



British Columbia  
Museums Association  
SINCE 1957

# Best Practices

## *Module*

# CULTURAL DIVERSITY – COMMUNITY RELEVANCY & COLLECTIONS

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## Introduction

The goal of this Best Practices Module is to enable a better understanding (and from that, action) of the principles and opportunities related to cultural diversity, community relevancy and collections.

Museums<sup>1</sup> have a long history and tradition of practice that is undergoing enormous change as social roles, audience/community interests, relevancy and accountability become paramount. Perhaps the greatest shift for the museum has been with regard to cultural diversity and changing community demographics. In the past, museums were primarily object-focused centres that were not necessarily reflective of, nor responsive to their communities. In today's modern democratic society, this is no longer acceptable. Fortunately, many museums have been engaged in a conscious reevaluation of their practices—central to that reevaluation has been the changing nature of society and its diversification.

There are significant opportunities and benefits to be realized from understanding diversity, relevancy and collections and the relationship between them. Creating a culture of institutional learning, realizing meaningful partnerships, shifting from being reactive to proactive, reflecting diversity, building significant collections, delivering wide ranging and meaningful programming, and positioning the museum for enhanced visitation and use, are but some of the possibilities. The issues however, are complex and affect the entire museum including its mission, values, governance, staffing, programs and services. Diversity is more than a special exhibition or weekend programming, it is substantive transformative work.

The information contained here and in the additional resources at the end of this Module, identify best practices and practical tips for museums to use in addressing issues of cultural diversity. Emphasized, is the role of collections (tangible and intangible) as a primary tool for collaborative cultural work reflecting its inherent value to both the museum and cultural communities. In encouraging museums to think about these areas of activity, the Best Practices Module seeks to realize the museum's potential as a vital, dynamic and relevant organization within society.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this Module, "museums" are defined in the broadest sense of the term to include art, history, natural history and science.



## Context

For many years, the museum fulfilled an important stabilizing role in society reflecting dominant views and values. Since the 1960s, and in particular the last two decades, that society has been changing with new value systems finding prominence and authority. Across the world, governments have issued declarations recognizing the rights of all people, not just dominant groups.

In Canada, Federal policies of multiculturalism and immigration and voices previously silenced (lead in particular by aboriginal groups), have begun to secure places in society for diverse populations. The notion of democracy, human rights and freedom of speech mixed with demands for access and accountability have set in motion a vigorous exploration and reinvention of civic roles by private and public organizations alike. Global population shifts have brought with them new and alternative histories and narratives as well as a search for identity and fit within society. Additionally, the fractured state of modern society with its many attendant hardships has lead to a rise in community development philosophies and rationales. For the non-profit organization relevancy is critical. In Canada, it has become one of our highest measures.

Today the museum's functions are rooted in traditional practice, but its purposes have changed. It is finding meaning as a cultural centre a learning centre, an entertainment centre, as facilitator, partner and as a resource, that delivers services to constituents. While the collections remain important, there has been a dramatic shift towards an audience-focused mandate.

Within this context of societal change, many museums are ideally positioned to lead connections with cultural communities. As local, often grassroots organizations, they have wide ranging relationships and a flexibility and nimbleness for engaging with opportunity. They understand the value of information and communication and hold many of the skills essential for moving towards an inclusive society.

***TIP:***

*Diversity: While cultural is perhaps the most obvious of our "diversities," diversity in all forms can provide enormous benefits to the museum. From age, gender, religion, sexuality, economic ability and value systems to ethnicity, our communities are made up of complex and dynamic mixes of people. What collections, exhibitions or research projects might be of interest to these different communities of people? What projects could you work on together?*



## Principles

### Cultural Diversity

Implicit in the museum's move towards cultural diversity, is the understanding that the full range of people present in a community should have the opportunity to be represented within the museum's exhibitions, programming, research, collection building, and governance. Is your community comprised of eight different cultural groups but only three are evident in the museum's collections? Do your programs actively encourage understanding and acceptance of diversity? Is there equal access to the museum by all members of the community (equal in encouragement as well as a feeling of being welcomed and belonging)? Do the members of your staff, board and volunteer teams reflect the population of your community? Does your museum work as an equal partner on collaborative projects—projects where each partner achieves a better place for having participated?

Cultural diversity has been a critically important topic for government, business and non-profits for many years. For each geographic area, detailed demographic information is widely available and provides an excellent starting point for the museum that wishes to understand their community better. Additional resources for understanding and making use of such data include cultural associations, multicultural and educational organizations, volunteer centres and municipal planning departments.

