

# CURATOR CORE COMPETENCIES

American Alliance of Museums Curators Committee

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Standing Committee on Ethics

## ABSTRACT

*Curator Core Competencies is a comprehensive statement of the domains in which curators work, the duties they perform, and the applied skills that they must all possess to be successful in today's profession. It defines who we are, what we do, and why curators are important.*

## **A Curator's Core Competencies**

### **Introduction**

The role of the museum curator is rewarding, broad and challenging. This compilation of curatorial core competencies created by CurCom's Standing Committee on Ethics addresses the skills required of curators to be successful in their profession. During the creation of this document, several sources provided valuable information regarding the skills identified by respective institutions as integral to the role of curators. The AAM, CurCom's Code of Ethics, US Federal Government's position classifications, US National Park Service classifications, College Art Association's standards and guidelines, International Committee for the Training of Personnel and International Council of Museums served as references, helping to create the foundation for this document. Most important were the informal conversations with curatorial colleagues and conference sessions since the 2012 AAM annual meeting, which provided valuable insights into the demands on museum curators today, and revealed the growing need to formally study curatorial education, experience, and training, as well as to express the competencies required to practice the craft. The 2014 survey conducted by CurCom validated much of the input taken from these discussions and revealed other interesting considerations.

For all the things this document is, there are several things that it is not. The Core Competencies is not a manual on how to be a curator. Instead, the intent of this document is to define the curatorial profession and identify the commonalities of curatorial domains where curators of all academic disciplines work. This document is also not intended to be a generic list of competencies for all museum professionals - it is

for curators, aspiring curators, those who train curators, and those who are interested in what a curator is.

### **Defining a Curator**

According to the most recent version of CurCom’s Curatorial Code of Ethics (CurCom, 2009), Curators are “highly knowledgeable, experienced, or educated in a discipline relevant to the museum’s purpose or mission. Curatorial roles and responsibilities vary widely within the museum community and within the museum itself, and may also be fulfilled by staff members with other titles.”

The varied, and unique roles curators perform and the domains in which curators work requires the Curators Core Competencies to go beyond this statement to state more definitively what curators *are* and what they *do*. Rather than defining curators by their function or role, which shackles curators to ineffective categories, the Core Competencies defines curators by what they must know and within the domains they work. Curators contribute meaningfully to philosophical issues that guide their institutions. Like all competence, curatorial competence is rooted in a meaningful sum of knowledge, experience and skill. To reduce it to skill or functions undermines the larger contribution for which curators are uniquely capable. This also informs how curators should be educated in order to advance the practice.

The Core Competencies goes beyond trying to resolve the tension between the academic and procedural functions, relying on the nuance of what a competence is – knowledge, experience and skill combined, to frame the understanding of curators. In

addition to a statement about what CurCom defines a curator as, this document details the domains in which curators work, the types of competencies curators must have, and the applied skills and faculties required to carry out those responsibilities.

Museum Curators are subject-matter specialists in a field related to their museum's mission, researchers, supervisors of museum collections, exhibition developers, and public advocates for the collection. As scholars, curators provide museums with credibility within academic circles and as trusted sources of information amongst communities by serving as information brokers and conduits for conversation. Curators have a responsibility to expand knowledge and perform relevant research, yet they also facilitate access to knowledge for broad audiences and their peers. Curators build trust and rapport with communities and act with uncompromising integrity, serving as overseers of the public's most meaningful possessions. While most curators are connoisseurs of a particular subject, they are also generalists who have extensive networks of other curators and scholars they can call upon when needed. Equally as important, curators maintain their own expertise in order to be contributing members of a network - they are responsible for object authentication and identify dubious or bogus examples and advise administrators on new acquisitions, gifts, or purchases. This requires an investment of time, for both the museum and the curator, and demands an unwavering dedication to the Code of Ethics. Curators study an academic discipline outside of museum studies, yet it is increasingly crucial that they be fully immersed in museology and know the role and function of museums to be successful members of a museum team and leaders for the advancement of the profession.

Thus, curators are much more than academics who work with collections; they are information brokers who, through learned and creative interpretation, create meaningful experiences for people. Curators foster civic engagement through social and cultural dialogue by being active members of a community, building networks, and utilizing multiple information gathering platforms that constituents use to lend feedback. Curators are advocates for the collection and the public alike. They are comfortable in galleries, archives, libraries, community forums and digital landscapes. They are engaged in their profession and constantly consider new approaches to their work.

