CENTER FOR CURATORIAL LEADERSHIP

ON BOARD ING

STARTER KIT

MAGGIE ADLER WASSAN AL-KHUDHAIRI SHAWNYA HARRIS

FOREWORD

It is a pleasure to introduce the third volume of the Center for Curatorial Leadership (CCL) publication series on issues in the museum field, this time authored by three alumni of the CCL Fellowship class of 2021 and addressing staff retention as one strategy for fostering more inclusive and successful workplaces.

This publication emerged from the authors' participation in our core Fellowship program. Each year the program begins with two weeks of intensive learning at CCL's home base in the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and throughout New York, followed by a weeklong residency with a museum director. In the program's final week, the cohort of curators is divided into teams and assigned a

practicum that challenges them to work collaboratively and rapidly to push proposals into action, just as museum leaders must do when presenting new ideas to their boards of trustees. The goal is to deliver within the week a well-researched, imaginative presentation about a real-life challenge faced by museums across the field.

Employee satisfaction and retention has become a pressing issue in the years since the onset of the pandemic. For their practicum, CCL Fellows Maggie Adler, Wassan Al-Khudhairi, and Shawnya Harris produced such a concrete and actionable presentation on the subject that we thought it would be a valuable resource for colleagues in museums throughout the country. While you sadly won't see the GIFs that accompanied each slide, you will surely benefit from the sage advice put forth in this pamphlet, refined over the course of the past two years and edited in its final form by our Senior Advisor Christa Clarke.

We have been delighted by the widespread use of our first two publications, authored by CCL Trustee and former director of the Seattle Art Museum Kim Rorschach. While those publications focused on recruitment and entry into a leadership position, this latest pamphlet is intended for broader use at the departmental level.

CCL places moral leadership at the foundation of everything we do. This volume, accordingly, argues

that retaining staff requires institutions to convey a sense of belonging and care. We hope the words within this document will help you achieve this objective in your own workplace.

We would like to thank the authors, our Senior Advisor, and CCL staff members Caitlin Palmer and Emma Payne for their work shepherding this document from the original PowerPoint to its final published form. We are also grateful to The Kaleta A. Doolin Foundation for its generous support of this publication. We hope that it is the first of a larger portfolio of best practices in leadership and management emerging from our alumni.

ELIZABETH EASTON
Director & Co-Founder
Center for Curatorial Leadership

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BACKGROUND

Employee satisfaction and retention is a universal concern in art museums. And as museums seek to expand and diversify their workforce, they increasingly face the challenge of applicant pools that may not have directly applicable museum experience, which can often lead to frustration and staff turnover. How might museums evolve their processes and practices for recruiting and hiring while keeping retention in mind? What can be done to ensure inclusive and productive workplaces? How can museums provide new hires with the support they need to thrive?

The organizations most successful in attracting and retaining staff humanize the HR process not only by reinforcing institutional values and promoting the museum's mission throughout the hiring process, but also by intentionally creating a sense of trust, connection, and belonging for new staff. For Kimberly Wilson, who leads Human Resources at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, asking "how can I make today better?" and "how can I meet people where they are and reinforce how they are critical to organizational structure?" is crucial to retaining the talent she is involved in recruiting.

For many museums, however, such a purposeful approach to communicating values, honoring individuality, and embracing inclusion rarely manifests in the HR process. If it does, it often ends at hiring. This methodology does not set up new employees for success in the workplace or encourage their retention. Proper and enhanced onboarding might be one method of addressing experiential inequities in the museum field. This booklet proposes ways to better structure a new recruit's first experiences to ensure comfort and transparency and foster feelings of belonging, value, and authentic engagement.

OBJECTIVES

1	**Anticipate Needs** Introduce colleagues and their roles, and provide an orientation to museum resources and facilities.
2	**Build Relationships** Disrupt silos and break down hierarchical barriers by creating networks of support and communication across the museum.
3	**Foster Belonging** Help employees see themselves within organizations by affirming selfhood and providing positivity about their role and contributions within the institution.
4	**Improve Trust** Enact the promise of transparency from day one.
5	**Align Goals with Institutional Mission** Maintain and sustain a passion for work and a sense of shared purpose.

ANTICIPATED OBSTACLES

1 Limited time and resources.

2 Hierarchical or disengaged leadership.

3 No Human Resources department.

ONBOARDING CHECKLIST

The following is a menu of a la carte suggestions for supervisors. Some museums will have departments and processes dedicated to these functions, so a number of the suggestions below may already be in practice in your institution. Others may be introduced by the supervisor or other departmental volunteers.

