

## ALLIANCE ACTIVITY GUIDE

# Accessioning Activity

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Accessioning is the formal act of legally accepting an object or objects to the category of material that a museum holds in the public trust, or in other words those in the museum's permanent collection. Because it commits staff time, space and other resources to the proper care of this material, it is important that acquiring material for the collections be done in a thoughtful, inclusive way that reflects the best interests of the museum and its audiences, and can be sustained by the available resources. This activity guide helps museums explore how well its collections plan and collections management policy facilitates decisions-making about potential acquisitions.

## Museum Assessment Program

Since 1981, the Museum Assessment Program (MAP) has helped museums strengthen operations, plan for the future and meet national standards through self-study and peer review. Supported through a cooperative agreement between the Alliance and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, MAP helps museums do one or more of the following: prioritize goals; plan for the future; strengthen communications between staff, board and other constituents; and build credibility with potential funders and donors.

Part of the MAP process includes a self-study questionnaire, which uses questions and activities to provoke exploration. The activities provide museums with the opportunity to assess the knowledge about its operations in action. The activities are designed to be conducted as group exercises in order to stimulate dialogue about issues and challenges that the museum faces. MAP participants assemble an assessment team to work through all of the activities and self-study questions. Museums not participating in MAP may find it helpful to create a team of appropriate participants for each activity.

This activity is one of many designed by MAP as part of the self-study process. It ranks highly with program participants and has been used in over 2,000 assessments.

## Materials

- » Copies of your collections plan and collections management policy
- » Data on your proposed acquisitions and your accessions for the past three years

## Participants

Suggested participants include a cross-section of staff involved in collections—curatorial, registration, conservation, collections management—your director, and members of the governing authority (from your collections committee, if you have one).

## Part 1: Preparation

Have collections staff assemble and review the information on proposed acquisitions and accessions for the past three to five years (as appropriate, depending on the volume of your acquisitions). Identify any material that fell into the following categories of problematic potential acquisitions:

- » Requests of unwanted material
- » Unwanted material offered by a board member or a major donor
- » Material offered as a “permanent loan”
- » Unwanted material offered as part of a larger collection that contains desirable material with potential legal problems (e.g. permit issues, NAGPRA, questions about donor or seller holding valid title, etc.)

Out of this list of potential acquisitions, is there material still in your custody that falls into any of the following categories?

- » Material that was accessioned and has created unexpected demands on resources (for preparation, conservation, storage).
- » Material that has been in your custody over one year, and remains unaccessioned. If so, why?
- » Material accepted during this period that has already been deaccessioned.

## Part 2: Review the Acquisitions Process

Have participants meet to review the acquisitions data collected in Part 1. Make sure they have reviewed copies of your collections management policy and collections plan. Start by examining the list of all material accessioned in the time period chosen.

- » Are there any second thoughts about any of the accepted material?
- » Does anyone have reservations about any of these decisions in hindsight?
- » Have any unforeseen problems arisen regarding material that was accepted into custody or accessioned?
- » Was material ever accepted due to political pressure?
- » Were there any repercussions from not accepting material you did not want?
- » What happened to material that was rejected?
- » Did your collections management policy and collections plan help you deal with these situations?
- » How often did you follow these policies and plans, and how often did you make exceptions?
- » What is working well in the policy and what is not working yet?
- » Do you feel the need to revise them?

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## Summary

Summarize the findings and discussion using the points listed above as a framework. Note any conclusions about how well the collections plan and collections management policy are working to guide acquisitions, and any changes you may make to help you avoid or resolve issues in the future.

## Core Documents Verification

The [Core Documents Verification](#) program verifies that an institution has an educational mission and policies and procedures in place that reflect standard practices of professional museums, as articulated in *National Standards and Best Practice for U.S. Museums* and used in the Accreditation program. Addressing acquisitions/accessioning is a required element of a collections management policy, one of five core documents that are fundamental for basic professional museum operations. Use this Alliance activity guide to help your museum strengthen its collections management policy and its understanding of acquisitions and accessioning. For more on collections management, please see the Alliance’s reference guide on this topic.

## Standards

The Alliance’s standards address “big picture” issues about how museums operate. For the most part, they define broad outcomes that can be achieved in many different ways and are flexible enough to accommodate a diverse museum field. These standards can be achieved in tandem with standards issued by other organizations that address aspects of museum operations or the museum profession.

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**Adhering to standards is achievable by all types of museums.**

Standards provide a common language that enables museums to self-regulate, demonstrate professionalism and increase accountability. Policy-makers, media, philanthropic organizations, donors and members of the public use standards to assess a museum’s performance and evaluate its worthiness to receive public support and trust. Simply stated by Elizabeth Merritt in *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*, “Standards are fundamental to being a good museum, a responsible nonprofit and a well-run business.”

Having a strong collections management policy helps museums adhere to standards. For more on standards, visit the Alliance’s website at [www.aam-us.org](http://www.aam-us.org).

## Where to Find Out More

The [Museum Assessment Program](#) (MAP) helps small and mid-sized museums strengthen operations, plan for the future and meet national standards through self-study and a site visit from a peer reviewer. IMLS-funded MAP grants are non-competitive and provide \$4,000 of consultative resources and services to participating museums. For more information, visit [www.aam-us.org](http://www.aam-us.org).

- » [National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums](#), edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt (AAM Press, 2008)

This guide is an essential reference work for the museum community, presenting the ideals that should be upheld by every museum striving to maintain excellence in its operations. It includes a full outline of the standards, including the overarching Characteristics of Excellence for U.S. Museums and the seven areas of performance they address. Throughout the book is commentary by Elizabeth E. Merritt, director of the Alliance's Center for the Future of Museums. This publication is available as a [free PDF to all museum members](#).

- » [Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies](#), by John E. Simmons (AAM Press, 2006)

This publication comprehensively addresses how to write such a collections management policy for museums of any type or size. It reviews the issues that a collections management policy should address and the pros and cons of choosing one policy option over another. It also includes many excerpted sample collections management policies.

- » [Sample Documents](#)

The Information Center's sample document collection is a unique and valuable resource for Tier 3 member museums. The collection contains more than 1,000 samples of policies, plans and forms from museums of all types and sizes, most of which were written by accredited museums. Tier 3 members can request sample documents from the Information Center in order to stimulate a conversation about issues and challenges facing the museum and to explore how different museums approach different issues. Using the sample documents should not replace the process of joining staff, governing authority and stakeholders in fruitful and thoughtful planning and policy-making.