University Historic Clothing Museums and Collections: Practices and Strategies

Sara B. Marcketti
Iowa State University, sbb@iastate.edu

Janet E. Fitzpatrick
Iowa State University, janfitz@iastate.edu

Carmen N. Keist
Iowa State University

Sara J. Kadolph
Iowa State University, skadolph@iastate.edu

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Abstract
University historic dress collections and museums provide unique opportunities to actively fulfill critical mission statements of the university, including possibilities for research projects, providing firsthand opportunities for students to view real-life objects, and outreach/service opportunities to the public. Despite the importance of collections in fulfilling university missions, research about current practices and best practices is scarce. The purpose of this study was to document practices, challenges, and opportunities for excellence experienced by university collections within the United States. To explore the topic, a qualitative methodology in which 14 curators and collection managers were interviewed was utilized. The results of this study suggest that many curators and collection managers endure many similar struggles within their departments, such as lack of financial resources, time, and support from upper administration. Yet, all of the participants stated the significant contributions and impact material culture can have on the mission of their institutions.

Keywords
historic clothing, collections, museums

Disciplines
American Material Culture | Fashion Business | Fashion Design

Comments
University museums’ interpretation of objects in a welcoming environment for the general public can “play a vital role in providing the bridge between academic staff and public groups” (Cross, 2009, p. 24). According to Bonner (1985, p. 288), “institutions of formal learning always have understood that maintaining collections for study and exhibition can be an important part of the education process.” University museums provide unique opportunities to actively fulfill critical mission statements of the university, including possibilities for research projects, providing first hand opportunities for students to view real life objects, and outreach and service opportunities to the public (Boylan, 1999). Despite the importance of university museums in fulfilling university missions, research about current museum practices and best practices is scarce. The purpose of this study was to document practices, challenges, and opportunities for excellence experienced by university historic clothing museums and collections within the United States.

University Museums

University museums usually exist to serve the student body and the faculty; the synergy that develops between universities and university museums occurs at several levels. Museums, including those highlighting art, the natural and physical sciences, and textiles and clothing provide opportunities for learning outside of the classroom for elementary through senior citizen groups (Packer, 2006; Spiess, 1996). University museums can reach students in nearly every discipline by engaging in collaborative projects with faculty and students (Blanco, 2010). A

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university museum provides a unique opportunity for undergraduate and graduate students to participate in an internship or work study assignment without having to leave the university or incurring additional expenses (Bonner, 1985). Further, university museums allow students, faculty, and outside researchers’ first hand opportunities to study artifacts not found in other institutional facilities. The objects contained within collections and museums can be used to acquire subject specific knowledge as well as more transferable skills such as communication and critical thinking skills (Chatterjee, 2010). Museum exhibits transform scholarship from a private act to a public experience because they reach a wider audience than most journal articles and refereed presentations (Breward, 2008). Further, museums provide a platform for academic research and a place where the community can provide feedback and interact with the university (MacDonald, 2008).

Many university museums rely on governing institutions for funding, facilities, staff, and administration. In order to continue to receive their funding, university museums are “under constant pressure to prove their worth and demonstrate that they are more valuable than a potential research group that could occupy the same location and probably generate more income” (Ashby, 2009, p. 43; Boylan, 1999). Due to the recent financial crisis within the United States, university museums have devised new ways to lessen their expenditures. Full time staff is often limited and in many cases faculty assume multiple roles: educator, researcher, and leader within the museum setting, which may or may not be considered a service assignment to the university (Ashby, 2009). This paper seeks to fill a gap in the knowledge base of current and best practices in textiles and clothing museums and collections.

University Clothing and Textiles Collections and Museums
The International Exhibition in Paris in 1900 displayed the first popular fashion history exhibition. Since then, clothing and textiles have been incorporated in exhibitions around the world. Fashion exhibits are unique in that they create an intimate setting and can create nostalgia for the viewer. The visitors are “invited to become involved in museum exhibitions through sight and a remembered experience of the pleasure of touching and wearing what is on view” (Palmer, 2008, p. 32).

