Background

LSU’s museums and performances serve faculty and students as well as the broader community. These collections are critical to teaching, research and community outreach. The need for more and better publicity, for more opportunities for sharing with campuses and communities across the state, and for integrated policies, was the motivation for the Faculty Senate’s appointment of our Task Force. The Task Force decided early that a separate committee of faculty and administrators should look into the needs of the Performing Arts. Our report deals with the museums.

The museum collections include the Rural Life Museum, the LSU Museum of Art, and the various, mainly science, collections under the umbrella of the Louisiana Museum of Natural History. Of these three, the first two, Rural Life and Art, are located off-campus and have built new facilities in recent years for their collections. The Task Force focused on the Natural History collections because of their underutilized potential and the dire need for appropriate facilities. These collections are extensive and of great interest and value to faculty, staff, students, the community, the state of Louisiana, and international researchers and visitors.

Although their missions vary, all of LSU’s museums and collections provide valuable resources for teaching, research and study. We identify a number of issues that need attention and study and we submit several recommendations to advance the university’s role in providing accreditable conditions for the care and access of all the museums, including Rural Life and Art which have also faced extensive cuts to their budgets.

Findings

1. LSU has rich and unique collections in its natural history museums/collections. They are collections derived from and primarily for research purposes, for use by the curators and scientists in various departments (notably Biology, Geology and Geophysics, Geography and Anthropology, and the Agricultural School), and by national and international colleagues. It is vital that they be preserved in perpetuity on the main campus for research even when extended to displays and traveling exhibits that benefit the broader community and the state.

   The collections are also important for teaching purposes, of graduate students involved in research who use this material and of undergraduate students who through research participation can work with such unique material to get an experience not available in any other Louisiana university. This statement applies as well to the Rural Life Museum and the Museum of Art. See, for instance, http://lsb380.plbio.lsu.edu/undergrad%20research/Undergrad.html
There are other uses of the collections, e.g. public outreach and school groups, etc. The Rural Life and Art museums have initiated major efforts in this regard but they have so far constituted a much smaller, secondary use for our collections of natural history. In June 1999, Governor Murphy Foster signed House Bill 826 that designated the sixteen collections together as the "Louisiana Museum of Natural History." To exploit fully such a designation and be an accredited museum that also has a public face with extensive displays and other activities will require substantial additional space, staff and funds. Current curatorial and support staff are already over-committed. The Task Force recommends uniting the collections in a new building designed as a museum, still centrally located on campus but outside the gated area so as to be accessible to alumni and citizens.

A few collections such as the Herbarium are in good shape (although they too could use more staff such as preparators) and our Herbarium collaborates with others around the state. As does the arthropod collection that recently received a National Science Foundation grant for developing a consolidated database uniting the collections at LSU, LSU-Alexandria, Northwestern State and Southeastern Louisiana:

http://www.2theadvocate.com/news/110512734.html?showAll=y&c=y

There may be similar opportunities elsewhere; see, for instance, recent news coverage of an extensive collection of 6 million fish specimens in 100,000 jars at the Museum of Natural History at ULL, Monroe:


Many other collections in the Natural History Museum, however, need urgent attention to protect collections from flooding, fire, and other hazards, including automatic alarms to central authorities if delicate items such as frozen tissue are at risk. The seriousness of this issue was underlined by the news in May 2010 during the term of our Task Force that a fire at the Butantan Museum in Sao Paulo, Brazil, destroyed one of the largest collections of snakes, spiders and scorpions (CNAH announcement 18 May 2010): http://www.cnah.org. This is an irreplaceable loss.

Besides staff and funds, a central museum that is accredited by the American Association of Museums and housed in a single attractive, modern building would of course be an important addition to LSU, and especially add to LSU’s standing as an asset to the state at large and its people. It could be vital to protecting our research collections and successful programs that depend on them. Given the central role of our collections in research, it is imperative that any such building be on the central campus. All members of the Task Force concur strongly on this issue.

The LSU Office of Campus Planning conducted a study of three possible sites on campus but outside the gated area and issued a report in February 2006 with fairly substantial details on the size and structure of such a building that would fit into the Campus Master Plan, along with cost estimates. Details are available on the Faculty Senate website:

http://www.lsu.edu/senate/Museum%20Of%20Natural%20History%20Location.pdf
Any such project will require a senior administrator such as a Vice-Provost or Vice-Chancellor to handle the raising of funds or an endowment from private and other sources. The National Science Foundation’s recent report, issued in March 2009 as "The NSF Scientific Collections Survey", recognized such collections as "an integral part of the nation's scientific infrastructure" and that NSF "has a stake in ensuring that collections created during the conduct of NSF-supported research are well-maintained and accessible to researchers":

An interagency group's survey is also available at:
http://www.ostp.gov/galleries/NSTC%20Reports/Revision_1-22_09_CL.pdf

