

Governance Challenges and Opportunities in B.C.'s Small to Medium Non-profit Museums

A conversation with past and present
Executive Directors about what needs
to change and how to change it

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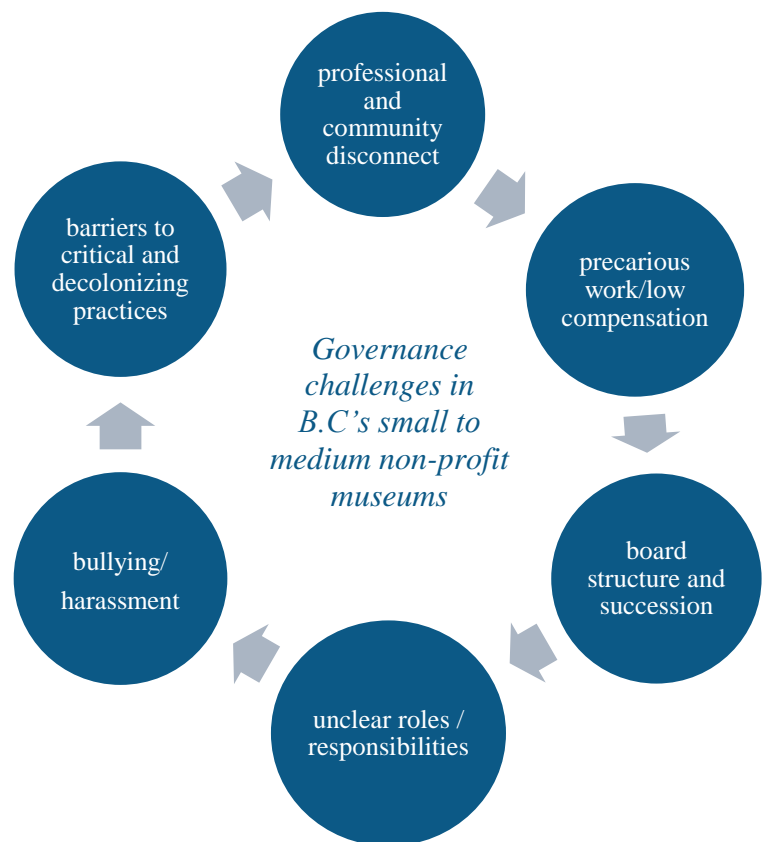
Executive Summary

In this study we conducted twenty in-depth, confidential interviews with the paid leadership staff of small to medium non-profit museums in B.C. Although we refer to all as ‘executive directors’ or ‘EDs’, their formal titles varied, including ‘corporate director’, ‘head curator’ and ‘manager’. Unlike larger institutions, the EDs of these institutions often had multiple roles and responsibilities, including curation, public programming, fund-development and facilities management. Several were the only paid staff member. We asked the participants about the challenges and opportunities they experienced with governance and the board/ED relationship in these institutions. Drawing from their on-the-job experiences, the EDs discussed some very concerning issues, and also had valuable input for tools and strategies to improve and even transform governance in B.C.’s small to medium non-profit museums.

Challenges experienced by the participants included poor compensation and working conditions; a lack of defined roles and responsibilities between board and management, leading to micromanagement and unmanageable workloads; boards disconnected from the ED’s professional and community museum work; and cases of bullying and harassment. Participants also discussed how governance issues, such as lack of diverse representation, created barriers to critical and decolonizing approaches to contemporary museum work.

Participants reported feelings of isolation, and limited opportunities for professional development, yet found limited or no recourse for their concerns. Many reported workplace stress and feeling ‘burned out’, and in some cases reported taking stress-leaves and/or leaving their positions or the sector.

The ubiquity of these themes amongst the participants indicates a sector wide, systemic crisis. Yet some participants reported satisfactory governance, which they attributed to evolving organizational practices. Whether their experiences were positive or negative, all participants contributed ideas to *improve governance*. These included mandatory and accessible board training in both governance and museums; reconsidering board structure and succession; limiting board terms and board size; implementing responsibility matrixes and job descriptions for both volunteers and paid staff; seeking external help with mediation and strategic planning; and linking funding to demonstrated governance capacity. Participants also offered ideas to *transform governance* such as changing from hierarchical to collaborative approaches and including both staff and community in key decision making, strategizing and structures of accountability.



Introduction

“You know, I’ve been around for a long time. I’ve been involved with boards for many, many years...Do you know what has changed? Nothing has changed.” (Interview # 8)

Museum professionals in small to medium non-profit museums in B.C. often find themselves working for volunteer boards, who fulfill the governance requirements mandated by the B.C. Societies Act. We asked the EDs in twenty of these institutions throughout B.C. to share their experiences with museum governance, and to reflect on both the challenges and opportunities they encountered. Most reported difficulties finding skilled board members, and in accessing funding for training to build governance capacity. Many also reported that governance challenges contributed to workplace stress, ‘burnout’; job precarity and job leaving.

These are not new issues, as governance and the board/management relationship have been troubling small to medium non-profit museums for many years. For example, Dickenson (1994) identified “board management conflict as the chief problem in museum management in Canada” (p. 95). Similar problems have been observed throughout the non-profit arts/culture sector by Youssef, Rans, Nolan & Friesen (2021), who argue that the current system of governance is “failing us” (n.p.). Nolan (2020) explains that with fundamental challenges in non-profit governance, “good intentions can be stymied by the structure” (n.p.), which often includes an imposed corporate governance model; lack of role clarity; volunteer oversight; a disconnect between board and professional knowledge; and an inherent vulnerability to disruption. Another challenge is that it is common to simply equate governance with board work, while in reality, “non profits are also governed by legislation and the community where they work” (Youssef et al., 2021, n.p.).

It is time for the BCMA to develop an overall strategy to transform governance in small to medium museums and provide specific tools to improve governance.

Although studies about governance issues in the non-profit sector are relevant, there has been less attention paid to the specific situation of small to medium museums governed by non-profits. Yet this issue consistently surfaces in conferences and informal discussions with EDs and staff of these institutions. Similar to other studies, we suspected that governance challenges in B.C.’s small museums are not caused by “issues of personality” (Dickenson, 1994, p. 95) but are rooted in underlying structural and systemic issues. Yet the museum sector in B.C. has been slow to analyse and act on this important issue. Our findings indicate that it is time for the BCMA to develop an overall strategy towards transforming the governance of small to medium museums, and to offer specific tools to these organizations to improve their governance practices.

As museum professionals, we had informal knowledge of the challenging situations experienced by many EDs. Yet because directors of small to medium non-profit museums often work in isolated and precarious circumstances, they have few opportunities to share their first-hand experiences. We realized that documenting ED’s experiences with governance and the board/ED relationship, as well as their ideas to improve governance structure and practice, could help inform much needed change. As such, we proceeded to formally gather and share this useful knowledge.

What is at issue?

Despite the social and educational value of small to medium non-profit museums, for years there has been anecdotal evidence that the governance of these institutions is often ineffective, and at times toxic for professional staff. We believe that poor governance not only impacts the individuals concerned, but ultimately impedes the organizations' ability to deliver programs and to respond to changing roles and responsibilities related to decolonization, reconciliation, inclusion, and diversity now expected of contemporary museums of any size.

When small to medium non-profit museums are caught up in dysfunctional board practices and board/ED dynamics, this harms individual museum professionals, institutions, and the wider sector.

Sandhra, McBay, Saltzman, Budney, & Perla (2021) explain that “toxic leadership is common in Canada’s cultural sector”, citing examples of dysfunctional working environments and systemic racism in Canada’s larger arts and cultural organizations. They also ask what we can do about it, and call for ways to move beyond traditional leadership models toward a “more inclusive and just future” (n.p.). Likewise, studies such as the Ontario Non-Profit Network (ONN) ‘Reimagining Governance’ (ONN, 2019) suggest that governance dysfunction in non-profits is rooted in “systems of inequity” that oppress and cause harm in wider society. These systems of inequity often run along lines of race, gender and/or socio-economic status and should have no place in B.C.’s contemporary museums. “In this time of transformation”, the ONN argues, “urgent forces are reshaping what we mean by governance, who participates in it, and how we design truly equitable and agile governance practices, structures and cultures” (ONN, 2019, n.p.).

Our study confirmed that the governance crisis identified in the wider cultural and non-profit sectors in B.C. and Canada (e.g. Sandhra et al., 2021; Ontario Non-Profit Network, 2019; Dickenson, 1994) is also a critical issue in small to medium non-profit museums.

