



CONNECTING TO COLLECTIONS / MINNESOTA!

Focus Group Meeting
November 21, 2008
Minnesota State University
Mankato, MN

Background

The third focus group meeting for the Connecting to Collections grant project was held at the Minnesota State University on November 21, 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

Blue Earth County Historical Society
Carleton College
Cottonwood County Historical Society
St. Olaf College
Midwest Art Conservation Center (MACC)
Minnesota Historical Society (MHS)

Minnesota State University, Mankato
Nicollet County Historical Society
Olmstead County Historical Society
St. Mary's University

Jessica Potter
Laurel Bradley
Linda Fransen
Mary Barbosa-Jerez
Patricia Ewer
Bob Horton, Shereilyn Ogden,
Caitlin Cook-Isaacson
Daardi Sizemore
Ben Leonard
Sherry Sweetman
Bill Crozier, Rachel Thomas,
John Skonieczny

Introductions

Bob Horton welcomed participants to Minnesota State University, Mankato, thanked our host, Daardi Sizemore, 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 digital preservation tools. The needs for increased access, better funding and management and institutional collaboration were 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 five 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.

Planning

Participants suggested developing incentives to planning (i.e., an incentivized grant program that would award more money to institutions adhering to higher planning standards) and local versions of the MAP and CAP grants with a built-in mentor component to hold individuals accountable for making a plan. Conservation emergency grants were also proposed. People would like more information about prioritization in planning and how to make an individualized plan. It was also stressed that institutions need to update plans regularly and have ongoing planning and trainings scheduled.

Basic education

Participants would like more workshops and training for staff as well as tutorial products in many formats and media to obtain a baseline understanding of what needs to be done. They would also like information on how to use that baseline knowledge to argue for their institutional needs and make a business case to a governing board, to funders and to the public at large. There is a need for information and assistance at every level of conservation, from the baseline to the highly specialized. Two ways to deliver this information might be multiple workshop stations at an annual meeting or short video demonstrations on YouTube.

Promotion and awareness

It was proposed that a media kit for conservation or a template for a media kit be produced and housed on the MHS website. Other suggested methods of encouraging public support and awareness of preservation include community events, conservation literacy education (i.e., public workshops on “how to care for your family treasures”), adopt-an-artifact campaigns, and newsletters/exhibits/podcasts telling the story of an object’s conservation. People also liked the idea of developing a formula for calculating costs of accessioning an item to provide that information to donors.

Digital media

Digitization is not only a means of conserving material but it also promotes increased access and increased use of materials. Many people indicated that our survey results may underestimate statewide conservation needs in terms of digital materials either because survey respondents had difficulty best representing those needs on the survey or because there is a lack of understanding of the urgency of digital preservation needs.

Institutional collaboration and support

Participants suggested “train the trainers” workshops for individuals within institutions to become local experts and share information with their regional colleagues. Some organizations would like to share case studies about collection management issues. This could be facilitated via a digital messageboard with RSS feeds. A statewide professional conference was also proposed as a way to disseminate conservation information through existing networks. Another way that we could utilize existing networks would be to organize a conservation area within David Grabitske’s local history blog. An online,

statewide clearinghouse could be created to compile educational resources and funding ideas, and to generate discussions about conservation.

Steps that each institution needs to take in order to meet conservation needs:

Planning – lets you know what you have and what your capacities are

Site Visit – professional assessment of your institutional situation (your unique needs) and what your options are

Doing – grant writing (supported by site visit report), promotion to public, building other funding support, preservation practices

Tools that allow this process to happen:

State programs

Workshops and training

Clearinghouse

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.

Digital Needs

A common application for digitization – perhaps something similar to CONTENTdm by Online Computer Library Center (OCLC)

Storage – for back up and preservation

A framework for decision-making/appropriate practices

Clearinghouse - could provide a list of like institutions, perhaps with a profile of each institution (their statistics, what software they are using, a wishlist, etc.)

Resources – tools to promote access without lots more work such as Flickr or Omeka
Collaboration

Webinars – similar to those hosted by the Twin Cities Archivist Roundtable

Total cost estimate

Audio-visual Needs

Education/Standards for audio-visual conservation

Technical expertise and training (sometimes more difficult to obtain than equipment)

Dedicated tech support staff

Collaboration and information sharing – a clearinghouse

Larger infrastructure for storing backup information - examine existing collaborative models like the Minnesota Digital Library (free, easy, educational, and incorporating diverse institutions, but generating no revenue so it is not sustainable)

Education/Workshops

Needs

Individualized education with personalized follow up

Hands-on workshops (as opposed to something online) because of questions asked by colleagues (and answered)

Shared experiences (networking with similar and dissimilar institutions)

A community network with planned events

Call-in webinars

Short term internships for hands-on experience with a conservator, could be similar to Angels program through the American Institute for Conservation, also with a training component, videotape those trainings

Visual resources available online

Templates for planning

A series or track curriculum: certification, awards, curriculum, structured/cumulative (with the responsibility to then share what you've learned – to become a local point person on planning or digitization, for example)

Mutual help – traveling to other institutions locally to help each other on a regular basis, sharing volunteers – you've accomplished something as well as had the opportunity to share with others

Long-Range Planning

Participants agreed on the need for accountability within an organization in order to move on the planning stages. In most cases, the planning won't get done unless someone is held responsible for seeing the process through to the end.

Needs

Workshops are not enough – it is boring, there is no accountability

Must be doable, break it down into manageable steps, have the plan in stages so you can have a sense of accomplishment, but then more steps to follow

Preventive care – baseline

Know where to get help in case of an emergency (other organizations, vendors)

Inventory is essential for planning

Have prioritized collections

Acquisition policies, including a de-accessioning plan

Resource allocation plan: cuts, responsibilities, next priorities (in staffing, space and funding)

Planning to acquire staff with certain skills (prioritizing training or hiring to obtain those skills)

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?

We found the right host in the right place

Diverse group attended, good conversation

Having done the survey in advance helped get participants in the mindset, and then had to try to rethink things (couldn't remember answers)

Looking at the video and viewing the data was good preparation

Bob facilitated the discussion well

Hopefully there will be a concrete plan that comes out of this process

Potential (inspiration to do something on our own, but also potential for a statewide project)

“I took the survey and knew I needed to do a lot, but after coming to this I feel like I can actually start to do something”

None of us know what we're doing; it is empowering to not feel alone and to feel like we can get started

It *felt* like the first focus group, didn't feel redundant

Good food

Tent cards were helpful

Low-tech presentation of materials made it a comfortable environment

What can we do better?

Who didn't come? How to involve more people in this project?