In 1999, NAME embarked on a strategic planning process to establish a vision of what we want the organization to be in the future. As part of this process, several task forces were formed to consider broad areas of concern within the profession. The following is the report from one such task force.

PREAMBLE

"Excellence" is perhaps the perfect buzzword. It is universally embraced; no one can seriously argue against being excellent. Yet, at the same time, it is so maddeningly hard to define, so profoundly intuitive, that no meaningful measurements exist. Everyone goes merrily about their business-as-usual, paying lip service to “excellence” but rarely making significant strides towards it. There is no clear destination, no road map for getting there, and no one to hold accountable if we never arrive.

This is unacceptable. Museums hold vast and valuable collections in the public trust. We receive tax breaks, government funding and admission income from our constituents. We enjoy tremendous public good will. And exhibit programs consume enormous amounts of resources -- not just money, but also the time and professional energy of countless careers. Excellence cannot merely be the stuff of idle daydreams, or an annual exercise in self-congratulation. It must be real, concrete, and the focus of our daily efforts. Exhibits require so much, from us and from our publics, they had damn well better be excellent.

But they’re not. Looking out across the profession, we not only find few exhibits worthy of the label "excellent," but a distressingly large number that fail to achieve even basic competence. Indeed, this emphasis on excellence at times seems misplaced. You cannot run before you walk, and you cannot walk until you learn to stand -- and sadly, too many of us are still struggling to find our exhibition “legs.” The profession suffers a critical lack of fundamental skills.

However, skills alone are not enough. There must be a purpose for these skills, a goal we can strive towards. And "excellence" is the name we give to that goal. It is not achievable every time. It is certainly not achievable all at once. But we believe it can be achieved, and it can be defined, in a consistent and measurable way. And once we've established that, then excellence may serve as a sort of beacon, drawing us all towards greater accomplishment.

Defining excellence and making it meaningful to the profession will be a long, involved process. A first step was taken in 1997 when the Council of Standing Professional Committees of the AAM
issued its *Standards for Museum Exhibition and Indicators of Excellence*. This document provided only a rough outline of excellence, particularly as it applies to the creative arts of exhibit design and development. NAME, as representative of the exhibition profession, must assume leadership in fleshing out these ideas and making them useful to exhibit practitioners. This report proposes to be a road map for achieving that goal.

**PART I: WHAT IS EXCELLENCE?**

“The best is the enemy of the good.”

*Voltaire* (1694-1778)

"Excellence," Mr. Webster tells us, is the state of exceeding norms and expectations. So before we can define excellence, we must first define standards. What do we expect of an exhibit?

That's an extraordinarily loaded question. There’s no shortage of competing ideas, philosophies and theories. To get the ball rolling we propose the following definition, recognizing that it is by no means "value-free," but hoping it will be as widely-applicable as possible:

An exhibit is a medium of communication. (How it communicates, what, and why are issues we leave for other philosophers.) As such, it works in four broad ways:

**Intellectually:** Exhibits present information. At the very least, the information needs to be accurate. Moreover, it should also be interesting, relevant, and, if possible, innovative in some way. If well done, an exhibit should make you *think*.

**Physically:** Unlike most forms of communication, which we access through one or two senses, an exhibit requires us to use our entire bodies. It presents 3-D objects in a 3-D space, which the visitor can access only by physically moving through. If well done, an exhibit should make you *do*.

**Emotionally:** An exhibit seeks to establish a context for its subject: awe, respect, excitement, calm, urgency, anger -- whatever is appropriate for its objects and its message. If done well, an exhibit should make you *feel*.

**Holistically:** An exhibit addresses these areas, not discretely and sequentially, but all at once and all together. It taps into every piece of you, and makes you activate every part of your humanity. If done well, an exhibit should make you *be*. 
That's a pretty tall order. Small wonder success is so elusive. Clearly we as a profession, or even as individuals, are not going to achieve "excellence" in one fell swoop. Rather, we need to establish steps leading towards this goal to guide us, to chart our progress, and to guard against backsliding.

