

Let's Talk Freely About Free Admission – Does It Really Impact Who Visits? (DATA)

Do free admission museums have lower income, younger, or more racially diverse visitors? Here's the data.

As we often say at IMPACTS and on this site, “**being data informed means getting comfortable being uncomfortable** (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/07/24/digesting-the-data-five-cultural-organization-findings-even-we-found-difficult-to-swallow/>).” The good news about data with 95%+ confidence like ours is that it removes guesswork and allows leaders to make strategic decisions based on facts rather than feelings. The bad news is that leaders tend to have strong feelings about their feelings. (It's human (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/07/24/digesting-the-data-five-cultural-organization-findings-even-we-found-difficult-to-swallow/>).)

And perhaps no topic in the museum industry is more fact-ignored and feelings-founded than the topic of free admission.

There is already a lot of science and pricing psychology on free and discounted admission that isn't news to a behavioral economist, but is consistently avoided by the cultural industry. **People have greater intentions to visit paid admission museums rather than free ones**

(<https://www.colleendilen.com/2015/08/12/how-free-admission-really-affects-museum-attendance-data/>), cultural organizations are generally **believed to be worthy of their price points** (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2017/01/11/distraction-blaming-admission-cost-for-cultural-center-attendance-data/>), people find free museums to be less satisfying (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2017/01/11/distraction-blaming-admission-cost-for-cultural-center-attendance-data/>), and free organizations **just get the same people to come back more often.** (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2015/08/12/how-free-admission-really-affects-museum-attendance-data/>)

But the most prevalent assumption may perhaps be that free admission museums are beacons of accessibility, welcoming more diverse audiences through their doors because they do not have an admission cost.

Let's unpack this idea. **Museums rather desperately need to reach new audiences in order to achieve long-term solvency.** (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/02/27/population-up-cultural-organization-attendance-down-what-gives-data/>) In our industry, free admission is often seen as a means to get those new audiences in the door, whether they're millennials, folks with lower incomes, or people from more racially diverse backgrounds than the **historic museum visitor** (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/01/23/active-visitors-currently-attends-cultural-organizations-data/>).

But is admission cost really a primary barrier stopping these audiences from coming? If free admission in and of itself were enough to reach and welcome new audiences, then visitors to free admission museums would have lower household incomes, be of a younger age, and be more racially diverse.

Are they? How big is the difference?

IMPACTS is in-market tracking visitors, behaviors, and perceptions related to 224 visitor-serving organizations in the US. The data below is from the 72 organizations for which we actively track the visitor metrics related to household income, age, and race on an ongoing basis. As you can

see, we track this for a range of organizations, including free and paid admission organizations of each entity type.

Buckle in, folks. This article features stone cold, high-confidence, unbiased science on how free admission *actually* affects visitation. If it gives you feelings, then good. We'll be on a smarter path to creating strategic programs and organizational cultures that truly welcome new audiences.

