

Objects in the Reading Room:

Centralizing Museum Collection Access through the Library, Archives, and Special Collections

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Abstract

This case study focuses on using a museum's library, institutional archives, and special collections spaces and staff to provide unified intellectual and physical access to all museum collections for research purposes (i.e., not for exhibition, conservation, or other curatorial functions). The case study describes the circumstances for this operational shift at the Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture (MAC)/Eastern Washington State Historical Society in Spokane, Washington from 2009 to 2014, how the model was implemented and differed from previous practice, and examines advantages and disadvantages for implementation and sustainability.

Keywords: access, public services, reference, museums, collection management

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In the last ten years, there has been increased interest in cross-over between libraries, archives, and museums, often referred to as LAMs. For these cultural heritage organizations, much of the literature and practice has focused on institutions collaborating with each other, but less so about potential internal cross-over within institution's departments, such as museums that contain libraries, institutional archives, and special collections.¹ This article describes a model for intellectual and physical access to all types of museum collections—regardless of department or discipline—that leverages the human and facility resources of the museum's library, archives, and special collections to provide enhanced access for staff and the general public at the Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture (MAC)/Eastern Washington State Historical Society (EWSHS) in Spokane, Washington from 2009 to 2014. The model centralized all museum collection access through the museum library and its research reading room, taking advantage of librarian user-focused expertise to meet user requests for all collections.

Current Practice for Museum Collections Access

Museum Collections

The concept of a museum's collections varies greatly from museum to museum. Collections might include zoological specimens, paintings, books, costumes, photographs, sculpture, audio and video recordings, and many others. In some museums, a museum library “containing a

1. See the *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, & Cultural Heritage*, spring 2007 (v. 8, no. 1) special issue on libraries, archives and museums; Duff, et al., 2013; Tonta, 2008; OCLC *NextSpace* newsletter, April 2003; Novia, J., 2012; Cannon, B., 2013; Given, L. L., & McTavish, L. L., 2010; Lavender, K., Nicholson, S., & Pomerantz, J., 2005; Waibel, G., Zorich, D. M., & Erway, R., 2009).

collection of books, periodicals, reproductions, and other materials related to its exhibits and fields of specialization” might provide library and information services to the general public, or may restrict these services to only institutional staff and/or museum members (Reitz, 2004-2014, “Museum Library”; Bierbaum, 2000, p. 24). The museum library may or may not circulate materials to internal staff or the general public, and it is usually separate from the museum’s object collection (Bierbaum, 2000, p. 24).

A separate or integrated department or collection may include the museum’s institutional archives: “the records created or received by its parent institution,” such as board minutes, accession registers, building plans, and exhibit catalogs, among many other materials (Pearce-Moses, 2005; Wythe, 2004, p. 1-19). “Museums ... *create* several kinds of archives. ... The archives associated with the objects in the museum collections—the documents of history, provenance, and validation—are customarily the charge of the registrar or curator. When registration facilities are crowded for space and the library is the more secure area or has better climate control, the files of these archives may be stored there *but are not regarded as part of the library collection*” [emphasis added] (Bierbaum, 2000, p. 24). As records created and maintained by the institution, these are considered part of the institutional archive.

In addition to a library collection and an institutional archive, a museum may also contain special collections or historical archives: “those [archival materials] pertaining to the subject area (as in a history museum), which are subject to the same curatorial care as the objects” (Bierbaum, 2000, p. 123). “This type of collection is found particularly in the historical museum [and] ... if [the] archives are a small portion of the museum collections, or if the library offers better storage conditions, these materials may be kept there *but will not constitute an element of the library’s collections*” [emphasis added] (Bierbaum, 2000, p. 24). These special collections may include paper-based or documentary type materials that were acquired along with object collections, but that are managed separately from the object collection because of space, format, or other considerations (Wythe, 2004, p. 19).

Within library science literature, special collections are defined as materials that are treated separately from the main collection of information resources because of condition, form, subject matter, geographic area, time period, or value; they are usually physically separated from the main collection and may require special access provisions (Reitz, 2004-2014, “special collections”). Often, library special collections are combined with its institutional archives and/or rare books department (Berger, 2014, p. 2-3; Wythe, 2004, p. 18). Within

a museum, the library, institutional archive, and special collections may be combined into one department, although they are almost always separately managed and housed from the museum's object collection.

