

Chapter 10: Assessments and Intellectual Control

Cataloging and documenting works of art in the collections are basic responsibilities of the museum.
—*Professional Practices in Art Museums*, Association of Art Museum Directors, 2001

Archivists strive to preserve and protect the authenticity of records in their holdings by documenting their creation and use in hard copy and electronic formats. They have a fundamental obligation to preserve the intellectual and physical integrity of those records.

—*Code of Ethics for Archivists*, Society for American Archivists, 2005

The Accreditation Commission expects that the scope of a museum's collections stewardship extends to both the physical and intellectual control of its property.

—*A Higher Standard: Museum Accreditation Program Standards*, American Association of Museums, 2005

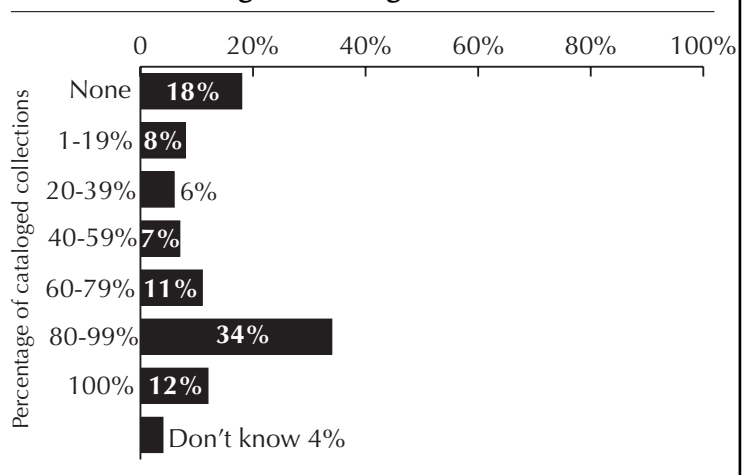
The preservation needs documented by the Heritage Health Index are infinitely harder to address if archives, libraries, historical societies, museums, archaeological repositories, and scientific research organizations do not have recent assessments of their collections' conditions. Institutions will also find it challenging to manage the care of collections if they do not have sufficient intellectual control over what they hold. Although knowing the quantity and condition of collections is a fundamental component of collections stewardship, too many institutions do not have this information. Results from the survey questions that asked institutions to report on the percentage of collections that are cataloged and the availability of current assessments reveal this need. In addition, the percentage of missing information and “don't know” responses throughout the survey is telling about the lack of intellectual control over collections.

The Heritage Health Index asked institutions to estimate the percentage of their collections accessible through a catalog.¹ The definition of “catalog” did not specify what descriptive detail it must contain to allow institutions the broadest possible interpretation to this question. Only 12% said that all their collections were accessible through a catalog, but 34% have a large portion (80%-99%) of their collection cataloged (figure 10.1). A little over 10% of

