


## ARTICLE

# Nothing can be Changed Until it is Faced: Museum Solidarity Statements as Reflections of Understanding Systemic Racism

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**Abstract** The May 2020 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police led many institutions to write and share statements opposing racism, committing to change, and claiming solidarity with the Black community. The authors saw an opportunity to compile data and assess the commitment of our field to racial equity by taking the statements at face value, examining them, and performing a content analysis. In our view, most statements of solidarity would represent a museum's best effort at reaching out to Black communities and communities of color, and at articulating the value it placed on its relationship with those communities. This assessment of "best effort" tells us that there is moderate progress toward the racial equity and justice that has been a hot topic for decades, but the findings suggest that only a fraction of U.S. museums are publicly facing their complicity in White supremacy culture, from the make-up of their boards and staff to the dominant content found in collections, exhibitions, and programs. The authors challenge this status, provide new resources as yet another starting point to help invite museums identify and examine the racism that lies within their institutions, and call for a more genuine commitment to the difficult but necessary steps to eliminate systemic inequity.

## INTRODUCTION

The May 2020 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police led many institutions to write and share statements opposing racism, committing to change, and claiming solidarity with the Black community. The authors saw an opportunity to compile data and assess the commitment

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of our field to racial equity by taking the statements at face value, examining them, and performing a content analysis. In our view, most statements of solidarity would represent a museum's best effort at reaching out to Black communities and communities of color, and at articulating the value it placed on its relationship with those communities. What does an assessment of this "best effort" tell us?

Sadly, but unsurprisingly, statements we examined addressed major social issues on a surface level. Of the more than 1000 institutions accredited by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) 47% made no statement on social media or their website regarding George Floyd's murder and the public outcry of racism that the murder highlighted. This sends a strong message of silent indifference or, at best, lack of knowledge or skill in how to address this important societal crisis. Among the statements that were made, there were expressions of sympathy for those affected by racism, recognition that museum staff had a lot to learn, and vague commitments to do better. Very few acknowledged that most museums and cultural institutions are deeply rooted in systems of oppression (i.e. Colonialism and White supremacy culture) and as such, they are complicit in the oppression of Black people and people with other marginalized identities. The tepid statements indicate that many museums see racism and oppression as something that exists outside their walls in "society." But we know that Museums are part of and a product of society. Museums often tout themselves as "valued" parts of their communities, but their failure to see or describe themselves as an active part of systems of oppression demonstrate that museums are part of the problem. Until we, as a field, can regularly and unequivocally state that our roots in Colonialism and White supremacy culture make us part of the problem, we will not be able to do meaningful work to address and rectify our role in oppression and exclusion.

It really should not come as a surprise to museums that they are part of the problem. For decades, studies have documented racial disparities and suggested ways to address the issue. A 2010 report titled *Demographic Transformations and the Future of Museums* notes "African Americans and Latinos have notably lower rates of museum attendance than white Americans. Why is that so? In part, it is the legacy of historic discrimination" (Farrell et al., 2010, p. 14). The report's calls to action encourage museum professionals and decision-makers to "Take responsibility for learning, in depth, about the communities we want to serve," and "Invest in the diversity of the field" (Farrell et al., 2010, p. 30). A 2015 survey found that decision-making staff in art museums staff (curators, conservators, educators, and leadership) are 84% White (Schonfeld et al., 2015, p. 7). As for visitors, 85% of respondents to a 2020 survey about cultural participation in the U.S. identified as White (LaPlaca Cohen & Slover Linett Audience Research, 2020, p. 5). Compare those numbers to the 2020 census data that the overall U.S. population is 63% White, and it is clear that U.S. museums have a stark diversity problem.

The disconnect is clear, and museums have supposedly been working on these inequities in large and small ways for years. Documenting progress in the field as a whole is difficult. We usually must rely on institutions to report on their own efforts, and that information often gets documented in grant reports or internal files and is not generally broadcast to the world. Finding, sorting, and

standardizing this data would be a monumental task. However, global events in the summer of 2020 led to the creation of a unique data set that offers a snapshot of U.S. museums attempting to connect with the Black community and other communities of color.

## Background

Studies of predominantly White U.S. museums have been documenting problems with a lack of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI), and calling for change for decades. In 1992, the American Alliance of Museums (then called the American Association of Museums 1992) (AAM) published *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimensions of Museums* which states:

*... museums have the potential to be enriched and enlivened by the nation's diversity. As public institutions in a democratic society, museums must achieve greater inclusiveness. Trustees, staff, and volunteers must acknowledge and respect our nation's diversity in race, ethnic origin, age, gender, economic status, and education, and they should attempt to reflect that pluralism in every aspect of museums' operations and programs. 1992(p. 9)*

American Alliance of Museums re-released *Excellence and Equity* in 2008 with a preface by AAM's then President Ford W. Bell in which he states museums must “embrace cultural diversity in all facets of their programs, staff and audiences, in order to have any hope of sustaining vitality and relevance. . . If we want our communities to support us. . . we must ensure that we reflect their varied interests,” (p. 3).

