INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES

IMLS Museums for America Grant Program
FY2021 Information Session

August 2020

Welcome to the Institute of Museum and Library Services' webinar, "Museums for America Grant Program Fiscal Year 2021 Information Session."

My name is Steve Shwartzman and I am pleased that you could join me today and that you are interested in preparing an application for the IMLS Museums for America grant program.

Our goal in this presentation is to provide specific information about the Museums for America grant program and make some recommendations that you may wish to consider when preparing your application. Since this is a pre-recorded webinar and you won't have the opportunity to ask questions, feel free to contact me or any of the other staff in the Office of Museum Services to seek answers to your questions or to discuss a project idea. The staff listing slide with contact information is shown later in this webinar.

Companion Webinar

PRE-RECORDED WEBINAR
IMLS OMS: Choosing a Funding Opportunity for FY2021
Basic information for all applicants

- https://www.imls.gov/webinars/imls-oms-choosing-funding-opportunity-fy-2021

Access recordings and transcripts of our webinars here:
https://www.imls.gov/webinars-archive

[Image: Pixabay 3307479]

This is one of a series of pre-recorded webinars designed to help you find the information you need to create a competitive application for IMLS museum funding.

"Choosing a Funding Opportunity for FY2021" was pre-recorded and is available as a video and as a PDF of the slides plus a transcript on our website at the link identified here.

In that webinar, we cover the IMLS vision, mission, and strategic plan with an emphasis on how they influence our grant making. We also address institutional eligibility, provide a quick overview of all our funding opportunities, how to find information online with a focus on our website, and we cover the three places you must be registered in order to apply for an IMLS grant.

We strongly recommend that you view this webinar carefully to get the complete picture of preparing and submitting a competitive application to Museums for America.

In addition to this pre-recorded webinar for Museums for America, we are providing pre-recorded webinars for all of our grant programs. A complete listing of the presentations is provided in our pre-recorded webinar, "Choosing a Funding Opportunity for FY2021," and you may access them by visiting www.imls.gov/webinars-archive.

FY2020 Museums for America

Project Category	Number of Applications	Number of Awards	Funds Requested	Funds Awarded
Learning Experiences	165	55	$29,994,434	$10,939,150
Community Anchors & Catalysts	36	5	$6,948,186	$922,268
Collections Stewardship & Public Access	144	49	$43,292,620	$7,812,529
TOTAL	345	109	$80,235,240	$19,673,947

Before we jump into the details, we are often asked about numbers of applications and funding success rates, and so here are the figures for the just completed

FY2020 Museums for America grant cycle. As you can see, with just over $19.6M available, we were able to fund over 31% of the applications we received.

[Image: Nick Youngson - http://nyphotographic.com/]

In this presentation, we'll be addressing the following topics:

- MFA Program Goals
- Characteristics of Successful MFA Projects
- Important Dates and Times
- The questions of How much and How Many?
- Project Categories
- Allowable and Unallowable Costs—what you can and cannot include in your project
- Application Components
- Application Tips
- The Review Process
- IMLS Staff Contact Information

MFA Program Goals

MFA supports projects that strengthen the ability of an **individual** museum to serve **its** public.

Activities might reflect museums as:
- active resources for learning and literacy
- institutions important in improving the well-being of their communities
- good stewards of the nation's collections

Emphasis is on local impact.

Mystic Seaport
Mystic CT

Portland Museum
Louisville KY

Palo Alto Art Center
Palo Alto CA

Museums for America, or MFA, is our largest grant program, receiving the largest number of applications each year and the one through which we make the largest number of awards. The overall goal of the program is to support activities that strengthen the abilities of individual museums to serve their publics. This might be through activities that reflect museums as active resources for lifelong learning, as institutions important in improving the well-being of their communities, or as good stewards of the nation's collections.

MFA is all about what **your** museum needs in order to better serve **your** public. It may well be exactly the same as what the museum across town or in a neighboring state needs, and that's ok. The important thing here is that our support should help you make a local impact.

Characteristics of Successful MFA Applications

- *Institutional Impact:* The project addresses a key goal identified in the institution's strategic plan.
- *In-depth knowledge:* The project design reflects a thorough understanding of current practice and knowledge about the subject matter.
- *Project-based design:* The work plan consists of a set of logical, interrelated activities tied directly to addressing the key need or challenge.
- *Demonstrable results:* The project generates measurable results that tie directly to the need or challenge it was designed to address.

With this focus on supporting the individual museum, what are the characteristics of successful Museums for America applications? There are four, and successful projects exemplify all of them well. As you prepare your application, then, you should keep these characteristics in mind.

It has been our experience that an unfunded application is one that has failed to deliver convincingly on one or more of these, so it is wise to think hard about how to structure your application to show how your project will be strong in each.

- **Institutional Impact:** The project addresses a key goal identified in the institution's strategic plan.
- **In-depth knowledge:** The project design reflects a thorough understanding of current practice and knowledge about the subject matter.
- **Project-based design:** The work plan consists of a set of logical, interrelated activities tied directly to addressing the key need or challenge.
- **Demonstrable results:** The project generates measurable results that tie directly to the need or challenge it was designed to address.

