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Cultivating "Mutual" Stewardship for Smithsonian Collections

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Abstract The Smithsonian Institution's 19 museums and galleries, National Zoo, archives, and libraries currently have 155.5 million collections items, 163,300 cubic feet of archival material, and more than 2.2 million library volumes. The unprecedented size and breadth of the collection naturally creates a "silo" effect in collections departments - collections staff can get caught up in a unit-specific agenda while big-picture institutional initiatives take a backseat. This paper addresses the collections professional development initiative through the National Collections Program (NCP), which seeks to increase Smithsonian pan-Institutional collaboration within collections and between departments. More specifically, this paper examines a case study through an NCP initiative that provides an opportunity for all Smithsonian staff across disciplines to take an introductory collections course on an internal open-source learning system. There are thousands of other staff members from various departments that could further contribute to the creation of a culture of collections stewardship awareness at the Smithsonian.

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The Smithsonian and the National Collections Program

It is not a small task to manage and care for 155.5 million collections items, 163,300 cubic feet of archival material, and 2.2 million library volumes. As the largest museum and research complex in the world with diverse collection types, the Smithsonian Institution serves as a unique collections microcosm. The more appropriate term would be a collections community, which encompasses 21 units or divisions that act as unique entities. This community serves as an opportunity to observe collaboration and communication on an unprecedented scale.

Every day, dedicated Smithsonian staff work with collections held in trust for the public. The size and structure of the Smithsonian creates challenges to collaboration, communication, and resource sharing to carry out goals. Some of these hurdles include physical distance between facilities, time constraints, and differences in priorities. Commonly known as "silos," unit-specific agendas often take center stage while big-picture institutional initiatives are in the periphery. Despite this, collecting units express a desire to interact across unit boundaries

and to also partner with non-collections staff in collections matters. No matter the department or field, every staff member at the Smithsonian has a valuable perspective to contribute to a holistic, multifaceted approach to collections stewardship.

The aforementioned silos are present in most departments in the Smithsonian and the National Collections Program (NCP) strives to breakdown those divisions and create bridges between departments.[1][2] NCP is the office responsible for connecting, advising, and providing resources for the collecting units of the Smithsonian. NCP's mission is to strengthen collections and to encourage collaboration between the collecting units of the Smithsonian. One of the NCP's main initiatives is Collections Professional Development (CPD). Through this initiative, an introductory collections course, is being created that will be available Institution-wide. The goal of this course, dubbed "Collections at the Smithsonian," is to raise awareness and knowledge about the role of collections in an accessible way and contribute to the creation of a broader collections stewardship culture.

Working administratively, the NCP provides central leadership and policy oversight of Institution-wide collections initiatives. NCP serves an advisory role, manages resources, and formulates plans that address Smithsonian collections needs. The main initiatives of the NCP include: collections care, collections emergency management, digitization, space planning, and professional development. NCP has been working on promoting collections stewardship initiatives since 1993.

Priorities and Challenges

Collections stewardship has long been a priority and concern for the Smithsonian. In 2005, the Office of Policy and Analysis' report, "Concern at the Core," discussed stewardship and other important concerns about the collections.[3] In 2012, the Smithsonian Inspector General identified collections stewardship as an issue for the Smithsonian's management.[4] In 2013, the Secretary of the Smithsonian at the time, Dr. Wayne Clough, stood before Congress and reminded all in attendance that a part of the Institution's strategic plan was to strengthen collections. As was relayed to Congress, Smithsonian staff working with collections are stewards of hundreds of millions of items and we are in the "forever" business.[5] These items, belonging to the public and representative of a large and diverse nation, are entrusted to the Smithsonian collections staff to preserve for future generations.

There are thousands of staff members from various departments that support collections stewardship indirectly and create a culture of awareness and investment. Several non-collections staff from across the Institution and from the administration already extend their arms in partnership and collaboration by participating in these conversations – but how can we expand those numbers? Leadership calls for the Smithsonian community to come together and look for more opportunities to work inter-departmentally and across units. The 2017-2022 strategic plan's first goal is to create a unified "One Smithsonian," and speaks about initiating new lines of communication across the institution.[6] The rhetoric is already in place, so NCP has and continues to take actions to make these goals a reality.

