

Dr. Lukas Neville, in partnership with the Winnipeg Art Gallery-Qaumajuq, has written this case solely for the Asper Business Case Competition (ALCC) 2024. This case is presented with the support of the James W. Burns Leadership Institute. The author has no intention to comment on or evaluate the handling of managerial decisions within the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Photocopying, transmitting, distributing, or reproducing this case in any form or by any means is strictly prohibited.

Winnipeg Art Gallery-Qaumajuq: A Strategy for the Future

Case Briefing

You are asked to prepare a strategy for the Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG)-Qaumajuq (*KOW-ma-yourk*) to **move to a free-admissions model and take other steps necessary to reduce barriers to access and participation** in the Gallery's spaces and programming.

This case consists of both this overview note, and a series of video interviews with key decision-makers and leadership team members that provide context, nuance, and detailed perspectives.

“One of the goals of the WAG-Qaumajuq is to engage new audiences to inspire and enrich the visitor's experience. To accomplish this goal WAG-Qaumajuq identifies and attempts to remove any real or perceived barriers to visiting. **One of these barriers is the fee for admission.** . . . Using art for change is central to our four strategic pillars. **The Gallery cannot advocate for change if everyone cannot have access to the art** which is our tool for change.”

– *Bill Elliott, Deputy Director and CFO.*

Your response to this case challenge should include:

1. A strategy for reduced admissions barriers, including a financial strategy for replacing the revenues from paid admission and other related foregone earnings related to the transition away from paid admission (e.g., changes to the value proposition for membership).
2. Initiatives and steps that the Gallery can take in parallel with your proposed admissions-model change that will enhance access and participation.
3. Consideration to other operational and programming changes that might be needed if WAG-Qaumajuq's visitors actually matched the broader community and if the Gallery was truly an accessible and inclusive space.
4. Clear, concrete steps and initiatives that would move the WAG toward this vision, ideally with the ability to pilot or trial key steps and learn from those experiences.

5. Use cases, illustrative examples, and innovative practices. Bringing inspiring examples from other organizations or cultural institutions will help to show the WAG what your ideas might look like in practice. Feel free to go well beyond art galleries when looking for examples and inspiration, and consider ideas from a diversity of sectors, industries or geographies. This isn't just a matter of copy and paste, of course – be sure to think about how ideas from elsewhere can be tailored and adapted to the WAG.

Where resources are needed for this change, you should be clear about how and from whom those resources could be secured. You can review the Gallery's financial statements from its annual report to get a sense of the institution's scale and financial position.

This is an initiative that is important (it's central to their mission and strategy), but it's not immediately urgent (there's no specific deadline to make it happen). We encourage teams to propose solutions with a focus on the steps that could be acted on in the next 5-year span (recognizing that the current Canada Life Second Sundays sponsorship expires in summer 2026).

Video Case Materials

This briefing note gives you a general overview of the situation and the 'ask'. **However, teams should watch each of the following video interviews with key Gallery personnel. Many critical details and context related to the case are contained in these interviews, and they should be considered a core part of this case.** Each of the interviewees describes how this initiative matters to their mission, what challenges might be involved, and what considerations and constraints teams should be aware of.

These interviews will give you specific details, different lenses and perspectives on the challenge, and context to help you better understand the WAG's priorities, values, culture, challenges, and ways of working.

Some of these people may be on your judging panel – take this opportunity to hear from them about this case directly!

- [Interview playlist](#) (all videos)
- [Stephen Borys, Director and CEO](#)
- [Bill Elliott, Deputy Director and CFO](#)
- [Rachel Baerg, Head of Education and Public Programs](#)
- [Julia Lafreniere, Head of Indigenous Ways and Learning](#)
- [Catherine Maksymiuk, Head of Engagement and Advancement](#)

About WAG-Qaumajuq

The Winnipeg Art Gallery opened its doors in 1912. In its 112-year history, it has moved from corners of civic exposition and auditorium spaces to its own campus, a modernist building opened in 1967. The gallery acquired its first piece of Inuit art in 1956; it now holds the world’s largest collection of Inuit art, showcased in Qaumajuq, a [dramatic Michael Maltzan-designed Inuit art centre](#) integrated with the Gallery’s original mid-century building. As you’ll hear in the interview with Stephen Borys, the ethos and mission of the WAG has also evolved over that time.

