

Museums & Galleries NSW

DEACCESSION AND DISPOSAL IN SMALL MUSEUMS

Clarification of terms

Deaccessioning is the formal process of removal of an object from the collection register, catalogue or database.

Disposal is the physical removal of the object from the organisation by the process decided upon by the collections or acquisition committee.

Most large institutions have come to consider deaccessioning as just another part of collection management. And as times progresses it is becoming an issue that more and more small organisations, both regional and urban, are also dealing with. For a long time, small museums in particular have been collecting material without a collection policy or any focus for the collection. However, as storage and display space has progressively filled to capacity, many smaller organisations are reconsidering their past practices and how to deal with them.

Deaccessioning is a process that requires much tact as the general public may view deaccessioning practices as a rejection or neglect of their gifts to the community. Most people give items to a museum or gallery because they want to see it preserved for future generations. They see the local museum or gallery as the best way to do this for what they consider to be their most precious and prized possessions. If they hear of the local museum deaccessioning items, they could be hurt and offended by the action. One way of combating this is to be open and honest with the community about what you are doing and why, and be very clear in your explanations of your actions.

Deaccession can be a tricky process if the organisation is unclear of the object's provenance, or how it came to be in their collection. It may also discourage potential donors from donating to the organisation if they feel it is just going to be rejected in the future. This can be alleviated by explaining to the community that the process of deaccession and that a more rigorous collections policy is intended to diminish the need for future deaccession procedures. This may be done through the local press or by holding an open day at your organisation, focussing on the issue.

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Some rural museums have accepted their need to deaccession some material from their collections, however, are nervous about upsetting past donors who have given and now may be upset by the thought of their gift being 'chucked out'. And rightly so. The last thing you want to do is to get the community off side, whether you live in a big city or a small town.

To combat this, some feel the best approach is to be as up-front about the process as possible and perhaps even place a small editorial in the local community paper. This article would explain the process and encourage past donors who may be concerned to come forward and discuss their thoughts with the museum. An editorial is something that museums may have to do, especially in the case of a museum that has been collecting for many years and records have not been kept on donors. It may be a necessity to ask past donors to come forward so that you can identify who gave what.

Deaccession decisions, like acquisition decisions, should be based on objective criteria and not personal taste. In addition to this, don't act in haste to make room for another large acquisition and don't be tempted to submit to the pressure of deaccessioning for financial gain.

Of utmost importance is that the organisation holds legal title of the object before it can be disposed of. If legal title is not held, for example a deed of gift signing the object over to the organisation, this becomes a more difficult process. Organisations should check their museums Statute, Articles and Memorandum or Trust Deed to ensure they are entitled to deaccession and dispose of material. For further information, consult a solicitor or a legal advisor such as the Arts Law Centre of Australia.

The Deaccession Policy

Just as an organisation should have an accession or acquisition policy they should also have a deaccession policy that covers these types of procedures. A deaccession policy is often written into the collection policy of an organisation, however it can be a separate entity.

The two major objectives of a deaccession policy should state what the organisation will and will not collect; and the second, how deaccessioned material will be disposed of. This should outline a series of steps to be taken by the organisation.

The disposal information should identify organisations that the object may be offered to for transfer as a method of disposal. These may include institutions in the area, or those that hold a similar collections policy and collections, or even to offer items of indigenous provenance back to the community from which it came. Establishing strong links with the local aboriginal community will assist in this area.

It should also be stated in the policy that deaccessioned material may be not purchased, if auction or sale is the defined method of disposal, by a member or staff, either volunteer or paid. This is seen as an unethical practice whereby a worker at the organisation may go through the process of deaccessioning an item, whether this be

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recommending or approving deaccession, simply because they hold full intention of acquiring it for themselves.

Organisations must have a collection and deaccession policy for their own protection and individuals should NEVER act alone in this type of operation, as it is advisable to have a faceless group of persons responsible for decision making than an individual. "A decision to dispose of any object should be the responsibility of the governing body of the museum, not of the curator of the collection concerned acting alone".

(Council of Australian Museum Associations Code of Ethics, 1985).

Recommendations should go to the director and board or collections/acquisitions committee of the organisation. The final decision should be made by these people, as should the method of disposal.