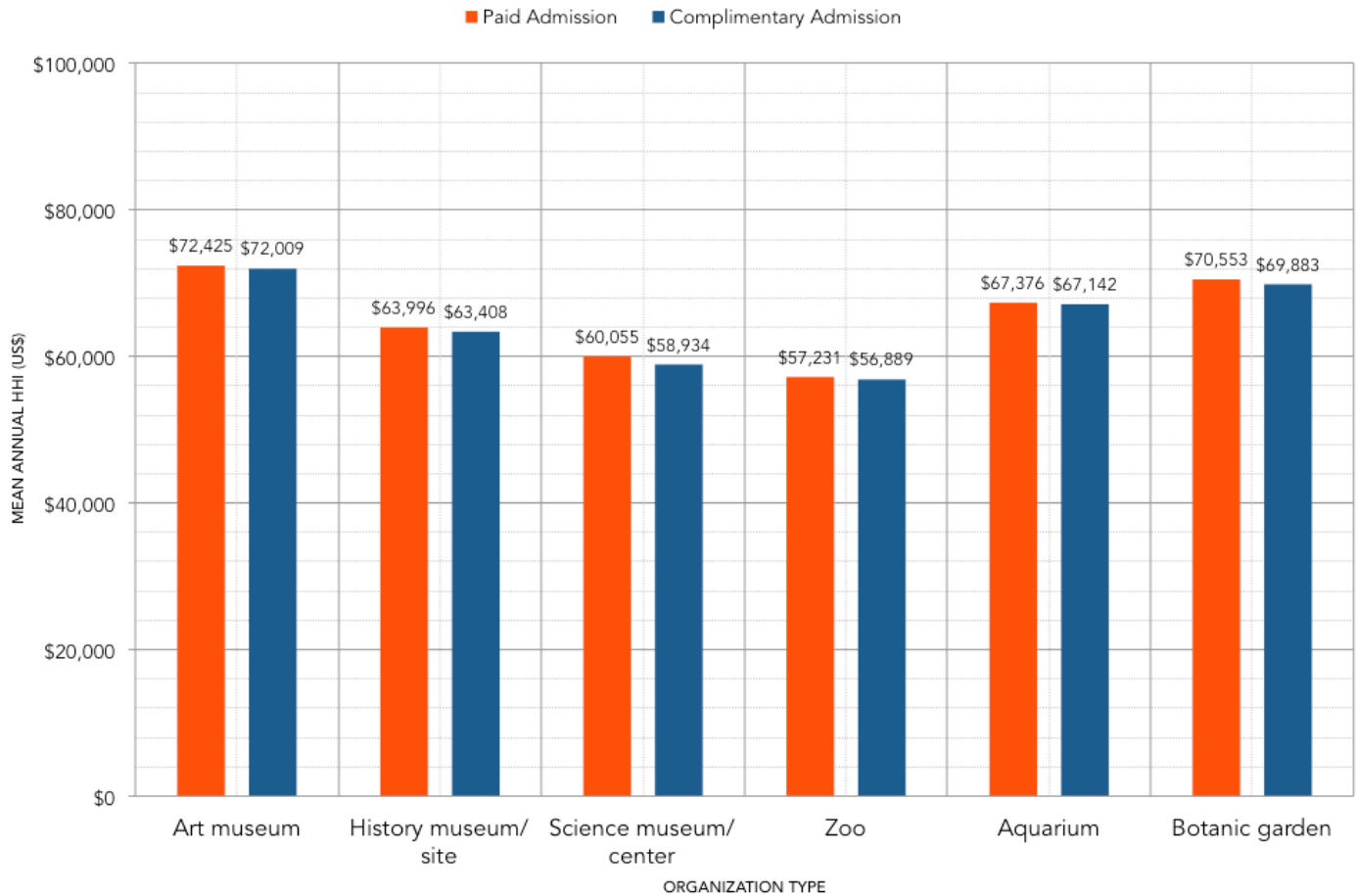
Household income of free vs. paid admission museum attendees

Let's start with the free admission metric we talk about most here on *Know Your Own Bone*. The data below shows the annual household income of visitors to paid vs. free organizations. These are folks who have visited these entities within the last two years, through the end of the first quarter of 2019.

If free admission organizations were effectively welcoming lower-income audiences because they are free, then the household incomes of visitors to these organizations would be dramatically lower. They aren't. They are not even statistically significant!

Annual Household Income of Visitors by Admission Basis

1Q 2019



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How could this possibly be?! Well, the kind of people who go to museums are the kind of people who go to museums. (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/01/16/active-inactive-unlikely-visitors-cultural-organizations-need-know-data/>) The visitors to free vs. paid admission organizations are so similar that depending on the time of the data pull, some free admission organization types actually have slightly *higher* household incomes than paid admission organizations. When we shared the **data through the end of 2017** (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2018/03/14/free-museums-attract-lower-income-visitors-data/>), this was the case for art museums. Again, however, this is not a statistically significant difference. The point is that free museums do not generally reach more lower-income audiences than paid admission museums.

