



Collections Management Policies, Part IV: Collection Access

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Museums, libraries, and archives hold their collections in the public trust. This means that while those institutions legally own the objects and documents in their collections, they do not keep them to benefit themselves. They are held to benefit the communities they serve. Often museums and other collecting institutions provide that service through exhibits and programs. In addition to those activities, collecting institutions may serve their communities by allowing the public to physically and virtually access objects they hold.



[Fairbanks Library Reading Room](#) (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

It is important that institutions carefully consider how to best provide access, under what

conditions, and to whom. Access guidelines should be included in the institutional collections management policy.

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

Collection Access

***Purpose:** Explains who has access to the collection, how the collection will be used and sets safeguards for the use of collections. Considers the needs of the collection as well as staffing capacity, physical facilities, and legal issues (such as donor privacy, and laws regarding sensitive records, like medical or adoption records).*

***Resources:** Americans with Disabilities Act; Freedom of Information Act; museum ethics policies; copyright laws*

***Guiding Questions:** Who grants access to the collection? Who has access to the collection, both internally and externally? Must collection items being accessed by the public be used in a specific area of the museum? Under specific security measures? In the presence of staff or volunteers? Are there cases in which access to the collection would not be granted, either due to the item being requested or who is making the request? How are the collections used by others within the museum structure? Are there any exceptions to the rule? Is, and how is, access to the collections promoted? Who provides approval for the use of representations of collection objects in publications? Can depictions of the museum collection be utilized for commercial use: by the museum? by a for-profit venture with museum approval? What is that approval process? How does the museum define its obligation to provide access to the collection as it pertains to the understanding of the collection being held in the public trust?*

Example:

The collections of the VCM will be made accessible to visitors barring legal restrictions on certain collection items or information contained within them. Access will be granted during normal business hours of the VCM or by special appointment. Items not on display and made accessible to visitors by special request will be studied under the supervision of staff or volunteers.

The VCM will do its best to make objects, and associated object records, accessible to visitors while preserving materials for future generations and safeguarding sensitive information housed in museum records, including but not limited to object value and personal living donor information.

All reasonable requests for access to the VCM collections will be granted to the best of the ability of VCM's facilities and staff/volunteers. The VCM strives to make the collections available both onsite and online through proper collection cataloguing and digitization.

Access to VCM collections will also be made through the activities of the museum. These activities may include exhibition, educational programming, specialty tours, public outreach, and online access via online collection catalogues, exhibits, blog posts, and publications.

Resources

- [Collections Stewardship Standards](#) (American Alliance of Museums)
- [Museum Archives Guidelines](#) (Society of American Archivists)
- [Public Trust and Accountability Standards](#) (American Alliance of Museums)

Further Resources

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

Collection Trainings

[Shifting Perspective: Preservation in the Wake of Natural Disasters](#)

April 9 (National Trust for Historic Preservation)

[Archives Are Not Neutral](#)

April 17 (DHPSNY)

Webinars

[DIY Audio 101: A Practical Guide to Producing Audio Content](#)

April 2 (Texas Historical Commission)

[Logic Models... More Than Extra Work](#)

April 9 (GrantStation)

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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