In May 2018, the NCP hosted the second annual Collections Share Fair (CSF), at which they conducted a survey and asked staff to identify their most pressing collections-related challenges within their units. Many topics were suggested, but five garnered the greatest

support from the staff: Deaccessioning, Object Safety, Open Access, Sharing Documentation and Loan Strategies, and Sustainability in Collections Management Practices. NCP's Collections Management Specialist Samantha Snell, under the initiative of the Collections Professional Development subcommittee, organized a conference where these issues could be discussed across the silos for the first time.

The inaugural C[3] (Collections Collaboration Community) Conference in 2018 proved to be a new platform where staff from across the Smithsonian (including those non-collections partner units) could collaborate on the five issues initially identified at the CSF. 168 attendees from across the Institution listened to a panel consisting of Secretary David Skorton, Deputy Under Secretary for Collections and Interdisciplinary Support, Scott Miller, Director of the National Air and Space Museum, Ellen Stofan, and Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Stephanie Stebich discuss the importance of collections. Afterward, participants split into five groups to attend sessions based on the previously mentioned collections subjects. Though each topic could have a dedicated article detailing its complexities and possible solutions, this article will focus on the issues identified at the Object Safety meeting.

Object Safety

Within the Object Safety session, all attendees were encouraged to participate in the discussion. Large sheets of paper were hung in the front of the room and sticky notes were passed around for attendees to write down the specific issues that contributed to object safety concerns. Scribes for the session grouped organized sticky notes into categories for visual clarity. Next, participants called out possible solutions for each category. From there, attendees prioritized solutions on a numbered scale, which were weighed against an x and y-axis of value vs. difficulty. The final large sheet of paper displayed the proposed action steps for each category – with the most valuable and feasible solutions addressed first.

Catharine Hawks from the National Museum of Natural History and Sarah Stauderman from the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, led the object safety discussions and provided guidance as the group identified several solutions to object safety issues. One solution that was frequently mentioned was to create an institutional culture of "mutual stewardship." Outside of designated and protected collections spaces, it would be best if everyone was equally invested in the best care and stewardship of collections items.

Everyone has different priorities and tasks to fulfill depending on their position. However, outside of collections, not everyone may see what their role is in collections care. As explained in *Fragments of the World: Uses of Museum Collections*, "Museums themselves, it is often said, erect barriers around the collections…Only certain staff have the right to access and 'use' collections. Even within the museum, activities and projects proposed by non-collections staff are too often resisted as 'not invented here'."[7] Collections are at the heart of a museum and everyone needs to be invested   in collections stewardship.
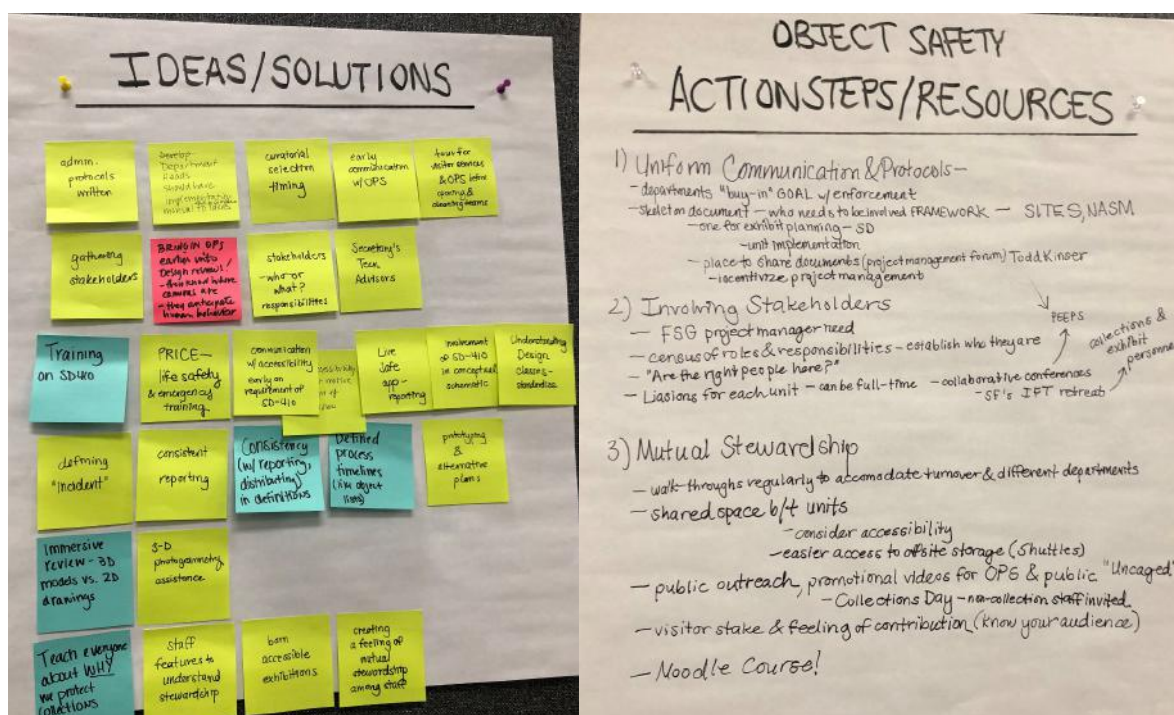
Figures 1 and 2: (left to right) The "Ideas and Solutions" and "Action Steps" large sheets used to capture data from the object safety session during the 2018 C³ Conference.