We concur that these issues must be addressed, because while “good governance in nonprofit organizations advances organizations’ missions and strengthens communities” (ONN, 2019, n.p.), dysfunctional board practices can impede museums’ accountability and responsibility (Janes & Sandell, 2019). By examining and re-thinking the power dynamics and communication between boards, EDs, staff and communities, we can begin to democratize the structures and systems of these institutions, and support transformative work around truth, decolonization and reconciliation; inclusion and diversity; and critical engagement with historical and contemporary issues. But the process of reimagining governance requires both commitment and support in the areas of funding, training, and strategic planning, particularly in small to medium-sized organizations.

There is a need for funding, training and strategic planning support

The Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage (Dabrusin, 2018) recommended that the Department of Canadian Heritage and Canadian Conservation Institute collaborate with the museum sector and post-secondary institutions to “train museum volunteers and board members.” This recommendation called for on-line learning specifically targeted to the needs

of small and/or rural museums (p. 2). While the Standing Committee identified several of the challenges faced by smaller museums, particularly the many dimensions of funding, it only obliquely acknowledged that many of these institutions also need assistance with “strategic planning and board development” (p. 33). Yet we hear consistently from museum professionals that governance structures and practices, including challenging board/ED relationships, have for many years been a crucial and difficult issue in the sector.

Governance issues are systemic

We learned from this study that leadership challenges experienced in small museums go deeper than personality conflicts and funding issues, as was noted in the wider museum sector by Dickenson (1994). A reason for this situation posed by Dyck (2020) is that volunteer board members are charged with “overseeing the work of full-time professionals” yet often do not have training or experience in key areas such as governance, human resources, and museum management. In short “the huge problem is that we are asking people who know nothing about our business to be our bosses and give them the power to do so” (Youssef, Rans, Nolan & Friesen, 2021, n.p.). This can lead to what Dickenson (1994) described as “unresolved differences” (p. 95) and clashing perspectives between museum directors and boards with respect to institutional goals, values, and strategic directions. We urge staff, boards and communities of small to medium non-profit museums to examine these goals, values and directions, and to ask “where does the board fit, what is their role in supporting governance?” (Youssef et al., 2021, n.p.).

Inspiration and guidance can be found in the growing movement in museums and other non-profits towards rethinking and transforming governance. According to the Ontario Non-Profit Network (2019), “many people believe that nonprofit governance can and should be better designed” (p. 5). They argue that organizations can move away from prescriptive ideas of board effectiveness to develop “their own governance innovations...based on their unique structures, processes, people, and relationships” (ONN, 2019, n.p.). Drawing from these ideas, we assert that as museums develop just and functional governance frameworks, including “greater inclusion and diversity in decision making” (ONN, 2019, p. 6), they will move toward greater social accountability and responsibility.

In short, our study helps to demonstrate that governance transformation must take place in small to medium non-profit museums so they can better realize their visions and missions. This will ultimately lead to better impacts for our communities.

Our Study

The purpose of this study was to help address governance issues in small to medium non-profit museums, and to contribute to wider initiatives around re-thinking and transforming governance in the museum sector.

The context of B.C.'s small to medium non-profit museums

According to Canadian Heritage (2019), small to medium museums comprise 90% of all B.C.'s museums, welcome 2,572,050 in-person visits per year, and employ 1,400 heritage professionals (298 full-time, 833 part-time, 269 contract). They receive public funding from federal (\$3,568,000), provincial (\$5,184,000) and municipal (\$12,196,000) sources, as well as funding from private donors.

Although small to medium non-profit museums may not have a high profile in the arts/heritage sector, they are important educational and memory institutions that conserve and share B.C.'s cultural and scientific heritage. Often located outside of urban areas, these institutions engage deeply with their communities and contribute to educational, social, and economic infrastructures.

According to Tim Willis (2019), visitors spend more time with exhibits in smaller museums than in larger ones. Yet in addition to developing public exhibitions, small to medium museums engage in a multitude of other functions, such as managing historically important collections and creating tourist and community-oriented programs. These programs include educational opportunities for all age groups including early childhood, K-12, post-secondary and adult learners. Small to medium non-profit museums often work in partnership with other organizations, such as First Nations, daycares, schools, community groups, and seniors, and provide employment to local workers, students, and tradespeople.

Increasingly, all aspects of museum work must also respond to a mandate from government and civil society to be socially responsible. Social responsibility includes changing dominant 'white settler' narratives to those that support decolonization and reconciliation as well as working with communities to better understand and address complex histories, social inequities, and socio-ecological issues (BC Arts Council, 2018.; Janes & Sandell, 2019; Dabrusin, 2019).

Yet in spite of their social, educational and economic value and potential, many of B.C.'s small to medium non-profit museums experience profound challenges in the way they are governed, which threatens both the efficacy of their operations and their sustainability as institutions.

Methodology

Because EDs form the link between governance and operations in these institutions, and have detailed and historical institutional knowledge, we sought to engage their knowledge base, including their experiences, strategies, and suggested resources.

We looked at small to medium museums in B.C. that are governed by non-profit societies.

- Twelve had yearly budgets below \$200,000 per year,
- Six had yearly budgets between \$200-500,000 per year,
- Two had yearly budgets between \$500,000 and 1million per year.

In terms of staffing levels,

- Five of the participants we interviewed were the only staff member.
- Five of the participants' institutions had a staff of two, including the ED,
- Eight of the participants' institutions had three to five staff including the ED
- Two had nine or ten staff including the ED.

We asked:

“How do EDs in B.C.’s small to medium non-profit museums understand and experience governance and the board/ED relationship?”

We used a qualitative methodology which consisted of 20 open-ended interviews between one and two hours long (see Appendix 1). EDs from a minimum of two institutions from each of B.C.’s defined geographic regions were randomly sampled from a master-list of small to medium non-profit museums in B.C. Further participants were identified through snowball sampling. Private (for profit) museums and those operated by municipalities were not included. We conducted a content analysis based on initial themes generated from a literature review, as well as themes that emerged from the interviews.

**To obtain solutions,
we must first speak
truthfully.**

It is important to give voice to the specific and troubling nature of the governance challenges faced by EDs in small to medium non-profit museums, and to how some organizations have overcome similar challenges. This can be difficult, because as public institutions, museums, including their EDs, understandably prefer to ‘put their best foot forward’ and keep sensitive information internal. For this reason, participation in the study was strictly confidential and voluntary, and results were generalized so the individuals and organizations could not be identified.

But to obtain solutions, we must first speak truthfully about the issues. This study demonstrates how common and deeply entrenched governance challenges are in many small to medium non-profit museums, and that dysfunctional governance harms not only individual museum professionals, but the entire sector.

Participants

The participants were either current EDs or had recently left the position. They drew from their current as well as past experiences to answer the interview questions. As the study progressed, we realized they could be categorized into five groups:

- already left their position due to governance and Board/ED issues (3 participants)
- considering leaving due to governance and Board/ED issues (2 participants)
- staying but finding it stressful due to governance and Board/ED issues (2 participants)
- staying and satisfied with governance and Board/ED relationship (5 participants) *
- currently satisfied with governance and Board/ED relationship but having had governance issues in the past (8 participants)

*Note that 4 out of these 5 who were currently satisfied with governance and the board/ED relationship were replacing an ED who had experienced governance issues.

Results

A. What Needs to Change? 5 Challenges

Our study identified five key challenges widely experienced by the participants in their organizations related to governance and the board-ED relationship:

1. precarious and poorly compensated work
2. board structure and succession
3. lack of defined roles and responsibilities (or lack of adherence to defined roles and responsibilities)
4. boards disconnected from the ED's professional and community museum work
5. bullying and harassment / feelings of isolation / no recourse

We interpret all of these as contributing to the high levels of workplace stress and burnout reported by many of the participants, which in some cases resulted in stress-leave or resignation.

Challenge #1: Precarious and poorly compensated work

“You get paid so little, especially when you're in a rural community. The value of the sector is not there.” (Interview #16)

As Friedman (1994) observed, “the problem of low compensation in the museum world is a persistent one and can lead to instability in the sector” as museum workers realize that “no matter how high they rise in their organization, they will never even have an adequate salary” (p. 124). This issue held true for most of the participants of this study, who also reported poor working conditions, a lack of work/life balance, and task saturation.

“I was given the base wage for the museum manager position. I understand that we're in a small museum...I think if I had been anywhere else in my life, I might not have been okay with that wage. I might have left.” (Interview #14)

Most participants reported poor compensation levels and working conditions that were not aligned with their professional qualifications, job knowledge and experience. This included contract work, low wage levels, and lack of benefits:

“We are getting just above living wage. The highest manager is about \$21.50. So it's not that much better, we need to work on that for sure. And then we have no benefits either.” (Interview #18)

Some also mentioned that their physical working conditions were uncomfortable and at times unsafe. For example, one participant recollected:

“It's just horrible. I'm not going say it's unsafe. It's really not, but we are in a space that we have outgrown...we have issues with mice at certain times of the year.” (Interview #10)

Another participant explained:

“It would sometimes reach 43 degrees in the front office and you can't work in conditions like that. There was no air conditioning until after my efforts - three years of getting funding and convincing the municipality who owned the building that we need some help.” (Interview #3)

Another noted:

“I'm coming to you from a windowless office that is a closet.” (Interview #2)

Why are ED's salaries so low?

