

ESSENTIAL WRITTEN PLANS, POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES FOR COLLECTIONS-HOLDING INSTITUTIONS



Having written plans, policies, and procedures in place that assist in the governing, planning, and maintenance of collections is vital in order for institutions to have properly functioning and thriving collections. Policies and procedures are essential documents for any collections-holding institution to have in place.

These documents are very important in the efficient, effective day-to-day operation of organizations, but they become essential in times of change and transition. Having practices articulated in writing helps the organization's staff and volunteers know how their predecessors determined they should carry out the activities of collections care and management, even if those predecessors are not in the room to ask directly.

There are important differences between these different types of written guidelines.

Policies are formal documents that provide overarching standards and guidelines for decision-making, regulating all activities that comprise care and management of the collections. Policies must be approved by the institution or department's highest authority – often a board or other governing body.

Procedures are less formal guidelines that document in detail how staff will carry out collections care and management tasks. Procedures do not require the same level of approval as policies. If policies are the guiding principles, procedures are the detailed explanations of tasks and responsibilities to carry out a particular activity. These should be developed by the staff members or volunteers who are responsible for actually carrying out and/or overseeing the execution of the tasks involved.

Plans or **programs** formalize and integrate policies and procedures within the scope of a specific initiative, like digitization or environmental monitoring.

Please note: the names for these documents are terms commonly used in the field, but your institution may have other names for documents that fulfill the same purposes as those listed below. As the provided samples demonstrate, there is variation as to how these documents are organized and what they cover; the descriptions below offer general commonalities regarding purpose and scope.

It is also important to note that while some of these documents can be drafted by staff members/volunteers who work most directly with collections, some of them (such as collections management policies, preservation plans, emergency preparedness and response plans, etc.) require significant input from multiple stakeholders across the organization.

POLICIES

Collections Management Policy

The document that underpins all other collections-related plans, policies, and procedures is the **Collections Management Policy (CMP)**. Developing and implementing a comprehensive, up-to-date CMP should be an essential priority for all collecting institutions. A vital document for any collecting institution to have in place, the goal of a CMP is for all internal and external users to have a clear idea of

how the organization manages the items in their collection. Sometimes CMPs are thought of as a consolidated set of smaller policies; they contain a variety of elements and policies including the Mission Statement, Collecting Scope, Statement of Authority, Acquisition Policy, Collections Development Policy (CDP), Accessioning Policy, Deaccessioning Policy, Collections Care Policies, General Statements on Access & Handling, and Loan Policy.

What is a Collections Management Policy?

As stewards of a community's cultural heritage, collecting institutions are tasked with an often-challenging balancing act. A collection must simultaneously be protected and preserved for future generations while remaining accessible to the public and advancing the current institutional mission. For many, navigating this tightrope walk of collections stewardship may feel impossible, especially for small and mid-sized institutions that may be limited in resources like funding, time, and staff capacity.

A Collections Management Policy is the net below the tightrope. Having one in place acknowledges that stumbling is an inevitable part of collections stewardship, and provides protection in case you fall. This document outlines policies that address the various components of collections management at an organization, including acquisition, accession, registration, cataloging, control, security, and storage. These policies also clarify who is responsible for managing the collection and provide a framework for how an institution cares for, grows, and makes its collection publicly accessible.

An effective Collections Management Policy clearly establishes the conditions and scope of stewardship, serving not just as an internal guideline but also as public commitment: an outline of the terms by which the institution holds its collection in the public trust, an agreement to keeping the collection accessible while maintaining the highest legal, ethical, and professional standards for its care.

Why is a Collections Management Policy Important?

Writing and instituting a Collections Management Policy at your institution offers several benefits beyond the usefulness of the policy itself. In developing a CMP, staff at all levels are offered broad understanding of the processes and ethics that shape the institution, and provided with a clear outline of how collections care supports the organizational mission. More practically, these policies are sometimes needed to apply for certain funding opportunities and are considered a "core document" required for a museum to receive accreditation through the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). Collections Management Policies are also key documents in loan negotiations between organizations; without one, an institution risks being unable to accommodate loan requests, consequently limiting public access to the collection.

