Sample Lesson 5: Understanding Bias in Museum Data (two sessions)

Overview:
Museum collections represent an assemblage of materials shaped by many different people over time. Current researchers must identify various types of bias in the material in order to use it effectively and reliably. This lesson will be presented in two sessions, one focusing on bias in the original process of collection, and the other on bias generated by museum practices of selection and recording.

Students will prepare in advance by examining database reports of accessions and of groups of cultural material, considering what types of bias they reveal.

Goals:
- learn to recognize bias in museum data
- develop methods to overcome bias
- gain awareness of strategies to deal with bias

Lesson 5A: Bias Resulting from Museum Practices

Goals:
- become aware of how museum practices shape collections and information
- gain awareness of how materials move from collectors into museum
- become familiar with the varying ways that museum’s classify objects

Session outline:
Visit to National Museum of African Art, with presentation by Curator
Visit to Freer/Sackler Gallery of Asian Art, with presentation by Curator
Visit to National Museum of the American Indian, with presentation by Curator

Discussion at each venue of methods and criteria for acquisition and deaccession; organization, history, and goals of records systems; attitudes regarding restoration or modification of objects; types of research supported.

Summary discussion
Lesson 5B: Bias in Collecting

Goals:
- gain awareness of the processes that affect collecting, considering both the collector and the agent within the source community
- gain understanding of collections as selected samples of the universe of material
- learn to recognize bias in a set of artifacts
- learn methods to reduce bias

Session outline:
Presentation on
- bias in any set of data, the processes that generate bias, and how it can affect results.
- practical and conceptual factors that affect the collection of objects

Group exercises:
- look at narratives of collecting events and discuss factors that could affect resulting collections
- compare sets of similar material from different collectors and note how they vary
- compare object collections to photographs of the same time/place; discuss processes of selective acquisition (NB: selective processes in photography will be a separate lesson)
- explore ways to graph temporal and geographic distribution of objects

Presentation on
- research methods to enhance the quality of collection documentation, generating additional information to assess bias
- methods to increase the size of the data set and diversify sources

Summary discussion