

Collections Sustainability Rubric

Following the December 2017 workshop [Don't Raid the Cookie Jar: Creating Early Interventions to Prevent Deaccessioning Crises](#), a task force of the AAM Professional Networks Council (PNC) formed. The PNC believes that sharing resources to help museums survive and thrive is a critical means of avoiding crises that negatively impact the mission and specifically the collections at the core of the mission. To this end, the Task Force developed the Collections Sustainability Rubric, assembled related resources, and established a mechanism for peer-to-peer support.

About the Task Force

Charge: The objective of the Task Force is to promote thoughtfully managed collections and deaccession practices. By promoting best practices and providing the opportunity for peer consultation on such matters, **the Task Force aims to safeguard institutions and avoid crisis that often lead to poor management of collections and divestment thereof.**

Goals: To help institutions of all sizes consider their collections stewardship from the broader perspective of sustainability and promote institutional and collegial conversation on the matters of deaccessioning, management, and governance.

Founding Task Force Members and Professional Networks

- **Curators Committee:** Ellen Endslow, Director of Collections/Curator, Chester County Historical Society, eendslow@chestercohistorical.org
- **Collections Stewardship:** Robin Lawrence, Manager of Curatorial Affairs, Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, rlawrence@discovernewfields.org
- **Historic Houses and Sites Committee:** Cara Seitchek, Fundraiser for the Smithsonian, SeitchekC@si.edu
- **Leadership and Management Network:** Elizabeth Varner, Adjunct Professor, IU Robert H. McKinney School of Law, Elizabeth.C.Varner@gmail.com

Key Tenets Behind this Project

Collections stewardship is not an island and not the sole responsibility of the collections management and curatorial staff. An institution that is stable and sustainable is one in which collections management is seen and treated as an integral and strategic aspect of the museum's educational mission; its management, organizational health, and governance; and maintaining its relevance to its communities. Collections management staff, management and leadership, and the governing authority must work together and with equal diligence to promote institutional sustainability.

Deaccessioning is part of the life-cycle of an institution and an appropriate collections management practice. Generally speaking, deaccessioning does not cause institutional failure. However, deaccessioning is often a symptom of institutional challenge if it is considered as a means to financially stabilize an institution.

When ethical practices in administration and collections management are overlooked and when the necessary human and financial resources and support for collections and their management are neglected, sustainability is at risk.

What is the Rubric and How to Use It

The Collections Sustainability Rubric is an assessment tool that to help you:

- gauge the health of your institution and stability of its collections
- self-check if your museum is going down a pathway towards a crisis that could lead to a decision to improperly deaccession collections

It lists some key indicators of good practice and red flags in the areas of **collections, governance, and management** to help you realize and head off crises that could lead to financially motivated deaccessioning.

Overarching these three areas are mission and a strategic plan: two things absolutely necessary for all institutions to guide and inform their decisions around collections, governance, and management. Likewise, underpinning these three areas is community support—something necessary for institutional success.

For each of the three categories, the rubric has four levels describing the health of the institution:

- **Doing well:** Operations consistent and stable; professional standards are regularly reviewed and used.
- **Struggling:** Doing good, effective things but resources and/or communication are challenges.
- **In crisis:** Usual resources not available; inconsistent processes and communication.
- **Hospice:** Not viable; leadership, relevance, community support, and resources lacking.

The rubric is best used with the companion list of deaccessioning-related resources associated with each of these four levels. These resources include books, articles, guidelines, professional practices, and other format that provide a wealth of information available to the fields of museums and special collections libraries.

The rubric is not a comprehensive guide on how to deaccession, govern, or otherwise manage the museum and its collections. Rather, it is designed to raise awareness and spark conversations internally or within a network of your colleagues to inform action.

Contact the Task Force members with feedback, questions, or suggestions for additions to the rubric at deaccessiontaskforce@gmail.com.

