



CONNECTING TO COLLECTIONS / MINNESOTA!

Focus Group Meeting
November 17, 2008
College of St. Benedict
St. Joseph, MN

Background

The second focus group meeting for the Connecting to Collections grant project was held at the College of St. Benedict on November 17, 2008. The purpose of the meeting was: to confirm and broaden the assessment of preservation needs; to evaluate formally the stakeholders' capacities to meet needs; to determine the process, resources and skills necessary to meet needs; and to form partnerships to support an implementation grant project.

Participants

College of St. Benedict/St. John's University
Haehn Museum, Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict
Hubbard County Historical Society
Iron Range Research Center and Ironworld
Midwest Art Conservation Center (MACC)
Minnesota Historical Society (MHS)

Morrison County Historical Society
Pope County Historical Society
St. Cloud State University
St. John's Abbey
Sherburne County Historical Society

Kathy Parker
Maira Wild
Karen Danks
Scott Kuzma
Patricia Ewer
Bob Horton, Sherelyn Ogden,
Caitlin Cook-Isaacson
Mary Warner
Ann Grandy, Merlin Peterson
Keith Ewing
Andrew Goltz
Maureen Galvin

Introductions

Bob Horton welcomed participants to the College of St. Benedict, thanked our host, Kathy Parker, and went over the meeting's agenda. Attendees introduced themselves and shared their reasons for attending the focus group. Many individuals were interested in learning more about basic preservation practices and long-range planning. The need for institutional collaboration was also stressed.

The Heritage Health Index

Sherelyn Ogden gave an overview of the Heritage Health Index, the first comprehensive survey of the condition and preservation needs of collections in the United States. Based on the survey results, the Heritage Health Index identified four recommendations to “alleviate serious conservation problems and spare us the painful loss of some of our most valued treasures.” The recommendations are as follows:

- 1) recommit to providing safe conditions for housing collections;
- 2) develop an emergency plan;
- 3) assign responsibility for caring for collections to members of staff;
- 4) encourage individuals in both the private and public sectors to support these initiatives.

Connecting to Collections Initiative

Sherelyn then described the Connecting to Collections initiative launched by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. As a multi-faceted initiative, Connecting to Collections has five main components:

- 1) A national summit attended by representatives from every state and a DVD movie of the summit made available to those who were not present;
- 2) A national tour of “mini-summits” addressing different preservation topics;
- 3) A four-minute video about cultural heritage and the importance of preserving collections;
- 4) The Connecting to Collections bookshelf, a set of 25 core resources in collections care awarded to 3000 different institutions (Jan-March 2009 application for last 1000 bookshelves);
- 5) Statewide planning grants awarded to each state to foster cooperation among institutions to implement the recommendations of the HHI.

Connecting to Collections / Minnesota!

The planning grant for Minnesota was awarded to the Minnesota Historical Society in collaboration with the Midwest Art Conservation Center. The goal of the project is to identify collections care needs in cultural institutions across the state and to develop a plan to meet those needs through an online survey and a series of focus group meetings. Sherelyn discussed the statewide project in the context of the national initiative. She also passed around some of the resources available to institutions and encouraged individuals to visit the state and national Connecting to Collections websites.

Survey Findings Discussion

Participants took a few minutes to look through a report, prepared by Sherelyn, of the findings of the Minnesota survey. Bob then led a discussion of participants’ responses to the survey findings. Our survey confirms that what the HHI found is true locally. Participants brainstormed about some of their specific collections care observations, priorities, and needs.

The following is a list of priorities generated from the discussion.

Functional inventory and appraisal

Each institution will have a broad array of needs, and an inventory process will help determine the appropriate priorities. Participants stressed the importance of performing an appraisal of each item before it is accessioned to assess the size, cost, rarity, and use value (i.e., does it tell multiple stories?). The importance of intellectual control was noted.

Basic care and practices

Many institutions would like to see a series of “How-to’s” produced on conservation. These would include professional appropriate practices as well as organizational assistance (i.e., “How to prioritize conservation within a budget”). Currently, people visit online sites run by organizations such as the Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC), Midwest Art Conservation Center (MACC), the American Association for Museums (AAM) and the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) for resources. People also consult Conservation Online (CoOL) and Material Safety Data Sheets and fact sheets. It was also suggested that we could produce short video demonstrations of conservation techniques and required supplies, similar to a cooking show.

Preservation planning (short term, medium, long range planning)

Participants mentioned that one overlooked aspect of planning includes having clear policies and procedures in place for accessioning and de-accessioning. For emergency planning, people suggested that we share the link to dPlan: the Free Online Disaster Planning Tool from NEDCC. Also, some participants would like to see basic information as to what constitutes a long-range plan and to view examples of plans.