The WAG’s strategic plan describes an ambitious vision for its role in the community. More than an exhibition space or a collection of works, WAG describes its mission as *“using art for change”*. They describe their role as disruptors, collaborators, and creators. They describe their purpose as forging new paths, making a difference, and being of service. And they describe a vision for the gallery that involves “interrogating the museum”, finding ways of relinquishing traditional forms of control and prioritizing equity. You can read about the museum’s intentions and progress toward the value of equity on their website [here](#).

The WAG delivers a wide range of programs and exhibits to the more than 400,000 visitors who walk through the Gallery’s doors annually. These include presenting touring shows from national and internationally recognized artists and curated exhibitions from its own collections. The Gallery offers workshops, events, art talks, craft shows with local makers, a late-night “nuit blanche”, and a “WAG In Bloom” event that pairs art with floral designs. The gallery includes a gift shop whose primary mission is creating a retail space to create markets for local and Inuit artists to sell their art to the public. Qaumajuq, whose lobby/atrium space is free to the public, includes a small cafe with seating looking onto the Visible Vault, a towering glass spire filled with the gallery’s storage of its more than 7,500 Inuit sculptures.

As you’ll hear in the interview with Julia Lafreniere, the Head of Indigenous Ways and Learning, the WAG’s impact extends beyond Winnipeg through virtual visits and touring exhibitions in communities outside of Winnipeg.

Admission Revenues

Revenues from general admissions are presented in the Revenues section of the case. The breakdown of admissions by category (based on information from 2017; assume the breakdowns are fairly similar now) is as follows:

Adult admissions	44%
Senior/student admissions (including school groups)	26%
Member admissions	13%
Free admissions (second Sundays; Indigenous visitors, etc.)	11%
Family admissions	3%
Other/miscellaneous	3%
Total	100%

Other Financial Considerations

As you'll hear in the interview with Catherine Maksymiuk, there are considerations beyond finding a way to replace admission revenues. For example, the plan should consider the impact on their current 3-year Second Sundays sponsorship with Canada Life (ending in Summer 2026). The plan for financing free admissions should also be either permanent or long-term enough that the WAG can plan its operations around it – and avoid a sudden or unexpected return to admission fees.

In addition to the lost revenue from admissions, a shift to a free-admission model would have at least two other financial consequences:

- 1) **Assume the possibility of a \$1.3 million, one-time tax payment.** The construction of WAG-Qaumajuq was financed in part by a GST credit that was expected to be repaid over time through GST remissions on admissions over many decades. While there is uncertainty about if and how this would be enforced by the CRA, a precautionary approach would be to assume the worst-case: A \$1.3M one-time tax liability that would be associated with the change.
- 2) Without mitigating measures, assume a **decline in membership revenues.** Free admission to the Museum is a central element of the value proposition for museum members. You can read about the current benefits of membership on the WAG site [here](#). The precise impact is unknown; you may want to estimate the impact in your plan using research or reasonable and well-defended assumptions.

The WAG has 1698 paid memberships, representing 2186 paid individual members (the WAG sells both individual and family memberships). The attrition rate for membership varies from year to year but is typically in the range of 40-60% per year. Membership revenues are presented in the Revenues section below. The interview with Catherine Maksymiuk shares some of the WAG's lessons from its experiment with free memberships for youth under 25.

Revenues

Revenues for the 2017-2022 fiscal years are as follows. Figures are in \$000s.