Do Free Admission Museums Attract Low Income Visitors?



When the Met announced that it was moving from a “pay what you wish” admission fee to a mandatory fee for out-of-state residents, there was some backlash that this would impact the type of people who visit the Met. We looked into it when they were still “pay what you wish,” and **visitors to the Met were very similar to/the same as visitors to paid-admission organizations such as MoMA and the Whitney.** (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2018/01/10/mets-admission-price-will-not-hurt-accessibility-may-help-data/>)

Average age of free vs. paid admission attendees

Maybe free admission doesn't effectively reach lower-income audiences, but it *must* help engage millennials, right?

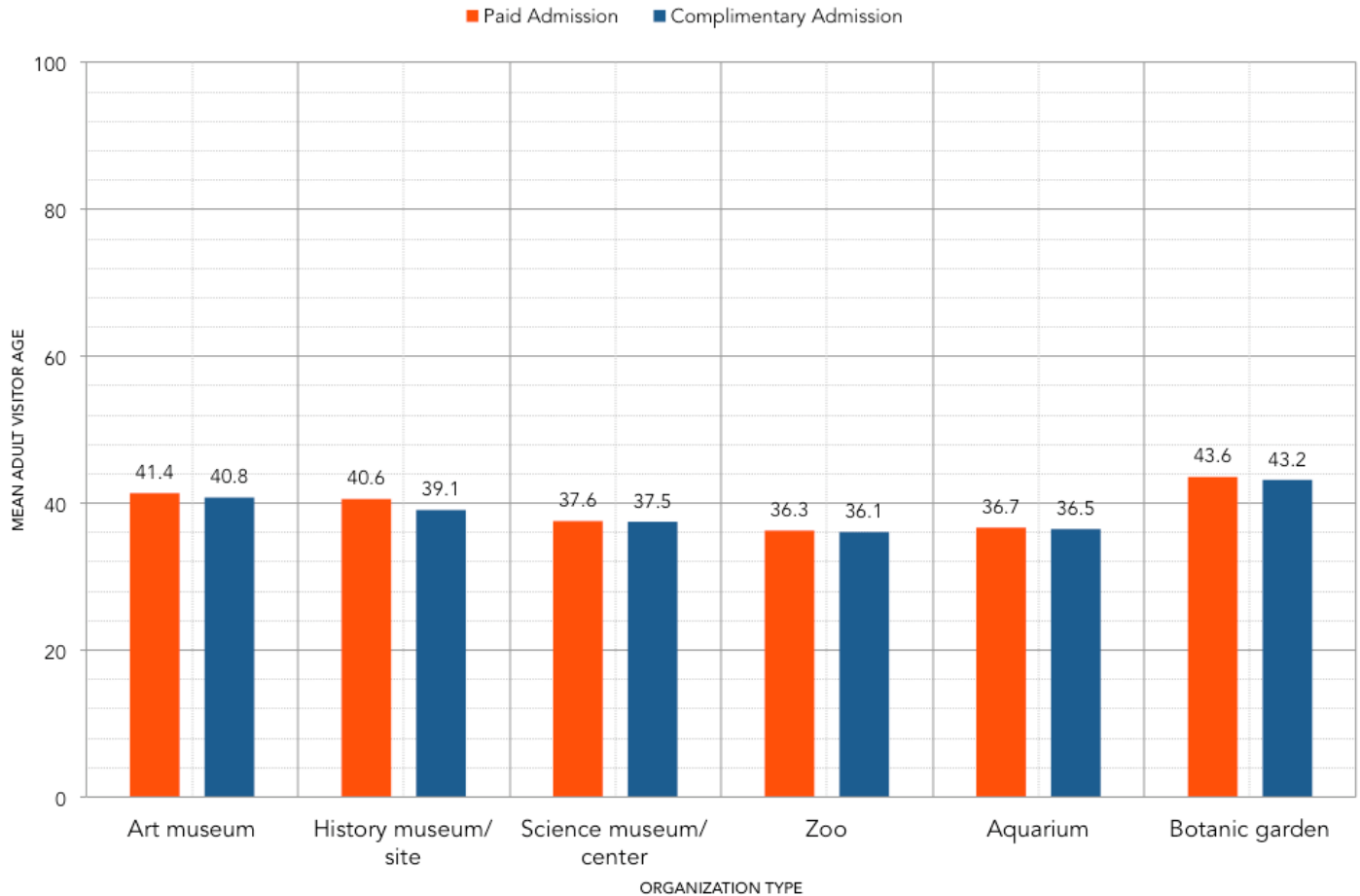
Millennials are a critical audience for museums. Not only because they aren't visiting museums at representative levels given their size, but because they also already make up the largest percentage of museum attendees. (Over here at IMPACTS, we call this situation "**The Millennial Opportunity.**" (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2018/11/14/cultural-organizations-need-keep-talking-millennials-data/>)) This generation is so big that it is both the one that we aren't reaching adequately and the generation that makes up a majority of visitation to many healthy organizations. They are the generation to attract and keep happy. (Oof!)