It has been widely known for some time that compensation for museum professionals is considerably lower than similarly qualified workers in other sectors (Friedman, 1994, p. 124). The literature and media often mention low levels of public arts/culture funding as the main reason for the poor compensation and substandard working conditions commonly experienced by museum and other arts/culture professionals (e.g. Dabrusin, 2018). But the issue is more complex than funding and involves museums' history as 'elite' institutions; a high degree of volunteerism in the workforce; and a reliance on museum professionals accepting “the intrinsic rewards of museum work as compensation for low salaries” (Friedman, 1994, p. 124). Our study similarly found that although increasing funding to small to medium non-profit museums is important, it will not in itself solve the problem of poor compensation and working conditions. A review of the job postings on the BCMA list-serve demonstrates that attitudes and practices that undervalue museum professionals are

The experience, knowledge and skills of museum professionals are often misunderstood and undervalued by boards.

deeply embedded and pervasive throughout our sector, particularly in museums run by non-profit organizations. One ED reflected that while they were satisfied with the compensation they were receiving, this was not common in the sector:

“I’m lucky that my board understands that you need to pay people a living wage. A lot of board members don’t comprehend that if you pay somebody with a master’s degree \$17 an hour to do a job that requires 10 years experience...they’re going to be frustrated and they’re going to leave soon. And (staff turnover) creates turmoil and problems at the board level...People serving on boards...need to understand that there’s a crisis of wage in the sector and that good people will and are leaving. And if board members don’t comprehend that, then that’s also the systemic part. We’re already in a crisis.” (Interview #2)

Apart from overall funding, participants identified reasons for their poor compensation levels. These included ‘industry standards’; undervaluing museum professionals; explicit and implicit expectations of volunteer labour; and systemic gender bias.

‘Industry standards’. Participants revealed that *low compensation levels throughout the sector* enabled boards to justify low compensation levels in their own organizations, rather than basing salaries on job performance, experience, and qualifications. Further, participants of this study described boards who demonstrated a ‘take it or leave it’ attitude with respect to compensation and working conditions, and some who expressed the belief that museum professionals somehow ‘chose’ to be undercompensated:

“We could have put more things in place for wages, benefits and pensions quite a while ago. I think that really came out of the organizations just not being supported very well historically. It’s like, ‘well, you chose to be in this profession, so you chose not to have these things’. I think that we need to change that.” (Interview #4)

“I specifically told the board that I was unhappy with my salary and zero benefits, and was experiencing burnout from the heavy workload. Board members called a bunch of other museums, similar in size and found that many other EDs were all getting paid on average \$20-24/hr with no benefits and so concluded that no further effort was needed to improve the salaries of workers! No critical thought! Not examining how many years of experience their ED has and how much money did she pull in for the museum this year? And nothing done to alleviate the workload.” (Interview #3)

In contrast, one participant (Interview #11) had successfully requested that her board pursue equity with the town workers, as they were ultimately funded by their municipality. “I’d rather be in a job that I can actually pay the bills” she explained, “there is just no way I could work for \$25 an hour forever and ever. I wouldn’t be here if I was still making that per hour.”

Undervaluing museum professionals.

“I don’t think the board had a really strong sense of the value of the position.” (Interview #12)

Many participants expressed the belief that their compensation was impacted by how their professional expertise and role as ED was misunderstood and/or undervalued by boards. Some suggested this was because experience and knowledge of museum theory and practice was not common amongst board members, and that boards were not always aware that the participants were conducting professional and challenging work:

“If you put an accountant into my place, would you try the same stuff on that person? Because we're in social science, we're considered soft skills. Right? And it's not.”
(Interview #4)

“The president has consistently minimized not only my role, but what it's worth.”
(Interview #17)

Rather than showing commitment to salary levels appropriate to professional qualifications and experience, in most cases we reviewed, boards instead sought to keep salaries as low as possible. In some cases, this was vigorously pursued, *unrelated to funding availability*, and based on underlying beliefs and values:

“One board member...was really angry that we were getting more pay...She also believed that everyone should work for free in the museum...” (Interview #9)

Expectations of volunteer labour. Participants reported that volunteering their labour was often embedded in their positions, whether through direct ‘asks’, or indirectly through unrealistic job descriptions and related duties. This was often attributed to a strong volunteer culture amongst board members, with a resultant difficulty of separating the roles of paid staff and volunteers. The result for many participants was unmanageable workloads leading to routine contributions of their own time to fulfill job requirements:

“Some weeks will be normal, 40, but sometimes it can be 60, 65, 70 hours... I do bank that, but I barely ever take the time.” (Interview #15)

“With events we were there on weekends. I would still work my five days in the office and then I would help out at an event.” (Interview #19)

Volunteer duties for some included board responsibilities on top of their own, because certain skills and capacities, such as financial knowledge, were not present amongst board members:

“We don't have a lot of expertise on the board...I have mentioned to the board that ultimately a lot of the financial things I do are as a volunteer, at home in the middle of the night at the last minute.” (Interview #18)

Gender. Some participants wondered if gender played a role in their low compensation, as has been demonstrated elsewhere in the non-profit sector (Uppal, 2020). Since small to medium non-profit museums are predominantly staffed by women, gender inequality expressed in poor compensation presents a systemic and sector-wide issue:

“I deserve to be paid what he (my predecessor) was being paid. I don't know if it's specifically because he was a man... I can't help but wonder if that was part of it.” (Interview #12)

There are some exceptions.

Although many participants reported that their compensation levels were kept inappropriately low, referencing one or more of the factors listed above, there were exceptions. For example, one participant appreciated the role of board members in pursuing better compensation for staff:

“We also have had champions on the board, people who are strongly in favor of better wages, I mean, really what's there to lose? We go to council and say, ‘this is how much we need.’” (Interview #11)

Challenge #2: Board structure and succession

Challenges related to board structure and succession included ownership issues; finding skilled board members; a need for greater diversity and representation; and understanding governance models.

Ownership issues. The need for term limits on board positions was frequently invoked by the participants as a means to avoid what one described as “ownership issues” and maintain the museum as a community organization:

“The only way to really make the board healthy was to implement some terms of office because there was one person who had been on at that point for 20 plus years...We couldn't have that kind of ownership issue...where people start to believe that they own the museum. It's a community museum, which is owned by the people, and we get operating money from the district. It needs to be a public facility, not ‘so and so's museum.’” (Interview #11)

Finding skilled board members.

“As opposed to some organizations, we don't have a lot of professionals on our board. We don't have lawyers; we don't have accountants. We just have people, most of them are retired.” (Interview #19)

Our results reflect those of other studies of non-profit governance that suggest “challenges in recruiting people with the right competencies” (ONN, 2019, p. 8). Youssef et al. (2021) argue that many boards lack knowledge of organizational processes, yet are ultimately responsible, leading to a crisis of accountability. Participants remarked on difficulties finding members of the public willing to sit on their boards, which was particularly serious in small towns. One noted, “you often find the same people sitting on the same boards” (Interview #19) and “our board has been pretty static for a long time” (Interview #19). In addition, museum-related knowledge and skills were not often present at the board level:

“For most community museums of this size, it's rare that you'll get a board member that will have absolutely any experience in museums.” (Interview #5)

Yet several participants were marginalized from the decisions that impacted their professional work and the organization. In some cases, EDs were completely excluded from providing a management perspective to help inform board decisions:

“The board is so important in a small museum because every decision that they make impacts you, and we did have to fight to be included in some of their meetings...It took a long time for them to understand that we needed to be there, because you can make a decision, but will that actually work? Is that appropriate or is that even possible?” (Interview. #14)

A need for greater diversity and representation. Recently, there have been calls for B.C. museums to move beyond a predominantly ‘white settler narrative’ to include greater diversity and critical analysis in the histories they share. The reforms called for include changes to the curatorial and interpretive aspects of museums, and to governance and HR structures and approaches that can perpetuate systemic racism in the sector (Sandhra et al., 2021) and block or minimize progressive change.

Several participants reflected on this important and timely shift in the museum sector and how governance of their institution has been slow to embrace diversity, particularly with respect to board composition.