Important Dates and Times

Applications are due by 11:59 pm EST on **November 16, 2020.**

- Awards will be announced in **August, 2021.**

- Projects must start **September 1, 2021.**

Here are important dates relating to MFA applications. Applications must be received through Grants.gov by 11:59 pm Eastern Time on November 16, 2020. The date is new this year, but as in the past, it is non-negotiable. The time stamp is auto-generated by the Grants.gov system, and we have no ability to override it. We will say this over and over again, but start early and submit your application early. That way, if you encounter a difficulty of any kind when submitting your proposal, you'll have some time to resolve the problem and resubmit.

MFA awards will be announced in August, 2021, and MFA projects must be scheduled to start on the first day of September, 2021.

Please make sure that everyone involved in preparing your grant application is aware of these dates.

How much and how many?

HOW MUCH?
$5,000-$250,000 (total request)
with **1:1 cost share required**

HOW MANY?
There is no limit on the number of applications your museum may submit to MFA under the FY2021 announcement.

Regarding how much money you may request, there is only one option in MFA. All requests must be between $5,000 and $250,000, including both direct and indirect costs. If you ask for less than $5,000 or more than $250,000, your application will most likely be rejected and not reviewed.

Requests to Museums for America must have at least a 1:1 non-federal cost share. Cost share can take a number of forms—among them are cash, staff time, volunteer time, third-party contributions, grants from foundations, and support from state or local government. Cost share cannot come from other federal sources.

In terms of how many applications you may submit, there is no limit to the number of applications you can file in response to the FY2021 funding announcement for Museums for America.

What is a "project"?

A temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result.

- A project is **temporary** in that it has a defined beginning and end in time, and therefore defined scope and resources.
- And a project is **unique** in that it is not a routine operation, but a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal.

Source: https://www.pmi.org/about/learn-about-pmi/what-is-project-management

We have made reference several times to "projects" here, and so let's take a minute to consider just exactly what that means. The Project Management Institute has a good definition, which is "A temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result."

They go on further to explain that a project is temporary because it has a defined beginning and end in time and therefore defined scope and resources.

And a project is unique in that it is not a routine operation but rather a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal.

We recommend that you keep this definition in mind as you conceptualize your IMLS project. Think of it as temporary non-routine set of activities, which collectively have a beginning and an end in time, a defined scope requiring specific resources, and which are designed to accomplish a specific, singular goal.

MFA Project Categories

Lifelong Learning: IMLS supports the ability of museums to empower people of all ages and backgrounds through experiential and cross-disciplinary learning and discovery.

Community Anchors: IMLS promotes the role of museums as essential partners in addressing the needs of their communities by leveraging their expertise, knowledge, physical space, collections, technology, and other resources to identify and implement solutions.

Collections Stewardship and Access: IMLS supports the role of museums as trusted stewards of museum collections as the natural, cultural, artistic, historical, and scientific foundations of our shared heritage and knowledge.

With that concept of "project" in mind, let's turn to project categories. Second to choosing to apply to the Museums for America grant program, this is likely to be the most important decision you make about your funding application. As you can see here, there are three options: Lifelong Learning, Community Anchors, and Collections Stewardship and Access.

Why is your decision about which project category to choose so important? For one thing, your application will be reviewed by museum professionals who have experience and expertise in these general categories. And for another, your application will be competing against others who have chosen the same category. In short, the entire review process incorporates an assumption that your project aligns with the category you've identified. It's an important choice, and it's important to get it right.

Project Categories: Lifelong Learning

MFA Lifelong Learning projects might include:

- Developing museum resources that foster various types of literacies
- Creating and delivering interpretive and educational programs
- Exhibition development, design, and fabrication (non-construction)
- Developing, designing, and delivering digital learning resources
- Providing programs for audiences of various backgrounds, circumstances, and abilities
- Professional development/training for formal and informal educators
- Creating partnerships with schools and developing resources in support of K-12 school curricula
- Programs and partnership development for out-of-school audiences
- Implementing program evaluations or studies to guide the development, redesign, and/or effective delivery of learning experiences

Successful Lifelong Learning projects will provide high-quality, inclusive educational opportunities that address particular audience needs.

So let's take a look at what kinds of activities a project in each of these categories might include.

A project in Lifelong Learning might include but is not limited to design and fabrication of an exhibit, program development for all types of audiences, creating interpretive plans, media, training for teachers, partnerships with schools or out-of-school audiences, or program evaluation.

As you plan your project in this category, we strongly recommend starting with the concept of "learner at the center" and build around it. Spend time really thinking through who your learners in this project are and what their needs are. It's not likely going to be "everybody," so who is it really? What do they want to learn, what do you want them to learn, and what's the best way to achieve that goal? We'll get to the whole idea of problems and needs in a few minutes, but a major takeaway here is to be focused on identifying your audience and thinking about how you are going to serve them.