Collection Access

Museums, archives, and special collections as separate types of institutions are all concerned with preservation and security, more so than a public or academic library. At the same time, these institutions are committed to providing access to their holdings, especially if they are publicly funded. Guidelines for providing physical and intellectual access to special collections, archives, and object collection materials are covered in the literature.² Within the museum context, access to collections is mandated by codes of ethics and best practices. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) *Code of Ethics for Museums*, states: "Museums have a particular responsibility for making collections and all relevant information available as freely as possible, having regard to restraints arising for reasons of confidentiality and security" (ICOM, 2013). In the United States, the American Association of Museums directs museums to "provide regular and reasonable access to, and use of, the collections/objects in its custody" and notes that museums should be guided in decisions regarding collection access by their collections management policy (American Association of Museums, n.d.). While emphasis is placed on access to museum collections, most museum collection management literature focuses on public access through exhibitions or loans to other museums for exhibition purposes, preservation, and registration and security, with marginal space to providing access to objects and records. When this is discussed, it generally focuses on access for internal staff and "visiting scholars" (Burcaw, 1973, p. 114). In addition, collection access is described as requiring criteria for legitimate use and users, especially in regards to security: "The museum should however take special care with requests of this type [external research requests] and ensure that the bona fides of researchers are fully established and cross-checked for security reasons before they are allowed directed access to collections for purposes of research" (Ambrose and Paine, 2006, p. 132). For many museums, the focus on their public products—exhibitions and educational programming—can divert staff resources from providing collection access in a timely fashion; often, collection departments are only able to fit in collection access between exhibition installations, preparing objects for loan, and processing new acquisitions.

2. See Anderson, "Research Use: Ethics, Restrictions, and Privacy" in Wythe, 2004, p. 55-64; Kepley, "Reference Service and Access" in Bradsher, p. 161-73; Benedict, "Archival Ethics," in Bradsher, p. 174-84; Stielow, "Archival Security" in Bradsher, p. 207-17; Stewart, "Security" in Wythe, p. 109-11; Berger, 2014, Chapter 5: Physical Layout and Operations, p. 161-72, and Chapter 7: Security, p. 187-210.

Procedures and guidelines for providing access to materials in museum collections, archives, and special collections usually incorporate some elements of the following:³

- » Supervision of researchers at all times
- » Non-circulation of items
- » Limited or no access to storage rooms
- » Registration of researchers and documentation of all requested and examined items
- » Special handling of items

In addition, museums and institutional archives are concerned with privacy and confidentiality. For museums, this can include an object's storage location and valuation information (Bradsher, 1986; Wythe, 2004; Burcaw, 1973; Ambrose and Paine, 2006; Genoways and Ireland, 2003). For institutional archives, there may be legal reasons, such as attorney-client privilege, that require certain materials not be made available to the general public (Bradsher, 1986; Wythe, 2004).

Each type of institution—museum, archive, and library special collection—has a separate domain and body of literature describing collection access. However, there is little in the literature that describes how a museum might utilize its library, special collections or institutional archives staff and physical spaces to provide physical and intellectual access to all collections, including objects.

About the Institution

The Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture (MAC)/Eastern Washington State Historical Society (EWSHS) was founded in 1916 as the Spokane Historical Society. At first, its collections included “a meager display of a few curios in a single six foot show case ... on the fifth floor of ... City Hall.” In 1925, the museum moved to a permanent location, the 1898 A.B. Campbell house in Browne's Addition. The next year, the State of Washington authorized the museum to “collect books, maps, charts, papers and materials illustrative of the history of Washington;” this collecting scope expanded to include regional art in 1973. With the addition of the Cheney Cowles Memorial Museum building in 1960, the museum began to restore the Campbell House to its “Age of

3. See Ambrose and Paine, 2006, p. 132, 203-4; Genoways and Ireland, 2003, p. 189.

Elegance.” The physical plant continued to expand, with an addition to the Cheney Cowles Museum building in 1984 as well as a separate exhibition and education building in 2001. The extensive collections of the Museum of Native American Cultures (MONAC) were acquired in 1991. First accredited by the American Association of Museums in 1972, it became a Smithsonian Institute Affiliate in 2001, and rebranded itself the Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture (MAC). Its current mission statement is to “actively engage all people in the appreciation of arts and culture through collections stewardship, exhibits and programs that educate and entertain” (Schoonover, 1991; “About the MAC,” n.d.).