***TIP:***

*Community Mapping: One of the best tools for understanding the make-up of a community is community mapping. Generally intended to search out data and visually represent it in a way that gives insight into of a unit of people or resources, mapping can take the form of a creative artist project or a scientific demographic analysis. It can be a superb programmatic activity that delivers information and engages the community in understanding itself. A search on the Internet will reveal resources on theory, case studies and possibilities for funding.*



## Community Relevancy

Relevancy is a tricky topic. Relevant to who, and with so many differing people and ideas, how is possible to achieve relevancy amongst all people?

Relevancy can be seen as a continuous circle—a journey that requires constant monitoring and adjustment in response to changing external and internal demands and influences. There is no one answer or solution. Rather it is series of steps, each individual to the museum and its communities.

Multiple perspectives are critical to attaining and/or increasing relevancy. It is wise to check assumptions about your museum with others. If you can, do visitor surveys (include non visitors), talk to community leaders, stakeholders and citizens. Understand what is important to your community and where your museum fits in, or does not. Learn to recognize relevancy using some of the indicators below:

- Increased overall attendance and new audiences
- Demand for services and programs
- Steady growth in memberships and supporters
- Growth in complexity and depth of collection resources
- Ongoing successful partnerships and collaborations
- Enhanced relationships with stakeholders, collectors/donors, research/educational partners, community groups, funders and politicians
- Awards for programs and services
- Community ownership and pride in the museum (by diverse peoples)
- Diversity made visible by the people who work and volunteer
- Increased fundraising results and earned revenues.

**TIP:**

*Being Relevant: Ultimately, relevancy comes when a community feels the museum is a valuable organization, undertaking activities that are of interest to them. It also comes when the community can see themselves represented in and at your institution. From your board, to your volunteers and staff—does your museum reflect the diversity of the community in which you are located? If not, consider ways to add diversity to your team. Ask a cultural leader if they will join your board or a committee. Seek out students of diverse backgrounds to staff your summer projects. Offer volunteer opportunities to new immigrants who are often keen to work at the museum to learn the language and history of their new home. Make diversity an objective in your new recruitments. The rewards of diversifying your museum team cannot be underestimated!*



## Collections Practice

Museums are separated from other cultural institutions by their collections—the acquisition of unique cultural, historical, artistic, living and scientific materials. Throughout the history of museums, these collections have been the subject of some reverence—objects of connoisseurship, placed in positions of importance or locked away, with only a select few permitted to handle. Today the context for collections is changing, slower than other parts of the profession, but with the same necessity. Led by urgent and articulate interests from originating communities, the collection is no longer within the museum's solitary purview and the museum is no longer considered the single authority nor the final arbitrator on what may or may not occur concerning a collection.

A second critical issue for collections practice is the limited range of representation that characterizes most museum collections. Built over the years by individuals with specific interests and/or the “donation dribble” of bits and pieces of offerings, it is rare to find a collection that encompasses a truly diverse representation of community history, issues and contemporary life.

For institutions seeking to engage with diverse cultural communities, the collection is a valuable starting point as a primary interest shared by both parties. For many cultural communities, objects, artworks, oral histories, songs, family narratives, photographs, regalia, specimens, traditional foods, language and other tangible and intangible materials both historic and contemporary are critical aspects to their cultural identity and survival. The collections (within the museum and in private hands) are vivid connections to people and their experiences, environment, history, and culture. To embark on a collections project with a cultural community is to move directly into a place of engagement where meaningful shared values can be realized.

While traditional collection resources took the form of objects and their documentation, cultural diversity practices expand to include a much greater array of sources drawn from traditional knowledge, memory, historical experience and living culture. The museum professional must consider how best to capture these new types of information and resources, and how to make them accessible.

### *TIP:*

*Collections Management: The practice of collections preservation and management tends to be conservative, formal and focused on safe guarding the collection. Collections management in the culturally diverse museum must adapt to very different practices and find new methods for fulfilling its obligations. From prioritizing documentation of critical contextual information (alternate names for objects and cultural narratives), to relaxing loan guidelines, building collections that may not be physically owned by the museum, and developing intellectual property policies that respect ownership by creators and originating populations, these can deeply challenge formerly held ideas of professionalism. The key is understanding the goal or outcome and adapting the means to achieve that outcome. It is useful to know that in recent years the museum profession has come to value adaptation of the rules and even encourage it, where the outcome is greater than the steps in the process.*



## Power, Authority and Ownership

Set within this context of change, the museum has seen a shift of power from the institution (curators and directors) to the community (audiences and knowledge experts). This shift challenges the underpinnings of authority—who has the knowledge and rights to speak on behalf of a subject or people? Who holds the decision-making power? Who owns the tangible objects and intangible history? Moreover, who has the rights of access—to handle, borrow, use, preserve or destroy?