Formulating Solutions

The lack of consistent communication and collaboration between collections staff suggests that there is a need for relationships to be built on trust and understanding. The NCP strives to foster these communications and raise awareness about collections stewardship. NCP has been modeling collaborative behavior and moving forward with their main initiatives.[8] In doing so, NCP is helping everyone work together towards common goals.

The online sphere has opened opportunities for cultural institutions to collaborate and has created a digital sharing space. When professionals from several disciplines have access to collections knowledge, we can all benefit. Digital platforms are great equalizers that remove degrees of separation and bring different perspectives together. Because of its flexibility, most learning styles can be reached through the channel of online instruction. There is also the advantage of easy experimentation and modification based on continual evaluations, creating a "living" course that can adapt to the needs of its students. Using online space as a mechanism for creative and innovative ways to professionally develop Smithsonian staff, NCP looked to Moodle as an avenue for collections stewardship instruction.[9]

Moodle, an open-source, mostly internal online learning software, is already an established and frequently used tool by many sectors of the Smithsonian. Moodle is frequently used for online courses and as a site to register for in-person training. When the NCP began formulating ideas for a Collections Professional Development initiative, developing a "Core Collections Curriculum" became a priority. This program includes a plan to expand with more specialized and intensive courses as the curriculum successfully progresses. Starting off, NCP, through discussions with the Smithsonian community, sought to determine what core ideas or topics should be the focus of courses for Smithsonian staff.

The Collections Curriculum plan combines data from the Object Safety session at the C ^{3} Conference, with additional research and survey data from the Smithsonian collections community. Research was conducted on 242 museum studies programs' curricula, accessed from the American Alliance for Museums,[10] and research was also done on humanities, art history, public history, and historic preservation coursework to ensure a broad review. In addition to this, a survey was distributed to the Smithsonian collections community for their feedback on what collections information was essential for all staff. Based on the information gleaned from a broad scope review and consultation of the Smithsonian Collections Advisory Committee, NCP concluded that five courses should make up a "core collections" track at the Smithsonian and that the first one, should be an introductory course – accessible across all backgrounds and departments to introduce people to collections and collections stewardship.

