



21st Century Museum Professionals

Sample Application 21MP-259670-OMS-26

Zoo Atlanta

Amount awarded by IMLS: \$429,901

Amount of cost share: \$603,893

Zoo Atlanta will strengthen career pathways into zoo and museum professions by expanding the Zoo's internship program and establishing standardized training, mentorship, and evaluation systems. Program participants will develop the knowledge, professional competencies, and workplace behaviors necessary to successfully advance within the zoo and museum workforce. Through training and targeted professional development, over 60 interns will gain applied experience, career readiness skills, and expanded professional networks that position them for entry-level roles and long-term career pathways in the field. Zoo Atlanta staff serving as intern liaisons will strengthen their supervisory, mentoring, and leadership skills through formal training and applied experience. Intern participants will be students currently enrolled in higher education and intern liaisons will be early- to mid-career staff members at Zoo Atlanta. The project will establish a scalable workforce development model, evaluation-informed training curriculum, and dissemination of results through professional networks or conferences to support career readiness for students through workforce training practices in the museum and zoo field.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the current Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.

NARRATIVE

I. Project Justification

Project Overview: Zoo Atlanta respectfully requests \$487,085 over three years from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to support *Career Connections: Pathways for the Museum Workforce*. This project will strengthen career pathways into zoo and museum professions by expanding the Zoo’s paid Intern Program to serve **72 young adults over eight semesters**, implementing supervisory training for up to **27 Intern Liaisons**, and conducting a comprehensive three-year evaluation. In Fall 2025, Zoo Atlanta piloted a paid Intern Program, transitioning from an unpaid model to one that supports Intern and staff development. Building on the lessons from the inaugural cohort, this project will deepen professional development for both Interns and their supervisors while establishing standardized training, mentorship, and evaluation systems to support sustainable workforce pipelines. Interns will engage in experiential learning aligned with zoo and museum career pathways, receive individualized mentorship from trained Intern Liaisons, and earn compensation that supports full participation in professional development. Intern Liaisons will complete supervisory training and coaching to strengthen mentorship, leadership, and workforce preparation skills. A three-year evaluation, begun by an independent Consultant before transitioning to an in-house Program Evaluator, will measure career readiness, supervisory growth, and employment outcomes to identify and refine effective workforce development practices.

As the only major zoo serving Georgia, Zoo Atlanta is uniquely positioned to connect local young adults to museum and zoo careers through established partnerships with regional colleges and universities. By formalizing paid entry pathways and supervisory infrastructure, this project advances intentional, evidence-informed workforce development within the institution and contributes to broader field knowledge.

Alignment with Goal 2 – Recruit and Train Future Museum Professionals: This project directly advances **IMLS Goal 2** by expanding paid, clear recruitment pathways and strengthening training systems for emerging and current museum and zoo professionals. In alignment with **Objective 2.1**, the project recruits and prepares future professionals through a compensated Intern Program, competency-based training, and mentorship. In alignment with **Objective 2.2**, the project establishes and evaluates workforce training models through a three-year assessment, generating evidence to improve recruitment and preparation practices. Findings, tools, and program frameworks will be disseminated through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) regional and national conferences and peer partnerships, contributing to sustainable, scalable workforce development practices across the museum field. This project responds to the need for structured, paid pathways to entry and formalized supervisory training to sustain the museum workforce pipeline.

Alignment with Zoo Atlanta’s Strategic Plan: In Zoo Atlanta’s 2023–2027 Strategic Plan, a “Key Commitment to People” includes a goal to establish staff professional development programs based on position and individual performance. By further developing a paid Intern Program and implementing new trainings to help Intern Liaisons effectively support the growth of inexperienced young professionals, this project strengthens professional development for both current and future staff. It also assesses the Program’s impact on both Interns and Intern Liaisons, helping bolster the workforce of the Zoo and the broader museum field. Additionally, the Strategic Plan includes a goal to implement a standardized method and plan to evaluate Education programming that has clear, measurable program outcomes and vehicles for collecting metrics. As the Zoo does not currently have an in-house evaluator position, the *Career Connections* project’s three-year evaluation through a contract Evaluator and creation of a new Program Evaluator position in Year 3 will not only provide needed evaluation expertise for the paid Intern Program in the short-term, but it will also build Zoo Atlanta’s evaluation capacity and serve as a launching point for future in-house evaluations. Lastly, by building upon existing and establishing new partnerships with local colleges to recruit Interns, this project supports Zoo Atlanta’s goal to develop new or improved collaborations with universities to augment research and educational opportunities.