PRIOR TO EMPLOYEE ARRIVAL WELCOME PACKET

Consider including the following:

- Employee/staff handbook.
- Internal expert sheet (who to talk to about what).
- Staff directory with names, emails, office numbers, mobile numbers, and office locations; include preferred pronouns and headshots, if possible.
- Staff roles document with 1–2 sentences about what each person does; include Director with slightly longer description.
- Museum Board directory; include bios and headshots, if possible.
- Organizational chart.
- Map of the building.
- Emergency protocols and procedures.
- Strategic plan.
- Budget overview (if applicable).
- Institutional timeline/history (a previous museum publication or a printout of the "About" page from the website); include a sheet on common lingo, acronyms, key figures, any special accomplishments, etc.
- Recent annual report.
- Materials such as newsletters, museum magazines, organizational calendar, etc., with information about upcoming events and programs.
- Museum style guide.
- Schedule for the first week.
- Area guide for transplants or city travel guidebook.
- Swag (a mug, pen/pencil, museum publication, t-shirt, sticker).

WORKSPACE

- Ask about and address any accessibility needs.
- Get office supplies; identify special requests or needs.
- Set up email address and signature.
- Set up phone and voicemail.
- Set up computer and any needed software.
- Order stationery, including business cards and name tag.
- Arrange furniture setup.

FIRST WEEK
ORIENTATION

- Encourage the employee to personalize their workspace for comfort and efficiency.

- Provide an introduction to essential office services (how to use the printer/copier, where the mailroom is, etc.) and discuss any office environment protocols (e.g., “Who hangs the art? Can I bring a plant?”).

- Review building access and how to use keys/key cards.

- Schedule a tour of the building, including library/archives, object files, collection storage (if permitted), kitchen, restrooms, exits, nursery/recovery room, conference room(s), break room, etc. Offer pointers for how to get from point A to point B.

- Schedule a guided tour of the galleries.

- Encourage the employee to familiarize themselves with the museum by visiting the website, reviewing welcome packet materials, and exploring the galleries on their own.

FIRST ONE-ON-ONE MEETING WITH THE NEW EMPLOYEE

- Review the employee handbook together and answer any questions.
- Review the staff shared calendar and set up recurring meetings; discuss how to prepare for these meetings.
- Walk through the location of files and documents in shared drives and servers; review naming conventions for files.
- Discuss the strategic plan in relation to departmental goals.
- Discuss how the employee's tasks and responsibilities contribute to the larger department and to the institutional mission and goals.
- Set up expectations, processes, and procedures for working together, and ask about the employee's preferences and needs.
- Offer the opportunity to connect the employee with a colleague in an analogous job at another institution for a peer-to-peer meeting, and, if the employee is willing, set up an introduction.

INTRODUCTORY DEPARTMENTAL MEETINGS

- Ask each person to describe their role and share a personal fact or anecdote.
- Describe institutional workflow with a focus on how the different departments intersect.
- Share essential documents and design collateral, including stationery, logo(s), style guide, forms, etc.

CONNECTION AND INTEGRATION

- Arrange meetings with other department representative(s); preference is for the new employee to meet as many members as possible from each department regardless of hierarchy.

- Organize one or more group social lunches for the employee.

- If possible, arrange for the employee to meet with the Director or a member of the senior leadership team.

WITHIN THE FIRST 90 DAYS

- Arrange for the employee to attend a public program and/or tour.
- Encourage the employee to invite someone at the museum to lunch; the museum should cover all costs.
- If possible, facilitate a meeting for the employee with a museum member.
- Ask the employee to work one front desk shift and/or shadow a gallery attendant for one shift.
- By this point, the employee should have had at least one peer-to-peer meeting with the external colleague introduced by the supervisor.

90-DAY CHECK-IN

- Solicit feedback and gauge job satisfaction through questions such as “What’s working? What’s not working? How can I support you? What do you need? What are you proud of? What’s making you happy?”

- Review the employee’s responsibilities and goals and discuss any necessary additional support to fulfill their role; determine whether the employee would benefit from professional development training or other resources.

ONGOING

Inclusive practices begin with recruitment and should be sustained throughout the employee's career. While this publication is written for supervisors and proposes recommendations for the first 90 days, onboarding is an institutional commitment that requires ongoing and intentional practices and a collective approach.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:
MAGGIE ADLER



Maggie Adler is Curator of Paintings, Sculpture, and Works on Paper at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas.

Margaret (Maggie) Adler is Curator of Paintings, Sculpture, and Works on Paper at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. Adler's scholarly research focuses on nineteenth-century art, but consistent with the Carter's commitment to fostering cross-temporal connections, she often collaborates with living artists, including site-specific installations from Gabriel Dawe, Mark Dion, and Justin Favela. Following a 2019 gallery remodel, Adler played a critical role in the Museum's collection reinstallation that reconceived how visitors interact with the collection by emphasizing unexpected visual and scholarly relationships between historic and contemporary works. Most recently, she co-curated the nationally touring exhibition *Emancipation: The Unfinished Project of Liberation*, which featured works from seven contemporary Black artists acting in dialogue with John Quincy Adams Ward's *The Freedman* (1863) from the Carter's collection and reflected on ideas of emancipation and liberation from the Civil War to today.

