

How Federal Funders of Latino Museums Commit to Equity

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Highlights

In an Urban survey of 74 Latino-serving museums and cultural institutions, **80 percent reported applying for federal grants.**

But funding barriers still exist. Among organizations that reported knowing about IMLS but did not apply for its grants, **no awareness of IMLS's grant programs (42 percent) and complicated application processes (33 percent)** were among the top reasons they did not apply.

This is one of a series of products from Urban's research to inform development of the new **American Latino History and Culture program** to be administered by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. This grantmaking program aims to strengthen the capacity of American Latino museums at promoting and preserving the study of Latino life, art, history, and culture. For more, see <https://www.urban.org/projects/planning-american-latino-history-and-culture-program>.

Note: We use the term "Latino" throughout to remain consistent with legislation authorizing this new program (Public Law 116-260), and intend for it to reference all diverse people of Spanish and/or Latin American origin in the US.

In January 2021, President Biden issued the [Executive Order \(EO\) on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government](#), requiring US federal agencies to produce agency-level equity action plans to "assess whether, and to what extent, programs and policies perpetuate systemic barriers to opportunities and benefits for people of color and underserved groups."

Equity action plans are an opportunity for federal agencies, including those that fund Latino museums and cultural institutions like the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), along with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), to commit to specific actions to redress inequities in program provision and access. The April 2022 IMLS equity action plan prioritizes the five actions below (IMLS 2022).

1. Bolster **data collection** to deepen understanding of underserved and underrepresented communities and to drive data-informed, equity-based grantmaking decisions.
2. Strengthen **field engagement and technical assistance** capacity to reduce barriers to underrepresented populations engaging as grant reviewers, applicants, and beneficiaries of funding and programming.
3. **Diversify the museum and library fields** and mitigate demographic gaps across professions through paid internships, sponsorships, and fellowships serving high-school students through midcareer professionals.
4. Fill capacity gaps to **train and support grantees to meet civil rights compliance responsibilities** and implement equity-driven initiatives.
5. Update **contracting and procurement processes** to offer longer application periods and expand market research to identify and engage underrepresented applicants.

The NEA and NEH equity action plans identify similar goals and challenges, including strengthening data-collection capacity, expanding outreach to underserved communities, streamlining grant application processes, and removing barriers to accessing procurement

opportunities, as well as improving accessibility for people with disabilities (NEA 2022; NEH 2022).

EQUITY BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

Across IMLS, NEA, and NEH, barriers to equity identified in agency equity action plans include the **underrepresentation of people of color, people with low incomes, and rural communities in the arts and archival fields**, which limits communities' engagement with the arts and organizations' awareness of federal funding opportunities. **Limited staff capacity**, especially at IMLS as a micro-agency, has resulted in staff directing the bulk of its civil rights resources and technical assistance to its largest grantees. Moreover, the **highly specialized nature of arts and archival work** can make it challenging to solicit responses to niche procurement opportunities.

COMMITMENTS AND AREAS OF PROGRESS AND OPPORTUNITY

IMLS, NEA, and NEH have all committed to conducting deeper and more prioritized engagement and outreach in underrepresented communities. IMLS has already begun examining its grantmaking programs, supporting an Urban Institute evaluation of its Museum Grants for African American History and Culture Program and an ongoing evaluation of its Native American/Native Hawaiian Grant Programs (Ashley et al. 2021). IMLS has also launched an [American Latino Museum Internship and Fellowship Initiative](#) to support professional development in this field, and all three agencies have committed to engaging with historically Black colleges and universities to bolster a pipeline of museum professionals from underrepresented populations. Lastly, the agencies have made progress on contracting and procurement with small businesses. Since FY 2017, IMLS has reported exceeding Small Business Administration targets for contracts with small businesses, woman-owned small businesses, and small disadvantaged businesses.

To further operationalize equity commitments, IMLS could consider forming its own **agency equity team**. The Biden administration's [Executive Order on Further Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government](#), issued in February 2023, calls on federal agency directors to form teams of senior officials across agencies' policy, civil rights, data, and procurement divisions, among others, to coordinate the implementation of equity initiatives. IMLS and the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities more broadly are not included in this executive order, but they could consider forming a similar body modeled after the parameters outlined in the executive order. At IMLS, this team could be spearheaded by its equity and civil rights engagement officer, a role the agency committed to establishing in its 2022 equity action plan.

To specifically advance commitments toward Latino engagement, IMLS might also benefit from developing an internal **Latino Museum Working Group** (inspired by the NEH Working Group on Hispanic-Serving Institutions) to periodically assess American Latino-focused efforts and responses from the broader museum and education field to identify opportunities to support or inform these initiatives on an ongoing basis.

Collectively, the actions and commitments of IMLS and other federal funders have potential to begin removing barriers to opportunities that Latino museums and other culturally specific museums have experienced, facilitating greater funding and progress for the study of Latino art, history, and culture.

REFERENCES

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