

Looking a gift horse in the mouth: Assessing how and when to accept collections donations

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Introduction

Curating cultural and biological materials are central to museum collections. As repositories, museums are central to safekeeping biodiversity, community history and heritage. Additionally, soliciting community participation and private collection donations is a part of a museum's role. But not all family treasures are museum gold. Assessing historical or research value, determining provenance, and legal accessioning can be difficult situations to navigate. From a curation standpoint, potential donations can be extremely time intensive, expensive or even illegal to accept. However, community involvement is central to the social value of a museum, so donor relations should be protected. Our museum has developed a checklist for considering these issues.



Evaluation checklist

When assessing the appropriateness of accepting objects for accession, some key points to consider:

Philosophical-

- How do these objects support the institution's mission?
- Is there another institution that would be a more appropriate repository?
- Will they be exhibited or stored as research objects?
- If research objects, does the institution have a database mechanism or other communication vehicle to make these objects available to researchers?

Infrastructure-

- Is there physical space to hold the objects?
- Based on the object's condition, is conservation needed that can be supplied at this institution?
- Based on the objects' condition, how much investment is needed to care for the donation and are the skills and supplies available to care for the donation?
- What will the full cost be to properly accession the donation and maintain it into perpetuity, including keeping up with best practices and innovative curatorial practices (time, expertise, supplies and space)?
- If the object(s) will be on display, what will the labor, design and supply costs of the display be?
- Where will the curation & exhibit funding come from?
- Has the donor been asked to make a financial gift to support the donation?
- If institutional resources are limited, can partnerships be formed with other institutions to provide supplies or knowledge to support accepting this donation?

Stipulations-

- Does the donor insist on any stipulations with the donation that will indebted the institution into the future?

Objects-

- Is there documentation supporting the legality of the object's ownership and/or collection?
- Are there any concerns about contamination of the objects, such as past pest management treatments?

Decline

If you decide to DECLINE a donation:

- You may decide to investigate alternative repositories and offer a suggestion to the potential donor.
- Have a politely worded policy pre-written about the why some donations are not accepted. If posted online, this can be referred to easily.

Accept

If you decide to ACCEPT a donation:

- Follow your internal record-keeping process for accessioning.
- Provide receipt of objects received to the donor. Do *not* offer appraisal.
- Properly document and house object(s). Database as appropriate.
- It may be appropriate to make the donation known to the local community via press release or public event.

Resources

- Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections
- Utah Division of Arts and Museums
- American Alliance of Museums