Eight years after the first publication of *Excellence and Equity*, the July/August 2000 issue of *Museum News* (a publication of AAM) featured an essay by Lonnie G. Bunch, III titled *Flies in the Buttermilk: Museums, Diversity, and the Will to Change*. Bunch became the founding director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture, before being named the fourteenth secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in 2019. In this essential article, Bunch points out:

*[M]useums all seek to develop long-term, mutually reciprocal relationships with a dizzying array of communities. Yet why should these groups really believe our rhetoric of cultural transformation unless we are willing to exert the energy and make the hard choices that accompany the creation of a meaningfully diverse profession? We champion the practice of community outreach. But I think we need to promote “inreach,” a concept that challenges the profession to be more introspective, more deliberate, more honest, and more explicit in its efforts to change itself. (2019)*

The call for change continued in 2014, after the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Most public-facing organizations, including museums, remained silent as thousands demonstrated all over the United States, but in 2020 hundreds of museums decided to issue a statement after George Floyd's murder. In the years between 2014 and 2020 several factors pushed

museums to take more public stands. In response to Michael Brown's murder, a group of museum practitioners came together to craft and share a *Joint Statement from Museum Bloggers and Colleagues on Ferguson and Related Events* in the wake of Michael Brown's killing and ensuing public protests to call for museums to respond to issues of social injustice. The statement reads in part:

*We believe that strong connections should exist between museums and their communities. Forging those connections means listening and responding to those we serve and those we wish to serve. . . .we believe that museums everywhere should get involved. What should be our role—as institutions that claim to conduct their activities for the public benefit—in the face of ongoing struggles for greater social justice both at the local and national level? We urge museums to consider these questions by first looking within. (Jennings et al., 2014)*

Two signers of the Joint Statement, Aleia Brown and Adrienne Russell, initiated a monthly Twitter chat titled #MuseumsRespondToFerguson. This conversation, lasting several years and expanding with each meeting, generated a field-wide discussion about racial issues in museums (Russell et al., 2021). Other movements from museum workers seeking social change include #MuseumsAreNotNeutral, Museums and Race, MASS Action (Museums as Site of Social Action), MuseumWorkersSpeak, Change the Museum, and the Empathetic Museum. These groups, among others, have stimulated discussion and awareness (if not always action) regarding racism and deep inequities in museums.

The work is also championed by large professional organizations with funding from major philanthropic organizations. In 2019, AAM announced *Facing Change*, a multi-year project aimed at diversifying museum boards funded by \$4 million in grants from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Alice L. Walton Foundation, and Ford Foundation (AAM, 2019). That same year, AAM published the book *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums 2019*. While these steps are welcome, there is much more that professional organizations could do. AAM's *Core Standards for Museums* (which underlie the accreditation process) do not directly address DEAI (AAM, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

As the museum sector has homed in on these issues, the general public in the United States, especially the White public that has long had the privilege to not experience the daily toll of racism, has also taken more notice of the systemic racial inequities that underlie daily life. Books and articles about race, racism, and white supremacy by authors such as James Baldwin, Ta-Nehesi Coates, Bryan Stevenson, Ibram X. Kendi, Isabelle Wilkerson, Robin Di Angelo and many others are on bestseller lists. Essential thinkers on race, like Audre Lorde, Pauli Murray, Derrick Bell, and Kimberle' Crenshaw are being revisited, reread and widely referenced. In 2019 the *New York Times* launched the 2019 *1619 Project*, led by Nikole Hannah-Jones, documenting a direct link between racism and enslavement to the founding of the United States.

The COVID-19 pandemic began its extended worldwide impact in March 2020 and highlighted both the existence and impacts of systemic racism that had been relatively easy to ignore for many White people in the U.S. The deadly virus disproportionately affected Black people,

Indigenous people, and people of color (BIPOC) leading to a larger number of deaths in BIPOC populations than in White populations (Wood, 2020). Hispanic and Black people in the U.S. experienced the most negative impact of the economic downturn (Lopez et al., 2020).

The pandemic directly and negatively affected the museum field as well. An April 2021 survey of AAM member museums found that 56 percent of museums responding to the survey furloughed or laid-off staff since March 2020 with an average decrease of 29 percent (AAM & Wilkening Consulting, 2021, p. 3). Earlier in the pandemic, an October 2020 survey found that “Positions most impacted by staffing reductions included frontline (68%), education (40%), security/maintenance (29%), and collections (26%) staff” (AAM, 2020). In a 2015 survey documenting the demographics of art museum staff, security and facilities staff are approximately 50% White and 50% people of color (Schonfeld et al., 2015, p. 8). The same survey was conducted again in 2019 and found that education departments are the most diverse (74% White, 24% people of color) of “intellectual leadership positions”: conservation, curators, education, and museum leadership (Westerman et al., 2019, p. 11). Because layoffs and furloughs were most prevalent in some of the most diverse museum departments, it is reasonable to conclude that Black, Indigenous, and staff of color were disproportionately laid off or furloughed, thereby making the museum field even more White than it already was.