Need Being Addressed:

Atlanta’s Growing Economy and Workforce Need: Museums, zoos, and aquariums are foundational contributors to Atlanta’s economy and workforce vitality. Nonprofit arts and culture organizations generate nearly \$890 million in economic activity, support more than 12,700 jobs, produce over \$616 million in household income, and contribute nearly \$29 million in state and local tax revenue annually (Atlanta Mayor’s Office of Cultural Affairs, n.d.). These figures underscore the substantial role that cultural sector spending plays in Atlanta’s economic landscape and demonstrate that cultural institutions function as economic multipliers within the metropolitan region. Sustaining this impact depends on a skilled, continually developing workforce. Without standardized career pathways, the sector risks workforce shortages and limited long-term sustainability. As

Atlanta's economy expands, regional projections emphasize the need for a well-educated and continually developing workforce (Georgia Trend, 2024), and the City of Atlanta prioritizes workforce readiness and economic mobility (City of Atlanta, n.d.). Strengthening recruitment and training pathways within the cultural sector is therefore essential to maintaining capacity for the field and long-term economic contribution.

Expanding Entry Points to Recruit and Train Future Professionals: Entry into zoo and museum careers frequently requires prior hands-on experience, which can disadvantage individuals without professional networks or the financial resources needed to participate in unpaid professional development. Without paid, clear entry points, opportunities to enter these careers are limited, narrowing workforce capacities and long-term sustainability. As zoos and museums expand their roles in conservation, education, and community engagement, workforce demands increasingly require intentional preparation and mentorship. Internship programs serve as critical career pathway entry points by providing applied training, mentorship, and exposure to professional practice. In 2023 alone, eight former Zoo Atlanta Interns were hired into full-time positions at the Zoo, with others advancing into science careers or roles at peer institutions, demonstrating the effectiveness of internships as workforce pipeline strategies. Research confirms that experiential learning opportunities outside traditional academic settings expand opportunities and strengthen career outcomes. Zoos offer supportive environments for community college students pursuing research, reducing the challenges often associated with academic pathways (Anderson, 2010). Students who engage in research experiences beyond the classroom report significant gains in learning and career advancement (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019). However, unpaid internships, still common across zoos and museums, limit participation for individuals without financial means (Colton, 2022). Compensation enables interns to fully engage in professional development without competing employment obligations (Savoca, 2023). National data further demonstrate that paid internships strengthen recruitment and retention: 82% of interns who were compensated fairly would accept a full-time offer from their host organization, and nearly 80% report that internships significantly influence their interest in full-time employment (Handshake, 2025). Investing in paid, career-connected internships aligns with Atlanta's workforce development priorities and directly advances IMLS Goal 2 by strengthening recruitment pathways and building sustainable career pipelines for future museum and zoo professionals.

To ensure the success of Interns and strengthen sustainable career pathways within the field, Zoo Atlanta recognizes that workforce development must include early-career professionals who mentor and supervise emerging professionals. Building defined pathways requires investing in the individuals who guide Interns, equipping them with the leadership, supervisory, and coaching skills necessary to support meaningful career progression. The proposed Intern Liaisons are early- to mid-career staff members seeking advancement opportunities and supported by their managers to take on expanded responsibilities. The Liaisons are a unique component of Zoo Atlanta's Intern Program that reflects Zoo Atlanta's commitment to professional development and upward growth.

As the Intern Program expands to serve 72 participants over three years, reliance on informal mentorship models is insufficient to ensure consistent, high-quality workforce preparation across departments. By intentionally developing these individuals as mentors and leaders, Zoo Atlanta strengthens internal career ladders while improving the quality and impact of internship experiences. With financial support from this grant, the Zoo will intentionally track and evaluate the professional growth of Intern Liaisons over the course of the project. Through a combination of pre-assessments, ongoing reflection, and longitudinal evaluation methods, the Zoo will examine how targeted training and mentorship responsibilities increase participants' preparedness, leadership skills, and readiness to pursue advanced roles within the field. This approach will generate valuable insights into how standardized workforce training models not only benefit student interns but also contribute to the personal and professional development of emerging museum and zoo professionals. By formalizing both intern and supervisor development and embedding evaluation systems, this project addresses a broader field need for evidence-informed workforce training models aligned with IMLS 21MP priorities.

Target Group and Beneficiaries: The *Career Connections* project will immediately impact participants in Zoo Atlanta's Intern Program. Intern Program participants are college students, age 18 years or older, who have an interest in zoology or a related field. During the three-year grant period, 72 students of higher education will participate in the paid Intern Program designed to prepare them for professional roles within the field. In the past, the Zoo's unpaid internship program primarily attracted post-graduate students with extensive prior experience from four-year institutions. The newly launched paid Intern Program intentionally recruits emerging professionals who are currently enrolled in higher education and may not yet have prior field experience, expanding entry points into zoo and museum careers. Zoo Atlanta maintains recruitment relationships with Kennesaw State University, Georgia State University, Clayton State University, and additional regional colleges and community

colleges, with plans to expand outreach during the grant period to strengthen local workforce pipelines (see Supporting Document #1). Zoo Atlanta staff have faculty appointments at the University of Georgia, Emory University, Georgia State University, and Georgia Institute of Technology, which attests to the Zoo's investment in college-level teaching and ability to extend its educational reach far beyond the K–12 education typical of most accredited zoos. By targeting and expanding its recruitment across colleges, the Zoo aims to attract students from the local community.