Project Categories: Community Anchors

MFA Community Anchors projects might include:

- Creating trusted spaces for community learning, debate, and dialogue
- Designing programs in collaboration with specific audiences and relevant community partners to address community needs
- Building new partnerships to strengthen community connections through exhibitions, programs, and events
- Conducting community-focused planning activities
- Implementing audience-focused studies and evaluation

Successful Community Anchors projects strive to create a better quality of life within communities.

A Community Anchors project is likely to include activities that contribute directly to your institution's functioning as an essential partner in addressing community needs. As you scan this list, you'll see the word "community' in nearly every entry. Simply saying you plan to be welcoming to your community or you plan to serve your community is not likely to be enough. Reviewers should be able to see clearly that you have involved members of your community in planning your project and that you'll continue to involve them in its implementation and evaluation.

So, if your project involves exhibitions or interpretive programs, how do you know if your project fits best within Lifelong Learning or Community Anchors? We get this question frequently. After all a significant part of museum work involves creating exhibitions and delivering programs. Which category should you pick?

We suggest this test: If the motivation for doing the project comes from **within** your institution then you might well be looking at a Lifelong Learning project. If the motivation for doing the project comes from **outside** your institution generated by your community and a need they have identified then you might have a Community Anchors project.

Both approaches are legitimate, and both are fundable. Ultimately, it's your choice. What's important is that you choose one and write your application that way. Hybrids don't work as well as sharply focused applications.

The primary difference between a Lifelong Learning project and a Community Anchors

project is: a Community Anchors project is one that strives to resolve an issue within the community that is most often identified by the community. For example, an immigrant community may have trouble assimilating into your community and looks towards your museum to help develop an exhibit and/or related programming for the general community to learn about their people and the contributions they make to the overall wellbeing of the community. Another example might be that your community is suffering from serious health-related issues like Alzheimer's or dementia in seniors or obesity in children that some sort of joint community/museum partnership can work to help solve or at least improve the well-being of those affected through some form of programming. Perhaps, homelessness is an issue in your community or a high poverty rate, joblessness or social justice concerns that you feel must be addressed, again in partnership with the community, with the betterment of the community being your primary goal.

Community Anchors projects are more **external**.
Lifelong Learning projects are more **internal** and provide support for all types of education projects that the previous slide already identified, but the primary goal of Lifelong Learning is generally NOT the overall improvement of the community by addressing a community need.

Project Categories: Collections Stewardship and Access

MFA Collections Stewardship and Access projects might include:

- Planning for collections management, curation, care, and conservation of collections
- Preparing to mitigate the impact of natural and man-made disasters on collections and collections information through planning and training for preparedness, response, recovery and resilience
- Cataloging, inventorying, documenting, and registration of collections
- Acquiring, implementing, and enhancing collections management systems
- Planning and implementing digitization activities
- Conducting conservation surveys and assessments
- Performing conservation treatments
- Rehousing collections
- Environmental improvements for museum collections storage and exhibit areas

Successful Collections Stewardship and Access projects contribute to the long-term preservation of, increased access to, and expanded use of materials entrusted to the museum's care.

Our third project category is that of Collections Stewardship and Access, and this includes just about anything you need to do for and with collections, except acquire them.

We are very open to projects that have multiple components configured in ways that make sense for you. One project might consist of cataloging, taking digital photographs, and updating database records, while another might combine digitization activities with rehousing. We invite applications for projects that involve preparing to mitigate the impact of natural and man-made disasters on collections and collections information. This might be planning and training in emergency preparedness; developing networks for response; executing strategies for recovery; and/or developing resilience in preparation for the next time.

We support conservation projects of all kinds—general, detailed, and environmental surveys as well as treatments and environmental improvements. And you are welcome to incorporate aspects of training and/or collections management into these projects if doing so makes sense for your situation.

It's important to note that in this project category, we encourage a step-by-step, progressive approach to collections work, including conservation. This means assessing needs, creating a prioritized list of activities, and following through by **doing the most important things first.**

Choosing a Project Category

Lifelong Learning

Community Anchors

Collections Stewardship and Access

Having a hard time choosing? Try these:

1. Think carefully about what is "in the center" of your project. Who or what will benefit from your work? What will be improved once you've finished your project?

2. Decide whom you want to review your application. What kind of skill sets and experience do you want them to have?

3. List all the activities you plan to carry out and assign each to a category. Which category includes the largest number of activities? Where will most of the resources be spent?

Before we close our discussion of project categories, we want to mention our guidance for projects that could belong logically in more than one. Sometimes it's tough to choose, and you might be tempted to think that the best strategy would be to align with more than one—two, and maybe even three! We advise against that for several reasons.

First, the project categories have different goals, and we expect that projects aligned with each will address different problems, use different approaches, and will measure success in achieving the intended results in different ways. Second, not only do our instructions for applicants differ for each category, but so does our guidance for reviewers.

