



Guidelines for Collaboration

<https://guidelinesforcollaboration.info>

Guidelines for Museums

For the purposes of this document:

- *the term “museum” applies to any institution with collections.*
- *the terms “community” and “community members” refer to tribes and tribal members, as well as Native American corporations or communities seeking to collaborate with a museum.*

The following Guidelines were developed over a three-year period of collaboration between Native and non-Native museum professionals, cultural leaders, and artists. The Guidelines are intended as a resource for museums who are working in collaboration with communities. This document does not present a set of rules; instead, it offers principles and considerations for building successful collaborations.

There are two separate and complimentary sets of guidelines; one for communities and the other for museums. We encourage readers to refer to both. Although the focus for both documents is on collections-based collaborations, the Guidelines apply to all types of collaborative work in museums, including education, exhibits and public programs.

Although the Guidelines may be useful for many kinds of engagement with museums, they are not specifically intended as a resource for Native American Graves Protection Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) consultations.

This document can be printed.

BACKGROUND

Contributions of Native peoples continue to be among the least understood and recognized aspects of the human experience. When we look at museums and their

representation (or lack of representation) of Native peoples, this becomes evident. Museums as institutions of learning and understanding, and as repositories of material culture and information, are adopting different strategies to improve representations of cultures and their knowledges, access to archives and collections, and collections stewardship. One such strategy is collaboration. The SAR Guidelines for Collaboration respond to this evolution in the field with information to help museums build relationships and collaborations with communities.

COLLABORATION

True collaboration does not happen immediately—it is process driven and takes time and commitment. The specific manner in which you collaborate will be unique to your museum, the community, and the project. Do not confuse collaboration with a single invitation to view or comment on collections, or to rubber-stamp exhibition content. Collaboration is about sharing both authority and decision-making and includes cooperative planning, definition of outcomes and roles, task accountability, transparent budget discussions, and a clear structure for communication.

Some key questions to consider when developing collaborative relationships with communities include:

- What need or problem exists to prompt a collaboration?
- Does your museum have the time and resources to support a collaboration?
- How will the collaboration be of benefit to both your museum and the community?

WHY WORK WITH COMMUNITIES?

Museums can serve as valuable resources for communities. At the same time, museum professionals' increased recognition of the value in working with communities has generated more informed work and better practices. Myriad case studies exemplify successful processes that have led to meaningful collaborations (see "Case Studies"). Collaboration enables the museum to better document the context, meaning, and contemporary relevance of collections. In addition to providing enhanced understanding, a collaborative process improves the accuracy of museum records, thereby allowing for more-informed curation, conservation, and collections

management as well as the development of appropriate programming and projects. Collaboration can have a profound impact on museum staff; the experience can change the way you work with and view the collections you steward. Museum staff often recognize the value of their work when they witness the impact it has on communities.

Some potential outcomes of collaborations include:

- Artistic inspiration for individual artists and community-based arts programming.
- Community-based traditional arts and cultural revitalization initiatives.
- Augmenting and improving museum catalogue information.
- Incorporating cultural protocols into collections stewardship.
- Collaborative conservation examination, decision-making and treatment.
- Expanding museum loan programs to and with communities.
- Collaborative exhibit development and curation.
- Developing collaborative educational and interpretive programming.
- Strengthening and adjusting museum policies regarding access to collections.

The idea for a collaborative project or program can be initiated by either a museum or a community. As you consider embarking on a collaboration, you may find the information in the following sections to be useful in its planning and implementation.

CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS: WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES

Protocols: Many communities have cultural or governmental protocols to be aware of, respect and accommodate. These will vary, so ask your community contact what they are and how you can prepare for them. Examples include having your museum director (or other museum authority) greet the group at the initial visit or offering private time before or after viewing collections. The community may also have permissions procedures or review boards that will affect your project or program.

Human Remains: The presence of human remains in museum spaces can be a serious issue for many communities. People may not want to be near or see human remains. Talk with the community contact about human remains in your museum's collection to determine if there are concerns about being in the vicinity of remains, including those

from other cultures. Discuss what accommodations can be made, such as avoiding certain areas in the museum. Be aware that images of human remains can be an equally sensitive issue.

Listen, Learn, and Don't Take it Personally: As a museum staff member you may be approached by a community member who has grievances about museums they need to express, even if they have nothing to do with you or your museum. Remember that past museum practices and policies have impacted Native peoples negatively, and while times are changing, deeply felt emotions remain for some. Do not take expressed grievances personally—this is an opportunity for you to learn more about the context for such feelings of hurt or anger. Often the best approach is simply to listen and not feel pressured to reply or resolve the situation.

Community Representatives: Every community has individuals they regard as experts or authorities (tribal officials, elders, cultural leaders, artists). Each individual will provide perspectives from their own experience and background, so do not assume they are speaking for their community in general unless there is an understanding they are officially representing the community's political or cultural leadership. Respect the authority of their knowledge and expertise, just as you would any other scholar or researcher.