A new paradigm has emerged that embraces a shared mutual authority. Likewise new models of ownership are emerging. Not all objects belong in the museum. Some will always reside in private hands, others will be treasured and cared for by the community. Some objects, currently housed in museums, will be the subject of requests for repatriation back to originating communities. Still others may be housed at the museum, but not available for use (research, exhibition or programming) without the permission of the originating community.

Ultimately if the museum, working with its diverse communities, can achieve a shared vision for the long-term goal, then the steps towards that goal (including formerly taboo activities like loaning objects to individuals for traditional use, consulting on decisions around preservation and interpretation, providing access to objects and their documentation or conversely withholding access at the request of the community) will seem much less threatening.

Both museums and communities evolve and change over time, and predicting at what point in the cycle of awareness, advocacy and action each entity may be at is extremely difficult. Sensitivity to timing is critically important in working with community partners. It may be that they are not ready to participate in a collaborative project, or that they have significantly more pressing issues to attend to. Part of a shared mutual authority is the power to decide not only how, but also when, to proceed.

***TIP:***

*Access: Museum professionals have typically been trained to think of themselves as guardians of the collection, responsible for protecting the objects and the institution. As your museum begins to work with community members, it is critical that the staff be comfortable in their knowledge and skills to support different and new approaches to working with the collections and making them accessible. Staff must understand that community members share the museum's interest in safeguarding the objects, but that may not necessarily be achieved via the strictest conservation guidelines.*

***TIP:***

*Sustainability: Relationships take time to grow and develop and once active, need to be sustained. When planning a community relationship, consider what it will mean to sustain that relationship? If successful, it will be a transformative experience with long-term benefits and commitments.*



## Policy & Practice

Consider the following with regards to policy and practice in the culturally diverse museum.

First, in seeking to establish a relationship with a cultural community, it is imperative that the museum consults with the community and recognizes their cultural protocols. These are their “policies and practices” and they warrant respect.

As the museum develops its skills and attributes working with diverse communities, it is important that the work and skill sets be anchored within the larger institution, not just held by one or two people. If those individuals were to leave the museum, what would happen to the relationships and practices established? Could the museum continue as strongly without them? If the institution believes in the work and style of practice, then it should become policy, anchored in the institutional framework as an underpinning for all employees and volunteers to refer to in their day-to-day work.

Respect for an institution and its efforts to address issues of cultural diversity will depend on demonstrated positive action by that institution—a commitment to “walking the talk”. Again, policy and practice need to be aligned and manifest throughout the institution, regardless of which came first (did the museum complete a successful project and the board decide it needed a policy on cultural diversity, or vice versa?)

Policy gives staff and volunteers the support to work in areas that might be outside their traditional practice, and to continue regardless of critics who might be reluctant or uncomfortable with change. It is within the policy discussion (where the staff, director and board agree on a substantive, written direction) that critical issues can be explored and debated, ideas and values communicated, and all parties engaged and informed.

***TIP:***

*Policy & Practice: If your museum board is not yet ready to adopt a formal policy on cultural diversity, a good starting point might be to develop a set of management guidelines. As these would not require board approval, they can be used to introduce topics and discussion enabling staff to articulate ideas in a manner that can then be shared, reviewed and revised over time.*



## Human Resources

**Personal attitude and openness to different perspectives and ways of doing things is the single most important factor for success in working with cultural communities.** Sometimes that attitude is evident throughout the institution; sometimes it is found in just one or a few individuals.

Until very recently, museum professionals received very little training in the skills necessary for collaborative, community based practice—conservation, exhibition, marketing and business practices were the focus. For museums recruiting or looking at long term training goals, some of the following knowledge, skills and abilities are worth considering:

- Ability to see the big picture and think long-term
- Patience
- Curiosity and confidence to challenge traditional practice in search of better models
- Facilitation, collaboration and team work skills
- Communication skills (traditional written and verbal, as well as non-western oral)
- Listening skills (hear what is being said, directly and indirectly)
- Knowledge and respect for diversity issues (physical, intellectual, social, economic)
- Openness and respect for others including value systems, languages, cultures
- Ability to trust (in yourself and in others)
- Risk taking (comfort and ability to move from established models into the unknown).