Take a look at the average age of visitors to free vs. paid admission cultural organizations. One can tell immediately that the age differences are not significant just by looking at the chart. Amongst organization types that we track – including those not shown on this chart such as children's museums and natural history museums – the average age difference between a visitor to a free vs. paid admission organization is...

Can you guess?

Average Age of Adult Visitors by Admission Basis

1Q 2019



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It's only six months.

Six months!

So much for the idea that being free is a magic bullet to reaching scores of younger audiences.

Admission fees aren't what keep millennials from visiting cultural organizations.

(<https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/07/31/admission-fee-isnt-what-keeps-millennials-away-from-cultural-organizations-data/>)

Non-white visitation to free vs. paid admission organizations

The single most-shared characteristic amongst recent museum visitors is that they identify themselves as white, non-Hispanic individuals (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/01/23/active-visitors-currently-attends-cultural-organizations-data/>). As most entities know, this is a problem for the long-term solvency of museums in a diverse nation like the US. Thus, it's an important metric to measure over time. A common goal for museums is for the people inside the doors to better match the people outside of them.

Some may be thinking that free organizations must welcome a vastly different percentage of non-white visitors. After all, a quick Google search of the press releases of organizations that have gone free in the last decade (or have free programs worth a release) boast increased non-white participation as the singular success metric!

Let's pause here.