This introductory course plans to introduce collections as a field contextually and then use the course as a vehicle to offer advice on how everyone can be a collections steward. The course will be a way for all collections units to offer general information about their specific collections to the whole institution - in their own words. In addition to the main lessons of the Collections at the Smithsonian course, students will have access to resources introducing the various collecting units of the Smithsonian – with the information written by the professionals who work with these collections at each unit. With this two-pronged approach, non-collections staff would be introduced to collections work and collections staff would be able to find out more about each unit's approach to collections work. Individual collecting units such as the National Museum of American History are currently working with NCP to use the introductory collections course as a foundation upon which they can build more unit-specific courses centering on their unique collections training needs. This can serve as a training model that can be replicated by other collecting units.

Internal Inclusion

The collections at the Smithsonian span more than just objects. The designated collecting units include archives, libraries, museums/galleries, and the National Zoo. Collection types also encompass live animals, plants, and cryogenic specimens. The "Collections at the Smithsonian" course is committed to internal collections inclusion, which will require a careful use of language. For example, the course does not refer to "objects," but rather "collections items." Archives professionals work with "materials" and "records." Librarians work with "volumes." These are some very basic examples, but word choice has to be executed carefully to help others understand the scope of collections that we have. All units are represented in the course, having an equal platform to talk about their unique collections. Furthermore, NCP has the course material widely reviewed by subcommittees, collections managers, archivists, librarians, non-collections staff, and even non-museum professionals.

To be truly accessible for non-collections staff, the "Collections at the Smithsonian" course will span education levels, abilities, and backgrounds. We need to start with the basics; what is the purpose of a museum and what role do collections play in a broad museum context? Additionally, if you do not work directly with collections, what about your current work supports your role as a collections steward? There will be students enrolling in the course that may possess no higher education or experience in museum studies or with collections care. Therefore, presenting material to students of the course in a contextual and colloquial manner is important. The tone is vital, as the goal is to familiarize but not to patronize. Reversely, there

is much that the collections community could learn about other departments/fields and their priorities.

Finally, it is necessary that this course in its earliest versions be developed with accessibility and diversity in mind. Accessibility will be paramount and will be carried out by consulting with Smithsonian staff familiar with accessibility measures and by reviewing the course through the lens of GSA Section 508 Government IT Accessibility standards. The course training provider also pre-emptively received a certification in "Making E-Learning Accessible" from the Office of the Chief Information Officer in order to better understand accessible design. The Smithsonian is committed to working on inclusivity, particularly with the Latinx community.[11] Discussing how representative our collections are and what we are doing to include diverse perspectives from the kind of collections items we are acquiring to the staff hired to work with collections will be covered in the course material.

The "Collections at the Smithsonian" course is still under development and should be published on Moodle by the end of the 2019 calendar year. Even though it is still in its naissance, it is a step towards creating a Smithsonian-wide collections "culture." Even if it only produces conversations among staff that normally do not work with collections, there is the benefit of "passive exposure," meaning the level of familiarity with certain topics will rise through repeated exposure to them.[12]

Large Scale vs. Small Scale
The Smithsonian is a microcosm. An administrative office such as the NCP, dedicated to overseeing and working with multiple collections departments fits within the framework of such a large institution, but to others, it may seem like an interesting case study and nothing more. Arguably, there are several takeaways from the NCP's efforts to professionally organize collaboration efforts that are adaptable and useful on a smaller scale for other museums. This is in the form of key steps that are useful for collaboration:

- Bring key agents together
    - Look around at meetings and critically examine emails – are there other staff members that would have a perspective to contribute or that need to be aware of the information being shared? Invite them to the table.
    - Talk to your superiors about the need for a sharing space or time.[13] In a study done on innovating in the workplace by the Leibniz Centre for European Economic Research, it was concluded that:

        > *"In order to boost innovation performance, managers need to provide infrastructure and resources needed for inter-departmental collaboration. Opportunities are plentiful; managers should facilitate the transfer of best practices between departments; invest in collaborative information and communication technologies; and invest in shared meeting space in order to increase the number of encounters between members of different departments and thus information exchange..."[14]*

