Balancing Access and Security in Museums, Libraries and Archives, Part 1

Museums must strike a balance between access and security when responding to patron requests. As institutions, we are in the business of protecting collections in perpetuity AND making them accessible to our audience through exhibitions and patron access. A detailed *Collection Access Policy* and procedures to implement this policy are required in order to protect collection items. In general, the only people who should have unaccompanied access to the collection storage areas are the staff that have direct charge of caring for the collection:

- The registrar,
- The collection manager, and/or
- The curator.

These are three different job titles that have historically had different responsibilities in museums. Currently, smaller museums may use these titles somewhat interchangeably when they have only one individual handling all the collections-related activities. In the simplest terms, the traditional definitions of these three titles are as follows:

The **registrar** is responsible for the intake and paperwork associated with the collection.
The **collections manager** is responsible for the physical well-being and use of the collection.
The **curator** is responsible for the intellectual content about each of the items in the collection.

The concept of access to secured collection storage areas must be addressed in your written policies and procedures and those policies and procedures must be followed consistently every time access is requested; no exceptions.

Registrars, collections managers, and curators are the individuals who should be allowed unaccompanied access to a collection because it is their job to care for and document the items in the collection. All other staff in the museum need to request permission from collection staff and be accompanied by them for access.

For most requests, the collection staff will bring the requested items or documents out for examination in the secured access room rather than take the requester into the storage area.

Patron access to collections needs to be controlled and monitored to prevent theft or damage to collection items. Too many times museums, libraries, and archives have been victims of unscrupulous people posing as researchers to gain access to important and valuable collection items with the intent to steal. Both large and small institutions are vulnerable; documents have been stolen from small historical societies and from the National Archives.

There are seven key components of collections access policies. We will cover the first two in this newsletter.

1. The Work Area

When access is granted to patrons, the first task is to determine WHERE the patron will be working with the collection items and establish guidelines for these areas. This space must be monitored by collections staff personnel. It must be well lit, clean, and uncluttered so that staff can see what the individual is doing with the items requested.

Typically, these areas have set restrictions on what can be brought into the area. If laptops are allowed, make sure that there are outlets where they can be plugged in. Do not allow the case, briefcases, large purses or other bags and coats to be brought into the area. Provide lockers for safe storage of these bulky items.

Allow only a notepad and pencils for taking notes. No pens should be allowed as it is very easy to damage an artifact with a stray pen mark.

Do not allow cameras or use of cell phone cameras in the research area unless you are certain that the photos will not be used in ways you do not want them to be used. When an individual takes a photo, they have copyright to that photo and can use it in any manner they choose.

Written access and collection handling rules should be reviewed with the patron before they are allowed access to the collection. A copy of these rules should be given to the patron and the patron should be asked to sign an acknowledgment that they understand and will abide by the rules.

2. Granting Access

A policy for WHEN access can be granted to special collections, archives or stored collection material needs to be established and enforced.

One question to ask when creating such a policy is: will the collection be available any time for anyone to access without prior notification? This may not be the best choice for controlled, staff monitored access. Keep in mind, staff members have daily duties to attend to, projects and other work to complete and may not be fully available, or "have their minds in the game," when asked to drop what they are doing to assist and monitor someone who has requested access. Additionally, without prior knowledge of what the patron might want, a staff member might not have the required materials in the collection or be able to access them in an efficient manner.

There are two recommended alternatives to an "all access" policy. The first is **by appointment** only. In this policy, a request for access must be made in advance and scheduled for a time convenient for staff and the patron. A written request form should be required that outlines the requested materials and the purpose of use. Requiring written requests also allows the staff to determine if the repository actually has the materials being requested. Having a scheduled time will allow the staff to access the requested materials and monitor their use by the patron without distractions that could result in damage or theft of materials from the collection.

The second type of policy is **scheduled hours for access**. If the repository feels that limiting access to appointments only is too restrictive, then setting scheduled hours when staff will be available and totally engaged in helping patrons is another method of granting access that provides dedicated staff for pulling and monitoring materials requested. This policy can be implemented on a daily, weekly or monthly basis and can be customized to fit the demands of each institution.

Continued in the next newsletter! Stay tuned for key components three through seven of collections access policies.

2018 TRAINING SCHEDULES
ONLINE TRAINING

MS103: Basics of Museum Registration
Look for this course in early 2019

MS207: Collections Management: Cataloging
Your Collection
July 2 to 31, 2018

MS267: Museum Ethics
July 2 to 31, 2018

MS218: Collection Inventories
November 5 to December 3, 2018

MS007: The Mission Statement: Is It Really That Important?
November 5 to 9, 2018

!NEW!
SECURITY WORKSHOPS FOR TINY MUSEUMS

Collections Research for Museums now offering a half-day workshop titled "*Security for the Small Museum: Practical Low and No Cost Solutions*".

This workshop is designed for small museums with 10 or fewer staff (paid or unpaid) who are looking to improve or learn about museum security. It will present practical tips that anyone can implement with little or no cost focusing on non-technical solutions.

We are currently looking for institutions who would like to host one of these workshops

Check our website or call us for details:
http://museumcollectionmgmt.com

SERVICES
FILEMAKER® PRO CATALOGING TEMPLATES

Collections Research for Museums can assist small museums with computerizing their collection documentation using off-the-shelf database software.

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TRAINING ALSO AVAILABLE FOR PASTPERFECT MUSEUM COLLECTION'S MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE

See our website for more details or send us an email or give us a call.

ON-SITE TRAINING
Collections Research for Museums offers **classes for small museums in Cataloging and Collections Management.** The course is designed for those museums which have small, non-professionally trained or volunteer staffs. It covers the basics of marking, handling, measuring, and cataloging, plus general care and storage for all types of objects and materials.

PROJECT SERVICES
We also offer a variety of **other services** to museums, large and small. These **range from simple inventories to complete and thorough cataloging of collections.** Feel free to contact us for more information. We provide a **free initial consultation**.

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