Why Deaccession

There may be any number of reasons why an organisation will deaccession:

- there is a collections policy when there was not one previously;
- the collecting focus has been refined or altered
- the object is a duplicate;
- the object has been damaged or slowly deteriorated over time and the costs of conservation outweigh the value to the collection;
- the object can no longer be suitably stored by the organisation;
- the object should be returned to the Aboriginal, Torres Strait or other community group from which it came;
- the original owner or relative of donor has proven legal title to it, e.g.: it is stated in the donors will that it is to go to their son, and the organisation does not hold a deed of gift
- other reasons.

The Procedure

Before an organisation removes an object from the collection, it must ensure its members endorse this activity. Mention should be made in the collection policy that this action is an option and a possibility. Even if an organisation does not wish to take on this task, this should also be noted in the collections policy. An outline of the procedures should be noted in the collections policy.

The procedure is actually broken up into two phases, the first being the deaccession and the second the actual disposal.

Deaccession

All acquisition and deaccession decision should be based on the collections policy, using it in the decision making process. If an organisation does not have either of these documents, they should be written before any action takes place. It is also useful to carry out significance assessment to assist the committee in their decision making.

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Put the object/s identified for deaccession somewhere in the storeroom on their own, away from the rest of the collection. Ideally, storerooms should be made up of a number of collection areas including, objects awaiting transfer into the collection, and those potentially facing transfer out of the collection.

The Deaccession Process

Use the following steps as a guide.

1. Identify and list the objects you consider possible for deaccession.
2. Check museum records, such as donor and date of acquisition, for any information on the objects if not already known.
3. Fully list objects with any known relevant information and prepare to be presented before collections or curatorial committee of the museum for consideration, including a recommendation. Your recommendation document should include the following things:
 - Accession number (if one exists) and description
 - Provenance
 - Advice on legal status of object
 - Reason for deaccession
 - Any additional information you have from advisers regarding value, etc
 - Recommended method of disposal.
4. If committee agrees to deaccession, remove object from any museum records such as card catalogue, accession register, object files or computer database. Remember to record in the accession register the fate of the object so that this is recorded for future museum workers.
5. Place object in 'Deaccessioned Items' area of your storeroom for a recommended 'cooling off period' of at least 12 months. Twelve months is the general amount of time for a cooling off period. This time is provided to allow any further information about the object to come to light, such as relevance, value, provenance, etc.
6. During this time, you may act on the committee's recommendation for method of disposal by contacting donors, other institutions, etc.
7. After the cooling off period, dispose of the object following the hierarchy of methods of disposal as per the recommendation.
8. Develop a file, register or database of deaccessioned items with detailed information including a photograph for future reference.

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Methods of Disposal

Disposal is the physical removing of the object from the museum. This can be done in a number of ways and usually they are attempted through this order:

- Return the object to the donor, if donor in agreement
Draw on the corporate memory of past employees, volunteers, board or committee members to try and establish the missing information. If this still isn't established and the organisation wishes to continue the process, every effort must be made to establish the provenance and the donor's identity if it was a gift. A 'reasonable amount of effort and period of time' must be spent on trying to locate donors, if a gift. The committee should establish a reasonable amount and this might indicate that the organisation considers four attempts to contact the donor by letter or phone call, enough. It may also mean placing an ad in the local paper or through other networks.
- Transfer to another institution, if one can be located that will accept the object. This would be an institution with a similar collecting area, e.g.: if a maritime related object, a maritime museum would be most appropriate.
- Exchange with another institution if possible.
- Sale. Sell the object at public auction or by tender. This ensures the best fair market price for an object. As mentioned before, it should be noted in the deaccession policy that those connected with the museum not be allowed to purchase deaccessioned items. The funds generated from such sales should be then transferred into the acquisition budget so that items of greater significance to the organisation may be purchased in the future, or for other purposes such as conservation work for important collection items.
- Destruction - only be considered for an object if it were in **very poor condition**, had irreparable damage, etc. Destruction refers to a situation whereby the object would be simply placed in the bin.

Finally, don't re-use a deaccessioned objects number and don't destroy the records. This will only create confusion in the future. Note on the accession register that the object has been deaccessioned, and keep the files of deaccessioned objects in a file that indicates this. This creates a useful paper trail that will inform future museum workers when those with corporate memory have moved on.

Any questions regarding deaccessioning can be directed to the M&G NSW staff. Don't be afraid to discuss it with others in the field and other professional museum workers as well. Sometimes there are no hard and fast rules, and an organisation will have to make difficult decisions.

Ensure that all decisions and actions are fully documented and recorded so that if any queries are made about the object in the future, it is possible to answer those queries with an informed perspective.

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DEACCESSION AND DISPOSAL FLOWCHART

