

# MuseumsForward

## Deaccessioning museum collections

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### Abstract

The core of many museums are their collections, and it is expected that museums will care for the objects that comprise these collections, which are held in the public trust, in perpetuity. This has led museums to collect a vast number of objects, most of which will never be used by the museum. Deaccessioning, a natural and healthy way to manage collections and remove objects no longer relevant to the museum, is often seen as controversial and therefore infrequently practiced. The purpose of this research study was to examine the nature of large-scale deaccessioning projects in museums. This research was conducted with a case study design and data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with museum professionals involved in their museum's deaccessioning process, as well as document analysis. Three main findings were revealed in this study. First, museums engage in deaccessioning most often to address problems of limited storage space. Second, the greatest barrier that museums faced during their projects was not having enough resources such as staff time and materials. Third, museums that completed deaccessioning projects were often concerned with public perception and worked to avoid controversy. This study examined the practical work of large-scale deaccessioning projects in museums, and results may inform other museums about the realities of large-scale deaccessioning projects.

### Keywords

Deaccessioning; controversy; museum collections; collections management; public perception

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## Introduction

At the core of most museums are their collections. A recent survey found that over 13.2 billion objects – or 30.7 million cubic feet - are held in public trust by collecting institutions in the United States (The Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2019). Most of these objects are housed in storage and won't be utilized by the museum (Miller, 2020). In recent years, museum professionals are realizing that constant, active collecting is unsustainable because it will always require more resources, time, and space to manage collections (Morgan & MacDonald, 2020). Museums are experiencing a "profusion struggle" (Morgan & MacDonald, 2020, p.1). Deaccessioning, a process of lawfully removing an object from a museum's collection, is a natural and healthy way to manage collections, but it's often seen as controversial and not frequently practiced (Baker, 2014). This article describes results from a research study designed to examine the nature of large-scale deaccessioning projects<sup>1</sup> in museums.

### History of museum collections

The history of museums, and their collections as they are today, extends to the Enlightenment when wealthy Europeans collected cultural and natural history objects from "exotic" places (Miller, 2018). Museums emerged from cabinets of curiosity and the collector's pursuit was to have a complete registry of everything in creation (Gammon, 2018). Gammon describes these early museums as emerging from utopian ideals, attempting to become a microcosm representing every human and natural endeavor around the world. As museums evolved, ideas about collections did also. They became valued as more than symbols of private power and were acquired for a shared benefit or purpose (Miller, 2018). Certain objects then had informational, cultural, or emotional value and were worth being acquired and put into newly established permanent collections.

Museum collections shifted from being an individual's, utilized to show their own perception of reality or self-image, to being developed for the public, used to educate. They were meant to reflect society's values and create a singular national identity (Cameron, 2012). This is especially true in the case of Western nations as they pursued colonization.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase "deaccessioning projects" is used as a descriptor to unify all the deaccessioning work examined in this study. However, not all the participants classified their work as deaccessioning focused. Participants often framed it as a collections ranking, inventorying, or refinement work that identified objects not in alignment with their museum.

Soldiers sent back looted objects from recent conquests, and they were stored and displayed in national museums, describing the “good” that colonizers were doing for indigenous populations. The most famous of these collections is the British Museum. Because collections, and more broadly museums, were developed by the middle or upper-middle class elite, these values were not those of the wider public but rather those in power (Cameron, 2012). Museums functioned more as temples rather than schools, providing opportunities for people to reaffirm their beliefs and experiences. They did not inspire critical thinking about colonization but promoted empire building.

In response to colonial museums and collections, post-colonial museums have attempted to represent multitudes of heritage including varied perspectives and experiences. The attempt to represent these differences in collections has broadened the definition of heritage and caused museum collections to grow exponentially (Harrison, 2013). Collections are now so vast that they are overwhelmed with memory. The value of heritage has become diluted, and the selectivity of collecting has virtually disappeared because everything has potential value. Harrison (2013) argues that to manage these collections well, we must selectively choose to forget, or deaccession, so that heritage doesn't become valueless.

Both colonial and post-colonial collecting has led museums to accumulate vast numbers of objects with little regard to the resources required to house and manage them. The process of refinement through deaccessioning has been avoided largely due to controversy. Instead, many museums have slowed their collecting, relying on non-accessioning and becoming more selective about what they accession. Gammon (2018) argues that deaccessioning and non-accessioning provide the same function, and that excluding things at the outset has just as much impact on the shape of the collection as ongoing revision.

