

Addressing the Silences Toolkit

How to Build Reciprocal Community Partnerships
to Create a More Inclusive, Collaborative Society



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About the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience

The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC or the Coalition) is a global network of museums, historic sites, and grassroots initiatives dedicated to building a more just and peaceful future through engaging communities in remembering specific struggles for human rights and addressing their modern repercussions. Founded in 1999, the Coalition now includes more than 400 Sites of Conscience members in 80 countries. The Coalition supports these members through seven regional networks that encourage collaboration and international exchange of knowledge and best practices.

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Cover Photo Credit: The Elisabet Ney Museum and the Refugee Collective.
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Overview

OUR STORY: ADDRESSING THE SILENCES

Dear new friend,

We're so glad you're here. We believe strong, reciprocal community relationships are the key to a more inclusive and just society.

Historically, museums have often excluded communities and created systems that reinforce those inequities. To challenge this, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) launched *Addressing the Silences*. The project brought together a diverse cohort of museums and community partners from across the U.S.. Over three years, we moved from reflection to action—building meaningful relationships, dismantling exclusionary systems, and co-creating projects that amplify silenced stories.

This toolkit is the result of that journey, shaped by every member of our cohort.

Addressing the Silences was a labor of love. It was a lesson in vulnerability, a reminder that trust builds relationships and relationships drive change. It was a transformative experience we co-created in a supportive learning space that fostered lifelong friendships.

Now, we are excited to share what we learned with you. We hope you will join us in the ongoing work to build a more inclusive and collaborative future.

With much love,

The Addressing the Silences Cohort (2022-2025)



A few members of the cohort at our gathering in Austin.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

- ▶ **Who It's For?**
Any cultural worker aiming to build inclusive community partnerships.
- ▶ **Be Flexible & Adapt.**
This work isn't linear. Adapt these tools to your unique context and revisit sections as your partnership grows.
- ▶ **Don't Go It Alone.**
Collaborate with colleagues for support—it's more effective and more fun.
- ▶ **Make It Your Own!**
This is a hands-on workbook. Print it, write on it, and use it as an active tool.
- ▶ **Key Terms:**
 - + **Museum Partners:**
Your core internal group of staff, board, or volunteers from your institution leading this work or involved in the partnership. We refer to this group as the 'Museum Team' throughout the toolkit.
 - + **Community Partners:**
The external individuals, groups, or organizations you are collaborating with.

READINESS CHECKLIST

Ready to get started?

Here's what you'll need:

- ✓ **A Team:**
A small team (2-5 people) from different departments and levels.
- ✓ **Leadership Buy-in:**
Essential for approving internal changes and providing support.
- ✓ **Excitement & Apprehension:**
A readiness to embrace unknowns and take risks.
- ✓ **Willingness to Share Power:**
A commitment to co-create by sharing decisions, control, and ownership.
- ✓ **Vulnerability:**
The capacity to hear difficult truths and take responsibility for change.
- ✓ **Time:**
A long-term commitment (our projects took 1-3 years).
- ✓ **Money:**
A budget to compensate community partners and for the co-created project. Consider additional resources you can leverage to honor and recognize their work.

STEP 1:

Reflect & Plan



A few of the Addressing the Silences cohort members reflecting at our Gathering in Austin.

Let's get started!

Walk through the following activities with your Museum Team.

REFLECT ON COMMUNITY INCLUSION & EXCLUSION

Defining Community

At its core, a community is a group of people sharing common attributes or connections.

People are complex, holding multiple identities and diverse interests. When engaging a community, recognizing this complexity is essential. It ensures effective engagement and, more importantly, acknowledges individuals as whole human beings—not defined by a single characteristic or as representing an entire group.

Consider this framework developed by museum practitioner, Nina Simon.

Communities can be described by a combination of:

- ▶ **Geography:** Where people live or a place they feel connected to (a neighborhood, city, region, or type of place like “rural”). Examples: West-side neighborhood, Minneapolis, the Southwest, Cuba.
- ▶ **Identity:** How people define themselves and are perceived by others, often socially constructed. Examples: Asian American, Millennial, Vegetarian, Dancer, Transgender.
- ▶ **Affinity:** Shared interests, passions, or activities. It's what people care about, like, or do. Examples: Hiking, social justice, basketball, art, gaming.

Aim to describe communities using a combination of at least two of these descriptors. For example: “South County residents who are Latine and passionate about the arts,” or “Older adults who live downtown and love storytelling.”

Geography



I live...

Identity



I am...

Affinity



I like/do/
care about...



Using the Venn Diagram, list the communities you personally belong to.

Share and discuss with your team.



Defining Inclusion

Consider this definition from The American Alliance of Museums:

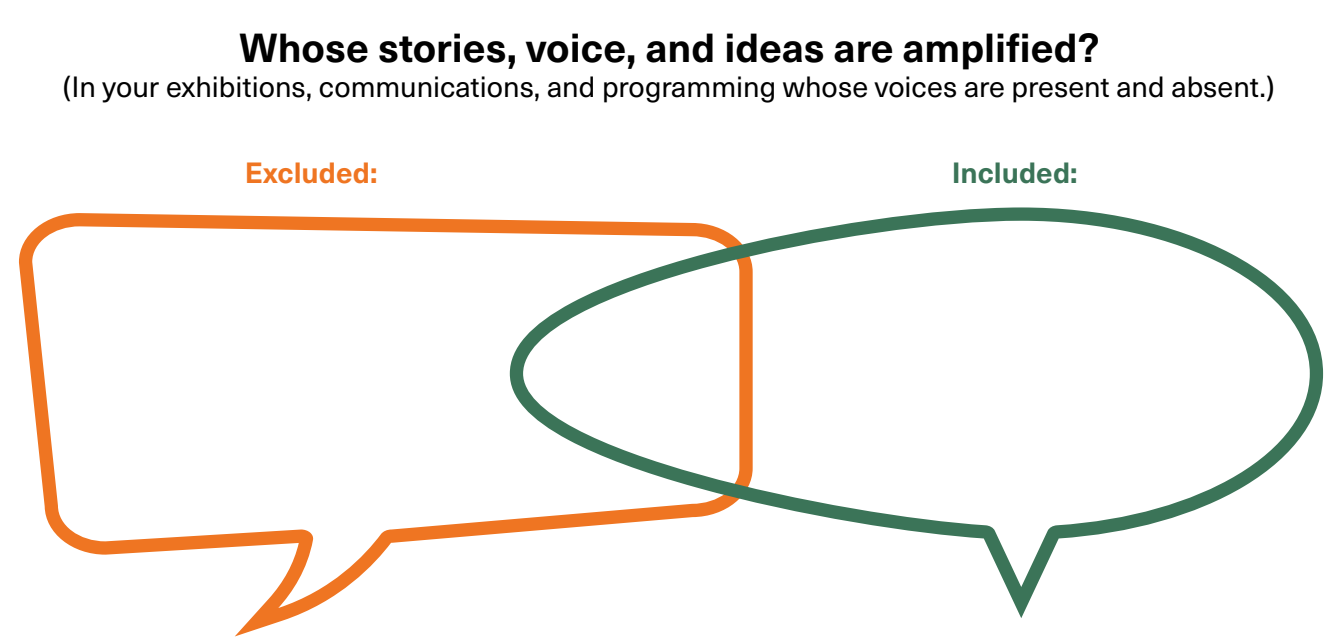
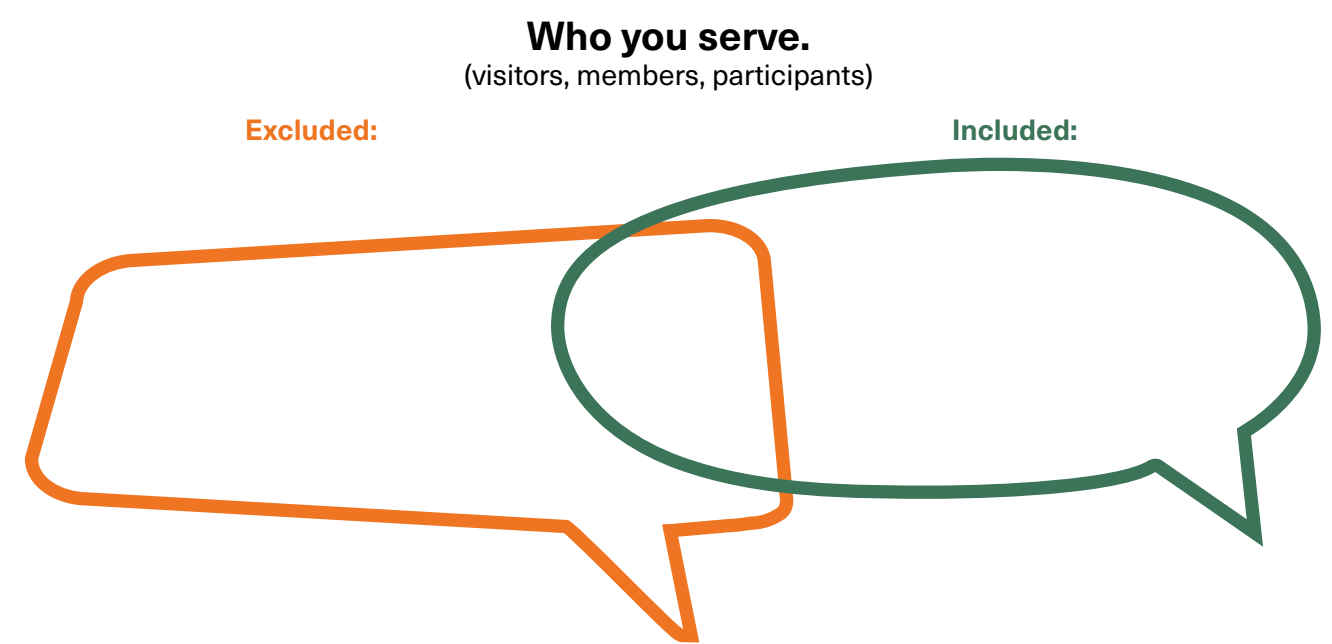
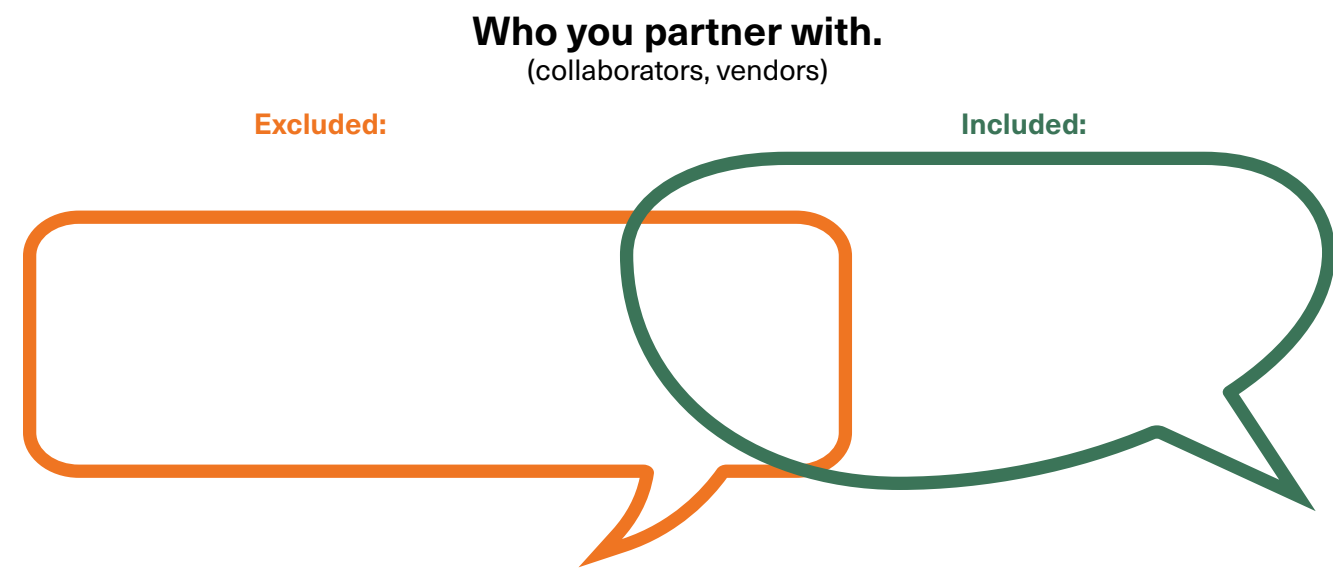
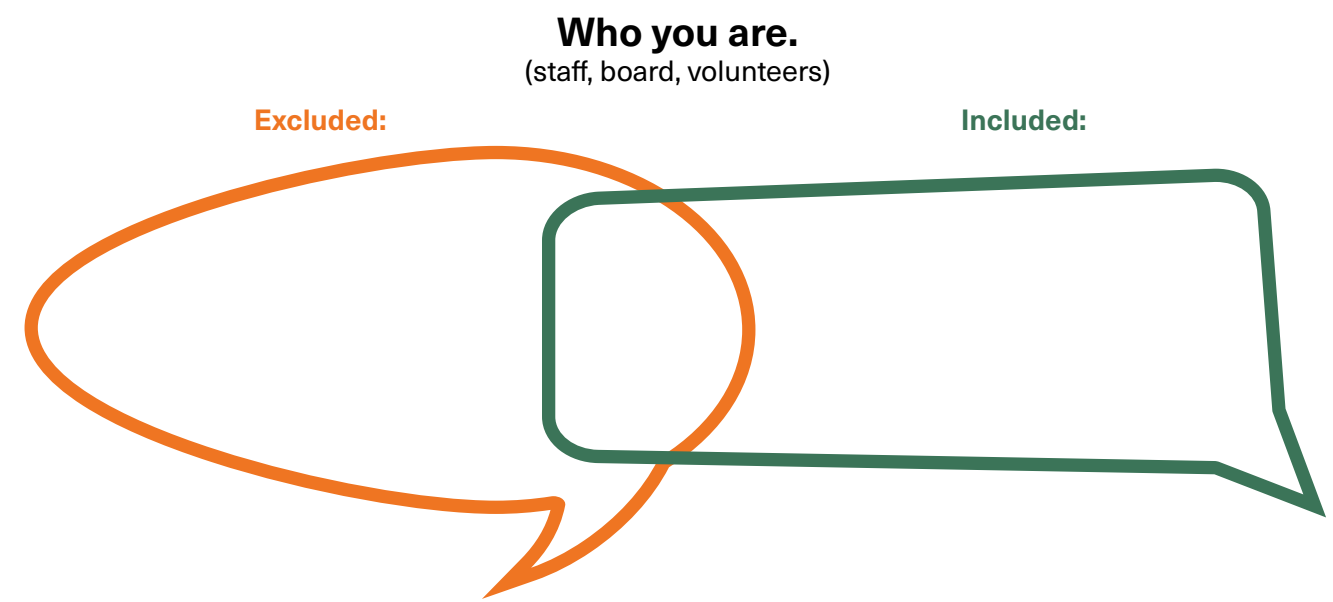
- ▶ Inclusion refers to the intentional ongoing effort to ensure that diverse individuals fully participate in all aspects of the work, including decision-making.
- ▶ Inclusion also refers to the way that diverse participants are valued as respected members of an organization and/or community.
- ▶ While a truly inclusive group is necessarily diverse, a diverse group is not necessarily inclusive.



