

Planning for Collection Care

By Gwen Spicer

We all know that Collection Care is important for long-term preservation of our institution's holdings. But how do we achieve this goal. The first step is planning. This might seem a bit odd coming from a Conservator. But, I have found that collection care cannot work in a vacuum. Typically, the museums I have helped or seen work towards improving preservation of their collections are strong and healthy institutions. They have thought beyond the vacuum. This does not mean they have large budgets, but they have a plan, and goals that guides an institution through the process of preservation. Planning can be done such that it focuses on collections care. The plan helps to assign rolls to the various tasks. Just this activity alone helps to establish to everyone that these tasks need to happen. Such that Preservation needs to be a holistic activity, that everyone under takes.

No discussion on collection care planning can occur without mentioning the findings of Heritage Preservation in their Heritage Health Index Report on the State of American's Collections. This comprehensive study with horrific results was performed in 2005. (Visit www.heritagehealthindex.org for survey methodology and participating institutions by state). Improper storage facilities are listed in the study as the "greatest hazard to collections." All of their data is based on national statistics, however, the collections in New York follows the same trends with the same percentages. With the only exceptions of more state funding available than other states, due to the great efforts of NYSCA and their administrating agencies.

Some of the many horrific findings are: **(need to select from list)**

70% of historical societies and museums have the majority of their collections stored in areas too small to accommodate them safely and appropriately.

75% of Historical societies and 68% of museums have experienced damage to collections due to improper storage.

26% of collecting institutions have no environmental controls

59% of collecting institutions have had their collections damaged by light

53% of collecting institutions have had their collections damaged by moisture.

80% of collecting institutions do not have an emergency plan that includes collections with staff trained to carry it out.

80% of collecting institutions do not have paid staff dedicated to collections care.

39% of institutions have a significant backlog in cataloging their collections.

70% of institutions do not have a current assessment of the condition of their collections.

40% have no allocated fund, 36% have no specific line item but use have other budgeted funds available. This leaves only 23% who do have allocated funds and 2% who do not know.

74% of institutions were small

50% of institutions do not have written long-range plans for the care of their collections.

30% have no staff who perform preservation activities

62% have not applied for external preservation funding in the last 3 years whether private or public sources. (need slide #34 as image)

As you read this long list, you might be thinking that these findings do not pertain or describe your institutions. These are museums in disaster regions along the gulf coasts or larger museums like the museums in the city. But no. #? museums in New York were surveyed in this study of all sizes with all levels of staffing and budgets in all regions in the state. In fact small museums have more of an ability to make changes, are more agile, have fewer bureaucracies so change can be simpler needing fewer staff members to implement.

The way out from this predicament is planning for collection care. Beginning by allocating funds for collection care, have an assessment performed on the conditions of your collections. Many members of UHA qualify for Conservation Assessment Programs Surveys (CAP, www.usha.org) or can apply for a NYSCA “Get Set” grant from the Grants for Museum Advancement program to have someone perform an assessment. Both of these assessment surveys can provide a holistic list of priorities with the care of collections in mind.

Also, establish a long-range plan that includes collection care with summary of needs, actions, and priorities. Funding for such an activity can be procured with a “Get Ready, Get Set.”

Allocate funds Perhaps adjust staff duties so all have a share in the preservation of ones collection. Often the solutions that are needed are intertwined with other activities that require full staff involvement. Whether educators, or Directors, or board members. Typically, it is time, not so much money that is required, but that too is needed. Such activities may start with simple activities as -pulling down shades to reduce light levels in galleries or furnished rooms, **or** monitoring of sticky traps, **or** changing the hygdrothermograph papers or downloading the data-loggers.

Some additional actions are:

- Begin to monitor your environment. Data-loggers have the least impact on staff time, but the low-tech method can be to install thermometers with a note pad.
- Add Preservation activities in your collection management policy
- Preservation is part of mission but gets ignored. Care is part of this.
- Gift vs. liability donors might be willing to “endow” care of their donation if they are only aware of this need.

Discuss with others of their progress. Often a solution that is needed at one museum has been done by another. “Why reinvent the wheel?” And remember preservation and collection care takes time and persistence. In your discussion remember the recommendations from the Heritage Health Index:

1. Every institution recommits to providing safe conditions for the collections they hold in trust

Gwen Spicer, "Planning for Collection Care" Upstate History Alliance e-newsletter, (Winter/Spring 2007).

2. Every collecting institution develops an emergency plan to protect its collections
3. Every single institution assigns responsibility for caring for collections to members of its staff
4. Individuals at all levels of government and in the private sector assume responsibility for providing the support that will allow these collections to survive

Here in NY we are fortunate to have several strong service organizations, such as UHA, who together enable museums to begin to work towards solving the findings of the Health Index, gathered by Heritage Preservation and IMLS.