It is accepted that a museum's mission, size or complexity of a collection, the degree to which the institution is interested in publishing, or the level of responsibility on an exhibition team dictates the priorities of curators. Some institutions have assistant curators who are less credentialed that work under the tutelage of a seasoned professional or associate curators who are junior in experience and expertise. In other museums, the curatorial profession involves independent responsibility, often with substantial freedom within their primary area of interest to utilize networks, investigate hypotheses, and conceptualize research projects and exhibitions. They identify, define and select specific problems for study and determine the most fruitful investigations and approaches to the problem area. Whether working as curator, associate curator, or assistant curator, the role they play in the institution is vital.

### **The Core Competencies**

Avoiding functional categories such as “Exhibitions”, “Collections” and “Interpretation,” the CurCom Ethics subcommittee presents this descriptive list of a curator’s competencies without reducing the curator to factors of performance. Therefore, the Core Competencies is a model that not only allows, but also encourages, knowledge, experience, and practical skill to converge as competencies under these important categories that underpin the entire museum institution.

Preservation, Research and Communication are vital efforts for curators, regardless of their respective institution’s focus area. Within these three foundational elements, curators possess the following nine core competencies and related applied skills:

Within Preservation:

(1) collection planning, (2) collecting, (3) collection care

Within Research:

(4) scholarly research, (5) object research, (6) applied research

Within Communication:

(7) exhibition development, (8) education, (9) outreach and advocacy

Additionally, curators possess “super competencies” that enhance their abilities to perform within each of these domains. These do not fit in any one area; rather they span the spectrum of competencies. These are currently identified as:

**Digital literacy:** Understanding the value of utilizing technology in all aspects of the curatorial method is a vital competency for curators. This is not to suggest that curators become computer software programmers, but curators do need to understand how they can use existing technology to perform successfully within each curatorial function. This competency is a critical expectation that does not replace any other skill or knowledge area. Curators deal with digital-born objects, the digitization of objects and collections, and use technologies to aid in the collection and research functions. They use and maintain databases and make data and digital images accessible to the public. There are many suitable digital platforms available that curators can use to enhance the curatorial function within this competency.

**Management / leadership:** While relying on many of the same skills needed to perform competently in the communication domain, management and leadership converges all three curatorial areas. Explained within specific core competencies, the ability to manage people, time, and resources, and to inspire others by providing purpose, motivation, and direction are paramount. Curators have a prominent voice in the museum profession and the community and have the interpersonal skills that allow them to be positive representatives of the institutions and collections, dependable and trusted advisors for administrators and board members, and professional role models for staff members and aspiring curators.

**Sustainability:** Sustainability requires curators to be good stewards of their environment, their communities, and their resources. Beyond fiscal ramifications, the choices museums

make have effects beyond the institutional structure. Sustainability informs how, where, and when curators preserve, research, communicate, and establish credibility with an informed public. Increasingly, sustainability must take into consideration limitations on growth and practicality of continuation.

## **Preservation**

Preservation of a collection goes beyond the physical well being of the objects under a curator's care. Preservation encompasses the assurance of a well-balanced collection and development of a strategic collecting plan that acknowledges an institution's ethical obligation to preserve the material culture of a society for posterity as well as the knowledge, information, and data regarding those objects. If the power of an object is its story or meaning, the research and communication domains are equally as important to preservation. Furthermore, curators must be well versed in all applicable laws that deal with the collections under their care. The following three core competencies are specific to this domain:

### **Collection Planning**

Curators have the responsibility to plan for and establish a collection that is meaningful as a source of information for scholars and laypersons, whether it is via public exhibition or academic study, and which supports the mission of the museum. A curator's collection plan not only fits the museum mission statement and the needs of the institution, but also reflects the best scholarship in a particular subject. This requires the ability to objectively survey a museum collection and use expertise to identify its gaps, duplications or excess



and to champion their perspective to the administration. The expansion or reduction of the size, significance and complexity of a collection is a corollary of scholarly research.

Planning also requires the ability to develop and implement a statement on scope of collections, which is essential for long-term viability of the collection, inhibits the duplication of objects, and helps keep the collection focused. Strategic or long-term planning is an institutional prerogative and the collection plan must adhere to institutional policy, mission statement, and current established best practices.

### **Collecting**

Curators plan an appropriate collection, a prerequisite competency for expanding the collection. Collecting proactively requires seeking objects that fill the gaps in the collection, fitting the needs of the institution and its evolving mission, addressing new research questions, and building networks of potential donors and vendors to aid this process. It requires curators to develop public relations skills, signaling a notable departure from traditional academic preparation, and includes making connections with persons or organizations that can contribute items to the collections or arrange for gifts, donations, or bequests. Fieldwork or the actual physical collection of artifacts or specimens, traditional methods for many curators (particularly in anthropological or natural history museums), remain a valuable methodology. Locating and authenticating objects, negotiating the purchase of objects, and corresponding with other curators are all paramount applied skills for curators. Additionally, familiarity with the Curators Code of

Ethics and museum accession and deaccession procedures reinforces the curator's commitment to integrity and high standards.