Discuss:

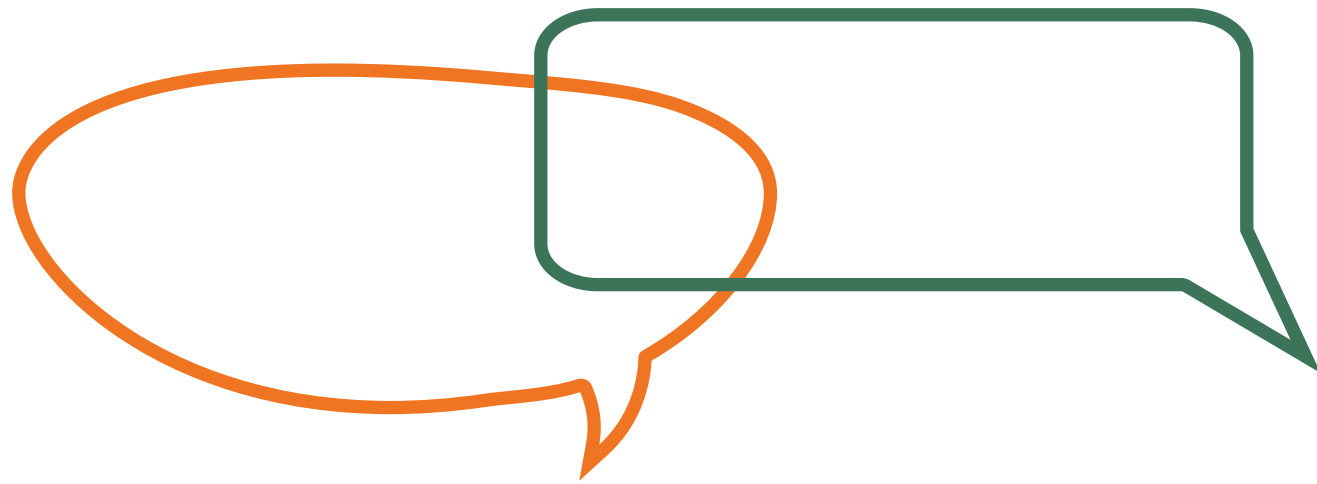
- ▶ What would you refine or add to this definition?
- ▶ What is the difference between diversity and inclusion?

Analyze:
Individually, use this diagram to write which communities your organization includes and excludes. Consider your organization’s specific mission, history, and region. When identifying communities, be specific and use at least two descriptors (geography, identity, affinity).



Who decides?

(Who makes key decisions in your organization: strategy, budget, program choices)

Excluded:**Included:****Who benefits?**

(Which communities ultimately benefit from your work?)

Excluded:**Included:****Debrief:**

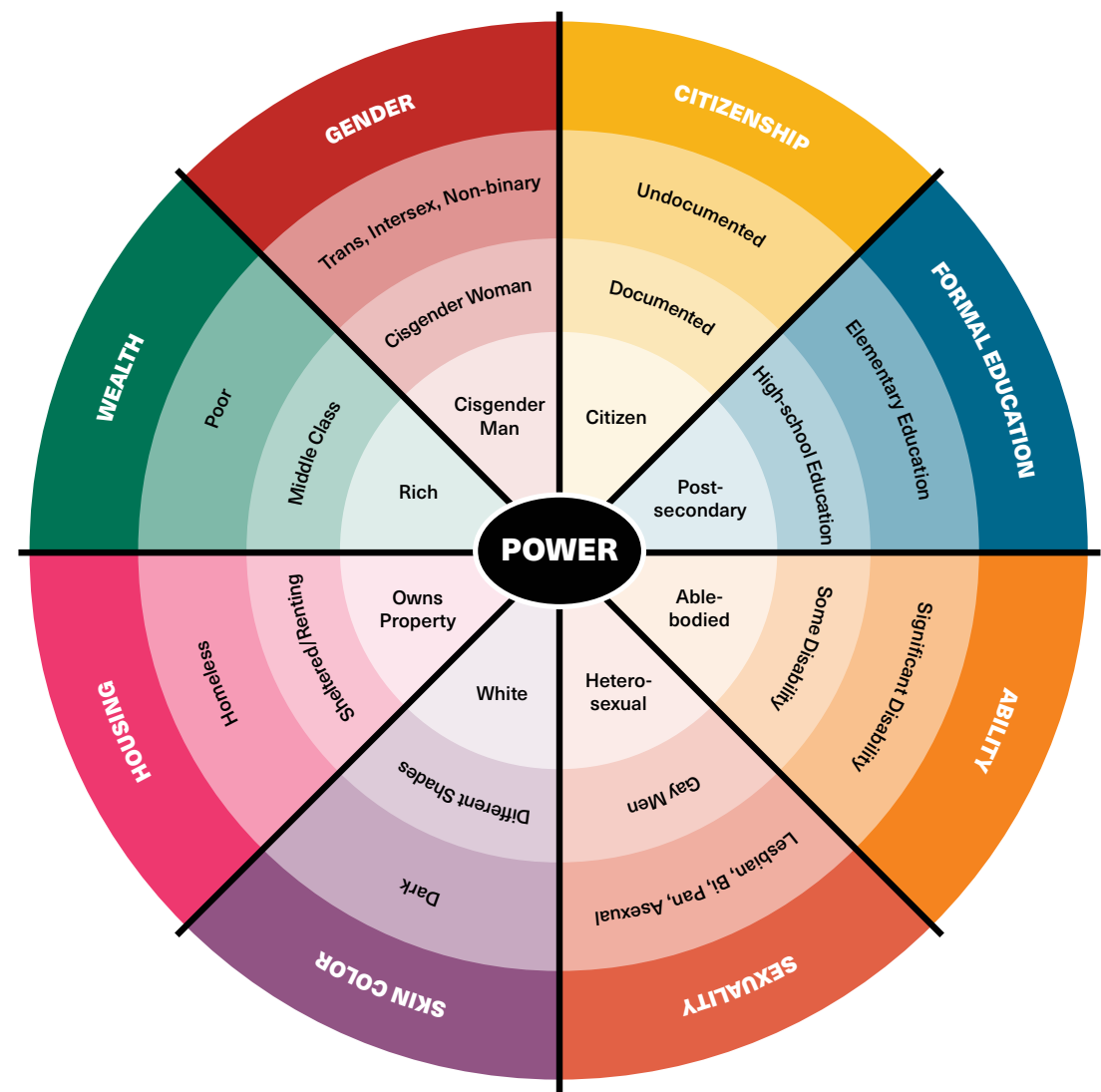
- ▶ What patterns, surprises, or observations stand out?

