American Writers Museum - Strategic Plan Summary

A team of American Writers Museum Board and staff created the organization’s first strategic plan in 2018. The plan was approved by the Board of Directors at the AWM annual meeting on December 4, 2018 and will guide the AWM’s activities through 2021.

The plan was informed by lessons learned throughout the museum’s development and during the first 1.5 years of operation, and considers visitor feedback, attendance numbers and revenue sources, as well as external factors, such as the influence and impact of other cultural institutions and tourist attractions. The plan includes three sets of goals, including operational, fundraising, and revenue generation.

Even before the AWM opened to the public, the executive planning team and the curating team understood the importance of representing the diversity of American writing, and as a result, the museum’s permanent exhibits feature many well-known writers, and many more who were under-recognized during and after their lifetimes, including women, racial minorities and immigrants. One of the museum’s core permanent exhibits - which is adjacent to the gallery housing the My America exhibit - explores the idea of “The American Voice” and the many diverse contributions to it. *My America: The Next Generation* is a major step forward in our plan to expand access to museum content, while encouraging personal engagement, by creating original online content and presenting it in appealing, user-friendly formats.

The strategic plan considers the AWM’s unique niche in the museum field, and its strengths, including:

- Extraordinary visitor experience, as evidenced by online reviews
- Unique focus on American writers with a nationwide scope
- Successful and well-received temporary exhibits
- Successful youth education program, as evidenced by teacher and student assessments
- Popular program of weekly events with award-winning and bestselling authors
- A National Advisory Council of 50 renowned authors and scholars who advise on content
- Strong partnerships with peer organizations and stakeholders, including teachers and students

The AWM is known as a modern, hands-on, interactive place where visitors are inspired, surprised and delighted. Building on its reputation as a technology-forward, 21st century museum, the strategic plan identifies actions to increase the *breadth* of the museum’s reach as well as the *depth* of content delivered, by digitizing components of the museum’s permanent and temporary exhibits and creating expanded online content.

The AWM will fulfill its mission in a more robust way by taking action on three of its core operational goals:

**Goal 1: Expand the museum’s reach**

**Action Steps:**

1. Create original online content in a variety of formats that complements the AWM’s permanent and temporary exhibits and programs.

2. Create some “members-only” online content, to maintain interest and encourage financial support from patrons who do not reside in the Chicago area.
3. Work with outside experts who share an understanding and passion for the AWM’s mission to develop innovative, user-friendly ways of engaging patrons online, that can be improved over time and used as a model for the AWM in the future, as well as other museums.

Goal 2: Enhance and deepen the Write In youth education program curriculum

Action Steps:

1. Engage additional curriculum designers and teachers to create curriculum that builds on new exhibit content, engages students on a personal level, meets Common Core standards for writing, and can be manipulated by teachers to complement their classroom teaching and students’ needs.

2. Continue to enhance students’ in-museum experience with additional activities such as in-person author events, writing contests, and events in collaboration with other literary organizations in Chicago that serve youth.

3. Create online educational content that is designed to captivate middle and high school students. This content may be created by the AWM or may be existing online content created by others and curated by the AWM.

Goal 3: Improve the existing program of author events

1. Build on the AWM’s existing program of author events by exploring themes that are represented in the permanent and temporary exhibits.

2. Create deeper impact by presenting “series” programs that explore a particular theme or genre over several events with different authors, scholars and other experts.

3. Expand the reach of these author events by recording, editing and disseminating them online, with added content that guides the viewer to explore specific writing or content that interests them. This approach has been successfully executed in one of the museum’s permanent exhibits.

These ambitious initiatives will not only better serve the AWM’s audiences and expand the museum’s reach, they will also be used to solicit financial support from a broader base of donors. The AWM’s model for revenue in the coming years is focused primarily on contributed revenue, with a smaller portion of revenue coming from earned sources like admission fees, membership, facility rental and retail sales.

Based on experience since the museum opened, we know that the AWM can reasonably accommodate approximately 45,000 visitors per year in its 11,000-square-foot physical space, and still provide a comfortable experience for the visitor. The museum is implementing marketing efforts to help reach this number, and will also focus on disseminating content online to significantly expand reach, increase depth, and create new models. This approach will bring new opportunities for sponsorship, grants and contributions from individuals that will sustain the museum’s operations in the coming years.