

# Community-Based Collections Training: Producing Indigenous Museum Professionals

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## FRAMING

*What if tribal museums were recognized as being capable of training well-rounded museum professionals: adept at public engagement, community relationship building, and cutting-edge collections care?*

Too often tribal museums consider themselves at a disadvantage when comparing their institutions to larger mainstream museums. They often lack the trained staff and the financial and human resources found at other organizations. However, the reality is that many tribal museums are rich with resources. Often tribal museums are in the heart of source communities, surrounded by the land, flora and fauna needed to understand the unique perspective of their tribal history. Unlike mainstream museums hosting Native collections, tribal museums are directly tied to their community knowledge and practice.

## PURPOSE AND IMPACT

Tribal museums have the responsibility to teach about the past, address contemporary issues, and present new ways of sharing cultural memory in the future. To do so, many museums need additional human capital to fulfill educational, community engagement, and collections duties. The purpose of this project was to develop a toolkit to assist tribal museums and cultural centers to recognize and activate their rich assets in order to expand the museums' purpose and role in the community.

This toolkit will assist tribal museums in the creation or enhancement of an entry level training program for tribal members. The program initiates interested community members into museum roles actively preserving and promoting history and perpetuating community knowledge and cultural heritage. Enlisting these community members to share the responsibility of being advocate and teacher will resonate on a personal level and be undertaken by the individuals in their professional careers.

## PROCESS

This work is based upon my professional experiences within tribal museums, mainstream museums, and theoretical conversations held with museum professionals, museum studies instructors, and classmates across the United States.

My desire to provide similar learning opportunities to other Indigenous folk, I began by recognizing the need for tribal museums to lay groundwork through a thorough planning process. I created planning documents to be used in brainstorming sessions at the beginning of planning, and evaluation/review components to be used at the end of the training program. From there I analyzed the most impactful training elements of my own career and interwove these types of experiences into the toolkit. This included hands-on training, interaction with community members and O'odham lands, and the opportunities to produce exhibits and programs to meet community needs and requests.

## DELIVERABLES

The product is an easily downloadable toolkit. The toolkit covers five phases to assist in the planning, design, and implementation of a tribal museum training program (see steps to the right). Introductory text summarizing the goals and purpose has been provided in each phase. Blank worksheets will assist in the brainstorming and design process. Additional support comes in the form of In Action pages discussing how the Tohono O'odham Nation Cultural Center & Museum implemented their program, and My Experience pages to discuss the ways the training program impacted trainees.

To be more accessible and useful to tribal museums, the toolkit is available for viewing online allowing tribal museums to print by page or section. The 88 pages print black and white. Prints can be archived for future use.

## CONCLUSIONS

Using this toolkit, tribal museums will be able to determine their training capacities based on their unique resources and how to sustain the program in-house, or if they will need to seek additional outside resources. Success of the program will rely heavily on the museum's commitment to the training process, and their relationships with community members, organizations, and their professional networks. The strength of this program is in the application of planning and design. The initiating and implementing of a community-based training program will differ from community to community. For every tribal museum, the goal should be to produce a workforce of tribal members capable of working within the museum, and for being competent proponents of their community and cultural heritage.

## PREPARING YOUR MUSEUM AND VISUALIZING YOUR TRAINING PROGRAM

Building a training program impactful and valuable to the host museum and the community must start with the 'why.' The host museum should consider the reasons for their Native community to invest in a museum and what the driving hopes were from the beginning. The host museum should know where the organization fits into the community and how they are meeting its needs.

During brainstorming sessions staff and collaborators cover big picture ideas, and consider day-to-day operative duties needed to ensure the museum fulfills its purpose. The focus is to pull all these conversations into the direction of the training program activities, workshops, and goals. The host museum should state the goals they plan to attain, and the overall change they hope to provide to the museum and its community.

## IN-HOUSE COLLECTIONS TRAINING

The core of this training program is practice-based skill-building. This section focuses on standard museum skillsets to prepare participants to work within collections and be trained to work at any museum. Unique to this program is the enhancement of object files to incorporate community knowledge and stories. The training program encourages the participants to be introduced to NAGPRA practices, as well as cultural care methods specific to the local community. As a tribal museum, it is important to emphasize cultural care methods that meet the spiritual needs of these objects, and the intention of the community.



## KNOWLEDGE GATHERING AND SHARING

As participants are learning more about museum practices, it is vital they begin to connect these cultural objects to the living culture. Doing so, it is no longer a solitary piece of history isolated within a box, separate from its purpose. Identifying the many uses, stories, and knowledge tied to the object allows for a broader sense of the importance to the community other than a standard object file. These files will be more useful to community members connecting to their culture. One way of achieving this is for host museums facilitate opportunities for participants to interact with community members, contribute to community activities, and connect with the culture. Host museums should consider how community traditions, ideas and practices exist in the community, and how to incorporate them into their training program.



## EMPOWERMENT AND CONNECTION

Throughout this experience, the participants are realizing their strengths, and interests. They are gaining a sense of ownership and a right to contribute to the overall mission and goals of the museum. In smaller museums, a flexibility and an 'all hands-on deck' mentality is necessary for the success of the entire museum. The museum should provide opportunities to cross-train beyond the collections. Also, encourage participants to find new links between the work they have been doing, the history they have been learning, and the experiences they have had in other museum departments.

The goal is to prepare tribal members to recognize when to activate their networks, knowledge, and advocate for cultural practices within the repository and combine this with standard training. By the end of the program, participants will have grasped the museum's purpose, the need for organization and will recognize their ability to advocate for the museum and their culture.



## REFLECTING ON THE PROCESS AND PLANNING FOR FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS

Whether the museum and team plan to end the training program or have committed to training more participants, it is important to complete a review of the project. Reconvening at the end of this initial training program, the planning group should reflect on the program's successes and challenges and areas for improvement. This time is for a thoughtful assessment of quantitative (tangible/measurable data) results and qualitative (emotive/sensed) outcomes from the program for the museum, participants, partners, and community members. It is also a time to celebrate the partnerships gained, community relationships deepened, and newfound connections to cultural heritage.



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### Resources

Kramer, J. (2014). *Switchbacks: Art, Ownership, and Nuxalk National Identity*. UBC Press.

Lonetree, A. (2012). *Decolonizing museums representing native America in national and tribal museums*. University of North Carolina Press.

Prown, J. D. (1982). *Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method*. *Winterthur Portfolio*, 17(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1086/496065>

Vygotskii L. S., Cole, M., Stein, S., & Sekula, A. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.