So how can you choose the best category for your project?

Here are three things we suggest you try. **Think carefully about what is "in the center" of your project.** Is it the learner? Will people who engage with you as a result of your project, let's say to create a new exhibition and related programming, acquire new knowledge, develop a skill, experience a change in attitude about the subject of your exhibit? Or is it the community that's in the center of your thinking? Is your project one that will address an important community need, and are you doing it because you believe your museum can make a difference? Or is your project about the collections? Will your project result in a better managed, better cared-for, or more accessible set of objects?

A second way to go at this might be to think about **who you want to review your application.** If you apply under Lifelong Learning, we will put your application in front of museum
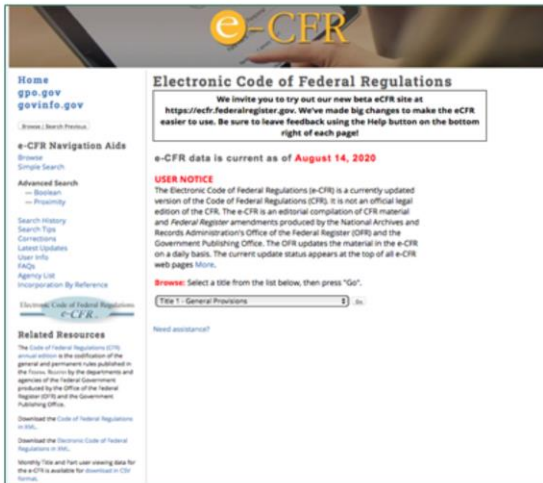
educators, exhibits professionals, interpretive specialists and professionals with deep experience in understanding how people learn in museum environments. Would you rather we put it in front of a a combination of experts in civic engagement and social justice, community outreach, and collective impact? If that sounds "right," then it may push you toward Community Anchors. And if you apply under Collections Stewardship and Access, you can be confident that your application will be reviewed by some combination of registrars, collection managers, curators, conservators, or collections information specialists. If that seems appropriate, then this is most likely your best choice.

Still undecided? A third strategy to try might be to **make a list of all the activities** you plan to carry out. Then assign each to a project category, and then count to see where MOST of these activities occur and where MOST of the time and money will be spent. That might well provide your answer.

Our most important advice, then, is to choose one project category, study the instructions for preparing an application as well as the review criteria for that category, and write your proposal accordingly. As always, if you have questions, call the IMLS staff to discuss them.

http://tinyurl.com/yd7gq9bp

We'll turn now to allowable and unallowable costs for your project. Be very careful in preparing your proposal and include only allowable costs in both your IMLS request and your cost share. To do otherwise can hurt your chances of getting positive reviews and being recommended for funding.

We'll go through some common expenses that are allowable and unallowable, but for details, please see Title 2, Subtitle A, Chapter II, Part 200 of the Code of Federal Regulations covering Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards, or "2 CFR 200" for short.

Fortunately, the regulations are available online in a searchable format on the U.S. Government Publishing Office website and a tiny url link is listed on this slide.

Of particular interest is Subpart E—Cost Principles, a small section of which is shown on the right side of the slide.

Allowable Costs

Examples of allowable costs

- personnel salaries, wages, and fringe benefits
- travel expenses for key project staff and consultants
- materials, supplies, software, and equipment related directly to project activities
- equipment to improve collections storage and exhibit environments
- third-party costs
- publication design and printing
- staff and volunteer training
- internships/fellowships
- indirect or overhead costs

In the MFA Notice of Funding Opportunity, we provide a partial list of the most common examples of allowable costs as listed here.

These costs may be part of what you ask IMLS to pay for and/or what you will pay for as part of your cost share. **The rules about allowability apply to both sides of your budget.**

Unallowable Costs

Examples of unallowable costs

- general fundraising costs, such as development office staff or other staff time devoted to general fundraising
- contributions to endowments
- general operating support
- acquisition of collections
- general advertising or public relations costs for general promotional activities
- construction or renovation of facilities
- social activities, ceremonies, receptions, or entertainment
- research projects

We also provide a list of generally unallowable costs, again both for IMLS funds and for cost share. These costs may **not** be part of what you ask IMLS to pay for, **nor** can they be part of what you will pay for as part of your cost share. In fact, unallowable expenses can't show up anywhere in your proposal.

As you prepare your application, it's a good idea to compare your list of proposed expenses against these lists of allowable and unallowable costs and against the appropriate set of cost principles. If after that you have specific questions, please contact us and we'll be happy to help.

Application Components: Required Documents

These components are required of all MFA applications.

- Application for Federal Assistance/Short Organizational Form (SF-424S)
- IMLS Supplementary Information Form (including Abstract)
- IMLS Museum Program Information Form
- Organizational Profile (1 page)
- Strategic Plan Summary (2 pages max.)
- Narrative (7 pages max.)
- Schedule of Completion (1 page per year max.)
- IMLS Budget Form
- Budget Justification
- List of Key Project Staff and Consultants
- Resumes (2 pages max. each)

Next up are application components. Your application will consist of a series of individual documents, and it's very important to make sure you prepare and submit everything you should.

