

Health and Safety Training for Emerging Museum Professionals and the Evolving Work Economy

Museum collections and conservation professionals: *Have you ever found yourself elbows deep in an unlabeled artifact box, and then realized too late that it contains hazardous materials?* You are not alone; many colleagues have experienced that same sickening revelation. In some ways these experiences have become an unofficial rite of passage into the profession.

Thanks to many dedicated predecessors and colleagues, there is a wide variety of resources available on health and safety topics specifically for collections professionals. Today's Emerging Museum Professionals (referred to here as EMPs) have the advantage of this framework, but the authors' research, surveying 31 EMPs in museum collections-oriented roles, shows there is still very little consistency or emphasis on their health and safety training.

Most EMPs learn about health and safety issues from their employers, and the trainings were mostly distributed evenly between onboarding sessions, ongoing lessons, and on an as-needed basis. Still, fewer than half of participants said they received health and safety training as part of their onboarding process to a new institution. The first weeks in a new collection are an important time to learn about the materials and likely hazards, and how to deal with them.

Nearly 50% of respondents received either minimal or no training in their academic programs. This was corroborated by our academic program review which examined the publicly available course offerings of 189 museum studies programs across the country. Only 6 programs clearly offered collections health and safety trainings, and 29 universities offered related coursework. Approximately 76% of programs did not appear to offer any coursework related to collections health and safety. Of the 50% of respondents who received some training in their academic programs, nearly half said it was integrated into part of a collections course.

Our survey respondents indicated they feel there is a gap between the knowledge they have and the knowledge that is necessary to protect their health. Most participants regard health and safety training as a priority and have worked to personally expand their knowledge to be a better advocate at their organizations.

The museum field needs to standardize when, where, and how collections professionals receive health and safety training. With the rise of the gig economy, temporary and project-based employment is increasingly prevalent in the cultural heritage field. More and more museum professionals are working as contractors, where the individual is responsible for their own health and safety. In contrast, staff members have access to their institution's safety and health services, within which employers are required to ensure a safe and healthy workplace. Of course, for museums with 10 or fewer employees, there are some exemptions.

Health and safety concerns can be yet another barrier to finding employment, but there are a number of things you can do to protect yourself as a contractor while responding to a Request for Proposal (RFP). The employer likely provided a detailed Statement of Work (SOW) to be performed. While not all of these elements will be critical, you want to consider the following before accepting a contract:

- › Is there information about hazards that are present or potentially present?
- › Did they request a brief safety plan be submitted with the RFP?
- › Does the museum have emergency procedures?
- › Does the SOW require training certificates for things like first aid and hazard communication?
- › If the SOW lists the safety and health manager or a point of contact, consider requesting further information.



Need Help?

Have a question about health and safety in your conservation work? Send it to us at Health-Safety@culturalheritage.org.

Not all contract positions place the weight of health and safety awareness on the individual's shoulders. When working for a large contracting firm, workers should receive health and safety services as an employee benefit from the firm. Some museums also include contractors and subcontractors in their occupational safety and health management system. By doing so, the museum or the firm is accepting responsibility for the contractor's safety and will likely provide access to hazard awareness training.

For those who work mainly as contractors, a *Best Practices Guide for Contractor Safety and Occupational Health Performance* is available at <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1004956.pdf>. This guide explains types of contracts, defines terms, and provides best practices at each stage of the contract, including selection, contract preparation, post award safety orientation, contract safety administration, and post-contract evaluation of safety and health performance.

Ultimately, professional opportunities in the museum field are changing, and it is important for collections professionals to understand their rights and benefits in each form of employment. It is equally as critical for EMPs and collections professionals at all stages in their career to know what hazards they may come across and how to control them. Only with an understanding of both can we leverage the available resources to best protect ourselves.

—Emily England, UIC MUSE Graduate Student and Curator at Swedish American Museum;
Joy Erdman, MS, CIH, CSP, Joy Solutions LLC, Falls Church, VA, joyerdman00@gmail.com;
Melissa Miller, MA, Sole Proprietor of MQM Museum Services

Help FAIC Advocate for Conservation

Share our new Friends program and introduce newcomers to conservation!

The Foundation for Advancement in Conservation launched a Friends of Conservation program to engage new audiences. Invite your parents, friends, and clients to learn more about conservation - we'll do the outreach for you!

Our new Friends donate to FAIC, which supports scholarships, workshops, and resources for conservators and preservation professionals. In turn, Friends get tips on caring for personal items, learn behind-the-scenes conservation stories, and get more connected to the field.

Find out more about the benefits of being a Friend at www.culturalheritage.org/friends.



Friends of Conservation

