



advancing the
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A Call to Action ...

Summary of Connecting to Collections Discussions

Thursday, February 26, 2009 DeBary Hall Historic Site

Background

Fifty archeology, archives, historic house, library, natural history, art, and history museums and special collections professionals met at DeBary Hall Historic Site (halfway between Orlando and Daytona Beach) on February 26, 2009. Graig Shaak, Steering Committee Chair, and Myriam Springuel, FAM Program Manager welcomed Forum participants. They provided an overview of the national and Florida's Connecting to Collections initiatives and the Heritage Health Index. They reviewed the work done to date by both the Steering Committee and colleagues who attended a Forum in September 2008 in Miami. They reviewed the priorities identified at the Miami Forum, including:

- Training needs
- Regional conservation centers and shared storage
- Collaborations to prepare for and after a disaster

Identifying Priorities

Forum participants broke up into small groups to identify collections care issues in their organizations. They were asked to consider what aspects of documenting, managing, storing, caring for, preserving, conserving, training, or preparing for disaster needs attention to ensure the long-term viability of collections. Seven small groups, with representatives from different disciplines in each group, identified needs and reported to all Forum participants. The participants were then asked to place dots on those issues they believe to be the most critical. The most critical issues are (in order of importance at this Forum):

- Lack of funding
- Lack of qualified staff or volunteers
- Training
- Access to collections care resources
- Storage needs
- Documentation of collections
- Need for disaster plans and training to carry them out
- Advocacy
- Access to collections

It was agreed that while funding and staff shortages are critical issues, it would not be a productive use of time to brainstorm solutions to those two issues. It was also agreed that the last three items on the list are integral to other items. Time would best be spent brainstorming solutions to training, access to collections care resources, storage needs, and documentation of collections.

Three small groups worked on each of the four topics. They were asked to answer several questions about each topic:

- Why is this topic important? Why do we need to pay attention to it?
- What do we need to know to develop solutions?
- Who needs to be involved in answering the questions and finding solutions?
- What else should we consider about this issue?

Their recommendations are summarized below.

Training

Why do we need to pay attention to this?

Lack of training leads to loss of collections, damage to collections, and to lack of public trust. Trained staff can best implement a mission that includes collections preservation, they improve productivity, are better able to secure funding, are able to train others, including volunteers who can help with collections care, and are best able to make collections accessible to the public without damage.

What do we need to know to develop solutions?

As a field, we need to better understand where and what kind of training is available. We also need to better understand who should be trained and at what level. Internally, within each organization, we need to better understand if there are deficiencies within our staff, as well as understanding the needs of the collection to identify where training is needed.

Who needs to be involved in answering the questions and finding solutions?

Within organizations, staff, board members, and volunteers all need to be involved in assessing training. Within the field, professional organizations, university museum training programs, and larger institutions need to better understand field-wide training needs to respond appropriately. Grantors should also be involved to help develop funding solutions that have the greatest impact.

What else should we consider about this issue?

Training solutions should look both at formal training through university programs and professional development for those already in the field. In developing training, it is critical to consider affordability of professional development, sharing standards and best practices, providing opportunities for professionals and volunteers, ways to cross-train staff within organizations, curriculum and progressive skill development, how the training can help build public trust, and mentoring a new generation of professionals and volunteers. Training should also consider ways in which larger organizations can provide services to smaller organizations (this is discussed in the Access to Collections Care Resources discussion).

Access to Collections Care Resources

Why do we need to pay attention to this?

Collections are vital to understanding history and culture. We need to understand history to move forward. In turn, history and culture are vital economic engines. Collecting organizations must act as proper stewards to maintain public trust. Exhibitions and education programs are all based on collections. Without collections we have no stories to tell. There are opportunities for organizations to work collaboratively to care for collections and to help the public understand why they are so important.

What do we need to know to develop solutions?

Collecting organizations must first be able to document what they have through inventories and documentation. They should assess their collection, prioritizing and quantifying needs. That assessment should include how the collection is used in support of the mission. Records should be complete, and kept safe, both on and off site. Organizations should understand what they can do internally and when they need to call in specialists. There was consensus that many organizations need help in being aware of what resources are available for collections care in their regions. Regional solutions and collaborations should be explored.