It is important to point out that museum staff demographics are likely trending more White due to the pandemic and due to racism and frustrations museum workers of color feel as they leave the field. This trend is in strict opposition to trends of the U.S. population in general. *Demographic Transformations and the Future of Museums* acknowledges that around the year 2045 White people will be in the numerical minority, and current U.S. minority groups will collectively become the new numerical majority (Farrell et al., 2010, p. 9). Museums have a little more than 20 years before White people become the minority. How much real change can be made in that time so museum staff more closely reflect the diversity of the populace they serve? As noted above, reports have been documenting the discrepancy and urging change for more than 30 years, yet no significant movement has happened.

## **The Study**

George Floyd’s death was captured on video and shared widely on social media. Massive public protests against police brutality and racial injustice took place all over the world in the days and weeks to follow.

Organizations of all kinds, including museums, issued statements of solidarity with Black people and people of color and against racism. Museum statements shared on social media and websites condemned racism in U.S. society, published art and writing of Black artists, avowed they had “much to do,” and promised “to do better.” At a virtual meeting in July 2020, MASS Action members discussed the phenomenon of these hundreds of statements. We saw an opportunity to document and assess the commitment of our field to racial equity by taking the statements at face value. The broad range

of statements reveals that some museums communicated authentic support, while others communicated no substance, and some likely compounded the hurt to Black people and other communities of color. In this report, we provide a quantitative content analysis of statements made by more than 500 museums after the murder of George Floyd. We find that efforts of U.S. museums to create and disseminate substantive and authentic statements of solidarity with communities of color, especially Black people, remain disappointing.

## METHODS

We selected as our study sample the approximately 1100 museums accredited by AAM, the largest professional association in the United States for museums and other cultural institutions.<sup>1</sup> Their list of accredited institutions is public and accessible on their website, and AAM describes accreditation as “the museum field’s mark of distinction.” (AAM, n.d.-a, n.d.-b) Many non-accredited museums also made statements, but we needed to create parameters for data collection that could otherwise become unmanageable. MASS Action volunteers identified statements by 545 accredited institutions.<sup>2</sup> Volunteers looked at each institution’s Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts in addition to their institutional websites to identify and document statements.

We developed an open coding analysis, first identifying broad criteria that we developed during the initial readings of statements. Around 20 MASS Action volunteer data collectors sought out statements, recorded what they found, and made preliminary assessments as to whether each statement met the criteria. A core group of three volunteers (the authors of this article) met regularly to discuss what to do with the data, and we refined the categories by adding levels of success in each of the five categories. We recruited 10 additional volunteers for this refinement stage, and after multiple rounds of scoring, cross checking for consistency, and hours of discussion, we agreed on these three tiers of success in addressing each standard.

A = Excellent: Clear, unambiguous fulfillment of category, best case scenario. No interpretation necessary.

B = Good–Fair: Fulfillment of category, but not as strong as A. It’s not great, but it does some of the work. If you have to interpret at all, then it’s this category.

C = Poor: Very vague or general attention to the category so that it’s basically meaningless.

Does not address the category at all or only speaks to society’s larger issues, not museums specifically.

We met multiple times to check that we were reliably coding the same statement the same way and re-coded all unique statements. One of the core team then reviewed all scores to check for consistency. These criteria can still be interpreted subjectively to some extent, and to practice a transparent process, we are sharing our data. We encourage you to examine our coding of each statement: [bit.ly/MuseumStatementCodes](https://bit.ly/MuseumStatementCodes). You can also examine the original statements themselves: [bit.ly/MuseumStatements](https://bit.ly/MuseumStatements).

## The Five Standards

The standards help break down a statement into component parts that we see as necessary for an institution to communicate meaningful and impactful equity and anti-racism work. The standards are based in an understanding of museums laid out in the MASS Action Toolkit: “. . .[Museums] cannot separate themselves from the collective memories that link their development with white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, abuse of labor, colonization, imperialist theft of art and artifacts, destruction or absencing of alternative ways of interpreting and representing art and artifacts, structural racism and other oppressions” (Patterson et al., 2017, p. 13).

1. Acknowledgment of complicity in racism
  - A. The statement directly and explicitly acknowledges the organization’s complicity in and perpetuation of racism as an institution. This could include an examination of museum history.
  - B. Complicity acknowledged in an indirect way – referring to operations or practice of the museum. May note a problem with inequity or racism in the museum field. This category was used when “museums” are mentioned as problematic, but the organization did not explicitly include themselves.
  - C. Very Little/vague or not mentioned at all (ex: we have work to do; society has problems).
2. Structural analysis/reflection
  - A. Examines how board, administration, staff composition, collections, exhibitions programs, public image exemplify White supremacy and inequity. The statement provides specific institutional examples of racist and non-inclusive practice by the museum. Can be present or past structures.
  - B. General, acknowledges that the museum itself can embody systemic racism.
  - C. Very little or none mentioned.
3. Actions
  - A. Lists one or more specific action they will take to counter White supremacy in museum practice racist/non-inclusive practices BEYOND the action of the statement. These could include but are not limited to forming advisory groups, meeting with the community, and analyzing and diversifying collections.
  - B. Lists one or more general actions to counter White supremacy with DEAI. Or generally addresses structure or practice in museums broadly.
  - C. Very little or none mentioned. Addresses racism in society as a whole. “Listening and learning” or “supporting change” goes here.
4. Deadlines
  - A. Specific indication of when actions will happen. Deadlines create transparency around commitments and ensure collective accountability to actions.
  - B. General indication of when actions will happen (ex: In the coming months).
  - C. Continuing things, very vague or none mentioned.

