

# INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

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## Considering Collections Committees

*By Tamara Hemmerlein, Director, Local History Services and Kelsey Smith, former Intern, Local History Services*

An important task of a history organization is to work with its communities to interpret and share their stories. One of the primary ways to do that is to collect objects that represent those stories. Active collections committees are key to meaningful and thoughtful collecting.



*Executive Committee, Flanner House Guild Tea, 1946 (Indiana Historical Society, M0649)*

### **What is a collections committee?**

A collections committee is often one of the standing committees included in an organization's

governing documents. Its responsibilities and functions are included in the collections management policy.

Members are usually appointed by an organization's board of trustees to provide oversight and guidance about an organization's collections. Typically, collections committees oversee:

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

In some cases, collections committees may raise funds for collections care and oversee collections care and security. The committee might also be directed to work with museum staff on proposed improvements to storage and display environments and make recommendations to the board regarding operating costs or capital improvements for collections care activities.

### **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, individual biases may affect the collections and the stories an organization can tell.

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 from the communities an organization serves can also arise from having a collections committee.

### **What does a collections committee do?**

The authority, duties, and responsibilities of the collections committee, and reporting requirements, should be clearly stated in the collections management policy. It is also a good idea for the policy to include information about the composition, leadership, and number of committee members.

There should be guidelines for how the collections committee interacts with paid and unpaid organization staff. For example, museum staff may make recommendations to the collections committee for the development of professional collection policies and procedures. Then, the committee and museum staff would collaborate to draft and implement collection policies and procedures.

Collections committees are often given authority to accession and deaccession items from the collections. Some collections committees are empowered to determine if an object donation will be accepted and can make that decision without board approval. Others must present potential acquisitions to the board before the objects can be accepted for accession into the collections. If the collections committee makes the accessioning decisions, they are often required to make a formal report to the board to record the decision in the minutes, and thus add accessioning and deaccessioning decisions to the official organizational record.

Collections management policies include information about deaccessioning decisions. The staff may be required to present a list of potential deaccessions to the collections committee for review at certain times of the year. Then, the collections committee meets to review the recommendations, discuss the proposed deaccessions and approve (or not) the objects for deaccessioning. After the collections committee has made its determination, a list of deaccessioned objects may be presented to the board for its approval.

### **Who sits on the collections committee?**

Museums form collections committees in different ways. 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 organizational mission. A board member is often the chair of the committee so that there is regular communication between the board and the collections committee.

Depending on the organization and its structure, the staff (paid and unpaid) may sit in on meetings and make recommendations to the committee. These staff may or may not be allowed to vote but should be encouraged to offer information about how the objects fit into the overall collection scope and the organization's capacity to appropriately care for the objects.

When thinking about who should sit on a committee, think about the perspectives the organization needs to make good decisions about accessions and deaccessions. Consider including people who:

- have knowledge about the 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 the types of objects an organization collects.

A collections committee can also be an effective way to include younger people in your organization. A former IHS Local History Services intern, sat on a collections committee during college at a local history museum. It was a great opportunity for her to experience and participate in the workings of a museum, and her younger perspective was appreciated by the rest of the committee. She was considered a full member with input in decisions, a vote, and an opportunity to contribute knowledge she gained in school to the discussions. The committee also discussed collections care and management that gave her a chance to conduct research on best practices to share with the group.

At another organization, the collections committee included someone who frequently questioned why that organization needed to collect objects. While this at first may seem 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. His skepticism, in this way, was valuable to the decision-making process.

A good collections committee will help hone organizational collecting practices, build a stronger collection, and allow history organizations to broaden historical perspectives and tell more inclusive stories.

## Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Museum Handbook, Collections Advisory Committee](#) (National Park Service)
- [NEDCC Preservation Leaflets](#) (Northeast Document Conservation Center)
- [Timely Tips](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

## Collection Trainings

[Ready or Not: Cultural Heritage Disaster Preparedness Information Session](#)  
**April 5** (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

Managing Moving Image Collections

**April 9** (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

DHPSNY: Understanding Dew Point

**April 18** (Conservation Center for Art and Historical Artifacts)

OSHA'S On-Site Consultation Program

**April 25** (Connecting to Collections Care)

Writing Grants for Audio Preservation and Reformatting

**April 30** (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

Webinars

**Recorded** – (Indiana Historical Society)

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Local History Services

(317) 232-1882 |  
[localhistoryservices@indianahistory.org](mailto:localhistoryservices@indianahistory.org)