

Information Center Fact Sheet
Writing a Collections Management Policy

What is a Collections Management Policy?

A collections management policy (CMP) is a comprehensive written statement of the purpose of the museum and how this purpose is carried out through the museum's collections activities. A strong CMP introduces consistency in the day-to-day handling of an institution's collections.

What should a Collections Management Policy include?

The first step in drafting a policy is to define the purpose of the institution. The museum's mission statement determines what the museum will collect and preserve. Even if the museum has a formally approved mission statement, it may still want to use this as an opportunity to review the mission and revise the statement as needed to reflect the current agenda of the institution. In addition to the mission statement, many CMPs include the following information:

- ❖ **Scope of Collections:** broad description of the museum's primary emphasis for its collections
- ❖ **Authority:** delineation of the decision-making authority and responsibilities among the governing authority, committees, and staff
- ❖ **Codes of Ethics:** reference to the museum's own institutional code of ethics, professional codes of ethics by which the museum abides, and any special ethical considerations (for example, issues facing a museum that frequently collects objects from other countries)
- ❖ **Categories of Collections:** names and definitions of categories, if the museum categorizes objects by different levels of care, documentation, or use
- ❖ **Acquisitions/Accessioning:** specific criteria for additions to the collection; outline of the decision-making process
- ❖ **Deaccessioning/Disposal:** specific criteria for removing an object from the collection; direction on how to dispose of the object; a statement of how the proceeds will be used; outline of the decision-making process
- ❖ **Loans:** conditions covering the temporary transfer of collection objects (not their ownership) from or to the museum
- ❖ **Objects found in collection, abandoned property, and unclaimed loans:** discussion of how the museum will handle objects with unclear title
- ❖ **Conservation/Care:** outline of the museum's obligations and commitment to the preservation of collection items
- ❖ **Insurance & Risk Management:** an overview of the museum's approach to safeguarding the collection and the types of insurance coverage to be provided
- ❖ **Documentation/Collections Records:** a list of the types of records to be maintained and the standards for documentation
- ❖ **Inventories:** a description of methods to maintain physical control of the objects, including a commitment to conducting periodic inventories
- ❖ **Access:** discussion of access and confidentiality concerning the collections or collections records
- ❖ **Appraisals:** statement of whether museum will conduct appraisals for donors

- ❖ **Laws:** reference to various laws that affect collections or collecting activities and the museum's commitment to adhering to them
- ❖ **Rights & Reproduction:** reference to the ownership of rights of collection objects
- ❖ **Photography/Filming:** statement about whether the museum allows photography or filming in the museum or of specific objects and, if so, under what conditions

Additional Resources

"Collections Management," John Nicks in *The Manual of Museum Planning*, 2nd edition, Gail Dexter Lord and Barry Lord (AltaMira Press, 1999)

A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections, 2nd edition, Marie C. Malaro (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998)

"Managing Things: Crafting a Collections Policy," John Simmons, *Museum News* (January/February 2004)

Museum Governance, Marie C. Malaro (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994)