**Accessing Collections**

**Moderator Notes**

***How to use:***

*These notes and accompanying slideshow are designed for use in a group format with a moderator/presenter and several participants. The group size is flexible- with a smaller group it can be run as largely a guided discussion with some background, while for a larger group it can be run with more defined boundaries between presentation and break-out discussions.*

*Discussions are integrated throughout the presentation. If using this in an in-person setting, ensure that participants will be able to easily talk with each other. At the start of the presentation, encourage participants who are scattered to move to sit with the group.*

*If you are in a remote setting, think about strategies for encouraging and moderating discussion appropriate to your audience and platform. If the group size is large, you should be prepared to use breakout rooms to facilitate conversation.*

***Running time:***

*The amount of time this curriculum will take depends significantly on the time allocated for discussion. Typically, at least 50-60 minutes is needed for the program, but it can be extended to two hours with more discussion time and incorporation of additional activities.*

***Suggestions for customization of the presentation***

* *Integrate examples of particularly fragile items from your collection into Slides 13-14.*
* *Include some significant but rarely accessed collections from your own institution in addition to or in place of the examples on Slides 20-24*

***Suggestions for supporting activities***

* *Display some collections that are commonly accessed at your institution*
* *Invite a collections manager to demonstrate the process for pulling an object/item and preparing it for viewing*
* *Invite a researcher or educator who regularly accesses your collections to give a short presentation or Q&A on how they use collections in their research or teaching*

**Accessing Collections**

**Presentation Notes**

Plain text can be read directly from the notes when presenting

*Italicized text in boxes provides additional information for the moderator, including suggestions for guiding discussions.*

**Slide 1:**

*Welcome your group of participants. Introduce yourself and any other presenters. If the group size is small, you may also wish to have participants introduce themselves. Depending on the context explain the purpose of this workshop and the goals for the session. We would appreciate acknowledgement either here or at the end of the development of this curriculum by the University of Oregon Libraries and Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (and it will also help explain the focus on examples from these institutions). If you have done so, highlight ways that you have customized this presentation to your institution.*

**Slide 2:**

Museum and library collections are held in the public trust, but for objects that are not on open shelving/public view, the museum or library controls access to them. In this module, we will explore some of the diverse reasons people access collections, the processes for doing so, and how museums and libraries can work to connect with communities and raise awareness of their collections.

**Slide 3:**

Let’s start out by thinking about the different kinds of groups that might want access to collections. We are going to look at five examples from UO Special and Museum Collections. For each, we’ll brainstorm who might be interested in requesting access to this item.

**Slide 4:**

Here we have a list of grievances and demands from the UO Black Student Union that was sent to the president of the University of Oregon in 1968. Who might wish to view this document?

*Ideas: The current Black student task force on the UO campus, student activists, UO faculty and staff, students in classes on civil rights movements, scholars of student activism or civil rights, the students who wrote this document and/or members of their families, community members*

**Slide 5:**

This is a suit of armor from the Edo Period in Japan. Who might wish to view this object?

*Ideas: scholars and students of Japanese art or martial history, aficionados of Japanese armor, costumer for a historical film or play, re-enactors/LARPers/cosplayers*

**Slide 6:**

This undated, untitled image was taken by Ruth Mountaingrove, a photographer who co-founded Rootworks, a lesbian intentional community and photographed the lesbian land movement in Oregon more generally. Who might wish to view this photograph?

*Ideas: scholars of intentional movements, scholars of lesbian activism, photographers, members of the lesbian land movement community and their families, family members and friends of the women pictured*

**Slide 7:**

This is a lithograph by the contemporary artist Alexander Calder. Who might wish to view this print?

*Ideas: scholars and students of his art, artists interested in the techniques he used*

**Slide 8:**

Here we have two street photos of Eugene, OR, one taken in 1959 and one in 1990. Who might wish to view these photographs?

*Ideas: architecture and urban planning students, historical preservationists, local history buffs, nostalgic community members*

**Slide 9:**

In an ideal world, all collections would be easily accessible- you might walk into a museum and see every work in a collection on display or pull a rare book off the shelf in a library. In practice, it is generally necessary to restrict access to museum and special collections. These restrictions take different forms.

**Slide 10:**

Most museums and special collections do not allow direct access to their collections storage areas. Here, you can see the UO Libraries special collections storage area at left and the reading room at right. Patrons who wish to view items from special collections need to make a request to the librarian, who brings the collection out for use in this space where activities can be monitored.

**Slide 11:**

Museums follow a similar procedure, but they often have less room for viewing collections not on display. Interested parties generally need to contact the museum in advance and make an appointment to visit.

*Pose the following question to the audience:*

Why don’t museums and library special collections tend to allow direct access to their storage areas?