Sample actual CMPs:

Alutiiq Museum. "Collections Policy." <https://alutiiqmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Collections-Policy-2023.pdf>

University of Leicester "Archives Collections Management Policy." <https://le.ac.uk/library/about/policies/archives-collections>

Beloit Historical Society. "Collections Management Policy." http://www.beloithistoricalsociety.com/research/collections_management_policy.pdf

Fenimore Art Museum & The Farmer's Museum. "Collections Management Policy." https://fenimoreartmuseum.org/files/Collections/Collection_Management_Policy_July_2013.pdf

'Iolani School Archives. "Collections Management Policy." <https://iolani.libguides.com/c.php?g=315202&p=2106013>

Wayland Historical Society. "Collections Management Policy."

<https://www.waylandmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Collections-Management-Policy.pdf>

Other standard policies include the following listed below.

Note: A number of the below "policies" would typically be sections contained within an overall Collections Management Policy. When these topics are covered in a standalone document, it is often procedural in nature.

Access and Handling Policy – An Access Policy stipulates who is allowed to visit and use an institution's information and/or collections, and under what terms. Handling Guidelines provide individuals who will physically use collections material with tips for safe care of these objects while they are being used for research, shelved, cleaned, reproduced, moved, or touched for any other reason. Both Access and Handling policies may delineate different guidelines and stipulations based on different categories of materials, e.g. outdoor sculpture vs. sculpture on exhibition indoors. While often these two types of guidelines are incorporated into one overall document, they may be separated out as well.

Samples: Getty Research Center. "Reader Registration: General guidelines and policies for library access." https://www.getty.edu/research-conservation/library/reader-registration/#instarch_polSpecialCollectionsAccessPolicy

Paul Pratt Memorial Library. "Historical Room Archives Policies & Use Procedures." <https://www.cohassetlibrary.org/173/Historical-Room-Archives-Policy-Use-Proc>

University of Toronto Art Museum. "Collections Access Policy." <https://artmuseum.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Art-Museum-Collections-Access-Policy-Final.pdf>

Accession Policy - A statement of how materials are physically and legally transferred to the institution's permanent collection. This policy should include statements on how accessions will be formally documented, as well as processing procedures. This should result in the creation of Deed of Gift Forms to record and secure agreements between donors and recipients.

Samples: Cleveland Museum of Art. "Accessioning Museum Records." <https://files.archivists.org/groups/museum/standards/2.%20Appraisal%20and%20Acquisition/Accessioning%20Museum%20Records%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

J. Paul Getty Trust Institutional Archives. "Accessioning Manual." https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/Accessioning_manual_6th_edition_0.pdf

Note: Both of the above standalone resources are more procedural in nature. Accession policies are typically contained within an overall Collections Management Policy.

Acquisition Policy - A statement that identifies the kinds of materials an institution will accept and the conditions or terms that affect their acquisition. Staff may want to include additional details regarding institutional collections like the number of copies of publications, yearbooks, etc. the institution will maintain as a part of the collection. "Acquisition" occurs before "accession;" while an *acquisition* is anything obtained by an institution, an *accession* is a legal transfer of ownership.

Samples: Museum of Fine Arts Boston. "Acquisitions and Provenance Policy." <https://www.mfa.org/collections/provenance/acquisitions-and-provenance-policy>

South Street Seaport Museum. "Acquisition Guidelines." <https://southstreetseaportmuseum.org/acquisition-guidelines/>

Collections Care Policy - A general statement on the preservation and care of collection materials in addition to guidance on storage and housing, environmental control, housekeeping, and security.

