



advancing the  
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through education  
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A Call to Action ...

## Summary

# Connecting to Collections Forum

March 23, 2009

## Goodwood Museum and Gardens, Tallahassee

### Background

Fifty-five archeology, archives, historic house, library, natural history, art, and history museums, and special collections professionals met at Goodwood Museum and Gardens in Tallahassee on March 23, 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 forums in September 2008 in Miami and in February 2009 at DeBary. Priorities identified at the two previous forums include:

- Lack of funding
- Lack of qualified staff or volunteers
- Training needs
- Regional conservation centers, shared storage, and expanded storage
- Collaborations to prepare for and after a disaster
- Need for disaster plans and training to carry them out
- Access to collections care resources
- Documentation of collections
- Advocacy
- Providing public access to collections

### Identifying Priorities

Forum participants separated 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, and/or preparing for disaster need attention to ensure the long-term viability of collections. 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):

- Need for additional trained staff
- Lack of funding

- Backlog on cataloguing and researching collections, database management
- Digitizing collections and making collections documentation available on-line
- Need for on-site and off-site storage

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. Time would best be spent brainstorming solutions to the backlog in documentation and cataloguing, digitization and on-line conversion of collections, and the need for storage.

Six small groups worked on each of the three topics (two groups per topic). They were asked to answer the following questions about each topic:

*Why is this topic important?*

*What do we need to know to develop solutions?*

*Who needs to be involved in finding solutions?*

*What else should we consider about this issue?*

Their recommendations are summarized below.

## **Documentation / Cataloging / Researching**

### **Group 1**

*Why is this topic important?*

Documenting and cataloguing collections is critical to know what the organization owns, why it is important, and why it matters that we preserve objects. We can only tell stories around an object if we know its history and context. Creating education programs, encouraging public access, and developing interpretation are all based on proper documentation. Legal issues, promoting the collection, advocating on behalf of the collection, collaborating with other institutions, and setting priorities for care, conservation, disaster preparation and recovery all require appropriate documentation.

*What do we need to know to develop solutions?*

We need to be clear about our institution's mission and priorities. We need to understand basic standards and best practices at other collecting institutions, as well as requirements imposed on us by others such as legal and insurance requirements. We need to understand what resources already exist, including those provided by state and national organizations. And we should look at related fields to enhance our work.

*Who needs to be involved in finding solutions?*

The list of those who should be involved in finding solutions is long and includes those who work inside the organization (board members, directors, curators, managers, faculty members, researchers), those who use our collections (researchers, professional organizations, avocational users, educators, general public), those who fund our organizations (government agencies, legislators, private donors who need to better understand long-term costs of collections care), and partners. We should consider asking donors to provide funds for the long-term preservation of their gift.

*What else should we consider about this issue?*

We need to consider the lifespan and long-term use of technology as it changes. We should consider new technologies, as well as future users, and continuing education for staff.

## **Storage**

*Why is this topic important?*

Preserving collections is at the heart of our missions. Our space for storage is often inadequate. This affects long-term preservation of collections and compromises their safety. We often work with inadequate supplies and should identify alternatives that are more affordable. We should create a list serve or a website to share resources, including sharing of policies and procedures. We should have standards for educating both the public and politicians.

*What do we need to know to develop solutions?*

We need better training to assess problems, and self-assessment tools to help us determine problems. We need to understand what actions are appropriate to preserve collections and which may do more harm than good. We need to be aware of existing resources, especially grants. A statewide inventory of collections care needs would help us understand the magnitude of the problem.

*Who needs to be involved in finding solutions?*

Staff at all level in museums, libraries, and archeology collections should be involved. Government officials at all levels should also be involved in finding solutions.

*What else should we consider about this issue?*

When we accept an object, we should understand its long-term care needs and educate the donors about the cost of caring for that object, maybe even requesting that they provide funds to support that cost. Could we put signs acknowledging donors in storage and do tours of storage? We should convince foundations that they should fund costs related to storage. We should also learn how to write more compelling grant proposals for collections care. We need to better understand how to deaccession collections and create collections swaps.

### **Digitization**

*Why is this topic important?*

Digitization makes our collections readily available to researchers and scholars, and to the general public. Digitized collections can help demystify collections for our visitors, bringing us new audiences and maybe even increasing visitor statistics. Digitized collections can help us meet the public's expectations for access to collections. Digitized collections enhance preservation, and help with internal documentation including doing inventories.