- ▶ Where do you see diversity? Where do you see inclusion (or a lack of it)?

IDENTIFY A COMMUNITY OF FOCUS**Understanding Power and Marginalization**

As you reflect on communities included or excluded by your organization, patterns may emerge. Societal biases, both conscious and unconscious, create inequitable access to power. This privileges some identities while marginalizing others. These harmful and divisive power dynamics manifest within society and our organizations.

Examine this wheel of power adapted from *Recipes for Wellbeing*. The outer layer refers to identity markers. The identities in the center of the wheel indicate closer proximity to power and privilege in our society. Identities further from the center indicate marginalization.



What identities are missing in this wheel? Notice how our complex identities position us differently regarding privilege and marginalization. We must all strive to rebalance these inequities in our personal and professional lives. This requires attention, awareness of biases, and intentional, equitable decision-making.

As you reflect on excluded communities in your organization, consider:
Which of these communities faces significant marginalization in society and, specifically, in your region?

Honing In

It can feel overwhelming to recognize how many communities are excluded by your organization and marginalized in society. You're not alone. Let's start making a change! We suggest focusing on building a relationship with *one specific community* first.

EXAMPLE

Oakwood Cemetery chose to focus on **local Tejano descendants** because the cemetery had a direct history of institutional harm against this community. Tejano people had been segregated and buried in unmarked graves, so the staff's work was centered on repair, accountability, and rebuilding trust.

The Elisabet Ney Museum chose to focus on **local immigrant and refugee artists** because of the powerful, untapped connection to their founder, Elisabet Ney—an immigrant artist herself. This focus allowed them to make their historical narrative relevant today by amplifying the stories and art of a community that shared a direct connection to Ney's own life.



Oakwood Cemetery
photograph by
Reena Diamante from
Spectrum News

IT'S YOUR
TURN!

Set guidelines for your discussion. Then, use the following questions to select one specific community to build a relationship with (remember to use at least two community descriptors).

Discuss:

- ▶ Which communities are essential for telling a more complete or honest history of your site or content?
- ▶ Which communities possess strengths or skills your team admires?
- ▶ Which community relationships with your site are most in need of repair?
- ▶ With which community can you envision a long-term relationship flourishing?
- ▶ **As you finalize your choice, clarify why building a relationship with this specific community is important to your organization.**

Decide one specific community of focus and why before beginning the next section



Historical Museum at Fort Missoula and the Montana Black Collective Juneteenth Event

PLAN FOR REPAIR, RECIPROCITY,
AND SHARING POWER

Before inviting a community partner, the Museum Team will reflect and plan how to approach this partnership with care, intention, and a commitment to genuine collaboration. You will likely need to revisit this section as you begin collaboration.

Addressing the Need for Repair

Before trust can flourish with your community of focus, your institution may need to address past harms—whether intentional or unintentional, recent or historic. You might already be aware of this need, or it may surface as you begin outreach. Regardless of past events, you are responsible for current actions and fostering a path towards healing.

Repair looks different for every relationship, and healing is an ongoing process for both your institution and the community. Before contacting your community of focus, intentionally consider how you will approach repair. As you move forward, develop a specific repair process with your partner.

Consider this perspective on healing from the health and education program, Head Start:

“Healing can be thought of as a process. This process repairs disruptions in our health and well-being. It leads to recovering our capabilities and functions. Along the way, we can grow in ways that build new strengths. Healing from a traumatic event does not mean we forget the event or erase its effects. Instead, the event and its effects can, over time, be remembered, understood, and felt in new ways. Remembering, understanding, and feeling in new ways can reduce the distress that has been caused. This process can uncover and expand personal strengths that we otherwise might never have recognized.”

IT'S YOUR
TURN!

Reflect:

Individually, think about your personal relationships. What have you learned about repairing harm you've caused?

Discuss:

- ▶ Share personal lessons about repair. Which of these actions might apply to the repair needed for this partnership?
- ▶ What do you know about how your community of focus understands and practices repair?
- ▶ What could be the initial steps towards repairing this relationship?

Ingredients for Reciprocity

Consider your personal relationships—friendships, family, or romantic partners.

What makes them reciprocal?

Often, institutional partnerships feel transactional or tokenistic, primarily serving the institution's agenda rather than fostering mutual benefit. What if we approached professional partnerships with the same care and respect we give personal ones?

We define **reciprocal relationships** as those that: Build mutual responsibility to share power, energy, strengths, and care, while actively working to mitigate imbalances.

While each relationship is unique, certain ingredients are key for reciprocity:

- ▶ **Trust:** Start by extending trust. If mistrust or low trust exists, begin with repair.
- ▶ **Accountability:** Do what you say you're going to do, walk the talk, and own mistakes.
- ▶ **Flexibility:** Be open to different ways of doing things and willing to compromise, especially on structures and processes.
- ▶ **Time:** As author and activist, adrienne maree brown says, "relationships move at the speed of trust." Building a strong foundation takes time.
- ▶ **Strength-based Approach:** Instead of a needs-based i.e. "we have what you need" approach, focus on mutual strengths. Ask: "What can we uniquely create together that we can't do alone?"
- ▶ **Listen, Learn, Unlearn:** Listen to understand, not just to respond. Continuously learn about your community of focus. Unlearn extractive or harmful practices.
- ▶ **Kindness:** Be kind to each other and yourselves throughout this process.

"Reciprocity isn't simply a question of tit for tat. Thinking of reciprocity transactionally may even be counter-productive—keeping us conceptually separated in thinking about 'what we get' vs 'that they get.' Rather, the strongest projects and experiences were mutually beneficial in deeply intertwined ways."

— Museum Partner

"For us, reciprocity was developing a level of trust with our museum partner. Through prioritizing trust and transparency, we were able to have meaningful and impactful conversations which translated into action."

— Community Partner,
Montana Black Collective



IT'S YOUR
TURN!

Considering your specific community of focus, **create a “recipe” for a reciprocal relationship** using the ingredients listed on the previous page. What other ingredients are essential? What steps are important to remember? How long does trust need to simmer?

Debrief:

- ▶ Share and discuss your “recipes” with your team.
- ▶ Which “ingredient” from your new recipe has been most absent from your past partnerships, and why do you believe that is?

Sharing Power

In 1969, Sherry Arnstein introduced the “Ladder of Citizen Participation” to analyze the spectrum of public involvement in U.S. government and planning. Each rung signifies an increasing level of community agency and decision-making power. The ladder highlighted superficial forms of participation and offered a framework for more authentic and equitable citizen engagement.

Let’s apply **Arnstein’s Ladder** to community partnerships in cultural institutions, moving from the lowest to the highest levels of power-sharing:

“Having open and honest communications and a willingness to listen and change is critical to partnership-building. Sharing or giving up some control can offer an incredible opportunity to create something new.”

— Museum Partner,
John Dickinson Plantation



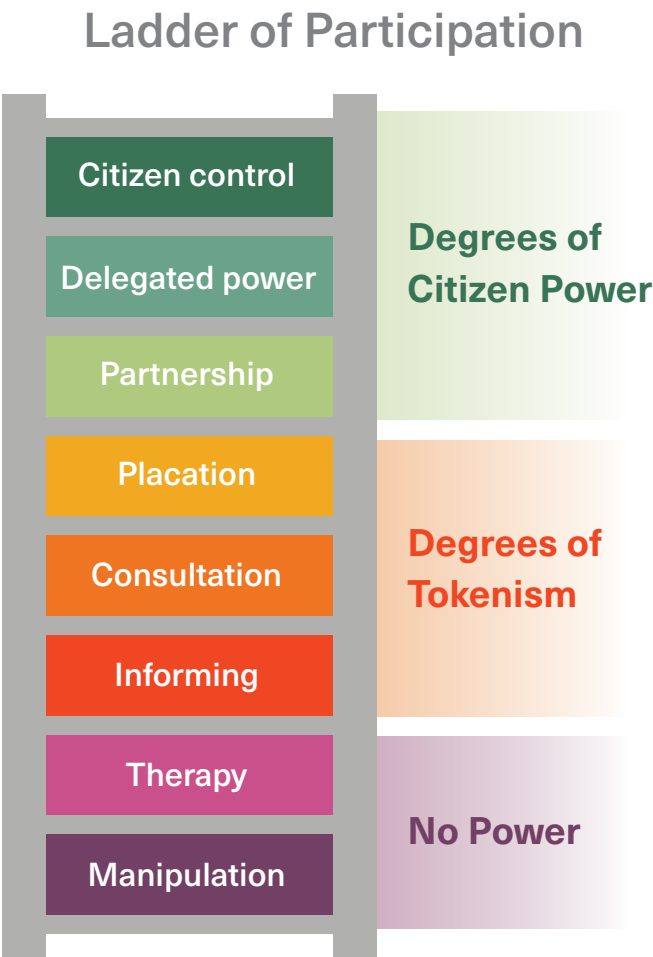
Site Supervisor Devon Filicicchia leads the Southern Delaware Alliance for Racial Justice and John Dickinson Plantation staff on a tour of the Zwaanendael Museum

Levels of Non-Participation (Avoid These):

- ▶ **Manipulation:** Institutions create an illusion of participation. Decisions are pre-made and community input won’t change outcomes. **Example:** An advisory committee is expected to approve a program plan as presented.
- ▶ **Therapy:** Institutions design programs that imply a community has a “problem” the institution can “fix” without genuine relationship or understanding of the community’s actual needs or perspectives. **Example:** A museum offers “disadvantaged” schools free admission, not knowing that transportation costs are the bigger barrier to field trips.