Collections Sustainability Rubric

April 2020

HEALTH OF INSTITUTION	MISSION and PLANNING Does your institution have a Strategic plan and a clear Mission? Do they include collections? Do they align with AAM's Core Document Required Elements?					
	COLLECTIONS		GOVERNANCE		MANAGEMENT	
Institution is...	Indicators	Red Flags	Indicators	Red Flags	Indicators	Red Flags
Doing well Operations consistent and stable; professional standards are regularly reviewed and used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trained staff Collections Management Policy (CMP) written, comprehensive and followed Clear, current, written procedures and plans (Deaccessioning, collecting, etc.) Development dept. supports preservation & interpretation Relevant to community Programming incorporates collections and includes community in development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff understands/follows some not all standards; is less engaged with community Development sometimes incorporates collections in fundraising strategies; usually grasps museum standards Collections Management Policy, Collecting Plan, deaccessioning policy/procedures more than 5 years old w/o review or update Collections and programming are active but not collaborative; community may be involved in the process or not 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> STRATEGIC PLAN IS CURRENT Governing authority understands its role and mission; follows good practice Collections committee is active; understands differences between advising vs. participating in day-to-day operations Members understand museum standards and ethics, especially collections-related Governing authority is engaged in supporting the institution, collections initiatives, and community Term limits are in place Members reflect the diversity of community and stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> STRATEGIC PLAN IS RECENT BUT THERE'S NO REGULAR REVIEW OR SCHEDULED UPDATE All or members understand their role and the collections; others not involved/aware Museum standards not well understood; some members view the collections as financial assets Some do not provide financial assistance; some are not members Term limits usually adhered to There is little board training, orientation or development Diversity not a priority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership savvy about standards, community impact, and business models Empowers collections staff; cohesive in approach Communicates collections needs and opportunities clearly with staff and governing authority Adheres to ethics Succession plan is clear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership understands community impact and business models, but is unclear about collections standards (or vice versa) Encourages collections staff but teamwork inconsistent Knows collections ethics and standards but may not follow them Financial challenges exist but there is a realistic and feasible plan to address Succession plan partially complete/outdated Collections are capitalized; treated as financial assets on balance sheet
Struggling Doing good, effective things but resources and/or communication are challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes in staff, mission, leadership Deadlines slip but catch-up possible Collections management backlog grows Communication is usually good; omissions are overcome Collections and programming have different agendas but still usually produce positive results Community usually has voice but not always 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collections Mgmt. Policy not current; not aligned w/ practice; stakeholders not familiar with it Collections Plan doesn't serve mission Deaccessioning procedures not followed Communication with management challenging (lack of common ground, personality) Collections management slowing down, limiting public access Collections & programming effective but don't interact' and no community involvement / input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> STRATEGIC PLAN NEEDS TO BE UPDATED Governing authority and staff may seek relevant advice to address gaps in strategies Governing authority leadership and/or collections committee lacks consistent communication with collections staff or each other; may not meet regularly Recruitment of members occurs on an <i>ad hoc</i> basis; limited collections interests represented Term limits not consistently maintained Orientation / training sporadic Blurred definition of governing authority's role/impact on collections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNCLEAR DIRECTION ABOUT WHO UPDATES STRATEGIC PLAN Governing authority or collections staff seek advice to address collections strategies, but not always collaboratively Individual or collections committee members make unilateral decisions about the collections Term limits applied until there is a crisis Clarity of role starts to diminish No training on museum-specific issues Not meeting regularly or inability to reach quorum Idea of selling collections to stabilize the institution voiced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes in leadership, mission, staff but there is an awareness of community connection Strategies lack focus Succession plan out of date Deadlines and collections issues fall through the cracks but feasible plans are possible Communication is clear enough for most board and collections staff to understand Collections are acquired but management on existing collections is haphazard 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collections committee less active and may be unaware of tasks Communication with collections staff is challenged (lack of common ground, personality) Collections policies are unclear Succession plan is on the list but low priority Idea of selling collections to stabilize the institution voiced
In crisis Usual resources not available; inconsistent processes and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collections staff have little awareness of the job; would ask for help if they knew who to ask Collections and programs not synchronized or may be limited Community not an obvious partner Development efforts not focused and/or exclude collections Collections issues fall on deaf ears 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff has no knowledge of standards or who to ask Collections stored inappropriately and endangered; there is no access Little attempt to communicate across the institution What is a Collections Management Policy? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> STRATEGIC PLAN ARCHAIC OR NON-EXISTENT Obstacles (internal/external) to creating strategic plan Collections committee is inactive or functions independently Communication with collections staff is limited; advice not sought or ignored Term limits are meaningless No development or orientation Disregard of collections stewardship standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> STRATEGIC PLANNING OR THINKING ARE NOT PART OF THE CONVERSATION. Individual ideas override plan of action Collections committee has few attendees (or disbanded) and individual opinion rules; collections staff ignored What is a board orientation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited knowledge of museum management Lacks community spirit Deaccessioning viewed as a general fundraising option Few strategies are relevant to mission; issues fall through the cracks and are ignored Communication is inconsistent Succession plan lost in a file drawer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership skills not relevant to mission Okay communication with governing authority or staff but not both; and overall poor communication Lack of strategic vision let alone plan Collections viewed as burden rather than community asset; little regard for public trust responsibilities vis-à-vis the collections Financial instability with little or no obvious method to resolve What is a succession plan?
	Community Support?					
HOSPICE Not viable; leadership, relevance, community support, & resources lacking	There is no effort to care for or understand the collection. Its purpose is lost and the collection is deteriorating in place or is disappearing from the institution. It has little relevance or use to the community.		NO STRATEGIC PLAN. No Vision or leadership. No obvious community support. Is the institution of value in current form?		There is no effort to lead, internally or beyond the walls of the institution. If there was a vision at the beginning, it is no longer obvious. Finances are insufficient and potential volunteer help is insufficient or non-existent.	