5. Financial investment

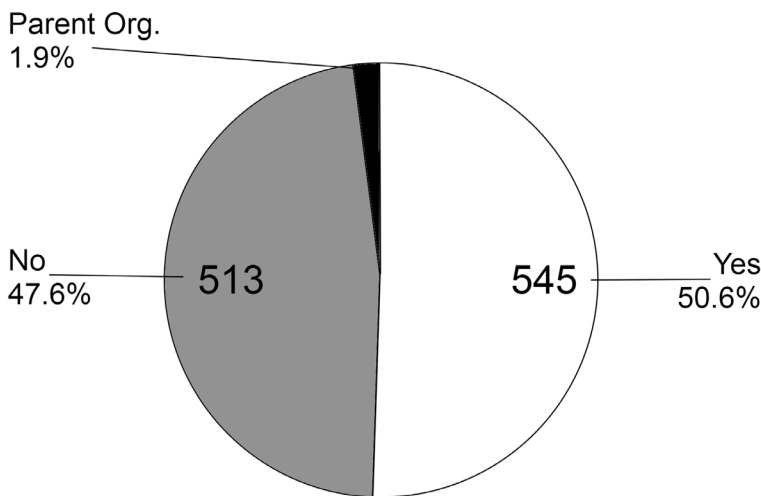
The statement commits funds to the achievement of the above. Knowing that institutions often cite lack of funding as an obstacle to doing any kind of work, and remembering that “budgets are moral documents,” we see this as a key need. (*quotation often attributed to Dr. King, though its exact source is unknown*).

- A. Specific amount of money identified and earmarked for DEAI work.
- B. General indication that funds available or will be allocated.
- C. None mentioned.

Initially there was an additional standard as part of the coding: Desired Outcomes – The statement articulates desired outcomes of anti-racist/inclusive actions which are key to setting measurable goals so that the institution can gauge its progress in anti-racism and equity work. However, coders could not reach consensus on consistent coding, and we could not create a reliable usable definition/delineation. In some statements an outcome can be read as the actions museums describe they will take as a result of addressing inequity, and in others an outcome can be an impact on visitors and staff as a result of the actions they promise to take. Since we already have the category “Actions” and the results coders identified as “Desired Outcomes” largely repeated what was already tracked there, we eliminated this category from the results.

**Results: Findings and their Implications**

Of the 1078 accredited organizations we examined, 47.6% (513) did not make a statement and 50.6% (545) made a statement (Figure 1). We omitted 1.9% (20) of statements from this tally because



**Figure 1.** Did AAM accredited institutions make a statement summer 2020?

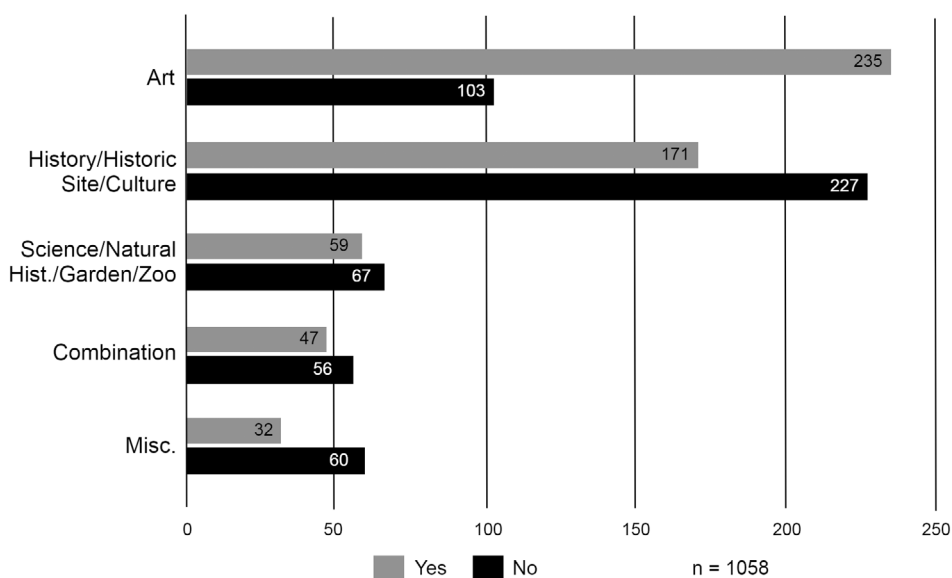


these institutions shared a statement from a parent organization like a university or government entity that did not specifically address museum practice. Additionally, these organizations did not have to do the work of creating their own statement, so we left them out of the results and analysis.

