



Museums for America

FY2012 MFA

Tier 2 Reviewer Handbook

Engaging Communities
April 19-20, 2012

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Welcome to the Tier 2 MFA Program Review Process

Thank you for offering to serve as a Museums for America (MFA) Tier 2 reviewer for Engaging Communities. We have selected you to review this year's applications because of your professional expertise in museum exhibitions, educational programming, and outreach. We have prepared this handbook specifically for Tier 2 reviewers to ensure the fair and candid review of this year's top applications and to provide you with the procedural and technical information you need. Please use it in tandem with the Museums for America FY2012 Guidelines available at:

http://www.imls.gov/applicants/museums_for_america_guidelines.aspx

Even if you have reviewed for MFA or other IMLS programs in the past, we strongly encourage you to read through this booklet since we have made some significant changes to the MFA review process this year.

MFA Program Overview

Museums for America (MFA) is the largest grant program for museums at IMLS. The goal of MFA is to strengthen the ability of a museum to serve the public more effectively by supporting high-priority activities that advance the institution's mission and strategic goals. Applicants can apply for projects in one of the following three categories:

- Engaging Communities (Education, Exhibitions, and Interpretation)
- Building Institutional Capacity (Management, Policy, and Training)
- Collections Stewardship (Management of Collections)

Fiscal year (FY) 2012 MFA funding will support projects and activities that strengthen the role of museums to serve as valuable resources for lifelong learning and as important institutions in the establishment of livable communities. MFA grants can fund either new or ongoing museum activities and programs, such as improvement of institutional infrastructure; planning; management of collections; public access; professional development; purchase of equipment or services; research and scholarship; educational programming and exhibitions; training; or efforts by museums to upgrade and integrate new technologies to improve overall institutional effectiveness.

Your Role

For the FY2012 MFA program, we received 471 applications on November 1, 2011. IMLS staff checked all applications for eligibility and completeness, and Tier 1 reviewers have evaluated all eligible applications. Each application received three (though several received only two) Tier 1 reviews with comments and scores for each of the four narrative sections proscribed in the MFA Grant Guidelines: Statement of Need, Impact, Project Design, and Project Resources.

Of the 471 applications, Tier 2 reviewers as a group are reviewing 222. You are one of 46 museum professionals with substantial professional experience who will review subsets of applications and then meet in Washington, DC, to discuss findings and to make final funding recommendations. Five separate panels will meet in April and May to consider applications submitted to the three MFA application categories – Engaging Communities, Collections Stewardship, and Building Institutional Capacity. Approximately two weeks before your panel meeting, we will send you details about the meeting schedule and logistics. Your particular panel will review 46 applications over two days; you have been assigned to review 13 or 14 applications from that group.

For some of the applications you review, we have designated you as the “presenter.” This means you will take the lead during the panel deliberations by giving a brief verbal synopsis of the organization and the proposed project, your preliminary score, and your concise reasons for making these recommendations. (For more detail on how panel deliberations are conducted, please see page 14 of this handbook.)

We do not ask you to do detailed technical reviews as a Tier 2 reviewer. Rather, you can rely on Tier 1 reviews for an analysis of the technical strengths and weaknesses of each proposal. You will evaluate applications from a broad perspective, identifying projects that best meet IMLS MFA program goals and are poised for success. You will also provide insight into issues pertinent to this year’s competition as well as provide recommendations on improving the grant program and its process.

We have a limited amount of time for each panel meeting, and we find that the panel discussions are most fruitful when panelists are well-prepared before they arrive. We therefore suggest that you follow the step-by-step procedures outlined in the next few pages for evaluating the applications assigned to you.

MFA Application Review Instructions

This section of the handbook contains detailed information on how to review a Museums for America program application. We have arranged the information in ten steps. If you encounter any problems while undertaking your Tier 2 reviews, please contact one of us immediately. Between the two of us, we are available during normal work days, Monday through Friday, 8:00 am to 6:00 pm Eastern Time. We will be happy to answer your questions and help troubleshoot any technology problems you might encounter.

| | |
|--------------|---------------------------------|
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STEP 1. Verify Your Access to Applications Online

Information relating solely to software usage has been removed from this sample handbook.