Resources on Deaccessioning

Last updated June 1, 2020

In addition to being a general list of resources that offer guidance and perspectives on standards, ethics, and professional practices related to deaccessioning, this list also serves as a companion to the Collections Sustainability Rubric. The levels and color coded headings align with the levels of institutional health in the rubric. The divisions build on each other; and they are not hard and fast, but can help you navigate the list based on your own operational needs.

Rubric Level 1 – “Doing Well”

Operations are consistent and stable; professional standards are regularly reviewed and used.

These are also basic/ introductory deaccessioning resources for all institutions

Codes of Ethics, Statements, Position Papers

- **AAM Code of Ethics for Museums**
<https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/code-of-ethics-for-museums/>
- **ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums (International Council of Museums)**
<https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf>
- **AASLH Statement of Standards and Ethics (Association for State and Local History)**
<http://download.aaslh.org/AASLH+Statement+of+Standards+and+Ethics+-+Revised+2018.pdf>
- **Professional Practices in Art Museums (Association of Art Museum Directors)**
<https://aamd.org/sites/default/files/document/2011ProfessionalPracticesinArtMuseums.pdf>
- **AAMD Policy on Deaccessioning (Association of Art Museum Directors)**
https://aamd.org/sites/default/files/document/AAMD%20Policy%20on%20Deaccessioning%20website_0.pdf
- **Art Museums and the Practice of Deaccessioning (Association of Art Museum Directors)**
<https://aamd.org/sites/default/files/document/PositionPaperDeaccessioning%2011.07.pdf>

Terms, Fact Sheets, FAQs, Practices

- **Questions and Answers about Selling Objects from the Collection (AAM)**
<https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/questions-and-answers-about-selling-objects-from-the-collection/>
-
- **Society of American Archivists Glossary**
<http://files.archivists.org/pubs/free/SAA-Glossary-2005.pdf>

- **Deaccession and Disposal in Small Museums, Terms and Fact Sheet (Museums & Galleries NSW, Australia)**
<https://sustainingplaces.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/deaccession-and-disposal-in-small-museums.pdf>
- **National Park Service Museum Handbook (chapter on deaccessioning)**
<https://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/MHII/mh2ch6.pdf>
- **Deaccession Done Right (Oklahoma Museums Association Technical Bulletin #47)**
https://www.okmuseums.org/sites/oma2/uploads/documents/Technical_Bulletins/Technical_Bulletin_47_-_Deaccessioning_Done_Right.pdf

Recorded Webinars

- **The Deaccessioning Dilemma: Laws, Ethics, and Actions (Connecting to Collections Care)**
https://www.connectingtocollections.org/the_deaccessioning_dilemma_laws_ethics_and_actions/
- **Why do we need this? Insights and Hindsight from Deaccessioning (Connecting to Collections Care)**
<https://www.connectingtocollections.org/why-do-we-need-this/>

Books

- **A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections, 3rd edition by Marie C. Malaro and Ildiko Pogany DeAngelis**
<https://www.amazon.com/Legal-Primer-Managing-Museum-Collections/dp/1588343227>
- **Museum Governance. Mission, Ethics, Policy by Marie C. Malaro (see chapter 7)**
https://www.amazon.com/Museum-Governance-Mission-Ethics-Policy/dp/1560983639/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1528120462&sr=1-1&keywords=malaro%2C+museum+governance

Assessment Programs

- **Accreditation Program (AAM)** —Get recognized for your museum's good work and adherence to standards, ethics, and professional practices
<https://www.aam-us.org/programs/accreditation-excellence-programs/accreditation/>

Rubric Level #2: Struggling

Doing good, effective things but resources and/or communication are challenges.

In addition Level #1 resources, these options provide additional insights into improving challenges with the collections or leadership.