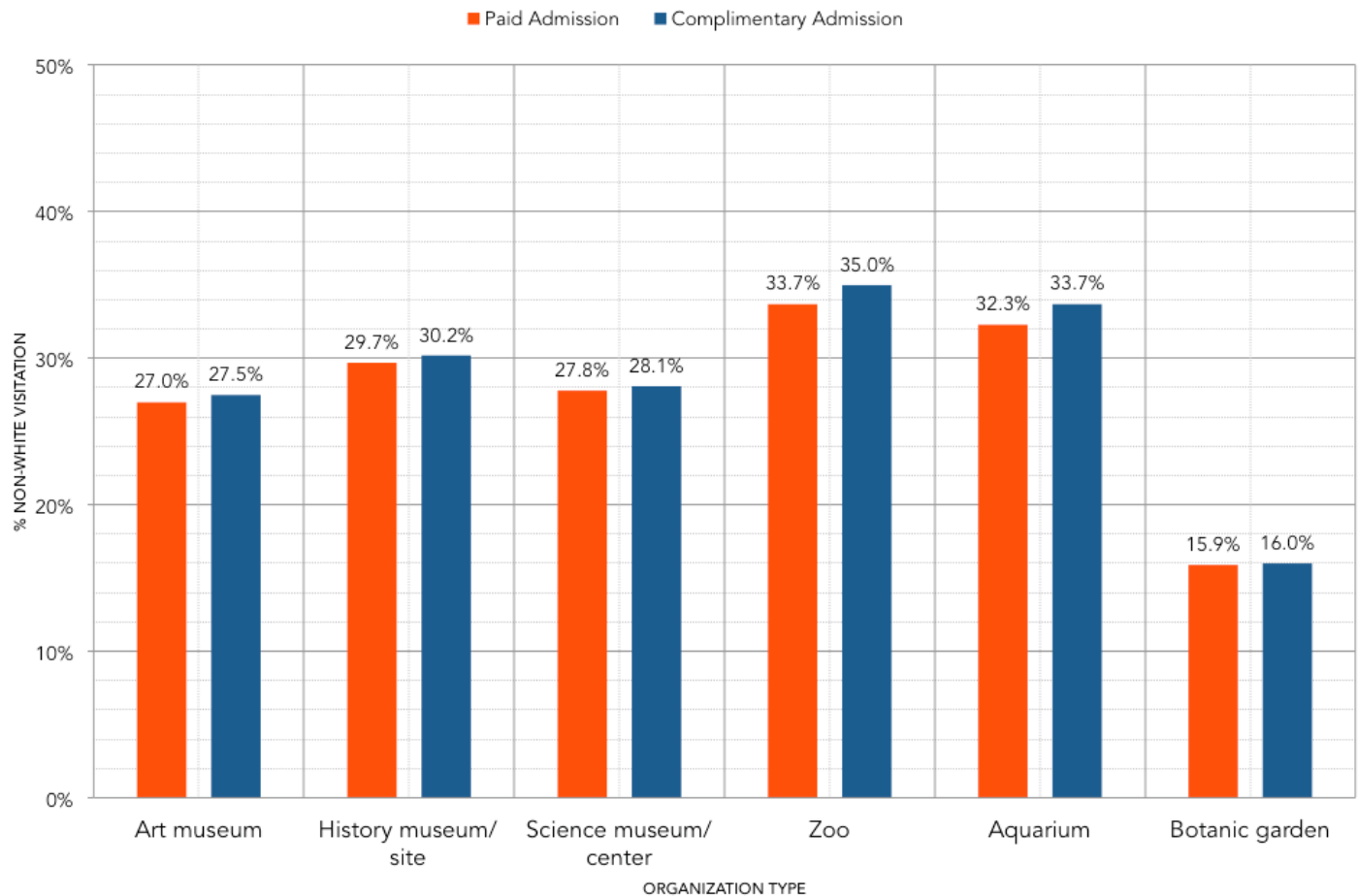
Just as millennial audiences are not the same as low-income audiences, non-white audiences are not the same as low-income audiences.

(<https://www.colleendilen.com/2018/02/28/diverse-visitors-not-low-income-visitors-leadership-assumption-hurting-cultural-organizations/>) This is a prevalent form of stereotyping and it's important to call out. People can be many things, and part of effectively engaging new audiences is making active effort to understand them on multiple levels.

The US is a diverse country. As of the first quarter of 2019, 39.6% of the US population identified themselves as non-white. In order to be purely representative, 39.6% of museum visitation should come from non-white audiences. Here's how different museum types stack up.

Diversity by Organization Type

1Q 2019 Non-White Visitation by Organization Type



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Generally, museums are not engaging non-white individuals at representative levels (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2018/02/21/well-cultural-organizations-welcoming-racially-diverse-attendees-data/>), and the differences between percent visitation to free vs. paid admission organizations are not meaningful from a data perspective. Also, and critically, our industry doesn't generally adjust for population growth. This means that the percentage of non-white folks visiting museums *should go up over time no matter what*, or there's a big problem.

