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To: Bosanko, William <william.bosanko@nara.gov>
Cc: Chris Naylor <Chris.Naylor@nara.gov>
Subject: Special Request
Attachments: Exhibits - Process, Decision Making, Controversy.docx

This is the last of my research. Attached is what I was able to find on the exhibit decision making process. Included is information obtained from searching for "Exhibits, Controversy".

I have responded to your request by providing three of four separate documents. If you would like me to bring them all together in a single document, let me know.

If you need something else, or need me to keep digging, let me know.

A search of other archival and cultural institutions has not yielded anything beyond what I already provided you. If they have well articulated standards, criteria, process and decision flows, and forms for exhibitions, they are not in the public domain.

I did come across a couple NARA file plans that have exhibit related documentation. Not sure they will yield much of use, but I can take a look at them when you are ready.

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David Coontz II, CICA
Office of the Chief Operating Officer

Exhibition Information from Other Cultural Institutions

Smithsonian Institution. “The Making of Exhibitions: Purpose, Structure, Roles and Process” (Oct 2002)

<https://www.si.edu/content/opanda/docs/rpts2002/02.10.makingexhibitions.final.pdf>

Over the past two years of research on exhibitions, the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) study team interviewed museum professionals at over sixty museums, inside and outside the Smithsonian, on various aspects of exhibition-making, including capabilities, structures, processes, management and indicators of quality. In addition to the interviews, OP&A staff reviewed current literature related to the exhibition-making process and to museums in general, visitor studies, marketing and business (looking at topics such as innovation and creativity, learning organizations, and organizational culture and change)

Almost all but the smallest museums have an internal exhibition committee that reviews exhibition ideas and forwards those they consider viable to the most senior staff or director. Most committees review both exhibition and public program ideas. In one mid-sized museum, the committee includes representatives from the exhibitions, collections, public programs, visitor services, marketing and development departments; another includes the curatorial, collections, design, education, public affairs and development departments, as well as publications, conservation, photography and retail sales. In research-oriented museums, the committee tends to include representatives from curatorial disciplines and senior collection managers and sometimes representatives from the public programs or exhibition offices.

In the past decade, as museums have become more dependent on revenue from their audiences and more sensitive to their needs, individuals “representing” audiences participate in decisions about exhibition ideas. In a related paper, we noted that in some museums, marketing is a senior level position and is at the table when senior leadership makes the decision to develop an exhibition. At other museums, a representative from the department of education is sometimes asked to play that role.

Exhibition Selection and Approval Process.

In general, ideas are expected to be sketched out or somewhat developed before they are seriously considered, except when directed from above. The example cited above for the museum of anthropology, where someone presents just an idea, is a rarity. The Tech Museum of Innovation, for example, asks that “suggestors” self-screen ideas using a set of questions grouped under two major headings: (i) fit with museum and values, and (ii) fit with strategies and plans. A committee then screens the ideas with additional questions regarding fit with budget and schedule.

Very few institutions have formal criteria for selecting exhibitions, but many interviewees readily discussed assumed criteria. Criteria include relationship to mission, merit, fundability, availability of objects (in-house or available on loan), and audience draw and appeal. Interviewees agreed that, in general, mission statements are sufficiently broad that exhibition ideas are never rejected because they do not fit. Merit is generally understood to be approval by an in-house content specialist.

A less frequently discussed, but important, decision-making criterion is the relationship of a current or potential museum supporter or stakeholder to a proposed exhibition. The personal interests, dislikes or collections of board members, elected officials and financial supporters of museums are evident in many exhibition decisions. The potential response of government officials, particularly elected ones, can exert a significant influence, especially where the museum receives public funds. If an idea seems viable, it may be vetted with other players and circulated for wider comment. The exhibition committee forwards ideas it deems acceptable to top-level management for approval and inclusion in the exhibition plan. As noted, the composition of the initial committee may well determine the fate of an idea.

American Historical Association. “Standards for Museum Exhibits Dealing with Historical Subjects” (2017)

<https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/statements-standards-and-guidelines-of-the-discipline/standards-for-museum-exhibits-dealing-with-historical-subjects>

In aiming to achieve exhibit goals, historians, museum curators, administrators, and members of museum boards should approach their task mindful of their public trust. To discharge their duties appropriately, they should observe the following standards:

1. Exhibits should be grounded in scholarship, marked by intellectual integrity, and subjected to rigorous peer review. Evidence considered in preparing the exhibit may include objects, written documentation, oral histories, images, works of art, music, and folklore.
2. At the outset of the exhibit process, museums should engage stakeholders in any exhibit and may wish to involve their representatives in the planning process.
3. **Museums and other institutions funded with public monies should be keenly aware of the diversity within communities and constituencies that they serve.**
4. **When an exhibit addresses a controversial subject, it should acknowledge the existence of competing points of view. The public should be able to see that history is a changing process of interpretation and reinterpretation formed through gathering and reviewing evidence, drawing conclusions, and presenting the conclusions in text or exhibit format.**
5. Museum administrators should support the work of curators who create historical exhibits produced according to these standards.

National Coalition Against Censorship. “Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy”.

<https://ncac.org/resource/museum-best-practices-for-managing-controversy>

3. Procedures for Addressing the Press or Complaints from the Public after an Exhibition or Special Program Opens.

Taken together, the Free Speech Commitment and the procedures to anticipate and respond to controversy will help to:

- Equip an institution with the tools to respond to criticism of controversial content;
- Improve relationships with the public;
- Support the right of audience members to access a wide variety of work;
- Safeguard the exhibiting institution against self-censorship;
- Introduce transparency;
- Ensure institutional support of curatorial decision-making; and
- Provide board member orientation.

The promotion and use of these strategies by national organizations and leading institutions will help validate them as the best practices in the field, and will help create communities of support when controversy arises in a specific institution.

American Library Association.

What if a library-initiated program causes controversy?

Libraries should not shy away from controversy. Staff should be aware of applicable library policies and the criteria for selecting programs and community use of library spaces. They should be prepared to explain the policy, as well as the bedrock principles of intellectual freedom.