

Create a Cornerstone for Good Collections Management

It is a common misconception that all museums maintain permanent collections. While a collection is not a requirement, most museums are collecting institutions.

As such, a museum is ethically and legally bound to properly care for the collection. This means having the correct policies and procedures in place to help manage and maintain the collection. The foundation for this care is a collections management policy.

The mere mention of the words “collections management policy” conjures thoughts of a lengthy, rarely used document gathering dust on a shelf. In reality, this policy guides all collections-related decisions in a legal and ethical way and helps the museum maintain consistency and uniformity in day-to-day management of collections.

It also promotes the responsible development and expansion of the museum collection, as well as delegates and defines responsibility among museum staff. This document is used daily and demonstrates commitment to a standard of care that all museums, regardless of size, should maintain.

Surprisingly, many Texas museums operate with no policy in place to manage collections, leaving them vulnerable to significant risk. The Texas Historical Commission (THC) is committed to raising greater awareness of a policy’s role in the responsible management of any museum collection.

“Our agency feels so strongly about the importance of the collections management policy that we now require museums to have one in place before applying for a History Museum Grant or to the Curatorial Facility Certification Program,” says Bratten Thomason,

director of the THC’s History Programs Division.

So, what comprises a collections management policy?

According to the American Association of Museums, it is “a comprehensive written statement of the purpose of the museum and how this purpose is carried out through the museum’s collection activities.” The American Association of State and Local History defines it as “a document outlining an institution’s standards and guidelines for managing the collections in its care.” Both definitions underscore the obligation every museum has to provide appropriate care for the objects entrusted to it.

Each museum is unique and needs to adopt a collections policy that best fits its specific institutional needs. Additionally, because the process of developing the policy is just as important as the resulting document, there is no standard template to follow.

In general, all collections policies should address these basic issues:

■ Statement of purpose

This defines the specific scope of the museum’s collection in terms of subjects, geographic location and time period of the collection. It also

delineates the various classifications and acceptable uses of the collection.

■ Acquisitions and accessions

This section details the different methods the museum can use to acquire objects for the permanent collection and who is authorized to make these decisions. The most typical means of acquisition are through donations, purchases and abandoned property.

■ Cataloging, inventories, documentation and records

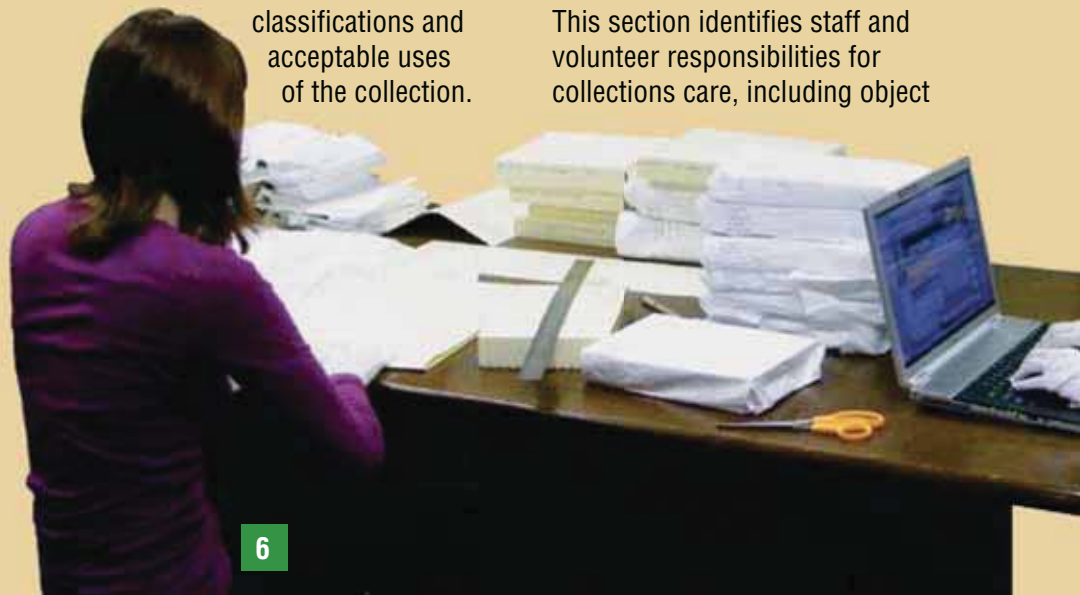
This section describes the records the museum maintains about each object in the collection. This includes, but is not limited to, catalog sheets (manual or computerized), storage location, donor information, deed of gifts, damage forms, conservation and repairs, exhibit records and anything else that documents the care and use of the object while in the museum.

■ Loans

This part of the policy defines how the museum will handle outgoing loans (loans of objects to another institution) and incoming loans (loans from another institution). The policy identifies the necessary forms for all loans, allowable timeframes, insurance requirements and any other loan restrictions or procedures. It also lists who has authority to approve loan agreements.

■ Care of the collections

This section identifies staff and volunteer responsibilities for collections care, including object



handling, storage environments and monitoring, preventative conservation, conservation treatments and repairs, pest control, and collection inventories.

■ Access to the collections

This portion details how the museum controls access to collections on exhibit and in storage. It outlines who is allowed access, how and for what purpose.

■ Insurance

This section reviews the type and amount of insurance the museum carries on the collections, including permanent and loans. It describes who is responsible for negotiating and purchasing insurance, how loss and damage are reported and by whom, and what types of insurance records the museum must keep.

■ Deaccessions

This portion explains the circumstances under which the museum can formally remove (deaccession) an object from the permanent collection. It describes the deaccession process, the steps the museum must take and the approval that is necessary to remove an item from the collection.

Though the museum board has ultimate authority for reviewing and approving the collections management policy, it is best to assign a committee or team to develop it. Typical members of this committee

include the curator or other person whose main responsibility is care of the collections, one or two staff or volunteers who work with the collections on a regular basis, and a board member.

This core team reviews nationally accepted standards of collections care, researches trends in collections management and policies, reviews sample policies from similar institutions and determines what will work best for their particular museum. As with any policy, the board reviews it annually to ensure it still meets the organization's mission and goals.

Because of the resources now available on collections management policies, the research phase is not as arduous as it once was, making policy development possible in a few short months in some cases.

Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies, by John E. Simmons (available at www.aam-us.org), is a comprehensive guidebook offering advice on how to write policies for any type of museum. It includes an extensive bibliography and a wide variety of sample policies from diverse institutions.

The THC's Museum Services Program can also offer assistance to museums developing or revising a collections management policy by suggesting additional resources, providing sample policies and offering feedback on existing or draft policies. To contact the program's staff, call 512.463.5853 or email history@thc.state.tx.us. ★

This article was written by Laura Casey and Carlyn Hammons of the THC's History Programs Division.

Staff at the Galveston County Historical Museum catalog rare books with funding from a 2009 History Museum Grant.



Above: Storage is a vital aspect of collections management.

Museum Workshops Planned

Join the THC's Museum Services staff and learn more about developing collections policies and sound management practices at one of the upcoming day-long workshops "Knowing What You Have: An Introduction to Collections Policies & Documenting Museum Collections." Staff will offer the workshop in 10 locations — one in each of the state's heritage trail regions — beginning in January.