Samples: Northampton Museum & Art Gallery. "Care of Collections and Conservation Policy."
<https://www.northamptonmuseums.com/info/19/about-1/138/caring-collection/2>
University at Albany. "University Libraries Preservation Policy."
<https://library.albany.edu/policies/preservation>

Collections Development Policy (CDP) – A document that states active, aspirational collecting goals based on gaps in content/knowledge in the existing collection. In many cases, CDPs also articulate exclusions or limitations – that is, certain types of items, formats, restrictions, etc. that the organization explicitly will *not* collect.

Samples: Brooklyn Historical Society. "Collections Development Policy for Libraries, Archives, and Special Collections."
https://files.archivists.org/groups/museum/standards/2.%20Appraisal%20and%20Acquisition/BHS_CollectionDevPolicy2015_BrooklynHistoricalSociety.pdf
Cleveland Museum of Art Archives. "Collections Development Policy."
https://files.archivists.org/groups/museum/standards/2.%20Appraisal%20and%20Acquisition/Collection_development_policy%20-%20FINAL.pdf
University of Nebraska at Lincoln. "Architecture Collection Development Policy."
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=librarycolldev>

Deaccession Policy – A statement of the procedures through which materials in the collection are deaccessioned or removed. This includes who will make the decision regarding the removal and the processes for disposing of deaccessioned materials. **This policy is extremely important for maintaining healthy collections.** Collections that no longer align with the Collecting Scope should be considered for deaccession. While this is typically incorporated into a Collections Management Policy, occasionally institutions will develop and maintain a standalone Deaccession Policy.

Samples: Art Institute of Chicago. "Deaccession Policy." <https://www.artic.edu/collection-information/deaccession-policy>
University of Alaska Museum of the North. "Deaccessioning & Disposal."
<https://www.uaf.edu/museum/collections/ethno/policies/deaccessioning/>
Pepperdine University. "Deaccessioning Policy."
<https://library.pepperdine.edu/collections/deaccessioning.htm>

Digital Preservation Policy – These guidelines document an organization's commitment to preserve digital content for future use; specify file formats to be preserved and the level of preservation to be provided; and ensure compliance with standards and best practices for responsible stewardship of digital information. Digital preservation strategies and actions should address content creation, integrity, and maintenance, providing a framework for the active management of digital content overtime to ensure ongoing access.

Samples: Baltimore Museum of Art. "Digital Preservation Policy."
https://files.archivists.org/groups/museum/standards//3.%20Records%20Management/BM_A_DigitalPreservationPolicy_2016.pdf
Purdue University. "Digital Preservation Policy."
<https://purr.purdue.edu/legal/digitalpreservation>
York University. "Digital Preservation Policy." <https://digital.library.yorku.ca/tags/digital-preservation-policy>

Exhibition Policy – A document that dictates the responsibility of exhibition planning, rotation schedules, environmental specifications, case/enclosure specifications, and security.

Samples: Jennie King Mellon Library and Chatham University Archives & Special Collections. “Display and Exhibit Policy.”

https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/ExhibitionManual_Example2.pdf

East Tennessee State University Reese Museum. “Exhibition Policy and Procedures.”

https://www.etsu.edu/cas/cass/reece/documents/exhibition_policy_2018.pdf

University of Montana Mansfield Library. “Hosted Exhibit Policy.”

<https://www.umt.edu/library/about/policies/hosted-exhibit-policy.php>

Loan Policy - Guidelines on how to conduct incoming and outgoing loans, typically for exhibition but possibly for research or other purposes. This includes requirements for borrowing institutions and guidelines for how/when the institution can seek out or accept temporary loans. This should result in the creation of Incoming and Outgoing Loan Documents to record and secure agreements between lending/borrowing institutions.

Samples: Maryhill Museum of Art. “Loan Policy.” <https://www.maryhillmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Maryhill-Loan-Policy.pdf>

UNC University Libraries Louis Round Wilson Library Special Collections. “Exhibition Loan Policy.”