Throughout the United States, many universities, colleges, and community colleges have collections of historic dress ranging from very small holdings consisting of a few hundred garments to large collections of 50,000 plus garments and textiles (Queen & Berger, 2006). These collections developed for a variety of reasons including to provide hands-on opportunities, to learn construction details for fashion design students, and to provide examples of silhouettes from different periods and decades for fashion history and design courses (Arthur, 1997). Many of these collections are considered teaching collections so that students can touch and explore the textiles and garments and utilize the collections as material culture libraries of fashion history (Blanco, 2010; Sauro, 2009). Since their founding, dress and textile collections have been effectively employed as educational tools to encourage university outreach and community participation. According to Miller and Portillo (1996): “A heightened sense of community history and pride in a vital collection supports a cycle of investment and outreach between the university and the community” (p. 48).

Past research indicated that university costume collections face a number of challenges including lack of space for exhibits and storage, poor climate control, and inadequate resources (Smathers, 1977). Furthermore, museums that encompass textiles and clothing face challenges regarding their perceived importance both within and outside of academia. Textiles and clothing
have traditionally been viewed as less important or of a lower status in museums and in academia (Steele, 2008). Fashion curator, Anderson stated, “Prejudice, fear and suspicion still surround the status of fashion within many museums….This sometimes takes the form of fashion being tolerated as a form of ‘entertainment’ which will ‘pull the crowds’, with no acknowledgment of the serious contribution it makes to the educational role of the museum” (Anderson, 2000, p. 374). In his critique of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute’s exhibit Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the 18th Century, art historian Gaskill stated, “Dress, then, provides curators with opportunities to explore layers of complex history scarcely available by other means. It brings its own problems [however, such as] a low position in the art hierarchy…” (1994, p. 616). While acknowledging that their renowned fashion collection is now given due credit by the art world, the esteemed Victoria and Albert Museum states on its website, “The V&A has collected both textiles and dress since its earliest days. For many years garments were only acquired if they were made of significant textiles, as fashion had a low status within the decorative arts” (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2011).

Methods

To explore the topic of current trends and best practices in textiles and clothing museums and collections, a qualitative method was selected to obtain “rich” or “thick” data (Esterberg, 2002; Kvale, 1996). This type of data allowed for a deeper understanding of museum practices through participants’ descriptions of everyday experiences (van Manen, 1990). We searched the Queen and Berger’s Clothing and textile collections in the United States: A Costume Society of America guide (2006) for universities, particularly at land-grant institutions with historic textiles and clothing museums and collections. Purposive sampling of land-grant institutions was utilized because these schools have a rich legacy of creating and maintaining collections (Ep特权 &
University Historic Clothing Museums

Ferguson, 1971). Further, due to the tri-partite mission of these schools, we were interested in exploring the diverse ways museums and collections fulfilled the research, teaching, and service missions. A total of forty requests were sent via email to identified curators and collection managers, with a total of 14 individuals participating in the study for a 35% response rate. The researchers visited three of the universities within driving distance in order to physically experience the museums and collections and learn first-hand from the curators and collection managers visited. For all of the interviews, we utilized an interview protocol that ensured a systematic approach to data collection and minimized interviewer bias, yet allowed participants the opportunity to openly explore the topic (Kvale, 1996).

The interview schedule, included in Table 1, included demographic questions such as “What were your education and work experiences that led you to become curator/collection manager?” and museum related questions including, “How is the museum/collection utilized in your department?”, “How does the museum/collection support the university’s mission related to education, research and service?”, and “What are the challenges of serving as the collections manager/curator of the museum?” With informants’ consent, all in-person interviews were audio taped and transcribed to ensure accuracy in data analysis. These interviews ranged from one to four hours in length. After reviewing the transcripts, theme analysis was used to extract themes from the data. In theme analysis, themes that emerged from the interviews were pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of the collective experiences of the curators and collection managers. According to Leininger, themes are identified by "bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone" (1985, p. 60). This study was reviewed and declared exempt by the university institutional review board. The following section provides results and discussion with both quantitative findings and
University Historic Clothing Museums

Participants’ work experiences ranged from 2 to 30 years with an average of 11 years as curator or collection manager. The age of the participants ranged from the late 20s to over 70, with an average age of 53 (Table 2). The ages of the participants suggests that retirements at certain institutions may be forthcoming, providing opportunities for new hires. Education experiences that led to the curatorship/collection management position included undergraduate and graduate work in anthropology, textile and dress history, museum studies, art history, and textile conservation. Six of the participants (primarily faculty members) earned doctoral degrees; eight participants (primarily staff members) earned what they viewed to be terminal masters’ degrees in subjects including textiles and clothing, museum studies, and anthropology. Melissa, a curator at a land-grant university spoke of her circuitous path, including jobs in fundraising, publishing, and research before her current position. She mentioned both an attraction to the educational mission of academic institutions as well as an aversion from some of the “nasty politics” at private museums that led to her current position. Many of the participants mentioned working as graduate assistants or volunteering in historic textile and dress collections, museums, and historical societies prior to their academic careers.

