

## ALLIANCE ACTIVITY GUIDE

# Deaccessioning Activity

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Deaccessioning is a necessary and appropriate tool in collections management, and a way for a museum to refine its collections. Often times, an object does not fit the organization's scope of collections, cannot be cared for properly or poses a hazard to staff, so it may be considered for deaccessioning. This activity facilitates discussion to determine how well a collections plan and collections management policy help make decisions about deaccessioning. The activity also assesses the appropriateness of deaccessioning and the decision-making process.

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## Museum Assessment Program

Since 1981, the Museum Assessment Program (MAP) has helped museums strengthen operations, plan for the future and meet national standards through self-study and peer review. Supported through a cooperative agreement between the Alliance and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, MAP helps museums do one or more of the following: prioritize goals; plan for the future; strengthen communications between staff, board and other constituents; and build credibility with potential funders and donors.

Part of the MAP process includes a self-study questionnaire, which uses questions and activities to provoke exploration. The activities provide museums with the opportunity to assess the knowledge about its operations in action. The activities are designed to be conducted as group exercises in order to stimulate dialogue about issues and challenges that the museum faces. MAP participants assemble an assessment team to work through all of the activities and self-study questions. Museums not participating in MAP may find it helpful to create a team of appropriate participants for each activity.

This activity is one of many designed by MAP as part of the self-study process. It ranks highly with program participants and has been used in over 2,000 assessments.



## Materials

- » Copies of your collections plan and collections management policy
- » Data on your deaccessions for the past five years

## Participants

- » Suggested participants include a cross-section of staff involved in collections—curatorial, registration, conservation, collections management—your director, and members of the governing authority (from your collections committee, if you have one).

# Part 1: Review Collections Plan, Policy and Materials

Have collections staff assemble and review the information on proposed and actual deaccessions for the past five years. Conduct a tour of collections (including storage) for the group working on this. Have them re-read the collections plan and collections management policy.

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# Part 2: Review the Deaccessioning Process

Have the participants meet to review the deaccessioning data collected in part 1. Start by examining the list of deaccessioned material. Discuss the following:

- » Have the deaccessions that have taken place been conducted in accordance with the policies and procedures of your organization?
- » Have any exceptions been made?
- » Are there deaccessions that have been approved over a year ago, but have not yet been disposed of? If so, why?
- » Are deaccession proceeds used in accordance with the museum's policies on capitalization of collections?



Ask the group, based on their tour or their existing knowledge of collections, whether there is any material in your collections which does not seem to belong. This would include material that does not fit your collections plan, or scope of collections statement in the collections management policy, or mission.

- » What is the historical reason you hold this material?
- » Are there political considerations that are a barrier to deaccessioning?
- » If there is material that should be deaccessioned, what are the costs of keeping it (in space, staff time, pest control risk, etc.)?
- » What are the barriers to deaccessioning and disposing of this material?
- » Are there any modifications this group thinks should be made to the collecting plan or collections policy to tighten up deaccessioning, or expedite it?

## Summary

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Write a summary with a list of recommended follow-up actions. Include any conclusions about how well the collections plan and collections management policy are working to guide deaccessioning, and any changes you may make to help you avoid or resolve issues in the future.

## Core Documents Verification

The [Core Documents Verification](#) program verifies that an institution has an educational mission and policies and procedures in place that reflect standard practices of professional museums, as articulated in *National Standards and Best Practice for U.S. Museums* and used in the Accreditation program. Addressing deaccessioning is a required element of a collections management policy, one of five core documents that are fundamental for basic professional museum operations. Use this Alliance activity guide to help your museum strengthen its collections management policy and its understanding of deaccessioning. For more on collections management, please see the Alliance’s reference guide on this topic.

## Standards

The Alliance’s standards address “big picture” issues about how museums operate. For the most part, they define broad outcomes that can be achieved in many different ways and are flexible enough to accommodate a diverse museum field. These standards can be achieved in tandem with standards issued by other organizations that address aspects of museum operations or the museum profession.

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### **Adhering to standards is achievable by all types of museums.**

Standards provide a common language that enables museums to self-regulate, demonstrate professionalism and increase accountability. Policy-makers, media, philanthropic organizations, donors and members of the public use standards to assess a museum’s performance and evaluate its worthiness to receive public support and trust. Simply stated by Elizabeth Merritt in *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*, “Standards are fundamental to being a good museum, a responsible nonprofit and a well-run business.”

Having a strong collections management policy helps museums adhere to standards. For more on standards, visit the Alliance’s website at [www.aam-us.org](http://www.aam-us.org).

## Where to Find Out More

The [Museum Assessment Program](#) (MAP) helps small and mid-sized museums strengthen operations, plan for the future and meet national standards through self-study and a site visit from a peer reviewer. IMLS-funded MAP grants are non-competitive and provide \$4,000 of consultative resources and services to participating museums. For more information, visit [www.aam-us.org](http://www.aam-us.org).

- » [National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums](#), edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt (AAM Press, 2008)

This guide is an essential reference work for the museum community, presenting the ideals that should be upheld by every museum striving to maintain excellence in its operations. It includes a full outline of the standards, including the overarching Characteristics of Excellence for U.S. Museums and the seven areas of performance they address. Throughout the book is commentary by Elizabeth E. Merritt, director of the Alliance's Center for the Future of Museums. This publication is available as a [free PDF to all museum members](#).

- » [Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies](#), by John E. Simmons (AAM Press, 2006)

This publication comprehensively addresses how to write such a collections management policy for museums of any type or size. It reviews the issues that a collections management policy should address and the pros and cons of choosing one policy option over another. It also includes many excerpted sample collections management policies.

- » [Sample Documents](#)

The Information Center's sample document collection is a unique and valuable resource for Tier 3 member museums. The collection contains more than 1,000 samples of policies, plans and forms from museums of all types and sizes, most of which were written by accredited museums. Tier 3 members can request sample documents from the Information Center in order to stimulate a conversation about issues and challenges facing the museum and to explore how different museums approach different issues. Using the sample documents should not replace the process of joining staff, governing authority and stakeholders in fruitful and thoughtful planning and policy-making.