Levels of Tokenism (Use with Caution & Transparency):

- ▶ **Informing:** A one-way flow of information from the institution to the community with no structured opportunity for feedback or dialogue. **Example:** A museum issues a statement or press release about a controversial decision.



- ▶ **Consultation:** Institutions solicit community opinions. However, this often lacks institutional accountability to act on the input, or clear pathways for continued involvement. **Example:** A museum hosts focus groups, but doesn’t explain how input will be used. Participants are frustrated when their ideas aren’t implemented.
- ▶ **Placation:** Communities are invited to advise, participate, or have limited influence on specific projects, but the institution retains overall control of the process and wider decisions. This can feel tokenistic if community participation is confined to narrow areas or input isn’t integrated meaningfully. **Example:** A museum invites a group for a one-off cultural event designed without their input, with no further engagement.

Levels of Community Power (Aim for These):

- ▶ **Partnership:** Genuine power-sharing begins. Institutions and communities collaboratively design processes, share planning and decision-making, and co-create projects from inception to completion. This can influence broader institutional practices. **Example:** The Wing Luke Museum’s community-developed model for co-creating exhibitions.
- ▶ **Delegated Power:** Institutions transfer significant strategic control over specific programs or resources to community groups. Collaboration with communities becomes a core institutional function. **Example:** James Madison’s Montpelier now shares governance and high-level decision-making with the Montpelier Descendant Committee.
- ▶ **Citizen Control:** The highest level. A community fully governs a program or even an institution, including budget and strategy, representing a full redistribution of power. **Example:** In 2022, the City of Oakland returned Joaquin Miller Park to the Indigenous Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, granting them full control over land use and stewardship.

Using the Ladder

Arnstein's ladder is a framework for intentionally increasing power-sharing, not a rigid grading tool. Not every partnership must reach the top rung; consultation can be appropriate if transparent and acted upon. The goal is to weave diverse opportunities for meaningful community participation throughout your organization, consistently avoiding tokenism.



Reflect:

▶ Think about one current partnership your institution has. Where does it sit on the ladder?

▶ How could you realistically move that partnership one step up the ladder?

Discuss:

▶ For the new partnership you're developing, you aim for "Partnership" level or higher. What concrete steps can your team take *now* to pave the way for success at this level of power-sharing?

FIND A COMMUNITY PARTNER

This section guides you through identifying potential community partners from your community of focus, initiating contact, having initial conversations, and finalizing a community partner to proceed with.

Identifying Possible Partners

Even if you have someone in mind, explore options, especially if you lack existing connections.

Find your common ground

Ask yourself: "Why might this community *want* to partner with us?" The answer shouldn't feel like a stretch. Look for a genuine link based on:

- ▶ **Shared Interests:** Storytelling, art, a specific historical period, etc.
- ▶ **Shared Values:** Education, social justice, healing, community-building, etc.
- ▶ **Shared Place or History:** A connection to the same land, neighborhood, or historical event.

EXAMPLE

The Partners: Historic Stagville and their neighbors, Urban Community AgriNomics.

The Connection: They discovered their common ground was both literal and thematic. They were connected by:

- ▶ **Shared History & Place:** Both organizations are rooted in the same historic plantation land.
- ▶ **Shared Values:** Both focus deeply on land stewardship and community healing.



Urban Community AgriNomics.
Photo by Urban Community AgriNomics.

Discuss:

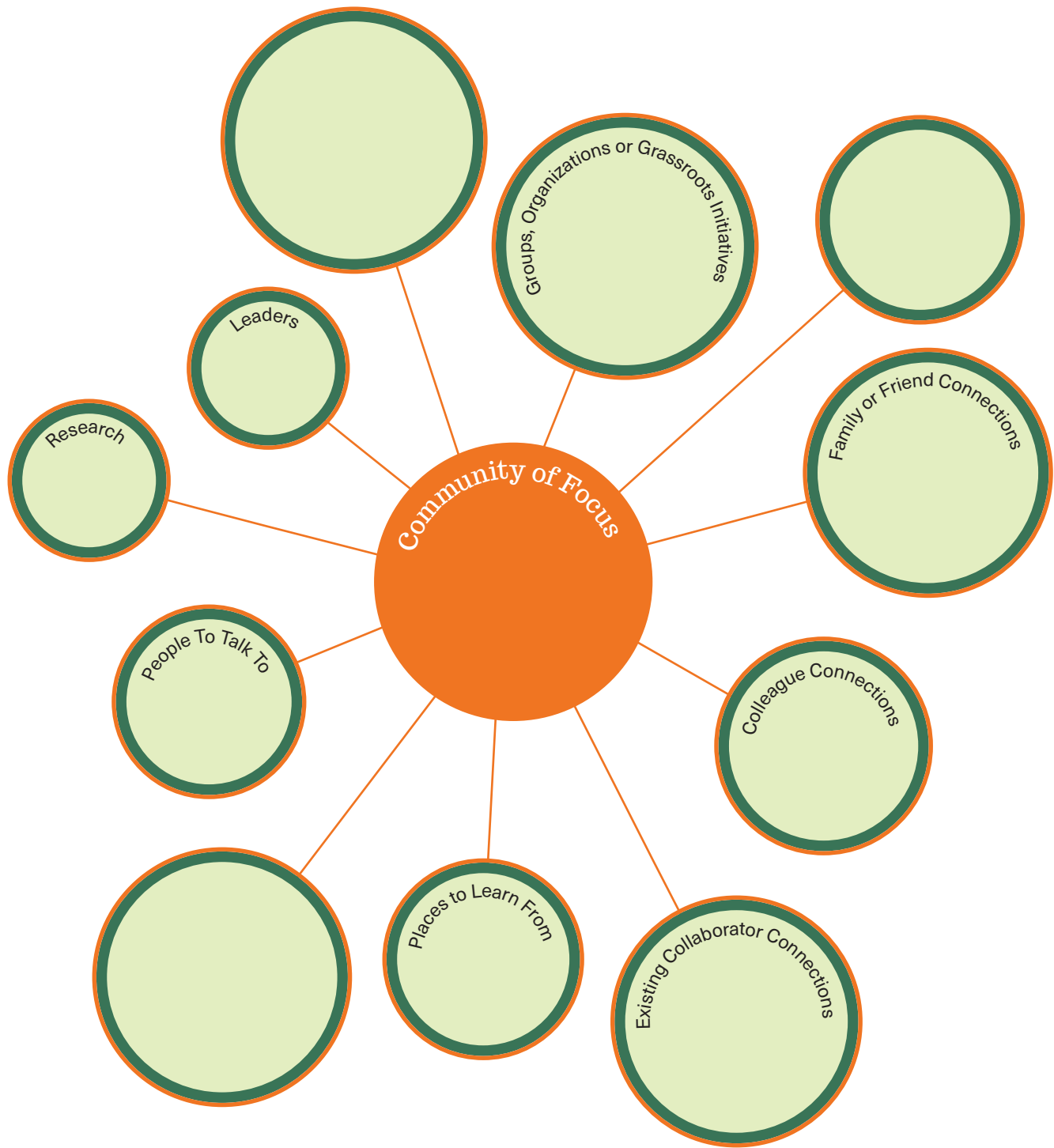
- ▶ What might be your common ground with your community of focus?
Note: You might make some assumptions here.



Historic Stagville photograph by Samantha Everette.

Draw a Mind Map of Connectors:

A mind map is a visual brainstorm of ideas and how they are related. Write your community of focus in the center. In each circle, write names of individuals or groups you know (or know of) from or connected to this community. ***This should be messy!***



Talk to Your Connectors:

- ▶ Decide which connectors to contact.
- ▶ Explain your intentions and the partnership qualities you seek. Connectors often have excellent recommendations and may offer introductions—accept them and ask how the partner prefers to be contacted.



David Lei, a board member of the Chinese Historical Society of America, built upon a previous collaboration with Michelle Wu to connect with youth from the Community Youth Center interested in civil rights history.

Inviting Potential Partners to Chat

Reach out to a few potential partners initially. It's okay to explore possibilities and gauge interest without settling on one immediately. Be patient if responses are slow; follow up if needed. If you face rejections, don't get discouraged and ask for alternative recommendations.

Tips for Initial Contact:

- ▶ **Communicate on Their Terms:** Use their preferred method if you know this from your connector (call, email, in-person at an event).
- ▶ **Show Appreciation:** "We admire the way you..."
- ▶ **Highlight Common Ground:** "We care about X, and we believe you might too."
- ▶ **Be Flexible:** Ask them to choose a convenient meeting time and location.
- ▶ **Be Clear & Concise.**



Send out your invites!

Having Your First Chat

Meet with a few potential partners, ideally in person. Be transparent that you're exploring options with others. Think of this as a first "hang out" with a potential new friend, rather than a formal meeting.

Tips for the First Chat:

- ▶ **Meet where they're most comfortable:** Respect their choice of time and location.
- ▶ **Break the Ice:** Invite everyone to introduce themselves with their name and something they care about. This helps with pronunciation and builds connection.
- ▶ **Connect as People:** Start by getting to know each other's stories.
- ▶ **Learn About Each Other's Work/Organizations.**
- ▶ **Listen Actively:** Listen more. Be prepared to hear feedback, including potential criticisms of your institution.
- ▶ **Cover Key Points:**
 - + Shared interests and values.
 - + Your interest in collaborating.
 - + Your intentions for a potential partnership (reciprocity, co-creation).
- ▶ **Follow Through:** State when you'll follow up, and then do it.



Michigan History Center's first chat with Dr. Delia Fernández-Jones from Michigan State University & Latino Leaders for the Enhancement of Advocacy and Development (LLEAD)



Choose a partner:

Now that you’ve had a chance to talk with a few potential partners, it’s time to decide who you’ll work with more closely on this project.