<https://library.unc.edu/wilson/visit/perm/exhibition-loan-policy/>

Yale Peabody Museum. “Loan Policy.”

<https://peabody.yale.edu/sites/default/files/documents/collections/loanpolicy.pdf>

Records Management Policy – A document that provides guidelines for selecting and preserving critical and historically significant records, adherence to industry standards, compliance with legal mandates, reduced costs by eliminating storage of obsolete records, improved access to records, improved data security, increased accountability, and reduced risks.

Samples: North Tonawanda History Museum. “Records Retention Policy.”

[https://files.archivists.org/groups/museum/standards/8-](https://files.archivists.org/groups/museum/standards/8-North%20Tonawanda%20History%20Museum%20Records%20Retention%20Policy.pdf)

[North%20Tonawanda%20History%20Museum%20Records%20Retention%20Policy.pdf](https://files.archivists.org/groups/museum/standards/8-North%20Tonawanda%20History%20Museum%20Records%20Retention%20Policy.pdf)

Cleveland Museum of Art. “Policy for Records.”

https://files.archivists.org/groups/museum/standards//3.%20Records%20Management/CM_A%20Records%20Policy.pdf

Drexel University Libraries. “Records Management Policy.”

[https://drexel.edu/generalcounsel/policies/OGC-](https://drexel.edu/generalcounsel/policies/OGC-4/?_gl=1*_1g70tx6*_ga*NDczMTMzNDY1LjE3MDk1Nzk2OTc.*_ga_6KJ1PNLE19*MTcwOTU3OTY5Ni4xLjAuMTcwOTU3OTcwNS41MS4wLjA)

[4/?_gl=1*_1g70tx6*_ga*NDczMTMzNDY1LjE3MDk1Nzk2OTc.*_ga_6KJ1PNLE19*MTcwOTU3OTY5Ni4xLjAuMTcwOTU3OTcwNS41MS4wLjA](https://drexel.edu/generalcounsel/policies/OGC-4/?_gl=1*_1g70tx6*_ga*NDczMTMzNDY1LjE3MDk1Nzk2OTc.*_ga_6KJ1PNLE19*MTcwOTU3OTY5Ni4xLjAuMTcwOTU3OTcwNS41MS4wLjA)

PLANS AND PROGRAMS

Written plans and programs formalize and integrate policies and procedures within the scope of a specific initiative, like digitization or environmental monitoring. Some examples of plans and programs follow:

Cyclical Maintenance Plan – A written schedule outlining building inspection and preventive maintenance activities that should occur on a routine basis. Inspections and activities can be annual, more frequent (seasonal or cyclical), or less frequent (in the case of major projects like replacing a building’s roof or painting a building’s exterior).

Samples: Historic Bartram’s Garden. “Cyclical Maintenance Manual.”

<https://www.heritageconsultinginc.com/images/images/Cyclical%20Maintenance%20Manual%20Bartrams%20Garden..pdf>

Texas Historical Commission. “Historic Courthouse Maintenance Handbook.”

https://thc.texas.gov/sites/default/files/2024-02/THCPP_courthouse_maintenance_manual.pdf

Montgomery County Public Libraries. “Facilities Plan.”

<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/Library/resources/files/about/facilitiesplan.pdf>

Digitization Plan - These guidelines set priorities for the digitization of collections items and standards, outlining digitization procedures to ensure that anyone digitizing material is doing so in a consistent manner. Includes guidelines for documentation preparation, handling, appropriate tech use, file naming and metadata, and a digital backup plan following the “3-2-1” guidelines (three copies, two media types, and at least one copy maintained off-site).

Samples: UCLA Library. “Digitization Policy.”

<https://www.library.ucla.edu/about/policies/library-special-collections-digitization-policy>

Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society. “Project Plan for Digitization.”