- Communicate about what tasks, projects, or philosophies drive your work and why. Ask what the most pressing issues are for each person's department. Note where the problems overlap; this is where collaboration is needed.
- Formulate an action plan
    - Write down specific actions or projects that could be carried out and what steps are feasible to accomplish goals.
- Make roles and responsibilities clear and set a timeline[15]
    - With your action steps clear, decide amongst yourselves who is best suited for which steps and who has the most time, ability, and connections to carry out important tasks.
    - Assign roles and responsibilities accordingly and estimate time to achieve each step.
- Stick to the commitment
    - Do your part in fulfilling the overarching goal.
    - Follow-up with everyone involved and stay in communication about progress.
    - If you encounter a roadblock, circle back to your group and find a way to work around it, if possible.
    - In some cases, done is better than perfect. Things can re-worked and having something concrete on paper or finished as a draft builds more momentum than continual formulation.
- Seek to listen and understand[16] [17]
    - None of this is possible without an environment of openness and respect.
    - Ask questions and learn from those whose job greatly differs from yours.
    - Let people know you are interested in them as a person and as a trusted colleague.
    - Be patient and always try to find common ground in situations of disagreement.
- Get up from the desk or get out of your comfort zone[18]
    - Make it a point to get to know colleagues from other departments and build relationships with them. Learn about others' work by asking to observe and intently listening.
    - Let them know about your priorities even if it seems irrelevant to their position. You could gain an outside advocate by raising awareness.
    - More often than not, meet people where they are as a gesture of goodwill and open-mindedness.

Conclusion

This article focuses on a specific case of identifying issues and taking action with an internal course to foster collaboration through collections stewardship. The action of reaching out to the Smithsonian community to solicit their input regarding needs and how NCP can provide for those needs has been a rewarding experience. Creating positive environments for open discussions, being an active listener to individuals and groups that often work behind-the-scenes, and empowering others to speak up and know that their voice matters are inspiring aspects of this project. NCP acknowledges that one size does not fit all and that the collections and the staff who care for those collections are constantly transitioning in and out of positions and evolving in their unit roles. Creating a community is one action but creating a sense of community and feeling of belonging is quite another.

There is still much work to be done to connect the people and the collecting units of the Smithsonian. However, forward motion on these issues will only provide clarity and allow for successful pathways to be found. It can be difficult to maintain a focus when everyone is dealing with their own challenges. Finding the way through trial and error and changing one perspective at a time can be a slow and sometimes disheartening process. The steps provided above present one approach for optimizing collaborative efforts. Additionally, the Coalition to Advance Learning in Libraries, Archives, and Museums features best practice tips for navigating several forms of collaboration if this model is not adaptable for your institution.[19] Cultural institutions succeed when all of us work collaboratively.

List of Figures

Notes

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[3] Smithsonian Institution, "Concern at the Core: Managing Smithsonian Collections, An Executive Summary, April 2005," *Reports/Smithsonian Organization and Audience Research*, April 1 2005, accessed January 13, 2019.

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Smithsonian Institution, "Our Plan," *Smithsonian 2022, Greater Reach, Greater Relevance, Profound Impact*, accessed January 13, 2019.

[7] Suzanne Keene, *Fragments of the World: Uses of Museum Collections* (Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005),79.

[8] Lynda Erickson and Tamara J. Gratton, "Eight Ways to Build Collaborative Teams," *Harvard Business Review*, November 15, 2016, accessed January 14, 2019.

[9] William B. Crow and Herminia Wei-Hsin Din, *All Together Now: Museums and Online Collaborative Learning* (The AAM Press of the American Association of Museums, 2011).

[10] American Alliance of Museums, "Directory of Museum Studies and Related Programs," *American Alliance of Museums*, accessed September 2018.

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[14] Maarten Cuijpers, Hannes Guenter and Katrin Hussinger, "Costs and benefits of inter-departmental innovation collaboration," ZEW Discussion Papers 11-003, ZEW - Leibniz Centre for European Economic Research, 2011, accessed January 13, 2019.

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[17] Benjamin Hardy, "13 Ways to Get Others Financially and Emotionally Invested in Your Goals," *Medium.com*, March 12, 2018, accessed January 14, 2019.

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