



Sparks! Ignition Grants for Libraries and Museums

FY2012 NLG Reviewer Handbook

For information, contact:

Museums

Helen Wechsler: (202) 653-4779 or hwechsler@imls.gov

Tim Carrigan: (202) 653-4639 or tcarrigan@imls.gov

Libraries or Library-Museum Collaborations

Chuck Thomas: (202) 653-4663 or cthomas@imls.gov

Traci Rucker: (202) 653-4689 or trucker@imls.gov

**Welcome to
The Sparks!
Program Review
Process**

Thank you for offering to serve as a Sparks reviewer. We have selected you to review this year's applications because of your professional expertise in libraries and/or museums. We have prepared this handbook to ensure the fair and candid review of all eligible applications and to provide you with the procedural and technical information you need. Please use it in tandem with the FY2012 Sparks! Ignition Grants for Libraries and Museums Guidelines available at:

http://www.ims.gov/applicants/sparks_ignition_grants_guidelines.aspx

Even if you have reviewed for other IMLS programs, including Sparks, in the past, you should read through this booklet since we have made some significant changes to Sparks this year.

Purpose and Scope of the Sparks! Ignition Grants Program

The Sparks Grants are a special funding opportunity within the IMLS National Leadership Grants program. These small grants encourage libraries, museums, and archives to test and evaluate specific innovations in the ways they operate and the services they provide. Sparks Grants support the deployment, testing, and evaluation of promising and groundbreaking new tools, products, services, or organizational practices.

Applicants may propose activities or approaches that involve risk, as long as the risk is balanced by significant potential for improvement. Eligible institutions of all sizes and types are encouraged to apply.

Successful proposals will address problems, challenges, or needs of broad relevance to libraries, museums, and/or archives. A proposed project should test and evaluate a specific, innovative response to the identified problem and present a plan to make the findings widely and openly accessible.

To maximize the public benefit from federal investments in these grants, the Sparks Grants will fund only projects with the following characteristics:

Broad Potential Impact - Applicants should identify a specific problem or need that is relevant to many libraries, archives, and/or museums, and propose a testable and measurable solution. Proposals must demonstrate a thorough understanding of current issues and practices in the project's focus area and discuss its potential impact within libraries, archives, and/or museums. Proposed innovations should be widely adoptable or adaptable.

Significant Innovation—The proposed solution to the identified problem must offer strong potential for non-incremental, significant advancement in the operation of libraries, archives, and/or museums. Applicants must explain how the proposed activity differs from current practices or exploits an unexplored opportunity, and the potential benefit to be gained by this innovation.

Application and Review Process

1. Applicants submit their applications using Grants.gov—the single point of entry for IMLS grant applications.
2. IMLS receives the applications and checks them for organizational eligibility and application completeness.
3. IMLS identifies a pool of available reviewers with appropriate expertise and assigns three reviewers to evaluate each application.
4. Reviewers receive access to the applications, evaluate them, and

complete their reviews online.

5. IMLS uses reviewers' comments and scores to rank the applications. IMLS may schedule conference calls with reviewers when scores for the same proposals diverge significantly and more conversation and an opportunity to revise scores/comments is warranted.
6. IMLS staff members provide a list of applications recommended for funding to the IMLS Director for approval.
7. IMLS awards Sparks grants in June. IMLS notifies all applicants whether or not they have received an award. With their notification, all applicants receive anonymous copies of their reviews. IMLS also sends notification of the awards to each participating reviewer.

**How Your Reviews
Are Used**

Your scores determine the ranking of applications and are the basis for decisions about which proposals are recommended for funding and which do not.

For applications that are not funded, your comments may be used to revise proposals for future submission.

Follow Up

After we announce awards for the Sparks program in June, we invite you to call the Sparks staff to schedule an appointment to discuss your reviews and provide feedback to us about your experience as a reviewer.

We greatly appreciate the tremendous amount of time and effort you commit to being a reviewer. By participating in the peer review process, you make a significant contribution to the Sparks program and provide an invaluable service to the entire museum and library community. Thank you!

Application Review Instructions

Verify Access to Applications Online

You will use **two** online systems:

1. ApplicationsOnline: A file sharing system from which to download proposals you will review.
2. IMLS Online Review System: A system to enter your evaluative comments and scores for each proposal.

