

## ALLIANCE REFERENCE GUIDE

# Developing a Collections Management Policy

---

This reference guide aims to help museums develop a collections management policy, a core document supporting a museum's mission and purpose. This guide explains what a collections management policy is, why it is important and considerations for developing one. It reflects national standards and is in line with the requirements of the Alliance's Core Documents Verification and Accreditation programs.

1

## What It Is

A collections management policy is a set of policies that address various aspects of collections management. This policy defines the scope of a museum's collection and how the museum cares for and makes collections available to the public. A collections management policy also explains the roles of the parties responsible for managing the museum's collections.

Institutions with living collections may use different terminology for the policy and processes that govern the management of their plants or animals. Museums that do not own collections but borrow and use objects owned by others should have policies in place regarding borrowing items.

## Why It Is Important

Collections advance the museum's mission while serving the public. Because collections are held in trust for the public and are made accessible for the public's benefit, the public expects museums to maintain the highest legal, ethical and professional standards. To demonstrate these standards, museums establish policies to support its mission and operations and to guide decision-making. Policies give the governing authority, staff and public the opportunity to learn about standards and help the museum fulfill its responsibilities as a steward of collections.



## What to Consider

- » *The process of creating and implementing a policy is far more important and beneficial to the museum than the actual policy itself.* The policy may seem like the end result, but in actuality, the end result is a broad understanding of ethics and procedures, which influences how the museum operates.
- » *There are many different ways to create policies.* Each museum has its own set of challenges, which requires thoughtfulness in policy-making. Museums are encouraged to take time to explore their circumstances and articulate them accurately in their policies.
- » *Policy-making should be integrated in order to be effective.* Each of the museum's official documents should speak to one another consistently and comprehensively to support the museum's mission.

---

“A policy is useless if it is outdated, ignored, too complex to be followed, too simplistic to be useful, or does not serve the museum’s mission. [...] Good policies help the museum achieve its mission and demonstrate its commitment to professional standards and best practices.” John E. Simmons (*Things Great and Small*, 2006)

---

# Anatomy of a Collections Management Policy

A strong policy is consistent in the day-to-day handling of an institution's collections and is written to meet the specific needs of the museum and its collection. It is important to take the necessary time and resources to think through and develop a realistic and usable document. Establishing policies that are not eventually followed is detrimental to the museum and the community it serves.

There is no one, perfect template for any document. Since the museum field is so diverse, each of the museum's documents should be influenced by its history, community, collections and governance. Interrelated policies and plans contribute to a cohesive vision and mission. While collections management policies vary in organization and in content, listed below are some elements commonly found in these policies.

## Mission, Vision and History

Policies, procedures and plans should support mission. Thus, many museums begin each document reiterating their mission, followed by other introductory material, including the museum's vision statement and a brief history of the museum and its collections. This section provides the users of the policy with a better understanding of the museum's choices and its role in collections stewardship. For more guidance, review the Alliance's reference guide on mission statements.

## Statement of Authority

The governing authority, committees and staff each play a role in helping the museum fulfill its role as stewards of its collections. This section summarizes those roles and responsibilities and usually includes the name of the museum, its purpose and identification of who is responsible for legal and fiduciary matters. Sometimes the statement of authority is found in the introductory sections, along with mission, vision and history.

## Code of Ethics

A code of ethics is a set of principles that guide the conduct, decision-making and behavior of museum staff, volunteers and governing authority. It is a policy statement that establishes values and ethical standards that enable the museum to fulfill its mission and put the interests of the public ahead of the interests of the museum or of any individual. Each museum should develop its own institutional code of ethics, specific to its operations and needs. This document states that it applies to staff, governing authority and volunteers. A museum will often include its code of ethics—either in its entirety (although it should exist as a stand-alone document as well), in an excerpt or in a reference—in the collections management policy. For more guidance on this, please review to the Alliance's reference guide on codes of ethics.