STEP 2. Consider Potential Conflicts of Interest

Scan your group of applications to see if there are any potential conflicts of interest. Please see the Reviewer Conflict of Interest Statement included as **Appendix I** of this handbook. A conflict of interest may arise if you have a financial interest in whether or not the proposal is funded or, if for some reason, you feel that you cannot review it objectively. Contact Sandra Narva at 202/653-4634 or snarva@imls.gov immediately if you suspect you may have a conflict.

STEP 3. Remember Confidentiality

The information contained in grant applications is confidential. Do not discuss or reveal names, institutions' project activities, or any other information contained in the applications. Contact us if you have any questions concerning an application, and do not contact an applicant directly.

STEP 4. Gather Resources

Familiarize yourself with the Museums for America Grants – FY2012 Guidelines, which are available at

http://www.imls.gov/applicants/museums_for_america_guidelines.aspx.

Feel free to use the FY2012 Tier 2 Review Criteria Quick Reference sheet on page 16 of this handbook. The sheet summarizes the types of information you should look for in each application and provides guideposts for your review. Consider printing this page and keeping it nearby as you read applications.

STEP 5. Read Your Applications and Tier 1 Reviews

Read your applications and the Tier 1 reviews to develop a feel for the range of applicant responses and review comments.

Both the Tier 1 reviews and the applications are identified by the same log numbers (e.g. MA-04-12-0345). You will find three Tier 1 reviewer reports associated with each of your assigned applications.

Tier 1 reviewers have provided comments scores for EACH of the four sections of the narrative using a scale of 1-5 and the following definitions:

Tier 1 Score Definitions

- 5 – Excellent:** The applicant’s response is outstanding and provides exceptional support for the proposed project.
- 4 – Very Good:** The applicant’s response provides solid support for the proposed project.
- 3 – Good:** The applicant’s response is adequate but could be strengthened in its support for the proposed project.
- 2 – Some Merit:** The applicant’s response is flawed and does not adequately support the proposed project.
- 1 – Inadequate/Insufficient:** The applicant’s response is inadequate or provides insufficient information to allow for a confident evaluation.

STEP 6. Evaluate Your Applications

Now read your applications again and take notes as you read, focusing on each of the three Tier 2 review criteria. You are looking for projects that are strongest in these three areas:

- **Relationship of Project to MFA Program Goals**
- **Potential for Successful Project**
- **Institutional and Community Impact**

Remember that you are evaluating each application individually and not simply comparing them against one another.

The following are characteristics of good reviewing practices, so DO:

- Use your professional knowledge and experience to assess the information objectively.
- Judge the application on its own merits, not on extraneous information you may have about an organization or the people involved in the project.

- Call IMLS if you question the accuracy of any information in the application or the integrity of the applicant.
- Consider a project's strengths *and* weaknesses. Acknowledge and compliment strengths, and offer practical suggestions for improving weaknesses.
- Be thoughtful in your analysis of the project.
- Make your comments concise, understandable, and specific to the individual applicant.
- Be sure your comments correlate with the number scores you provide.

Remember, both successful and unsuccessful applicants use your comments to improve their operations and their future submissions.

To avoid making poor comments, DO NOT:

- Make derogatory remarks or level harsh criticism.
- Penalize an applicant because you feel the institution does not need the money. (Any eligible institution may receive funds, regardless of need.)
- Question an applicant's honesty or integrity in your review.
- Merely summarize or paraphrase the applicant's own words in your comments.
- Make vague or overly general statements.
- Offer or ask for irrelevant or extraneous information.