### **Deaccessioning practices**

Deaccessioning is the process of lawfully removing an object from a museum's collection (*Guidelines on Deaccessioning of the International Council of Museums*, n.d.). Each museum's collection management policy defines the process of deaccessioning and disposal to ensure accountability to the public (Moser, 2020). Deaccessioning happens for many reasons and includes repatriation, which is the return of stolen objects to their country or culture of origin. This research focuses on deaccessioning as a collections management tool to manage the number of legally acquired objects in the museum's collection rather

than repatriation which occurs when objects were collected illegally. Professional museum organizations like the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), and the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) have guidelines and policies around deaccessioning and were created to ensure that deaccessioning is done ethically.

Professional guidelines are all similar, requiring museums to thoughtfully consider the objects in their collections based on a list of criteria. This includes considering the physical condition of the object. If it is too deteriorated or damaged to be conserved it may have no use for study. If objects are duplicates and having many does not add value to the collection, they can be deaccessioned. Objects that are not the best quality or lack aesthetic, historic, or scientific value for exhibition or study are also candidates for deaccessioning. Sometimes objects are removed from collections if they pose a threat to the health and safety of the staff and public. Objects can be considered for deaccessioning if another museum is better suited to providing care and access to them. In this instance a museum will deaccession the object and transfer ownership to the other institution. Objects can be also deaccessioned if their authenticity is determined to be false or fraudulent. In addition, if an object has been stolen or illegally transported, it may be subject to repatriation. Finally, museums may deaccession objects if they simply do not fit within the mission or collecting goals of the institution (*Guidelines on Deaccessioning of the International Council of Museums*, n.d.).

If objects fit within these criteria, museums then must ensure that they have full legal ownership of them before deaccessioning. Once objects are deaccessioned, the method for disposal must be determined. Professional organizations have many accepted disposal methods including donation to another cultural or educational institution, transfer, exchange, sale, return to the donor, repatriation to the appropriate culture or country of origin, or, if none of the above is possible, the destruction of the object (*Guidelines on Deaccessioning of the International Council of Museums*, n.d.).

### **Controversy and deaccessioning**

Controversy concerning deaccessioning occurs when it is done in a perceived unethical manner, specifically concerning the sale of deaccessioned objects. Because museum collections are held in the public trust, monetizing them is often seen as a betrayal of this trust

especially when the funds from the sale are used for something other than collections care (Moser, 2020). This turns collections into accounting assets when they are supposed to be considered priceless (Vecco & Imperiale, 2017). For example, in 2020 the Baltimore Museum of Art proposed the deaccession and sale of three works of art, the funds from which would be used for salary increases for staff (Sheets, 2020). This was controversial because the Baltimore Museum of Art appeared to have selected these works based on their potential monetary value. In addition, when objects are offered for public sale, there is a possibility of the object returning to private ownership, reducing access to the object and the information it holds (Moser, 2020). AAM, AAMD, ICOM, and AASLH all have statements and policies renouncing evaluating objects for deaccession based on their monetary value and using the funds from the sale to fund projects unrelated to the museum's collection ("AAM Code of Ethics for Museums," 2000; *Art Museums and the Practice of Deaccessioning*, n.d.; "Deaccessioning and Capitalization of Collections," 2017, *Guidelines on Deaccessioning of the International Council of Museums*, n.d.).

The AAMD has been particularly strict with their censure of museums that use funds from the sale of deaccessioned art for operation costs rather than the purchase of art and they have sanctioned several museums in recent years for doing just that. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the AAMD have relaxed their deaccessioning rules and will not sanction museums that use the funds from the sale of deaccessioned art to cover operations costs until April of 2022 (Zaretsky, 2020). This is due to the financial difficulties that many museums found themselves in during the pandemic.

Deaccessioning in museums in the United States first became controversial in 1972 when the Metropolitan Museum of Art deaccessioned and sold several works to buy a Velazquez portrait. This deaccession caused public outrage. It forced The Met to develop procedures for the sale of art, and professional organizations like AAM and AAMD began requiring museums to have formal guidelines available to the public concerning deaccessioning. Prior to this controversy, museums had deaccessioned objects regularly to manage collections. Schneider (2018) argues that public outrage about deaccessioning is connected to changes in the socio-economic situation of the American public. Earlier deaccessions were not controversial because they occurred when the country was dealing with the Great Depression and World War II, and it was framed as forward thinking and progressive (Schneider, 2018). Today deaccessioning is controversial because works sold at auction are often transferred to

private ownership highlighting class and wealth disparity (Schneider, 2018). While it is common for deaccessioned art to be sold into private ownership, Gammon (2018) notes that “on average 70% of works deaccessioned by museums return to the public marketplace within a generation, and 30% are reaccessioned by other museums through future benefaction of private collectors” (p. 32).