How to Decide?

There’s no single right answer, but think about which conversation left you feeling most energized.

Ask your team:

- ▶ Who seemed most excited to collaborate with us?
- ▶ Where did we feel the strongest connection or “vibe”?
- ▶ Who was most open to co-creating something new?

Before beginning the next section, choose your partner.

A Friendly Reminder: This decision is just for this project. You’re not closing the door on anyone else. The ultimate goal is to build a network of trusted relationships in the community, so find ways to stay connected with everyone you have met.

STEP 2:

Build Your Relationship



The Catoctin Furnace Historical Society staff & members of the Catoctin Furnace African American Skilled Ironworkers Descendant Group enjoy a hike together at Blue Ridge Summit Overlook.

“The most beneficial lesson we learned was to slow down and take time to get to know our partners—both their organization and as individuals. Tabling any sort of agenda or goal and going into our meetings with simple curiosity enabled us to learn more deeply about one another and find the natural intersections in our work. This time was invaluable to enabling both partners to discover each other’s strengths. When it came time to start discussing project work, we could capitalize on our strengths to develop a shared purpose that was mutually beneficial.”

— Museum Partner, Michigan History Center

For the following activities, museum and community partners should work together.

You may be tempted to skip this step or rush through it but there is true value in building relationships that are authentic and much of this work will be diluted if relationships are not centered.

GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER: MORE LIKE FRIENDS!

Think about how new friendships start. You connect over shared interests, admire something about the other person, or simply enjoy their company. You get to know each other better as people—what they like, what they are good at—and often do things together in places or activities they enjoy.

We are aiming for deep, reciprocal relationships here, so let’s approach this more like making a new friend than starting a formal professional partnership.



Hermann-Grimma and Gallier Historic Houses staff out to lunch with Gaynell Brady from Our Mammy’s.

One of our biggest lessons? **Slow down, get to know each other as human beings before diving into any project.** This also helps you understand your community of focus on a much deeper, more personal level.

We’ve brainstormed some fun activities you and your community partner can do together, just like new friends might. We spent two months just doing these activities.



How to Play:

- 1 Work Together:**
Choose and complete activities on the card with your partner.
 - 2 Get BINGO:**
Aim to complete a line in any direction—horizontally, vertically, or diagonally.
 - 3 Reflect After Each Square:**
What did I learn about my partner, myself, and our community through this experience?



B I N G O



ce 



***<http://nphm.org/program/36-questions-for-civic-love>**

GET TO KNOW YOUR ORGANIZATIONS

Once you've connected as individuals, it's time to learn about each other's organizations or ways of working. The goal is for both museum and community partners to understand:

- ▶ How each entity engages with community members.
- ▶ Their respective strengths.
- ▶ Their internal processes or approaches to their work.

When visiting the museum, both partners should pay close attention to any potential **barriers of access and exclusions of stories** they might encounter or observe. This is crucial for preparing for internal change at the museum.



Elisabet Ney Museum visiting the Refugee Collective to learn about their natural textile dyeing method

Behind the Scenes Activity Ideas :

We suggest each partner selects activities most appropriate for their context or creates activities of their own. Here are some ideas:

- ▶ Visit each other's spaces, where public-facing work happens.
- ▶ Take a personal, "behind-the-scenes" tour.
- ▶ Attend an event or public gathering hosted by the other partner and discuss it afterward.
- ▶ Attend a relevant internal meeting (staff, board, volunteer, or community group meeting).
- ▶ Experience a school or public tour, then debrief.
- ▶ Host an informal "brown bag" lunch with key people at your organization.
- ▶ Share and discuss an internal policy or common practice.



Casa de Rosado Galeria and Cultural Center

1h · 🌐

We wish to thank the staff from the Michigan History Museum for dropping in for a DEI volunteer sugar skull molding session! Staff learned about the history of the sugar skull and how it's a component of the Day of the Dead celebration.

The Michigan History Museum stops by again next week to help 800 underserved Lansing School District students have sugar skulls for Hispanic Heritage Month with funds from the City of Lansing Neighborhood Grant. We'll done Michigan History Museum!



Michigan History Museum Staff at Casa de Rosado Galeria and Culture Center Volunteering to Make Sugar Skulls

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Go Behind the Scenes:

- ▶ Each partner (museum and community) chooses two “behind-the-scenes” activities for the other to participate in from the list above or create your own.
- ▶ After these activities, reflect:
 - What did you learn about each other’s organizations/work?

- What potential barriers or exclusions of stories did you notice at the museum?

FIND YOUR SHARED PURPOSE

Your **Shared Purpose** is the significant societal change that you and your community partner are uniquely positioned to address together. It’s bigger than your individual organizational missions.

Think of it as your “**North Star**”—the guiding light for your collaboration, the shared future you are building. You can revisit and refine this purpose as your partnership grows.

EXAMPLE

The Old Bakery and Emporium & Veterans Suicide Prevention Channel / AVA Fest: To transform lives through healing and art.

The Historical Museum at Fort Missoula & the Montana Black Collective: To raise awareness of social injustice and the lesser-known stories of Missoula’s BIPOC community.

Historic Stagville & Urban Community AgroNomics: To ensure the stewardship of the former plantation land is shaped by healing between people, land, and its history of the enslaved people.



— Marshall Ganz,
community organizer and lecturer.



Find your Shared Purpose aka your North Star:

1. Reflect Individually (Your Constellation)

Individually, reflect on your personal and organizational motivations, values, hopes for the future, and strengths. Draw a constellation of stars and write your reflections next to them.

2. Share and Discuss

Share your constellations with each other. Discuss the common themes, shared motivations, and desired impacts you discover.

3. Define Your Shared Purpose

Together, write one clear, memorable sentence that captures your Shared Purpose. This should reflect a change you both care about and have the strengths to address together. Write your final sentence inside the North Star on the next page.

4. Make It Visible

Cut out your North Star and hang it where you can see it often. This will be your guide.



Our Shared Purpose aka North Star

Cut out your North Star and hang it where you can see it often.



Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum and staff with the Sitka Tribe of Alaska's Cultural Resources Committee discussing the museum exhibitions

THIS IS AN ONGOING PROCESS

These activities are just the beginning. Building strong relationships is an ongoing process, not a one-time task. Expect to revisit these exercises or similar trust-building activities as your partnership evolves, especially if trust needs rebuilding, motivations shift, or new team members join.

"Reciprocity was built in our ability to truly listen to each other and provide thoughtful and reflective responses. We were able to share cultural norms and fallacies, admit what we did not know, share pains and personal stories. We got to know each other. Break bread, eat together and visit local sites and communities to learn about the diversity of people."

— Community Partner,
Urban Community AgriNomics

STEP 3:

Make an Internal Systems Change



Latino Leaders for the Enhancement of Advocacy and Development (LLEAD) and Michigan State University staff go behind-the-scenes at the Michigan History Center.

"We learned that sometimes it is the little things that can be significant barriers. As an example, we've decided to rethink meeting times for our governing board. Their meeting times and dates presented challenges for those from underrepresented communities to get involved. To correct this we've changed the meeting times and dates to when it is more conducive to increasing diversity on our boards. We've also reintroduced term limits to allow new voices to join."

— Museum Partner,
The Historical Museum
at Fort Missoula



The Historical Museum at Fort Missoula and the Montana Black Collective Missoula collaborating for the Juneteenth celebration.

In this step, you will make one **internal systems change**—to a policy, practice, or structure—at the museum that addresses a barrier to inclusivity and collaboration.

A Note on Reciprocity for Museum Partners in this Step

This work focuses on changing the *museum's* internal systems. Therefore, the primary responsibility for the labor lies with the museum team. As you move forward, keep your partnership balanced and growing:

- ▶ **Be mindful of your partner's time.** They are your advisors in this step.
- ▶ **Proactively offer support.** Notice and act on ways to share museum resources and support your partner's goals too.
- ▶ **Consider a small, mutual project.** Some teams found that working on a small, collaborative project at the same time helped maintain a sense of mutual benefit. For example, The Old Bakery and Emporium & Veterans Suicide Prevention Channel / AVA Fest experimented with informal Painting Parties.

Find an approach that feels genuinely supportive for both of you.

EXAMPLE

Hermann-Grima and Gallier Historic Houses discovered their community partner was personally interested in learning their open-hearth cooking techniques. The museum offered this training, helping her connect more deeply with the staff and her own ancestors. This shared experience expanded everyone's knowledge of local culinary history and sparked new ideas for both organizations.



Gaynell Brady from Our Mammy's learns open-hearth cooking techniques with staff from Hermann-Grima and Gallier Historic Houses.

START FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Why begin changemaking internally?

Often, when museums aim to address inequities with new community partners, the immediate impulse is to launch a big visible public project. However, without first building mutual understanding, strong relationships, and supportive internal systems, these efforts often lack lasting impact.

Starting “inside-out” ensures a solid foundation for transformation, following a path similar to the anti-racist systems change organization, *Forward Through Ferguson's* model:

Awareness
of Inequity



Understanding
Why Inequity Exists



Transforming
Towards Equity

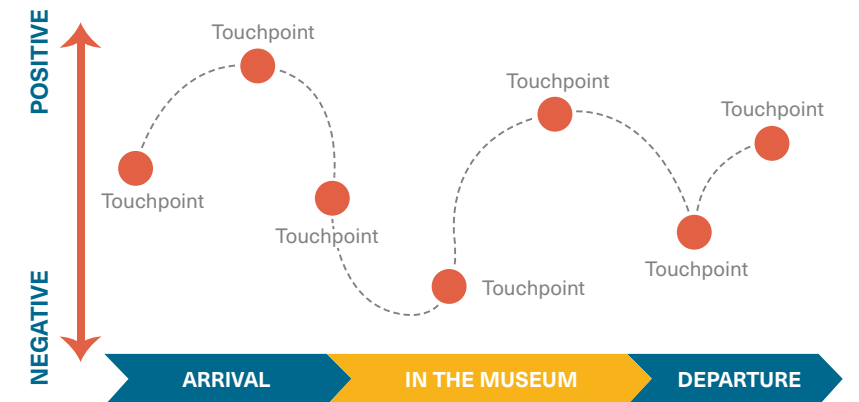
BUILD AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING OF BARRIERS

Broaden Awareness

Your “behind-the-scenes” activities with your community partner likely highlighted some specific exclusions and barriers at the museum. A simplified journey map can further illuminate their experience. A journey map is a visual representation of a person's experience with an organization over time. Its purpose is to understand their journey and identify areas for improvement from their perspective.

