OVERVIEW: AGENTS OF DETERIORATION AND THE NEED FOR COLLECTIONS CARE

Definitions

Collections Care:
The range of activities that preserve cultural heritage collections. Activities include collection management, environmental management, proper storage and handling practices, and monitoring. Collections care is also known as preventive conservation in some circles.

Preservation:
The global activities associated with maintaining collection materials for use or display, whether in their original format or in some other usable format.

Conservation:
Techniques and procedures that are used in the treatment of individual items, usually after some damage has occurred.

People
Who performs collections care, preservation, and conservation activities?
Collections care and preservation
- All staff and most volunteers can be trained to perform these activities.
- For anyone, match skills and interests with tasks.
Conservation
- Professionals only, please!
- Most conservators have areas of specialty so be sure to match your damaged collections with the appropriate conservator.

Policies
Policies provide the framework for the institution, they do not provide tasks or procedures for accomplishing the work.

Mission Statements
- Probably the most important "policy" your institution will have.
- Ensures the institution has a clear identity with stated goals and for an identified audience.
- Brief but poignant
- The foundation for all other policies

Poll question
- How many of you know and understand the implications of the mission statement for your institution?
  - Yes/No or raise hand

Sample Mission Statement
- The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is America’s national institution for the documentation, study, and interpretation of Holocaust history, and serves as this country’s memorial to the millions of people murdered during the Holocaust. The Museum's primary mission is to advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy; to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy.

Collection Policies
1. Collection as a verb - what the institution intends to collect, what the scope of these collections will be, and criteria for determining if something fits this policy – aka Collections Policy
2. Collection as a noun - how the institution will manage what it does collect. The collection management policy includes guidelines for storage, care and handling, security, conservation and preservation, and deaccessioning – aka Collections Management policy
Other Policies to Consider

- Disaster Preparedness
- Deacessing
- Volunteer
- User/Reader/Access
- Exhibit
- Donor
- Security
- Events

The Agents of Deterioration

All of our collections are deteriorating in many different ways. For a little fun (while you are learning!) see the National Museums Liverpool's great game on the Agents of Deterioration at http://www.diduknow.info/agents/

Chemical

- Organic materials degrade by two primary mechanisms: hydrolysis, oxidation.
  - Oxidation: the gain of oxygen – oxidizing agents are the source of this oxygen.
    - Oxidizing agents include ozone, chlorine and chlorine-based elements, peroxides, and nitric acid.
  - Hydrolysis: for many elements, the gain of hydrogen – water is often the source of this hydrogen.
    - For cultural heritage materials, this water comes in the form of relative humidity.
- Chemical degradation is catalyzed by inappropriate temperatures and relative humidity, light and pollutants.

Don't forget the Red Rot!


Biological

- Mold, Insects & other pests
- Exacerbated by inappropriate temperature and relative humidity levels, water incidents, and poor storage locations
Physical

- Poor storage & handling practices
- Physical forces that can be brought to bear on collections include pressure, abrasion, and impact.

Incidental

- Water emergencies
- Fire
- Vandalism
- Theft

Pop Quiz

- Most of the deterioration to our collections is caused by:
  1. Dust bunnies
  2. Improper temperature and humidity settings in storage areas
  3. Children
  4. Pterodactyls

Selection

We cannot save everything!
Selection

- How do we choose?? First and foremost, select materials that fit with the institution’s collection policy. Also consider:
  - High use collections
  - Materials going on exhibit/loan
  - Materials that directly support teaching/research at your institution
  - Iconic materials from your collection
  - Materials that are valuable to the institution in some way

Value

- Artifactual
- Evidential
- Informational
- Contextual
- Monetary

Selection

- At-risk objects and collections
  - Acetate and nitrate negatives, media for which you don’t have playback machines, flaking paintings, insect infested collections
  - When is at-risk too damaged to be able to get a good copy without too much time or money – think about your return on investment

Selection: Intellectual Control

- Do you know
  - What you have?
  - Where it is?
  - What format?
  - What condition?
  - What value?

  - If you don’t know what you have, how can you prioritize for care, let alone justifying the cost of maintaining it?

Questions?

Homework

- Describe an item in your collections that is showing signs of deterioration. How is it deteriorating?

- Complete and submit homework via https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/basics1

- Homework link and links to additional resources will be posted on the Collections Care Basics page at https://www.connectingtocollections.org/courses/collections-care-basics/