The authors carefully considered whether or not to include statements from culturally specific institutions like Indigenous or Black History museums. We wondered whether the five standards could or should be applied in the same way to institutions that, by their very existence, stand against systems of White supremacy. After lengthy discussion we decided that it was not within the scope of this project to decide which institutions fall within or outside structural systems of racism and oppression. We included these institutions in the data set and coded them the same way we coded statements from predominantly White institutions.

A little more than half of accredited organizations (545 of 1078) made a statement our volunteers identified and documented. Of these, 121 were duplicates because umbrella organizations such as historical societies or museum campuses oversee multiple individually accredited historic sites or museums, and each individual site shared the same statement. Fourteen organizations made more than one statement that we recorded and coded. Three of these follow-up statements were made after public pressure and comments on social media pointed out the inadequacy of their first statement. In total, we have a data set of 559 statements; 121 are duplicates, and 14 institutions have two different statements.

When examining what types of museums made a public statement, we excluded the 20 statements from parent organizations and found that art museums were much more likely to make a public



**Figure 2.** Breakdown of statement vs. no statement by institution type.

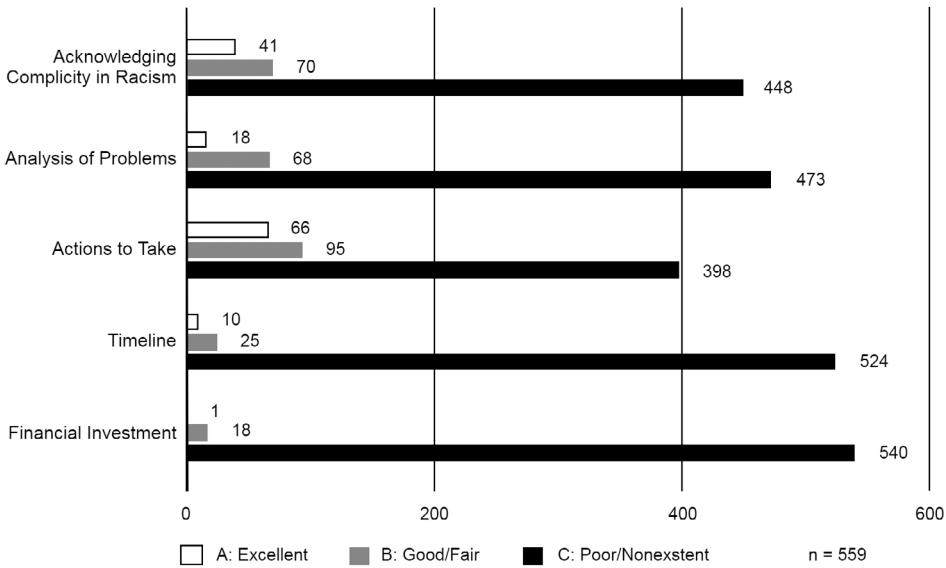


Figure 3. How well did statements meet the five standards?

statement than any other type of organization (Figure 2). Art museums were the only category for which more museums made a statement than did not. More than 69% of accredited art museums made a statement while only 43% of accredited history museums/sites did so. We can only speculate on why this is so, and we see this as an area very worthy of more research and investigation. The category “Combination” includes museums that feature two or more content specialties, such as art and history, or science and history, etc. The “Miscellaneous” category includes museums with a very narrow focus, like military history, and children’s museums.

As a whole, organizations that wrote and shared a statement did not actually communicate much substance and generally failed to address our Five Standards. Figure 3 and Table 1 present the distribution of the three levels of success for each of the standards. In every category, the number of statements coded as the lowest (C Poor/Nonexistent) of our three-tiered scale for the criterion is much closer to the 513 institutions that did not release a statement than to the number of statements coded as doing an excellent (A) or even passable (B) job.

For the first standard, acknowledging complicity in racism, of 559 statements, only 7% (41) were categorized as group A (excellent), and 13% (70) statements were coded group B (good/fair). An example of an A statement: “We openly and honestly acknowledge that racism remains a problem within our organization, just as it is within our community and nation. By acknowledging these truths, we can begin to address the systemic issues facing both our own organization and the greater society through our mission” (Conner Prairie, 2020). An example of a B statement: “At the same time, we know that no community is free of systemic racism, and that museums have often been complicit in the marginalization of Black voices” (Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2020).

Table 1.

How well did statements meet the five standards?