Flexibility: Working with a community requires an ability to “go with the flow.” You may not get a timely response to an email or phone inquiry, or a visit may be canceled unexpectedly due to a community's unforeseen cultural observances. You may also get unexpected visits from community members. Be prepared for these occurrences and be accommodating or politely explain your time constraints. Agendas for planned visits, while necessary, also need to be flexible.

Collections: Museums and communities view items in collections differently. Community members may see collections as having a life or a spirit and not as inanimate objects. Listen to and make note of how community members refer to collections. They may use language that avoids words such as object, artifact, and specimen. Incorporating their terms in your work with them demonstrates you are listening and respecting their cultural perspective.

Language: Community members may speak in their own language at times. This may occur because the information being conveyed is private or because this may be the only way to properly explain something. If they want you to know what they are saying, they will tell you.

Hospitality: Providing a warm welcome for community members shows them you appreciate their time and effort. Creating a welcoming environment may include meeting participants at the airport or hotel/motel if they have not previously visited, having your museum director welcome them, providing a meal(s) during the day and breaks with coffee, water, and snacks. Sharing a meal is a great opportunity to get to know people and communicate more informally.

Handling of collections: During visits, provide information on your museum's handling procedures and policies and be open to discussing options: for example, not wearing gloves when handling some collections. If you require gloves, explain why, especially if this relates to your museum's history of pesticide use and health and safety concerns. It is important to approach the explanation and discussion about handling and use of gloves sensitively to indicate the purpose is not about restricting access or handling.

Compensation: Community members, like other experts, should be appropriately compensated for their expertise and time, taking into consideration the number of hours and days they will be participating. Community members take time off from jobs or other responsibilities to participate in a museum project or program.

Keeping in Touch: Discuss the best way to stay in touch with the community contact or group – and check in on a regular basis to maintain the relationship. If you are unable to meet face-to-face with community members, consider alternatives to maintaining communication and forwarding the project's goals. For example, communities may have access to video conferencing technology.

Knowledge Appropriation: Native knowledge has often been inaccurately or inappropriately used or shared to further a museum's or an individual's research, publication, or other projects. To build trust with communities, it is important to discuss and agree how collected information will be used, shared, and archived.

Restrictions: In Native communities, access to knowledge is not a universal right. For many communities, cultural, religious, or ceremonial knowledge is restricted to certain individuals. There may be recognized individuals who have the authority to restrict access to certain collections. Be aware that restrictions can change.

THE MUSEUM VISIT

The intent of these Guidelines is to help build a good foundation for collaborative work with communities. Prepare for an inviting and successful visit by coordinating with other museum staff and community representatives to develop a mutually respectful and trusting relationship. Involve the community in determining project scope and timeframe and allow additional time for them to make decisions regarding their participation. Even given the best of intentions for the visit, missteps may occur, but these situations can provide learning opportunities and inform your process moving forward.

BEFORE

Whom should you contact?

If you have not already identified whom to work with, contacts can be made through a community's cultural center and museum, cultural committee, Cultural Preservation Office (CPO), Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO), or tribal government. You can also work through professional networks, such as regional museums and associations that have connections with communities in their area (advisory boards, community outreach, liaisons, etc.). One notable resource is the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries and Museums (ATALM).

What to consider before planning a visit:

Participants:

- Establish who the primary contacts will be for the museum and for the community.
- Determine the number of people participating. For collections work, strike a balance in terms of the number of people involved. For example, do not have eight staff members participating if you only have two community representatives.
- Provide the community with brief biographies of participating museum staff and contact information, and ask the community to do the same for their participants.

Logistics:

- Discuss and create an agenda with the community. Remember to schedule breaks.
- Inform the community members what your museum will provide, including transportation, parking, lodging, and meals as well as honoraria or other compensation.
- Check for any accessibility or special needs, such as wheelchair, dietary restrictions, etc.
- Explain the reimbursement process and send reimbursement forms ahead of the visit (see Additional Information: Form Examples).
- Discuss and send media release forms in advance.

Collections work:

- Send relevant collections history and context information to the community prior to the visit. This may include collections documentation, articles, catalog, accession records, photographs, video, and any pesticide treatment history.
- Discuss how the collections will be accessed and viewed. For example, will the items be viewed in the collections housing area or in a separate space? Ask them what items they wish (or do not wish) to see or be near.

Cultural sensitivity:

- Be mindful that community members see collections items as having a life or spirit, not as inanimate objects.
- The museum will need to be aware of cultural protocols, such as gender restrictions on handling, privacy for songs or prayers, or how to care for offerings made by community members. In anticipation of any cultural observances that include burning and/or plant materials, inform appropriate staff (e.g., disarm smoke alarm), and inform the community if your museum has restrictions on burning or food offerings.

DURING

Throughout the visit it is important to maintain a welcoming environment. Begin every visit by greeting people at the museum's entrance and provide an opportunity to exchange pleasantries and introductions over coffee or some other refreshment. This allows time for community members to familiarize themselves with the staff.

Although an agenda may have been established and agreed upon, be flexible and allow for change. Do not be driven to get specific results or expect immediate answers. Be mindful of personal or cultural boundaries. At times, no answer to a question might be the answer—the topic may not be something the visiting community members wish to discuss, or there may be general or seasonal (summer vs. winter) restrictions on certain topics.