Zoos and aquariums come the closest to reaching representative levels, and – though small – they have the biggest difference between free and non-free organizations. There are a few reasons for this. **Zoos and aquariums have the lowest perceptions that they are “not for people like me.”** (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/03/20/perceptions-matter-how-welcoming-are-cultural-organizations-data/>) Their primary experiences also often revolve around animals and immersive environments, removing some dependence upon content

interpretation. Amongst the organizations we track, zoos and aquariums also tend to have some of the most strategic targeting of emerging audience groups. This is because **zoos and aquariums have the smallest endowment backstop of organization types, and aquariums are most reliant on earned revenue contributions.**

(<https://www.colleendilen.com/2018/10/31/easiest-spot-visitor-engagement-trends-aquariums-heres-data/>) In other words, these two organization types actually feel it when they make not-so-smart business decisions, and have the greatest incentive to engage folks. Their survival depends upon it. They *have to* make effective and strategic engagement decisions, so they do. **This is why it's often easiest to spot upcoming engagement trends by watching aquariums** (<https://www.colleendilen.com/2018/10/31/easiest-spot-visitor-engagement-trends-aquariums-heres-data/>).

Being free is not the same as being welcoming

...Though it does encourage the **same people to come back more often**

(<https://www.colleendilen.com/2015/08/12/how-free-admission-really-affects-museum-attendance-data/>), simply putting a “free” sign on your door doesn't generally bring in a steady stream of folks who are desperate to come in, but could not afford it.

The things keeping new audiences from free museums are the same as those keeping audiences from paid admission museums – and **cost is the 14th biggest barrier**

(<https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/01/30/inactive-visitors-are-interested-in-attending-cultural-organizations-why-dont-they-data/>) for those with interest in attending. I don't care if it's made free for everyone, I don't want to skydive. My primary barrier is not cost, it's falling to the ground at 120 mph. (Kudos to those of you who are less fearful of such things!) Removing fees does not in itself alleviate the significantly bigger barriers when it comes to visiting cultural organizations. For **those without interest in visiting a museum in the first place**

(<https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/02/06/theyre-just-not-that-into-you-what-cultural-organizations-need-to-know-about-non-visitors-data/>), the most important factors are simply

not being interested, feeling that the institution is “not for people like me,” and having a negative past experience (perhaps being bored on a field trip as a child). These aren’t quite as dramatic as the barrier of plummeting to earth, but they still are primary reasons why some folks say, “no thanks.”

Understandably, if someone doesn’t want to do something in the first place or doesn’t feel welcome, cost is less important. **Time is more valuable than money**

(<https://www.colleendilen.com/2017/09/20/time-trumps-money-visitors-cultural-organizations-data/>), and the primary goal is to be worthy of someone’s time in the first place.

We all like getting things for free, and conversation about museums having an admission price can upset the people who want to visit them but don’t want to pay for it. I mean, I’d push back if I were used to getting sweet potato fries for free or from the government, and then there were data scientists *showing* that I would pay a fair, market price for them because I like them. (I totally would. Also, I do.)

Being welcoming is more than being free

And often, being free isn’t even a relevant part of the equation. Blaming admission cost for our industry’s inability to engage diverse audiences can be a distraction from the real, more difficult barriers that prevent folks from visiting. These include establishing ongoing relevance for different kinds of people, and rising above the noise touting unique experiences in a world where there is less incentive to leave the house.

It’s becoming clearer and clearer that being welcoming is not born of the development of a straightforward one-off program or offering free admission. **Being welcoming involves weaving values of diversity, equity, and inclusion into the fabric of the experience and organizational culture – and celebrating thoughtful, targeted access programs that actually work.**

Admission revenue can help fund these targeted, strategic programs and so that they may exist in the first place, and fuel a culture wherein these values are embedded within the organization.

The data is in, and it's clear: Free admission is not a panacea for welcoming new audiences.

*Nerd out with us every other Wednesday! **Subscribe here** (<https://colleendilen.us16.list-manage.com/subscribe/post?u=7394c160d5afdd0f3db9d6b7e&id=3e51cf438a>) to get the most recent data and analysis on cultural organizations in your inbox.*

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