<b>All coded statements (559)</b>	<b>A: Excellent</b>	<b>B: Good/fair</b>	<b>C: Poor/nonexistent</b>
Acknowledging complicity in racism	7% (41)	13% (70)	80% (448)
Analysis of problems/complicity	3% (18)	12% (68)	85% (473)
Actions to take	12% (66)	17% (95)	71% (398)
Timeline	2% (10)	4% (25)	94% (524)
Financial investment	0.2% (1)	3% (18)	97% (540)

Similarly, very few museums addressed our second standard, analyzing their internal systems in their statements. Three percent (18) of statements were coded as the highest level (A) of structural analysis and/or reflection on how board, administration, staff composition, collections, exhibitions programs, and the like exemplify inequity. This section of a statement from Williams College Museum of Art falls into this category: “[Our exhibition] begins the critical work of reassessing our permanent collection with the understanding that collections that have been shaped by the Western canon undeniably present an incomplete history of artistic achievement that often obscures the contributions of women, queer folk, persons of color, artistic collectives, and makers we cannot identify” (Williams College Museum of Art, 2020). Twelve percent (68) of statements were coded as doing a good to fair job of fulfilling this category (B ratings) with a more general acknowledgment that the museum itself can embody systemic racism. For example: “In museums and throughout the art world, that history is at play in everything from the works selected to be displayed, the artists chosen to be elevated, and the people who make up the staff” (Harn Museum of Art Instagram, 2020). With so few making the connection between a museums’ internal workings and their participation in inequitable systems, there seems to be little awareness of or admission to the fact that museums need to change.

The standard where museum statements performed the best was in identifying actions to take. Twelve percent (66) of 559 statements were coded as A: offering clear and unambiguous actions, including “We want to commit to celebrating BIPOC history as well as contemporary BIPOC authors, scientists, researchers, and experts. We believe a holistic perspective of our past and present is the only way forward; that is why 30% of the stories we share on our blog moving forward will be sharing, celebrating, and elevating BIPOC stories and voices” (Museums of Western Colorado Facebook, 2020). This example is particularly noteworthy because in addition to being specific, it also offered a quantitative metric by which their progress could be measured. Of the 559 statements, 17% (95) were coded as describing actions but ones that were general and non-specific. For example, “We will continue to make changes where we can through internal policies, exhibitions, committees, programs and fellowships” (Museum of Science and History, Jacksonville Facebook, 2020). This statement was coded as ambiguous or unclear because we cannot be certain what changes will be made, if any. If we look at the combined work of A and B coded statements together, it is positive that 29% of statements offered action to take. However, statements of intention to act do not mean that these actions have happened, will happen, or that once implemented they have positively impacted their intended audience(s). This is the next critical level of work for the field: being held accountable for the statements and commitments made to take action to actually change the museum field.

More than 90% of statements did not address the timeline or financial investment standards. If the statements are potential commitments to action, then there is ideally a timeframe by which the public can expect such action to occur. We acknowledge that meaningful DEAI and anti-racism work should be ongoing and institution-wide, but without a deadline to complete specific tasks it is impossible for museums to be held accountable. Only 3% of statements made any mention of financial resources to support the work described within. Monetary commitments are one of the most impactful ways a non-profit organization can demonstrate true commitment to DEAI and anti-racism work. Museum budgets are generally tight, and U.S. museums were deeply affected financially during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, so it is not surprising that so few statements made a public commitment of funds. Without money, however, DEAI work is often relegated to or taken up by passionate staff who already have an overfull workload. In many cases, these staff hold marginalized identities and are already negatively impacted by a White supremacist work culture. Museums cannot claim to be committed to equity work and then expect to achieve them without allocation of funds.

### Individual Input

Throughout the process of gathering this data, analyzing the data, and talking with those in the field about the research project, it became clear to us that there is a larger story behind these statements. Institutions and museum workers agonized over writing a statement or not, and within institutions, there was debate over who should write, review or have a say in the process.

The Instagram account Change the Museum (@changethemuseum), which offers anonymous reports by museum staff of racism and discrimination in the field, shared this post on February 1, 2021 about the Chicago Architectural Center (CAC):

*I sat in on meetings as part of a diversity and inclusion committee, which included BIPOC, women, and queer people. We came together to give feedback on a draft statement that the CAC would release to address current events. This original draft called out police brutality, anti-Black racism, and stood in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. It wasn't a perfect message but we felt it was a solid place to start.*

*The final draft was shared with us a bit later, and we were told it was ready to be released. This version completely left out any mention of police brutality, anti-Black racism and Black Lives Matter. . .*

*A dozen or so colleagues and I replied immediately, urging the people responsible for these changes to re-write the statement and include the parts of it that had been removed. We received a response explaining that mentions about BLM and police brutality might alienate some people and generate negative backlash. . .*

*The CEO and others in leadership made it clear that we cater to very specific audiences, and that anything outside of what those audiences expect can hurt the organization's ability to grow.*

To help round out the larger story behind these statements, MASS Action sent out a survey through its social media channels and email lists to learn more about the process of writing these statements. We collected responses from October through December 2020. Those completing the survey could identify as an individual sharing their personal point of view, or as an institutional representative sharing an institutional process and voice.

Out of the 35 survey responses that we received, 25 were from anonymous individuals. Of these 25, 17 identified as working at an AAM accredited institution. Ten responses were from official representatives of their institution, and four of these identified as AAM accredited institutions.

Individual responses included the following reasons their institution made a statement:

- To not be left out and to not be called out for not doing it.
- Following a trend/what peer institutions were doing.
- Appearances/face-saving/looking progressive.
- Feeling pressure from community and staff to put a statement out.
- The director's feelings of fear.