The guilds of the Middle Ages provide us with a metaphor. One did not achieve excellence in painting, metallurgy, or any other art or craft in a single leap. Rather, one began as an apprentice, learning the essential skills and acquiring basic competence. Then one became a journeyman, applying those skills and demonstrating one’s ability. Finally, when all those skills came together and were fueled by individual fire and spirit, one became a master of their chosen discipline.

Similar career stages, with or without formal titles, may help the exhibit profession as well. We must make the museum profession aware that exhibition is a complicated craft, and not something that anyone can walk in off the street (or in from another department) and master instantly. We must establish basic skills, required for basic competence of all practicing professionals; as well as a higher level of master skills, both achievable and measurable, to indicate excellence.

This paper takes a first crack at identifying these skills. We divide them into two broad categories: PROCESS, the behind-the-scenes professional work, which lead to PRODUCT, the audience experience.

(We have consciously and specifically chosen not to define product excellence in professional terms. While we believe that an excellent process will lead to an excellent product -- usually -- the purpose of the product is not to showcase our professional mastery. The purpose of the product is to serve the visitors' needs. This can be the only justifiable measure of excellence in an exhibit.)

1. **PROCESS: professional protocol**

**Competence:**

| process leads exhibitors through visual / sensory thinking and research | invents new meaning through visual / sensory thinking |
|-listens to questions from audience and colleagues | creates a place for ongoing public conversation |
|develops and uses design criteria | leads colleagues to understand and appreciate how design works |
|knows and applies the technical standards of applied fields | creatively employs standards to further storylines, involve audience, to push the envelope and redefine the field |

**Excellence:**
identifies necessary resources
finds new technical and intellectual resources

articulates content in visual / physical terms
reshapes understanding through visual / sensory thinking

synthesizes input from entire organization
design process defines and shapes the content / the way meaning is structured

provides evaluative tools (sketches, drafts, etc.); collects and uses feedback
enhances collaboration with audience and between colleagues

manages development calendar
eliminates waste of professional time

manages production budget
eliminates waste of public money

provides quality control
assures public support for museums

2. **PRODUCT: audience experience**

**Competence:**

| comfortable access | you feel compelled to enter the event |
| physical access: it’s within reach -- you can see and touch | the 4-D relationships underscore meaning |
| emotional access: it’s within feeling -- you can respond to it | the emotional impact sharpens understanding |
| intellectual access: it’s within reason -- you can understand, it’s coherent | the content is well-structured, beautiful, moving, elegant, and supported by evidence |
| cultural access: it’s within our experience -- it’s from a human point-of-view | the “why should I care?” is clear throughout |
| it is accessible to multiple learning styles | interpretive elements are integrated into a whole learning experience |
| you understand the meaning without words | the visual and spatial forms make new meaning |
| you can see and read every word | the text has literary value and impact |
| you can get safely in and out | the path itself has meaning |
| you know what it’s about | layers of meaning are revealed if you try |
| you know what’s expected of you | challenge and skills are equal, making “flow” |
| it’s a pleasure to spend time here | your life is enriched |

Each of these entries is shorthand for an important and complex idea. These need to be debated by the profession, fleshed out and defined before they can finally become meaningful signposts on the road to excellence.

**PART II: CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES**
Our process for defining excellence was not in any way earth-shattering. We simply put words to ideas that are already broad-based and common, if rarely articulated, within the profession, and arranged them under the rather intimidating rubric of “excellence.”

But if these ideas are so common, why is excellence so rare? What obstacles stand in our way and prevent us from achieving this lofty goal that everyone insists they want? We have identified a variety of factors, which we group into several broad categories:

EXTERNAL FACTORS

Institutional

Lack of understanding. There frequently is no clear institutional focus or direction for exhibition. Is it an educational tool? An opportunity to showcase collections? A scholarly dissertation? A marketing strategy? Some, none, or all of the above? And -- most important -- why? The answers vary from project to project and, all too often, are not even asked.

