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## What About Collections Committees?

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The term “collections committee” gets tossed around frequently in the museum world. Everyone’s committee seems just a little different. What are collections committees really about?

There is not a great deal of information specifically about collections committees in the museum literature. They are mentioned often in passing, but there is little available on the details of what they are, how they operate and who should be on them. Based on online conversations between professionals, publications from the field and personal experience, I have put together a brief guide on collections committees to answer some common questions about them.

### What is a collections committee?

A collections committee is appointed by an organization’s board of trustees to oversee the collections. Typically, collections committees oversee:

- **Accessioning**
- **Deaccessioning**
- **Collections policy matters**
- **Loans to and from the museum**

In some cases, as with the example below, collections committees can raise funds and oversee collections care and security. The role of the collections committee should be outlined in your collections policy, including how often the group meets and any other important details about its duties. The following is an example of a collections committee as outlined in the [Elkhart County Historical Society and Museum Collections Policy](#):

**Objectives:** The CC shall consider matters of policy and procedure relating to the collections of the Elkhart County Historical Society. The committee shall be responsible for overseeing collections care and security, acquisitions and deaccessions, and the loan of objects to and from the Elkhart County Historical Museum, subject to approval by the



Board of Directors. The CC provides the museum manager with counsel, oversight, raising funds for conservation and preservation, and helps develop plans to advance collection activities.

**Meetings:** Regular meetings of the CC shall occur quarterly each year. The committee shall review collections care activities including all accessions, potential loans and deaccessions. The chairperson shall provide a summary of the committee meeting to the Board of Directors. Minutes from committee meetings shall be particularly detailed with conversations regarding possible deaccessions.

### What authority does a collections committee have?

The collections committee is given its authority by the governing board of the museum ([See: A Legal Primer on Managing Collections by Marie Malaro](#)). Committees can be given authority to accession and deaccession items from the collections. If that is the case, items of significant value often require board approval. Sometimes collections committees only make accessioning and deaccessioning recommendations to the board. Even if your collections committee makes the decisions, it can be useful to run those decisions through your board to make it official. This is often done as a formality in order to record the decision in the minutes, and thus on public record. For example, the Elkhart County Historical Society and Museum policy states:

**Review by Collection Committee:** Every fall, or as requested by the curatorial staff, the CC will review a list of proposed items for deaccession. Approval for deaccession is reached with a majority consensus of the CC. This group shall present a list of deaccessioned items to the board for its approval.

The collections policy should also detail the authority of the committee and its relationship to the staff, as the Elkhart County Historical Society and Museum has done:

**Relationship to Museum Staff:** Museum staff will make recommendations to the CC for the development of professional collection policies and procedures. Based on these suggestions, the committee and museum staff will collaborate to draft and implement all collection policies and procedures. New policies and procedures will only be enacted after final approval by the Board of Directors. The committee shall also provide direction to museum staff for proposed improvements to storage and display environments, and make recommendations to the Board of Directors regarding operating costs or capital improvements for collections care activities.

### Who sits on a collections committee?

Different museums form collections committees in different ways. Larger museums sometimes form collections committees from among the staff, including a variety of departments. Museums frequently use a combination of staff, organization members, board members and community members to get a wide perspective on objects and how they fit the mission. A board member is often the chair of the committee. Frequently in smaller organizations, the staff members sit in on meetings and make recommendations to the committee, but do not vote. This is how the Elkhart County Historical Society and Museum outlines who sits on the committee in their policy:

**Membership:** The CC will consist of four to six members who are appointed by the Board of Directors to oversee collection activities. The committee chairperson must be a member of the Board of Directors. The remaining members of the committee will belong to the Elkhart County Historical Society, but not necessarily members of the Board of Directors. A quorum shall consist of a majority of the appointed members of the committee. The President of the Board of Directors, Curator of Collections, and Museum Manager are ex-officio committee members.

When thinking about who you should ask to sit on a committee, think about what kind of perspectives you need

to make good decisions about accessions and deaccessions. Think about inviting people who:

- **Have knowledge about your museum's subject area (local historian, genealogist, etc.)**
- **Work in a college or university history/museum studies department**
- **Have strong community ties**
- **Have knowledge of antiques and collectibles**

A collections committee can also be a good way to include younger people in your organization. I sat on a collections committee during college at a local history museum. It was a great opportunity for me to experience and participate in the workings of a museum, and my younger perspective was appreciated by the rest of the committee. I was considered a full member with input in decisions, a vote, and an opportunity to contribute knowledge I gained in school to the discussions. We also discussed collections care and management that in turn gave me a chance to conduct research on best practices to share with the group.

Personalities can be put to use as well. At another organization, the collections committee included someone who did not like antiques or history. While this at first seems strange, it had surprising advantages. He played the "devil's advocate" to the rest of the committee, who had to make a strong case to convince him to accession an object. This helped the museum take only the most relevant objects. Skepticism, in this way, can be valuable on a collections committee.

#### **Why have a collections committee?**

A collections committee can be a valuable part of an organization with limited staff. Having a group of people representing multiple parts of the community is a valuable tool for making collections decisions. When only one person makes the acquisition/disposal decisions, there may be individual bias unaccounted for. Diverse points of view allow for more thoughtful deliberation on potential accessions and deaccessions, while providing a wider knowledge base from which to draw. Opportunities for inviting new faces to your organization from your community can also arise from having a collections committee. A good collections committee will help hone your collecting practices and build a stronger collection.

#### **Resources**

Elkhart County Historical Society and Museum Collection Policy and Procedures Manual, available from [Local History Services](#) upon request.

A Legal Primer on Managing Collections by Marie Malaro, available in the [Lending Resources Center](#) of the Indiana Historical Society.

[Collections Advisor: Components of a Collections Management Policy](#)



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