

AASLH  
Making History with Your Community

**Collections Management Policy Template**

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Revised February 4, 2000

Introduction

The template is intended to offer suggestions for composing a collections management policy for an organization owning museum collections. The seven main headings are essential parts of any such policy, but the details depend completely upon the mission, structure and size of the individual institution. For example, a very small institution may have little funding and no professional staff; but, if a plan is in place, and if any progress is being made, that may indicate appropriate accomplishment, given the resources of that particular institution.

Still, any organization owning collections must address all the subjects herein, or it is not fulfilling its responsibility as a public trust. Most of the subheadings in the template apply to any museum, and therefore should be considered in the creation of a policy. Although the creation of such a policy may seem superfluous to small institutions, the analysis and examination of the organization is a very important additional benefit to the process.

I. Statement of purpose and collecting objectives

**Locate and examine legal documents that define the museum, and examine or compose the mission statement. Consider all the elements listed here in defining or re-defining the institution's mission.**

- A. Charter and bylaws
- B. Other establishing documents
- C. Founder's restrictions
- D. Mission statement
- E. Concept of public trust
- F. Current programs
- G. How the collections support the mission of the museum
- H. Address overall goal for collection, e.g., systematic collections, representative collections, historically significant collections, contemporary collections, etc.
- I. List present scope and use of collections
- J. Identify types of collections and rationale
- K. Museum's immediate collections goals
- L. Roles of board or other oversight groups

## II. Governance

**Cite board's fiduciary responsibility for: assets including the collections; for assuring that collections are properly and effectively used for public purposes; for ensuring that collections are preserved and maintained. Define roles of board officers.**

- A. Current governing authority
- B. From bylaws:
  - How board is chosen
  - Responsibility for funding
  - Board officers and responsibilities
  - Board committees and functions
  - Board terms of service
- C. Staff job descriptions
- D. Relationship of board and staff regarding collections (collections committee, executive committee, etc.)

## III. Additions to the collections

- A. Nature of ownership:
  - Restrictions, trusts, shared ownership
  - Ownership by museum or other entity (government, university, society, etc.)

**Define how materials and objects are acquired. Define how and when limitations on use or conditions affecting ownership of objects or materials by the organization are documented.**

- B. Criteria for acquisition:
  - Mission: geography, chronology, subject matter
  - Condition
  - Uniqueness
  - Properly documented
  - Size, delicacy
  - Donor-imposed restrictions
  - Cost of maintenance
- B. Authority to acquire:
  - Identify decision-makers; collection and funding decisions
  - Staff (or volunteer) collections committee
  - Identify board involvement (every acquisition; threshold value; etc.)
  - Procedures for acquisition (policy requirements, not administrative procedures)
  - Stress written records regarding all collections-related decisions
  - Allow for collection by all legal means
  - Define clear and legal ownership

#### IV. Removals from the collections

##### A. Criteria for removal

Condition (damaged, deteriorated)

No longer fits mission

Space; no longer able to care for item

Duplication (standard number or evaluative procedure?)

Lost or stolen

(N.B.: If an object has been accessioned twice by mistake, removing one of its accession numbers from the record does not constitute deaccessioning.)

##### B. Procedure for removal

Who initiates removals

Documenting: the object, donor or other source

##### C. Authority to effect removals

Staff and board responsibilities

Staff or board committees (threshold value to refer to board)

##### D. Disposal procedures

Restricted or open

Preference to museums? How to accomplish

Use of proceeds if objects from collections are sold

#### V. Lending and borrowing collections materials

##### A. Criteria for lending

##### B. Authority to lend objects

##### C. Criteria for borrowing

##### D. Authority to borrow objects

##### E. Considerations for all lending and borrowing

Lender must have legal title

Terms of the museum's contract for loans (the loan agreement)

Organization may decide that some or all objects are prohibited from loan

Must be written to avoid "parking" by those with special relationships with the museum

Length of contract limited; renewal or review point defined

Documenting condition, before and after transport

Evaluating potential borrowers (accredited? facilities reports, etc)

## VI. Care and conservation

**Define the curators' and conservators' responsibilities and authority and outline standards for exhibition and storage. Include definitions for record keeping, access to collections and records, and insurance requirements.**

- A. Include a list of documents that are basic to operations
- B. List documents that should be duplicated and kept off-site
- C. Identification of classes of objects; e.g., permanent collections, properties, equipment, education objects, demonstration items, exhibit props
- D. Conservation: identify personnel responsible for preventive care and professional conservation evaluations and treatments
  - How to judge the qualifications of a conservator
  - Policy of levels of care (e.g., groups other than permanent collections; buildings)
- E. Who approves conservation treatments and qualifications for conservators
- F. Access to collections and records
  - Security from various risks
  - Security of legal documents
  - Confidentiality of source documents, location and monetary values
  - Importance of inventory in case of loss
  - Policies for photography and videography access
- G. Insurance issues
  - Estimate potential risk against cost of insurance
  - Many significant objects are irreplaceable
- H. Storage and exhibition: physical security, light, atmosphere, fire protection

## VI. Ethical standards

- A. Overview
  - Clear standards for all board, volunteers and staff personnel
  - Enumerate and prohibit all conflicts of interest
  - System of checks and balances
  - Guidelines for resolving conflicts
  - State the consequences of misconduct
  - Ethics statement must be acknowledged by staff and board
- B. Personal collections: state the procedures required by the museum (reporting, first refusal...)
- C. Professional organization standards: AAM, AASLH, AIC, SAA, others