## Scope of Collections

This is a broad description of the museum's collections and an explanation of how and what

the museum collects and how those collections are used. This section can include a brief history of the collections and a review of the collection's strengths and weaknesses. It often sets guidelines for growing and developing the collection, which museums can then use in collections planning.

### Categories of Collections

These are the names and definitions of different categories of collections the museum cares for, documents and uses. Some common collections categories include: archives or library, education, exhibition, permanent, research or collections held under a repository or management agreement. In this section, museums might explain how collections in that category are used, acquired, cared for and deaccessioned.

### Acquisitions/Accessioning

Acquisition is the act of acquiring an item or object for any of the museum's collections. Accessioning is the formal act of legally accepting an object or objects to the category of material that a museum holds in the public trust, or, in other words, those in the museum's permanent collection. Because of this, it is important that acquisition/accession policies are written with the museum's mission in mind. The museum must ensure that each accession not only enhances or strengthens the museum's collections but can be properly cared for, stored and used. This section outlines the specific criteria and decision-making process for adding objects to the collection. Having a thoughtful accession/acquisitions policy will yield a strong and cohesive collection, in addition to helping

avoid any misunderstanding between potential donors and the museum. For instance, if an object does not fit the criteria for being accessioned, the museum staff can point to policy rather than say it was a choice made by judgment. If a museum has an acquisitions committee, their role and responsibilities can be outlined here. Furthermore, museums should include any legal or ethical obligations or restrictions concerning collection acquisition (e.g., appraisals, gifts, exchanges).

### Deaccessioning/Disposal

Deaccessioning is the opposite of accessioning. It is the permanent removal of an object from a museum's collections. There are many reasons for deaccessioning an object, several of them being controversial, but the practice is a typical part of collections stewardship and a way for the museum to refine its collection. It is important that the museum understand the legal and ethical implications of deaccessioning and write a policy that helps the museum be transparent and accountable with the public. The museum should state its adherence to the Alliance's *Code of Ethics for Museums* and make sure that the "disposal of collections through sale, trade, or research activities is solely for the advancement of the museum's mission." In thinking through the deaccessioning policy and its subsequent procedures, it is important that museums clearly outline the specific criteria for removing an object from the collection, as well as the decision-making process. Moreover, this section should be explicit about the methods and means of disposing of an object and include a statement about how the proceeds will be used.

## Loans

Loans help museums share information with each other and the communities they serve. This section delineates the conditions covering the temporary transfer of collection objects (not their ownership) from or to the museum. In this section, museums typically include information about loan approval and acceptance, loan fees, documentation, insurance and monitoring. If relevant, museums can include sections about old loans and restricted works (i.e., objects not permitted to leave the museum except under special circumstances). Museums that do not own collections but which borrow and use objects owned by others should have policies in place regarding these items.

## Objects in Custody

Objects in custody are collections that are found, abandoned or unclaimed. This section addresses how the museum will handle objects with unclear title.

## Conservation/Care

There are many factors that affect the quality of care for collections. Museums must properly preserve and care for collections they hold in the public trust. In order to protect the collection from deterioration, museums are encouraged to address the following in their collections management policy: storage, temperature, relative humidity, pest control, conservation, handling of objects, disaster planning and location inventories. If a museum has a long-range conservation plan, it can be mentioned here.

## Insurance and Risk Management

Risk management is a major part of the museum's responsibility to minimize any potential problems or dangers to the collections. This section is an overview of the museum's approach to safeguarding the collection (e.g., fire detection and suppression, security) and the types of insurance coverage provided. A more in-depth disaster plan accompanies the collections management policy. For more information on developing a disaster preparedness/emergency response plan, see the Alliance's reference guide on this topic.

## Documentation, Collections Records and Inventories

Documentation captures an object's condition, history, use and value. It is how a museum maintains physical and intellectual control over its collection. Without documentation, an object has no identity. Museums must therefore be diligent in creating legible and comprehensive documentation and in managing those records. In writing this section, museums typically reference the types of records created, what information is contained in each record, the parties responsible for maintaining and documenting the records and any procedures and back-up systems. Museum staff are encouraged to commit to periodically checking inventories in order to ensure that an object's supporting information is secure and can easily be retrieved.