Other HR considerations for the culturally diverse museum include:

- Commitment to diversify your staff, volunteer and board teams
- Respect for the time and knowledge provided by members of cultural communities including remuneration as appropriate
- Opportunities for sensitivity training for staff, volunteers and board
- Clear expectations for cultural staff or volunteers (what are you seeking from them?), and
- Clear expectations for museum team and how it will demonstrate commitment to the community through language and attitude.

***TIP:***

*HR Training: If your museum's staff team, volunteers and board members are unfamiliar with the cultural groups in your community, consider investing in a day or two of cultural training. These can be very powerful opportunities to help your team grow together and support one another in learning about the cultural group, protocols, language and values. Ask the cultural group you are working with if they would be willing to help with some sensitively training.*



## Getting Started

For many museums, the ideas contained within this Module are well understood and practiced. For others, this can be new territory. It maybe that the previous board or staff did not see cultural diversity or community relevance as an issue for their museum. It maybe that the current leaders are new to the field. It maybe that there had never been any training nor encouragement to try. Often the first steps are the most daunting.

If there is one thought to take away from this module, it is that community relevancy has become a paramount goal for all museums of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With communities undergoing enormous diversification, culturally and otherwise, providing an inclusive, welcoming and relevant environment for all community members has become a key professional standard for museums large and small. Addressing issues of cultural diversity is part of the museum's role as a socially responsible entity within society. It is also a tremendous opportunity for achieving relevancy, developing audiences and securing long-term financial and operational viability.

***TIP:***

*Where to start? If your museum is unfamiliar with collaborative projects with cultural communities, start small. Pick an upcoming exhibition or research project, work with your collaborator to set the goals, objectives and timeline and give yourself and your team (volunteers, staff, board) time to learn, time to work with your partners, to understand their needs, their values and their communication styles (which may be vastly different than yours). Once you find those places of shared common interests, future larger projects will be much easier to pursue.*



## A Guide to Working with Cultural Communities<sup>2</sup>

The following recommendations were developed from interviews with cultural representatives and BC museums. These recommendations echo our basic understanding of museum work in Canada and serve as an excellent refresher of things to keep in mind when starting out and/or continuing work with cultural communities.

### **Personal Attitude:**

Personal attitude and openness to different perspectives and ways of doing things is the single most important factor for success in working with cultural communities.

Think and act long-term (while your project may only be for a specified time, you are building a relationships for your museum, and relationships take time).

Try to think of yourself as a “collaborator” or “facilitator” rather than an “authority”. There will be a place for your expertise as a museum professional, but first there needs to be a place where the knowledge and expertise of the cultural community can be heard and honoured.

Work on sensitizing your staff team, volunteers and board—each will need to demonstrate positive personal attitudes and openness towards the community.

### **Museum as Resource:**

Museums that contain valuable resources and provide valuable services are ones that are sought out and appreciated.

Build collections (tangible and intangible) of significant objects and contextual materials. Capture the layers of experience, memory and living tradition through meaningful artefacts, art works and specimens as well as oral histories, photographs, archival support documents.

Make your museum a “happening place” with changing programs and exhibitions, dynamic, intriguing and contemporary, which respond to different community needs and interests.

Reflect real life by working across disciplines, interests and perspectives. Society and cultural communities in particular, do not separate environment, history, culture and art into silos of interest.

### **Access:**

Work to make your museum accessible, in all forms from physical (is there a wheel chair ramp?), to intellectual (do you make knowledge and information available without lecturing to your audiences?), social (does your museum feel welcoming and friendly?), and economic (do you provide opportunities for all levels of ability to participate?).

### **Partnerships:**

Enable everyone on your staff team to be active in your community—outside of your museum. Network with various groups and organizations; reach out beyond your normal sphere of influence; become known and trusted.

Be willing and comfortable to share power, authority, perhaps your collections, and certainly your knowledge. Territoriality has no place in working with cultural communities.

<sup>2</sup> JL Gijssen, Museums & Cultural Diversity, Canadian Museums Association Fellowship, 1999/2000.



**Luck / Timing:**

Know that sometimes the right people and the right opportunities to engage with a cultural community do not always occur simultaneous to your museum's interests. Relationships are organic and thrive when two or more parties share a common interest and goal. Work to position your museum (philosophically and operationally) so that when an opportunity does arise, your museum is ready and able to pursue it.