In 1960, the first museum library officially opened, which was envisioned to be a research library on the history of the Inland Northwest region.⁴ Previously, the library had been managed by volunteers under the direction of the museum’s director. The research library concept continued until the early 1980s, when the library changed its scope to collecting Inland Northwest special collection materials, and less library-type publications.⁵ These included significant historic photographs, manuscripts, and architectural drawings. The department functioned similarly to that of a special collections and archives division within a university library. The 1991 MONAC acquisitions added significantly to the book collection, as well as special collections materials. It also netted the museum a substantial increase in three-dimensional objects, which was the catalyst for the 2001 physical plant expansion. This building expansion and renovation consolidated all collection storage areas, including the library and archives, in the Research Center building (formerly the Cheney Cowles Memorial Museum building).

Operationally, the Museum Collection department and Research Library and Archives operated separately, although always under the umbrella of a Programs division. This operations model meant that collections which contained both Museum and Library/Archives materials were separated after accession and double or triple-numbering was applied. It also meant that separate collection management systems were used for many years. In addition, the Research Library and Archives focused on outside researcher needs, while the Collections Department spent more time on internal, exhibit-related needs. This meant different physical and intellectual set-ups and priorities for the two departments.

In addition, with the opening of the five-gallery exhibit and education hall in 2001, all museum staff was focused on exhibition and program development. It had been hoped that each discipline collection (Art, History, American Indian, Research Library and Archives) would have its own increased and dedicated staff. With the opening of the new facility in 2001, much hoped-for state funding did not materialize resulting in

4. The Inland Northwest is defined as the area between the Cascade mountain range and the Rocky Mountains, and southeast British Columbia and northeast Oregon; it is also referred to as the Inland Empire or Columbia Plateau (Stratton, 2005, p. 2).

5. The department came more into line with what is referred to as a “collecting archive:” “A repository that collects materials from individuals, families, and organizations other than the parent organization. Notes: The scope of collecting archives is usually defined by a collections or acquisition policy” (Pearce-Moses, 2005).

significant staffing cuts just as the museum opened the expanded facilities. Thus, the institution was already operating with limited staff before additional budget cuts during the 2008 economic downturn.

The Model

The integrated access model developed was based on a description of the access service model at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The V&A had established multiple reading rooms, which provided levels of access. The first room was for general browsers; the second for people who wanted to consult library materials; the third was the print room, where researchers could examine original prints and other archival materials that required increased security and special handling provisions.⁶

Between 2009 and 2014, the MAC used a modified model as there was only one reading room. The reading room was used to meet general access needs to the book collection, vertical file, finding aids for photographs and manuscripts, searching the collection database, as well as to meet the researchers' needs for physical access to original items, from a piece of ephemera to a three-dimensional model; from an archival collection of nineteenth century letters to a twentieth century quilt. Object collection storage rooms were also used as an access location point, though infrequently. Museum staff brought researchers into the object storage rooms only if the object they needed to examine was too large, fragile, or otherwise could not be accommodated easily in the reading room. Thus, physical and intellectual access to all the museum's collections was centralized within the reading room and its staff.

Catalyst for Implementation

The catalyst for implementing this centralized model of intellectual and physical collection access was the economic downturn of 2008. The downturn resulted in the loss of significant income for the MAC, both from the State of Washington and from private donors. The result included a 40 percent reduction in staff in 2009, with a further reduction in 2011 (Kershner, 2009; Kershner, 2010; Kershner, 2011). The Collections Department was reduced from three to one, and the Collections Librarian position split between the Library/Archives and exhibitions. Planned upcoming exhibitions, however, were not reduced, requiring the Collections Curator to focus strictly on loans (incoming and outgoing) as well as preparing the museums' own objects for exhibition.

6. At the time of this writing, the author has been unable to locate the article that describes this model.

Therefore, outside requests for information about or access to museum object collections were unable to be met.

Staff at the institution was poised to implement this model for centralized physical and intellectual access to collections. They had already been working together to implement a single collection management system for all collections, and hoped to develop a centralized digital asset management system and a cross-departmental digital asset manager position. Unfortunately, this position was lost during budget cuts. Most significant was the willingness of the staff and administration to try a new model for collection access. Willingness and buy-in came from the very top: the Executive Director, Museum Programs Manager, and Museum Operations Manager all supported the shift to a centralized point for information and access. Staff who implemented the model was willing to operate outside their traditional roles and responsibilities in order to create a streamlined user experience. These staff included the Collections Librarian, Museum Collections Curator, History Curator, and Special Collections Curator.