<https://www.gwbhs.org/documents/2012/11/si-644-digitization-project-plan.pdf>

National Archives and Records Administration. “Plan for Digitizing Archival Materials for Public Access.” <https://www.archives.gov/files/comment/nara-digitizing-plan.pdf>

Emergency Preparedness & Response Plan - An institutional document outlining various protocols in the event of an emergency. It documents the emergency management program and describes the provisions for response. The Plan contains a brief, clear, and concise description of the overall emergency organization, designation of responsibilities, and procedures, including notifications, involved in coping with any or all aspects of a potential credible emergency or disaster. It focuses both on the immediate response and long-term recovery.

Samples: Cape Fear Museum. “Disaster Plan.”

https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/CapeFearMuseum_DisasterPlan_Watermarked.pdf

Philadelphia Museum of Art. “Response to Disasters & Emergencies for Paper-based Materials.”

https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/PMA_PaperConservationDisasterPlan_2021_RedactedForExternalUse_Watermarked.pdf

State Library of Ohio. “A Disaster Plan for Small Public Libraries.”

<https://www.lyrasis.org/services/Documents/Planning%20and%20Preparedness/Disaster-Preparedness-Plan-Small-Public-Libraries.pdf>

Environmental Monitoring Program – Standardizes procedures for environmental data collection, usually focusing on light, temperature, and relative humidity. This document should also include provisions for data analysis and instructions for how staff should respond if environmental conditions are outside appropriate ranges.

Samples: Spurlock Museum. “Environmental Management Policy.”

<https://www.spurlock.illinois.edu/about/policies/environmental-management.html>

Yale Library. “Preventive Conservation: Environmental Control.”

<https://guides.library.yale.edu/pc/environmental>

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. “Environmental Monitoring.”

<https://www.library.illinois.edu/preservation/collections-care/environmental-monitoring/>

Fire Protection Plan – A document compiling various fire safety policies within an institution into one, comprehensive plan. While the nature of a *plan* is that it is focused on fire prevention rather than response, these may be together within one document.

Samples: Florida Atlantic University Libraries. “Fire Emergency Plan.”

<https://library.fau.edu/staff/fire-emergency-plan>

Lakehead University Chancellor Paterson Library. “Fire Safety Plan.”

https://www.lakeheadu.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/63/FIRE_SAFETY_PLAN_Library_2021.pdf

The British Museum. “Fire Safety Policy.”

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/Fire-Safety-Policy-2018.pdf>

Housekeeping Plan – A document compiling various housekeeping policies within an institution into one, comprehensive plan – this includes cleaning schedules, staff assignments/responsibilities, and guidance on collections-safe cleaning practices.

Samples: Minnesota Historical Society. “Historic Housekeeping Handbook.”

https://mnhs.gitlab.io/archive/conservation/www.mnhs.org/preserve/conservation/docs_pdfs/HOUSEKEEPINGMANUAL.pdf

Cornell University Library. “Housekeeping.”

<https://chinapreservationtutorial.library.cornell.edu/content/housekeeping/>

University of Washington Libraries. “Stacks Cleaning Procedures.”

http://www.lib.washington.edu/preservation/preservation_services/clean

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Plan – The practice of mitigating the risk of pests, without the indiscriminate use of pesticides. An IPM Plan includes an assessment of the current pest management procedures and potential spots of vulnerability; a program to monitor pests by a routine inspection of collections areas and placement of traps; the written recording of any pests found; the exact identification of the insects or other pests if a pest problem or infestation occurs; and the use of eradication procedures appropriate to the specific pest and the infested materials.

Samples: Minnesota Historical Society. “Integrated Pest Management Program.”

<https://www.mnhs.org/sites/default/files/heritagepreservation/lhs/technical/preservation/ipmp.pdf>

American Museum of Natural History. “Integrated Pest Management.”