Lack of value for exhibits as a profession. Curators and educators have permanent, even tenured positions; exhibitors are all too often contract employees on soft project money. Their role is not to be a creative equal, but merely a craftsperson hired to realize another's vision.

Lack of exhibits staff, particularly at small institutions. Exhibit work either falls to other staff (who are not trained in exhibition and who may treat it as a low priority), to freelancers (who are not part of the institution’s culture), or is not done at all.

Inertia. Some institutions develop a "formula" which worked once and is then rigorously followed until it becomes a hindrance rather than a help.

And -- the same old refrain -- insufficient resources: not just money, but time and staff, even vision, leadership, and structure, can be seen as resources that are far too scarce.

Team

Much has been written about the team process, not all of it good. While most would agree that exhibits
are insanely complicated endeavors, requiring the input of experts in many disciplines, no one as yet has
found the perfect formula for creating this collaborative art. The need for team members to speak their
minds too often leads to bickering paralysis; the need to avoid bickering paralysis too often leads to
team members afraid to speak their minds.

Even when these extremes can be avoided, there remains the challenge of balancing individual creativity
with the team dynamic. Compromise is essential, but also frustrating.

Meanwhile, our institutions do not nurture creativity, in individuals or in teams. For all of the new-
found infatuation with corporate management theory, we don’t encourage risk-taking nor reward
entrepreneurship. Such things are unquantifiable, inefficient, and don’t fit nicely onto a Gantt chart. But
they are indispensable.

Audience

Blaming the customer for a business failure is almost surely an indication that the person failing has
precious little business sense. But museum exhibitors do face several challenges with regards to
audience.

**Everybody likes us.** We enjoy tremendous good will and public support. We are largely non-
controversial (itself an obstacle, and one few administrators want removed). All we want to do is
educate, entertain, and show off cool stuff. We therefore are often judged leniently, in accordance with
our intentions rather than on our actual accomplishments.

This perception of museums as inherently good leads to problem number two: **lack of critical
discernment.** When someone goes to the movies, they do not pay eight dollars for the privilege of
sitting in a dark room with a bunch of strangers and eating overpriced popcorn; they are paying that
money in the hopes of enjoying the film. So they pay attention, and can usually explain what they did or
didn't like. But far too many museum-goers pay their seven dollars just for the privilege of going to a
museum. Some want to be exposed to “culture,” some to "education;" others go out of a sense of civic
pride, or civic duty. But the mere act of going is an end to itself; what happens inside is frequently of
secondary importance.

A third challenge stems from the **common perception of the Museum,** with an oh-so-capital-M, as the
place where society enshrines its treasures. We are expected to be solemn, serene, stern, elegant, and
removed from the run of everyday life. The phrase “museum-quality” connotes not just a level but a
type of object, and exhibits are expected to support and reinforce this image. Which makes it awful
hard to try something new.

In any event, few visitors have enough content expertise to tell whether the exhibit is achieving its goals,
and fewer still have enough museum experience to assess how the exhibit tried to achieve its goals.
With no one paying much attention, there's little incentive to strive for excellence.

INTERNAL FACTORS

Judgement

Just as our audience is too often uncritical of us, we are too often uncritical of ourselves. As stated earlier, we lack definitions and benchmarks that define what is standard, let alone what is excellent. We lack critical thinking skills, tools, or even a common vocabulary for discussing these issues. And, not wanting to hurt our colleagues' feelings (or our own chances of getting another job), we are often too easy on ourselves and on each other.

Inexperience

These deficits in critical judgement stem from a lack of standard education and training, both before entering the field and once on-the-job. Meanwhile, major exhibit projects are so long and complicated that it is difficult to amass enough experience to ever say one has mastered the craft.

Isolation

Most communities have few museums. Even in larger cities, institutions are physically separate -- the mall or campus is a rarity -- and intellectually segregated by subject matter.