Collaborative efforts (Minnesota Library Access Center could be a model for digital storage and the Minnesota Digital Library)

There are currently many networks in place and we should utilize those connections (i.e., David Grabitske’s local history blog and the Minnesota Alliance of Local History Museums). There was discussion about the importance of expanding those networks without imposing structures or policies on other organizations. Each category seemed to have room for collaboration, but one of the most popular suggestions was a website clearinghouse with fact sheets on appropriate practices and information on bulk buying. Another suggestion was to develop a statewide or localized CAP grant with formal and informal site visits.

New Media

The evolving vulnerability of new media (i.e., obsolescence, decay) presents new challenges (i.e., a steep learning curve, ongoing investment). However, the media do lend themselves to collaboration. Participants mentioned that one benefit of digital access to materials is the ability to gather stories from the public about each object, but this creates new information management and credibility issues. Collaboration on sites

like Flickr presents a problem because no one has responsibility for the conservation of data.

Public Outreach

There is a strong need for public outreach and education on the donor level and also for the public to understand the importance of government assistance. A few people suggested that, when writing letters to thank donors, institutions calculate and provide information on the cost of conservation for an item. Participants reinforced the idea that having a clear plan and an assessment allows an institution to make a strong proposal and clear business case to funders, legislators, and local visitors.

One participant suggested this all-encompassing priority: “We need a collaborative approach to developing a business plan to educate people about the need to preserve digital content.”

Bob offered the analysis that we were describing two separate iterative processes for different planning levels:

Institutional Process

- Inventory
- Priorities
- Business case
- Plan

State Process

- Collaboration
- Partnership
- Shared Resources
- Business Case
- New Media

Discussion (post-lunch)

Bob Horton led the afternoon discussions. In the state, MACC and MHS currently have some of the greatest conservation capacities. Bob described three different areas in which MACC and MHS felt they could provide sustainable support: new media, education/workshops, and planning.

New Media: This category includes audio-video collections and digital collections. Some new media issues that organizations face are appropriate practices for digitization, use/access to collections, and storage.

Needs

A central location to house usable but obsolescent machines/hardware

Vendor information - develop standards for determining which vendor to use; possibly a master contract with vendors to deal with statewide digitization; a statewide inventory in order to know what the contract would entail, and what questions to ask

Future planning and infrastructure - not only avoiding loss, but looking forward proactively - acknowledgment of migration as an ongoing process, not just one permanent solution

Education and Outreach - digitization and preservation standards, appropriate practices, "do no harm," what not to collect, storage, practices (all will lower cost and risk in the long run), also share information about what you should be migrating the information to and how to go about it

Stronger partnerships (with, for example, the University of Minnesota)
How to know with whom to partner? Take advantage of existing partnerships

A (better) strategy to address conservation of born-digital content

Include the cost of preservation/cost of access of sites like MDL on their website to demonstrate the need for project funding. MDL provides a standard for documentation and access to materials but does not generate any revenue.

Education/Workshops

Needs

Basic standards education in all areas

Stabilization – standards for the minimal level of care to be given to each kind of collection

Standardized collections care manual – could be personalized for each institution

Hands-on training

A template or form for all sorts of planning (emergency, salvage, integrated pest management, etc.)

Continuing self-education – where to get your questions answered, which tools to use (RSS feeds, forums, webinars, etc.)

One-day internships for people managing collections

A "Teach the Teachers" or "Train the Trainers" program - a responsibility to share knowledge regionally, becoming a local expert

Increased public knowledge about what conservators do

Ways to disseminate information?

Multiple ways: workshops, activities, books, online, existing networks, and a person to contact

Long-Range Planning

Needs

Scalable Planning – how to start, how to proceed, what is the right amount of detail and planning for your institution

Making it user-friendly so that all institutions can at least prepare the minimal plan rather than being put off by the amount of work

On-site consultation

Statewide information on planning should include an entry point for each institution, outlining the basic level of care then laying out stages to get to the appropriate practices or goals

A checklist of ideals

Site visits to corroborate the need for funding and care

Intellectual controls so that each institution can do self-assessment

Sample plans - not just a template - must have critical application of planning so that people think for themselves

Clearinghouse/centralized resource

Business Case/Plan

- Using awards/checklists/guidelines as built into the business plan to make your case
- More small produced pieces (like the 4-minute Connecting to Collections video)
- Public Education about what is done in an institution -not only what you'd like to be able to do
- Measurement/Performance-based evaluation of each institution, show/demonstrate that conservation is a good investment

Wrap-Up

All information regarding the project, including these minutes, will be posted to the website. We intend to follow up with an implementation grant proposal.

What did we do well?

Found the right host and site

Good food

Including all voices made for good discussion

Bringing together a diverse audience from a variety of institutions (history museums, libraries, etc)

Good directions, planning and organization for meeting

Surveying before the focus group meeting – survey was well-made and completing it was a helpful process for each institution as well

Ability to use the website beforehand

What can we do better?

Who is not at the table? Volunteer-run organizations and others?

How to incorporate informal conversations over lunch – asking people what they've learned

Issue a list of focus group participants to foster regional connections [great idea- we provided this for the next focus group along with a list of web resources]