7. Assign Scores

As a Tier 2 reviewer, you will provide only ONE overall score for each application. Use a scale of 1-5, with 1 = lowest and 5 = highest, according to the following definitions:

| Tier 2 Score Definitions | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 5 – Excellent: | The proposal is outstanding, and the project completely fulfills the goals of the MFA program. |
| 4 – Very Good: | The proposal is solid, and the project is well-developed and highly recommended for funding. |
| 3 – Good: | The proposal is adequate, but probably falls short in a number of ways and could be strengthened. The project would likely be successful and is worthy of funding but it is not a high priority. |
| 2 – Some Merit: | Although the proposal has worth, it is flawed in one or more ways and requires major reworking. The project is not likely to be successful and should not be recommended for funding. It might be a project that is worthy of a resubmission with improvements. |
| 1 – Do Not Fund: | The proposal would not be successful and is not recommended for funding or resubmission in this form. |

Be sure to use only whole numbers—not fractions, decimals, zeroes, and not more than one number. Also, use the full range of scores to help determine which applications best meet the evaluation criteria.

Please note that scores of **3** (Good), **4** (Very Good), and **5** (Excellent) all correspond to “fundable.” What varies between and among proposals might be the degree of alignment with the **purpose** of the MFA grant program, some aspect of its potential for **success**, or the level of institutional and community **impact**. These are the areas we ask you to consider in crafting your evaluations, and they are the criteria we will ask you to emphasize during the panel meeting.

The following matters are **NOT** criteria we want you to take into consideration: indirect cost rates, the financial need of an institution, the national importance of a collection, and any information outside the application that relates to the museum, its staff, people served, or its history.

STEP 8. Review Your Work

Review your draft comments and preliminary scores. When you are finished, proofread your reviews. A review with even one missing score or comment cannot be accepted by the IMLS Online Reviewer System. Adjust your scores, if necessary, to more accurately reflect your written evaluation. Scores should support comments, and comments should justify scores.

Be sure that for each application, you have provided:

- written comments for each of the three evaluation sections; and
- a single score from 1-5 for the entire application.

We welcome your Additional Comments, should you wish to provide them. This section is optional and is not associated with a numerical score.

STEP 9. Submit Your Reviews

Information relating solely to software usage has been removed from this sample handbook.

STEP 10. Next Steps

Review your assigned applications and review comments again to prepare for the panel meeting in Washington, DC.

Your Role during Panel Deliberations

At the Meeting

In preparation for the panel meeting, be sure you will be ready to act as “presenter” for the 4 -5 specific applications for which you have been assigned this role (as identified in “My Application List” sent to you via e-mail at the beginning of the review period), and to discuss and comment on all 13-14 applications you have read and reviewed.

We will preload electronic copies of all applications slated for discussion onto a PC laptop for your use at the meeting. You will also be able to use the laptop to record any changes to your final scores and/or comments. You are welcome, of course, to bring your own copies with notes, either paper or electronic. If you want to bring your own electronic files, we recommend using a flash drive or a CD for easy transfer to an IMLS laptop. Reviewers have told us that using one laptop at a time is preferable to two.

At the panel meeting, you will share your thoughts and recommendations with the full panel. IMLS staff will identify the application to be discussed, and the panelist assigned to “present” the application will give a brief verbal synopsis of the organization and the proposed project, his or her preliminary score (using the 1-5 scale), and concise reasons to support these recommendations. Each summation should be about three minutes in length. Then, the two other assigned readers will share their comments and scores for the proposal. Discussion will then be opened to the entire panel. Following discussion, each reader will be given an opportunity to assign a final score and make any additional comments for the applicant if necessary.

Issues Discussion

During the panel meeting, we will set aside time for an issues discussion, when you will be able to provide us with feedback on the MFA grant program, the application materials, and the review and panel process. Time permitting, we will also have a wide-ranging discussion of what challenges, trends, and opportunities you see today in today’s museum community.

After the Meeting

After the panel review process is complete, IMLS staff will review your final recommendations with the IMLS Director, who will determine, based on the funds available, which applications to fund.

Our Thanks!