Community Partners: Map Your Museum Visit

- ✓ Walk through the museum as a visitor (during an event or open hours).
- ✓ Map your journey from arrival to departure, noting *key touchpoints*: entering, interactions with staff, moments experiencing exhibitions/content, participation opportunities, navigation, and exiting.
- ✓ For each key touchpoint, note:
 - Did you feel it was a positive or negative experience? Why?
 - Where were your community's stories/ideas reflected? Where were they missing?
 - Where were your stories, ideas, or opinions welcomed?



Community & Museum Partners: Debrief the Journey Map

- ✓ Review the journey map together. Discuss why touchpoints felt positive or negative.
- ✓ Identify the most significant barriers and exclusions encountered.
- ✓ What might make these experiences more positive and inclusive?

EXAMPLE

To address transportation barriers for the **Beardstown High School Spanish Club**, the **Illinois State Museum** paid for buses for students to visit the Museum, and met the students in their community to do work. For many students, this resulted in their first-ever museum visit.

Once there, the students identified deeper issues: exhibits were not fully bilingual, they didn't see themselves reflected, and in one exhibit, Latine culture was presented as monolithic rather than diverse. Critically, the students felt safe enough to share this feedback because the staff had already built a strong relationship with them. They had earned this trust by consistently showing up at school events, speaking both English and Spanish, and demonstrating a genuine commitment to listening and taking action.



Illinois State Museum staff visiting students at a Beardstown High School event



Beardstown High School Spanish Club experiencing the Illinois State Museum.



IT'S YOUR TURN!

Pinpoint Barriers & Exclusions:

Museum & Community Partners Together:

- ▶ Compile a list of specific exclusions and barriers identified from all previous activities (relationship building, behind-the-scenes, journey mapping).

- ▶ Prioritize the top three areas, practices, or policies that are most challenging and urgently need change.

Build Understanding

Museum Partners: Internal Reflection

- ▶ Review the list of barriers and exclusions identified with your community partner.
- ▶ Reflect on why these exist within your organization and what has prevented positive change so far.

"Not everything critical is bad, it is a way to grow and an opportunity to rethink, re-assess, and rebuild."

— Museum Partner,
John Dickinson Plantation



Museum team discuss:

- ▶ What specific internal practices (spoken or unspoken), structures, or policies contribute to these exclusions/barriers?
- ▶ Why might these practices exist? What are their root causes?
- ▶ What has hindered change in these areas previously?

SPECIFY THE BARRIER, OUTCOMES, AND SOLUTION

Identify One Core Barrier

With your community partner, select the single most critical internal barrier to address. Note: Focus on agreeing on the problem, not on finding a solution yet.

EXAMPLE

The Elisabet Ney Museum and the Refugee Collective initially planned to address language barriers. That changed during a joint visit to a different museum's textile exhibition when a refugee woman, on her first-ever museum visit, reached out to touch a display. A guard loudly reprimanded her.

In that moment, the Ney staff realized the true barrier wasn't language, but a fundamental feeling of being unwelcome. They pivoted their entire focus from technical accessibility to the more essential work of creating a safe and welcoming space built on kindness and belonging.



Elisabet Ney Museum and the Refugee Collective visiting an art museum's textile exhibition together.



Museum & Community Partners decide one core internal barrier to address.

Define Desired Outcomes

An outcome is the specific, positive change you want to see in people as a result of your work. It's about the **human impact**, not the activities you perform.

Defining outcomes first creates a shared goal and points you toward the most effective solutions.

Outcomes are often changes in people's:

- ▶ Understanding (what people know)
- ▶ Feelings or Beliefs (what they think or feel)
- ▶ Skills (what they can do)
- ▶ Behavior (how they act)
- ▶ Well-being or Engagement

EXAMPLES

Michigan History Center & Michigan State University Chicano Latino Studies: The museum staff will know more about Michigan's Latine arts, history, and culture and have developed cultural competencies that will assist with future community engagement.

Oakwood Cemetery Chapel & Tejano Genealogy Society of Austin: The community partner will feel more support from the parks department and that their work is valued.

Historic Stagville & Urban Community AgriNomics: The community of focus will know how they can participate in museum operations and projects, and how to communicate their ideas directly with museum leadership.

Museum & Community Partners Discuss:

(Use the reflection questions from the Kera Collective to the right to help.)

Imagine the barrier is gone. What will be different for each group? Write one short sentence for each group:

- ▶ The museum team will...
(think, feel, know, do, or experience what differently?)

- ▶ The community partner will...

- ▶ The community of focus will...

Kera Collective's Internal Change Reflection Questions

UNDERSTANDING

As a result of your internal change, what knowledge or understanding will your site or community gain? What kind of knowledge might you develop?

FEELINGS/BELIEFS

After your internal change, how will your staff or community feel? Will your internal change shift particular attitudes or beliefs?

SOCIAL/ENGAGEMENT

After your internal change, how will social interactions, engagements, or networks at your site or in your community be different?

SKILLS

After your internal change, what kind of skills will your staff or community members gain?

WELL-BEING

After your internal change, how will the well-being of staff or community members be different? How will theire well-being be positively changed?

CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR

After your internal change, how will the behavior of staff or community members be different? What shifts in behaviors or actions might result from your change?

Imagine Solutions

Now that you've defined the barrier (the problem) and the desired outcomes (the goal), it's time to find the solution. Your task is to identify an **internal systems change** that directly addresses the barrier and achieves your outcomes.

EXAMPLE

The Catoctin Furnace Historical Society & the Catoctin Furnace African American Skilled Ironworkers Descendant Group: This story shows how a systems change can transform a partnership.

- ▶ **The Barrier:** The Catoctin Furnace Historical Society partnered with descendants of enslaved people whose stories had been excluded. While many descendants were eager to be involved, the team identified a critical barrier: there was no clear pathway for them to contribute or hold leadership roles.
- ▶ **The Internal Systems Change:** To solve this, they brainstormed and co-created a crucial systems change: establishing formal, clear pathways for descendants to join the organization's board and help shape the site's interpretation.
- ▶ **The Outcome:** This change has been transformative. The organization now has three descendant board members and is working towards co-stewardship of the site, ensuring that descendants have real power in how their ancestors' stories are told.



Catoctin Descendants Agnes Summers Jackson, with daughters Vicki Winston, Sharon Green and Barbara Hart, and Michael and Julie Boon joined CFHS President Elisabeth Anderson Comer at the African American cemetery settlement.



Catoctin Descendants Agnes Summers Jackson with daughters Vicki Winston, Sharon Green, and Barbara Hart as well as sellers Michael and Julie Boone joined CFHS President Elisabeth Anderson Comer at the African American cemetery settlement.



Museum & Community Partners Discuss:

First, brainstorm and discuss potential solutions (internal changes).

As you evaluate your ideas, use this filter:

Focus on the “Next Right Step”. Your goal is progress, not perfection. Instead of a huge, multi-year overhaul, ask: “What is a meaningful internal change we can realistically implement now?”

Finally, select the single internal system change you will commit to.

DRAFT AN ACTION PLAN & MAKE IT HAPPEN

Action Plan

To make progress, break your internal change into small, manageable steps. Treat this as a living document and adjust it as you go. **Start small.** If the change feels overwhelming, just focus on the most important first step.

“Start small and understand that big change starts with very small adjustments and shifts in perspective. Our internal change helped to lay a good foundation and framework for larger change. The work we did in internal change helped us adjust our priorities and mindsets so that we could start the external change on good footing.”

— Museum Partner, Brush Square Museums



Brush Square Museums and the Living History Foundation working with youth interns

EXAMPLE

The John Dickinson Plantation and the Southern Delaware Alliance for Racial Justice (SDARJ) wanted to build stronger relationships with the broader African American community. Here is how they broke that large goal into a series of concrete, evolving steps:



The John Dickinson Plantation and the Southern Delaware Alliance for Racial Justice collaborating on community outreach at the Nassau School Public Meeting.

- ▶ **Step 1: Conduct Community Outreach.**
The team started with focused outreach to the African American community in Southern Delaware. This led to them hosting a town hall meeting.

▶ **Step 2: Identify a New Barrier.**
During the town hall, they realized a key practice needed to change: there wasn’t a clear way for community members to propose their own ideas for programs and events.

▶ **Step 3: Co-create a Systems Solution.**
To address this barrier and move toward shared power, the partners decided to create a formal process for community-led programming. The final step was to design and share a **new program proposal form** that not only invited new ideas but also formally involved SDARJ in the decision-making and approval process.



The John Dickinson Plantation and the Southern Delaware Alliance for Racial Justice co-host a town hall.

This step-by-step approach allowed them to discover the true need and create a lasting systems change.

Museum Partner: **Draft the Action Plan**

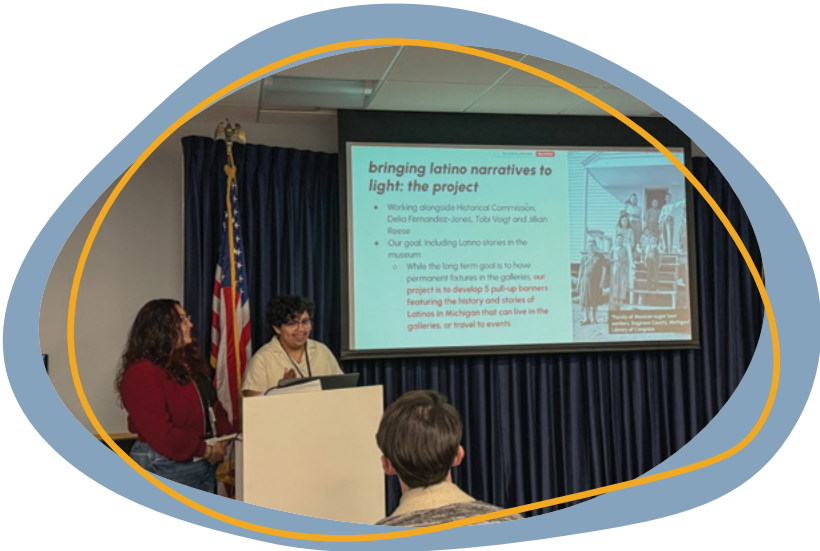
Use the template below to outline the steps your museum will take to implement this change. Consult with your Community Partner as needed.

