

Wagner Free Institute of Science
History 8152.001: Managing History
Fall 2009

Assignment: Develop a policy for photography and filming within the Wagner Free Institute of Science, including building interiors and collections

Institutional Background: The Wagner Free Institute of Science is a natural history museum and educational institution, dedicated to providing free education in science. Since its incorporation in 1855, it has provided a wide array of free education programs, initially for adults and, beginning in the early twentieth century, for a growing children's audience. Its natural history museum, library, and archive are open to the public. The collections are both historically and scientifically important.

In the 1990s, the Institute was designated a National Historic Landmark and its mission was expanded. In addition to teaching science, it is now committed to preserving its building and museum displays as important historical artifacts in their own right, and to interpreting them in the context of the historical development of science and science museums in the United States. Over the past decade, the Institute has been working toward long-range goals to improve collection management and care, complete a multi-phase building restoration; and maintain excellence in its core education programs while gradually implementing interpretive programming that enhances the museum experience.

Project: The Institute has in place an array of standard policies regarding the reproduction of images from its collections. Its library has well-developed forms and policies regarding rights, reproduction, access and use of any images under its aegis (see attached). The museum has similar forms that govern permission to photograph and/or publish images of the collection. Traditionally, the Institute has allowed photographing of specimens for academic use and provided images for publication in scholarly journals at no charge. It also cooperates with the media and permits photography and image use for publicity purposes. Until recently, these policies have been adequate to handle both the types and the volume of requests.

Over the past two or three years, however, the Institute has seen a rapid increase in the number of requests for images for personal and especially artistic use. These requests range from individuals wishing to photograph the museum space and/or specimens to artists wishing to conduct projects based on the collection.

The goal of this project is to assist the Wagner in developing a new photography/filming policy to handle the increased number of requests in a way that:

1. is consistent with its primary mission
2. does not conflict with collection or building preservation goals
3. is manageable within the framework of the Institute's capacity
4. maintains appropriate rights and control over reproduction and use, and
5. is clear and comprehensible to the public

This project is not intended to result in the development of a permission form for taking photographs. Rather, we are asking the class to think creatively and systematically about how the Wagner might develop a program that responds to growing public interest while also maintaining appropriate levels of stewardship and management. In developing the program, students should consider many approaches ranging from no public photography (i.e. the Wagner provides images on request) to placing no limitations on photography and a range of positions in between.

The policy should consider the nature and type of different requests: i.e. casual photography by a visitor for personal use; an artist or filmmaker requesting special access to individual specimens for filming or photographing over a period of hours (or days); or someone with a personal blog or website who wishes to include images of the Wagner. Important factors to consider in developing the policy are collection protection and security and staff capacity. Staff supervision is required for photography and filming to ensure the safety of the collection. For most professional projects it is also required to provide access to specimens (i.e., open exhibit case doors) and to areas that are not open to the public (the upper galleries of the museum, for instance). It is not necessary for students to determine actual fees but consideration should be given to fee structures in relation to staff time and the use of institutional resources as well as to copyright/use fees.

One important framing consideration: By the terms of its charter, the Wagner exists to provide free science education and thus does not charge admission to programs or the museum. This is an essential component of its mission and character. However, the founder never envisioned an unlimited extension of these free services. Indeed he understood that for the Institute to survive it must have income. Students should consider the development of the policy in light of the allocation of institutional resources and as part of the overall mission. What is the proper balance between providing photographic access and managing other institutional needs and programs?

The final submission should have two components: first, an outline of the proposed policy, and second, a personal statement evaluating the plan with a discussion of potential problems and any issues that have not been resolved.