Who needs to be involved in answering the questions and finding solutions?

Staff, board and volunteers should be involved. In addition, policy makers, potential donors, funders and the public should be involved in advocating for collections care. Professional organizations and affinity groups (such as FAM, AAM, IMLS, SERA) should play a role in disseminating information about available resources.

What else should we consider about this issue?

Related issues to consider include working with volunteers (training, supervision, appropriate responsibilities), the importance of collections documentation, the mission of the museum, the purpose of the collections to the community, and access to experts. Possible collaborations and mutual assistance among organizations was discussed.

Storage

Why do we need to pay attention to this?

Most collections are in storage rather than on view. It is often hard to make a convincing argument because so much of what is in storage is not accessible to the public. Yet it is often not accessible because of the space limitations of many storage facilities, or because proper materials to ensure safe storage are not available, repositories are scattered, documentation is incomplete, or there is no central support.

What do we need to know to develop solutions?

We need a survey to identify the scope of needs, including collections type and materials, their number and size, and the environmental needs specific to those materials. However, in many smaller organizations, staff is not trained to do a census or a survey of the collections. We should explore ways in which trained volunteers or staff at larger organizations can help assess collections – providing both an assessment and a training opportunity.

Who needs to be involved in answering the questions and finding solutions?

Staff, boards, and volunteers should be involved, along with donors and politicians.

What else should we consider about this issue?

Green storage alternatives should be considered.

Documentation

Why do we need to pay attention to this?

Documentation represents the institution's memory, as well as where the object comes from (provenance), why it is important, its history, and research done on the object. Documentation should be accessible to the public.

Documentation and policies represent basic management tools; they save time, streamline internal processes and training. Documentation is key for insurance purposes, and to plan for and recover from emergencies.

What do we need to know to develop solutions?

We need to share standards about data, databases, formatting of documentation, criteria for evaluating value and significance. We need to know what information is easily accessible. We need to conduct collections and needs assessments, regular inventories, and ways to make information accessible to the public.

Who needs to be involved in answering the questions and finding solutions?

Internally, we need to involve staff ranging from upper management to historians, from curators to registrars and IT experts. Externally, we need to involve researchers, donors, specialists such as conservators or historians, and the public.

What else should we consider about this issue?

Related topics to consider include technical evolution of collections management tools including obsolescence, backing up data, adding new data, intellectual property, and reviewing and revising changes in documentation. Professional organizations should be involved.

What else should we consider about this issue?

Discussions about storage should also consider cultural issues, "green" alternatives, off-site storage, training in collections care, collections policies, and scale of projects.

Concluding remarks

In a wrap-up discussion members of the Steering Committee and participants commented on priorities established. Overarching comments included:

- We can provide training easily for each other. There are many solutions that are ready to go. We just need to share them.
- There are so many similarities across the disciplines, both in challenges and in the solutions
- Museums and libraries are recognized as unbiased and trusted sources of information. It is critical that we work together to preserve our collections.
- Documenting our needs is critical. We need to gather information about the field. That information will be critical for all institutions as we advocate together, and for each individual institution to be able to better articulate why they need help. The survey needs to explain why responding matters both to the field and to our own organizations.
- The importance of collections cared for by volunteers was more clearly articulated here than in Miami. There are a larger number of community collections in this region, cared for by volunteers. Those volunteers have different needs. As a field, we need to find ways to help those organizations.
- We have to educate about collections and why they matter. Collections are “for” the people of Florida. We need to involve our users in advocating about the importance of collections. Florida Forever is very successful. We need to understand how that environmental lands purchase program evolved. How do we convince public officials that collections are as important as environmental lands? Once they are gone, we can’t get them back.
- Collections are the basis of all of our education programs. We should more clearly include collections care in overhead.

Note: A transcript of all the wall sheets written during the Forum is available from Myriam@SpringuelConsulting.com