Institutional representatives' responses included the following reasons their institution made a statement:

- We wanted to acknowledge that racism has shaped the past and continues to shape the present in inequitable and harmful ways, and that it will do so in the future unless we commit to actively doing something about it. We wanted to hold ourselves accountable to taking action as an organization by stating this publicly.
- Showing solidarity with the Black community and desire for a more equitable and just country; deepening our DEAI work.
- Staff members advocated for the museum to make a statement.

These responses present some similarities, but the individual responses describe a perception of more performative reasons for making a statement. Both sets of responses describe creating a statement as a response to pressure from internal or external sources to do so. If an institution is not actually committed to doing equity and inclusion work, then it is reasonable to expect that their statement will not be substantive.

## **Follow Up**

As this work is about accountability, we felt that it was important to check on those institutions stating publicly they would be providing an update. Out of the 559 institutions that made a statement, 28 mentioned a follow up action or report. Our research revealed that 22 out of the 28 did in fact provide a follow up as of May 2021. These ranged in scope and substance. Some were a first

institutional diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion statement, others provided detailed examples of training given to staff and changes in policy, and others were more vague messages of support. Almost all institutions that did share an update chose only to provide this on their website with no reference on their social media accounts. This is where the original statements were largely posted, and arguably where most members of the public would see the updates. Four of the 22 updates were posted on the institution's homepage, a wonderful step toward transparency and accessibility. Ten of the 22 updates took two or more clicks to find on the website. Some required the viewer to download a document, making these updates not nearly as accessible as the original statements. We do recognize that organizations must weigh carefully how they offer these statements because they do not want to appear performative or self-congratulatory. It is still important to note the difference in prominence of sharing original statements compared to the updates and we must be mindful of institutional choices around transparency and what that conveys to all audiences.

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this report is not to enable museums to write better statements. However, we do hope that the Five Standards we have identified can be useful tools for DEAI and anti-racism work in the museum field. For institutions that have yet to draft an internal or public statement/commitment to DEAI work, the Five Standards can be a guide. The Five Standards can also be adapted as a rubric for program evaluation and other self-assessment. We also recognize that this data fills a niche that has been empty in the museum field: data around equity and anti-racism work in museums.

The statements of solidarity published in the wake of George Floyd's murder in May 2020 serve as a snapshot of museums' and other AAM accredited institutions' understanding of their role in systemic racism and the racial divisions that undergird life in the United States. Of course, these statements and their analysis do not capture work happening behind the scenes or public statements/efforts made since Summer 2020, but the fact that 47% of AAM accredited organizations made no statement sends a strong message of silent indifference or, at best, lack of knowledge or skill in how to address this important societal topic.

While not all-encompassing or definitive, statements made by half of accredited institutions reflect a public attempt to call for societal change and a possible effort at connecting with Black communities. Where they fall short, as many do, they raise questions about why there has been no real movement or change after many decades of discussion about equity and inclusion in the field. *Centering the Picture: The Role of Race in Cultural Engagement in the U.S.* notes ". . .the problem has not been a lack of data about exclusion and inequity in the cultural sector; these have been documented and measured for decades with little effect. The problem has been one of capacity and will" (Benoit-Bryan et al., 2020, p. 7). Our analysis presents even more data, but will it actually move the needle on the will for change?

For us, the most distressing finding of this research is how few museums see themselves as part of the problem. Only 7% of statements explicitly stated that the institution itself is complicit in systemic racism and exhibited frank self-reflection, public acknowledgement, and the insight to connect their own situation with the existence of racism and injustice in the larger society. Museums do not see themselves as part of the problem, but Black people and people of color do. Anecdotally, one of the authors of this article has heard from more than one museum-job-seeker of color that before the POC applies for an open position, they search for the institution's public statement(s) related to George Floyd's murder. In a 2021 survey of perceptions of arts and culture organizations, "Among Black or African Americans, perceptions of the presence of systemic racism were significantly higher than among White Americans: 77% of Black/African Americans believed that systemic racism is present in at least one of the four genres they were shown, compared to only 35% of White Americans" (Benoit-Bryan et al., 2022, p. 32). Museums as a whole, are not aware of their systemic lack of inclusiveness, or if they are, they are unwilling to state it publicly. This core of inequity, of which most museums are oblivious, is reflected in the statements.

A 2021 report *A Place to Be Heard, A Space to Feel Held: Black Perspectives on Creativity, Trustworthiness, Welcome and Well-Being* summarized qualitative feedback from Black individuals on their views of arts and culture institutions in the U.S.:

*A strong theme in this research is that you can't "signal" trustworthiness; you have to live it. How can culture- and-community practitioners take actions that speak louder than words? The people we spoke with do their research, and they actively update their perceptions of an organization's trustworthiness over time. Public statements of support or commitment aren't considered evidence on their own; they're only as real as the actions, policies, and investments that follow them. It also helps to acknowledge shortcomings and show how the organization and its leaders have learned and grown from their mistakes. (Buyukozer Dawkins et al., 2021, p. 47)*

In *Flies in the Buttermilk*, Lonnie Bunch wrote, "[c]learly the rhetoric of change and diversity has echoed throughout the museum profession. And if rhetoric alone could effect change, then our profession would stand transformed. Unfortunately, words are not enough" (Bunch, 2019).

