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EDITORS’ NOTE

THE FULL BUNDLE OF STICKS. In his essay, “Not So Public: Access to Collections,” Joseph L. Sax explains how this phrase is used in legal discourse to mean the entirety of entitlements inherent in the things one owns. It might also be used metaphorically to describe the array of issues, problems, and collections confronting libraries, museums, and other organizations caring for our shared cultural heritage.

As we move into the future we must consider how to fulfill our responsibilities toward our collections, institutions, and patrons while maintaining our overarching responsibility to preserve cultural memory. In a world where access no longer necessarily equals ownership, and where electronic surrogates provide remote access to materials and objects, we must define the term “cultural heritage.” What is it and why is it preserved? Is there a hierarchy of worth that is applied to cultural objects? Do cultural heritage institutions embrace libraries, museums, and archives both public and private, as well as historical societies, Internet collectives, and private collections? As professionals entrusted with the care of cultural objects we are being asked these questions with increasing frequency, and rightly so. Issues of ownership, preservation, and use of collections once faced separately by museums, libraries, archives, and historical societies are now being examined collectively as we acknowledge that we have many more similarities than differences. The time has come for us to join together to reconceive our organizations creatively, set workable joint standards, and promote interaction across formerly distinct boundaries.

It is essential for us to begin thinking about how collections, regardless of format, are acquired, preserved, and made available for scholarly use and
public edification; how repositories are strategically positioned to ensure their longevity; and how cultural heritage professionals will be trained. We have much to learn from each other.

The essays brought together here begin to frame some of the important questions before us. Joseph L. Sax’s provocative article questions the responsibilities of private owners of cultural materials based on a thoroughgoing reading of the United States legal code. David Carr challenges us to reimagine our organizations, our collections, and our programs. He urges us to do this so that we may meet the broader responsibilities of cultural heritage institutions that promote life-long learning and knowledge formation. In the process, Carr questions some of our most fundamental beliefs. Roberta Shaffer outlines a new program at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Texas at Austin. Shaffer explains the inception and development of The Center for the Cultural Record, which will train professionals to handle all aspects of cultural heritage curatorship, effectively fusing the library, museum studies, and conservation programs at UT-Austin. Finally, Harold Augenbraum steps back in time to recount the establishment and evolution of society and mercantile libraries. These collections, often overlooked and yet very relevant, have a vital role to play on today’s cultural stage.

We hope these essays will inspire you to think about, in David Carr’s words, our “incendiary” institutions. We look forward to hearing your voices as we move forward to preserve our shared cultural heritage.