Prior to coming to the Carter, Adler held the Barra Fellowship at the Philadelphia Museum of Art from 2011 to 2012 after serving as Director's Office Fellow at Williams College Museum of Art, where she worked on projects with artists Jenny Holzer and Pepón Osorio. Adler also held the position of Director of Development at the Addison Gallery of American Art from 2007 to 2009. Adler holds a BA in classical languages and the history of art and an MA in the history of art from Williams College. She was a 2021 Center for Curatorial Leadership fellow.

WASSAN AL-KHUDHAIRI



Wassan Al-Khudhairi is the former Ferring Foundation Chief Curator at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

Wassan Al-Khudhairi is an independent curator and was appointed curator for the 2025 Hawaii Triennial. Most recently, Al-Khudhairi held the position of Ferring Foundation Chief Curator at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, where she organized exhibitions and new commissions with artists Hajra Waheed, Dominic Chambers, Gala Porras-Kim, Martine Gutierrez, Derek Fordjour, Stephanie Syjuco, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Bethany Collins, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Guan Xiao, and Hayv Kahraman, among others. She co-produced the podcast *Radio Resistance* to accompany the publication and exhibition *Stories of Resistance*, a thematic group show with over 20 participating artists.

Al-Khudhairi was co-curator for the 6th Asian Art Biennial in Taiwan in 2017 and co–Artistic Director for 9th Gwangju Biennial in South Korea in 2012. She served as the Hugh Kaul Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Birmingham Museum of Art, where she organized the first large-scale exhibition of the museum's contemporary collection, *Third Space / shifting conversations about contemporary art*. Serving as the Founding Director of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar, Al-Khudhairi oversaw the opening of the Museum in 2010 and co-curated the exhibition *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art* and curated *Cai Guo-Qiang: Saraab*.

She holds a BA in Art History from Georgia State University and an MA in Islamic Art and Architecture with Distinction from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Al-Khudhairi is a graduate of the Getty Leadership Institute, the recipient of the 2021 VIA Curatorial Fellowship Grant, and a fellow in the 2021 Center for Curatorial Leadership program.

SHAWNYA HARRIS



Shawnya Harris is the Larry D. and Brenda A. Thompson Curator of African American and African Diasporic Art at the Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, Athens, GA.

Shawnya Harris is the Larry D. and Brenda A. Thompson Curator of African American and African Diasporic Art at the Georgia Museum of Art, where she has worked since 2015. She was a 2021 Center for Curatorial Leadership fellow. Harris began her museum career in North Carolina, where she earned a PhD. in art history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She earned her undergraduate degree in African American Studies from Yale University. Harris has curated numerous award-winning exhibitions, including a recent retrospective on artist Emma Amos. Her exhibitions and publications have garnered several awards from regional art associations, including the Southeastern Museums Conference and the Southeastern College Art Conference. National awards include a James A. Porter and David C. Driskell Book Award in African American Art History in 2018 for her publication on the Larry and Brenda Thompson collection. Harris was named the Georgia Association of Museums 2022 Museum Professional of the Year.

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Center for Curatorial Leadership Fellowship Class of 2021.

MISSION

The Center for Curatorial Leadership equips curators with the tools to assume and succeed in art museum leadership roles in the rapidly evolving cultural climate of the 21st century. CCL identifies individuals who have the potential to become leaders and helps them shape themselves into professionals who not only take charge of the art in their care but are also capable of assuming the leadership responsibilities essential to high performance in today's art museum. CCL believes that there need be no contradiction between these two sets of obligations—indeed, that there must not be.

WHO WE ARE

Co-founded in 2008 by Agnes Gund and Elizabeth Easton, CCL is located in New York City and runs programs at home and in other cities, drawing upon the diverse resources of museums and academic institutions across the United States. Now in its sixteenth year, CCL has transformed the model for developing leaders in art museums with a singular fellowship program that encompasses mentorships with museum directors and other creative visionaries, rigorous coursework in leadership and strategic management, and professional networks for support and growth. Throughout the five-month fellowship, CCL gives curators the tools to manage teams, connect with diverse audiences, mentor emerging professionals, and understand the finances and inner workings of their organizations. In 2014, CCL expanded the arc of training provided by the core fellowship, launching new programs designed specifically for art history doctoral candidates and international curators of modern and contemporary art. Now, with almost 400 alumni spanning 46 countries—including 140+ who are museum directors or senior leadership—CCL's deep impact touches a broad swath of the museum field and their communities.

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