Public opinion about deaccessioning is largely tied to controversies. Since the 70s, there are regular news stories of museums deaccessioning and selling objects in their collections to use the funds to pay for operating costs. In these articles, the public is characterized as outraged, protesting outside the museum. While deaccessioning is a controversial topic, there are few scholarly studies examining public opinion of deaccessioning. In their article “Visitor attitudes toward deaccessioning in Italian public museums: An econometric analysis,” Vecco et al. (2017) argue that museum visitors’ perceptions of deaccessioning is context specific and visitors’ attitudes about deaccessioning do not impact their visiting behavior or likelihood to patronize the museum. The factors that most influence museum visitors are their socio-economic and demographic characteristics rather than higher ethical beliefs concerning deaccessioning. Much of the literature concerning public perception of deaccessioning is theoretical and empirical studies concerning this topic are still uncommon, so these conclusions are not easily extrapolated outside of Vecco et al.’s specific study.

### **Study purpose**

The purpose of this research study was to examine the nature of large-scale deaccessioning projects in museums. This research was guided by the following questions: 1) What factors lead museums to engage in large-scale deaccessioning projects? 2) What are the benefits and barriers to deaccessioning at these museums? and 3) What is the public’s response to large-scale deaccessioning projects?

### **Methods**

This research was conducted with a case study design because it could provide an in-depth analysis of the deaccession phenomenon by examining it within its real-life context using multiple sources of data (Pickard, 2013). Data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with museum professionals involved in their museum’s deaccessioning process.

## **Sampling**

Five case study sites were selected using a purposive sampling method that selected museums based on whether they had recently completed a large-scale deaccessioning project. Museums included in the research met the following qualifications: 1) completed a large-scale deaccessioning project in the last 10 years; and 2) published and/or presented about the project in media and/or conferences. A total of six prospective sites were contacted directly through emails found on the museum website and through the researcher's professional network. Ultimately five museums agreed to participate, and two to three collections staff were interviewed from each museum.

Participating museums were a large encyclopedic art museum in the Midwest (Site 1), a large state history museum in the West (Site 2), a small county history museum in the Northeast (Site 3), a small city history museum in the West (Site 4), and a small regional art museum in the Pacific Northwest (Site 5). A total of 12 staff were interviewed across these sites, including collections managers, curators, registrars, and board members working for the museum. In addition, staff shared a variety of documents about their deaccessioning process.

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted over the video conferencing platform Zoom. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. An interview guide (see Appendix A) was utilized throughout the data collection process to help guide the responses and reveal information about deaccessioning projects. Documents analyzed included collections management policies, deaccession recommendation forms, deaccession, and disposition procedures and checklists, public memos, and press releases.

## **Data Analysis**

The data gathered from interviews were analyzed across cases and within cases. Transcriptions from the interviews were coded using an emergent coding method to identify patterns and themes and the documents collected helped to supplement interview data.

## Results

### What factors lead museums to engage in large-scale deaccession projects?

Data analysis revealed three primary reasons that motivated museums to deaccession objects: a) a need for more storage space, b) a need for a revised collections plan, and c) a need for intellectual control. Interviewees noted a combination of these three reasons for deaccessioning.

#### *Storage space*

All participating sites indicated that storage space was a concern that they hoped deaccessioning would address. Sites 1, 2, and 3 all stated that it was one of their primary reasons for deaccessioning. For example, the curator from Site 3 said, “We were going to be evicted from that [off-site] storage space in a couple years and at that point, we were going to have to move all our collections to onsite storage, which was smaller.” Site 3’s collections management plan was revised in 2017 and states that museum staff must, “Physically move 3D collection from temporary storage to our current facility” requiring them to deaccession objects. The registrar at Site 1 described a similar situation in which their director led the initiative to rank their collections because their storage space was at capacity. This ranking project eventually led to deaccessioning objects from the collection to help increase storage capacity. At Site 2, the deaccessioning project was almost entirely driven by the need for more storage space. Site 2 also looked at acquiring another offsite facility but did not have the funds at that time.

