



CONNECTING TO COLLECTIONS / MINNESOTA!

Metro Focus Group Meeting
November 3, 2008
Minnesota Historical Society
St. Paul, MN 55105

Background

The first focus group meeting for the Connecting to Collections grant project was held at the Minnesota Historical Society on November 3, 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 process, resources and skills necessary to meet needs; and to form partnerships to support an implementation grant project.

Participants

Girl Scouts of WI and MN River Valleys
Midwest Art Conservation Center (MACC)
Minnesota Historical Society (MHS)

Minnesota Law Library
Minnesota State Fair Foundation
Minnesota Streetcar Museum
North Star Museum of Boy Scouting and Girl Scouting
Science Museum of Minnesota
University of Minnesota Archives and Special Collections
Winona County Historical Society

Midge Andreas
Colin Turner
Bob Horton, Sherelyn Ogden,
Caitlin Cook-Isaacson
Dennis Skrade
Mary Chung, Ana Heath
Aaron Isaacs
Claudia Nicholson
Tilly Laskey
Kris Kiesling
Jodi Brom

Introductions

Bob Horton welcomed participants to the History Center and went over the meeting's agenda. Attendees introduced themselves and shared their reasons for attending the focus group. Many individuals emphasized the lack of funds for conservation in their organizations and suggested collaboration between institutions of varying sizes.

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 collection 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;
- 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.

A state conservation clearinghouse

This clearinghouse could: facilitate networking; provide grant information; serve as a material depot/purchasing collective/cooperative buying initiative; produce a local DVD or video on conservation; and house resources. It was stressed that this should be

accessible to newcomers in collections care. The clearinghouse would need dedicated staff support.

Basic information

Many would like to see a prioritized list/chart to guide institutions in how to carry out appropriate practices from a variety of levels. Participants would like simplified directions and tips as well as preventative care information. Institutions could then better evaluate their own collections and start with a plan that is manageable for their needs and resources.

Localized Assessment

Participants suggested that institutions should receive site visits by professionals. In addition to institutions of all sizes benefiting from the knowledge gleaned from this assessment, the visit would result in an evaluation that helps organizations advocate for their needs based on “expert opinion” and would strengthen proposals for funding.

Business case

Institutions would like help in promoting and marketing the need for preservation and training. Bob Horton stressed that one of the best ways to do this is to demonstrate enhanced value and access. Digital collections were used as an example. Digital collections are important not only as a means of preserving materials but also as a way to allow for dramatically-increased access to materials.

It was concluded that, in keeping with these suggestions, the Connecting to Collections / Minnesota! project would have the dual functions of raising awareness (within an organization and with funders and the public) and providing support (preventive care, clearinghouse, site visits/assessment program, collections profiles).

Discussion (post-lunch)

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, and planning.

New Media: Bob Horton led this discussion. This category includes audio-video collections and digital collections. Some new media issues that organizations face are digitization best practices, use/access to collections, and storage.

Needs

Appraisal plus prioritization

Migration

Technical Resources

Cold (and other) storage for materials that cannot be migrated

Digitization for access- avoid replicating, in digital form, current problems

Evaluation of quality of data contributed by the public (e.g., blogs)

Preservation of born digital data

Capacities

Guidelines and specifications for appropriate technologies and preventative care
Collaboration with existing efforts (e.g., Minnesota Digital Library and Steve Museum Social Tagging Project)
Shared investment in tools for conservation of media
Photos may be easier to address than audio, film, or born digital materials

Education: Colin Turner led this discussion. Education was divided into two areas, workshops and online training.

Training Needs

Audio-visual materials
Storage and handling
Planning tools
Specific materials (e.g., leather books, photographs, brittle paper, composite objects, automotive items)
Business plan/grantwriting
Health and safety
Low cost conservation solutions

Suggested information delivery

Step-by-step online instructions
CD Rom/DVD of best practices or YouTube demos
Webinars
A professional available by phone to answer questions
Participants said they prefer workshops for hands-on training and meeting your peers and colleagues. They are prevented from attending by lack of time and money.

Conclusion

It all varies depending on the type of organization and the kind of work that needs to be done at that specific moment. People like the ability to access the information when they need it and not wait until a workshop is scheduled. Furthermore, they prefer to understand the larger picture of conservation, locate their institution within that picture, and proceed from that point.

Long-Range Planning: Bob Horton led this discussion.

Needs

Institutional collection profiles
An emergency/disaster recovery plan
Long-range preservation plan
Cataloging
Appraisal
Collaboration
Fundraising

A user-friendly process that removes barriers to progress
Initial positioning - an institution needs to perform initial practices on their own to receive assistance to get to the next level
Baseline of appropriate practices
Outcome-based evaluation – audience connection, sustainability, commitment/support from a board

Planning Process

Clarify goal of the plan – prioritization, secure funding, preservation, assessment/measurement
Review sample plans – examples from a variety of institutions
Investigate successful and unsuccessful approaches to planning
Use proposed clearinghouse as a tool for long-range planning

Wrap-Up

It was agreed that any statewide preservation plan must be user-friendly, meaningful, practical and sustainable for all institutions and organizations. We need to work with existing professional communities because we can reach more people. A Minnesota Conservation Summit was suggested. All information regarding the project will be posted to the website. We hope to follow up with an implementation grant proposal.

Feedback

What did we do well in this meeting?

Good food
Clear agenda
Moved along well
A variety of institutions participating
Helpful charts and survey results on paper.

What should we do differently in future meetings?

Begin by asking, “What is your biggest problem with your collection?”
Provide less orientation
Clarify upfront the meeting’s emphasis on problem solving within conservation
Suggest that participants watch the four-minute video beforehand
Start by dividing institutions between small and large so that different needs are clear from the beginning