We hope it is clear that your participation as a Tier 2 reviewer is a pivotal component of the IMLS peer review process. We thank you for your gifts of time and expertise and this very important contribution to the museum community. We wish you the best of luck in working through your reviews, as well as safe travels. We look forward to welcoming you to Washington in April.

Museums for America FY2012 Tier 2 Review Criteria Quick Reference

Your role as a Tier 2 reviewer is to evaluate how well proposals meet the broad, overall goals of the Museums for America program. Although you will provide comments for each of the three criteria below, you will be providing only ONE single score for each application. Consider the entire proposal, including the narrative and supporting documentation, as you evaluate each application's strengths and weaknesses in the following areas:

| |
|---|
| 1. Relationship of Project to Museums for America Program Goals |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence that the project will support high-priority activities reflected in the museum's mission and strategic goals. • Evidence that the project encompasses educational activities to share collections, content and/or knowledge to support learning. |
| 2. Potential for Successful Project |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence that the museum has identified a target audience(s) for the project, performed an assessment of their needs, and that the proposal is designed as the best solution to meet those needs. • Evidence that the project proposes efficient, effective, and reasonable approaches to accomplish clear goals and objectives. • Evidence that the project personnel demonstrate appropriate experience, expertise, and commitment to accomplish project activities. • Presents a cost-efficient, complete, and accurate budget with evidence of sound financial management. • Evidence that the project will be completed within the proposed timeframe. |
| 3. Institutional and Community Impact |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence that the project includes a strong evaluation component to measure its success. • Extent to which the project will enhance or expand the museum's capacity to support its strategic goals. • Evidence of a beneficial impact the project activities will have on the institution, its staff, and/or its audience(s). • Evidence that the museum can sustain the project or its impact over time. |

Application Overview

Once you have completed comments on Criteria 1 through 3, you may use the Additional Comments box to share your **overall** impression of the application and any general comments that do not fall into one of the above categories.

Please provide ONE overall score for the entire application using the scale of **1** through **5**. Please use the full range of scores to evaluate applications.

Rating Scale

5 Excellent **4** Very good **3** Good/adequate **2** Some merit **1** Do not fund

Appendix I

Reviewer Conflict of Interest Statement

As a reviewer or panelist for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), you may receive for review a grant application that could present a conflict of interest. Such a conflict could arise if you are involved with the applicant institution, or in the project described in the application, as a paid consultant or through other financial involvement. The same restrictions apply if your spouse or minor child is involved with the applicant institution or if the application is presented on behalf of an institution with which you, your spouse, or minor child is negotiating for future employment.

A present financial interest is not the only basis for conflict of interest. Through prior association as an employee or officer, you may have gained knowledge of the applicant that would preclude objective review of its application. Past employment (generally more than five years) does not by itself disqualify a reviewer so long as the circumstances of your association permit you to perform an objective review of the application. If you believe you may have a conflict of interest with any application assigned to you for review, please notify us immediately.

You may still serve as a reviewer even if your institution is an applicant in this grant cycle or you were involved in an application submitted in this grant cycle, as long as you do not review any application submitted by your own institution or any application in which you were involved. However, if you believe that these or any other existing circumstances may compromise your objectivity as a reviewer, please notify us immediately.

If an application presents no conflict of interest at the time you review it, a conflict of interest may still develop later on. Once you have reviewed an application, you should never represent the applicant in dealings with IMLS or another Federal agency concerning the application, or any grant that may result from it.

It is not appropriate, for your purposes or for the purposes of the institutions or organizations you represent, for you to make specific use of confidential information derived from individual applications that you read while you were serving as an IMLS reviewer. In addition, pending applications are confidential. Accordingly, you must obtain approval from IMLS before sharing any proposal information with anyone, whether for the purpose of obtaining expert advice on technical aspects of an application or for any reason.

If you have any questions regarding conflict of interest, either in relation to a specific application or in general, please contact Sandra Narva, Senior Program Officer, at snarva@imls.gov or 202/653-4634.

**Note: Appendices II and III have been removed
from this sample handbook.**