

The Accreditation Commission's Expectations Regarding Collections Stewardship

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Why does the Commission consider collections stewardship important?

Stewardship is the careful, sound, and responsible management of that which is entrusted to a museum's care. Possession of **collections** incurs legal, social, and ethical obligations to provide proper physical storage, management, and care for the collections and associated documentation, as well as proper intellectual control. Collections are held in trust for the public and made accessible for the public's benefit. Effective collections stewardship ensures that the **objects** the museum owns, borrows, holds in its custody, and/or uses are available and accessible to present and future generations. A museum's collections are an important means of advancing its mission and serving the public.

What are the Accreditation Commission's expectations regarding collections stewardship?

Per Program Eligibility Criteria:

- An accredited museum, either collecting or non-collecting, is required to have a formal and appropriate program of documentation, care, and use of collections.
- An institution that owns collections (including living organisms), whether actively collecting or not, is required to have accessioned at least 80 percent of its permanent collections.

Per the Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum, an accreditable museum must demonstrate that it:

- owns, exhibits, or uses collections that are appropriate to its mission
- legally, ethically, and effectively manages, documents, cares for, and uses the collections
- conducts collections-related research according to appropriate scholarly standards
- strategically plans for the use and development of its collections
- guided by its mission, provides public access to its collections while ensuring their preservation
- allocates its space and uses its facilities to meet the needs of the collections, audience, and staff

- has appropriate measures in place to ensure the safety and security of people, its collections and/or objects, and the facilities it owns or uses
- takes appropriate measures to protect itself against potential risk and loss

The Commission also expects an institution to:

- plan strategically and act ethically with respect to collections stewardship matters
- legally, ethically, and responsibly acquire, manage, and dispose of collection items as well as know what collections are in its ownership/custody, where they came from, why it has them, and their current condition and location
- provide regular and reasonable access to, and use of, the collections/objects in its custody

This requires thorough understanding of collections stewardship issues to ensure thoughtful and responsible planning and decision-making. With this in mind, the Commission emphasizes systematic development and regular review of policies, procedures, practices, and plans for the goals, activities, and needs of the collections.

How does the Commission assess whether the institution's collections and/or objects are appropriate for its mission?

The Commission compares the institution's mission—how it formally defines its unique identity and purpose, and its understanding of its role and responsibility to the public—to two things:

- the collections used by institution, and
- its policies, procedures, and practices regarding the development and use of collections

(See also the Accreditation Commission's Expectations Regarding Institutional Mission Statements.)

In its review, the Commission examines whether:

- the mission statement or collections documents (e.g., collections management policy, collections plan, etc.) are clear enough to guide collections stewardship decisions



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- the collections owned by the museum, and objects loaned and exhibited at the museum, fall within the scope of the stated mission and collections documents.
- the mission and other collections stewardship related documents are in alignment and guide the museum's practices.

How does the Commission assess whether the institution effectively manages, documents, and cares for its collections and/or objects?

The Commission recognizes that:

- there are different ways to manage, house, secure, document, and conserve collections, depending on their media and use, the museum's own discipline, size, physical facilities, geographic location, and financial and human resources. Therefore, the Commission considers many facets of an institution's operations that taken together, demonstrate the effectiveness of its collections stewardship policies, procedures, and practices. The Commission considers the museum's collections stewardship policies, procedures, and practices in light of these varying factors.
 - museums may have diverse types of collections categorized by different levels of purpose and use—permanent, educational, archival, research, study, to name a few—that may have different management and care needs. The Commission expects these distinctions to be articulated in collections stewardship-related policies and procedures.
 - different museum disciplines may have different collections stewardship practices, issues, and needs related to their specific field. The Commission expects museums to follow the standards and best practices appropriate to their respective discipline and/or museum type as applicable.
- In its review, the Commission expects that:
- a current, approved, comprehensive **collections management policy** is in effect and actively used to guide the museum's stewardship of its collections
 - 80 percent of the permanent collection is formally accessioned and an appropriate and reasonable percentage of the permanent collection is cataloged, inventoried, and visually documented
 - the human resources are sufficient, and the staff have the appropriate education, training, and experience, to fulfill the museum's stewardship responsibilities and the needs of the collections
 - staff are delegated responsibility to carry out the collections management policy
 - a system of documentation, records management, and inventory is in effect to describe each object and its acquisition (permanent or temporary), current condition and location, and movement into, out of, and within the museum
 - the museum regularly monitors environmental conditions and takes pro-active measures to mitigate the effects of ultraviolet light, fluctuations in temperature and humidity, air pollution, damage, pests, and natural disasters on collections
 - an appropriate method for identifying needs and determining priorities for conservation/care is in place
 - safety and security procedures and plans for collections in the museum's custody are documented, practiced, and addressed in the museum's emergency/disaster preparedness plan
 - regular assessment of, and planning for, collection needs (development, conservation, risk management, etc.) takes place and sufficient financial and human resources are allocated for collections stewardship
 - collections care policies and procedures for collections on exhibition, in storage, on loan, and during travel are appropriate, adequate, and documented
 - the scope of a museum's collections stewardship extends to both the physical and intellectual control of its property
 - ethical considerations of collections stewardship are incorporated into the appropriate museum policies and procedures
 - considerations regarding future collecting activities are incorporated into institutional plans and other appropriate policy documents

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The Commission also reviews the following documents required to be submitted as part of the accreditation process:

- Repository agreement for objects in custody without title (required for some museums)
- Visual images that illustrate the scope of the museum's collections
- Collections management policy and loan policies (custodial care and borrowing policies for museums that do not own or manage collections, but borrow and use collections for exhibits, education, or research)
- Sample copy of completed collections documentation record(s) (with accession, catalog, and inventory information)
- If the museum is authorized to deaccession, a copy of a deaccession form or other written documentation used for deaccessioning purposes (a completed form if applicable, otherwise a blank form)
- Sample copy of a completed outgoing loan agreement
- Sample copy of a completed incoming loan agreement
- Sample copy of completed condition report form
- Emergency/disaster preparedness plan (covering staff, visitors, and collections)

In addition, the following documents are not required but should be provided if available:

- **Collections plan**
- Conservation plan
- Completed RC-AAM Standard Facility Report

Glossary

Accessioning: The creation of an immediate, brief, and permanent record utilizing a control number for an object or group of objects added to the collection from the same source at the same time, and for which the museum has custody, right, or title. Customarily, an accession record includes, among other data, the accession number; date and nature of acquisition (gift, excavation, expedition, purchase, bequest, etc.); source; brief identification and description; condition; provenance; value; and name of staff member recording the accession.

Care: The museum keeps appropriate and adequate records pertaining to the provenance, identification, and location of the museum's holdings and applies current professionally accepted methods to their security and the minimization of damage and deterioration.

Collections: Objects, living or nonliving, that museums hold in trust for the public. Items usually are considered part of the museum's collections once they are accessioned. Some museums designated different categories of collections (permanent, research, educational) that functionally receive different types of care or use. These categories and their ramifications are established in the museum's collections management policy.

Collections management policy: a written document, approved by the governing authority, which specifies the museum's policies concerning all collections-related issues, including accessioning, documentation, storage, and disposition. Policies are general guidelines that regulate the activities of the organization. They provide standards for exercising good judgment.

Collections plan: A plan that guides the content of the collections and leads staff in a coordinated and uniform direction over time to refine and expand the value of the collections in a predetermined way. Plans are time-limited and identify specific goals to be achieved. They also provide a rationale for those choices, and specify how they will be achieved, who will implement the plan, when it will happen, and what it will cost.

Objects: Materials used to communicate and motivate learning and instruments for carrying out the museum's stated purpose.

Standard Facility Report: A standardized form developed by the AAM's Registrar's Committee (RC-AAM) to expedite the exchange of information critical to lenders and insurers. Museums fill in information about their physical specifications, and policies and procedures related to environmental controls, fire protection, security, handling/packing, and loans. Available only through purchase from the AAM Bookstore.

¹ First issued by the Accreditation Commission in June 2001
This revised version supercedes the 2001 version.