You may have to ease into the direct work with collections by providing time for visitors to adjust to the museum environment. Some individuals may experience strong emotional reactions during the visit, especially when interacting with collections. They may need time alone with other community members or with the collections.

As you know, any constructive interpersonal engagement requires accurate reading of, and appropriately reacting to, the people with whom you are working. During the course of the visit, be conscious of your body language and tone as well as that of the other participants, and be prepared to adjust the conversation and activity if necessary.

Considerations during the visit:

- Review the agenda for the day and decide together how you would like to proceed.
- Offer community members the opportunity to tour the facility and exhibitions with museum staff.
- Provide time and a place for community members to prepare themselves for accessing or working with collection items.
- Expect community members to have discussions in their own language throughout the visit.
- Offer explanations about the types of recording that will happen during the visit and allow time, if requested, for community discussion and decision about the media and release forms.

- Explain what happens to the information generated during collaboration and allow time for questions (see Documentation).
- Inform the community of your museum's handling policy and procedures.
- Take breaks as people need them. Provide food, water, and beverages.

AFTER

Create a record of the visit that includes details of place, time, individuals present, and collections viewed and discussed. Allow sufficient time immediately after the visit to transcribe and organize notes, recordings, and images while memories are fresh (See Documentation). Once completed, review the documentation with the community for accuracy and discuss any need to limit access to the written, audio or visual documents. Notify the community if any new information is acquired after the visit.

Things to consider after the visit:

- Acknowledge the community's time and contributions by sending a thank you letter right after the visit.
- Respond immediately to any requests made by the community.
- Ensure community members receive their compensation and reimbursements in a timely manner.
- Include an opportunity for feedback about the visit.
- Discuss lessons learned internally and, as appropriate, with the community participants.
- Discuss and determine next steps with the community (if any).

A VISIT TO THE COMMUNITY

A community may extend an invitation to your museum staff, board, or other affiliates so that the visitors can learn about and experience aspects of community history, culture, and arts.

The following guidelines may apply to your community visit:

- Ask whom you will be meeting and whether there is an agenda.
- Establish a primary contact person in the community and in the museum as well.

- Offer to provide information about yourself, and any other museum staff, ahead of time.
- Inquire about community policies, cultural protocols, and governance structure.
- Research relevant literature and online resources about the community.
- Ask about appropriate gifts for those with whom you will be meeting.
- Be prepared for unanticipated circumstances, such as cancellations or delays due to unforeseeable cultural observances.

DOCUMENTATION

The documentation generated through the collaboration is recognized as a resource not only for museums and communities but for all users of your museum's collections. A common challenge in many museums is the capacity to manage and update documentation. If a museum wishes to collaborate, infrastructure and/or staff capacity should be established to meet these goals. For example, you may need to identify or create a field in your database to include information shared by communities.

The sections below address three categories of museum documentation:

- Museum and tribal policies and release forms.
- Existing museum records about collections.
- New documentation produced through the collaboration.

POLICIES AND FORMS

Most community members will be unfamiliar with collection access forms and media permission/release forms used by your museum. These should be shared and discussed with the community point of contact before the visit. In addition, community members should be made fully aware of the intended use of any documentary media produced, such as in publications, social media, public relations materials, etc.

Explain why community members are being asked to sign the forms and allow time for review and discussion. They may have questions and may wish to edit the forms before signing to accommodate personal and cultural privacy concerns. Copies of signed forms should always be provided to the community.

Many communities have policies for research and media permissions as well as culturally appropriate care of collections. It is important for museums and communities to inform each other of policies and forms relevant to the collaboration.

EXISTING RECORDS

Whether documentation of your collection resides in a single database or is distributed among different locations in your museum, it is important to gather and share documentation with the community prior to and during the visit. You will need to set aside sufficient time to compile this information, perform data entry, and make it accessible to the community. Having access to all the museum's information helps contextualize collections and informs the community of the breadth of documentation as well as its gaps and inaccuracies.

DOCUMENTING THE COLLABORATION

Documentation will accumulate over the life of the collaboration. New information generally includes images, video and/or audio recordings, notes, and transcripts. Communities may also want to produce their own documentation, such as a video for their own records. Social media posts can also serve as documentation of the collaboration for both the museum and the community. The collaboration will likely generate information beyond the original intent, such as personal memories and anecdotes.

Over the course of your collaboration, as relationships grow, private and sensitive information could be shared by community members and documented by museum staff. This can be problematic since access to community knowledge may be restricted and governed by community protocols. Be prepared to discuss and negotiate the museum's ability to restrict access to, or strike from the record, any documentation generated during the collaboration.

In any case, it is important to provide community members with the opportunity to review information they shared before it becomes part of the museum record. In this way, inaccuracies can be corrected and any sensitive information can be identified.

Copies of all newly generated documentation should be given to the community contact. Determine with the contact the best format for sharing with other participants.

For questions or to provide feedback, please contact us at guidelines@sarsf.org.

To access case studies or additional information relating to the Guidelines, please visit www.guidelinesforcollaboration.info.