“The board is not representative of the community. Some of their great-grandfathers were (early) settlers in the area. That's great, but there are other people who've been through this community. There are people who are still here now, there are new people moving to the community. How to share that story and include them in those decisions?” (Interview #13)

“My board is not diverse. Our whole organization basically is not diverse...but when we talk about diversity training and improving diversity on boards or in organizations as a whole, we run right into that classic excuse ‘well we’re not very big. We’ve only got 20 people of a different culture’, which is not true either.” (Interview #17)

“When I started at the museum over 10 years ago, it was very much done by volunteers who meant very well, but they were white settlers themselves. So the story being told was absolutely one of the white settler.” (Interview #6)

Knowledge and implementation of various governance models.

The Canadian Association of Museum Gallery Operators and the Canadian Museums Association (2004) describe how governance models function in museums, drawing a key distinction between the roles and responsibilities of boards which have full-time professional staff, and those which have no professional staff. In spite of this guidance, some participants felt that their board did not follow a model, but governed in a more ad-hoc manner.

For those participants who could identify the governance models that were in place at their institutions, many were critical of what one described as “inherent formality” and “rigid structure” (Interview #17), which another understood as “applying a business model...(with) no true understanding of non-profits and museums” (Interview #5). Some participants expressed that carefully selecting a governance model, by “talking together and discussing the culture of your organization and picking something that works for who you are” (Interview #3) was not happening.

Most of the participants suggested there was a need for governance to be understood as a wider concept than board work, but that this was not happening at their particular organization:

“I think that we look at governance as just these people that come around the board table once a month, but governance is so much bigger than that. It's how you're leading your site, even informally, with all of the people in your community, shareholders and partners. With all of these people who have a place in your museum and come in to talk to you about the collections and what they'd like to see and how much they love the exhibit you worked on. This is all shaping and governing your site. I think that's how we must govern – with the voices of the community leading you and showing you.”(Interview #3)

Reminiscent of Youssef et al.'s (2021) concerns about the use of Carver model boards in non-profits, several participants expressed concern about this particular model, with one participant describing it as difficult to navigate and “aggression wrapped up in a business model” (Interview #5). Another recollected that their board meetings changed under the Carver model, and she was “not able to speak unless referring to her report” (Interview #3). She was also given several directives by the board but no resources with which to fulfill them. She concluded that:

“The Carver model is really patriarchal and colonial and not the kind of model you would want to use today in museums, which should look at ways to be inclusive and diverse and sharing of people's knowledge and including everyone. It's just really hierarchical, uninspiring, and a creativity killer.” (Interview #3)

Several other participants also discussed being excluded from governance under the Carver model, and of feeling like the inclusive and collaborative work cultures they had developed were negatively impacted by the imposition of the Carver model:

“I found that the board that was in place then almost used the Carver model as a form of bullying. They used it to add on more jobs to what I was already doing. At the time I was the only full-time staff person, so they said ‘we're going to use this model and you have to do this and this and this and this’ ...So I've got bad feelings, about the Carver model.” (Interview #9)

Challenge #3: A lack of defined roles and responsibilities (and/or lack of adherence to defined roles and responsibilities) between board and management leading to micromanagement and/or unmanageable workloads

The non-profit and museums literature indicates that making clear the roles and responsibilities of the board and ED is considered standard best practice (Davis & Mort-Putland, 2005; Dyck, 2020). In addressing museums and galleries specifically, the Canadian Museums Association and Canadian Art Museum Directors Organization (2004) state that “board members and staff need to have a strong, common understanding of the roles and responsibilities of museum trustees. They also need to keep up with government and community initiatives affecting Canadian museums” (p. 3). Steward (2017) similarly explains that “to effectively run a museum there has to be a clear definition of roles and responsibilities of board members, the executive director, and staff. Each of them needs to work together to fulfil the museum’s mission and meet the needs of its constituencies” (n.p.).

Yet despite this guidance, most participants described ongoing difficulties in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of board and management:

“Being a working board...they weren't always informing staff in the office what they were doing after hours. When I come in, stuff has moved...what is going on? And there was one board member in particular who had a lot of opinions on how things should be, and I would get just huge emails from him...that was a bit stressful.”
(Interview #19)

They further explained that this challenge also impacted their daily work environment by creating situations of micromanagement, task saturation and/or ‘sleeping boards’.

Micromanagement and task saturation

Failure to adequately define roles and responsibilities between board and ED was revealed in situations of board/ED micromanagement and interference from board members into the duties of the ED, as well as ‘sleeping boards’ where the ED was expected to do society work as well as their own job.

Similar to Thistle’s (2019) descriptions of widespread “task saturation” in small to medium museums, almost all of the participants described feeling overwhelmed with having more tasks and responsibilities than time and/or resources with which to accomplish them. One participant recollected that their board “tends to do the tasks that they like, so not everything is being addressed. They only want to do the fun things, and then you're left scrambling to do everything else” (Interview #14).

“The workload is unmanageable, but I just keep plowing through and, things get done. I'm really happy that most grants will allow extensions.” (Interview #9)

“It's unmanageable (the workload), there's too much placed on too few staff, which I think is pretty common in the museum industry...there is no backup here, it's you do it or it doesn't get done.” (Interview #20)

A surprising number of participants described janitorial duties as part of their responsibilities, which we flagged as inappropriate for professionally trained, usually female staff:

“I am Manager/Curator/Bathroom Cleaner, I do it all, and it's a lot of stuff for me to do.” (Interview #7)

Others reported being tasked with board duties as well as their own job descriptions:

“When I first started, I was taking minutes and I ultimately ended up stopping. I don't have time to take your minutes and type them up for you...I'm writing grants, I'm working with the public and developing exhibits and researching, responding to research requests, all these things...They didn't know how things had to be recorded and then documented.” (Interview #13)

The participants also noted that individual board members' social and personal investments in board or museum work at times made ED/Board roles and responsibilities unclear. They described times when requirements to “make space for board members to do things” (Interview #14) interfered with the actual work and compartment required in both board and management roles. Several EDs were concerned with the board's persistent interference into their defined role, particularly if there were curatorial duties. In one case, “the curator struggled because the board really enjoyed doing exhibitions and displays” (Interview #14). A related concern was emphasis on “the esteem that goes along with (board work)” (Interview #4) and “a difficulty in letting go of power when they become board members...and to keep in mind what they are working for is what is best for this organization” (Interview 6#). In many cases, EDs reported that a “legacy making and social club mentality” (Interview #3) resulted in board members becoming inappropriately involved in operational aspects of the museum that were specific to the ED's job descriptions:

“Certain board members wanted the work of museum staff to be their legacy and they wanted to kick staff out of high-profile projects...I think it comes down to ownership and authority struggles. They wanted to have their name on things...They were getting caught up in that.” (Interview #3)

Another chose to field interference by referring individuals to board-level decision making:

“So he started to phone and do things. And I told him that he needed to stop, to know that he's not the person to go off and do things. I said, we're a governance board. We do policies and look at financials. You don't go...phoning everyone based on who you think is important to phone.” (Interview #11)

Challenge #4: Boards disconnected from the ED's professional and community museum work functioning as 'volunteer bosses'

"A lot of them don't know what museums do today. They don't understand what museums are and what we're trying to do." (Interview #3)

"I think what's missing on this board is that there's no passion. There's no interest in museums." (Interview #20)

The findings of this study are similar to those with other arts non-profits, in which there were unresolved differences when volunteers without experience were given power over trained professionals (Dickenson, 1994; Dyck, 2020; Youssef et al, 2021). The participants described situations where their professional work was negatively impacted by power inequities and difficult communication:

"It was like staff and board were talking completely different languages." (Interview #5)

"People want to threaten, or they want to throw their weight around...What makes the museum successful is being able to get on with your work...museums are a professional field of work, which require education and experience." (Interview #4)

"They don't understand that you already have all these directives and projects you have to complete. That's laid out in your BC Arts operating requests...And even though you share that with them, did they even read it?" (Interview #3)

One participant wondered about the efficacy and ethics of 'volunteer bosses'. She also commented on the difficulty of boards and EDs having very different perspectives on the social and educational role of museums:

"Why are these volunteers your boss? How are they involved? How are they even helping you or being useful? This negligence is causing harm to others. They need to know that museums are not neutral. I've heard board members saying that, 'we should be neutral.'" (Interview #3).