Implementation

The central change was in the revision of the Collections Librarian position scope to include access to all collections. Additional changes included updating public information and expanding physical and intellectual access permissions for the Collections Librarian and Special Collections Curator.

Collections Librarian Position

The Collections Librarian job description was revised to include responsibilities for meeting access requests for internal and external clients for all collections. All collection inquiries for external research and collection access were funneled through the Collections Librarian. This position received requests through all mediums: in-person, by telephone, and email. External requests initially received by other museum staff, such as the Collections Curator or History Curator, were directed to the Collections Librarian for an initial reply. If the referring staff member had suggestions for collection resources or information, these staff provided these suggestions to the Collections Librarian at the time of the referral. If they wanted to be involved with the outside requester or be informed of the outcome of the inquiry, they would notify the Collections Librarian. Generally, the Collections Librarian made a point to follow up or notify

curators if she was dealing with or had responded to an inquiry in their subject or collection area.

The Collections Librarian used a triage process for reviewing information and access requests that took into account the type of request, the extent of resources available, the extent to which special appointments might be needed, and the urgency of the request. For example, requests by local television news reporters or newspaper journalists were dealt with quickly so as to meet their short deadlines. The Collections Librarian attempted to respond back to requestors within 24 hours of their inquiry during the work week, so that requestors knew their request had been received.

Similar to reference service requests for archival or special collections, the Collections Librarian was able to provide requestors with an overview of object collection items or groups of items that might meet their research needs. She could provide lists of objects from the museum's collection management database in PDF form via email; these lists might include thumbnail images of objects, if they had been photographed in the last ten years. Sometimes the images were scans of earlier photo prints or slides. The lists included general information, such as object type, title, date, dimensions, creator, and object number. These lists were invaluable in helping researchers determine the extent, if any, of the in-person research visit they might need to make. In some cases, providing the information from the collection management database and/or object records met the researcher's needs and no physical access was required.

If the researcher did need to physically access collection objects, he or she would identify the objects based on the lists from the collection management database. A list of the selected objects would be sent to the Collections Curator and the appropriate subject curator for review in case, there might be any known handling or preservation issues. The Collections Librarian also consulted with these staff to determine which locations would be best to use during the researcher's visit. For smaller items in good condition, the researcher could use the Reading Room. Objects would be retrieved from storage, placed on carts or tables, and the examination area, usually a table, would be prepared for the material type. Usually this meant a padded blanket with clean cotton cloth would be spread on the table. For two-dimensional items from the art collection, such as photographs or other prints, there was little preparation of the area as it was already clean, large and flat. If the objects were too large to retrieve and bring to the Reading Room, the Collections Librarian would make arrangements for the researcher to view the items in their storage location. As with appointments in the Reading Room, the appointments in storage rooms were supervised and the room was prepped for the visit

by providing space around the object for the examiner to look without bumping into or damaging other objects. Many times, the object would be located behind other objects that would need to be relocated temporarily during the researcher's visit. For example, a researcher wishing to examine a stagecoach wanted to be able to see all sides; this meant other items had to be relocated to other storage rooms or work rooms, and the stagecoach itself had to be moved away from the wall. This required considerable time from the Collections Curator to prepare the physical space with the Collections Librarian. However, it still saved the Collections Curator time, as she did not also need to supervise the visit (several hours) or coordinate the appointment time.

The Collections Librarian supervised all access visits. She provided security, registered researchers using appropriate forms such as access agreements and publication permissions, instructed researchers in special handling guidelines, and assisted them if they needed to use the Library/Archive's copying services. The Library/Archives Reading Room already had a copy machine available for archives and special collections use; therefore, it was convenient to also use this space for review of collection object files and copying of selected materials, if needed.

In addition, because the Library and Archives already had a workflow and forms in place to accept reproduction orders from researchers—including publishers—requests for object collection imaging or reproduction were moved to the department. The Collections Librarian and Special Collections Curator reviewed requests to see if digital images already existed in the museum collection management system, coordinated with the museum's part-time photographer to have photography completed, delivered images to requestors, and collected payment. This change in procedure allowed the Collections Department to invent their own imaging request workflow and forms. Since these types of requests were not frequent, they were a manageable addition to the already-established workflow in the Library and Archives.

