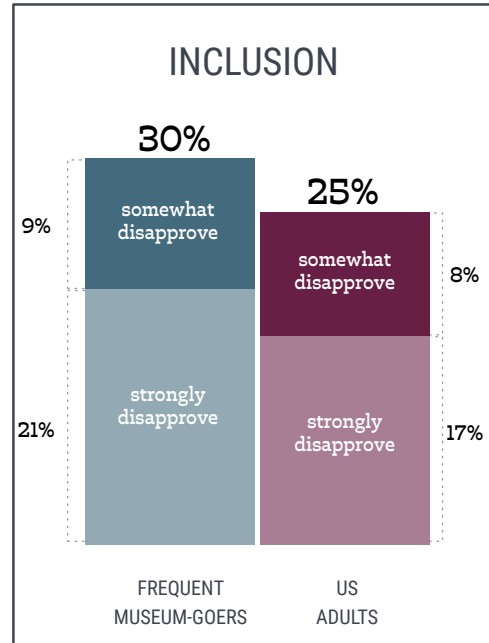
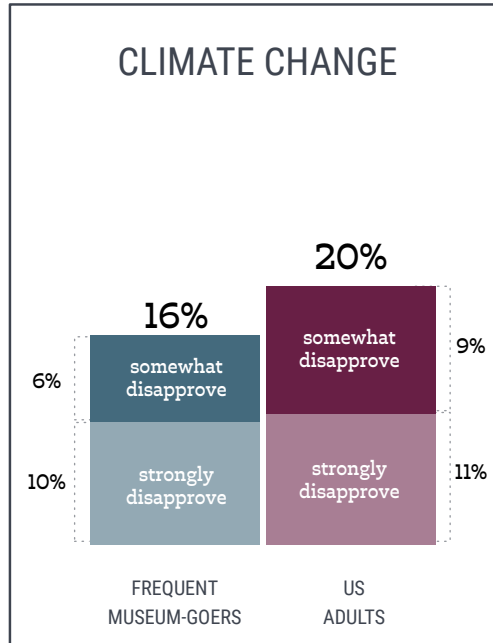
Most people support the work of museums to share science, build healthy communities, connect us to one another, and to explore our shared history.



So ...
what's stopping us?



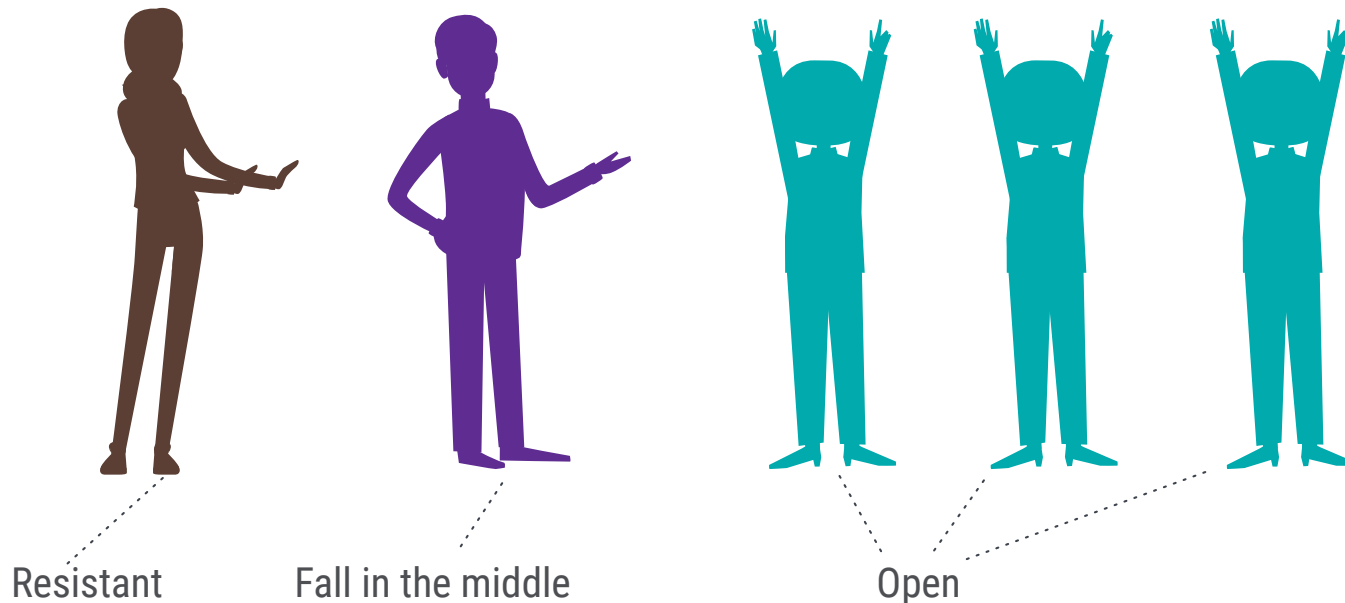
THE RESISTANCE: CONTENT THEY DON'T WANT:



Source: 2022 – 2024 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers (AAM + Wilkening Consulting)

Overall, about 1 in 5 people in the United States fall in that more “Resistant” segment, consistently resisting most/all of these topics and ideas.

About 3 in 5 are more “Open” to these topics, while about 1 in 5 fall more in the middle.



While 20% is far from a majority, it seems to be the tipping point when like-minded people have an easier time finding each other, validating perspectives, and developing a shared language of resistance.



They use that shared identity-based community to promote their ideas more broadly, capturing even more attention.

And when they vote, especially in primaries, they develop significant political leverage.



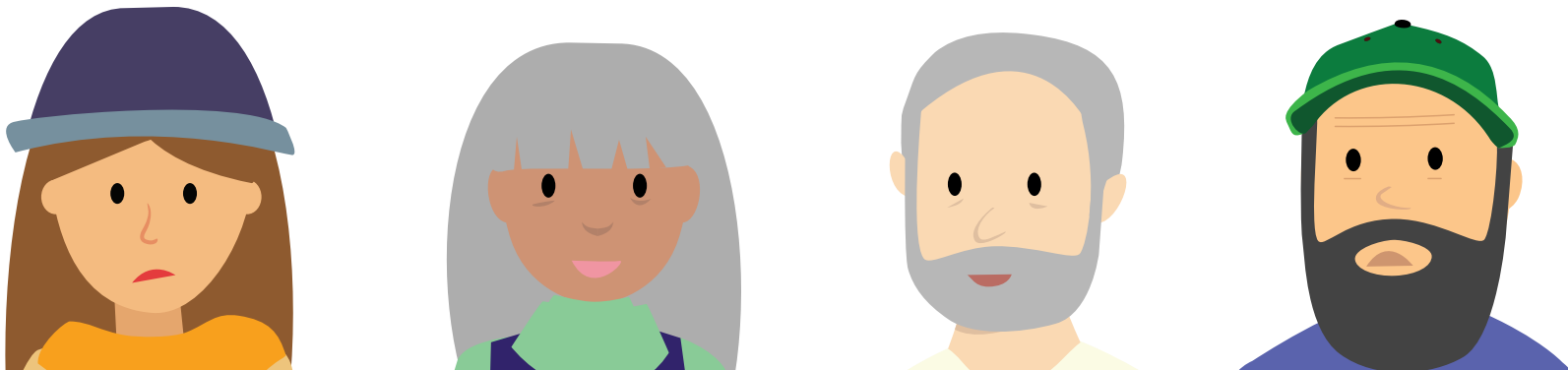
“Resistant” people often feel they are on the defensive, so they tend to be emotional, vocal, and volatile.

They use their political leverage to shut down content they don’t like, whether in schools, libraries, or museums.



What will help? As practitioners, finger-pointing and demonizing those who resist will be counter-productive.