Responsibilities as part of the museum/collection manager included management tasks of registration, cataloging, and garment care and preservation (n=14), collections acquisitions
University Historic Clothing Museums

(n=14), supervising personnel, including undergraduate and graduate student assistants (n=13),
exhibition research and installation (n=11), and fundraising and promotion (n=9). All of the
participants (n=14) stated that their museum/collection responsibilities included some
service/outreach component encompassing the installation of exhibits, providing tours and
educational programs to visiting classes and community groups, and sharing insights into the
proper care and storage of historic garments. Other outreach activities included panel and
individual presentations at university events, community libraries, and historic homes.

While all of the informants stated that they routinely brought items from the collections
into undergraduate and graduate courses, seminars, and community presentations, eight of the
participants’ responsibilities included formal teaching duties. These faculty members spoke of
the importance of students, in the words of Tracy, “seeing hands on” demonstrations of types of
fabrics, embellishments, designer work, and silhouettes. Three of the fourteen participants
oversaw the collection through “implied consent” meaning that they taught the historic dress
courses at their universities and thus were expected to take care of the collection without an
official position responsibility requirement. Hours devoted to museum and collection
responsibilities averaged 23, with a range of one hour to fifty hours per week. Those with staff
positions dedicated more hours per week to the collection than faculty members who cited
additional responsibilities such as teaching and research loads. Many of the participants
mentioned that the hours devoted to the collection/museum fluctuated per week depending on the
types of projects as well as their other research and teaching responsibilities that were underway.

“Insert Table 2 About Here”

Museums and Collections
Three of the participants indicated that their facilities were classified as museums; eleven participants identified their facilities as European and American historic textile and dress collections. The textiles and garments numbered from 100 to upwards of 30,000 objects. The majority of the collections represented 19th through 20th century dress history with particular emphasis on the university’s geographic region.

Facilities ranged from one small room that served as the collection storage and conservation area to a state of the art building to house, display, and preserve the textiles and garments (Table 3). The most sophisticated museum included multiple gallery spaces, conservation facility, classroom, seminar/reading room, reception area, and storage facility with extensive compact storage system, rolling hanging racks, archival boxes, and mannequins. All participants mentioned storage cabinets to house their collections. Most of the collections/museums included a mix of hanging racks and archival and non-archival boxes to store the collection. Examination and work tables, computers and printers, sinks, vacuums, and steaming units were frequently mentioned as examples of equipment available for use with the collection. While most of the participants mentioned at least a small display space to mount exhibits, adequate exhibit space seemed to be a consistent problem; particularly if faculty needed to compete for university-controlled space. Several participants mentioned using university controlled space in places such as the library and the president of the university’s house for exhibit display purposes. If exhibit space was readily available, participants curated between two and six exhibits per academic year.

“Insert Table 3 About Here”

Several collection managers, particularly at the three universities visited by the researchers, mentioned specific ways of caring for garments in storage. Garments stored in boxes
or shelving units often included acid-free tissue paper or muslin “slings” so that the garments were protected from each other. The muslin wrapped around garments facilitated moving objects separately without having to disturb multiple layers. Shoes in storage were stuffed with stockinet filled with 100% polyester fiberfill tucked into the shoe. This gave the shoes shape without undue stress. Further, accession tags could be stitched into the shoe insert without having to mark the actual object itself. The process of making padded hangers was described by Margaret. She stated her institution used unvarnished wood hangers. Then two layers of needle-punched batting in about 3.5” strips were wrapped around the hanger twice so that it doubles back on itself. Then muslin covers were slipped over the hangers (the covers were washed periodically). Tracy and Margaret both spoke of creating padded hangers as extra credit opportunities for students in their historic dress courses. Informants mentioned purchasing mannequins from the companies ACME Mannequins and Manne-King. Nylon stockings or black jersey was used as mannequin coverings that both protected the inside of the objects as well as allowing the “body” to be built to whatever shape was required.