These application components fall into three categories in Museums for America. The first is that of **Required Documents. All applications must include the documents listed here.** Omission of even just one might result in your application's rejection. Also important to note are page limits. If you exceed the page limit specified in the Notice of Funding Opportunity, we must remove the extras before your application goes out for review. That means your reviewer may well see a paragraph or sentence end in mid air and will wonder about your organizational skills and your attentiveness to detail. We often see this with resumes so if you are requesting resumes from staff, outside contractors or consultants please make sure they are 2 pages maximum. So, make sure your content fits into the page limits specified and make sure the number of pages holds when you convert your document to a PDF.

Conditionally Required Documents

These components are required of <u>some</u> MFA applications.

- Proof of Private, Nonprofit Status
- Final Federally Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement
- Detailed Condition Reports and/or Conservation Treatment Proposals
- Digital Product Form

    IMPORTANT: The term "digital product" includes (1) digitized and born-digital content, resources, or assets; (2) software; and (3) research data. See the Digital Product Form for specific examples.

The second category of application components is that of **Conditionally Required Documents. Some** applications must include one, two, or even all four of these, and it's your job to figure out which are required for yours.

- If you are applying as a nonprofit, then you must include your proof of nonprofit status issued by the Internal Revenue Service.
- If you are using a federally negotiated indirect cost rate in your budget, then you must include a copy of your final rate agreement.
- If you will create digital products during the course of your project, then you must complete and submit a Digital Product Form.
- If you are requesting support for conservation treatment, then you must include detailed condition reports and/or formal conservation treatment proposals.

Just like the required documents, omission of even one might result in your application's rejections.

Please note that the term "digital product" includes (1) digitized and born-digital content, resources, or assets; (2) software; and (3) research data. Please see the form itself for more specific examples. If you are creating any of these types of materials, you must include the form with your application.

Supporting Documents

These components are optional in MFA applications. Make good decisions, and include only those that supplement the Narrative and support the project description provided in the application.

- Letters of commitment from partners, third-parties and groups who you will work with
- Bibliography or references relevant to your proposed project design or evaluation strategy
- Letters of support from experts and stakeholders
- Relevant images
- Exhibit design plans
- Reports from planning activities

- Contractor or vendor quotes
- Equipment specifications
- Products or evaluations from similar completed or ongoing projects
- Collections, technology, or other departmental plans as applicable to the proposed project
- Web links to relevant online materials
- Needs assessments

The third group of application components is **Supporting Documents, and here is a partial list of examples**. Supporting documents are completely optional. You may submit some or none. We urge you to make good decisions here and include only those that supplement the Narrative and support the project description you provide in your application. This is not the place to introduce new information. We also recommend that you be respectful of your reviewers' time and avoid any temptation to include hundreds of pages of extraneous material that is not directly relevant to your project. More is not necessarally better. Being judicious really does work to your benefit. **Include what is important and helpful … and stop there.**

Strategic Plan Summary

- Summary must be no more than two pages long

- Focus: Helps connect your proposed project activities to your institutional goals and objectives

- Shows date and by whom the plan was approved

Inside advice: Use a narrative format for your strategic plan summary.

Let's turn to two specific documents that you will need to prepare from scratch, and by that we mean they are not forms. As you've seen, these are not ALL the documents you will need to submit, but they are very important ones and the ones about which applicants seem to have the most questions.

First is a **strategic plan summary**. As you read the MFA Notice of Funding Opportunity, you will see frequent references to strategic plans or strategic goals. IMLS wants to help you achieve your goals, and indeed, we've seen that one of the characteristics of a successful MFA project is addressing a key need or challenge that faces your museum and whose resolution is identified in your strategic plan. We ask for a summary of your plan—no more than two pages—so that reviewers will be able to understand how your proposed project's activities will further your institutional goals and objectives. To verify its legitimacy, we ask that you indicate when and by whom the plan was approved. For some institutions this might be the Board of Trustees. For others it might be someone or a group representing the authority for a division or a department.

Inside advice: Use a narrative format for your strategic plan summary. Although infographics and cleverly designed imagery might be just the thing for communicating your strategic plan to some audiences, it typically doesn't work well for our reviewers. These two pages are all they have, and they tell us they find a well-constructed, thoughtful, written summary the best way to confirm connections to your project. Make it easy for them to see them.

Narrative: Project Justification

Tell us:
- What do you propose to do?
- What need, problem, or challenge will your project address, and how was it identified?
- Who or what will benefit from your project?
- How will your project advance your institution's strategic plan?
- How will your project address the goals of the Museums for America program and the project category you have chosen?