While it was not a central concern for Site 4 or 5, space still played a role in motivating their deaccessioning projects. Site 4’s collection is currently housed offsite, and one of the main reasons given for deaccessioning in Site 4’s deaccession memos was “Quality: Any artifact of poor quality which occupies valuable storage space may be approved for deaccessioning.” Similarly at Site 5, they had moved into a new facility 10 years before the project and their head curator said, “We were already running into issues with collection storage space, and we were also looking to the collections down here that just are never being used.” Site 5’s collections management policy also stated maintenance and storage costs as a consideration for accessions and deaccessions. Deaccessioning objects unrelated to their mission allowed each of these sites to gain space for objects relevant to their collection, helping to refocus resources on objects that will be utilized by the museums.

### *Revised collections plan*

All participating sites indicated that their deaccessioning projects were implemented in conjunction with the need to develop or review their collections plans. The work of reviewing the collection for objects unrelated to the mission helped Sites 1, 3, and 5 refocus their collecting goals. A board member from Site 3 said, "We've [moved] from the old style of museum [which] was pretty much take anything but it also didn't really have any focus, so we're transitioning into having a museum with a lot more focus." The registrar and manager of curatorial affairs at Site 1 explained that their collections policy had not been revised in eight years, so their ranking project helped them identify redundancies in their collection that could be deaccessioned. It also informed their new collection plan because, since they had examined every object in the collection, they were able to make decisions about what they should focus on accessioning.

At Site 5, the deaccessioning project happened in response to their collection plan shifting. They develop a new collecting plan every ten years as required by their collections management policy. Consequently, they identified a collection of objects that had not been displayed or used in over ten years. The registrar at Site 5 said, "Early on, we really focused on anything and everything, and the material that was donated [was] meaningful and reflecting of the community but as the years went on, we had shifted our focus." The work that goes into deaccessioning helps reveal where the collection is lacking or where it has excess, informing collecting goals.

Sites 2 and 4 described the need to refocus their collecting goals around refocusing the utilization of their resources. The assistant curator from Site 4 said,

"We've talked in the past 3 or 4 years [about] strategic planning, so we needed to be able to define our scope and our collecting area and we want to make sure that our resources are spent in the most efficient way to benefit the collections."

In addition, Site 4 described a central component of their project as "reappraising all artifacts for relevancy to museum mission and scope of collection" in a public memo. The assistant registrar from Site 2 also described how the project helped them identify and deaccession objects unrelated to their collections policy.

### *Intellectual control*

Sites 1, 2, 3, and 4 all discussed gaining intellectual control over their collections as a driving factor for their deaccessioning or ranking projects. In Site 3's collections management policy, one of the goals for the collection was to "Establish intellectual control of every object maintained in the collection." For Sites 1, 2, and 4, deaccessioning occurred after or during a complete inventory of their collections. The manager of curatorial affairs at Site 1 described their ranking project as a way

"to more fully understand our collection. We are a 136-year-old institution and we're an encyclopedic museum, so we cover a lot of ground. By having a holistic collection review, we were able to capture immense amounts of information about the collection."

Site 1's deaccession policy stated, "Objects that are not appropriate for [the Museum's] accessioned collections or are not consistent with the goals of [the Museum]" may be candidates for deaccession. Site 2's associate registrar discussed a similar process at their museum:

"Deaccessioning allows us to reevaluate our collections, make sure that we get at ground level and look at things...and identify items that are not necessarily worth our time and effort to continue to take care of... We have nine different properties across the state and that has led to a lot of things that are unnecessary to document state history."

Their collections management policy stipulates that the museum "evaluate all deaccession proposals on a case-by-case basis."

Site 4 was in a similar situation to Sites 1 and 2 because the management of their collections changed several times during their history, leading to varied data management and collecting. Site 4's collections management policy specifically called out the past collecting activity as a reason for deaccessioning: "Circumstances may arise from wholesale acquisitions of the past, the reorganization of or a change of emphasis within the Museums themselves." The curator for Site 4 has been working on their Legacy Inventory Project for three years:

"There were a lot of things that had been collected by the museum for years under different management entities and under different missions. And so part of this Legacy Inventory Project was really to gain control over that. There's a lot of stuff that's in storage but there's scant

information [about] it so as part of that process and doing an inventory...we're gathering up all the bits and scraps of data that does still exist in city records. We're trying to determine whether or not these items should remain in the city collection."

Getting and maintaining intellectual control has helped Site 4 make decisions about what should and should not be in the collection.