Similarly, many also noted that although their boards were their employer, members often lacked knowledge about human resource management principles, nor were they respectful of the professionalism of their staff:

"Your boss should understand basic human resources ideas." (Interview #1)

"I think the biggest thing for me has been the lack of knowledge that people have about how we're professionals. And that we went to university, and we did a master's thesis and that sort of thing in the subjects that we're working on." (Interview #4)

A related problem was a lack of willingness to support the professional development of museum staff:

“Most of the members did not support me attending BCMA conferences and other different sessions. I remember about two years ago, reconciliation training in libraries and archives was in Vancouver. It was free, so all I had to do was go. And I could even charge my mileage. I just went for two workdays down there and they were complaining about that.” (Interview #13)

Some participants also described a sense of having ‘too many bosses’, in which they received contradictory directions from individual board members, and again noted that board members were often unaware of evolving museum practices and requirements:

“There've been moments where I thought, ‘I can't handle it,’ because there are times where it feels like I have 10 bosses.” (Interview #6)

“Board members...give directions to staff and sometimes they contradict each other. So staff were left wondering, ‘who's instructions do I follow?’ I think there's a disconnect. I don't think the board of directors really understands how staff operate, how the museum operates, and what gets done on a daily basis, because there's not that museum background and ongoing discussion. They're not getting that same contact. In terms of developments in the museum field, I don't think they're on the same page.” (Interview #20)

Challenge # 5: Bullying and Harassment/Isolation/Lack of Recourse

Bullying and Harassment

Challenges such as compensation levels, board structure and succession, and board disconnection from the professional and community aspects of the ED’s work were common themes reported by the participants. It was also concerning to hear many participants report serious dysfunction specific to the board/ED relationship, such as silencing, marginalizing, verbal abuse, gossip, threats, sexual harassment and racist/sexist behaviour:

“The president organized a workshop for the board from which I was excluded...I know the value of team building, and being excluded clearly said, ‘you're not part of this team’. And it's been like that ever since.” (Interview #1)

“I experienced bullying from some of the board... I had a woman walk in and she stood over me and told me to get out of my chair because she wanted to sit there, show me what's what. I actually had to ask if I should call somebody in to be with me while she was in the room. She realized how inappropriate she had been and resigned from the board.” (Interview #11)

“There've been a number of interest groups who have had representatives on the board and there have been physical threats towards me.” (Interview #4)

“There has been an environment which has been referred to as toxic. I've been ignored at every level. Aggressive and bullying behavior not experienced just by me, but other board members and community members outside of the organization.” (Interview #1)

“To us personally, there were very derogatory, sexually alluding comments at board meetings...When he would come to the museum, I never wanted to see him in the office. We always tried to see him in open public spaces.” (Interview #6)

Part of the problem identified by the participants, similar to other non-profits (e.g. Uppal, 2020), is a persistent view of small to medium non-profit museums as ‘something other’ than a professional workplace:

“You're dealing with some board members that are being very belligerent and their behavior is unacceptable, but no one will stand up and face that because...there is no real structure of a work environment.” (Interview #6)

Similar to Uppal’s (2020) Ontario study in non-profits, board treatment of EDs and other staff as non-professional and quasi-volunteer often had a distinctly gendered dimension:

“We are in the process of rewriting my job description right now, and this is where I'm starting to run into some fairly serious sexist views with the approach...It can be challenging at times, because we have a board member who is becoming increasingly difficult.” (Interview #17)

“I would express that I feel like I have a lot on my plate, that I'm quite busy and I need some support. Then they suggested I take time management courses and also said that, well, ‘I must be pretty tired dealing with my young children’.” (Interview #3)

One participant wondered if race was also a factor in the way she was treated:

“The person whose role I took over had the title of museum manager. I didn't get that title and ...considering they are the same job, I didn't understand why. But I left it at that. And then the person who took over my position, they gave him the title of museum manager...I'll be honest, as a woman of color, I did wonder, as the person who took over my job was a lot younger and had a lot less experience. He's doing a great job right now, but he is a white heterosexual male. I did wonder, why wasn't I given the same opportunities?” (Interview #14)

We flagged situations such as these as completely unacceptable and requiring further study and action. Yet a key challenge voiced by many participants was what they saw as a profound lack of recourse.

Isolation/Lack of Recourse

The participants explained that there was little or no recourse to better understand and address the challenging issues that came up with respect to governance and the Board/ED relationship. Lack of recourse was attributed to several factors, such as small staff numbers; job precarity; institutional power inequities and lack of accountability; limited resources; and lack of a wider support network for museum professionals working in these institutions.

As one participant reflected, because of working in isolation, “you don't know, sometimes you question if it's actually happening and then you come onto the realization of ‘who should I talk

to?” (Interview #1). Not knowing where to access information or whom they could talk to was a common theme:

“I didn't even know where to start because I was so busy working and I had so many deadlines and things that I was trying to figure out. Who can I talk to here and navigate this?” (Interview #3)

“All this crazy behavior...I didn't feel like I knew who to talk to. I talked to my family and to some other colleagues about it, but it's not like there's a real support network that you can go to with advice and conflict resolution.” (Interview #13)

The role of institutional power inequities was discussed by this participant, who noted that although policies and procedures for recourse existed at her organization, they were not observed:

“I have no recourse. I kept going to my boss and not getting acknowledged. And certainly no response, no changes...Last year I looked at our human resources policy, and there it is in black and white that the curator manager will receive an annual job performance review in which there's an exchange of ideas, both good things that have happened, what's been achieved, but also things that could be problems and challenges that need to be addressed. It's a chance for both sides to discuss that professionally... They've had these discussions elsewhere and I have not been included in them, which is against their own policy.” (Interview #1)

Finally, the theme again emerged of small to medium non-profit museums being seen as somehow ‘other’ than professional workplaces due to their strong volunteer culture, resulting in a lack of accountability for abuses of power:

“There is that ability for them to do things that in a normal working environment would not be acceptable. In part it is because they are not paid individuals, so they are never afraid of losing their position. They know there is no overarching body that would come and say, ‘Hey, what you did was unacceptable. And, you know, if you continue, there will be repercussions.’ There are no repercussions.” (Interview #6)

B. Impacts – Stress, Burnout, Job-leaving

“I have to leave the museum. I have worked so hard to build my career in the museum industry...it's over, I can't do this anymore.” (Interview #20)

We are concerned that the challenging issues described by the participants can contribute to stress and burnout. For example, one participant shared that she “had no time for family life and personal life” and that there was “zero work-life balance” (Interview #3) in spite of her efforts:

“Every moment when I was away, there'd always be something else that would come up. I tried to set strict boundaries and have everything completed in my short amount of time, and then not look at my phone, not check my emails every weekend. Almost always it would happen that someone would call- ‘there's an emergency, or something else happening’, or

there were so many events. That takes so much of my time, outside of my normal working hours.” (Interview #3)

Most of the participants attributed the main cause of their severe experiences of stress to working with boards. We noted that some EDs remained in their positions despite stressful situations with their boards or individual board members:

“It became known that this particular president was being quite adversarial and belligerent. And some volunteers told me if you go, we go, and I didn't want to leave a crumbling state behind me. And I thought, I have to stick around for these wonderful volunteers that are giving a lot of their time. And we're building this small community museum that maybe can be an example of how we can do things.” (Interview #6)

“When I first started it was pretty toxic. I was just a 20 year old assistant and I sat down with the president. I was like, this has got to change or I'm leaving because I can get a job anywhere. I don't need to stay.” (Interview #19)

“I think the only reason I did stay is because I knew they didn't want me to. I'm generally kind of a meek person, but I dug my heels in and just figured I could outlast them. And, you know, I did. We were gathering support in the community, with people who knew more about board structure. So we were building allies. What our current board came from was the result of looking for that support within the community. But I definitely had a lot of sleepless nights over it, there were days where I thought, I can't do this anymore, but...that little bit of stubbornness, and I've got so much invested in the museum too, and I didn't want to let that go. I thought that the community deserves to have a good strong museum and I felt that I could continue to do that. So, I just lasted.” (Interview #9)

Yet others chose to leave their organizations or the entire sector. We are concerned that the cumulative impact of workplace stress and burnout on EDs is damaging not only to individual museum professionals, but to organizational and sector sustainability. The overall similarity of experiences amongst a wide variety of organizations indicates that this problem is systemic rather than isolated:

“I thought about this, like maybe I need a mediator to come in, but to me it just felt like so much had happened. I couldn't see myself staying...It just felt like it was so broken. I was a hundred percent burned out...So I actually went on a three-month stress leave first. I thought maybe I could recover a bit and then I might feel like I could keep working there, but I just didn't. After the three months, I just really felt I couldn't even bear to go back. And just thinking about going back actually made me feel physically sick.” (Interview #3)

“Too many struggles, too much emotional investment. And I felt I was fighting a fight that I just couldn't do on my own. I just tried to hang in and tried to hang in and then it's just like...(my) own quality of life is more important than this...It just got to the point where it's not worth my effort if it's not appreciated. I know the community appreciated it, but not the board. And it just got so toxic...I've only been back a couple of times. I still get anxious driving that way. I don't want to go there. Cause I had such anxiety every day the last six months I worked there. I was so anxious going into work every day.” (Interview #13)

The participants reflected that the cost to smaller organizations losing EDs to stress and burnout can mean losing valuable and specific knowledge about the museum's holdings, grant and fund development, and community relationships built over time. The impact on organizations is even greater when the ED is also the only staff member.