*Themes for the response: fragility of collections, ability to monitor use, space constraints, importance of maintaining proper shelving, concerns about security*

*You might choose to discuss a trend towards incorporating open storage models in public areas in some museums*

**Slide 12**

Due to these practices, enabling access requires labor on the part of library and museum staff. While in some cases, the process may be as simple as pulling a small box off of a shelf, for some items, it can be significantly more complex to prepare an item for viewing. Bulky items such as the almost six foot tall wooden screen at left are difficult to move, and large textiles such as the one at right often require significant layout space.

**Slide 13**

Some collections are exceptionally fragile or vulnerable such that frequent use could cause damage. For these collections, museums and libraries might request a substantive justification for why it is necessary to have physical access to the item (as opposed to, for example, viewing a high resolution image). That said, libraries and museums can work to find creative solutions to provide access.

As an example, UO Libraries Special Collections holds an important and rare copy of Edward Curtis’s 1910 photographic work, The North American Indian. The folios are very fragile, and, as you can see at right, researchers are strongly encouraged to find other ways to view the piece and must justify their need to access the original. However, UO Libraries also recognizes the broad-ranging interest in this work, and consequently holds regular open viewing days when selections from the work are brought out of storage for anyone to see.

**Slide 14**

Another example is the Ken Kesey Papers, also housed in the UO Libraries Special Collections. This is a high demand collection that, due to donor restrictions, cannot be scanned and made available digitally. For this reason, the UO Library staff constructed a set of special archival boxes which enable the collection to be easily viewed without handling and ensures preservation of the internal order of the papers.

**Slide 15**

Should anyone be allowed to see anything from the collections? Should they be required to provide a reason for their interest?

*Possible Discussion Themes:*

* *The potential challenges of playing a gate-keeper role. Who decides what use is legitimate? How might structural biases be reinforced in this decision-making?*
* *Can the yes be qualified? The Curtis folio example of finding creative ways to expand access while minimizing impact on the object/item and the institution resources*
* *Is the answer different for different kinds of institutions with different kinds of resources and missions?*

**Slide 16**

As we discussed at the beginning of this presentation, access to collections is central to the missions of museums and libraries. While collections are held with the intention of long-term preservation, their vitality comes through interaction with those for whom the institution holds the collections in trust. However, accessing collections can be intimidating for some, given that it requires proactively reaching out to the institution. Most importantly, if someone doesn’t know the collections are there, they may not even know to look.

**Slide 17**

Today, the internet and digitized versions of resources are of course the primary path by which people learn about collections. We aren’t going to focus too much on the benefits and challenges of digitization in this presentation *[Note: See dedicated module on this issue]*, but it’s important to note that digitization and the sharing of collections images and catalogs through online resources is important not only in terms of increasing access through widespread sharing of digital versions, but also in creating awareness of in person collections.

**Slide 18**

Digitizing collections is a complex, resource intensive process. However, even if an institution isn’t in the position to share digital images or host an online catalog, simply sharing detailed descriptions of collections contents can be helpful. For example, the UO Libraries holds a set of collections related to United States involvement in the Philippines in the early 20th century. While the holdings have not yet been digitized, they have been described as you can see here for the papers of Maurice P. Alger, a lieutenant in the US Philippine Constabulary. The special collections webpage summarizing the collections appears on the first page of a google search for “Philippine Constabulary”

**Slide 19**

In the case of some collections, museums and libraries may find it productive to work very closely with communities that have particularly strong connections to a collection. An example of this is the Lee Moorhouse Photographs. Moorhouse was an Indian Agent for the Umatilla Indian Reservation who produced over 9,000 images in the late 19th and early 20th century which document Native American life in the Columbia Basin.[[1]](#footnote-1) The UO Libraries worked collaboratively with the Tamástslikt Cultural Institute (TCI) of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation on the curation of this collection as part of the Picturing the Cayuse, Walla Walla, and Umatilla Tribes Project. The TCI added their own cataloguing fields to the object records including revised titles, descriptions, notes, terms, and classes. This project recognized the deep personal connections of the tribal members to this material and gave the tribe comprehensive access to the collection.

**Slides 20-24**

*This activity invites the group to brainstorm how to raise awareness of several collections held by the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art and UO Libraries Special Collections.*

*On the subsequent four slides are four collections held by these institutions. For each collection, identify an audience that might be interested in the collection and propose a method that might be used to raise awareness of the collection among that group.*

*This activity may be completed as one large group with discussion of each item, or as a set of small groups. With small groups, each group should make their decision independently and compare the results.*

**Slide 25**

*Ask participants to reflect on this closing question. Consider asking them to think quietly and write a few notes, then to share their thoughts with a small group or the participants as a whole.*

*This closing reflection offers an opportunity to think about the importance of access to collections. You might choose to take this as opportunity to reflect on how these collections are more accessible to some individuals than to others and ways that institutions can expand the audiences they serve.*

1. Description from *Picturing the Cayuse, Walla Walla, and Umatilla Tribes* collaborative project. <https://oregondigital.org/sets/moorhouse>, accessed 9/15/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)