Reviewers will look for:
- *Clear explanation of the project, and if Collections Stewardship and Access, a clear description and quantifications of the collections/records that will be a focus of the project*
- *Evidence supporting the identification of the need, problem, or challenge to be addressed, and if Collections Stewardship and Access, its high-priority status*
- *Clear identification of the beneficiaries and their involvement in planning where possible*
- *Specific, actionable, and measurable ways in which the project advances institution's strategic plan*
- *Alignment of project with MFA and the project category chosen*

Now let's talk about the Narrative of your proposal. You have seven pages to cover three very important issues, and the Notice of Funding Opportunity provides lengthy guidance on what the Narrative should cover. The specifics differ for each project category (i.e. Lifelong Learning, Community Anchors, and Collections Stewardship and Access), and so you should make sure you're following the guidance for the category you've chosen.

On the left side of the slide are the questions we ask you to address in your Narrative, and on the right side are the points we ask reviewers to evaluate. It's good practice to consider both sides when you are putting together your application.

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

In this first section of the Narrative, you should lay out the reasoning for your project. This is where you describe the problem that you're setting out to solve or the need that you're going to address, and you tell us how you know it deserves attention. You might do this by citing published research, previous studies, or data gathered by your organization or by others. You should be crystal clear in identifying who or what will benefit from your project, because every activity that you identify in the work plan and every result that you propose to achieve should have an obvious connection to this problem and the beneficiaries you identify.

Defining a need, problem, or challenge

- Remember that the federal government wants its investment to result in something getting better.
- Articulate what will get better as a result of your project as precisely as possible.
- Identify why it is important that this change happens.
- Hone your problem definition carefully.
- Present data that support your problem definition.

Because the need, problem, or challenge is foundational in your application, keep these points in mind.

- The federal government wants its investment to result in SOMETHING getting better.
- As you define your need, problem, or challenge, articulate WHAT will get better as a result of your project as precisely as possible. Will someone learn something, develop a skill, change an attitude? Will members of your community be better able to work together to solve problems? Will collections be better cared for? Will their lifespan be extended? Will access to your collections and the information surrounding them be expanded? Identify why it is important that this particular change happens.
- Hone your problem definition carefully in clear, succinct terms.
- Gather and present data that support your problem definition.

Narrative: Project Work Plan

Tell us:

- What specific activities will you carry out?
- What are the risks to the project and how will you mitigate them?
- Who will plan, implement, and manage your project?
- Will partners be engaged and for what purpose?
- When and in what sequence will your activities occur?
- What time, financial, personnel, and other resources will you need to carry out the activities?
- How will you track your progress?
- How and with whom will you share your project's results?

Reviewers will look for:

- Activities informed by appropriate theory and practice
- Clearly stated goals, assumptions, and risks
- Appropriate evaluation activities and performance measurements
- Team with sufficient experience and skills
- Realistic and achievable schedule
- Appropriate time, financial, personnel, and other resources
- Clear methodology for tracking progress and adjusting course when necessary
- Effective plan for communicating results and/or sharing discoveries

PROJECT WORK PLAN

This is where you identify who will do what activities, when, and using what resources.

We also ask you to think about risks that are inherent in your particular project and to tell us how you've taken that into account in your planning. We'll say more about that in a few minutes.

We want you to explain how you will track your progress toward achieving your proposed results and what you'll do if you need to correct course. And finally, reflecting the federal government's desire that everything in which we invest generate as broad a benefit as possible, we ask you to tell how and with whom you will share your project's results.

Defining an activity

- An activity is something that someone does.
- It has a beginning and an end.
- You know when you've finished it because it doesn't need to be done any more (or it is no longer on your To Do List).
- It is not a "goal," "result," or "outcome." It is a thing you do as part of striving to achieve those.
- Aim for a reasonable level of granularity in identifying your activities—not too much, not too little, just right.

[Image: https://pixabay.com/en/stick-figure-road-sign-traffic-sign-1097163/]

Your work plan will be built on activities, so it's important to be clear about just what an activity is.

An activity is something that someone does. It has a beginning and an end (just like projects), and you know when you've finished it because it doesn't need to be done any more. It is no longer on your To Do List.

An activity is NOT a goal, a result, or an outcome. Rather it is something you do as part of striving to achieve those.

Aim for a reasonable level of granularity in identifying your activities. That might be hard, but strive for not too much, not too little, but rather just right.

Defining risks

About Risk

- There is no checklist of risks, but every project has them.
- The best proposals will show that the applicant is aware of them and has a plan for dealing with them.
- Answer the question, "What if?"

Examples of Risk

o A project is dependent upon fundraising to generate cost share, but it might not be complete by the time the application is submitted. What will the institution do if the money is unavailable by the time the project starts?

o A project may be structured around university interns, who will be selected and trained according to well thought-out processes. What will happen if one or more interns drops out? What's the plan for replacing them mid-project?

o A project involving rehousing collections into new museum-quality collections storage furniture might run into delays in preparing the space or in the delivery of the cabinets. What happens to the collection items then? How will the institution ensure that they remain safe and secure?

o A project depends on your community partners to achieve success, but one partner drops out mid-project. What do you do now?