Finally, the funneling of information and access requests was not limited to outside entities. This method was also applied to internal requests from the public relations department, administration, and curatorial staffs. While curatorial staff already had individual physical access to their specific subject collections and could search the museum's collection management system themselves, the Collections Librarian could assist them in executing searches, as well as troubleshooting problems with the system. This was especially critical because of the limited data available in most object records. Knowing the data and structure allowed the Collections Librarian to search more efficiently.

This allowed curators to save time, although it also limited their knowledge of the system.

Public Information

In order to direct all inquiries to the Collections Librarian, the staff made a concerted effort in all marketing materials, including the website, to give out only the email address and telephone number of the Library and Archives. In addition, the museum developed a new website design during this time, which allowed the staff to group collections access under the Research category, rather than by each department. The same was true for grouping all collection types under Collections, rather than by departments. Another initiative was development of an online interface for the collection management system; the interface was developed so that users could search across all departments if needed. Staff thought this would meet user needs as they did not distinguish the museum's collections by departments or subject areas or formats. They just wanted to find "stuff".⁷

Expanded Collections Available to Researchers

Because of the change to how access was provided, a wider range of resources were available to researchers, both those undertaking archival research and those examining cultural objects. In the past, researchers would have had to make separate appointments in order to examine materials in different departments; for example, if they wanted to review the papers of a local inventor, they would need to schedule an appointment with the Research Library and Archives; if they wanted to also examine the models built by the inventor, they would need to make a separate appointment with the History Curator or Collections Curator. Because of exhibition deadlines, the latter staff was usually not able to provide access to the objects for several weeks or months after the initial inquiry. Once these types of requests for collection access were consolidated, the researcher could make one appointment to view all materials, and many times could examine the archival material next to the object it referred to, providing a seamless information experience.

The types of resources traditionally made available to researchers through the Research Library and Archives, or to museum staff through the Collections Department, were divided and different. This division caused information gaps; in bringing together information access, many of these gaps were merged and sometimes brought back together collections that had been separated because of format. The types of

7. Almost a century earlier, John C. Dana similarly described visitors' interests in viewing both the objects and information about them: "It would be difficult to find a point in time, in the life of any visitor who has shown a lively interest ... when a book would be as useful to him as when he has just been examining the collections which attract him" (as cited in Bierbaum, 2000, p. 154).

resources traditionally made available through the Research Library and Archives included books, periodicals, manuscript collections (personal papers, corporate records), architectural drawings, scrapbooks, historic photographs, and maps. In addition, the archival records of the museum could be consulted. These included records of the board of trustees and director, publications created by the museum (newsletters, press releases), photographs of museum events and people, curators' research files, and exhibition records. The Collections Department cared for and provided access to the object collection files, which included traditional museum forms and information, such as gift statements, donor correspondence, conservation records, copies of catalogs and exhibit label text, and additional information assembled about the objects, the creators or collectors, donors, etc. These records served as the basis for the collection management system records when the museum began using an automated system in the 1980s. These records also included information about library and special collections items that were accessioned through the Registrar's office prior to 1983, when all donations were accessioned centrally. This provenance was generally lost when the items were transferred to the Research Library and Archives, particularly when a new photograph numbering system was developed in the 1980s.

Extensions to Collection Access Model

In addition to changing the way the museum provided physical and intellectual access to its collections, the staff also envisioned implementing changes to the way object collections were cataloged. These changes would take into account the greater expertise of those with library or information science backgrounds in assessing and applying controlled vocabulary terms, as well as considering the "aboutness" of three-dimensional objects, not only their "of-ness".⁸ This change would also allow the library staff to bridge access for all collection types using the same controlled vocabulary terms in library, archives, special collections and object collection records. In this way, users could see the connections between materials based on subject, as well as material type or format. While staff hoped to implement this practice, it was not feasible because of changes in administration.

Changes in Practice and Training

In order to implement the access system described, the staff made intentional changes in their daily work, job descriptions, and training from other staff members. In daily work, this meant that the Collections

8. See Zoller, G. and DeMarsh, K. (2013). For the record: Museum cataloging from a library and information science perspective. *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society*, 32(1), p. 54-70 for an example of library/information science practitioner's crossing over into museum object collections.

Curator referred inquiries to the Collections Librarian, rather than reply herself; the same was true for subject curators. Changes were made to informational materials, such as the website, signage, telephone voice mail messages, and was communicated to visitor services staff, who were the front line when working with the public, and museum staff such as the public relations, administrative secretary, and others who received collection information requests and questions.

