

Museum Standards & Policies: Make Them Work For You

We are all aware in our work in museums how important it is that we fulfill our obligations of public trust and public service. That can seem daunting but fortunately there are two important resources at our fingertips that can help our museums stay on course and to communicate with others who will help us: Standards and Policies.

Standards

Standards contribute to fulfilling the obligations of **public trust** by creating reference points for good practice which museums can work towards at all levels of their operations.

The Museums Association of Saskatchewan describes their standards as “a consistent set of operational goals”, and “a comprehensive set of operational guidelines”. [Museums Association of Saskatchewan, *Standards for Saskatchewan Museums*, 2010 p. 5]

Standards enable museums to:

- Provide appropriate stewardship of collections
- Meet visitor expectations
- Be accountable to funders and donors

In Ontario, museum standards are implemented by the provincial government ministry with responsibility for museums (Ministry of Tourism & Culture). The Ministry uses the ten *Standards for Community Museums in Ontario* as criteria for the assessment of the operation of community museums in our province in qualifying for operating grants (CMOG). Not all provinces have them and, for those that do, while the expectations for what good practice entail are similar, their approach and purpose differ from province to province.

The most useful Standards documents are reviewed regularly and revised as the needs of the museum community and their audiences change. These Standards

cover all aspects of museum operations and are relevant and applicable to the diverse institutions in the provincial museum community.

- Standards represent sound and accepted museum practice and ethics – they provide goals for achievable operational excellence in the ‘core’ areas.
- Standards recognize the museum’s need for self-determination – each museum decides what is relevant to its aspirations (expressed through their institution’s policies).
- Standards rely on voluntary implementation – standards are not rules or regulations [but note their relationship to receiving operating grant support (CMOG) as described above].
- Standards assist the museum to undertake self–evaluation – they provide a built-in review process.
- Standards recognize the diversity of the museum community.

Standards documents provide useful guidance for what museums, in general, should do. You may have already noticed the emphasis in the *Standards for Community Museums in Ontario* on museum policies...Policies, created by individual institutions, provide the internal framework for your work in the context of the type and size of institution you are, your mission and your community.

Policy

While policy is often created by boards, or at least is the responsibility of museum boards, **our museum policies can (or should) provide guidance:**

- for planning,
- decision-making and

- evaluating the success of our work on behalf of our institution and our community.

Policy is defined as "a statement of principles which provides a basis for action." Policies guide an organization towards achievement of its vision or mandate.¹

The establishment of a policy framework from which to operate is a key role of a governing body.

Policy provides board members and staff with parameters from which to make decisions and to take action.

A museum's policies must follow from the Statement of Purpose, Mission or Vision Statement. Policy required for each institution will vary according to its nature and purpose, but most museums should have policies that cover the key areas of operations. These are **operating policies**.

Policies:

- **set direction** for museum managers in making decisions and guiding our actions
- are **useful communication tools** because they outline in considerable detail the thinking behind the way we do business; in other words, **they detail how we will be publicly accountable.**
- Particularly in a small community, policies can also be useful in **making sure an issue doesn't become personal**. "That is an amazing collection of your family's Nazi military artifacts documenting their involvement as members of the Hitler Youth but 'unfortunately' the museum's exhibition

¹ Tips for Boards - Policy Development written for the Ontario Museum Association by Carrie Brooks-Joiner & Sarah Stacy September 2000

policy will not let us consider your proposal to guest curate an exhibit proving that the Holocaust did not take place.”

Museum policy often addresses issues that are ethical in nature.

Why must we be so concerned about ethics?

- Museums look after the world’s cultural property and interpret it to the public.
- Our collections are also a significant component in defining cultural identity, locally, nationally and internationally.
- Museum work is a service to society and demands the highest standards of professional practice.
- Most of our museums receive funding that comes from some level of taxes or other public money.
- An effective museum requires the confidence of the public it serves.

Sometimes museum policies will specifically identify ethical positions. More commonly, **our policies will specify that the museum will comply with other ethical guidelines**. Most frequently, in Canada, museums cite the Canadian Museums Association (CMA) **Ethics Guidelines**. Others, the International Council of Museums’ (ICOM) **Code of Ethics for Museums**.

It is important that we don’t just “say” we follow them. **It is important that board members, paid staff and volunteers are familiar with their contents and know where their policies comply and where and why a decision was made to go a different way.**