The majority of participants stated objects in their collections were numbered according to the year of the donation, specified donor number, the number of the garment that was donated, and finally a letter to signify the parts of the garment (i.e., 2011.10.5a or 2011 - year donation was received, 10 - donor number, 5 - fifth object donated by donor, a - part of donated object such as a jacket in a three piece suit). There was some variation in donor numbers; several collections managers stated the donor number stayed the same from year to year, while others gave new numbers to donors each year they contributed objects to the collections.

The museum in the study with the largest staff included a curator, 20 hours per week collection manager, two graduate assistants working seven hours per week, and four volunteers
working 3-15 hours per week. The collection in the study with the smallest staff included only
the participant who devoted 1-10 hours per week to the collection depending on her other
teaching and research responsibilities.

For database management systems, six participants used PastPerfect, three used Excel;
three utilized proprietary systems and two used Filemaker Pro. Six of the fourteen
museums/collections maintained a collections manual/governance document. Several collections
managers mentioned their manuals included information about exhibit materials and archival
supply companies, as well as handling, dressing, and packing procedures. Tracy commented that
the process of developing the collections manual was time-consuming, yet necessary. The
historic collection committee comprised of five faculty and staff members spent two years
developing the document which underwent numerous drafts. The document proved helpful in
that it provided institutional history regarding the collection and helped justify acquisition
decisions to potential donors.

Several of the collections/museums had websites (n=10), primarily for the purpose of
extending the reach of their facilities beyond the university to the general public. According to
Camille the website “provides artistic inspiration and educational opportunities to a world-wide
audience and maintains connection to [textile] enthusiasts and scholars world-wide.” Melissa
commented that her museum would be “invisible” without their website. The desire to update the
websites with searchable garment and textile images was frequently mentioned, but lack of time
and money limited the initiation of these projects. Several participants who utilized the
PastPerfect database management system mentioned the desire to create virtual exhibits with this
software, but indicated other tasks, such as database entries of objects were of higher priority.
Social media, such as Facebook and blogs were mentioned by several participants as fairly straight-forward, yet time consuming means to publicize their collections and museums.

Five of the fourteen institutions maintained a “Friends of the collection/museum” sponsorship and membership program. Three of the five respondents gave their Friends programs a tepid endorsement, citing the bi-annual newsletters, special invitations to exhibit openings, and annual membership renewal letters as helping to attract new audiences to the collection, but also entailing tedious book-keeping work. One curator even stated she was going to let the Friends group become inactive because board members were adding to her workload and not actively helping with fund-raising for the museum. Melissa stated while most of her “Friends” were “lovely people who just want to be involved and helpful” there were a few that expected “red carpets at their feet and curator at your service.” The two collections that seemed to have the strongest Friends group were either governed by a Director specifically in charge of this group’s activities or maintained by the university’s development officer who sent invitations for fundraisers, updated events on Facebook, and planned all Friends tours and trips. According to Margaret, “the development office does a yeoman’s job for us!”

All of the collections and museums relied on a mix of financial support from the university, college, department, donations, endowments, and grants. Several of the participants (n=5) mentioned that they were not allowed to seek financial support from individual or corporate donors, as this was the function of their university’s development foundation. The Institute of Museum and Library Services and Costume Society of America were mentioned as viable sources of possible grant funding. The participants that acquired grants included both small and large facilities, yet they all had in common perseverance and dedication to regular grant writing as part of their responsibilities. Many participants stated even with backgrounds in
fundraising, grant-writing courses and seminars, and assistance from grant officers at their universities, acquiring external grants was difficult. Roadblocks to successful grant writing included lack of time to properly dedicate to the grant writing process and ineligibility either due to their status (i.e., were not classified as museums by their universities), or their needs did not meet the criteria of the grant agencies (i.e., the museums needed graduate assistance for cataloging and data entry and the grants did not allow funding for salaries or hourly pay).