Action Steps (What will you do?)	Who is involved? (Who needs to be consulted?)	Who leads & decides? (Who is the final decision-maker?)	When will this action step be completed?
STEP 1:			
STEP 2:			
STEP 3:			
STEP 4:			
STEP 5:			

Make it Happen

It's time to put your plan into action. As you implement the change, remember to:

- ▶ **Be Flexible:** Your action plan is a guide, not a rigid script. Adjust it as you learn what works.
- ▶ **Communicate:** Keep your community partner updated on your progress and discuss any challenges that arise.



Michigan State University Chicano Latino Studies interns share their project work at the Michigan History Center.

REFLECT AND CELEBRATE

After you've implemented the change, schedule time to reflect and celebrate together.

- ▶ **Be Patient:** You may not see the full impact immediately.
- ▶ **Celebrate:** This was an important first step, even if there were bumps. Acknowledge the effort and progress you've made!
- ▶ **Look Ahead:** The process likely uncovered new areas for improvement. Note these and pay attention to additional changes needed for moving forward as your relationship evolves. Systems change work is ongoing.

“One of our internal changes created opportunities for Michigan State University Chicano Latino Studies students to explore museum work as a potential career. We created a hands-on, real-world program where students researched and developed exhibit panels on aspects of Latine history and culture for inclusion in the museum. We made mistakes in how we set up the work, because the students felt anxious and responsible for representing all Latine people in their work. But being able to have open, honest conversations helped us learn and course-correct quickly. This learning was important as we started our external change in communities.”

— Museum Partner,
Michigan History Center

Museum & Community Partners Reflect and Discuss:

REFLECTION QUESTION	PROMPTS FOR YOUR DISCUSSION
1. What was the impact?	Reflecting on your desired outcomes, what has changed so far for the museum team, the community partner, and the community of focus?
<div></div> <div></div> <div></div>	
2. What did we learn?	What were the most important lessons from the planning and implementation process? What went well? What was challenging?
<div></div> <div></div> <div></div>	
3. What's next?	Based on what you learned, what will the museum partner continue to do? What will the museum partner change or improve next?
<div></div> <div></div> <div></div>	

STEP 4:

Make An External
Storytelling
Change



Beardstown High School Spanish Club teacher, Gabriela Montoya, with her students in front of their pop-up exhibition made in collaboration with the Illinois State Museum and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

In this step, Museum and Community Partners will make one external, public-facing change that amplifies a previously excluded story. This is about building understanding and connection, not just presenting new facts. Thinking back to Arnstein's Ladder, the goal is to operate at the level of *Partnership* or higher. In short, this means both partners share power and make key decisions together throughout the entire process—from the initial idea to the final launch.

MAKE SHARED DECISIONS

The heart of co-creation is shared decision-making. There's no single right way, but these tips can help guide you.

The Foundation

- ▶ **Lean on Reciprocity:** This entire process requires those ingredients for reciprocity like trust, flexibility, and kindness. Keep building those muscles.
- ▶ **Stay Focused on Your “Why”:** Always keep your shared purpose front and center. It's your compass when you disagree.

“Stop saying no. Decision makers need to stop finding excuses or barriers, and instead turn the conversation to ‘How can we?’ This allows the community partners to be in charge and allows for the internal team to think creatively and try new approaches.”

— Museum Partner,
Illinois State Museum

The Process

- ▶ **Be Clear Upfront:** If certain options are off the table or not up for debate, state that clearly at the beginning.
- ▶ **Brainstorm with Open Minds:** When generating ideas, suspend judgment. Use a “yes, and...” approach to build on each other's perspectives without shutting them down.
- ▶ **Let Ideas Simmer:** Before choosing, give everyone space for reflection. A great idea often needs time to incubate and can surface in informal, unstructured time together.
- ▶ **Embrace the “Messy Middle”:** Synthesizing ideas can be uncomfortable. Normalize disagreement and focus on understanding different viewpoints to strengthen the best ideas.
- ▶ **Decide and Commit Together:** When you're ready to finalize, check for genuine agreement. Adjust as needed to ensure everyone feels ownership of the final decision.

UNDERSTAND STORYTELLING CHOICES

We learn and connect through stories. A simple timeline of facts can inform, but a true story makes us *feel*. The emotional threads—love, fear, belonging, loss etc.- are what draw us in and allow us to identify with the characters. When we connect with the emotions in a story, we build empathy and learn from the choices people make as they face challenges.

As museums, we hold power to shape these connections. Every story we tell is the result of intentional choices. To build more inclusive narratives, we must become conscious of these choices and the impact they have.

Consider this framework for analyzing any story:

CHOICE	KEY QUESTION
VOICE	Who is telling the story? Whose perspective are we hearing?
CENTRALITY	Who is the main character? Who is in the spotlight?
AGENCY	Who has the power to act and make decisions in the story?
SCOPE	What are the boundaries of the story? (e.g., time, place, context)

When you intentionally shift one of these elements, you don't just change the story's focus; you change its emotional core and its power to create change.

As you make more inclusive storytelling choices remember:

- ▶ People are strong enough to hear truths about the past.
- ▶ People are not their oppression.
- ▶ Someone is always resisting.
- ▶ People live whole lives; tell their stories with a full range of emotion.



Museum & Community Partners Warm Up: 10 Word Stories

Powerful stories don't need to be long.

- 1. Find a picture with a person in a setting—in the space you're meeting or on your phone.
- 2. Individually, write a 10-word story about them that includes a character, a challenge, and an emotion.

- 3. Share your stories and notice the emotional connections you created.

Museum & Community Partners: Storytelling Intervention Practice

- 1. **Find a Story:**
Together, choose an existing story at the museum (e.g., a tour script, an exhibition label, a brochure).
- 2. **Analyze It:**
Using the framework above, discuss the choices that were made about Voice, Centrality, Agency, and Scope.
- 3. **Make an Intervention:**
Change one of those choices (e.g., add a quote from a new perspective, expand the timeline, shift who is in focus). You aren't changing the truth, but you are sharing a different layer of it.
- 4. **Discuss the Impact:**
How does this single change affect your reaction to the story?
What new understanding does it create?

SPECIFY THE STORIES, OUTCOMES, AND FORMAT

Choose Your Focus Story

Your goal together is to select one or a few powerful stories that have been marginalized. The right story will resonate with your community of focus, your community partner, and advance your shared purpose. It's hard to narrow it down, but starting with a clear focus is key.

EXAMPLE

The Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum and the Sitka Tribe of Alaska focused on the museum's most prominent and painful narrative: the one about its founder, which is presented at the very entrance to the museum. The museum's name and introductory story celebrated Sheldon Jackson, a missionary who was a central agent of settler colonialism focused on the forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples. He was a founder of the Alaskan boarding school system, which inflicted deep trauma, and a collector of Indigenous art and cultural belongings.

This created a core contradiction. While the museum's programming is 98% Indigenous-led, its foundational narrative—the first thing visitors encounter—honored a figure of immense harm. This introductory story excluded the painful truth of Jackson's legacy and the fact that the museum sits on the traditional homeland of the Tlingit people, who are part of the Sitka Tribe of Alaska.

As new partners, they were continuously building trust and repair, which required addressing this foundational pain point. Their capacity to address this together was further strengthened by creating internal changes in the friends group including a new board tribal liaison position, cross promoting each others' events, and updating exhibition terminology for Tlingit to include both Lingit and Tlingit. Their shared work now focuses on transforming the museum's name and entrance story to acknowledge the full, complex truth of its history and to center Indigenous voices and perspectives from the moment a visitor walks through the door.



Sitka Tribe of Alaska's Cultural Resources Committee meets with museum staff to share their thoughts, suggested revisions, and feedback on the Sheldon Jackson Museum's introductory exhibition



Museum & Community Partners:
Use some of these prompts to guide your discussion.

- ▶ **Remember Your North Star**
 - ✓ **Action:** Revisit your partnership’s Shared Purpose statement.
 - ✓ **Question:** What stories will most effectively advance this purpose?
- ▶ **Walk the Museum Together**
 - ✓ **Action:** Tour your spaces, specifically looking for gaps and opportunities.
 - ✓ **Question:** Where do we see story exclusions? Where could we add a new voice?
- ▶ **Engage the Community Directly**
 - ✓ **Action:** Attend a community partner event or host a conversation at the museum with food.
 - ✓ **Question:** What stories does your community of focus feel are most important to share?
- ▶ **Explore Dominant Regional Narratives**
 - ✓ **Action:** Look at local media, school curricula, or public spaces.
 - ✓ **Question:** How is this community’s story told—or silenced—in the wider region?
- ▶ **Dig into Your Own History**
 - ✓ **Action:** Review your museum’s institutional history and mission.
 - ✓ **Question:** What untold stories are essential to your specific site or history?

Your Goal: Narrow It Down

After your discussions, give each other time to think individually. Then select one or a few specific stories to focus on. Remember, this is the starting point for ongoing work, not the only chance you’ll have.

Define Desired Outcomes

As with your internal change, start by defining your desired outcomes. Remember, an outcome is the specific, positive change you want to see in people—it’s about the **human impact**, not the project itself.

EXAMPLES

The Illinois State Museum & Beardstown High School Spanish Club: The community of focus will feel proud of their identity, learn from one another, create in their first language, and feel empowered to share their emotions.

Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum & the Sitka Tribe of Alaska: The general public will better understand Sheldon Jackson, his connection to boarding school history, and the resilience and continued presence of Indigenous peoples.

Elisabet Ney Museum & the Refugee Collective: The community partner will feel empowered to share their lived experiences and skills in farming and fiber.

Hermann-Grima and Gallier Historic Houses & Our Mammy’s: The museum staff will understand the value of co-creation and how it opens up richer possibilities and deeper impacts.



Museum & Community Partners:
Define Your Outcomes

Imagine these stories are shared powerfully with the public. What will be different for each group?

Write one concise sentence for each, focusing on what you want them to **think, feel, know, do, or experience.**

- ▶ The community of focus will...

- ▶ The general public will...

- ▶ The community partner will...

- ▶ The museum team will...

Choose the Format

You know the story you want to share and the outcomes you hope to achieve. Now comes the exciting part: deciding how to bring that story to life.