## Access

Museums must give the public reasonable access to collections and collections records. In this section, the museum usually explains who

has access to what and why, and denotes how those collections will be used and with what safeguards. Museums might assess staff capacity, physical facilities, preservation and awareness of legal issues (e.g., Americans with Disabilities Act, donor privacy, Freedom of Information Act) before shaping these policies.

### Appraisals

Often, members of the public will contact a museum to seek staff expertise on an object. This can take the form of an appraisal or an authentication. Museum staff can appraise objects internally in order to establish a value for insurance. However, an appraisal or authentication by staff or governing authority on behalf of the public is discouraged. There are several legal and ethical restrictions to this practice and to addressing these concerns in their collections management policies. It is prudent to outline restrictions on staff appraising items donated to the collection and include a statement about conducting appraisals for donors or the general public.

### Legal and Ethical Considerations

There are many laws regarding the ownership and protection of cultural and natural resources, including but not limited to: stolen, looted or reappropriated art, archaeological material

removed from federally owned or controlled land and issues relating to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Museums usually state compliance with local, state and federal laws that affect collections or collecting activities and the museum's commitment to adhering to them. It is important that museums be aware of ethical concerns regarding employee conduct, conflicts of interest, selling items from the collection or restoring certain objects.

### Intellectual Property

In order to protect themselves and any intellectual property, it is important for museums to be aware of intellectual property rights, laws and concerns. Typically, this section addresses the acquisition of copyright for accessioned objects and the adherence to intellectual property laws, including: trademark, fair use, electronic use, licensing, image use, commercial use, royalties and fees, reproductions, privacy and Visual Artists Right Act, etc. Museums might consider including a statement about whether or not photography or filming in the museum or of specific objects is permitted and if so, under what conditions.



## Review/Revision

A collections management policy is a living, breathing document that should always be practiced. Museum staff should regularly review the policy and, when necessary, consider revising it. A museum might create a schedule for review.

## Glossary

To familiarize all staff, volunteers and board with the collections management policy, museums may include a glossary of terms.

## Where to Begin

For policies to be effective, they must be understood and accepted by everyone at the museum. This means educating the staff, governing authority and volunteers about the purpose of the policies, the distinction between policies and procedures, and how the procedures put policies into action.

In most institutions, the governing authority approves and has the ultimate responsibility for the policies. Staff participation is critical for preparing policies that everyone understands and to which they are committed.

Policy development can be time-consuming, but approaching the issues from a variety of perspectives can be beneficial. The process is most effective when there is full staff involvement at every stage: initial draft, review, revision and recommendation to the governing authority for approval. Here are some steps in the policy development process:

- » *Assemble the writing team.* Select a team that has a manageable number of participants yet represents a variety of perspectives within the institution, including administration, collections, conservation, governance, public programs, research and security. Include the staff who implement the procedures.
- » *Develop the policy.* Use the mission statement and scope of the collections statement to develop broad, institution-wide collections management policies. Then develop specific policies to address particular institutional issues.
- » *Review standards.* Review the policies to ensure that they are based on current legal, ethical and professional standards and adhere to the museum's code of ethics.
- » *Get feedback.* Ask other staff members to comment on successive drafts of the policies. Once you have received feedback, revise the policy as necessary.
- » *Get governance endorsement.* Following staff review and revision, present the policies to the museum's governing authority for approval. Be prepared to explain and defend each policy as well as to incorporate the governing authority's suggestions.
- » *Develop procedures.* Once the policies have been approved by the governing authority, prepare a set of procedures for implementing each policy.



- » *Implement.* The completed collections management policy and the corresponding procedures are presented, implemented and carried out by staff. Relevant staff should have been included in developing the policies and procedures but there may still be a need to talk about how to carry out their responsibilities.
- » *Review and revise periodically.* These policies and procedures will evolve as the museum grows and thrives. Procedures might need revision more often than policies.