We have to understand the values and attitudes of these “Resistant” individuals to consider why they are resisting specific content.



When we analyze the language and rationale “Resistant” people give for objecting to content, we’ve found that they are more likely to view the world as one of scarce resources, and allocation is a zero-sum game.

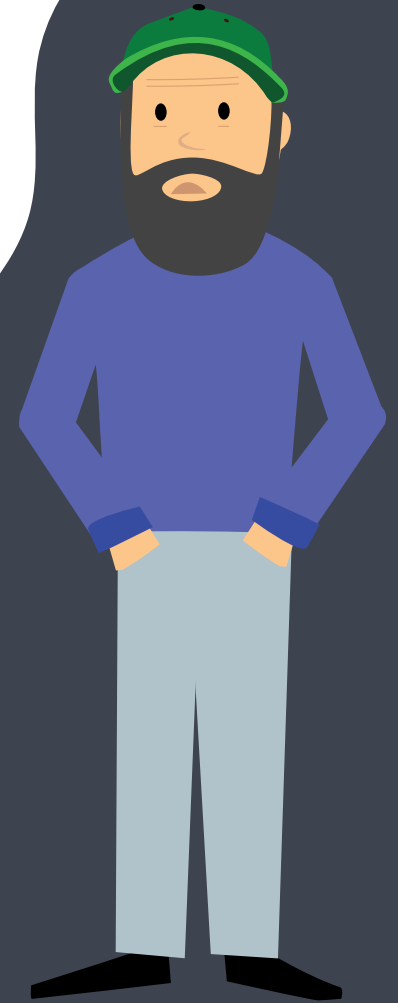
Thus,
everything
results in a
tradeoff.



And if everything is a tradeoff,
then at whose expense are
resources (financial, attention,
or identity) reallocated?

More “Resistant” people fear
it is at *their* expense.

Which brings us to the heart
of the issue.



FEAR.

The fears expressed by
“Resistant” people are
strong, palpable,
and defensive.



