

ABOUT MINERAL COLLECTIONS IN SMALL DEPARTMENTS

I read the "Triple Point" essay by Rodney Ewing, "Museums Are Not Attics" (*Elements*, August 2008), then thought about it for a while. Ewing only touched the tip of an iceberg. I am retired, but work part-time for the geology department (a small department with 4–5 full-time staff) at California State University, Bakersfield. During one quarter, I taught the mineralogy and petrology classes and had my nose rubbed in the working collection of minerals and rocks. There I found nice quartz crystals (without a label) in a coffee can; fine samples of twinned epidote pushed to the far back of a cabinet; a great example of chevron folds used as a door stop; an excellent technical sample of analcime in a pasteboard box tossed in with 40 miscellaneous, dirty rock samples; and hundreds of samples with no labels or documentation. I found these only because I was looking for example samples for my classes. I greatly doubt that such archival problems are unusual for small departments.

The geology department has one (shared) technician to care for the samples, as well as to provide equipment and support for all the laboratory classes. This explains the pasteboard boxes and coffee cans and the fact that one corner of a crowded supply room houses all the supplies and equipment for all the classes offered by the department. A year later, I proposed a solution:

- creation of a rock and mineral library (I used the term "library" instead of "collection" because the former more correctly indicates the function and purpose of the collection)
- donation of one half of my time (if I could have afforded it, I would have donated all of my time)
- development of a labeling system and a computer-generated documentation system that would be designed to facilitate addition of samples and system maintenance

- sorting and weeding out of the existing samples
- purchase of 50 lockable drawer cabinets that could be housed in a couple of rooms (this was the main cost)
- hiring of a student laboratory assistant for a year

I estimated the cost at about \$90,000 for one year, with minor upkeep once the system was set up. The department staff thought it was a great idea. The Science Division and the university didn't have the money and were not interested. I tried again two years later—same result. This was, of course, right when the university was developing a Division I athletic program (as opposed to a Division II program).

From the viewpoint of the rest of the university, what was the point? These were just rocks, and you can pick up rocks anywhere or buy them cheaply from any science supply house; nor would they disappear like some endangered species. Most of the rest of academia (also, unfortunately, many of our colleagues) do not understand the utility of carefully labeled, described, and preserved samples; nor do they appreciate the beauty and rarity of a 1.5 cm long, twinned crystal of epidote. On the other hand, we mineralogists and petrologists have not done a very good job of explaining the utility of such a "library."

If you really want to feel upset, multiply this by several hundred small geology departments around the world with inadequate support and space. My personal collection (from over 40 years of geology work) of mineral and petrology samples is worth ~\$5000 and is fully labeled and documented. There are a few very rare or world-class samples, but nothing a museum would want. I am 74 years old and not much longer for this world. Would I donate this collection to a small geology department? Knowing what I do, not very likely. Would I recommend that other people donate their samples to a small department? No. Do I cry? Yes, some.

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