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Collections Management Policies, Part II: Additions and Removals from the Collections

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No institution has unlimited space or capacity to care for everything that is offered. Each object that comes into the collections will use resources – time, material, funds – that could be allocated to another object. Each object that an organization is offered may divert resources from a current collections object. So, institutions that collect historical objects and interpret the stories they represent should have a Collections Management Policy (CMP) in place that includes information about what to accept and what to remove from the collections.



Silverstein Furniture Company (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

CMPs should include sections that guide decisions about what an organization acquires and accessions (accepts) into and deaccessions (removes) from its collections. These sections outline what to consider when making those decisions and lay the foundation for developing the procedures that are involved in both accessioning and deaccessioning. They also help institutions allocate and use resources wisely to provide the best collections stewardship they can.

Examples from the (fictional) Vintage County Museum Collections Management Policy:

Additions to the Collection

***Purpose:** This section is sometimes called “Acquisitions/Accessioning” or “Collecting Criteria.” It outlines the guidelines followed when considering a new collection object whether through purchase, donation, or transfer. “Acquisition” is the act of physically getting an object for the museum’s collections. “Accessioning” is the formal act of legally gaining ownership of an object. After being accessioned, the item is held in the public trust. Additionally, this section is used to outline the specific criteria and decision-making process that places the policy at the center of decisions, rather than relying on individual judgment or bias. Furthermore, it details the role and responsibilities of the collections committee in the decision-making process.*

***Resources:** Museum’s mission; code of ethics; collecting priorities; Board guidelines governing committees*

***Guiding Questions:** Does the museum purchase objects for the collection? Is the museum willing to accept objects with restrictions (placed by donor? placed by law)? Will the museum take items on long-term loan (more on this in the loan section)? Who has the final say on purchasing or accepting an object? Does the object have to meet certain criteria to be*

considered? What is this criteria? How is the object tracked while it is in the museum's care but not yet legally owned by the museum? What forms must be signed and filed for full ownership by the museum to take effect? How are objects physically received into the building? Are all "in process" items kept separate from the rest of the collections? Is special permission needed for purchase of items over a certain dollar amount?

Example:

Objects being considered by the VCM, whether through donation or purchase, are susceptible to certain protocol. An object that meets the requirements of the scope and categories of the VCM collection as outlined in earlier sections will be recommended to the Collections Committee for approval, with final approval by the Board of Directors. This will provide an opportunity for the VCM to ensure the object is a worthwhile addition to the collection.

VCM will not accept long-term loans or restricted donations, except in rare instances including, but not limited to, legal restrictions regarding personal information contained within non-public record. The VCM will also use due diligence to ensure that items of questionable origin (illegal or unethical) do not enter into the collection.

While objects under consideration by VCM are on the premises, the items will be tracked using Temporary Custody Receipts and will be housed in the Collection office. Any item providing reason for concern of infestation (insect, mold, or otherwise) will be temporarily quarantined until further inspection can occur.

Once an item has been approved for accession, the VCM will assign the item an accession number and follow the procedure laid out in the Collection Accession Procedure (see attachment).

Removals from the Collection

Purpose: This section can also be referred to as "Deaccessioning/Disposal." In this portion of the policy, the museum outlines why objects may be permanently removed from the collection and clarifies acceptable methods of disposal of such objects. This section also states that proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned objects will be used for direct care of the collections and not used for general operating expenses, etc. Like the previous section, it establishes a clear decision-making process concerning what objects are deaccessioned.

Resources: Museum's Code of Ethics; American Alliance of Museums' Code of Ethics for Museums; American Association of State and Local History's Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics; ethics policies related to the museum's specific area of focus (art, archaeology, medicine, etc.)

Guiding Questions: Who has final say on deaccessioning and disposing of a collection item? What are the approved ways a deaccessioned item can be disposed of? Are there different approved ways based on condition? If an item is sold, how can the proceeds of the sale be used? What records of deaccession and disposal are kept for collection items? How is deaccession carried out? What happens to an object after it is deaccessioned?

Example:

Deaccessioning is the formal process used to remove materials legally and permanently from the VCM collection. Once legally removed from the collection, VCM may dispose of items through sale at public auction; transfer to an outside entity or to the VCM's EC; destruction in keeping with local, state, and federal laws. Deaccessioning is undertaken primarily for the purpose of focusing, refining, and upgrading the VCM collections, in support of its mission and public trust responsibilities.

Items for potential deaccession can be identified and brought forth by any VCM staff or volunteer. Objects may be suggested for deaccession for a number of reasons, including but

not limited to: not in keeping with mission; duplicates other material of better quality or stronger provenance within the VCM collection; VCM can no longer adequately care for or preserve the object; item poses a threat to other items or staff; poor condition; lacks provenance or object history; the object's removal is mandated by law (i.e.: the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act); or it is outside of VCM collecting scope and a more appropriate repository for the item has been identified. Items proposed for deaccession and disposal must be voted on and approved by the Board of Directors and must be presented to the Board with a clear and full justification for deaccession. The VCM must also be able to prove legal ownership of any item before disposing of it.

The VCM does not deaccession objects merely for financial gain. Proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned materials will be used exclusively for the care, conservation, and acquisition of VCM collection items.

Resources

- [Developing a Collections Management Policy](#) (American Alliance of Museums)
- [Acquisitions and Accessioning](#) (American Alliance of Museums)
- [Museum Handbook – Accessioning](#) (National Park Service)
- [Museum Handbook - Deaccessioning](#) (National Park Service)

Further Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Timely Tips](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Northeast Document Conservation Center](#)

Collection Trainings

[Inventorying for Archives](#)

Feb. 19 (Conservation Center for Art and Historical Artifacts)

[From Clear to Compelling: Writing Label Copy that Moves Visitors](#)

Feb. 26 (Texas Historical Commission)

Webinars

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

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