[Image: https://cheekymunkey.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/What-is-an-IT-security-risk-1024x437.jpg]

We also ask you to think about risks that are inherent in your particular project and to tell us how you've taken that into account in your planning. Think of it as answering the question, "What if?"

There is no checklist of risks, but every project has them. The best proposals will show that you are aware of them and have thought through a plan for dealing with them. Look at your activities and think about what could go wrong. Focus on the ones where your experience (your own or that of your group) tells you, "Yes, that could happen" and identify steps you would take in response.

IMLS knows things go differently than expected. We just want you to prepare by identifying implementable options.

Here are some examples of risk that might be part of a project for which you might seek MFA funding.

- A project may be dependent upon fundraising to generate the cost share, but it is not complete by the time the application is submitted. What will the institution do if that money is not available by the time the project gets underway?
- A project may be structured around university interns, who will be selected and trained

according to well thought-out processes. What will happen if one or more interns drops out? What's the plan for replacing them mid-project?

- A project involving rehousing collections into new museum-quality collections storage furniture might run into delays in preparing the space or in the delivery of the cabinets. What happens to the collection items then? How will the institution ensure that they remain safe and secure?
- A project depends on your community partners to achieve success, but one partner drops out mid-project. What do you do now?

Narrative: Project Results

Tell us:

- What are your intended results that will address the need, problem, or challenge you have identified?
- *For Lifelong Learning* and *Community Anchors* projects: How will the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and/or attitudes of the intended audience change as a result of your project?
- *For Collections Stewardship and Access projects:* How will the care, condition, management, access to, or use of the museum collections and/or records that define the focus of your project improve?
- What data will you collect and report to measure your project's success?
- What tangible products will result from your project?
- How will you sustain the benefit(s) of your project?

Reviewers will look for:

- *Clearly articulated, realistic, meaningful, and actionable results linked to the need, problem, or challenge addressed*
- *A solidly grounded and appropriately structured plan to effect the meaningful change proposed*
- *A well designed and feasible plan for collecting and reporting data*
- *Useful tangible products*
- *A reasonable and practical plan for sustaining the benefits of the project beyond the conclusion of the award*

PROJECT RESULTS

The third section of your Narrative should be devoted to articulating your project's intended results.

This section is your chance to convince the reviewers that your project will result in something getting better. The need or problem you identified in your Project Justification will be addressed directly, and it will be diminished or eliminated altogether.

We ask you to tell us what data you will collect and report in order to measure your project's success.

If your project will generate tangible products (and most do), here's the opportunity to describe them and make the case that they will be useful. And last but not least, we ask that you tell us how you will sustain the benefit of the project. How will this improvement that you propose to make continue once your grant is over?

Defining intended results, success measures

- Answer the question, "What will be better as the result of this work?"
- Think through how you'll recognize success and how you'll measure it for each of your high-level activities.
- Tie everything back to your need, problem, or challenge.
- Include tangential benefits or positive outcomes, but make sure they are in addition to, not instead of, your original intended results.
- Consider constructing a logic model to explain your intended results and your plan for achieving them.

We often hear that defining intended results and success measures is challenging for applicants, so it's worth spending a bit of time on this here.

Let's think back to the questions we referenced a couple of slides ago when we talked about defining the need, problem, or challenge that your project is addressing. If you said someone will learn something, how will you know? If your problem related to segments of your community being better able to work together, how will you know when that has been achieved? If collections will be better cared for, how will you be sure and how will you measure "better?" If you're digitizing to expand accessibility, how will you know when you've done it?

All of your results should tie back to your need, problem, or challenge. You may well experience tangential benefits and/or positive outcomes, but make sure you identify them as "in addition to" and not "instead of" your original intended results. Reviewers are likely to see that as a disconnect.

This focus on results and measuring success in meaningful ways is not new, but it hasn't gotten easy. There has been a tremendous amount of work done on ways to measure success, and we as an agency are still working on this. For you as an applicant though, we encourage you to consider using a logic model to explain your intended results and your plan for achieving them.

Many MFA applicants use logic models, and reviewers appreciate their conciseness and focus. There are many excellent resources available to help you construct a logic model, and among these are IMLS's "Shaping Outcomes," a free online course developed in partnership with Indiana University-Purdue University of Indianapolis. It is available at www.shapingoutcomes.org, and it is customized to meet the needs of museum applicants. There are downloadable worksheets and numerous examples that you are likely to find relevant to your own work.

So, to recap: Your Narrative has three sections—Project Justification, Project Work Plan, and Project Results, and you have seven pages for it. The sections are all equally important. Write clearly, address what we ask you to address, and keep an eye on those review criteria. We're telling you here exactly what the reviewers will look for, so make it easy for them to find it and understand it.

At this point, we'd like to share a few tips gleaned from our collective experience in working with applications submitted to the MFA program each year.

First on the list, make sure your registrations are complete and your passwords and user names are current. You must have a DUNS number, an active SAM.gov registration, and a current and functional Grants.gov registration, and if you are just starting out, you'll need to acquire them in that order. In other words, you must have a DUNS number to register with SAM.gov. You must have an active SAM.gov registration to register with Grants.gov.