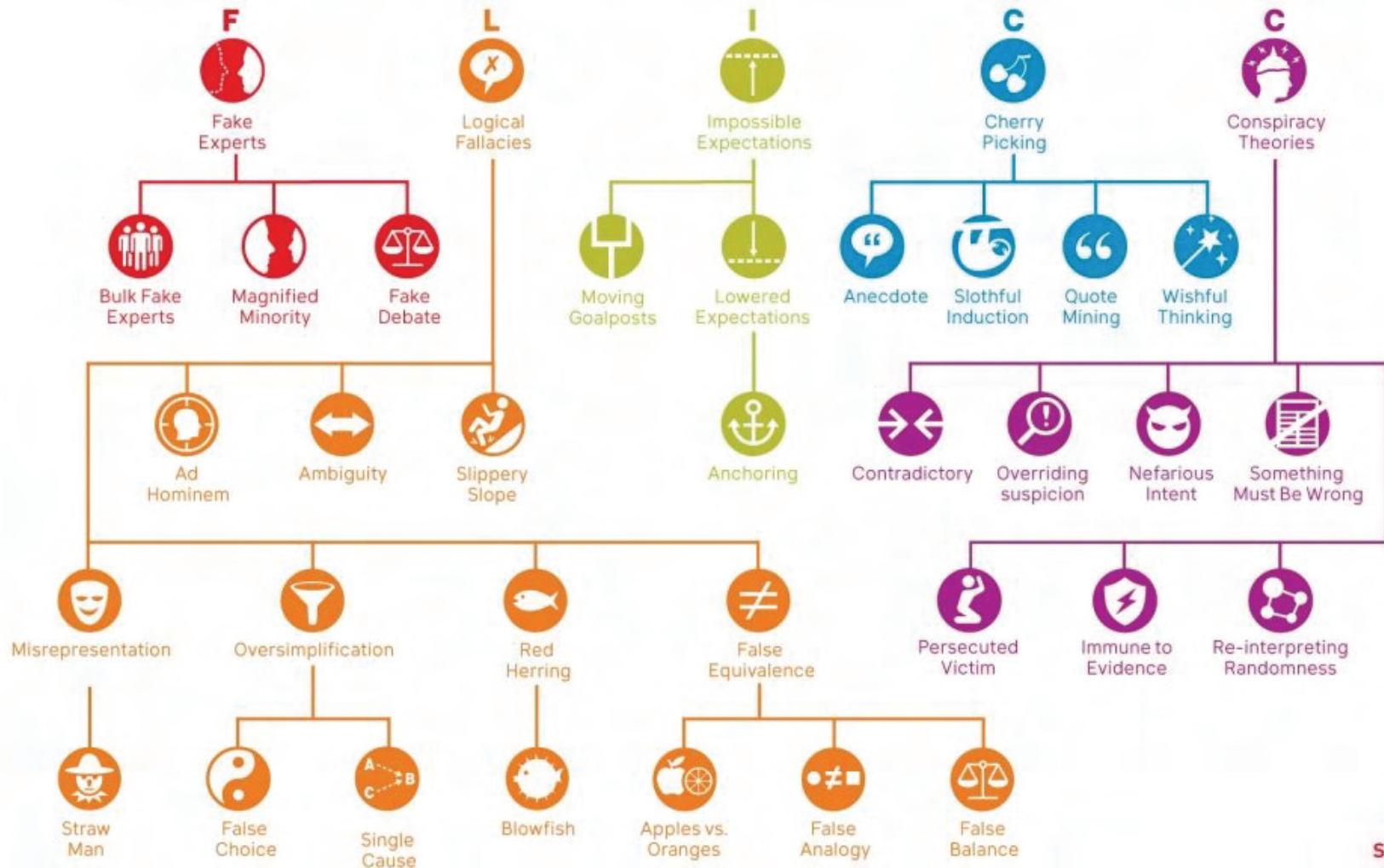


These fears tend to prompt highly emotional responses.

And because they feel this content *does harm*, they use defense mechanisms to shut down those experiences, including:



THE DEFENSE MECHANISMS:



sks.to/flicc

Source: SkepticalScience.com / John Cook

In particular, we see a lot of:

CODED LANGUAGE – e.g., “Just the facts, and I’ll make up my own mind” or privileging what is “important” or “significant”

FALSE CHOICES – e.g., perceived tradeoffs or both sides fallacy/fake debate

DIVERSIONARY TACTICS – e.g., logical fallacies, quote mining/slothful induction, or simply this is “not your job”

Which means this is also fundamentally a trust issue.

DO THEY:



Trust the content being shared?



Trust the purpose of the institution?



Trust the people working in the institution?



And trust that their interest and well-being are valued as human beings?