Instructions for downloading applications are included as **Appendix I** of this handbook. Use the following link to verify that you have access to all your assigned applications:

<http://applicationsonline.imls.gov>

For “User,” enter the e-mail address you have on file with IMLS, and for the “Password,” refer to the password that was included in the email you received from us. Contact us immediately if any applications are missing or if you cannot open them.

Conflict of Interest

Before we assigned proposals for you to read, we provided you a list of applicants and asked you to identify any conflicts of interest. Once you begin reviewing your assigned applications, if you discover any previously unidentified potential conflict, contact us immediately. Please see the Reviewer Conflict of Interest Statement included as **Appendix II** of this handbook. A conflict of interest would 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.

Confidentiality

The information contained in grant applications is strictly 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. Do not contact an applicant directly.

Read Applications

Your thorough reading and understanding of each application will be the key to providing both insightful comments and an overall rating for the application. In advance of doing so, reread the Sparks guidelines at http://www.imls.gov/applicants/sparks_ignition_grants_guidelines.aspx. On the next pages is a quick reference sheet that you may wish to print and place in your workspace. It lists the types of information you should look for in each applicant’s responses and should serve as guideposts for your review.

Sparks! Ignition Grants for Libraries and Museums Review Criteria Quick Reference

<p>1. ASSESSMENT OF NEED</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposal provides evidence that the identified problem, need, or challenge is real and is significant for libraries, archives, and/or museums. • Proposal demonstrates thorough knowledge of current library, archive, or museum practice related to the identified problem or need. • Proposal identifies the primary stakeholders, audiences, or groups affected by the identified problem, challenge, or need. • Proposal demonstrates thorough knowledge of other activities, projects, and/or published literature related to the identified problem or need.
<p>2. PROJECT DESIGN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposal clearly explains how the project will attempt to address the identified problem or need, and why the proposed activity is an appropriate and innovative response to that need. • Project proposes approaches that are efficient, effective, and reasonable to accomplish its clear goals and objectives. • The proposal adequately explains the roles and responsibilities of all organizations and staff participating in the project. • The proposal explains a well-rounded communication plan that will reach targeted audiences effectively.
<p>3. INNOVATION AND IMPACT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Originality of the proposed activity. • Potential for significant change in the field that could result from the project. • For projects that involve building digital content, software, or other technology products, in addition to the above criteria, evidence that the project’s products support interoperability and accessibility in its broadest context, and potential for wider adoption in other libraries, archives, or museums.
<p>4. EVALUATION PLAN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposal clearly explains a testing and evaluation methodology including details of what will be measured, and how measurements will be analyzed to evaluate the potential of the innovation for broader adoption. • The project evaluation will provide reliable information on which to judge the relative success of the project.
<p>5. PROJECT RESOURCES: PERSONNEL, TIME, BUDGET</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposal clearly describes how the applicant will effectively complete the project activities through the deployment and management of resources including money, facilities, equipment, and supplies. • Proposal includes a cost-efficient, complete, and accurate budget that uses appropriate resources for the proposed activity. • Proposal includes evidence that project personnel demonstrate appropriate experience and expertise and will commit adequate time to accomplish project goals and activities.

Evaluate Applications

Read your applications again and take notes as you read. Draft comments for each of the five narrative responses. We strongly recommend that you draft your comments using Microsoft Word, and then cut and paste them into the Online Reviewer System form (see Appendix III).

- Use your professional knowledge and experience to assess the information objectively.
- Judge the application on its own merits. Do not base your evaluation on any prior knowledge of an institution.
- If you question the accuracy of any information, call IMLS to discuss it. Do not question the applicant's honesty or integrity in your written comments.
- Do not contact the museum.
- Consider whether the applicant has the resources to successfully complete the project.
- Analyze the narrative section of the application in your comments. Summarizing or paraphrasing the applicant's own words will not help the applicant.

Characteristics of Constructive and Effective Comments:

- They are presented in a constructive manner.
- They are concise, specific, and easy to read and understand.
- They acknowledge the resources of the institution.
- They are specific to the individual applicant.
- They correlate with the score given.
- They reflect the application's strengths and identify areas for improvement.
- They are directed to applicants for their use.