Importance of Collection

All of the participants (n=14) described the valuable teaching, research, and outreach opportunities their collections provided to their academic department, university, and community. Tracy viewed the museum as representative of the tripartite land grant mission – it provided opportunities for students to view garments that they learned about in their historic dress courses, it allowed faculty and students opportunities to gain and share knowledge through material culture research, and it created an important service opportunity through educational programming and the website that made the museum available to a world-wide audience. The participants that taught courses routinely brought garments into their classes; Tracy specifically mentioned the positive educational outcomes of having students examine first-hand the styles, design details, and silhouettes of garments in the history of fashion and design courses. She believed the use of garments in her courses added to students’ enjoyment as well as learning and helped keep enrollment fully subscribed, thus contributing student credit hours and supplementary fees to the department budget. The collections and museums were valued because of their role in recruiting new undergraduate, graduate students, and faculty to the academic departments. Camille stated the museum also acted “as a resource to expand course offerings, to
help build the reputation of the department through research, and as an important high-visibility link to the department.”

Scholarship related to the collection and shared at peer-reviewed conference presentations and in peer-reviewed journal articles were cited as the most important outcomes for promotion and tenure purposes. Other scholarship related to the museums, such as its use in innovative teaching and exhibit curation was viewed as providing ancillary support for promotion and tenure. Gabrielle stated her collection “is a rare scholarly resource for clothing/textiles/material culture that can be utilized for research across several disciplines: arts, humanities, social and physical sciences.” She cautioned, however, that not many scholars are familiar with how to use three-dimensional objects as “documents” in their research and this necessitated careful training and education efforts on her part. Steele (1998) contended that many academics and even many fashion historians spend little or no time examining actual garments, preferring to rely exclusively on written and visual sources. Yet, object-based research can provide unique insights into the historic and aesthetic developments of fashion. Collection managers and curators may consider developing “how to” research guides for examining material culture for scholars interested, yet not familiar with this line of inquiry.

Community outreach was viewed as one of the most important aspects of the collections by the participants. Andrea, curator at a large land grant university stated, “The collection gives the department visibility in the community. It documents the history of the university, state and region, and it serves as a window to the international community through its collection of international dress.” Andrea further stated that the collection “gets me out into the community meeting prospective donors, giving programs across the state, and collaborating with museum professionals in the city, state, and world.” Tracy’s university museum regularly hosted school
and church groups from the region as well as providing commentary on the history of dress on
the local public radio station. The completion of community presentations often resulted in
increased donations of artifacts and financial support to the collection as well as public relation
opportunities to bring attention to the department and college within the university setting.

Professional Benefits

Professional benefits cited by the informants included the satisfaction of preserving state
and local history, introducing the museum and its holdings to the community, educating citizens
of the state regarding textile and historic clothing preservation, and collaborating with museum
professionals in the city, state, and world. Several participants mentioned the opportunity to
travel to research sites and the satisfaction gained from expertise in a particular area. Suzanne
proudly stated, “There is always something to learn and actually looking at the garments
provides the best perspective for doing so.” Participants stated that museum curatorship provided
them with recognition as professionals within the textile, clothing history, and conservation
communities. Dana commented, “Every time I tell someone that I work at the textile collection,
they’re always like ‘whoa.’ It’s kind of a nice place that everybody seems really interested in and
they all want to learn more about it.” She also stated that with a small staff of two people, “it is
nice to be able to get involved in so many different aspects of the collection and get to do all of
these different tasks. It kind of gives you a more holistic view of how this will work with this.
Instead of just everybody having their own little thing and that is all they do.” Melissa
exclaimed, “I like being ‘the curator,’ the big fish in a little pond!”

The creativity necessary to research material culture for publications, presentations, and
exhibits was an often cited professional benefit of museum work. Gabrielle stated, “It is
personally very fulfilling because it is amazing to have an idea….and work towards the goal of
presenting the idea to the public, whether it is an exhibition, working on a catalogue, or working on a presentation.” Tracy loved how information learned through curation of exhibits was infused into courses and how students often commented to her “how lucky they were” to have the collection and exhibits to learn from as part of their undergraduate career.

