



CONNECTING TO COLLECTIONS / MINNESOTA!

Second Metro Focus Group Meeting
December 10, 2008
Minnesota Historical Society
St. Paul, MN

Background

The fourth focus group meeting for the Connecting to Collections grant project was held at the Minnesota Historical Society on December 10, 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

Blake School
College of St. Catherine Archives
Dakota County Historical Society
Latvian Lutheran Church
Macalester College
Midwest Art Conservation Center (MACC)
Minneapolis Central Library
Minnesota Historical Society (MHS)

St. Paul Public Library
University of Minnesota Archives
Walker Art Center

Janet Woolman
Margery Smith
Chad Roberts
Gunda Luss
Ellen Holt-Werle
Patricia Ewer
Heather Lawton
Bob Horton, Sherelyn Ogden,
Caitlin Cook-Isaacson
Greg Simpson
Karen Spilman
Daniel Smith

Introductions

Bob Horton welcomed participants to the Minnesota History Center. Attendees introduced themselves and shared their reasons for attending the focus group. Many people indicated that they would like to learn more about local conservation resources and grants, as well as the Connecting to Collections project. A few people said they would like to discuss the specific needs of archival and art collections. The importance of emergency and disaster planning was also noted.

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 four 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. Our survey confirms that what the HHI found is true locally. Bob then led a discussion of participants’ responses to the survey findings, noting that funding from the recently enacted Minnesota Legacy Amendment for cultural resources may be available to help finance the implementation of some of the ideas

developed today. Participants brainstormed about some of their specific collections care observations, priorities, and needs.

It was suggested that the greatest conservation need was one not represented on our survey: **labor**, both paid and unpaid. Three areas were discussed:

More professional staff are needed in collections management, conservation, technology. While participants appreciated that professional training is already available and more affordable than hiring new staff, they still have a need for new staff and more local and subsidized training. One popular idea included a statewide program of shared services to deal with backlogs (a group of professionals who could be farmed out to different institutions on a one-year basis) to lower barriers and overhead costs.

Structured internships could be supported by larger institutions. Student interns would be placed to work in smaller institutions with professional supervision and perhaps receive credit from an educational institution.

Volunteers have higher turnover than in the past, but have a strong interest in working with the collections. Retiree volunteers often have less technical/computer skills. It helps to offer a small stipend, sometimes grant-funded, to encourage longevity and dedication of volunteers. A statewide training program for volunteers or the sharing of well-trained volunteers could help to create a wider knowledge base/skill set among institutions.

Adequate storage was cited as another need. Participants need more space, humidity and other controls to create the right space, and space to store digital collections. A physical clearinghouse could house obsolete technology and software and function as a service center. An online clearinghouse could list of the kinds of technologies that each repository has and could facilitate the sharing of services.

Collaboration lends credibility to projects. Participants suggested that a statewide project should work with the Minnesota Association of Museums (MAM), Twin Cities Archivist Roundtable (TCART), Minnesota Digital Library (MDL) and other professional groups. At annual meetings we could organize hands-on conservation training/workshops to reach the most people. Participants also noted the need to share information across institutional lines not only within dedicated archives, museums, schools, or local historical organizations. This could be accomplished by networking events, online resource lists, or a message board. Institutions could contribute information on their current projects, resources, and needs and others could set up RSS feeds to personalize the information they receive.

Surveys and assessments were another common need. Focus group attendees mentioned that they have difficulty completing surveys of their collections because of the amount of time they require, again stressing the need for more staff/hands. MAP and CAP assessments are helpful because of the planning documents that are generated, but

they are sometimes a painful planning process. Included in this discussion was the importance of prioritizing and creating accessioning and de-accessioning policies.

Some repositories would like assistance in developing a **business case**. Organizations must document a collection's *use value* with statistics and measurements to demonstrate the need for funding. Additionally, we could work together on promotional efforts emphasizing the importance of the collection in supporting all other work (publications, exhibitions, outreach, etc.) perhaps by creating a local video. Others suggested that institutions give tours of the collection/conservation area to board members, funders and to the public to increase visibility and understanding.

People would like more information on **emergency plans**, including disaster prevention and response, training of employees, how to implement and update the plan regularly, and specific information on what to include in a plan. It was suggested that a business case should clearly stress the need for an emergency plan; after you've proved the significance of a collection, it follows that you should do everything in your power to protect it.

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.

Long-Range Planning

It was mentioned that all conservation planning is dependent upon the organization's strategic planning (acquisitions, de-accessioning, resources).

Needs

Preventive planning

Surveys and appraisals to determine institutional priorities

Collaborative workshops/hands-on planning education

Technology plans (looking forward and backward)

A path or stages of planning supported by a strong mission statement

Outreach/promotion of existing tools

Knowledge of the costs of implementing plans

Business case

Delivery Methods Priorities

Clearinghouse and customized support function: to share models/plans/standards between institutions so you know what to ask for and how to justify it

Use of current tools (i.e. dPlan: the Free Online Disaster Planning Tool from NEDCC)

Tutorial on how to do your own needs assessment survey

Education/Workshops

Needs

Planning education

Basic, preventive care information

Training in grant finding and grant writing

Conservation products/supply education/advice (people currently use Gaylord Catalog -a commercial resource)

Business case assistance

Delivery Priorities

A variety of resources that are immediately applicable and available (a call-in service or an online reference service about basic preservation and other topics)

Video demonstrations/trainings

Visiting institutions/Angels program to train participants by doing hands-on work for repositories that need help.

New Media

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

Digital Needs

Education and planning (i.e. technical information, information about rights and security, etc.)

Ongoing migration of information to a more stable technology

Ongoing funding

Collaboration

- Benefit smaller institutions
- Support
- Economy of scale
- Ref: International Species Information System (ISIS) – zoological data base, shared information, to be looked into

Cost effectiveness and prioritization

What to do with born digital materials

- Sustainability
- Cost
- Skills
- Support

Delivery Methods

Shared digital repositories

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?

- Good time frame, good schedule
- Bringing group together
- Complimentary parking
- Lunch
- Accessibility of meeting
- Good support
- Sharing of resources
- Explanation of background

What can we do better?

- Where is this project going?