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# What They Really Want to Do Is Direct

**P**hilippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and doyen of art museum directors in this country, called it “the battle of the ‘curator/director’ over the ‘administrator/director.’” Museum trustees might prefer that administrative types lead their institutions, he observed at the founding of the Association of Art Museum Curators (AAMC) in 2001, but he declared it “essential to enlarge the pool of curators with the qualifications to be tomorrow’s museum directors.”

Agnes Gund and Elizabeth Easton, the two noted New York museum professionals, couldn’t agree more. To that end, in January they will launch the Center for Curatorial Leadership (CCL) to help make curators the art museum directors of the future.

“Curators are the custodians of the art in museums,” said Easton, former chair of European painting at the Brooklyn Museum. “They’re the people through whom the rest of the museum communicates regarding exhibitions, acquisitions and loans from the permanent collection. What makes an art museum much different [from a business] is that art is at its core. It needs a director with scholarly distinction and a background in art who learns about management, as opposed to a manager who learns about art—a much more difficult proposition.”

To give scholars those management skills, CCL will bring ten fellows each year to New York, at various points from January through June. They will have two weeks of mini-courses in areas such as finance and nonprofit management, a week at a major museum and a final week of study, as well as a mentor’s guidance. Throughout the year, CCL will hold executive leadership seminars and in the long term act as a clearinghouse

for directorial positions. The center provides tuition, travel, room and board—thanks to Gund, president emerita of the Museum of Modern Art, who will give \$500,000 annually for the first three years. Easton expects no problem with additional fundraising, especially once the program demonstrates its success.

“I think there’s a perception that curators are mandarins of a different generation, that they only think of their research,” said Easton. “We want to position them as much more.”

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Applicants, nominated by themselves or their institutions, must be curators currently employed at American art museums. All staff levels are eligible, but candidates must have experience supervising personnel and finances and exposure to fundraising and strategic planning. Chosen from 50 contenders, the inaugural class includes curators from the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Frick Collection, the Orange County Museum of Art, the National Museum of Women in the Arts and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Easton has seen up close how the changing role of curators can strongly affect how museums are run: At her former institution, the Brooklyn Museum, Director Arnold Lehman

sparked controversy by restructuring the curatorial positions. Many agreed with board member Michael de Havenon, whose letter of resignation condemned “the disempowerment of the curatorial staff in order to consolidate decision-making in the hands of the administration.” Easton left the museum last year, along with two other curators and two trustees. Asked if her experience there influenced her decision to found CCL, Easton said, “I was at the Brooklyn Museum for 18 years, so it shaped most of my professional career.” She added, “My experience running AAMC showed me the broadest concerns of the profession at large. It was the right time for me to do something about them.”

An FAQ on the center’s website addresses a potential concern: “Will my interest and participation in the CCL be understood as a negative signal to my home institution that I wish to leave?” Easton’s response: “When I announced plans for the center to the Association of Art Museum Directors, it was unanimously well received. Many directors will soon be looking at retirement, so many important positions are opening up. They all want to work together to train the next generation.” The center’s advisory committee indicates such support—it includes de Montebello; Susana Torruela-Leval, director emerita of El Museo del Barrio in New York; and Axel Rüger, director of Amsterdam’s Van Gogh Museum. A certificate from CCL sends two messages, Easton said: “You’re willing to play a larger role beyond a curatorial one, to develop your expertise. And you have the tools, you understand more about larger issues. This will make departments run better and contribute to the museum.”

But ultimately, “Leading a museum isn’t about administration; it’s serving a mission,” said Easton. In the future she and Gund envision, business managers are presumably still welcome to learn about art. Just not on the job.—*Leah Arroyo*