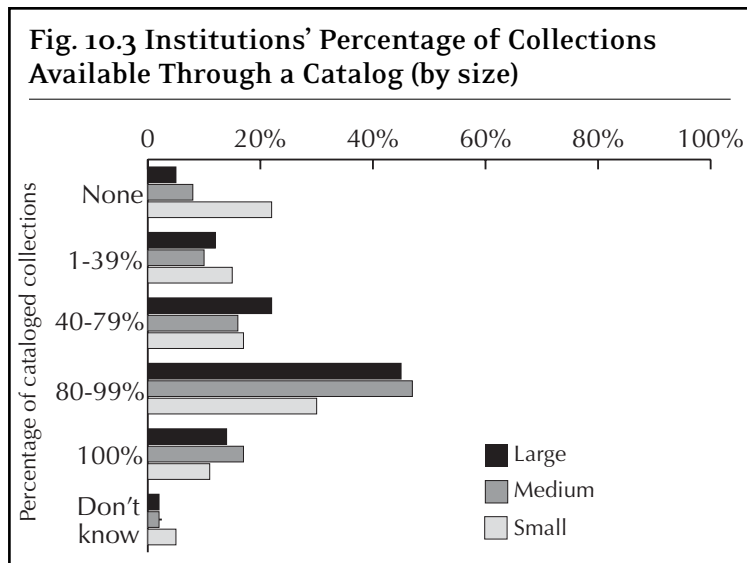
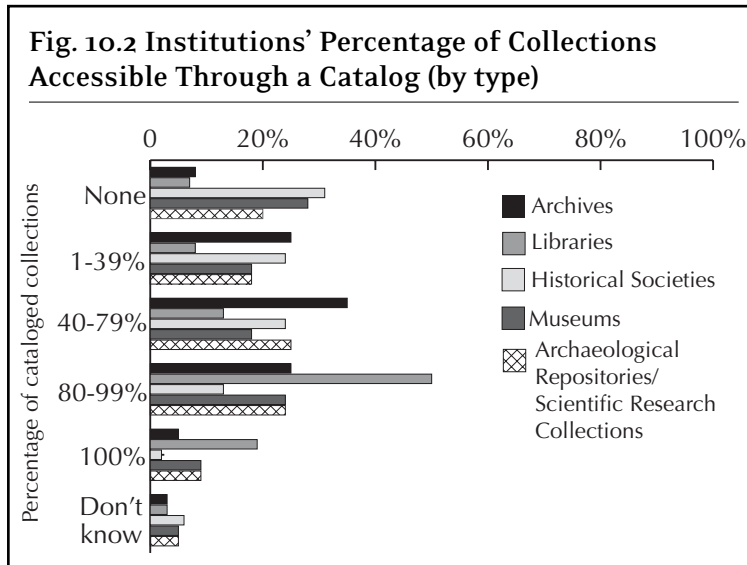
institutions have a backlog in cataloging, with only 60-79% of collections cataloged. Almost 40% of institutions have a significant backlog in cataloging, with 59% or less of their collection not having basic information recorded about it—including 18% of institutions with no cataloging records on any of their collections. That so many institutions lack information about their collections may explain the low response rate on the survey question that asked for the quantity of collections.

Looking at cataloging levels by institution, libraries are significantly more likely to have collections cataloged, with 69% of libraries having more than 80% of their collections cataloged (figure 10.2). Archives are least likely, with only 30%

Fig. 10.1 Institutions' Percentage of Collections Accessible Through a Catalog



1. Catalog: research tool or finding aid that provides intellectual control over collection through entries that may contain descriptive detail, including physical description, provenance, history, accession information, etc.



having a catalog that includes more than 80% of their collections. Only one-third of museums and archaeological repositories/scientific research collections have more than 80% of their collections cataloged. Institutions with no cataloging records include 31% of historical societies, 28% of museums, and 20% of archaeological repositories/scientific research collections. Only 7% of libraries and 8% of archives do not have anything cataloged.

Percentage of collections cataloged directly relates to size of institution, with smaller institutions more likely to have little or no collections data. Of the large institutions with none of their collections information in a catalog, 14% are large science museums/zoos/botanical gardens, 10% are large art museums, and 6% are large his-

tory museums/historic sites/other museums (figure 10.3). Small institutions with the highest percentage of having no collections cataloged include science museums/zoos/botanical gardens (43%), art museums and historical societies (33%), history museums/historic sites/other museums (31%), and archaeological repositories/scientific research collections (26%).

By governance, federal institutions are most likely to have more than 80% of their collections cataloged (60%), followed by 59% of institutions with county/municipal governance and 52% of state governed institutions. Tribal (50%) and non-profit (21%) organizations were most likely to have none of their collections cataloged.

Seventeen percent of institutions cited an urgent need for finding aids or cataloging of collections; it ranks as the second greatest urgent need cited by institutions after environmental controls (figure 10.4). Combining need and urgent need figures, 65% of institutions need cataloging—the third most frequent need after staff training and condition assessments. Historical societies (29%) and archives and history museums/historic sites/other museums (both 23%) cite an urgent need for cataloging.

