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'Museums should be accessible': the backlash to the Met's new pricing policy

The decision to charge out-of-state visitors a set \$25 fee has enraged many who believe the New York institution's 'staggering wealth' should make access easier

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When the Metropolitan Museum of Art introduced their pay-what-you-wish policy in 1970, Richard Nixon was president, Elvis Presley was alive and New York City saw its very first gay pride march.

It was a different era and now, the Met is attempting to update its admission policy by introducing a two-tier pay system starting on 1 March. Visitors from outside New York state will pay a standard fee of \$25 upon flashing their identification card, while in-state residents can still use the same pay policy from 1970.

Some critics are outraged. The past week has seen a New York Times piece titled *The New Pay Policy Is a Mistake*, while Jezebel's Aimée Lutkin claimed *The Met Should Be Fucking Free*. The

New York Post writes that the museum has never had the right to charge admission and Alexandra Schwartz in the New Yorker says the new policy diminishes New York City.

The Met's museum president and CEO, Daniel Weiss, is not surprised. "People have become very comfortable with the idea of the pay-what-you-wish policy," said Weiss in an interview. "Nobody was happy with the announcement because it isn't that kind of announcement - but the policy has effectively failed and therefore, needs to change."

In November the museum received its largest donor gift of \$80m from museum trustee Florence Irving, the largest since David Koch donated \$65m in 2013. This new admission policy will bring in \$6-11m estimated revenue, equivalent to just 14% of the museum's \$305m operational budget, which seems a bit feeble.

"If we are able to get an extra \$10m in revenue, that's the equivalent of several hundred jobs, major exhibitions, it is meaningful revenue for us," said Weiss. "We want the admissions policy to help our operations but not solve all of our problems."

Many think the new \$25 entrance fee - which is the same for several other city museums - is too expensive. Weiss disagrees. "In every society and throughout history, excellence costs money," he said. "If you're willing to spend \$25 to go to the MoMA or Guggenheim, or spend \$15 to go to the movies, we don't think asking \$25 to come to the Met is an unreasonable request."

Only 63% of visitors paid the full suggested admission in 2004, the institution reported last year, and that had dropped to 31% in 2016. The average contribution is \$9.

Many New Yorkers are opposed to the admission hike, such as Ellen Handy, a professor at the City College of New York's art department.



Photograph: Mary Altaffer/AP

"The staggering wealth of the museum's trustees and supporters makes it unseemly that the financial instability should become the burden of the public, which the museum serves," said Handy. "Museums should be accessible at no cost to everyone."

While the museum plans to partner with the Office of Immigrant Affairs to assist undocumented residents in feeling welcome at the museum, asking for ID upon entry to the museum is not the answer for many.

"Distinguishing between museum visitors by their place of residence is unfair and asking museum visitors for proof of address seems shockingly invasive and inappropriate, particularly at this

moment in history,” adds Handy.

It also poses a problem to Jason Lazarus, an art professor at the University of South Florida in Tampa. “The \$25 fee separates visitors by economic class and origin – the most basic way of engaging the public,” said Lazarus. “This policy reveals a lack of imagination from Daniel Weiss and company, as our cultural institutions, more than ever, need visionary leaders who can think with more sophistication and ingenuity than ‘our admissions income has fallen behind’.”

Visitors who pay the full suggested entry fee have dropped 73% over the past 13 years at the Met, an institution with a \$40m deficit. “The Met is struggling with a big deficit, albeit one of their own making, and is presumably exploring all possible avenues for raising money,” said Harriet Senie, director of art museum studies at the City College of New York.

“The new policy will probably not make a very large dent in the deficit and is already prompting a public relations backlash,” she said. “It’s really a wake-up call to assess cultural priorities in arts funding but that is unlikely to happen under the current administration.”

For out-of-towners like Doug Fogelson, an artist based in Chicago, the new admissions policy doesn’t feel right. “As an American artist who visits New York City regularly to visit multiple museums, galleries and cultural institutions, I have always appreciated the Met for its egalitarian door policy,” said Fogelson. “Giving preferential treatment to state ID holders isn’t a compromise; it seems more like a way to profile certain people as users versus patrons.”

Museums have a greater responsibility to the public now more than ever, according to Marit Dewhurst, director of the art museum education program at City College of New York.

“As one of the most visited museums in the world, the Met has a responsibility to make its vast cultural resources accessible to everyone,” she said. “Policies that require the Met to impose a carding system that ranks some visitors more valuable than others threaten any premise of true accessibility.”

Some museums offer discounted admissions to local residents in New York City, such as the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum, as well as the New York Botanical Garden. Across the country, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art offers free admission to LA County residents four times a week, while the Art Institute of Chicago’s admission of \$25 is \$5 cheaper to Chicago residents with proof of a valid photo ID with a residential address. The Detroit Institute of Arts also offers free admission to local residents.

The Met is not alone in raising their admission fees. Just last week, the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, raised its admission fee for tourists by 40%, while three museums in Ottawa, Canada, have gone up 44% for individual ticket prices. In October, archaeological sites in Egypt raised their entrance fees by 50% and tourist attractions in Phuket, Thailand, also have a two-tier pay system, where tourists pay 80% more than locals. There is the same system in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where tourists pay double of what locals pay for museum entry – and the local ministry is working on raising museum entrance fees even higher in 2018.

Some New Yorkers understand the Met’s position, however. “I think it is fair for the Metropolitan to charge admission,” said Ileen Gallagher, a museum studies professor at New York University. “Government subsidies in this country do not provide adequate funding for institutions to maintain services and high-quality exhibitions.”

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