4 A recent example of a successful uniting of natural history collections of a university in a modern museum building is the Sam Noble museum in Oklahoma. Two experts who were intimately involved in it toured LSU collections with support through the LSU Foundation from citizens interested in supporting a major museum on the LSU main campus. Their “Mares/Tirrell” report, entitled “Development of a new Natural History Museum building for LSU, Baton Rouge”, is available on the Faculty Senate website:
http://www.lsu.edu/senate/Mares_Tirrell%20Report%20on%20Museum%20of%20Natural%20History%20at%20LSU.pdf

The website has a disclaimer that this report has not been endorsed by LSU or the LSU Museum of Natural History. Indeed, while the external experts were very complimentary of LSU’s rich collections, this report’s criticisms of the current housing of them and of their safety against theft, fire and flooding has been objected to by several of our curators as unduly harsh. There is, however, little doubt that the current facilities in the old Geology building (Howe-Russell Geoscience Complex) or at Foster Hall are inadequate and not worthy of the uniqueness of some of our collections such as the extensive one of bird specimens.

5 Virtual Museum: A central website portal that connects all the collections is valuable and is mostly available at the sites:
http://appl003.lsu.edu/natsci/lmnh.nsf/index
http://appl003.lsu.edu/natsci/lmns.nsf/index

With some improvements, such a unified portal can be used by people, whether at LSU or elsewhere, to know what is available for research and whom to contact. Without impinging on individual curators and their responsibility over their collections, this can only be a plus in directing people to individual websites.

6 There is no forum for the various curators of the Museum of Natural History to come together in regular meetings. While some have close ties stemming from their research, there is no unified platform for all of them. Indeed, some of the curators who attended a meeting with the Task Force on November 15, 2010 under an invitation from our Task Force to all curators noted that it was a rare occasion to exchange information
and ideas about their collections. (A specific item that was noted was that the Log Library and Core Repository, one of the collections, was recently moved, rather poorly and into poorer space.) It would be useful to have regular sessions for curators of the Natural History collections, perhaps convened by a senior administrator mentioned in item 3 above, to discuss ideas and concerns that would also inform that administrator of all issues pertaining to "The Louisiana Museum of Natural History at LSU", including planning for and seeking further growth, endowment, buildings, etc. We note that there is no advisory board or acquisition committee for the Natural History Museum and we may be losing donor opportunities to add to and strengthen our collections. It was noted that many years ago, the museums answered to the VC for Research and that office might be the natural one for such coordination between all 16 curators.

7 LSU's current policies on fund-raising are unduly restrictive, tying the hands of individual curators from pursuing funds on their own and for interested citizens to help.

8 Outreach programs such as the Museum Saturdays for schools at Foster Hall, or taking mineral displays to schools, and traveling exhibits have valuable teaching functions and accrue credit to LSU in the community and the state. The Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History and the Florida Museum of Natural History have extremely successful traveling programs.

Based on our findings, we recommend the following:

**Recommendations**

1. The university should assign responsibility at the vice chancellor level for development and oversight of policies that ensure quality conditions for and further strengthening of all collections, including those in the Rural Life Museum, the LSU Museum of Art and the Louisiana Museum of Natural History. The committee further recommends that this individual be the Vice-Chancellor for Research.

2. The university administrator assigned to this task should have an advisory group consisting of curators, faculty who use the collections, students, and a community representative. An experienced museum registrar who is knowledgeable about handling collections would be a valuable addition. The administrator and such a group will be to develop a policy statement that guides university practices and ensures that the collections are safe and secure, properly managed including digitized records, and accessible to appropriate constituencies. Other issues to be addressed are (all but the last items which are specific to Natural History being applicable to all museum collections):

   a. Increased and coordinated marketing of programs, exhibitions, and traveling exhibits. Currently, publicity is often inadequate with no easily accessible and complete calendar of events.
b. Increased security and accreditable level of care for all museum collections. This is not optional but a major priority for the university.
c. Creation of a centralized inventory of collections, with relevant curatorial information and documentation of individuals and units responsible.
d. Establishment of policies and procedures for the ownership, documentation and maintenance of objects purchased with university and grant funds, including the object’s description, when it was received or collected and from or by whom, its assessed value when appropriate, and other information appropriate to the object’s documentation.
e. Streamlining of application and approval processes for grants.
f. Obtaining priority fundraising status and flexible policies (no opportunity passed up even for small grants because of bureaucratic procedures) for units that must self-generate support.
g. Encouraging public supporters to help in fundraising, donating time, etc.
h. Accreditation of the Louisiana Museum of Natural History and how to move towards it, and increased efficiency through cooperation within its various collections.
i. Planning, raising funds, and moving towards a new building to house the above collections, such a building still located centrally on campus but with modern facilities and safeguards.

* Initially, Andrea Houston was appointed to the Task Force but could not participate because of other obligations. Laura Lindsay became an Acting Dean during the course of our deliberations but continued on the Task Force because of her extensive knowledge of museums that was invaluable in shaping our findings and recommendations.