To get a sense of the accessibility of collections information, the Heritage Health Index

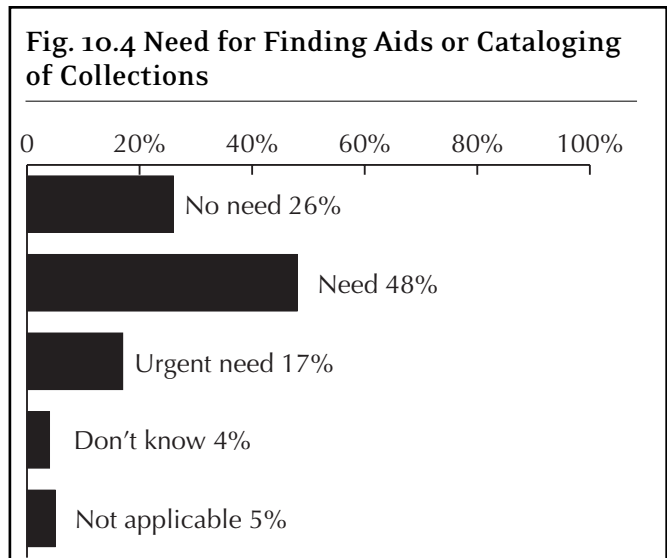


Fig. 10.5 Institutions' Percentage of Collections Catalog Available Online

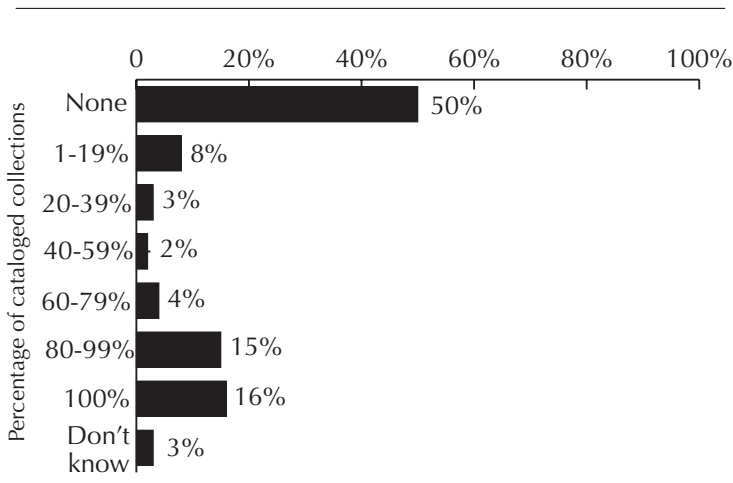


Fig. 10.6 Institutions' Percentage of Collections Catalog Available Online (by type)

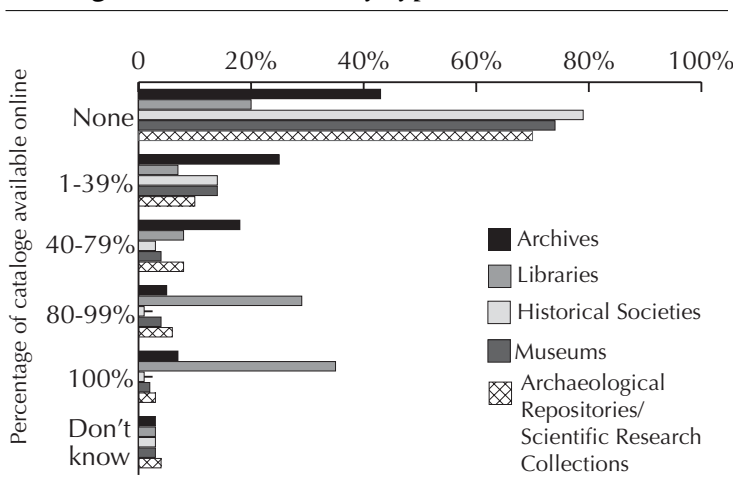
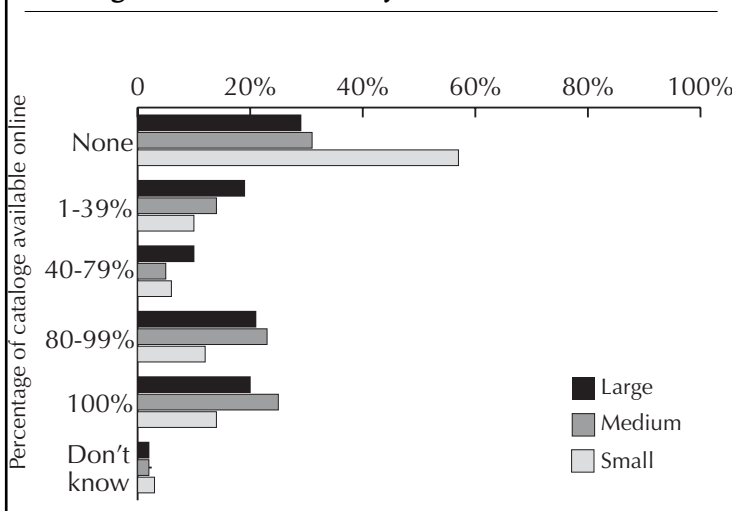