Revenue source	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Province of Manitoba	2,427	2,437	2,437	2,531	2,787	2,731
Federal government <i>Includes CEWS</i>	453	229	386	2,167	1,018	1,350
City of Winnipeg	398	398	398	358	392	438
Government of Nunavut	444	270	259	175	125	125
Other governmental	-	-	-	-	-	43
Admissions	342	375	154	41	205	264

Revenue source	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Membership sales	129	140	106	78	115	111
Studio programs <i>(e.g. art classes)</i>	190	189	211	63	169	283
Interpretive programs <i>(e.g. group and school tours)</i>	118	130	119	54	116	155
Touring exhibitions and collection management <i>(i.e., loan of artworks)</i>	20	66	73	35	70	33
Events and space rentals	216	248	211	22	107	291
Retail sales (WAG Shop)	1,021	975	667	362	967	949
Food services	72	24	17	9	22	89
Sundry and interest	76	66	82	66	131	154
Assiniboine Park Conservancy	84	80	65	74	-	108
General donations <i>(including Annual Appeal)</i>	373	428	104	216	140	295
Foundation gifts <i>(including WAG Foundation and Volunteer Committee)</i>	164	251	185	241	438	226
Corporate sponsorships	449	34	225	375	409	213
Fundraising events	261	229	324	0	301	296

Details about some of these revenue sources, including the WAG Shop and the Assiniboine Park Conservancy, are shared in the interview with Bill Elliott. You may also wish to review the WAG's summary of expenditures and revenues from its annual report [here](#).

Other Operational Considerations

The cost of admission is only one barrier to access and participation. There are questions of transportation and parking (Winnipeg is a fairly car-dependent city for those living outside of the core). There is metered street parking nearby and a few hours of free parking on Saturday, but most visitors would park in nearby paid parking garages, with costs ranging from \$4-6/hour with daily rates between \$10 and \$12. Winnipeg Transit has a stop directly in front of the Gallery, but round trip fares range from \$5 for youth and seniors to \$6.50 for adults.

It is also important to note that the WAG, were it to have free admission, would be one of only two public spaces or institutions with truly open doors to the public. The other is the Winnipeg Public

Library. The Library, and its central downtown branch in particular, has encountered challenges related to [balancing access with security and safety](#). Teams may wish to anticipate and address the potential challenges that are associated with creating a safe and welcoming atmosphere for all. As you approach this consideration, take into account the WAG-Qaumajuq's overarching priorities around access, equity, decolonization and reconciliation, which you can [read about here](#).

There are also questions of how the museum's operations and programs would scale to a larger and more varied base of visitors. Listen to the interview with Rachel Baerg to hear about some of the ways that more visitors might strain the capacity of existing practices and structures. Your plan should consider how the institution as a whole would cope with success – and scale their programs and supports to meet the needs of a growing visitor base.

In addition to the financial costs, there are social and cultural barriers to attendance. As CFO Bill Elliott describes, some of these are barriers of *perceptions*: The Gallery often receives calls from people nervous about the dress code. Others have questions about how to act or behave – what noise is allowed? What art can be touched? The Gallery can be intimidating, especially for those without experience in similar cultural institutions or prior art education. How to navigate the Gallery (a “white, settler space”, as Elliott describes it), and how to interact with art can require knowledge and skills that aren't available to all, and can create a psychological barrier to participation. The WAG has begun to address this in a number of ways, including having a small number of “ask me guides” whose role is to interact with visitors, answer questions about the art and exhibitions, and make visitors feel welcome in the space. You should think about changes that would strengthen the effect of free admission on inclusion.

Teams may consider how to sustain and deepen practices that create a welcoming and accessible environment – especially at scale, if the number of visitors increases substantially. As you'll hear in the interview with Julia Lafreniere, it's not enough to just remove admission fees – the WAG will need to think about other steps around programming, exhibitions and events that would broaden the relevance and appeal of the institution to a broader audience.

In conclusion, our case judges, including WAG staff and leadership team members, are excited to hear your solutions and recommendations for moving the WAG toward free membership and finding other novel ways of reducing the financial and non-financial barriers to a WAG-Qaumajuq that is truly open to all.

Please consult the competition rules provided to your team. You may (and should) conduct outside research and use other sources of information beyond those provided in the case. However, teams are strictly prohibited from contacting or speaking with the WAG's staff, funders or partners directly.