

April 22, 2021 Muse-ings

This week's Muse-ing comes from Lauren Taylor, an emerging museum professional in the Cooperstown Graduate Program. Lauren introduces us to a unique partnership that provides some food for thought on the design and utility of disaster training.

If you have had a training, work, or job search or hiring experience that you think could benefit others, propose a Muse-ing by sending us a short one-paragraph email that describes your angle at museumstudies@udel.edu. Commentaries no longer than 600 words.

I am excited to share with this broader group my experience organizing a cultural property training program for United States Army Reserve soldiers, because it impacted my view of cultural property law, expanded who I thought collections management might be relevant to, and provided an experience that others in our field might find valuable and useful to consider.

Each year, Cooperstown students work with the 403rd Civil Affairs Battalion out of Syracuse, New York, to organize a classroom training and a series of practice scenarios to give U.S. Army Reserve soldiers experience in handling and evacuating cultural artifacts while managing relationships with community members. Coming into this program, I had some prior experience managing cultural property, but had never done something quite like this.

The program started as a part of our Culture & Collections course. In this course, students perform research on historical topics related to cultural resource management, including international agreements outlining treatment of cultural property in times of war. The course also explores best practices for management of different collections material types. This information is synthesized into a final classroom presentation, designed to provide U.S. Army Reserve soldiers the basic knowledge necessary to prepare for handling situations where international cultural property management may be necessary. Given the level of destruction and the potential for disaster during times of war, this knowledge is essential for those on the frontlines tasked with protecting valued artifacts with local groups coming from different cultures. Practically, the training program allowed our class to hone our soft skills in articulating the importance of international cultural resources and training those without prior knowledge in collections management – skills that will surely come in handy for future conference presentations and intern supervision even if I probably will never be on the front lines doing this work.

Following the classroom training module, the program moves into a scenario phase that essentially practices implementing the classroom learning. Students design a realistic scenario involving cultural property at risk in a fictitious country experiencing violent conflict. Students play roles, making the soldiers' mission objective (e.g., retrieving a cultural significant artifact, safely transporting sensitive cultural property, etc.) difficult but not impossible. Soldiers not only utilize their new skills in handling and packing artifacts using best practices, but also rehearse building relationships with local community members, ensuring that they are representing the will and interests of community leaders they are working with. We come together as a group at

the end of the program and talk about what we thought worked well, some key takeaways, and things that can be improved for the future.

This program specifically helped me see a wider applicability for my museum skills. Museum professionals do not only have a responsibility to teach people about the past through artifacts. Teaching a range of professionals about respectful and careful consideration and handling of cultural resources, according to international best practices, is important to ensuring the protection of those resources during violent conflict. Community buy-in and representation is applicable in a wide variety of settings, from international conflict to natural disasters and everyday museum collections management in the United States. Particularly for most of us who cannot participate in existing trainings like the Smithsonian's Cultural Rescue Initiative, programs like this one can prepare students and a range of defense and emergency personnel for the crucial work of preserving cultural resources during dangerous times.