The Collections Librarian's job description was rewritten to include responsibility for access to all collections. Previously, this position had been titled Archives Librarian or Special Collections Librarian indicating that the position was focused on archival, special collections, and library materials. With the change in job description, the position was renamed "Collections Librarian" to encompass all collections and to indicate that the position, as a librarian, was focused on users and information access.

Significant training was given to the Collections Librarian and Special Collections Curator, and reciprocal training to the Collections Curator. This was an attempt to cross train so that each position could cover basic functions of the other positions, if needed. The Collections Librarian and Special Collections Curator learned proper object handling techniques as well as general guidelines for how to assess if objects could be safely moved and handled. In addition, staff cuts necessitated the Collections Librarian spend significant time supporting exhibition installation and de-installation, including retrieval and preparation of objects, as well as condition assessments. This work dovetailed well with her functions in providing object collection access to researchers.

Finally, extensive training on using the museum's collection management system was undertaken by the Collections Librarian. Because the Special Collections Curator had been involved in the migration from the previous system to the new, she had expertise and was able to train the Collections Librarian in how to use the system. In addition, training in the type of information available in the object collection files, coupled with instruction in the life cycle of information within the museum's institutional archival records, allowed the Collections Librarian to effectively track down information about objects for researchers.

At this time the object collection files (accession files) were physically relocated to the Archives Storage room and placed next to the Library and Archives' donor and collection files. This allowed for easy physical access to object collection files when assisting researchers, provided climate control and security for the files, which included degrading paper that should not have been frequently handled, and increased security in that only curatorial staff had access to the storage room.

Analysis

There were advantages and disadvantages to the implementation of this access model. Institutions considering a similar model should be aware of potential barriers or concerns to implementation.

Advantages

The advantages of the model are efficiency and increased focus on user needs. In leveraging the user-focused training of librarians, the museum was able to meet user requests for collection information and access more efficiently than in the past, especially during times of peak exhibition installation and deinstallation activity. Users were able to benefit from a one-stop approach to information and physical access that spanned all collection types. This approach benefited users as they were interested in any resource that related to their topic of interest, whether 3-D or 2-D, archival or material culture. This equated to users needing to contact the museum fewer times as they did not need to contact each department individually. In addition, this model allowed collections that had become disassociated to be reunited for the benefit of users, both internal and external. From the perspective of the museum's staff, the implementation of this access model was positive: "I certainly appreciate all of the support that [Library and Archives staff] were able to give to collection functions during those difficult times" (V. Wahl, personal communication, January 30, 2015).

Disadvantages and Barriers to Implementation

Disadvantages or barriers to implementation of this access model focus on physical space and personnel issues. In terms of physical space, the institution must have a large enough "reading room" or collection public access space to accommodate three-dimensional objects. Use of traditional library reading carrels is not feasible. Ideally, the space will have large tables adequately spaced apart, which allow for objects to be spread out and for users to move around the objects without risk of damage. Proximity to object collections is also an issue. Minimizing transport time and transport risks, such as moving through small doorways with large carts, is essential. Especially if the collections are physically located in separate buildings or connected by narrow passages or doorways, there will be increased risk of damage to objects during transport. In addition, adequate security provisions are necessary. If the physical space cannot be adequately secured—for example, if there are

windows that open to the outside or if the general public can easily access the space without being seen by staff—then it is not an optimal space for objects, let alone for archival or special collections materials.

Institutions should also consider the personnel and personality issues involved in implementing this model. Because the model diverts responsibility for collection information and physical access from their traditional positions within a collection, registration, or curatorial department to the library, which may or may not be part of the same division, there may be significant push-back from staff who will see this as a risk to their position(s). Curators in particular may not be comfortable with “the public” receiving uncurated information. In this case, continuing to consult the curator during the reference process is required. The curator may find that he or she appreciates the extra time available to do other work, or may resent not having the opportunity to display his/her expertise publicly. This will need to be navigated tactfully. In the end, personality may provide enough of a barrier that implementation is not possible.