### **What are the benefits and barriers to deaccessioning at these museums?**

To understand how these large deaccession projects progressed, it is important to examine the benefits that emerged and barriers the museums faced. In addition to achieving their motivating goal (see above), museums identified two main benefits to deaccessioning: a) improved stewardship of the collection, and b) acquiring acquisition funds. Within the discussion about barriers, two themes emerged: a) the resources the projects required, and b) determining the logistics once the projects were underway.

#### *Benefits*

##### Improved stewardship of the collection

All five sites discussed how, upon the completion of their projects, they improved the stewardship of their collections by making the management of their collections more focused. Sites 2, 3, and 4 all discussed how their projects made their collections healthier and will allow them to better serve their communities. The curator at Site 3 said, "We work for [our] community, and the community deserves the best. So why are we trying to maintain poorly, a very, very large collection when we can fit it down, and maintain everything properly for perpetuity." The curatorial assistant at Site 4 had a similar sentiment:

"Once this project is completed, we're going to have an extremely refined, pure collection. They're not going to be boxes of stuff that we'll never look at again. The things that we're keeping will all have direct links to all the aspects of the history of our region that we want to express as a museum, to educate our community and our public about their past."

The assistant registrar at Site 2 characterized their deaccessioning project as helping to reaffirm their mission and better utilize resources to care for objects remaining in their collection. Their collections management policy stated, "Development of the permanent collection is guided by the Collection Plan... and ensures that the resources expended on accessioning and preserving collections are being wisely allocated." The associate registrar expanded on this and said, "The benefit of deaccessioning is to cull the collection. You ensure that we are keeping things that meet our mission and value statements, that are significant to the museum and the people that we represent through the state historical society." In all three institutions, the deaccessioning projects have helped the museums refocus their collections on their missions and work for their communities.

Sites 1 and 5 both discussed stewardship from the perspective that the objects deaccessioned would be stewarded better by their new owners. The registrar from Site 1 said,

"We've deaccessioned and transferred to a lot of local museums around... so that's rewarding to know that these things are not going to be tucked away in a drawer [but] that people actually are getting to view them and interact with them."

The registrar from Site 5 had similar sentiments: "We were able to make sure that the artwork was leaving our hands and going to somebody else that is going to take care of them." Several deaccessioned works were transferred to a local arts and culture organization. A public memo released by Site 5 stated, "The museum agreed on nine textiles to donate to a local arts and culture organization that could both appropriately care for the artwork and share their historical significance with the community for generations to come."

### Acquisition funds

Sites 1 and 5 discussed the acquisition funds that they have acquired from the public sale of their deaccession projects. They both primarily disposed of deaccessioned objects through public sale. The registrar at Site 1 explained,

"As things have been sold over the years, that money has been put into our acquisition funds, with the idea that we would always use it to purchase something of better quality than what was sold. There's been 50 acquisitions

that have been supported by the funds from the 8000 [works] that have been sold.”

This is supported by their deaccession policy which said, “The funds received from the sale of objects will be used to improve stewardship of the collection through the acquisition or deaccession of objects or the direct care of the collection.” Similarly, at Site 5 the money from the sale of their deaccessioned objects, Chinese and Japanese textiles and jades, has gone toward purchasing works by contemporary Asian artists from the region. In a press release after the deaccession, Site 5 stated, “Per standard museum policy, proceeds from the sale of the rest of the deaccessioned works will be used only to acquire other works of art for the museum.” The curator at Site 5 said, “We were able to buy a number of objects immediately and then we've been able to keep using it and buy works by Asian American artists for the collection.” Site 5 was able to purchase objects relevant to their community and their mission with the funds from the objects that were not relevant.

Sites 2, 3, and 4 also sold works at public auction but noted that as history museums, their deaccessioned objects did not sell for much money. Site 4 included information about the public sale of their collections at the end of their deaccession memos: “Upon final deaccession approval, items will be sold at public sale through [the] Auction House, and the proceeds deposited in the restricted escrow account for future acquisition and artifact conservation.” Site 2 and 3 also detailed how the funds from deaccessioned objects sold in public auction will be used in their collections management policy.

### *Barriers*

### Resources

All five sites mentioned the resources, specifically staff time, it takes to complete a large deaccessioning project. All sites added these projects to their regular tasks and noted the challenges of the additional work. The curator from Site 4 mentioned that their time frame easily doubled. The curatorial assistant said,

“It's hard to be the only staff person doing this. I've been fortunate enough to have one or two temporary technicians, and once they got their feet under them, our

project took quantum leaps forward. Most of the time, though, I've been doing this by myself."