Will you reshape an existing museum story by intervening with a new perspective? Or does your story need a completely fresh canvas—something created entirely new?

Whether you remix a current narrative or start from scratch, get creative with the format. Could it be a walking tour, a collaborative mural, a podcast series, or a digital campaign? Remember, the most powerful place for your story might be outside the museum walls.

EXAMPLES

The Chinese Historical Society of America & the Community Youth Center launched new youth internships and a civil rights tour to engage youth in history and civic action. The tour highlights six landmark cases—previously untold by the museum—where Chinese Americans fought for civil rights that benefit all Americans.



Civil Rights Tour with the Chinese Historical Society of America and Community Youth Center at Ross Alley by Lei Huang



Elisabet Ney Museum staff and the Refugee Collective staff and members harvesting produce from their new “Gifting Garden” for the Hope Food Pantry.

The Elisabet Ney Museum & the Refugee Collective co-created the “Naturalists at the Ney” program, which included art workshops in block printing and natural dyeing. The museum hosted events where Collective members could sell their artwork and crops, creating direct economic opportunities. To support these initiatives, they established the “Common Roots Gifting Garden,” which provides materials for the artists, produce for a local food pantry, and helps share the story of Elisabet Ney’s naturalist lifestyle.

Oakwood Cemetery Chapel & the Tejano Genealogy Society of Austin researched the unmarked graves of Tejanos in their segregated cemetery and launched four collaborative projects: “Caminar,” a walking tour honoring the individuals they identified; “Unificar” a digital exhibition of Tejano social organizations; a Día de los Muertos event for descendants; and a symposium to share their findings.



Video from Oakwood Cemetery Chapel and the Tejano Genealogical Society's "Unificar" digital exhibition.

Museum & Community Partners: **Creative Brainstorm**

Grab a large piece of paper and some colorful markers. Invite community members to join you. Use these big questions to spark your imagination as you draw, write, and map out ideas.

BRAINSTORMING PROMPT	BIG QUESTIONS TO SPARK IDEAS
Our Strengths	What format utilizes our combined knowledge, skills, talents or resources?
Place & Presence	Where does this story truly live? Should it be inside the museum, out in the community, online, or a combination?
The Experience	How do we want people to feel? What should they see, hear, or even touch?
The Audience	Who are we trying to reach, and what format will best connect with them?
Participation	How can we invite the audience to become part of the experience? Can they add their own voice, art, or ideas?

Your Goal: **Narrow It Down**

After your brainstorm, let the ideas incubate. Then, regroup to select the one format and location that feels most powerful and achievable right now.

DRAFT AN ACTION PLAN & MAKE IT HAPPEN

A successful collaboration depends on clarity about key decisions and roles. Before you start, map out the most important decisions you will need to make together.

EXAMPLE

The **Illinois State Museum & Beardstown High School Spanish Club** co-created three exhibitions sharing the stories of immigrant and first-generation youth, with pop-up displays at both the museum and the school. The students drove the creative process, making key decisions on everything from the stories shared and oral history questions to the label design and bilingual language order. Most importantly, they defined the desired outcomes for their visitors, designing the exhibition to meet their goals.



Beardstown High School Spanish Club students installing their pop-up exhibition in collaboration with the Illinois State Museum and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

Museum & Community Partners: Draft an Action Plan

Use the template below to outline the 3-5 most critical decisions required to make your storytelling project happen.

Key Decision (What needs to be decided?)	Who is involved in this decision? (Who has input?)	Who implements? (Who owns the action?)	By when will this decision need to be made?
DECISION 1:			
DECISION 2:			
DECISION 3:			
DECISION 4:			
DECISION 5:			

Make it Happen

Put your plan into action! As you implement, remember to be over communicative and flexible with your partners.

To understand if you are achieving your desired outcomes, we highly recommend observing how visitors experience your project firsthand. This will provide invaluable insights for your final reflection.

REFLECT AND CELEBRATE

Reflect

Within one week of completing your project, schedule a reflection meeting. Bring your desired outcomes and any notes from observing your public project.

EXAMPLES

The John Dickinson Plantation & the Southern Delaware Alliance for Racial Justice created audio stories about the enslaved, free, and indentured Black people who had lived there. At the second workshop in Bay City,the effect was powerful. They learned that hearing authentic, heartfelt narratives in the very spaces where people actually lived was a key to building empathy, allowing visitors to feel a tangible connection to the past, and the humanity of those individuals.



Grand Rapids Historical Marker Project with the Michigan History Center, Dr. Delia Fernández-Jones from Michigan State University.



Bay City Oral History Workshop with Michigan History Center, Dr. Delia Fernández-Jones from Michigan State University & Latino Leaders for the Enhancement of Advocacy and Development (LLEAD).

Michigan History Center, Dr. Delia Fernández-Jones from Michigan State University & Latino Leaders for the Enhancement of Advocacy and Development (LLEAD) led five community workshops on preserving family heirlooms and conducting oral histories. At the second workshop, staff presented standing up from the front of the room. But for the discussion, they pulled up chairs and sat with the participants at their tables.

Afterward, a LLEAD member pointed out that the energy in the room shifted when they sat down. The dialogue became more open, engaged, and comfortable. The museum staff learned that the simple physical act of sitting at the same level as participants dismantled perceived hierarchies and fostered genuine conversation. For all the remaining three workshops, they began by arranging the room in a large circle, allowing everyone to sit together as equals.

IT'S YOUR
TURN!

Museum & Community Partners: Reflect & Discuss

Discuss and respond to the following questions. Have your original desired outcomes in front of you.

▶ Part 1: Overall Impressions

What went well with this project? What makes you say that?

▶ Part 2: Outcomes for Key Groups

Participants & Community of Focus

Was there a difference in who you expected to participate and who showed up? If so, why do you think that happened?

Which of your desired outcomes were achieved? Why do you think they were successful or not?

What unexpected outcomes occurred? What did you learn from this?

Community Partner
Which of your desired partner outcomes were achieved? Why do you think these outcomes were successful or not?
What unexpected partner outcomes occurred? What did you learn from this?
Museum Staff & Volunteers
Which of your desired outcomes for staff/volunteer were achieved? Why do you think these outcomes were successful or not?

▶ Part 3: Key Takeaways & Next Steps

What is the biggest takeaway or lesson learned as a team?
What might you continue, improve, or change for next time?



The Old Bakery and Emporium and Veteran's Suicide Prevention Channel/AVA Fest Summer Solstice Jam collaboration.

Celebrate!

Don't skip this step! Acknowledging your hard work and partnership is crucial. Celebrate the successes, the lessons learned, and even the challenges you overcame together.

EXAMPLE

Our group held a virtual celebration with music and making party hats. They wrote three things on their hats—one thing they were proud of themselves for, one thing they were proud of their partner for, one thing they were proud of the team for—and shared them in a series of toasts.

IT'S YOUR TURN!

Museum & Community Partners: Celebrate!

Plan a fun and meaningful celebration. It can be anything from an ice cream party to a rollercoaster ride.

STEP 5:

Keep At It



Staff and visitors sharing their natural dye and printmaking artwork at the Elisabet Ney Museum and the Refugee Collective’s “Naturalists at the Ney” program

WHAT’S NEXT?

This is just the beginning. The real work is making this a lasting practice. Continue to strengthen your partnership, pursue your shared purpose, and co-create projects that build a more inclusive future.

This process is designed to expand. Our cohort is already launching next-step projects, forming new collaborations, and using this framework to engage other communities.

AHA! MOMENTS

This process was an experiment filled with learning, mistakes, and unexpected challenges. Here are the most important “aha” moments we discovered along the way.

1. The Relationship is the Foundation

- ▶ **Move at the speed of the relationship.** The work is only as strong as the trust you build. Prioritize getting to know each other as humans before making plans or projects. This may feel counter to past practices, but it works.
- ▶ **Prioritize informal time.** Some of the best conversations and strongest ideas happen over shared meals or during unstructured time, not in formal meetings.
- ▶ **Show up where it matters.** Meeting partners in their own spaces—their offices, neighborhoods, and events—builds stronger connections and pushes you out of the museum’s comfort zone.
- ▶ **Bring others along.** Invite colleagues outside of your core team to partner events and experiences. Keep them updated with your progress and opportunities to join in.

2. Navigating the Work Together

- ▶ **Expect the unexpected and be flexible.** Life happens—leadership changes, health issues, loss, and community crises might arise. Navigate setbacks with care for each other and be ready to adapt your plans.
- ▶ **Focus on a Shared Purpose, not just project goals.** A larger, shared vision for a better future will deepen your relationship and drive your collaboration forward when challenges arise.
- ▶ **Practice proactive reciprocity.** Don’t wait to be asked. Constantly look for opportunities to share resources, invite partners to your events, and support their goals.

▶ **Communicate boundaries and capacity honestly.** It's better to be clear about what is possible than to overpromise and underdeliver.

3. Principles for the Work Itself

- ▶ **Center the community's lived experience.** Representation matters. Prioritize their stories, perspectives, and needs over traditional museum practices to build genuine connection.
- ▶ **Repair is an action.** It requires more than words. It means sincerely apologizing, acknowledging the specific harm, and backing it up with tangible, structural changes.
- ▶ **Tell stories with all the senses.** Think beyond words on a wall to find creative and experiential ways for people to connect.
- ▶ **Internal change is ongoing.** The most valuable changes often come from constructive feedback you receive after launching a project. Be ready to listen and adapt.

4. The Personal Transformation

- ▶ **This work is personal.** The process builds deep professional and personal relationships that can last a lifetime. Vulnerability, friendship, and learning to work as a unified “we” are not side effects; they are essential parts of the work.



What were your most important “Aha!” moments in this process?

Final Thoughts

Best of luck on your journey!

This is an exciting opportunity to grow, challenge yourself, and build new skills that will serve you well into the future. Embrace each step with curiosity and confidence—you're more capable than you think. Remember, learning is a process, and it's perfectly okay to revisit this toolkit whenever you need a refresher or a bit of guidance. It's here to support you along the way. Stay motivated, keep exploring, and most importantly, enjoy the experience. *You've got this!*



Addressing the Silences cohort gathering at the Old Bakery and Emporium.

The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience is the only global network of historic sites, museums and memory initiatives that connects past struggles to today's movements for human rights.

We turn memory into action.



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