In addition, all staff must buy into the new model, including the librarian, archivist, special collections curator, or combination thereof. Staff positions gaining new tasks under this model may need to give up other tasks in order to take on these responsibilities. The positions that take on responsibility for all collection access must also be able to think outside the construct of traditional library materials and consider all resource types as potential information carriers for users. These might include artist sketchbooks, donor letters describing the acquisition of an object, or correspondence between the museum director and donors. Finally, the staff who will be providing physical and intellectual access need adequate training in understanding museum object collection data, handling three-dimensional objects, and assessing object condition prior to physical access. These are aspects not usually learned in library and information science, although some aspects are taught in archives management or rare book courses. Providing adequate training to fill these gaps may be cost and time prohibitive to the institution. In addition, learning how three-dimensional objects are described, as well as deficiencies and changes in institutional cataloging practice over time are necessary in order for the staff providing intellectual access to exhaust the ways they search. Learning these methods may or may not be possible or efficient for staff.

Another disadvantage is in sustainability of the model because it is a hybrid of professional domains. When staff leave the institution, it may be more difficult to fill their positions because of the interdisciplinary nature of their position. The learning curve may be too high or the

position too diverse in terms of collection types. On the other hand, someone who is interested in access and is able to make the leap to material culture as information resources will be able to take advantage of this type of position. At the MAC, the centralized access model was not sustained after significant administrative changes and staff turnover in 2013 and 2014, which included the Collections Librarian and Special Collections Curator positions. The MAC has reverted to using the previous access model of separate physical and intellectual access through the Research Library and Archives or the Museum Collections department (V. Wahl, personal communication, January 30, 2015).

Other Issues and Potential Impact

Other areas that could be affected by implementation of this access model include physical space and intellectual systems. Because access staff is concerned with all collection types, they will need access to all storage areas. This brings up issues of security; the more access people have to collection materials, the higher risk to the collections and for the staff to be held accountable when items are identified as missing. On a positive note, the change in access could prompt a rethinking of the use of collection storage spaces, which are an expensive part of museum operations. Use of this model might prompt the movement of collection objects that are requested more frequently to be moved to storage areas that are more conducive to convenient paging by staff and that minimize the transport and handling risks described above. This may also prompt the decoupling of storage rooms and subject areas. For example, storing art materials, such as works on paper, in a room with archival collections or photographic collections might take advantage of spaces set up especially for these two-dimensional materials.

Another area that may be impacted is the museum's information systems. Because access is centralized, this may prompt the shift to a smaller number of systems in order to create a federated search or a discovery-type service. Whether the information system is adequate for many resource types is an issue. However, with continued movement on linked data initiatives, these may become less so in the future.

Information equity is an issue the institution and the librarian will have to grapple with a model such as this implemented. In the model, equal provision to intellectual and physical access for collections is mandated. This means the curator, scholar, student, and general public are treated as much the same as possible. Of course, the museum opens itself up to liability in providing information such as the object's valuation or provenance information for objects of questionable ownership. For

public institutions, this is less of an issue as they are subject to public records laws. For private institutions, this is a murky area. For the librarian who adheres to the ALA Code of Ethics, this will be cause for conflict. In addition, with the AAM describing “legitimate” access for users, this raised issues of equity. Who is “legitimate” and who decides who is “legitimate”? For institutions with American Indian objects, this will be an issue for objects that require special handling or viewing restrictions, based on the cultural practices of the tribe or people. Fifty or one hundred years ago, these same objects were considered legitimate sources of information about how aboriginal people lived, which is why they are in museum collections. But how do those charged with providing equitable access balance the cultural restrictions with fair access? This issue has been debated recently, especially with regard to American Indian materials in archives.⁹

Conclusion

Partnerships among museums, libraries and archives have been a recent trend. This case study described an internal partnership that leveraged the human resources and physical spaces of a medium-sized, general museum’s library, archives and special collections division to provide intellectual and physical access to all museum collections, thereby improving user access and experience.

The access model implemented centralized internal and external research requests through one staff position, the Collections Librarian, and utilized the library, archives, and special collections reading room as its central physical space. This model leveraged the user-focused training of the Collections Librarian to meet user requests for information about and access to all museum collections, as well as exposed users to a wider array of resource types than were available to them previously.

Institutions considering implementation of this model should consider several aspects, including staff willingness, administrative buy-in, and available physical spaces. Equitable access and sustainability are areas of concern when implementing the model. This access model was implemented as a response to reduced financial and staff resources, and but one example of how cultural heritage organizations are collaborating internally to meet user needs within an environment of reduced resources.

9. See the First Archivist Circle’s “Protocols for Native American Archival Materials” (2007, retrieved from www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/).

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