The assistant registrar from Site 2 acknowledged the challenges with adding staff, but also highlighted how they are beneficial in the work:

"There [were] two part time positions that were devoted to this project and...it was harder for contractors to make decisions on how to deaccession objects. There wasn't enough confidence to make those quick decisions to keep the process moving so hiring a position that was full time sped up the process."

The manager for curatorial affairs and the registrar at Site 1 both discussed the amount of staff time and dedication it takes to complete their ranking project. The manager for curatorial affairs advised other museums undertaking projects like this to have a staff person working on the project full-time and the registrar said,

"You need to have staff who are dedicated to it and make it a priority to really push through. I've worked at other museums in the past, who have tried to start projects like this and if everybody's not on board, it loses steam, and then the project dies."

At Sites 2, 3 and 5, staff discussed the time it took them to research the objects for deaccession. The assistant registrar at Site 2 mentioned, "It just took a really long time to do th[e] survey and research with the curators because we wanted to make sure that we were intentional with what we were doing, and everything was justified really easily." The board member from Site 3 voiced this challenge in their deaccession process as well, and the registrar at Site 5 discussed the time and effort that it took to get things to auction:

"It was very time-consuming especially when the artworks went to auction. [It] takes a lot of time and effort to get objects ready for deaccessioning, there's a lot of condition reporting, a lot of time pulling and staging. Then that doesn't even speak into the work that the curators do."

She also mentioned that the amount of work it required has prevented them from doing more deaccessions because they haven't had the staff time.

### Logistics

Sites 1, 2, 3, and 4 all discussed challenges in establishing the workflow of the deaccessioning projects. They all had procedures in place written in their collections management policies but creating a system to ensure each object was processed correctly was challenging. The curatorial assistant from Site 4 said,

“A big lesson for me [was] to break things down to bite sized chunks. The first part of it can be considered a pilot project where we tried a few things. A few things were great, a few things didn't work, and we abandoned that, and had to go back and redo some things.”

Interviewees from Sites 1 and 2 also discussed breaking things down into smaller pieces and looking at sections of the collection to make the process more manageable. The associate registrar from Site 2 said, “We have concentrated on subject matter a lot of the time, depending on what kind of object it is.” At Site 1, during their ranking project, they went department by department based on the exhibit schedule to decide which curators would have time to create a list of objects for deaccession. The registrar from Site 1 explained,

“The groups (for deaccession), depending on the curator could get quite large, the largest was 700 at one meeting for one curator, which was quite a big group, but we try to keep it now at like 200 and below for each curator.”

In addition to breaking things into manageable lists, ensuring that all the staff and volunteers are on board and working together was a challenge discussed by Site 1 and 3. The manager of curatorial affairs' role at Site 1 was to supervise and manage the ranking project:

“It involves a lot of staff, [and] ensuring that everyone was rowing together was something that was really critical to my job... A critical part of success was ensuring that we still had the whole team on board at all points.”

The collections assistant from Site 3 also mentioned the challenge of getting everyone on the same page: “Just getting it rolling and getting a good system, because of course when you have a big group of volunteers everyone's giving opinions [on] how it should be done. So you have to form this is what's working, this is how we're going to do it.”

### **What is the public's response to large-scale deaccessioning projects?**

A central aspect to this study was the public perception of deaccessioning projects, as deaccessioning is often considered controversial and portrayed in a negative light in the media. Only two sites reported negative feedback from their communities and both sites have been working with their communities to repair these relationships. The remaining three sites had positive responses from their communities, something they each attributed to transparency.

### *Positive Public Response*

Sites 1, 2, and 3 all had positive responses from the public during their deaccession and collections ranking projects. All three sites presented their projects at professional conferences discussing the benefits that came from them and the challenges that they experienced. In addition, Site 3 also did a great deal of public outreach. The curator at Site 3 noted, "We did a public education campaign telling the public, 'This is what we're doing, and this is why we're doing it.'...and not one person ever said to us, 'Shame on you, you should be keeping everything.'" Site 3 had deaccessioned and sold objects about 20 years ago which had caused a lot of public out-cry at the time. The curator decided to do the public education campaign to get out ahead of it and make sure it did not happen again. Site 1 also did some public outreach about their ranking project:

"At the very beginning there was a little bit of hesitancy, but I think we did a good job of kind of getting out in front of it and explaining, 'We're not cleaning house, we're not getting rid of everything, we're really taking a scholarly approach to this and looking at pieces in the collection to see where they really fit.'"