## Core Documents Verification

The [Core Documents Verification](#) program verifies that an institution has an educational mission and the policies and procedures in place that reflect standard practices of professional museums, as articulated in *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums* and used in the Accreditation program.

A collections management policy is one of five core documents that are fundamental for basic professional museum operations and embody core museum values and practices. Listed below are elements required for the collections management policies of museums participating in the program.

### Collections Management Policy Required Elements

Note: Institutions with living collections may use different terminology for the policy and processes that govern the management of their plants or animals.

For institutions that own or manage collections:

- » acquisitions/accessioning
- » deaccessioning/disposal of collections/use of proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned collections
- » loans, incoming and outgoing (museums that do not lend/borrow should state this fact)
- » collections care
- » inventories and/or documentation
- » access and/or use of collections

For institutions that do not own or manage collections, but borrow and use objects for exhibits, education, or research:

- » care/responsibilities for objects in temporary custody
- » borrowing policies

## Where to Find Out More

Content for this reference guide was pulled from *Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies* and *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*.

- » [\*National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums\*](#), edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt (AAM Press, 2008)

This guide is an essential reference work for the museum community, presenting the ideals that should be upheld by every museum striving to maintain excellence in its operations. It includes a full outline of the standards, including the overarching Characteristics of Excellence for U.S. Museums, the seven areas of performance they address and commentary. This publication is available as a [free PDF to all museum members](#).

- » [\*Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies\*](#), by John E. Simmons (AAM Press, 2006)

This publication comprehensively addresses how to write such a collections management policy for museums of any type or size. It reviews the issues that a collections management policy should address and the pros and cons of choosing one policy option over another. It also includes many excerpted sample collections management policies.

- » [\*Museum Registration Methods 5<sup>th</sup> Edition\*](#), edited by Rebecca Buck and Jean A. Gilmore (AAM Press, 2010)

This tome encompasses all that needs to be known and done when a museum accessions, measures, marks, moves, displays or stores an object or artifact of any kind. The 5th Edition includes special teaching sections that challenge readers with questions about the process and procedures of accessioning and caring for objects. It also contains expert advice from more than 60 acknowledged leaders in their disciplines, a bibliography, a glossary and multiple sample forms.

- » [\*Collection Conundrums: Solving Collections Management Mysteries\*](#), by Rebecca Buck and Jean A. Gilmore (AAM Press, 2007)

This book provides guidelines for investigating and determining what to do with the oddities found in every museum collection—objects without record, identification or sometimes even a location. The text features a history of registration methods and the standards for collection documentation and care, along with sample documents such as loan agreements, co-tenancy agreements, storage agreements and deeds of gift.

» [Sample Documents](#)

The Information Center's sample document collection is a unique and valuable resource for Tier 3 member museums. The collection contains more than 1,000 samples of policies, plans and forms from museums of all types and sizes, most of which were written by accredited museums. Tier 3 museum members can request sample documents from the Information Center in order to stimulate a conversation about issues and challenges facing the museum and to explore how different museums approach different issues. Using the sample documents should not replace the process of joining staff, governing authority and stakeholders in fruitful and thoughtful planning and policy-making.

## Standards

The Alliance's standards address "big picture" issues about how museums operate. For the most part, they define broad outcomes that can be achieved in many different ways and are flexible enough to accommodate a diverse museum field. These standards can be achieved in tandem with standards issued by other organizations that address aspects of museum operations or the museum profession.

12

### **Adhering to standards is achievable by all types of museums.**

Standards provide a common language that enables museums to self-regulate, demonstrate professionalism and increase accountability. Policy-makers, media, philanthropic organizations, donors and members of the public use standards to assess a museum's performance and evaluate its worthiness to receive public support and trust. Simply stated by Elizabeth Merritt in *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*, "Standards are fundamental to being a good museum, a responsible nonprofit and a well-run business."

Having a strong collections management policy helps museums adhere to standards. For more on standards, visit the Alliance's website at [www.aam-us.org](http://www.aam-us.org).