**Respect / Communication:**

Demonstrate interest in the community by seeking out their knowledge and perspectives; get to know the cultural community. What are their priorities? Who would be best to approach and work with?

Respect the protocols of the groups you are working with; while they may be very different from your museum's systems and styles of working, a trust in yourself and in others will result in a successful project.

Understand that within all cultural communities there can be a further diversity of thought, approach and values. No one group is a monoculture.

Ensure the leaders (elected, appointed or cultural) are aware of your project and have been appropriately contacted (even if you are working with representative members at other levels).

Communicate, communicate, communicate—keep everyone including your own staff, volunteers and board up to date on the project.

**Diversify:**

Recruit people from the cultural community to work with you in a paid capacity; honour their knowledge, expertise and time.

Demonstrate your commitment to diversity by diversifying your staff, your board and your volunteers.

**Business-Like:**

Respect issues of copyright and intellectual property and understand that you do not necessarily have rights to use and/or reproduce cultural materials, narratives and information.

Do your homework, be professional and accountable.

Fulfil expectations with community partners—deliver what you say you will.

Establish a good track record with stakeholders, supporters, supervisors, funders and your board by building on small successes.

**Take Risks:**

Sometimes it takes a “leap of faith” to move into a new area of learning and activity. It can be risky and will likely involve hard work and perhaps a stumble or two along the way. Intentional risk taking does not need to jeopardize financial or operational aspects of the museum, but it may push your museum's philosophical approach and historical practice. If your museum is risk adverse, start small and each time push a little further. Use your imagination and good conscience to succeed.



## Resources

Included in the following are excellent online materials and bibliographies for further reading. In particular, *Cultural Diversity: An Introduction* (Museums Australia) and the *Multicultural Action Plan* (Texas Association of Museums) are superb resources for smaller museums seeking starting points and tips for addressing issues of cultural diversity.

*Confronting Demographic Denial: Retaining Relevance in the New Millennium*, Eric J. Jolly. **ASTC Dimensions**, Association of Science – Technology Centers, January/February 2002.  
See: <http://www.astc.org/pubs/dimensions/2002/jan-feb/jolly.htm>

*Cultural Diversity: An Introduction, Museums Methods: A Practical Manual for Managing Small Museums and Galleries*, Museums Australia, 2004.

See:

[http://sector.amol.org.au/publications\\_archive/museum\\_management/museum\\_methods/cultural\\_diversity](http://sector.amol.org.au/publications_archive/museum_management/museum_methods/cultural_diversity)

*Cultural Pluralism and Museums Bibliography*, Edited by Lynne Teather and Kelly Wilhelm, 2000.

See: [http://66.46.139.212/ccm/CF\\_test/ocasi/index.html](http://66.46.139.212/ccm/CF_test/ocasi/index.html)

*Diversity and Museums Selected Links*, American Association of Museums, no date.

See: <http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/div/Diversity-Links.cfm>

*Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, American Association of Museums, Washington, 2002.

*Multicultural Action Plan* (including Institutional Self Study), Texas Association of Museums, 1995.

See: [www.io.com/~tam/multicultural/actionplan](http://www.io.com/~tam/multicultural/actionplan)

*Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, Edited by Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine, Smithsonian Press, Washington, London, 1992.

*Museums and Cultural Diversity: Policy Statement*, International Council of Museums, 1997.

See: [http://www.chin.gc.ca/Applications\\_URL/icom/diversity.html](http://www.chin.gc.ca/Applications_URL/icom/diversity.html)

*Museums and Diversity*, American Association of Museums, no date.

See: <http://www.aam-us.org/sp/m-and-d.cfm>

*Museums Australia Incorporated Cultural Diversity Policy*, Museums Australia, 2000.

See: <http://www.museumsaustralia.org.au/dbdoc/culturaldiv.pdf>



## Resources cont'd...

Museums and Relevancy, **Journal of Museum Education**, A Publication of the Museum Education Roundtable, Vol 31, No. 1, Spring 2006.

See also BC Museums Association at: <http://www.museumsassn.bc.ca/content/home.asp>: **BC Museums Association Standards for BC Museums** or to order a copy contact BCMA Member Services Coordinator at (250) 356-5700

**BC Museums Association Best Practices Modules:** First Nations: Developing Relationships & Partnerships; Collections Management; Community Outreach & Programming; Social Responsibility Programming.