“Unfortunately, they've lost those connections that I built...I'm not in touch with that community (anymore)...I was getting more consistent funding from the two municipalities, and the tourism industry. I was getting grants for all those different projects...and it just all went down the drain. It's just so sad to see that happen...I would say probably less than ten people in that community, but they're the ones that speak the loudest and are on the board and have that authority.” (Interview #13)

“What's the cost of the loss of EDs in these small organizations? I don't think (the board) is going to realize that for a while. The loss of knowledge about what's in the holdings, in the archives. The knowledge about the history and most importantly the loss of relationships.” (Interview #3)

Given the experiences recounted by some of the participants, we flagged the need to identify the cost to museum organizations, and the wider sector, of losing skilled and experienced staff due to governance issues. We also suggest that looking closely at governance situations that are working well, or have improved over time for EDs and boards, could provide insights into how to improve situations that are not working well.

C. What is working?

In contrast to the difficulties recounted by many participants, some of the participants provided feedback on what they thought was working well for their organizations. Some indicated that they had a good working relationship with their boards, although were concerned that this could easily change in the future. Some of the governance qualities that were similar in these participants' organizations were term limits; clear roles and responsibilities; a role for the ED in recruiting board members; role for the ED in board meetings; and establishing shared visions and values.

Term limits

Many participants expressed that limited board terms helped develop a healthier organization:

“They should have an expiration date on the board membership. That would definitely help make changes. Some organizations have that in their constitution. You're only allowed to be on the board for a certain number of years and you have to take a break and then you can come back later.” (Interview #13)

Clear roles and responsibilities

As a solution to board micromanagement, interference with the ED's roles, and offloading governance work onto EDs, many participants stressed the need to clarify roles and responsibilities:

“The Board needs to consist of practical people who want to do something for the community and who trust their ED to do the job.” (Interview #4)

Some highlighted the benefits of strategic planning towards this end and suggested the use of tools such as a responsibility matrix and/or board job descriptions. The experiences and comments of the participants also suggest that strategic planning processes should include both EDs and boards, and when possible, should also include paid and volunteer staff, members, and members of communities served.

Including ED in recruiting board members and in board meetings

We heard from EDs that being included in governance processes such as board recruitment and board meetings is crucial to the functional governance of these institutions. They also explained that it is important to develop structures and processes that better integrate ED’s organizational and professional knowledge:

“(The ED) needs to play an active role in recruiting for your board...if you're serious about changes that need to be made, you need to identify people that will get on the board. That will be the voice that will support what you need to do, or at least understand the changes that need to happen.” (Interview #2)

Establishing shared visions and values

We heard from some EDs that being meaningfully included in governance processes, can help to establish shared visions and values, identified by the participants as key to well functioning organizations:

“You need to have a shared vision, a philosophy of what you're doing, because that guides all kinds of decisions. This is a really important point. If you don't have that shared philosophy and that shared vision, and you're not on the same page, then it's chaos.” (Interview #1)

Recommendations – Ways to improve governance in small to medium non-profit museums

“This article...the title reads: “The arts are beautiful. The sector is not.” There is an image of a ballerina with one foot in a pointe shoe, and then the other foot reveals what is beneath, which is a toe in blood. So it talks about behind the scenes, below the surface of the arts and cultural sector, is a deep, tragic history that needs to be undone.” (Interview #16)

One of the advantages of this study was that it accessed the substantial, grounded knowledge of the participants, many of whom had worked in small to medium non-profit museums for several years. Drawing from their experience, they had many recommendations to improve and/or transform governance in these institutions. Some of these were steps that can be taken by small to medium non-profit museums; some were directed beyond the organizations, to museum associations, funding organizations, and/or universities/colleges that train museum professionals;

and some were for museum professionals currently experiencing similar challenges as outlined in this study.

A. Recommendations for small to medium non-profit museums:

Recommendation # 1: Find ways to better represent communities.

A clear recommendation from the EDs was that boards must find ways to better represent the diversity in their communities, even within the limitations of current governance models:

“The structure of the board needs to change. They need representation from youth. They can invite Indigenous community members to be involved-that would be great.”
(Interview #13)

“The board model is within that structure that is not creating space for diversity. It's not creating room for real change. I don't know how quickly BC Societies is going to change governance models to really create the change that's required. So you have to do it on the ground. It's looking at the equity of your organization, and that goes to your board as well. Does your board truly represent your community? In our case, not really. That's something that we're working on.” (Interview #16)

Recommendation # 2: Have written policies and use them.

To address the limited recourse experienced by EDs when dealing with Board/ED conflict, some participants recommended the use of clear written policies:

“We have a policy that sets out the processes for if there's conflict between staff or a conflict between a supervisor and a staff member or conflict between the ED and the board.” (Interview #2)

They suggested that rather than ‘reinventing the wheel’, organizations could look to other non-profits for examples of such policies:

“There are thousands of not-for-profits that have, you know, good policies and bad policies. And so we found one that worked for us and just tweaked it.” (Interview #2)

Recommendation # 3: Clearly identify roles and responsibilities

Youssef et al., (2021, n.p.) advise that rather than strictly adhering to a particular governance model, organizations should “get beyond abstract definitions of what board responsibilities are” and make specific lists of “all the functions in your organization.” including “marketing, communications, events, and human resources”. Clearly listing all functions can help to clarify the nature and extent of board and ED’s involvement. Dyck (2020) further highlights values alignment and shared leadership between governance and management, as well as the use of tools such as responsibility matrixes that identify board and ED roles in areas such as strategic planning, day to day operations, budget and spending, partnerships, and human resource management.

Recommendation # 4: Implement regular facilitated board training and strategic planning sessions that include the ED and staff.

There are many resources available for training and strategic planning in non-profits, including trained facilitators who are knowledgeable about the challenges of small to medium non-profit museums. Yet some participants noted that training and strategic planning were not prioritized in their organizations, and even met with resistance from boards. We strongly encourage these organizations to acknowledge the value of board training and strategic planning, and to implement them on a regular basis.

“There's so many resources out there. The BC Museums Association Brain has proven to be quite a resource. I've sent that out to the board and staff regularly. There's American organizations that are working specifically within the not-for-profit sector that have a lot of board specific resources that are how to work through strategic planning with your board and how to diversify.” (Interview #16)

In addition, we call for boards to include EDs and staff in training and strategic planning. In some cases, we learned that EDs were excluded from these sessions, which negatively impacted knowledge-sharing and collaboration between board and staff. While we understand that the financial and time cost of implementing regular training and strategic planning is a perceived barrier, we argue that the long-term benefits and efficiencies outweigh short term costs. In addition, we call elsewhere for specific funding to be made available for board training and strategic planning through agencies such as the BC Arts Council.

Recommendation # 5: Prioritize operational funding.

Several participants explained that their museums were dependent on project-based funding. Lack of reliable, yearly funding has a clear impact on smaller organizations long-term sustainability, and tends to produce museum jobs that are precarious and underpaid (e.g. Dabrusin, 2018).

“I think that the board has benefited by how much work I do and that they haven't had to do a lot of deeper thinking on how the operation is working and that ultimately it's not financially sustainable for us to keep looking for project funding...so it really just so heavily falls on me.” (Interview #18)

Operational funding, particularly to cover permanent staff positions, creates opportunities to build governance capacity. Although challenging, we encourage small to medium museums to make operational funding a priority, whether through various levels of government or private sources.

Recommendation #6: Be proactive about recruitment.

We heard from participants that although difficult, it is “very important that you recruit suitable board members who have the skills and personality to help with and engage with the issues” (Interview #2). They also suggested that EDs play a crucial role in board member recruitment, which can help to ensure board diversity.

B. Recommendations for advocacy organizations, learning programs and/or funding agencies:

Recommendation # 1: Draw inspiration from allied sectors such as libraries

Some participants suggested that our allied professions, such as libraries, can provide ideas and models for moving forward on reimagining governance and insisting on decent work and a social justice framework:

“If you look over the last number of decades, museums have moved forward, but the speed at which they move forward is really quite slow. We can look to libraries and other examples; I find libraries have moved forward much quicker than museums and archives. They've been able to be more flexible to the desires and needs and calls for justice from the community than museums and archives have.” (Interview #16)

Recommendation # 2: Make operational funding more available

We repeatedly have heard about the challenges of project-based funding. Addressing this involves “changing the funding structure so that smaller and medium organizations can do the work” (Interview #16). Currently, job precarity tends to characterize work in small to medium museums funded on project bases:

“So often we are project-based funded and in some cases you're only going to have a job if the next project fund comes in. I don't know if everyone in the sector knows that we're up against that kind of thing in smaller institutions.” (Interview #16)

Smaller to medium non-profit museums that rely on project funding have few opportunities to do the work required to move toward meaningful governance transition.