TRUST AND SKEPTICISM

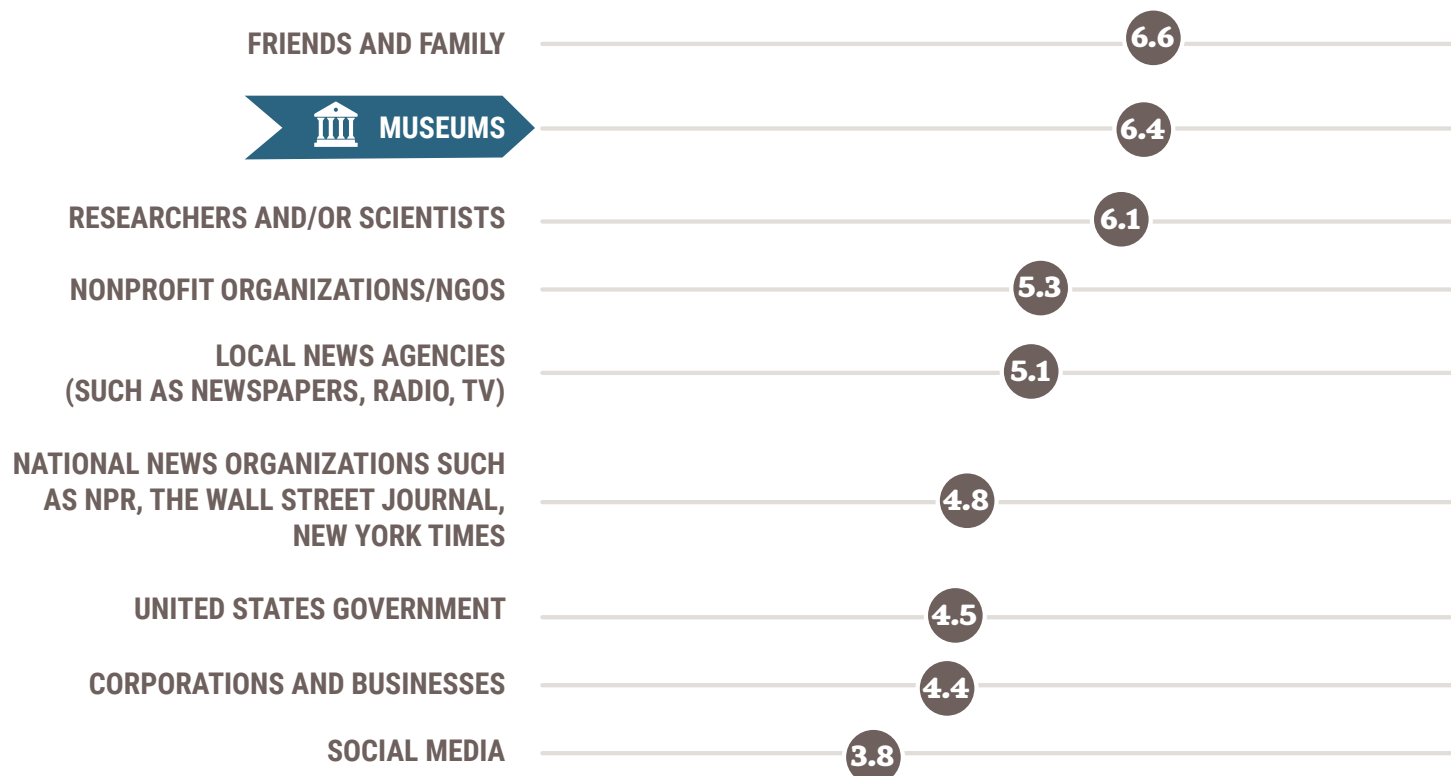
The good news is that trust in museums has proven to be rather resilient in the United States.





How trustworthy do you find ...