### *Negative Public Responses*

Sites 4 and 5 had challenges with public perception during their projects and both attributed these problems to inadequate transparency about the process. As a city museum, Site 4's deaccessioning process involved a public comment period in which the public has access to the list of proposed deaccessioned objects and the reasons why they may be deaccessioned. The public can leave comments about the objects online and there was a group who were critical of the museum's deaccessioning. The curator at Site 4 said,

"There's a select group of folks in the community who...review these and make sure we're not doing

anything wrong. I thought that people would get on board and see the value of this project earlier on, I don't know if they will fully trust the decision-making process.”

Despite the challenges with public perception, they continued to deaccession and educate the public about this process. They included language about the thoughtful nature of the project in their memo: “Deaccessioning of any object in the Permanent Collection will be recommended by curatorial staff after careful consideration of the object as it relates to the mission statement and scope of collections.”

Site 5 experienced a similar situation to Site 4. They communicated with the donor’s children about deaccessioning the collection but once the objects were deaccessioned and sent to auction, there was a great deal of public outcry. The deaccessioned objects sold for much more than the museum had anticipated, causing the donor’s children to feel that they had been misled by the museum. They filed a lawsuit with the museum and created a public petition to get the museum to keep the objects. The head curator at Site 5 said,

“The auction prices were far higher than the estimates had been and that's what caused the whole [outcry]. They just got upset, they felt like they had been lied to. The ways in which we communicated it, we hadn't really understood or done the due diligence, clearly with the right people about how the community felt about these objects being here and losing them.”

It ultimately led the museum to use the acquisition funds from the sale to buy works to accession faster as well as transferring some of the objects to a local arts organization to begin repairing their relationship with the public.

## Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to examine the nature of large-scale deaccessioning projects, including what led museums to the projects, the benefits and barriers of the projects, and the public’s response. Through interviews and document analysis from five museums that recently completed large-scale deaccessioning projects, three major findings were revealed.

First, study results suggest that museums engage in deaccessioning because museum collections are gigantic. No matter the size or type of museum, every collection has something that does not fit the mission or scope, is a duplicate of a duplicate, or is too deteriorated to use. The

size of the permanent collection was commented on by almost every interviewee. This problem of too much stuff identified by the participants supports Morgan and MacDonald's (2020) discussion of the "profusion struggle" in museums and Harrison's (2013) discussion of the "crisis of accumulation." Most of the museums in this study have been collecting for over 100 years and, as Harrison (2013) notes, collections have increased exponentially to try to represent all types of heritage. Morgan and MacDonald (2020) and Gammon (2018) discuss the recent trend toward refining museum collections, because they are so large and overwhelming. In their article, Morgan and MacDonald (2020) discuss how overwhelmed curators are with the size of their collections and feel unable to collect objects from contemporary life because their collections are already so large. Participants in this study confirmed this feeling, often noting that after their deaccessioning projects were completed, they had more space for collections to represent contemporary collecting goals.

Second, the largest barrier to the deaccessioning projects was the resources required to complete the projects. While removing objects from the collection ultimately allows museum resources to be spent on relevant objects, the deaccessioning process requires a great deal of resources to prepare objects for deaccessioning. Participants at all five case study museums discussed challenges they had with securing enough staff time to research candidates for deaccession and several discussed needing additional resources to accomplish the work, like office supplies and workspace. This contrasts much of the literature which focuses on the retention costs of non-relevant objects rather than practical costs of removing objects from the collection (Harrison, 2012; Miller, 2018; Morgan & MacDonald, 2020). It is important to consider retention or acquisition costs, especially with non-relevant objects, but none of the literature discusses the costs associated with removing objects from the collection. The literature on deaccessioning focuses on it from a theoretical point of view, considering implications of deaccessioning without drawing on specific examples. This gap in the literature was represented by the participants of this study when they discussed the challenges that they had with deaccessioning.

Finally, public perception of the museum during their deaccessioning projects was a concern for many of the participating museums. While sites followed museum best practices and their collections management policies, they were all conscious that a controversy could arise. During interviews, participants were emphatic that they were not deaccessioning relevant objects, as this is where most controversies arise. This supports Gammon's (2018) and Baker's (2014) theories about

museums avoiding deaccessioning to avoid controversy. Study results also supported Gammon's and Baker's theories about non-accessioning being utilized to manage collections rather than deaccessioning. Most of the participating museums curtailed their accessioning, in addition to their deaccessioning projects. In addition, the acquisition funds aspect of controversy, using the funds from the sale of objects for operations costs, was also something the participating museums were conscious of during their projects. The sites that sold works at auction only used the funds from the sale toward accessions or collections care as per professional museum organizations. The interviewees often underscored that the funds would not be used for anything non-collections related in their conversations with the researcher.