Characteristics of Poor Comments:

- Make derogatory remarks. (Offer suggestions for improvement rather than harsh criticism.)
- Penalize an applicant because you feel the institution does not need the money. (Any eligible institution may receive funds, regardless of need.)
- Penalize an applicant because of missing materials. (If you believe an application is missing required materials, please contact a NLG staff member immediately.)
- Question an applicant's honesty or integrity. (You may question the accuracy of information provided by the applicant, but if you are unsure how to frame your question, contact IMLS.)
- Offer or ask for irrelevant or extraneous information. (Your comments should concern only the information IMLS requests of applicants)

Remember that successful and unsuccessful applicants use your comments to help improve their projects or future applications.

Assign Scores

After you have read, evaluated and provided written comments, please provide a single numeric score for the application that reflects your opinion of the proposal's overall quality and your recommendation of whether it should be funded this year.

- Use only whole numbers.
- Do not use fractions, decimals, zeroes, or more than one number.

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.

IMPORTANT: To help applicants understand and benefit from your reviews, make sure that your scores accurately reflect your written comments.

Evaluating Innovation and Impact

After you have finished providing evaluative comments and a numeric score for each of the five sections of the proposal, the IMLS online review system provides a section called "Additional Comments" where you can provide other comments about the proposal overall. For the Sparks! Ignition Grants, however, we require that you use this section in a very specific manner. Please enter in this section a Yes/No response for the two main characteristics we seek to fund, Broad Potential Impact and Significant Innovation. *Do not enter additional comments in this section, only the following text evaluating the proposal overall:*

Broad Potential Impact: Yes or No
Significant Innovation: Yes or No

Your evaluation of each proposal on these two characteristics, within the context of current library or museum practices, as well as the evaluative comments and scores for each of the five sections of the proposal, will help IMLS program staff decide which proposals should be considered for panel review.

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

The Online Reviewer System All Tier 1 reviewers will use the IMLS Online Reviewer System to submit comments and scores for each application. *IMPORTANT:* This system is different from the one you used to download the applications. Instructions and tips for using the Online Reviewer System are in **Appendix III** of this handbook (How to Use the IMLS Online Reviewer System).

For all questions about reviewing, either technical or programmatic, please contact a NLG program staff member directly. Please do not use the hotlink on the Online Reviewer page, as your question may not receive an immediate response.

Once you have completed assigning scores and providing comments for each application assigned to you, we recommend that you print a copy of each completed review to keep for your files. Then click on the submit box to send the entire review to IMLS.

Reminders

The Online Reviewer System is a wonderful tool; however, there are a few points regarding its use of which you should be aware:

- When accessing this system, use only the e-mail address we have on file for you.
- Once you submit your reviews, you cannot go back in to make revisions. If you feel you need to make a change, you must contact an NLG staff member, and we will authorize your re-entry into the system. However, prior to submitting your reviews, you may repeatedly enter and exit the system without losing your information.

Deadline The deadline to submit NLG Tier 1 reviews via the Online Reviewer System is **May 9, 2012**.

Follow-up Conference Calls In some cases, Sparks staff may contact you in the weeks following the deadline to schedule a conference call with other reviewers. If scores for the same application are divergent, a conversation among those who reviewed the applications provides the opportunity to compare notes, hear others' opinions, and express specific concerns about or praise for a

project. Reviewers will not be required to come to consensus, but will be able to change their scores and comments if they wish. These discussions are very valuable as staff try to determine which proposals should move to the next level of review.

Returning Materials to IMLS

You will receive, via email, a Peer Reviewer Services Agreement and the Direct Deposit Sign-Up form. Please print, complete, scan, and e-mail the forms to Tim Carrigan at tcarrigan@imls.gov (museum) or Kathy Mitchell at kmitchell@imls.gov (libraries). Honoraria are paid electronically, and the Direct Deposit Sign-Up form must be completed in its entirety, even if a similar form was submitted in a prior year with the identical banking information.

Should you decide mail rather than e-mail your Peer Reviewer Services Agreement and Direct Deposit Sign-Up form, please send both to:

IMLS
Attention: Tim Carrigan or Traci Rucker
1800 M Street NW, 9th Floor
Washington DC 20036-5802

Managing Copies

Keep your applications and a copy of your review sheets until **September 30, 2012**, in case there are questions from IMLS staff.

Please maintain confidentiality of all applications that you review.

After September 31, 2012, destroy the applications.

Thank you for serving as a NLG Reviewer!

Appendix II

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 Helen Wechsler, Senior Program Officer, at hwechsler@imls.gov or (202) 653-4779.