Most exhibit departments are small. We have few colleagues on hand to bounce ideas off of. This problem can be especially acute for freelancers, who do much of their work alone in home offices or studios.

With tight schedules and limited resources, few of us have the luxury of spending time on the museum floor, with the audience, and seeing how our work is actually used, to see what works and what doesn't.

Within the profession, we have few opportunities to network, to discuss ideas, to ask for help. With tiny travel budgets, we don't even get out to see each other's work often enough. As such, we lack a sense of a profession, a common purpose and culture.

Fear

Without knowledge, experience, or fraternity, we become paralyzed by fear. No one likes to fail. We especially don't like to fail in public, on a large scale, in a permanent medium. We really, really don't like to fail when we have no job security. And since neither we nor our institutions are knowledgeable
in what works or what is possible, we are predisposed to always make the safe move, or no move at all, rather than to try something new.

Difficulty

Let’s not forget -- exhibition is hard. Integrating content and design, sorting out the trivial from the essential, incorporating the input of a dozen different specialties: this is difficult, complicated work. It takes years to complete a single large project. On a journey of a million steps it is easy to lose your way, to forget where you’re going, and it’s certainly impossible not to stumble now and again. And let's not kid ourselves -- there is no magic bullet. Even if we were to sweep away all obstacles in our path, exhibit professionals are still faced with an extremely complicated, difficult job.

PART III: OPPORTUNITIES

“It’s the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine.”

R.E.M., 1989

The items in the previous section were for the most part what we consider “Obstacles” -- limits imposed upon us from the outside, and which, if we cannot change them, we must work around. In this section, however, we list items that might be considered “Challenges” -- limits set from the inside, environments which we can work within to find new ways to achieve our goals.

Intellectual integrity and identity

A rising chorus of voices -- in conference presentations, in professional articles, even in casual conversations -- insists that "In an increasingly superficial and artificial (or virtual) world, museums can position themselves as purveyors of the authentic and the profound." Cut through the buzz words and it boils down to this: museums are important because we've got real stuff, and we've got real scholarship to back it up. And both of these have value -- a value which is not always fully appreciated, but which is beginning to get some notice, both within the profession and outside. Can we take that notice and do something with it?

Perhaps. But we must define ourselves first. What is it about exhibits that people value? We must recognize and establish our core values, strengths, and competencies before we can fully exploit them.

Bottom-line focus

We all know the story. Government funding is down; private philanthropy has not taken up the slack;
museums must become more business-like, find other sources of earned income, etc. The profession is in upheaval, rethinking what it means to operate in the public trust when it requires such large sums of non-public money to do so. As historic alliances among governments, communities, NGOs, corporations, and capital come apart and are rearranged, we can insert our vision for exhibitions -- for public making meaning -- in the new, emerging power structures.

Our best strategy is to evolve in a way that takes advantage of this environment. Instead of bemoaning the end of our old, comfortable world, the time has come to find ways to adapt to our new reality. Everyone is abuzz with talk of "the experience economy." Well, exhibits are the key component of the museum experience. We're in the spotlight, which is nice. But we must also seize this opportunity to educate the new business-focused managers coming in from other fields as to what an exhibit is, what it does, why it exists, how it works.

This is an opportunity for us to learn from them (how to create a brand identity, a niche, a market position for our institutions). Just as importantly, it is an opportunity for them to learn from us (what is an exhibit, anyway). Educating the rest of the institution would be a nice side-effect. And we need to do it on our own terms -- since we are the resident experts -- rather than allowing someone else to define us.

New exhibit themes

Museums are beginning to mount exhibits on biodiversity, cultural diversity, etc. These are fresh, uncharted territory. The paradigms of stuffed animals, mannequins, paintings on white walls -- all problematic, all developed before exhibition emerged as a separate profession -- needn't hold sway in these brave, new worlds. Also, there does seem to be growing public interest, if not in the buzz words, then at least in concepts like environment and ethnicity. So we have the opportunity to make the scientific foundation of these complex, still-emerging ideas widely accessible.