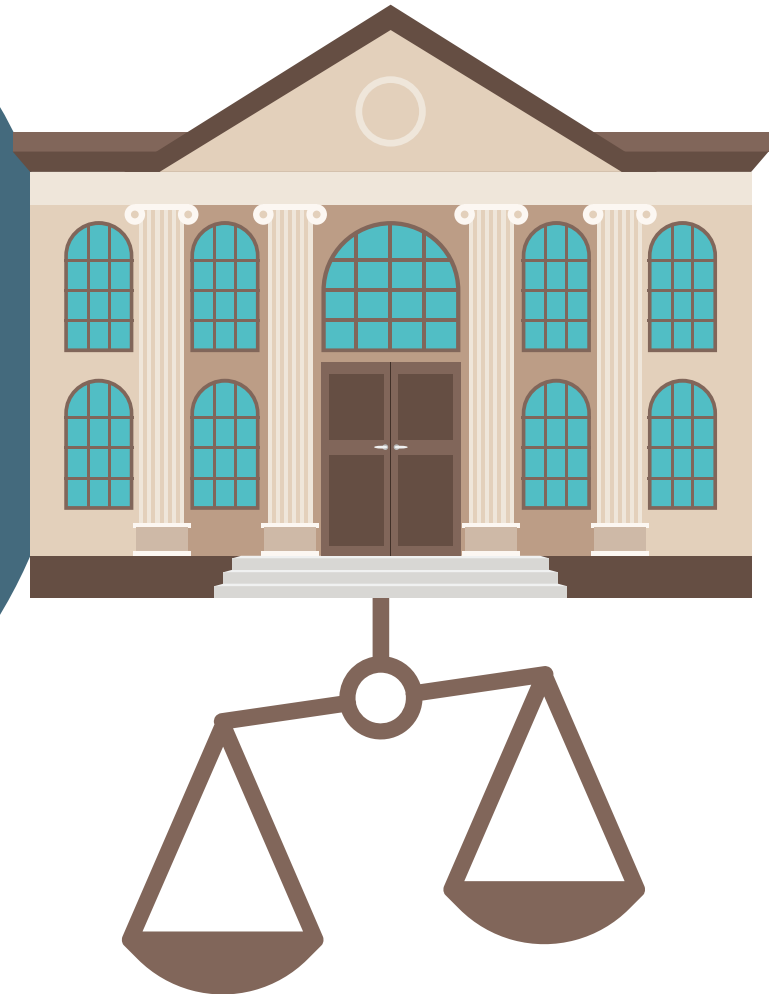
(respondents indicated on a scale of 0 to 10; average scores presented)



OVERALL AVERAGE: 5.1





92%

Of U.S. adults think
museums are non-partisan
providers of educational
content



Why are museums generally trusted?

RESEARCH SUGGESTS:

-  Museums are perceived as research-oriented and fact-based
-  Art, objects, artifacts, and specimens are perceived to be inherently trustworthy
-  Museums are perceived as non-partisan and “neutral”
-  History itself is inherently trustworthy because it is in the past, the past can't be changed, and therefore it is just facts and “neutral”

As practitioners, this inherent trust presents a responsibility and a challenge.

After all, we make choices about what art to share, whose stories to tell, and what evidence to consider.

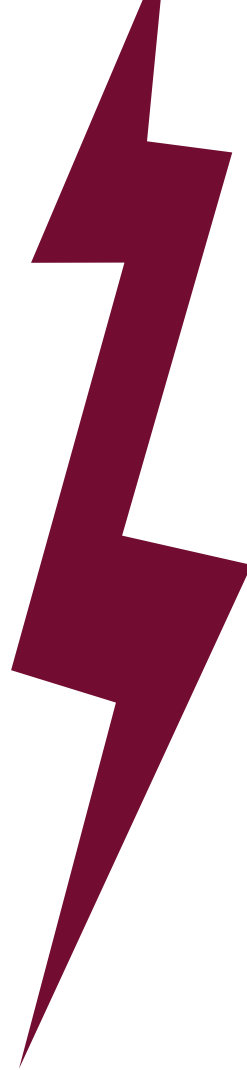




Generally, more “Open” people have significantly greater levels of trust in museums.

Additionally, as museums have become more inclusive, those who

have been excluded in the past appear to be cautiously increasing their trust in museums.



But at the same time, more “Resistant” people feel these changes are coming at their expense, and that museums are becoming political actors.

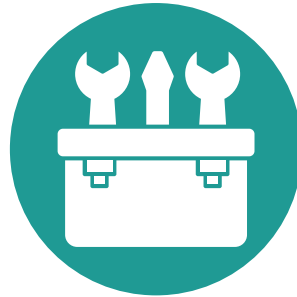


This politicization of content can quickly bring controversy to a museum.



Ultimately, however, here's the thing: Museums are not divorced from our civil society, including the partisanship happening on so many topics that museums share.

It is unrealistic to think that museums are immune from these pressures, or that museums can contort themselves in ways to avoid polarizing topics since visitor values so deeply influence what they view as "political" or not.



TOOLS TO HELP

Fortunately, there are tactics and tools that can help you think through engaging broader audiences, including those with more “Resistant” worldviews.