### **Collections Care**

Although collections managers and registrars typically oversee the day-to-day maintenance of collections, they form a well-functioning team along with a curator to ensure the preservation of the museum collection. Curators are ultimately responsible for its care and preservation and advocate on the collection and team's behalf for resources. Curators with no support staff may also carry out practical care. Curators know the fundamental requirements of object preservation and best practices of documentation and collections record management. They are well versed in materials analysis and industry standards of handling and collections care. Curators have a working knowledge of handling, storing, and caring for objects in order to ensure compliance with current best practices. Furthermore, curators have the ability to recognize objects in need of professional conservation and to coordinate those efforts with registrars, collections managers, and conservators. Lending and borrowing objects with other institutions is a staple of museum work and requires curators to understand the inherent risk to objects from travel.

### **Research**

Scholarly research is essential to curatorial activity, yet it is only one of three types of research curators must master. Object and applied research are also core competencies.

### **Scholarly Research**

Scholarly research is the study and investigation that contributes to the sum of knowledge and is oftentimes hypothesis-oriented. For curators, scholarly research refers to object research, content or contextual research, and the contribution to the advancement of museology and the curatorial practice. As with all museum professionals, curators must engage in the theory of museums and be the caretakers of their own profession. In museums, object, subject matter, and content research relating to the museum's mission and subject area is traditionally performed by the curatorial staff. It requires empirical and original research and writing, using accepted scholarly methodology aligning with the curator's academic discipline. The importance of writing for peer-reviewed journals or other scholarly publications cannot be overstated. Curators must tackle the overarching issues of the museum profession and share insights and knowledge with the curatorial and academic communities through scholarship.

With all the demands placed upon museum staff, it is important that curators continue to function within the scholarly research core competency. The academic prestige and credibility of museums as reliable and trusted information sources depends upon the academic reputation of the curatorial staff. Furthermore, while it is not possible to be an expert in everything in a museum's collection, it is important for curators to foster a reputation of expertise in an area in order to be a contributing member in a curatorial network. A strong command of the use and citation of primary and secondary sources coupled with a professional, scholarly writing style is necessary when publishing original research. Equally as important are the abilities to recognize subjective and objective viewpoints. Synthesizing information and data into an orderly narrative or thesis that is

supported by empirical evidence gathered through the use of learned research methods is a necessary skill for curators. Curators use their broad, substantive knowledge in their particular academic disciplines and specialized knowledge in their fields when called upon as the subject matter expert of the institution they serve.

### **Object Research**

Categorizing, classifying, documenting, establishing or expanding taxonomic systems for collected specimens, artifacts, or works of art are curatorial core competencies that apply to object research. While object research may be a type of scholarly research, this type of research may not actually form an intellectual argument or thesis (which separates it from scholarly research), yet it is essential for gaining intellectual understanding of a museum collection and deserves its own category. Curators are not normally expected to know everything about each object in the collection; rather this competency involves connoisseurship and the ability to conduct research to determine the authenticity, importance, and quality, whether rare or representative, of a museum object. Emphasis on connoisseurship and subject matter expertise within the context of museum collections is paramount to maintaining a museum's credibility - and is the primary responsibility of the curator. Though resources are stretched in most institutions, curators should ideally seek to carve out time for critical functions like scholarly research and publishing. While this presents a challenge, it is crucial to keep pace with the evolution of a curator's field of discipline as well as the larger museum field in order to avoid a narrow perspective brought about by daily demands. Current, accurate, and consistent research and documentation of objects is at the root of providing information on the collection and

helping fulfill the museum's educational mandate. This is one of a curator's primary responsibilities.

### **Applied Research**

Curators investigate, interpret, collect, and arrange information and objects necessary to support the educational and public service responsibilities of museums through exhibitions or targeted educational programs. Rather than directly adding to a body of knowledge, this competency involves synthesizing and interpreting facts and scholarly research (of their own or other scholars) for public inquiry and involves creating experiences for museum visitors that facilitate learning - most often through exhibitions. Acting as an information broker, curators compile data from a multitude of sources, distinguish between good information and bad, and develop a narrative - be it through explanatory material or exhibit label text - relevant to the public the museum serves. Applied research requires the curator to write interpretively. Due to the collaborative nature of this competency, curators work with others inside and outside the museum to compile information and to use that information to the greatest benefit of the community. This type of research can also utilize techniques from other disciplines, such as sociological qualitative research or oral history in order to collaborate with and engage the public.

### **COMMUNICATION**

Curators communicate with peers, museum administrators, colleagues, other scholars, and the public through exhibits, outreach and advocacy, and educational programs. This

domain involves the ability to communicate effectively with a variety of people from different backgrounds. Today, curators must be able to work and communicate within multiple publics, the digital landscape, and with other professionals to gather and disseminate data that aids in the curatorial process.

