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Collections Management Policies and Ethics

Collections management policies help maintain the highest ethical and professional standards in relation to stewardship of collections held in public trust. Collection policies outline the scope of a museum's collection, clearly define the roles of the parties responsible for managing the museum's collections, explain how the museum cares for collections, and how the public may access the collection. These policies are guided by an overarching clear and detailed mission statement. By establishing the museums' principles and objectives in this manner a comprehensive purpose forms, resulting in a transparent ethical policy to be embodied. Below are some of my personal takeaways pertaining to collections management in relation to practices, mission statements and the ethics that guide collecting institutions.

Often accompanied along with collection policies are professional code of ethics determined by member organizations in which help museum professionals and the institutions they work for to achieve accreditation, such as the American Alliance of Museum's Code of Ethics for Museums, or the International Council of Museum's Code of Ethics. Miller states "Professional codes of ethics are considered living documents because they continue to evolve in response to changing values, situations, and social movements."

(29) Professionals practicing in particular disciplines also adhere to a consensus of the profession, for example the Code of Ethics for Registrars or the Professional Practice for Art Curators. This approach of providing tailored ethical practices should also include a code of ethics for all staff, volunteers, and board members. These policies are so important that a museum must have its own institutional code of ethics to be accredited. Just like the professional code of ethics, museum mission statements and collections policies also need careful review to evolve with the changing values of the museum. It should be noted that the legal status of a museum can affect the collection policies used. However, whether an institution is public or private, a trust, corporation, or an association all maintain a commitment to collection stewardship, and professional best practices.

Collecting museums use a scope of collections to guide the collection development in relation to its mission. These include parameters such as the geographic area of interest to the museum, the subject manner of the museum, a relevant period of interest, and the intended use of the collection. The scope of collection provides guidelines for future acquisitions, however “many museums create separate, more detailed collection plans that supersede much of what was traditionally included in a scope of collections policy.” (Simmions, 29) The comprehensive collection plan will specifically define the types of objects the museum collects and why it does so. It describes what the collection includes, what is missing, what to no longer collect, and what may need to be removed from the collection.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect collecting museums must navigate in their collection methods are the restrictions that could be imposed upon them. Museums obtain objects through donation, purchases, or field collection. Donation of gifts is preferable, as this gives the museum the ability to consider the object in relation to its relevance, provenance, conservation, and value in the scope of its collection while potentially saving money. However, these donations must be evaluated more in-depth, as consideration should be given to the motivation the donor has in offering their objects. For example, donors may wish to attach restrictions to their objects, such as how, when and where their objects will be exhibited, requests to have the objects loaned back to them, or mandate the return of the object if it was to ever be deaccessioned. These restrictions encumber resources allocated to museums and constrain present and future staff. A helpful example (though not a donation) of staff being encumbered by objects in collections is when speaking with Christian Valvano, Assistant Registrar of the Fine Arts Center (FAC), they were able to explain the Dale Chihuly collection was purchased by the previous curator who was a fan of Mr. Chihuly. They mentioned the museum had to fundraise to add these works to the permanent collection, as there was no way to purchase them via funds allotted from the collections accession plan. When asked what the collection care policy entails for these objects, the shocking scope of having to fully dismantle each “hornet nest cone” from the ringed frame of *Orange Hornet Chandelier,* every time the object is cleaned was very surprising. The consequence of accessioning this object based on one induvial preference means all future staff must contribute to its laborious care. Looking back at the mission

statement of the FAC, it was very vague with no geographical area of interest, and no time-period of interest, and thus this most likely contributed to accessing works from a Seattle based artist in the permanent collection. However, these dynamic works do fit into the museum's mission in relation to creating an innovative, awe-inspiring exhibit for the education of the glass medium. I just wonder if it would have been more beneficial to incorporate a work of the glass medium from Colorado. This highlights the importance of having a well-defined collection plan, and mission statement.

Another ethical intersection that should be clearly defined in the collections management policy is the role of who is responsible for making collection management decisions. Miller explains collection authority and the ethics of collection management pertaining to trustee best when stating, "....the less personages are directly and intimately involved in how collections are acquired, cared for, studied, or used, the better. Their volunteerism must leave collection jusgments to directors, curators, collection managers, conservators or knowledgeable consultants." (14) The intricate management of collections stewardship is best navigated when each professional has clearly defined roles and responsibilities. This is especially important when it comes to following cultural property laws like The Reparation Act and NAGPRA. Defined roles will flow throughout the collections policy in relation to defining the "who" and "how" of acquisitions and accessions, deaccessions, loans, care, documentation, risk managements, and access.

Because museums have an ethical obligation to provide proper care for the collection held in the public's trust. Comprehensive collection policies will include collection

care plans detailing: “staff responsibilities, preventive conservation, handling of objects in the collections, conservation treatments, packing and shipping, special care of sacred or culturally sensitive objects, storage environment, pest control, off-site storage, and collection inventories.” (Simmions, 98) One would think that all this specialized care for priceless objects would mean keeping a collection tucked away, never to be seen again. However, to meet the basic public trust responsibilities, reasonable access to the collection and their records must be available to the public. Access will be defined differently at each museum as it takes into consideration staffing, resources, and physical facilities. In practice museums do not have to “...give everyone the right to access anything at any time. While it is true that greater access will enhance the public’s appreciation for the collections and may help increase financial support for the museum, to protect the collections the museum can provide safeguards that restrict access.” (Simmions, 112) This can be done in two ways according to Miller, Direct Access and Indirect Access. Direct access meaning physical contact or close proximity to the object, and Indirect access meaning pictures of the object, records or resources provided online about the object. (Miller, 86,87) A good example of defining the environment a collection can be accessed is in the Collection Policies of The Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum. Here, public access is qualified first by stating “the primary responsibility of every museum is to safeguard the physical integrity of its collections.” (12) Then goes on to define who on staff will be responsible for providing access, such as archival materials will be handled by the archivist, and artifacts to include the associated records will be regulated by the curator. (12) By setting the precedent in the

collection policy anyone on staff or otherwise can use this document to guide their actions in order to obtain access.

Finally, when unifying the information from textbooks, policies from different museums, real life examples from professionals, and practical personal experiences, I believe the overarching lesson in collections management is to expect policies to evolve and be prepared to evolve with them. Collection policies are essentially the steppingstones in which the mission of a museum can be achieved. Similar to many occupations, professional standards must evolve to meet best practices and so too do the living documents used to reach these higher standards. I believe the AAM'S Code of Ethics for Museums describes this evolution best when it states, "Although the operating environment of museums grows more complex each year, the root value for museums, the tie that connects all of us together despite our diversity, is the commitment to serving people, both present and future generations." (Simmons, 175)

Works Citited

Miller, Steven. *Museum Collection Ethics: Acquisition, Stewardship, and Interpretation*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2020.

Simmons, John E. *Things Great and Small Collection Management Policies.* American Association of Museums, 2006.

Colorado Pioneers Museum, Museum Advisory Board, *Collection Policies.* Colorado Springs, Colorado, 2003.