*What do we need to know to develop solutions?*

We need to identify resources, and understand limitations such as server capacity or copyright rules.

*Who needs to be involved in finding solutions?*

Senior administrators, IT and collections staff, consultants, and legal experts should all be involved. In addition friends groups and support organizations should be relied on to help us understand what the public might want to access on line.

*What else should we consider about this issue?*

Key issues to consider include: copyright, staffing, audience feedback, funding, and migration and maintenance of software.

## **Identify local collaborations**

Small groups were then asked to identify two collections issues that can be addressed at the local level, and what actions can be taken to help ensure the long-term viability of these collections. Some possible collaborations emerged, outlined below. Collaboration and working together was a recurring theme. Four groups identified sharing resources and best practices, and two groups identified collaborative actions for disaster planning and recovery as critical issues.

### **Information sharing of extant documents / Guides / Best practices**

Develop a list-serve and resource / information clearing house. Identify who might run it (Department of State? Professional group? Volunteers from among professionals with collections responsibilities?) Run a list-serve for a limited period, and then assess its value to those using it.

Topics on the list-serve might include the sharing of expertise, calls for help and for the loan of equipment, the pooling of resources for purchase, and the offer of free equipment from those who are upgrading to other equipment. It was underscored that the list-serve should include representation from the different groups represented in the room.

In-person meetings can also be held at our respective professional organization meetings as they move around the state. We should also consider cross-discipline training at our respective professional meetings.

### **Disaster planning and recovery**

Shared planning among cultural institutions and with police departments and emergency responders is critical. We should create mutual assistance networks now, before a disaster, to understand how we can best respond to help each other, and to develop call lists. Perhaps a mutual help disaster recovery group can also obtain discounts on insurance.

Directors should be involved, but they should assign a staff member to represent their organization in this mutual assistance network. We will know this idea is successful when we have strong lines of communication with first responders and with each other, and are regularly updating our network lists.

### **Documentation**

The process begins at the institutional level with cross-departmental meetings to set priorities that promote collaboration. We then meet with other institutions to determine shared priorities and resources. We then evaluate

institutional resources so we can determine how we can help each other. The priorities of this collaboration are then integrated into each organization's institutional planning.

### **Storage (Space)**

We should identify the types of collections we have in common, and determine what can best be stored off-site in shared compact areas. We should consider deaccessioning collections to an organization that can put that collection to better use. The State Archives and universities might help.

### **Collection Assessment**

Create an inventory of a local collection in the coming 6 months to 1 year, identify the collection's strengths, and articulate how those strengths help support the organization's mission.

### **Marketing our collections**

Create a collaborative consortium to help disseminate information about collections, and their importance to the community. This would include a collections and a digitization plan to identify who has what resources and how they can be used collectively.

### **Accessibility**

We should assess if the public can access our collections and collections documentation. Based on that we should consider digitization and documentation of the collections, and what can be shared. We can involve both volunteers and experts in reviewing collection accessibility.

## **Concluding comments made by participants**

- Solving problems together will lead to collaborations

## **Concluding comments made by Steering Committee members**

- It is important to make collections care manageable. The questions we have talked about quickly get very complex (i.e. Do I have to assess my entire collections before I start fixing problem? If yes, then fixing a small problem becomes a really big deal, but if I have small actions to take, then I can make a difference).
- Use social technology for communication and sharing resources (Facebook, Twitter, and similar social networking tools).
- It is critically important to convince funders, legislators, county and city commissioners, and our trustees, about the centrality of collections. We have to help them think holistically about the role of collections in the community.
- The level of knowledge in the room during this forum is amazing. How do we share that knowledge? Make it available to the smaller organizations that may not be here? Make it available to each other as we encounter problems and look for solutions? How do we do that in an environment where each one of us is increasingly understaffed?
- Solutions are in this room. Everyone communicated motivation and enthusiasm for solving problems, and sharing their expertise.
- The process of the forums and the Steering Committee has been very helpful. Many state organizations and a wide representation of types of collecting institutions have participated in this process. We have evolved ideas, and the Steering Committee is committed to help ensure the process moves forward.
- Fill out those surveys when they come out!