Challenges

Several of the participants referred to their collection and museum work as “a labor of love.” A lack of money was the problem cited by every participant in the study. Cynthia succinctly stated, “There is no money and there is no support.” Alice commented, “Money, money, money- always a challenge.” Because of extreme budget cuts, one collection manager’s sole help, an undergraduate student worker paid 12 hours per week, had her position eliminated. The faculty member was so desperate for help; she considered paying the student worker herself if funding through the department was not available. The cutting of extension workers at two universities added to the collection managers’ tasks at these institutions. Melissa stated, “The University used to have a much larger extension service….I get questions about, ‘how do I wash my sneakers.’ I don’t have any filter for that, so I answer my phone a lot less than I used to. You get to the point, where you get to the fifth call and you just stop picking up the phone.” Melissa also spoke of how lack of funding impacted her museum. Due to the lack of funding for a new building, the textile center, “is sometimes spoken of, sometimes not spoken of, there is a huge lack of clarity not only in terms of timing and focus, but also scope and mission.” Dana commented due to budget cuts:

The upheaval of it all, the environment at the whole school, everybody is on edge, and everybody is fighting for what they need because everyone is getting their resources reduced and you’re all getting shoved in these tiny little spaces and it’s not ideal for anybody and it’s hard to kind of keep moving forward if it seems like all of these resources are being taken away and everyone is fighting over the little bit that there is.
But, it’s temporary. I figure working with collections, I am always going to be in a windowless office.

Time constraints were consistently mentioned, both with regards to the need for balancing other responsibilities, particularly for faculty members, and the amount of clerical work necessitated by the collection. Lisa, a professor, mentioned the difficulty of providing adequate time to the collection. She stated, “I am working 65 to 80 hours a week and my focus is supposed to be research, so I have little time for the collection.” Since her university administrators seemed to value only high quality, peer-reviewed journal articles with impact factors, she perceived little appreciation for her collection-related work. Melissa stated, “I would just love an hour to do some research. It is heavily administrative and programming, and that’s a great disappointment.” This comment was echoed by Gabrielle who complained there was “too-much multi-tasking.” Other curators mentioned the complexity of planning exhibits. Ruth stated, “There is never enough time. Exhibits involve more than just selecting objects and picking a theme. Objects need to be dressed, researched, photographed, didactic material written and printed, and then publicity materials created and forwarded to appropriate news outlets. Getting everything done on time, let alone ahead of time can be challenging.” Deidra optimistically commented, “My time is broadly spread in a small department. However, I wouldn’t have it any other way. I enjoy this work!”

Lack of support from upper administration and fellow faculty members, in regards to financial support and basic understanding of the importance of the faculty members’ and historic dress collections, was another consistently mentioned challenge. Alice stated, “The collection remains under-appreciated within the larger university. As dollars dry up, the collections manager position remains part-time and at the grace of the dean of the college.” Gabrielle commented on the constancy of having to “educate academic administrators who do not
understand the value of museum artifacts in an educational institution.” Melissa believed
university administrators perceived material culture research as less “important” than other fields
even within the apparel program and thus “I feel as a poor step child, very strongly that we are
trotted out for display purposes.” Suzanne complained, “Administration has no idea why, for
example, a student can not do my job.” Several curators mentioned perceived jealousy from
colleagues over the amount of space and attention the collection garnered; another curator
commented on the general disinterest from her peers evidenced by lack of attendance at exhibit
openings and other museum related events. Deidra wished that fellow faculty members utilized
the historic collections more, yet understood that the collection was often considered her
“domain” since she was the instructor of the historic dress courses.

Several collection managers/curators mentioned the careful balancing act their jobs
required. Andrea stated, “It is a huge responsibility taking care of people’s objects and memories
yet representing the needs and limitations of the collection and university. It always requires
explanation and education when dealing with students, faculty, and community members to let
them know the value of a museum, of clothing as history, and of protecting the objects so people
in the future can enjoy them.” Suzanne stated, “Juggling the desire to please an important donor
with the reality of the lack of space and time. I’m pressured to be three things, a fashion
collection, a history of the college, and a history of the geographic area. We just can’t be all
things to all people. So, when I am with the chair of the department and I say, shouldn’t we just
be a fashion collection, and she says yes, but there’s a little old lady donor who graduated from
the college and she just can not be refused. So it is a huge problem.”

Three of the participants mentioned the challenge of “branding” their facilities. Tracy
commented that her university included both an art and historic clothing museum; the galleries
were even located within the same building. These facilities were constantly being confused by faculty, students, and community members. Since the university art museum had a longer history in the community, creating an identity for the textiles and clothing museum was problematic.

