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Collections Management Policies, Part I: Statement of Purpose and Scope and Categories of Collections

*By Tamara Hemmerlein, Director, Local History Services and Karen DePauw, Director,
Sharon (CT) Historical Society*

A collections management policy (CMP) addresses various aspects of collections management. It provides a framework for what an organization will and will not accept into the collection. It is approved by the board of directors and guides decision making about collections stewardship. The CMP is a core document for organizational success.



H. P. Wasson's Hosiery Department, 1906 (Bass #6102) (Bass Photo Co Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

The CMP has multiple sections, each one with specific information about collections stewardship. It's vital to understand the purpose of each section, where to find information about your organization, and what questions to answer in order to craft a strong policy.

This edition of Collections Advisor is the first of several that will explore the development of a collections management policy and provide examples of each section.

Vintage County Museum Basic Sample Collections Management Policy

(Approved by the Board and Adopted on March 2, 2024)

Purpose: Including the date the document was adopted can track its age and thus whether it is time to review and update it.

Statement of Purpose

- *Purpose: This section outlines the museum's mission, vision, and history as they pertain to the collection and the use of the collection in the museum's other activities: exhibits, education, programming, etc. Also frequently found in this section is an explanation of the public trust aspect of museums.*
- *Resources: bylaws; founder's restrictions; mission statement; any existing policies that govern the museum's "other" activities; past meeting minutes*

- *Guiding Questions: What work does the museum do? Why do the museum and its collection exist? For whom is the work of the museum carried out? When and why did the museum start collecting? What does it mean for the museum and its collection to be held in the "public trust?"*

Example:

The mission of the Vintage County Museum (VCM) is to collect and preserve the history of cool stuff in order to educate visitors on the effect of cool stuff on their individual lives and our collective history. The VCM's Collection Management Policy will guide the museum in fulfilling the public trust by following approved collection policies that ensure donated objects will be preserved, made accessible, and used for educational activities in alignment with professional museum practices.

The VCM has housed a collection of objects, documents, books, graphics, and ephemera since its founding in 2016. This policy guides the accession, use, deaccession, and disposal of those items.

Scope and Categories of Collections

- *Purpose: This section is also sometimes called "Collecting Objectives" and begins with a broad description of the collection as it currently exists. It details how and what the museum collects and how items are used. It can also review the collections strengths and weaknesses and identify priority areas of collecting. Also, identify different types of collections and the reason for collecting each one. Common types include permanent museum collections, archives, library, education, and research collections. Explain how each collection type is used, acquired, cared for and deaccessioned. For the basic collections management policy, the "Scope of Collections" and "Categories of Collections" can be combined. How to split them out will be addressed in the advanced policy. This section sometimes includes a list of broad categories of items the museum does not collect (for example: large vehicles, taxidermy, etc.) for reasons of space, safety, or any other reason the museum sees fit.*
- *Resources: the physical collections; exhibition and education plans; collection inventories and databases*
- *Guiding Questions: What is the current state of the collections? What types of items does the museum collect? What does the museum not collect? How are the collection items used? Are there areas of the collection that are stronger than others? Any areas the museum should focus on growing? Gaps in the collection that need to be filled? Does the collection house any "destination" collections...a classification of items that people from outside the area might come to the museum specifically to see? How are the items collected by the museum categorized? Does the museum categorize collection items in a way that may be different from most museums? If so, explain the reasoning behind categorizing the collection in that way. Are there specific guidelines for any of these sections falling outside what will be outlined in the following two sections...especially consider any non-permanent collections such as research or education collections that are not included in the two following sections. How is the collection arranged?*

Example:

The scope of the VCM collection includes items made in, used in, or having as their subjects, Vintage County.

The VCM maintains two categories of collections: Permanent Collection and Educational Collection. The provisions of this Collections Management Policy apply primarily to the Permanent Collection. Items in the Permanent Collection (PC) are subject to all museum

best-practices and standards, as set by the field. These items are accessioned and kept permanently in the public trust until such time that they may be examined for deaccession following the guidelines set forth by the Collections Management Policy. Items in the Education Collection (EC) are not accessioned into the Permanent Collections and are held to a different standard of care. The objects in the EC may be handled by or loaned to the public and are expected to suffer high levels of wear and tear, be used up, and eventually discarded. Removal and disposal of items from the EC may occur without a formal deaccessioning process as they were never accessioned by the VCM.

The VCM collects items falling into the broad object types of manuscripts, ephemera, books, 3-D objects, 2-D artworks, and photographs. Due to space and safety limitations, the VCM no longer collects large machinery or vehicles, fur, taxidermy, human remains, nitrate film, and objects that resided in the county but do not have a history connected to the county (i.e.: objects with connections only as items in area antique stores, objects merely collected by a county resident or entity, etc.).

Resources

- [Developing a Collections Management Policy](#) (American Alliance of Museums)

Further Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Timely Tips](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Collection Trainings

[Care of Newspaper Clippings](#)

Jan. 7 (Connecting to Collections Care)

Webinars

- [Recorded](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Collections Management Policy Toolkit](#) (Connecting to Collections Care)
- [Museum Core Documents Collections Management Policy](#) (Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums)

Read past issues of Collections Advisor [here](#).

[Local History Services](#)

(317) 232-1882 | localhistoryservices@indianahistory.org