Recommendation # 3: Make regular board training available and accessible

Organizations such as the BCMA can help develop board training materials in both governance and museums. But many participants of this study indicated that to encourage boards to engage in training, materials must be delivered in a format that is both affordable and accessible. Participants also cautioned that an understanding of board turnover must be incorporated into any training program, as well as the possibility that boards may not be receptive to training.

“I think trying to get boards to participate in that sort of stuff (training) is challenging. And then, you know, after two or three years they move on and you're back at the beginning again.” (Interview #12)

“I think that's a tricky question. Like what training, and are they going to really do it? Are they going to listen, or just say, oh, that doesn't apply to us.” (Interview #3)

“I think the challenge is that they're volunteers and this is not their day job. So their attention and follow through is not always there.” (Interview #5)

We suggest that the challenge of boards lack of interest in training is important to consider. Some participants suggested that focused training on areas of the greatest need could be helpful, as well as summaries, ‘cheat sheets’, and ‘mini-courses’ that could convey the most crucial information but in “bite size, 40 minutes max at a time” because “people can get overwhelmed” (Interview #13).

“A really clear, concise document that would come from a professional organization, such as the BCMA would be so useful...Also a mini course that the board members could take...something that would prepare them for the role that they're starting upon.” (Interview #6)

In terms of important topics, many suggested “not-for-profit finances” (e.g. Interview #2); legal requirements (Interview #3); board insurance and liability; and an introduction to museums with particular focus on B.C.’s museum sector (Interview #13).

Some also suggested mandatory self-evaluation tools that can measure the level of board knowledge and governance capacity, with the caution that these should not create an unwelcome burden on board members:

“Board self evaluation kit which the BCMA mandates boards to fulfill and report on.” (Interview #5)

“It would be helpful for boards to do self-evaluation and reflection. Perhaps a survey for boards to answer questions to assess what their level of understanding is on what the ED does and what the board should do, but I think this could also deter boards members from joining or staying.” (Interview #7)

Finally, several EDs suggested that funding was a barrier to board training.

“Especially with small to medium organizations, not necessarily having the robust professional development line item in their budget, it's always a concern when we're talking about training. Some boards might be reticent to provide the funding for a full year or for even a couple of sessions.” (Interview #16)

We suggest that funding programs could include specific incentives for boards to pursue training and/or facilitation for their organization to develop governance capacity. This could involve the provision of targeted funds solely for governance training and strategic planning, or embedded requirements for minimal board training in programs such as the BC Arts Council operational funding.

Recommendation # 4: Contents of museum board training should cover HR practices; knowledge of museum professionals' training and skill sets; and contemporary issues in the museum sector.

Many participants called for general board skills such as “more orientation for new board members” (Interview #19) and how to work with financial statements (Interview #19) and do effective fundraising (Interview #17). Board basics could also include introductions to the different types of boards, such as “the difference between a volunteer board, working board and governance board” (Interview #11) and greater attention to the concept of public trust and “representing your community” (Interview #13).

The participants discussed a profound disconnect between boards and their EDs on many levels, including HR practices; a lack of knowledge about the museum sector and about what museum professionals/arts administrators do; and about current movements in the museum sector toward social justice and truth and reconciliation. For this reason, we do not recommend a ‘one size fits all’ approach to non-profit board training for museum boards. Rather, information about characteristics, trends, and issues specific to our sector should be included.

“I think the board should do more to...see how the museum sector has been evolving and changing over the years...They also would have a better understanding of the things that we try to implement and things that we're doing.” (Interview #15)

In addition, participants stressed that basic HR knowledge and sensitivity training would be a great asset, and could perhaps help boards recognize and avoid some of the worst examples of inappropriate compensation, micromanagement, and harassment that we heard:

“For a lot of them, this is their first position on a board or, maybe they don't have a business background, so what it means to be on a nonprofit board, the fact that there's bylaws to follow there's the BC Society's Act. Also, how to interact with staff, what it means to have staff, what that relationship should look like and how to best coordinate operations with your staff.” (Interview #20)

“Board members should know that they're playing with people's lives, they're volunteers, but they can't just come on and shoot their mouth off and talk disrespectfully. They don't know the history here. They have to learn some things. So I think that sensitivity training is also important because that impacts people.” (Interview #11)

Recommendation # 6: Develop and support avenues of recourse and advocacy for B.C.'s museum professionals.

Because of the high levels of stress and lack of recourse discussed by many of the participants, we recommend that the BCMA or similar organization develop better advocacy and networking resources for museum professionals working in smaller organizations. These should involve information about compensation levels and advice and support for dealing with harassment, bullying, micromanaging and board dysfunction.

“If there was a committee of not board members, but people that were committed to the organization. It could be previous staff members, previous board members, really enthusiastic members, who could intervene.” (Interview #5)

“We need to ensure that people feel safe and welcome to work in the sector and to take on new roles and have that support.” (Interview #13)

“Maybe these small places don't have (recourse) because they don't have money to hire consultants or facilitators to come in. Maybe that what needs to happen is that (when an ED requests a review) an outside organization pays for it.” (Interview #6)

Several participants wondered if the BCMA could assume a more active role to address governance issues:

“Intelligent, capable, hard working, knowledgeable people have become casualties because this is taking place and it's permitted to take place under the oversight of the BCMA. They know what's happening, but they are not acting on anything. It's not acceptable.” (Interview #6)

The need for information and recourse beyond the participants' particular work setting was a common theme. Some called for the BCMA to create a fund for consulting, advocacy and mediation that could be accessed by small to medium non-profit museum EDs in crisis. For example, some participants outlined the need for external assistance to better understand the issues, and to mediate between EDs and boards:

“I would love it if you could call the BCMA and they would help you...Maybe if they had funding to work with PLEO (Pacific Legal Education Outreach) to offer some free consulting and mediation for (EDs of small non-profits). Perhaps the BCMA secures funding to work with a person at PLEO who devotes X amount of time a year to this kind of work as an annual service. I know there are some who need it right now.” (Interview #3)

“Having access to a mediator or an organization that we could rely upon to help when the situation is unbearable...to come and help us navigate this turmoil. But that has not been the case. So we're sort of left alone. We need a sounding board for when we are dealing with a board that is doing unacceptable things. I have seen many directors, managers, curators of small community museums leave their positions or be kicked out in the most unprofessional manner. This is happening and it's unacceptable... the abuse has to stop because it is happening.” (Interview #6)

Some envisioned a network of current or former small museum staff for discussion:

“An external consulting group, maybe made up of past museum employees who are now in the consulting world, then you do have that little bit of independence and separation, but you can talk freely. I do love that.” (Interview #14)

Others called for a formal or legal review process to be in place:

“There does need to be a review or complaint process, because you're employed, so if you make a mistake, your job is on the line, there's consequences. But the board are all volunteers. So if they make mistakes, if they forget things, there's really no consequences. Except now the staff kind of get to pick up the pieces. So... some sort of process in place for ineffective boards or ineffective board members.” (Interview #5)

“Is there someone that you can go to legally deal with this? Because it is discrimination. It is.” (Interview #13)

Recommendation # 7: Develop a specific grant program to assist small to medium non-profit museums with strategic planning and governance issues.

Several participants wondered if creating specific board training programs and funding them, and/or linking board training and evaluation to existing funding programs, could help improve governance capacity:

“I wonder if that could come with a grant - apply to have a board evaluation and we'll give you this at least for the first preliminary years.” (Interview #14)

Recommendation # 8: Include governance and HR strategies in training materials such as the 'small museum toolkit', webinar offerings and workshops. Include specific modules in financial and legal aspects of board work.

Several participants felt the BCMA could help by creating introductory materials for boards:

“That could be something that the BCMA could also offer- a 'how to kit and self-evaluation' (for boards).” (Interview #5)

These materials, particularly for new board members, would ideally explain “what their role will be as a member of a non-profit organization, what they should know about overseeing a museum, and also the clear differentiation between where their role stops, and the staff members roles start” (Interview #6). Other topics the EDs recommended were succession planning and ED recruitment (Interview #5) and how to “navigate situations that we've never been put into before” (Interview #6).

One participant (Interview #1) invoked models from Alberta where “funding is tied up with requirements to meet certain standards” and there is a requirement for boards to demonstrate “a level of education about this field”. They pointed out that this is not the case in B.C., resulting in less accountability.

