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LEARNING FROM THE PAST TO INFORM THE FUTURE

Abstract

For nearly four decades, the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum served as the primary repository for artifacts from the history of the US human spaceflight program. By way of the 1967 NASA-NASM Agreement, the Museum received the right of first refusal on thousands of items no longer needed for programmatic use, and found a means to store, display, loan, or study literally truckloads of objects. This left a decades-long backlog of cataloging and coming to terms with the breadth of material evidence of NASA's work. NASA reserved the right, however, to request access to artifacts for scientific and technical purposes, which they do utilize for programmatic needs. These ongoing needs with Apollo artifacts provide a prime example of the disconnect Mr. Grimsley indicates in his paper, a profound deficit in the documentation on the past that can inform current and future programs. NASA itself finds it easier to reverse engineer solutions from the products themselves rather than hunt through scattered and inadequate documentation in the federal records system and other institutional archives. My paper draws upon examples from the history of the NASM experience interacting with the needs of the donor agency (NASA) to illuminate the need for better strategies as a generational shift begins in terms of curatorial staff, NASA engineering personnel, and the balance of NASA's role in human spaceflight. Through prior decades, different curators and historians with idiosyncratic collecting and scholarly goals had varying degrees of success in documenting artifacts with technical and supporting materials. With NASA's conclusion of the Space Shuttle program and an effort to distribute over 1.2 million artifacts from that period more equitably in the community, they tapped into a community of museums who participate in the NASM-led Mutual Concerns of Air and Space Museums conference. That new model, made possible through a GSA online tool now nearly a decade in service, makes it possible for nearly any museum, library, archive, university, or science center in the United States to acquire a piece of this history. Distributing this history over a wider variety of institutions comes with many potential pitfalls, but with guidance and leadership on both sides of the process, collaboration can improve our shared understanding of the artifacts still trickling out from the Space Shuttle, Space Station, and forthcoming Orion programs.