Interpersonal skills are vital, particularly verbal communication and personal observation. Already a part of the planning core competency, written professional and scholarly communication is also an applied skill of curators within the communication core competency. Curators develop a digital literacy that exceeds the basic use of information and communications technology (ICT) for professional communication. They also adopt a more profound understanding of ICTs and keep up with their evolution. Curators do not need to write code, but they do understand how to use ICTs for different types of communication, visual or textual, and not rely on non-curatorial personnel to make decisions about curatorial content, especially in online spaces.

### **Exhibitions**

As the most visible of the curatorial functions, exhibition development is complex and collaborative. While some institutions have exhibition designers on staff or contract with design/fabrication companies, the judgments regarding what stories to tell, what artifacts to use to illustrate those narratives, the most effective method of delivering the message, or the use of space often falls on curators. Curators serve (sometimes lead or manage) on exhibition planning groups. As a member of an exhibition team where collaboration with museum staff from other functional areas is used to decide on narratives, themes, or other

elements, curators use their influence as the subject matter expert on staff to steer the team towards a logical solution.

When serving as the team leader or project manager, budgeting, resource management, and the ability to set and meet deadlines are necessary applied skills. Not to be overlooked, creating descriptive outlines and narrative scripts are responsibilities of the curator.

### **Writing**

Writing for museums is complex and demanding. Curators are masters of communicating in writing and in various media. Exhibition planning often requires interoffice communication as well as the ability to write descriptive outlines, narrative scripts, and scholarly works for publication. Equally, if not more important, is a curator's competency with interpretive writing. Often an overlooked applied skill, the capability to synthesize complicated information and present that information to an audience with varying degrees of ability, is a necessity. Curators know how to condense narratives into shortened text panels through interpretive writing techniques, ensuring that exhibition labels are accessible to many ages and not esoteric compilations of incomprehensible information. Accessibility is very much an ethical concern. If our treasures are accessible to the publics we serve, then so must be the information regarding those objects.

This core competency is unique to curators and separates them from professionals who work in related fields— history curators cannot just be historians nor art curators only art

historians. Using objects (both tangible and digital) to illustrate an idea or series of ideas is at the very heart of what defines a curator. This is known to the field as object interpretation. While visitors certainly create their own meaning out of the objects that curators arrange in an exhibition, curators reflect upon a larger ideal. Curators help others make sense out of objects and exhibitions, effectively opening windows of possibility and actualization. This competency requires a high level of creativity coupled with expertise. The use of collections in exhibitions and the way curators think about the objects in their care - what they mean and what they can help illustrate - is central to the curator's role.

Using collections artistically and creatively may be the most difficult applied skill to teach. Indeed, there are few places to learn this skill other than on-the-job or mentored experiences. Curators master those skills and challenge themselves to be original, thoughtful and unique.

### **Outreach and Advocacy**

Curators interact with diverse publics encompassing a range of ages and create dialogue with constituents. Furthermore, because museums reflect the value systems and beliefs of a community, curators understand the cultures of their publics. Keeping in mind that curators are reciprocal advocates for the public and the collection, the core competency of outreach and advocacy involves the ability to be actively involved in community events and engaged with community members. Interpersonal skills are absolutely vital in performing museum outreach. Curators' constituents are a wealth of information that must be tapped to better perform the exhibition and collections functions. Increasingly,



museum outreach and advocacy is taking place in an online environment. Curators are versed in the digital literacy required to make them capable participants.

## **Education**

The educational function curators perform is often very different from that of museum educators, tour guides or docents. Lecturing, gallery talks, publication of additional informational pamphlets or catalogues, formal classes, and student mentorship typically defines the nature of this core competency and requires an applied skill of public speaking.

Although curators rely upon museum educators for their pedagogical expertise, curators play a part in this aspect of museum work. The two professions collaborate extensively while developing education programs and exhibits, but the method for this collaboration is particular to each museum. While curators provide information and expertise on the collections, subject matter, and exhibitions, educators provide curators with projection platforms to fulfill specific public interest and needs. This requires curators to have the ability to collaborate professionally.

## AFTERWARD

Like the *Code of Ethics* that details the principles and beliefs and establishes the acceptable conduct, best practices and standards for museum curators, *Curator Core Competencies* is a living document subject to review and update. As the profession, technology, and the expectations of museumgoers evolve, the curatorial role will

subsequently broaden. Curators will always require professional development and the acquisition of new skills. This document is intended to steer the professional development of practicing curators and those aspiring to become a curator. The Standing Committee on Ethics may be contacted through <http://aam-us.org/resources/professional-networks/curcom>.