Interestingly, many called specifically on the BCMA to broaden their role in providing education to boards and advocacy to museum professionals:

“Why isn't the BCMA doing this? Why don't we all pool our resources and have a health plan for small museums in British Columbia, for example- is that something we could do to

provide benefits to staff? You know, if we pool the resources of all the members of the BCMA, it's not wage, but it is a benefit that we could provide.” (Interview #2)

Recommendation # 9: Develop training opportunities for EDs working with museum boards

Many of the EDs we spoke to had moved into museum management from specialist areas such as curation and education. They explained the value of training, particularly for those who have never been employed by a board, in helping navigate the many responsibilities and challenges of this position:

“I didn't really have an understanding of what it was to be an employee of a board. I never really thought about what the manager may have to deal with...If they don't have certain skills, it could be very, very difficult. Making something available to managers through training and resources, I think would be a tremendous benefit. And I think that boards might do better if they had someone who could in many ways steer the ship.” (Interview #8)

Recommendation # 10: Fund permanent positions in small museums to facilitate transition from working to governance boards

While we have recommended small to medium non-profit museums to prioritize operational funds, we similarly encourage funders to support permanent positions through the provision of operational funds. Participants explained that permanent, sustainable positions in these organizations result in reducing board responsibilities for operations:

“Trying to find grants or funding that covers staff wages is almost near impossible, but if you had something like that for small museums, I think it could do wonders. Like we have the BC Arts Council that won't give you funding until you get your two projects, or something along those lines. But what if there was a grant that just applied to small museums, to get your initial two people, then you're decreasing the board responsibilities right away and you can transition more easily to a governance board.” (Interview #14)

C. Recommendations for B.C. museum professionals

Recommendation # 1: Create a forum for discussion or professional association

Many participants were interested in developing discussion and learning groups with museum professionals who work in similarly isolated situations, in order to compare experiences and approaches in dealing with challenging situations. Some recommended that these groups be limited to museum professionals or kept anonymous.

“We could have a museum manager chat forum. So if you go in anonymously or not and say, this is the situation, have you dealt with something like this? What would you recommend? And then just get feedback from other managers that may have dealt with it or have some ideas.” (Interview #20)

“It’s very, very different working with small town boards. And so I think for executive directors or managers, having something that identifies what you might be confronted with and strategies for dealing with those things, I think would be beneficial.” (Interview #8)

One participant considered more formally organizing museum professionals working in small to medium non-profits, pointing out the differences between government and non-profit run museums:

“It’s all by design, right? The whole devolution of these sites and services to not for profits...the only unionized museum employees in the province are municipal or provincial... At small museums like ours that are run by non-profits, I think only Barkerville has unionized employees. So what if all of the museums went on strike?” (Interview #2)

Many saw the need for assistance, mediation, and advocacy to come from outside of their organization. One who reported having “a good board that I can talk to right now” still reported feelings of vulnerability and felt there was a role for external mediation.

“A forum or a collaboration, a network so that you have folks to discuss various issues, and the ways that others have dealt with it. I think that would be a most excellent resource. I have a good board that I can talk to right now, but you know, that could change. And there needs to be something that allows me or any person to have an issue mediated. An outside body who could come in and... interview board members and some of our working volunteers, I think, that would be good. As well as looking at board minutes.” (Interview #8)

Recommendation # 2: Advocate for ED professional development in the areas of financial management, executive directorship, and governance

Many participants emphasized that EDs should be supported with further training. This was in part because:

“You’re a generalist as an ED, and we’re coming from areas that are specialists. We’re curators, artists, educational planners, archivists...then all of a sudden, an administrator. It’s such different work and it took a good year to really learn, because it’s so diverse and broad in terms of the scope of work that you’re supposed to be an expert on.” (Interview #16)

One felt strongly about the value of “classes on financial management” (Interview #14). Another had been supported by the board to access considerable training:

I did a few courses with Vantage Point in terms of strategic planning, as well as the full year ED course with them. So much of that is about governance, and how do you ensure as an executive director that your board is working within a really strong and clear governance model.” (Interview #16)

Conclusion – Is it time to *transform* governance in small to medium non-profit museums?

Seeking alternative models of governance

The EDs we spoke to suggested that while governance within existing frameworks can be improved with better training and accountability, what is ultimately needed are new ways of thinking about governance. A common theme that emerged was concern about the hierarchical nature of existing governance, and that not being a good fit for the work of non-profit museums. The participants suggested that the troubling and systemic issues of ‘volunteer bosses’ and power abuse could possibly be addressed with more creative and collaborative models involving staff and the community.

“These systems of governance are not working, they're toxic. We actually just need new ways of doing governance. And I think that might be looking at different models, having conversations, talking with your staff and not being hierarchical...I would always bring, my co-worker to board meetings and we directed the site together. And we were so dialed into the community and what they wanted. It was the community changing us, not us going out and telling the community what to do. We were co-collaborators, we were definitely a feminist, non-hierarchical style of co-directing and working with community.”
(Interview #3)

Some participants felt that dismantling hierarchy may prevent burn out but also be the catalyst in decolonizing governance:

“I like the idea of dismantling the structures within museums, because I think that would take a load off...There's a huge load on your shoulders. And it doesn't have to be because really everybody brings components to the table, and work and deliverables. So I like the idea of dismantling that, I think it would allow all employees of an organization to share and give their best because they're not seen as lower... And (at the 2021 BC Heritage Conference) it was mentioned that boards are a colonial system. And that was an aha moment for me. If we really truly want to decolonize, if we truly want to Indigenize, if we truly want to say all the stories there are to say, then we have to decolonize the systems that are creating these stories. Even maybe the structure of museums in terms of organizational charts is colonial. So I really think that we're at a point where we need to do tons of restructuring or destructuring.” (Interview #6)

Some participants were already trying different modes of governance with the full support and participation of their boards:

“When you're talking about...the potential breakdown of a structure that's been in place for so long, there's hesitation, there's uncertainty...on our end too, because we don't really have any of the answers. But what is great is that I do have the trust of my board to propose these kinds of ideas, and then also to enact them.” (Interview #16)

A key message was that because communities are not ‘one size fits all’, neither should governance be. Participants called for the opportunity to develop governance that suited the culture of their organization.

“What is the culture of your organization? I think before you decide to just grab some sort of model and throw it on your organization, shouldn't you talk together and discuss what's the culture of your organization? Who are we? And pick something that works for who you are.” (Interview #3)

We conclude with a final recommendation from a participant, who called upon our sector to not only improve governance, but to seek new models that are better suited to the work of contemporary museums:

“Give yourself permission, even though you're a small institution, to make those radical choices. In my mind, they are not that radical. They are simply saying there's a different way... We have to look at all of the systems... I'm sure there's a better model out there, let's find it.” (Interview #16)

We encourage other organizations to explore new forms of governance and call upon the BCMA to support these initiatives with the provision of specific funding and training.

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Appendix One: Interview Questions

BCMA RETHINKING GOVERNANCE PROJECT QUESTIONS

(For Executive Directors/Managers of small to medium non-profit museums)

1. Do you know if your board of directors has a particular governance model? If so, please describe the model and the board's role in governance.
2. Can you describe how your membership is involved in the governance of your non-profit? Yourself? Other staff?
3. Is the current governance style working at your organization? If not, what changes might you suggest?
4. In general, how are the roles and responsibilities of board and ED defined? Can you share some examples?
5. How would you describe your workload (manageable vs unmanageable), and what about the actual physical space where you do your work (safe vs unsafe?)
6. What type of training, education and/or resources do you think would be helpful for board members to have to effectively support the work of your non-profit?
7. Do you feel valued/respected and supported by your employer (the board of directors) to succeed in your position as ED? If yes, how has this been demonstrated. (Raises, constructive performance review, positive feedback, active changes made in response to ED feedback etc.) If no, describe the reasons why you do not feel valued/respected/supported and what might change this.
8. Could you describe the relationship dynamics that exist between yourself and the board of directors as a whole? Or relationship dynamics between yourself and individual board members?
9. Have relationship dynamics between yourself and the board impacted your job performance, working environment and/or employee retention?
10. Have you experienced any level of workplace discrimination, harassment, bullying, microaggression (via policies, communication, or actions) originating from a board director or the board as a whole?

11. Do you feel as a Manager/ED of a nonprofit that there are established systems you can access for communication, support and conflict resolution for workplace discrimination and behavioral challenges originating at the board level?

If yes, what are the systems in place?

If no, what would you like to see?

12. Could you share any ideas on how boards might be evaluated and reviewed?

EDI and Sector Issues section

13. Does your organization have existing policies on decolonization, diversity, inclusion, and equity, social/environmental practices or other relevant sector or society issues? Are these policies actively practiced?

14. Have conflicting organizational directives impacted how your organization responds to current relevant sector topics such as inclusion/diversity, equity, reconciliation, decolonization, and social/environmental issues?

Lastly

15. Has COVID-19 had a direct impact on any of the issues we discussed today?

16. (Participant invited to comment further)