Two limitations influenced this study. First, only history and art museums participated. During preliminary research into potential sites, no natural history museums, children's museums, science museums, or any other type of museum had been reported to have completed a large deaccessioning project. This is not to say that these types of museums have not deaccessioned, but rather that they have not been as heavily reported as history and art museums have been. Since sampling was based on available information, those museums that have not been included in this reporting could not have been selected as possible research sites.

Second, only museums in the United States were selected to participate in this study. Museums outside of the United States have different laws guiding them on deaccessioning so this limitation was intentional. Museums outside the United States are deaccessioning but were excluded to allow for comparisons between participants to be drawn more easily. Further research should examine international museums and their deaccessioning practices as well as a wider variety in the type of museum.

## Implications

### Research

Deaccessioning has gained more attention in the museum field in recent years as museums evaluate their collections, missions, and resources. The deaccessioning projects studied here were finite initiatives. Further research into deaccessioning might examine museums that do deaccessioning work as a part of the museum's regular collections management tasks. This work is ongoing, and done to maintain collections' health, regularly evaluating objects for

relevance to the mission of the museum. In addition, this research examined museums doing large-scale deaccessioning work where collections were evaluated holistically, and large numbers of objects were removed as they were found to be non-relevant to the museum's mission. While an interesting facet of deaccessioning, these large-scale projects are not the only type of deaccessioning work being done in museums. Likewise, further research might include a wider variety of museums as well as museums outside the United States. As discussed in the limitations section, this research was confined to museums that have reported on their deaccessioning projects and were located in the United States intentionally to manage the scale of the research. Larger studies could draw on a greater variety of museums and projects that have not been reported on as heavily.

### **Practice**

This study examined the practical work of large-scale deaccessioning projects in museums, and it can possibly be used to inform other museums about the realities of large-scale deaccessioning projects. Many museums have large and unfocused collections and are running into similar problems that the participants of this research identified before they began their projects. Despite these concerns, museums are hesitant to deaccession because of the threat of controversy. This research helps to describe the realities of deaccessioning and may encourage museums to deaccession objects not relevant to their collection. There are museums that have successfully deaccessioned objects from their collections and found it was beneficial to their overall collection's health. In addition, it may help museums better prepare for deaccessioning projects and keep them from fizzling out.

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**The problem**

1. What was the problem that the museum was trying to solve through deaccessioning?
2. How did the museum decide that deaccessioning objects was the best course of action to address that problem?
3. Were there other solutions to the problem besides deaccessioning? What were they? Why did you choose deaccessioning as the solution or one of the solutions?
4. How did you decide how to go about the deaccessioning project?

**The process of deaccessioning**

5. Can you explain the procedure of your museum's deaccession project, step-by-step?
6. How long did the project take?
7. How many objects have you deaccessioned?
8. How did you get staff and board of directors buy-in for the project?
9. What kind of documents could you share about the deaccessioning project?
10. Written procedures, protocols, evaluative tools, worksheets

**The benefits and constraints of deaccessioning**

11. What was the most challenging aspect of the deaccessioning project?
12. What were the main barriers to deaccessioning?
13. Were there negative side effects to deaccessioning? If so, what were they?
14. What was the most rewarding or beneficial aspects of the deaccessioning project?
15. What were the main benefits of deaccessioning?
16. Were there any aspects with the deaccessioning project that you/the museum didn't foresee? If so, what were they?
17. What suggestions would you make to other museums/museum professionals considering similar projects?

18. How has the deaccessioning project shaped your institution in the years following its completion?

### **The public perceptions of deaccessioning**

19. How would you describe the public's reaction to the deaccessioning project at your institution? Was it seen as controversial? If so, how?

20. Was there public outcry at any time during your deaccessioning project? If so, how was it managed/what happened? If not, how do you think you managed to avoid it?

21. Was the public involved in the deaccessioning process? If so, what role did they play? How was the museum's public image considered before embarking on the deaccessioning project?

22. How did public opinion influence or not influence the project?

23. Did the museum do surveys of the public to gauge what they thought of the project? What were the results?

### **Personal information**

24. How long have you been working in the museum field?

25. How long have you been working at the museum?

26. What is your position within the museum? (job title)

27. What are your main responsibilities in your job?

28. What was your role in the project?

29. What is your gender, age, and ethnicity?

30. Is there anything else I should know that wasn't touched on in my questions?