Audiences and Inclusion: A Primer for Cultivating More Inclusive Attitudes Among the Public



Developing and
publicizing shared
values statements



Practicing
“disinformation
inoculation” with
staff and
stakeholders

1

GET THE FACTS. Find the information that shows majorities of people are on your side. This can be from reputable sources that focus on broader population research⁴ as well as museum-audience specific research such as our Annual Survey of Museum-Goers.



2

INOCULATE YOUR TEAM. That includes staff as well as trustees/governance and possibly major donors or stakeholders. Walk them through the three steps of disinformation inoculation:



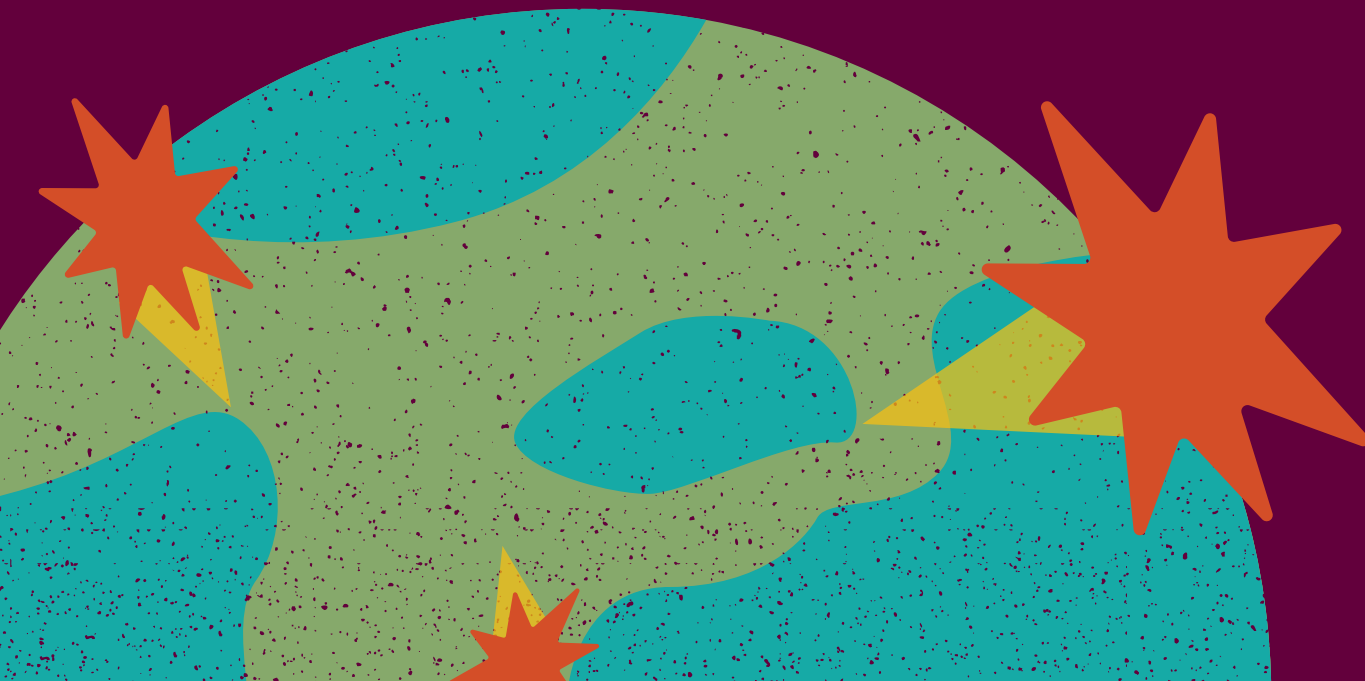


FINAL THOUGHTS

In the United States, we are expecting things will only become trickier as we continue to experience rather interesting times. This includes the response to the 2024 election, an upcoming commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the U.S., and relentless extreme weather events.