As we reflect on the role and implications of public statements made by museums, we also wonder what mix of societal conditions need to be present for so many institutions to make public commentary. Since May 2020, there have been many more publicized murders of Black people at the hands of police, there have been numerous mass shooting events covered widely in the media, and the Supreme Court of the United States removed federal protection of abortion. Why have none of these events prompted hundreds of museums to make carefully worded statements on social media? Many museums' social media accounts continue to support and celebrate awareness events like Pride Month or Black History Month, so what is the difference? What are leaders doing to make equitable change in their institutions for museum workers and their audiences? How do museums communicate internally and externally through statements, silence, and action?

There was a palpable urgency for social justice and racial equity work among many museum workers in the summer of 2020, but more than two years later the urgency is gone. Many museums are still drastically understaffed due to COVID layoffs leaving remaining museum workers with less bandwidth to attend to often voluntary DEAI work. We have all been negatively impacted by a global pandemic that continues to sicken and kill thousands each week with ever-evolving and highly infectious strains. We are collectively overwhelmed and exhausted, but the need for change still remains. We need to reinvigorate and reprioritize this work because “[t]he only thing you cannot do is nothing. Not doing this internal work will continue to harm BIPOC staff and visitors. It will push out BIPOC staff talent, not to mention harm your institution’s relevancy and public reputation. And living in a racially unjust society hurts the white-bodied, too.” (Russell et al., 2021).

We implore White staff at predominantly White institutions to examine their museum’s history and practices to understand how they reflect White supremacy culture and Colonialism. We specifically ask White staff to do this work because BIPOC staff have been overburdened with the emotional and intellectual labor of identifying the problems to be fixed.

We highlight the advice offered by the 2021 article *A Watershed Moment: Lessons from #MuseumsRespondtoFerguson and MASS Action* by [Adrienne Russell](#), [Anniessa Antar](#), and [Elisabeth Callihan](#):

*Get uncomfortable: This work cannot be done without discomfort. One of the primary characteristics of white supremacy culture is fear of open conflict, so many of us tend to avoid it. Conflict can be generative and is absolutely necessary in the pursuit of racial justice. Productive conflict surfaces outdated notions of how we relate to one another in our work; it can expose the structural, uncomfortable truths about oppression and ultimately lead us to new, more equitable ways of working. In addition to having these courageous conversations, being accountable in this work requires vulnerability and humility.*

*Be transparent: In order to narrow the gap between institutional positioning and institutional action, museums need an open and ongoing self-examination mechanism through the lens of anti-racism. And museums need to make their learning visible to their publics. Without this, it is far too easy to stop and start this work on a timeline that benefits the museum, forgetting that racial injustice is urgent work all the time.*

*Don’t reinvent the wheel: Racial justice in museums cannot happen by following a checklist. There is no one-size-fits-all roadmap; you must audit and individually address each one of your systems to impact the whole. But museums do not have to reinvent the wheel either. There are so many resources available, so many “maps” to choose from. (2021).*

Several free resources we recommend can be found online including the Museums and Race Report Card (2020), the MASS Action Readiness Assessment (2017), and the Empathetic Museum’s Maturity Model (2018).



We also offer our raw data as a resource and starting point:

- Compiled museum statements from Summer 2020: [bit.ly/MuseumStatements](https://bit.ly/MuseumStatements).
- A table with coding of each statement: [bit.ly/MuseumStatementCodes](https://bit.ly/MuseumStatementCodes).

## CONCLUSION

Lacking awareness of the need for fundamental shifts in museum systems and structures, museums are floundering, grasping for the next DEAI tactic without a holistic, systemic approach to transformation. This study confirms the wisdom of James Baldwin’s statement: “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” Lonnie Bunch echoed this idea with the concept of “inreach” in *Flies in the Buttermilk*: “I think we need to promote “inreach,” a concept that challenges the profession to be more introspective, more deliberate, more honest, and more explicit in its efforts to change itself.” (Bunch, 2019). We cannot change what we do not face, and only a fraction of U.S. museums are publicly facing their complicity in White supremacy culture, from the make-up of their boards and staff to the dominant White male content of their collections, exhibitions, and programs. We offer our findings as another starting point from which we invite museums to identify and examine the racism that exists within the institution so that we can genuinely begin the real, difficult, and sustained work of eliminating systemic inequity.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**END**

## NOTES

1. We wish to acknowledge a key cohort of museums that also issued statements: members of the Sites of Conscience network. Most are not accredited by AAM and thus did not fall within the purview of our study. A selection of statements and the framework provided by the International Sites of Conscience can be found in the following article. Norris, L., Paynter, B., & Nelson, A. (July 2020). The movement for memory: Statements of solidarity from sites of conscience. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 63(3).
2. Our data set is ultimately 559 statements because we included two statements from 14 institutions.

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