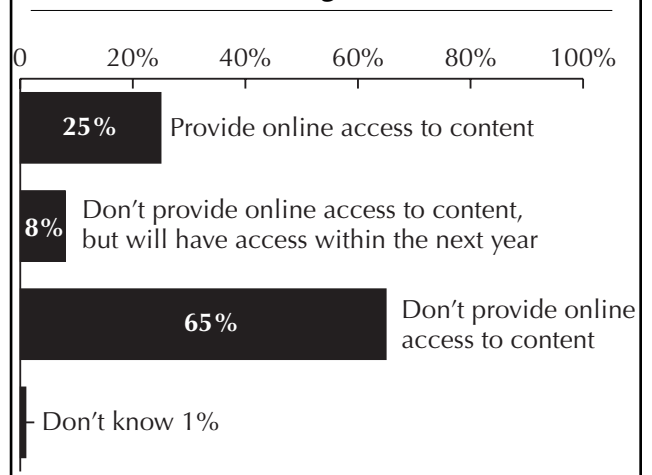
Fig. 10.7 Institutions' Percentage of Collections Catalog Available Online (by size)

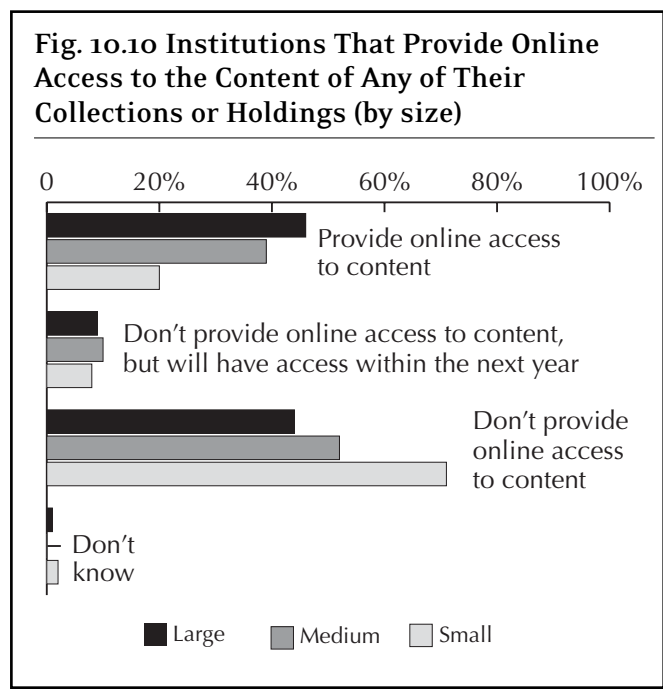
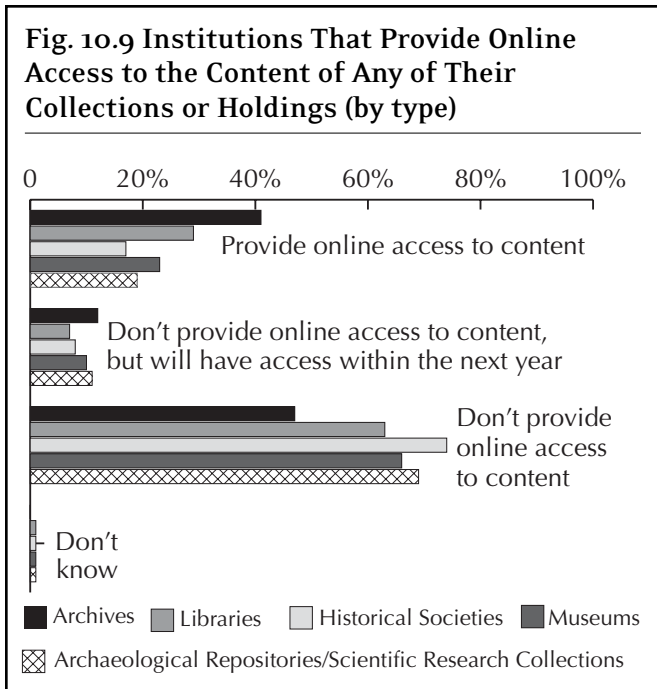