**Innovative Strategies**

Despite the real as well as perceived challenges experienced by the curators and collection managers in this study, many cited innovative strategies to ease the stress of their multiple responsibilities as well as bringing needed financial and community support. Deidra, a collection manager who teaches the historic costume courses, requires students in her class to spend one hour per week in the collection. Students earn participation points by vacuuming a certain number of boxes of artifacts per week and are assigned to work in teams to use collection contents to prepare mini exhibits in the decades of the late 19th through the 20th century. Deidra stated, “This is quite a production, but they really enjoy it, and they begin to understand the importance of maintaining a collection. My goal is to get the artifacts vacuumed and also to encourage students to volunteer in the future to help local museums.” Margaret described a documentation project in which students in the class use primary and secondary sources to describe and interpret an object from the collection. She found that this hands-on project makes the students realize, “it’s not just a costume in the collection; it is their costume. And these students often become wonderful donors, not only of costume, but also of financial support.”

Several curators/collections managers mentioned the importance of undergraduate work-study students, independent-study students, and honors students in the completion of both day-to-day tasks in the collection, such as re-housing shoe and hat collections and making padded hangers to more detailed work, such as researching information to provide background for future exhibits. Tracy commented on the dual benefits of having undergraduate students work in the
collection. She stated, “The honors undergraduates who worked in our collection were immeasurably helpful; they researched, curated, installed, and provided educational talks for two of our exhibits. This freed up faculty from this time-consuming duty, but also provided the students an incredible hands-on experience. Two students are considering graduate studies in our field, largely due to their work with our collections.”

Exhibit collaborations were also discussed by the informants. At Tracy’s university, the first and second place winners of the student fashion show were displayed over the summer months in the museum gallery space. This exhibit had multiple benefits. Exhibit attendees were able to see the garments in greater detail than when they were shown on the runway, student curation of the exhibit provided an opportunity for student engagement with museum practices (and lessened faculty responsibility to curate), and cross-promotion helped publicize both the fashion show and museum space. Other informants mentioned the importance of guest curators including graduate students, faculty from different departments at their university, and faculty from other institutions as providing valuable ideas and new viewpoints to their exhibits. Tracy commented a future exhibit would be the results of a competition in which fashion designers, both professionals and students were asked to redesign an object such as a paisley shawl from the collection. Other ideas for cross-collaboration included utilization of internal grants such as the “Big 12 Faculty Fellowship Program” that provided opportunities for faculty within the Big 12 Athletic Conference to travel to visit faculty at member institutions to exchange research ideas.

Due to limited funding from the university and very limited staff, many of the informants developed innovative ways to earn money to support their collections and museums. Several of the informants used funds derived from de-accessioned items in the collection as well as auctions to help fund their collections. Margaret’s university sold de-accessioned items from the
collection through an online seller. Suzanne held a “vintage fashion sale” each year right before
Halloween with de-accessioned items. Alice also mentioned that the department’s yearly fashion
show raised money to partially support the collection. One fundraiser in particular was held at a
historic home. Community members were invited to the event, where there was a cash bar and
silent auction. On the invitations, an extra line for additional donations was provided. Other
innovative ideas included charging money for tours that were provided during closed hours with
donated money applied to a costume acquisition fund. Dana commented that each donor of a
textile or garment is informed of the extensive amount of time and resources that it takes to
properly preserve their objects. A monetary gift amount of $200 to help off-set these costs is
suggested at the time of the donation.

To provide additional support for the museum/collection, several collection managers
mentioned the importance of partnerships. Four of the participants commented on partnerships
with their libraries, both in the lending of objects and documentation for display and as a way to
raise the visibility of both entities on campus. Other participants mentioned partnerships with
businesses. With funding from an internal university grant and a donation from the conservation
company Gaylord, Dana developed a free conservation workshop for community members. She
developed a PowerPoint and then provided examples of materials such as acid free tissue used to
preserve historic pieces such as wedding dresses. Donated quilt boxes were given away to
participants through a drawing. This program was considered so successful, that Dana will
institute it each year. Tracy spoke of collaborations between the museum and the undergraduate
graphic design program. Students in graphic design classes enrolled in independent study credits
in the apparel program and developed promotional and didactic signage for selected exhibits.
Several collections managers/curators mentioned innovative strategies in saving time in managerial duties related to the collection. To facilitate the updating of object information in the PastPerfect database system, Tracy stated newly acquired objects were dressed on mannequins and photographed before finding permanent homes in storage. Two other collection managers mentioned moratoriums on new acquisitions with the caveat that they did accept rare items or objects needed for upcoming exhibits. Melissa commented, “A surprising number of donors are willing to wait. That does clear out the people that just want to dump their stuff” - a problem mentioned by multiple collection managers.