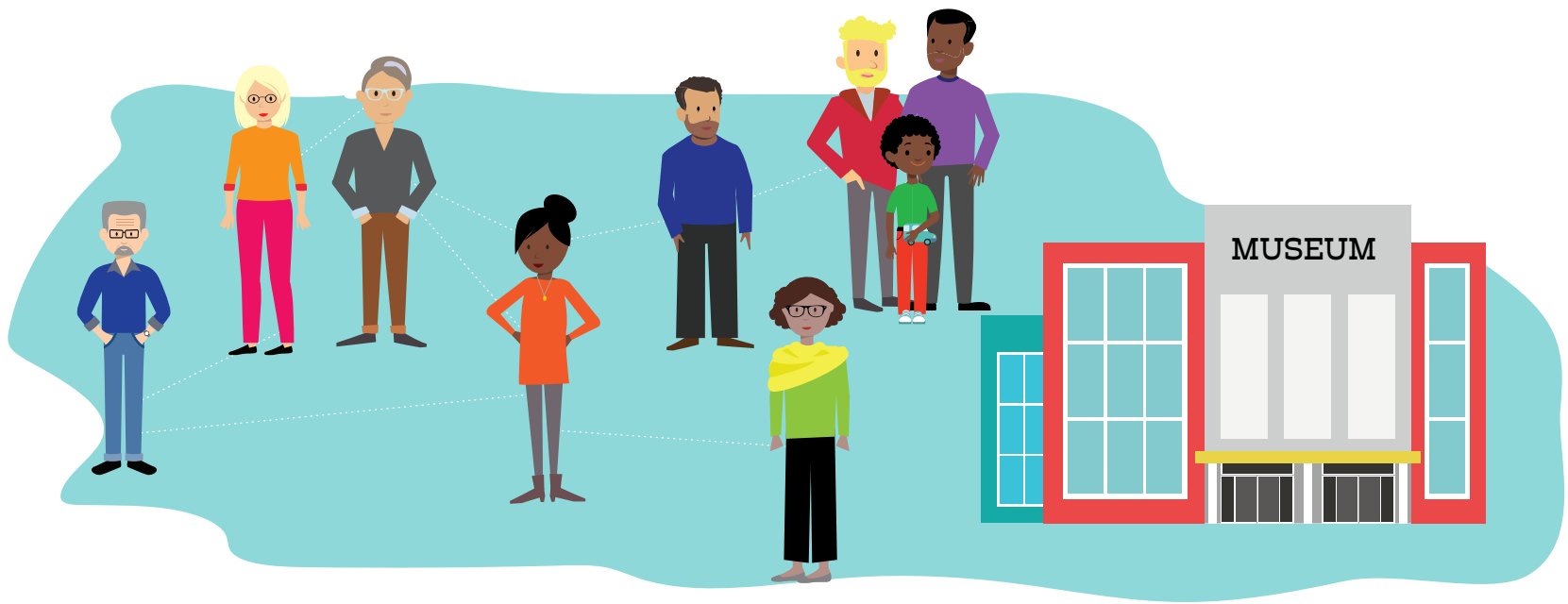


Similarly, there are ongoing challenges globally with the rise of far-right political movements, economic uncertainty, increasing conflict in the Middle East, disagreement with how we address asylum and humanitarian relief, and ongoing conflict in Ukraine.



But remember, most people want museums to do good, hard work that benefits us individually, our families, our communities, and our society.





And most people support the work of museums to explore art, cultures, and history, share science, build healthy communities, connect us to one another and our shared humanity on this planet, and to support our democracies.



“It is a privilege to have access to any museum, of any kind. They are a reflection of history and the humanities. Communities benefit from the enrichment provided by museums and we would all be worse off without them. Museums are a mirror of ourselves. We can look into the past or imagine the future, thanks to museums.”

Source: 2024 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers (AAM + Wilkening Consulting)

***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 = 90,178; 202 museums participating*
- *2024 Broader 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.**



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