included a question on the estimated percentage of the collection's catalog available online, whether for institutional or public use. Only 31% have such information available for more than 80% of their catalog, and half of all U.S. collecting institutions have no cataloging information available online (figure 10.5). At 64%, libraries are most likely to have online catalog access, while historical societies, museums, and archaeological repositories/scientific research collections are least likely to have any collections data available online (figure 10.6). Large institutions are more likely than small institutions to have their catalogs available online, with 41% of large institutions having more than 80% available, compared with 26% of small institutions (figure 10.7).

Only a quarter of institutions provide online access to the content of their collections or holdings through such things as online exhibitions, interactive resources, digital art, or digital copies of photographs, documents, or books (figure 10.8). Eight percent predict that they will begin to provide such content within a year. Archives (41%), libraries (29%), and museums (23%) are most likely to make collections content available online (figure 10.9). Large institutions are more

Fig. 10.8 Institutions That Provide Online Access to the Content of Any of Their Collections or Holdings



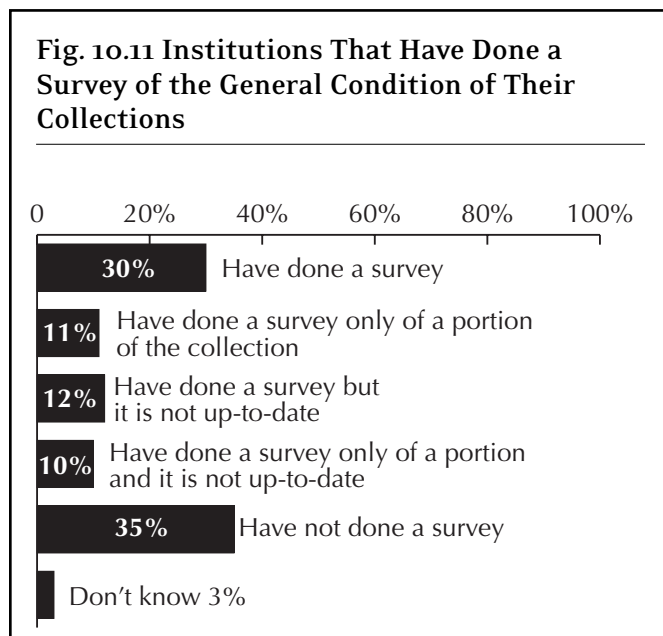


than twice as likely to provide access to content (46%) than small institutions (20%) (figure 10.10). The availability of such resources indicates not only an additional level of information about collections but also the existence of digital materials that should be potentially be part of an institution's preservation program.

Collections Assessments

The Heritage Health Index asked collecting institutions whether a survey of the general condition² of their collections has been done. Respondents were able to select from the following choices: "yes," "yes, but only of a portion of the collection," "yes, but it is not up-to-date," "yes, but only a portion of the collection, and it is not up-to-date," "no," and "don't know." Thirty percent of institutions have done a survey of the condition of their collections, but 35% have not done one (figure 10.11). The remaining one-third of institutions have surveys for only a portion of their collections or their surveys are out-of-date. Museums have a slightly higher percentage of having done surveys than other types of institutions (37%), and historical societies have the lowest percentage (22%) (figure 10.12). Libraries are the most likely not to have done any survey at all

at 46%, including 47% of public libraries, 40% of academic libraries, and 50% of special libraries. Large, medium, and small institutions have similar percentages of having current surveys that included all of their collections (figure 10.13). The percentage of institutions that have done surveys is about equal across types of governance. Tribal-governed museums have the lowest percentage of



2. Survey of general condition: an assessment based on visual inspection of the collections and the areas where they are exhibited or held.