It's crucial to remember that your SAM.gov registration expires each year and you must renew it. You can check your status at any time by going to www.sam.gov. In addition, your Grants.gov password expires every 60 days, and leaving accounts inactive for a year or more can result in the removal of all account roles. So … make sure you know who your Grants.gov Authorized Organization Representative is and be sure the username and updated password are in place.

Both the SAM.gov and Grants.gov websites have robust help features and FAQs.

Application Tips

IMPORTANT TO KNOW: We can make grants only to **eligible** applicants that submit **complete** applications, including attachments, **on or before the deadline**. So…

- Start early.
- Become familiar with Grants.gov Workspace. See https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/applicants/workspace-overview.html
- Do your background research.
- Revisit the MFA Notice of Funding Opportunity frequently and follow the Narrative outline it provides. Use headings, subheadings, or numbered sections in your Narrative to make it easy for reviewers to read.
- Avoid generalities, acronyms, and jargon.
- Check your spelling, grammar, and math.
- Ask a colleague to review everything with fresh eyes before you submit it.
- Be sure your application is complete.
- Make sure all application components are in the proper format and follow the correct naming conventions.
- Submit to Grants.gov **early** so you can correct any errors.

IMPORTANT TO KNOW: Our regulations state clearly that we can make grants only to **eligible** applicants that submit **complete** applications, including attachments, **on or before the deadline**. Those are the concepts we must live by. So here are some tips to help ensure that you can too.

- Start early. You've already done that by participating in this webinar, but don't lose momentum. Keep going!
- Become familiar with Grants.gov's Workspace. This has been available as an option for a couple of years now, and it is now the **only** option. It has many good features, including upfront validation, which allows you to correct errors prior to submission, and the opportunity to collaborate with others in creating your application. Consider starting with the Workspace Overview and check out the tutorials.
- Do your background research. Make it easy for the reviewers to see that you are up to date and know what you're talking about.
- Revisit the MFA Notice of Funding Opportunity frequently, and follow the Narrative outline it provides. Use headings, subheadings, or numbered sections in your Narrative to make it easy for reviewers to read.
- Avoid generalities, acronyms, and jargon. The people who will review your application are experts, but they may not be totally familiar with your particular field's shorthand. Make it easy for them to understand what you mean.
- Check your spelling, grammar, and math. It counts with reviewers!
- Ask a colleague to review everything with fresh eyes before you submit. Ask them to act like a reviewer who's seeing this for the first time.

- Be sure your application is complete. Check it against the Table of Application Components in the Notice of Funding Opportunity...and then check it again.
- Submit to Grants.gov early so you can correct any errors and avoid any trauma created by technology challenges.

Application Processing and Review Timeline

Date	Review Activity
Nov 16, 2020	Applicants submit packets through Grants.gov
Dec 2020 – Feb 2021	IMLS staff review applications for completeness and eligibility
Feb – Jun 2021	Review period
Jul 2021	IMLS Director renders final award decisions
Aug 2021	IMLS notifies applicants of award decisions; provides reviewer comments
Sep 1, 2021	Awarded projects begin

This is the general schedule of events to show what happens to your application once we receive it. IMLS staff will review it for completeness and eligibility, and you will hear from us via email if there are any problems.

From February through June, your experienced and knowledgeable peers will provide scores and comments based on the criteria outlined in the MFA Notice of Funding Opportunity, and IMLS staff will examine your budget, your financials, and your track record with past and current grants. We then prepare materials for the IMLS Deputy Director for Museums and the IMLS Director. By law, the IMLS Director is charged with the authority and responsibility to make final award decisions, and this happens in July.

In August, we will notify you by email of the award decisions and provide the scores and comments created by the reviewers.

And on September 1, 2021, funded projects begin.

IMLS Office of Museum Services

Mark Feitl	mfeitl@imls.gov	202.653.4635
Mark Isaksen	misaksen@imls.gov	202.653.4667
Ashley Jones	ajones@imls.gov	202.653.4782
Reagan Moore	rmoore@imls.gov	202.653.4637
Steven Shwartzman	sshwartzman@imls.gov	202.653.4641
Helen Wechsler	hwechsler@imls.gov	202.653.4779
Laura Zamarripa	lzamarripa@imls.gov	202.653.4753

Thank you very much for your interest in IMLS and in Museums for America, and we hope you have found the information in this webinar helpful. Here is a listing of the names, email addresses, and direct phone numbers for program staff in the Office of Museum Services, and we encourage you to contact us with any questions you might have about what you've heard or seen in this webinar or in the online MFA materials. We'll be very happy to help.

So, with that, we wish you good luck, and we look forward to seeing your application in November.

Credit

This presentation text is a work of the U.S. Government and its contents are in the public domain. Images in this presentation are used with permission of the source noted, unless otherwise indicated. If you reuse our work, please acknowledge IMLS as the source.

Good luck!