The same can be said for new exhibits on existing themes. More and more the call goes up for multi-disciplinary content; multiple voices; accommodation for diverse learning styles; making exhibits relevant and connected to visitor's lives; to explain the value of museums. The exhibit platform is the chosen medium for fulfilling numerous agendas. This puts us in a position of power, if we can only figure out how to use it.

Even after twenty or thirty years of creating the interpretive exhibition, we are still making it up as we go along. And that's a good thing. We know, or should know, as a profession that we have only just begun this innovative phase of cultural invention. We can't rest on what we have done because there will be more and better next year, next decade. This not-knowing-how-to-do-it is a tremendous opportunity for exhibit-makers to explore new forms.

The iron is hot. There is competition to nurture creativity, to reward creativity, to own creativity.
Technology

Lots of people grab this one first. It’s hot: connectivity; interactivity; data storage and retrieval. These all can enhance an exhibit. Technology is a tool for accessing visitors with different learning styles. It also offers great opportunities to do a lot of cool new things that simply are not possible any other way (think *Sounds from the Vault* as a primo, successful example). The dual challenges are to A) discover what those cool possibilities are, and B) use them properly and effectively, and not just as bells and whistles.

A second great opportunity of new technology is its potential to teach us, the museum communicators, how to communicate better. The Web -- rapidly becoming as ubiquitous and familiar as the telephone or TV -- is another non-linear information delivery system. How does it work? What language has it evolved? What ideas can we steal from it? What can it steal from us -- to make Web sites more like exhibits?

Good will

One of the challenges to excellence we defined earlier was that people like us too much; they uncritically approve of whatever we do, and so don't challenge us to do better. On the other hand, this tremendous good will also afford us a certain cover. Our forgiving audience isn't going to abandon us over a few well-intentioned mistakes. This should embolden us to try new things.
PART IV: WHAT NAME CAN DO

"A man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?"

Robert Browning (1812-1889)

And now, at long last, we arrive at the bottom line: what can NAME as an organization do to promote excellence in particular exhibitions? Of course, before we could make any useful suggestions, we had to first define what excellence is, and identify the obstacles and opportunities that affect our attempts to achieve it.

And that work is not quite done. While this task force has certainly enjoyed debating exhibit philosophy, we recognize the need to broaden the discussion to include more voices, more points of view. The gap between theory and practice is wide enough that we felt it would be inappropriate to close off debate at this juncture.

Rather than make a lot of specific recommendations, we felt the organization would be better served if we suggested some larger areas which NAME can work in, and then open up the conversation. Perhaps there are better ideas out there. Perhaps there is disagreement on the basic principles that brought us to this point. In any event, deciding on the particulars will certainly require input from the field.

So, we return to the Process / Product dichotomy which was so helpful in defining excellence in the first place, and suggest some NAME activities in each sphere:

IDENTIFY EXCELLENCE (THE PRODUCT)

Definition
- continuing and enlarging the discussion
- producing “Excellence in Exhibition” booklet

Recognition
- rethinking Awards program
- expanding exhibit review and criticism
- developing “Excellent Exhibits We Have Seen” guidebook
PROMOTE EXCELLENCE (THE PROCESS)

Advancing the Profession
- outreach to non-exhibit museum professionals
- incorporating Excellence-in-Exhibition into MAP or other accreditation

Professional Enrichment
- developing new approaches for training exhibit professionals
- training for students and new professionals

At the end of the day, our goal is not to impose excellence, but to promote critical thinking skills. It's all well and good to define excellence, award it, and try to emulate it -- but these efforts will be of little use if we don't understand it. We must cultivate our capacity, not simply to know what is excellent, but why it is so. Only then can we infuse our projects, our institutions, and our profession with the requisite “resonance and wonder” that are the hallmark of excellence.