Fig. 10.12 Institutions That Have Done a Survey of the General Condition of Their Collections (by type)

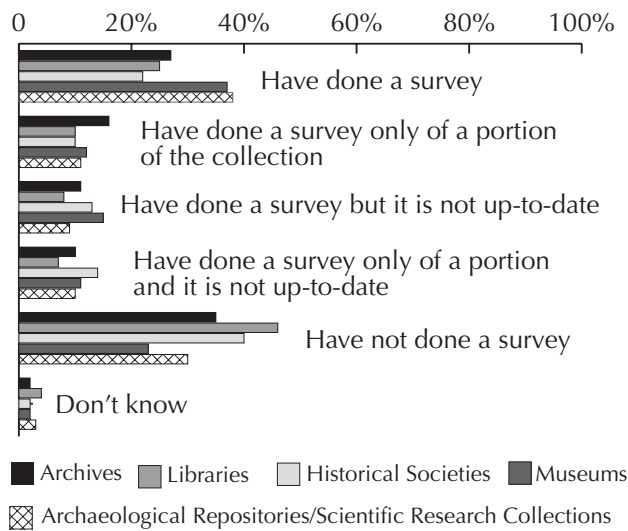
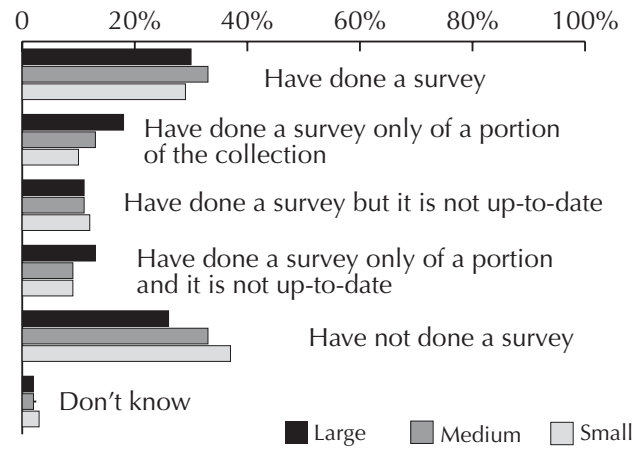
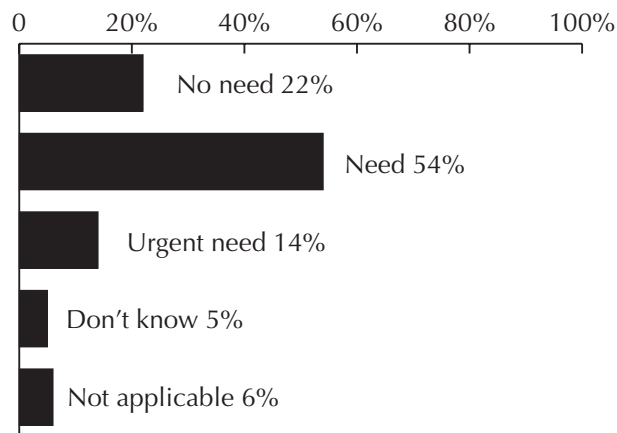


Fig. 10.13 Institutions That Have Done a Survey of the General Condition of Their Collections (by size)



having assessments (8%), but 19% of tribal institutions indicated “don’t know” in this question.

Fig. 10.14 Need for Condition Surveys or Assessments of Collections



In ranking needs, “condition surveys or assessments of collections” had a combined need and urgent need figure of 68%, the second most common cited need after staff training (figure 10.14). That assessments are such a common need and that only one-third of collecting institutions have a current assessment of their entire collection is consistent with the fact that many indicated “condition unknown” in the question about condition of collections items. It also explains why some survey questions, such as the one that asked institutions to indicate the causes of damage to items, had higher percentages of “don’t know” responses.

As more institutions conduct surveys on the condition of their artifacts, there is the potential for the percentages of U.S. collections items in need to increase.