Conclusions

In her article published in 1997, Arthur wrote, “As textiles and clothing programs are reorganized, renamed, and allied with different schools and colleges-and sometimes even eliminated-costume collections are undergoing scrutiny” (p. 57). Fourteen years later, during continued times of downsizing and retrenchment, many historic textile and dress collections continue to find themselves needing to prove their worth in the university setting. The results of this study suggest that many curators and collection managers endure similar struggles within their departments. Lack of financial resources, time, and support from upper administration posed significant challenges to the participants. Yet, all of the participants stated the significant contributions and impact material culture can have on the mission of their institutions, providing valuable teaching, research, and service opportunities for students, faculty, and community members. Innovative strategies suggested by participants included methods to involve undergraduate and graduate students in the day-to-day needs of the collection; both to accomplish necessary tasks and to expose students to museum related work. The selling of de-accessioned items and fundraisers were means of increasing revenue to support the collections
University Historic Clothing Museums

and museums. Collaborations with students and guest curators allowed another means of saving faculty time and providing another viewpoint for the curation of exhibits.

The authors of this study suggest collections managers and curators consider creating governance documents/collection manuals. Each time something new happens or something rarely experienced occurs, the collection manager/curator has to create a new process and/or form or try to remember "what did I do last time?" This suggests a lack of consistency in working with the collection. It also suggests a lack of commitment from the person in charge of the collection and the program. A collection manual/governance document is something that can be used to convince department, college, and university administration of the professionalism of the collection and the manager/curator. In addition, with changes in staff, new procedures do not have to be invented and forms developed. It means that standard procedures are documented and forms are available so that new staff can continue with consistent practices and not waste time or lose momentum with their professional development and use of the collection.

Participants interviewed for this study included both faculty and staff classifications. It seems that the most appropriate classification depends on the institution, the promotion and tenure document, the individual(s) working with the collection, and their other commitments (on campus and elsewhere). Staff classification seems to have several advantages, it does not affect promotion and tenure or productivity expectations, and time allocated to the collection could be identified in the position description. Cons of staff classifications include major decisions may need to be approved by faculty or administration. A faculty classification may include more autonomy in working with the collection and scholarly work related to the collection is more likely to be shared beyond campus at professional meetings and in publications. Cons associated with a faculty position working with the collection include the time consuming commitment that
University Historic Clothing Museums

may adversely impact promotion and tenure and productivity expectations and collection work is
often unappreciated by administrators as “important.”

This study sought to provide information on current and best practices of historic textile
and dress collections and museums in the United States. Increased collaboration and
communication by curators and collections managers is necessary to provide support as well as
the sharing of additional strategies for best practices. It is suggested that curators and collection
managers seek out one another at conferences such as Costume Society of America (CSA) and
International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) to share information. A webpage on the
CSA and ITAA websites could be developed to encourage collaborations among departments
with collections. People could post ideas regarding exhibits or grant possibilities. An "expert" list
could be developed as a resource for others to contact for help. This list could include individuals
who have successfully developed friends groups, individuals who have successfully written
internal or external grants, and individuals who have experience in mounting exhibits or
preparing exhibits to travel to other museums. The page could include a checklist related to
planning and mounting exhibits, a list of upcoming exhibits at each institution to see if others
want to borrow or rent the exhibit (working out details related to shipping, and so forth would
have to be undertaken by the institutions involved), ideas as to how to share exhibits with others
(like virtual exhibits), and educational ideas including how to use an exhibit to enhance student
and public education and interest. Just as the design group often sets aside time to meet at ITAA,
collection managers and curators could schedule a time to meet during ITAA's annual meeting.

Due to the small sample size and response rate of this study, future researchers may wish
to interview additional curators and collection managers at land-grant institutions as well as other
types of schools such as community colleges and private and public colleges and universities.
This additional research will further the knowledge and understanding of the ways in which collections and museums impact faculty and students’ academic lives.
References


University Historic Clothing Museums