<https://www.amnh.org/research/science-conservation/preventive-conservation/agents-of-deterioration/integrated-pest-management>

Historic New England. “Integrated Pest Management.” [https://museumpests.net/wp-](https://museumpests.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/3-Hist_New_England_IPM.pdf)

[content/uploads/2014/03/3-Hist_New_England_IPM.pdf](https://museumpests.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/3-Hist_New_England_IPM.pdf)

Preservation Plan - Outlines goals, objectives, and strategies related to collections preservation for the next three to five years. The plan should focus on staffing, funding, space, building, environment, security, emergency preparedness, collections development, access, intellectual control over collections, and more detailed topics that relate specifically to collections preservation. The plan should also outline the actions necessary to provide adequate staff and funding, assign responsibilities, and set a schedule for implementation. To implement the Preservation Plan, a timetable should be developed with assigned duties, taking into consideration staffing and funding levels.

Note: Since Preservation Plans often include detailed, potentially confidential information that organizations may not wish to share with the general public, it can be challenging to find actual working

plans online. The examples below contain much of the information that would be within a comprehensive Preservation Plan.

Samples: Delaware Division of Libraries. "Statewide Preservation Program Plan."

<https://libraries.delaware.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/123/2016/09/DEStatewidePresPlanningRptFinal20070830.pdf>

Arts Council England. "Collections Template: Care and Conservation."

<https://artsandmuseums.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Collections-Care-and-conservation-plan-template-1-1.pdf>

Minnesota Historical Society. "Long-Range Preservation Plan."

<https://web.archive.org/web/20220708100946/https://www.mnhs.org/preserve/conservation/reports/2010longrangeplan.pdf>

Security Program – A document compiling various security policies within an institution into one comprehensive program.

Samples: University of Alaska Museum of the North. "Access and Security Policy."

<https://www.uaf.edu/museum/staff-information/pdfs/Security%20Policy%20Revision%20Approved%208-10-2012.pdf>

Boston Public Library. "Collections Security Policy." <https://www.bpl.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2022/05/Collections-Security-Policy-5.24.2022.pdf>

<https://www.bpl.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2022/05/Collections-Security-Policy-5.24.2022.pdf>

Wayne State University Library. "Safety & Security Policies and Procedures Manual."

<https://www.bpl.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2022/05/Collections-Security-Policy-5.24.2022.pdf>

Space Plan - A document that outlines the current physical space, current and future space needs, and a plan for the continued expansion or maintenance of the physical space. Space plans consider many different facets of the collections space and should accommodate ten years of growth.

Note: As with Preservation Plans, the confidential nature of some of the information contained within Space Plans means that not many organizations make theirs freely available to the public. See the resources below for further information.

Samples: Smithsonian Institution. "Collections Space Framework Plan."

<https://www.si.edu/Content/Pdf/About/2015-Collections-Space-Framework-Plan.pdf>

Springfield Art Museum. "30-Year Master Plan."

https://issuu.com/bnim/docs/sam_masterplan_body_final_e9c3c05f42d140

Connecticut State Library. "Library Space Planning Guide." <http://mnl.mclinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/spaceplanningguide.pdf>

<http://mnl.mclinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/spaceplanningguide.pdf>

Strategic Plan – Outlines an organization's values, goals over a certain period (usually three to five years), the actions needed to achieve those goals, and other critical elements of the organization's operation.

Samples: Dickinson College. "Archives and Special Collections Strategic Plan."

https://archives.dickinson.edu/sites/all/files/Archives_Strategic_Plan_2020.pdf

Cumberland County Historical Society. "Strategic Plan." https://www.historicalociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CCHS_strategic-plan_2019.pdf

https://www.historicalociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CCHS_strategic-plan_2019.pdf

Museum of the American Revolution. "Strategic Plan." https://moar-media-production.s3.amazonaws.com/be7185de-ffb5-44b8-9ecb-cfa92d2a51ff/document_060721_MoAR_Strategic_Plan.pdf

https://moar-media-production.s3.amazonaws.com/be7185de-ffb5-44b8-9ecb-cfa92d2a51ff/document_060721_MoAR_Strategic_Plan.pdf