Codes of Ethics, Statements, Position Papers

- **Direct Care of Collections: Ethics, Guidelines, and Recommendations (American Alliance of Museums)**
https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Direct-Care-of-Collections_March-2019.pdf

- **Ethics Position Paper #1: The Capitalization of Collections (Association for State and Local History)**
<https://www.aamg-us.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CapitalizationofCollectionsAASLHPositionPaper1.pdf>

Recorded Webinars

- **AASLH Conversations: Deaccessioning in a Recession? Why and Why Not**
<https://learn.aaslh.org/products/recorded-webinar-aaslh-conversations-deaccessioning-in-a-recession-why-and-why-not>

Articles and Papers

- **Deaccessioning in Museums: Evaluating Legal, Ethical and Practical Dilemmas by Elizabeth Varner in . 9 Collections: J. Museum & Archive Professionals. 209**
https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2174071.
Note: this article has an excellent list of references to supplement this list
- **To Have and To Hold ... Or Not? Deaccessioning Policies, Practices, and the Question of the Public's Interest by Deandra Rose Mann in International Journal of Cultural Property, 24(2), 113-159.**
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-cultural-property/article/to-have-and-to-hold-or-not-deaccessioning-policies-practices-and-the-question-of-the-publics-interest/699DD45C7F2E9514FEFC1851344C9B5C>
Note: this article has an excellent list of references to supplement this list
- **Never Let Me Go? A Case Study of Deaccessioning and Disposal Undertaken at Museum of Wellington City and Sea, unpublished dissertation by Rebecca Loud**
<http://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10063/3421/thesis.pdf?sequence=2>

Books

- **Museums and the Disposal Debate, A Collection of Essays edited by Peter Davies**
<https://museumsetc.com/products/disposals-debate#ptab-editor>
- **Managing People and Projects in Museums: Strategies that Work by Martha Morris**
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442273665/Managing-People-and-Projects-in-Museums-Strategies-that-Work>
- **Leading Museums Today: Theory and Practice by Martha Morris**
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442275324/Leading-Museums-Today-Theory-and-Practice>
- **Leadership Matters by Anne W. Ackerson and John Baldwin**
https://www.amazon.com/Leadership-Matters-American-Association-History-dp-0759121842/dp/0759121842/ref=mt_other?encoding=UTF8&me=&qid=
- **Deaccessioning and Its Discontents: A Critical History by Martin Gammon**
<https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/deaccessioning-and-its-discontents>
- **A Deaccession Reader edited by Stephen E. Weil**
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780931201509/A-Deaccession-Reader>
- **Museum Collection Ethics: Acquisition, Stewardship, and Interpretation by Steven Miller**
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781538135198/Museum-Collection-Ethics-Acquisition-Stewardship-and-Interpretation>

- **Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Archives and Special Collections** edited by Laura Uglean Jackson
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781538116029/Reappraisal-and-Deaccessioning-in-Archives-and-Special-Collections>
- **Is It Okay to Sell the Monet? The Age of Deaccessioning in Museums** edited by Julia Courtney
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442270817/Is-It-Okay-to-Sell-the-Monet-The-Age-of-Deaccessioning-in-Museums>

Assessment Programs

- MAP - Museum Assessment Program (AAM)
- StEPs - Standards of Excellence for History Organizations (AASLH)

Rubric Level #3: In crisis

Usual resources not available; inconsistent processes and communication.

Seek consultant and peer support for advice and help.

- An AAM Professional Networks Task Force is in place to function in this way to help facilitate a peer-to-peer network of support. Email deaccessiontaskforce@gmail.com.
- Museum Marketplace (American Alliance of Museums)
<https://www.museummarketplace.com/consulting-services>
- The Museum Group
<https://museumgroup.com/>

Disclaimer: advice and opinions provided by individuals sourced through these resources is their own and they are not speaking on behalf of AAM.

Rubric Level #4: Hospice

Not viable; leadership, relevance, community support, and resources lacking.

Faced with closure or a merger with another institution, determine your legal obligations and options for dispersing your financial assets and collections to another museum or non-profit.

- **When a History Museum Closes—Ethics Position Paper #2 (Association for State and Local History)**
http://download.aaslh.org/history+news/ethics_paper_no2.pdf
- **Making A Good End: How to Close a Museum (Connecting to Collections Care recorded webinar)**
<https://www.connectingtocollections.org/close-a-museum/>
- **The Attorney General's office in each state provides guidance for legal aspects of handling community property.** <http://www.nasconet.org/resources/state-government/>
- **Updated list of abandoned property laws by state: see section on** International Legislation Related to Museum Property/Disposal of Museum Property/Abandoned Property

at <https://www.arcsinfo.org/programs/resources/legislation> (Association of Registrars and Collections Specialists)

- **Museum Associations Directories:**
 - **States:** <https://statemuseumassociations.org/directory/>
 - **Regional:** <https://statemuseumassociations.org/regional-directory/>
 - **National:** <https://statemuseumassociations.org/national-directory/>

- **State by state listing of non-profit agencies and associations**
<https://www.charitycompliancesolutions.com/resources/state-state-nonprofit-agencies-and-associations>