A secondary target group includes Zoo Atlanta staff serving as Intern Liaisons. Over three years, up to 27 staff members (approximately one per participating department annually) will receive supervisory training and coaching to strengthen mentorship, feedback, and leadership competencies. These early- and mid-career professionals will gain skills that support both Intern success and their own career advancement at Zoo Atlanta and beyond.

In the long-term, the beneficiaries of the *Career Connections* project include current and future Intern participants within the Atlanta community, Zoo staff serving as Intern Liaisons, and other future professionals across AZA-accredited institutions. Zoo Atlanta will disseminate tools, evaluation reports, and workforce training models through AZA regional and national conferences and partnerships with peer institutions, contributing to workforce development practices across the field. By developing a sustainable recruitment and training pipeline aligned with its Strategic Plan, Zoo Atlanta strengthens Atlanta's cultural workforce while reinforcing long-term capacity of the organization and museum and zoo field nationally.

II. Project Workplan

Project Team: Staci Wiech, Vice President of Education, and April Anderson, Director of Volunteer Programs, will plan and implement the project, with April managing all day-to-day aspects, including selecting Program participants and supporting Intern Liaisons, as well as coordinating industry-specific trainings for Interns. Combined, they bring over 30 years of experience designing, implementing, and evaluating Education Programs. **Gabrielle Frega, Training and Development Manager**, will develop and lead the Intern Liaisons' trainings as well as the Interns' professional development trainings. **Joy Kubarek, Ph.D., of Inform Evaluation & Research**, will lead the evaluation as a contract Evaluator, bringing over 20 years of experience in science education and an understanding of zoos and aquariums (see Supporting Document #2). The **Intern Liaisons**, who will primarily be Animal Keepers and mid-level Managers, will provide direct training and supervision of Interns within their respective departments. A full-time **Program Evaluator** will be hired in Year 3 to continue the contract Evaluator's initial evaluation beyond the grant period, and the successful candidate for this position will have two years of relevant experience and a master's degree in science education or a related field. (See Projectstaff.pdf for more details about the project team's experience and qualifications.)

Project Activities: The *Career Connections* project has five main components: **(1)** The Zoo will **select and onboard Interns and Intern Liaisons** for each Program semester. **(2)** The Education and Human Resources teams will **refresh, design, and conduct trainings** with Intern Liaisons and Interns. **(3)** The contract Evaluator and Zoo Atlanta will **evaluate the Intern Program** to determine a baseline of understanding, longitudinal effects, and Program evolution. **(4)** Informed by evaluation findings, the team will **continuously improve programs**. **(5)** The Zoo will transition from a contract Evaluator to a **full-time, in-house Evaluator and create a sustainability plan** beyond the grant period.

Component 1 – Expand Paid Intern Program (Years 1, 2, and 3): Zoo Atlanta will build upon its successful Fall 2025 pilot by expanding the paid Intern Program to serve additional students and Intern Liaisons (see logic model in Supporting Document #3).

- **Activity 1a: Select Intern Liaisons:** Prior to each annual cycle and as needed throughout the year, interested Zoo staff, with manager support, will apply to serve as Intern Liaisons. The Education team will select Liaisons and initiate supervisory training led by the Training and Development Manager. Liaisons will rotate annually to broaden leadership opportunities and build supervisory capacity across departments. (See position description in Supporting Document #4.)
- **Activity 1b: Recruit, Interview, and Select Applicants:** With Liaisons in place, Zoo Atlanta will recruit Interns through existing partnerships with local colleges and universities while expanding outreach, particularly to community colleges. The Program will be advertised approximately three months before each semester. Applicants will complete an online application and interview process led by the Director of Volunteer Programs with support from Intern Liaisons. Selection will prioritize candidates who demonstrate strong interest in conservation and zoology and possess a level of field experience appropriate for an internship (see Supporting Document #5 for Interview Process and Guidelines). Selected Interns will be assigned to a department and matched with an Intern Liaison. The Program will operate in three annual

cycles: Spring (February–April), Summer (June–August), and Fall (October–December). During the 12-week semester, Interns will gain on-the-job experience in areas such as animal care, education, nonprofit administration, and research. (See position description in Supporting Document #6.)

Component 2 – Training to Support Interns and Intern Liaisons (Years 1, 2, and 3): The Zoo Education and Human Resources teams will support the Intern Liaisons and Interns by reviewing and refreshing trainings designed to meet the outcomes of the Program. The project staff will conduct evaluations following each training course in addition to interviews with staff and Interns to guide new content needs and inform updates once the trainings are implemented.

- **Activity 2a: Intern Trainings:** Intern training will integrate career readiness, transferable professional skills, and foundational knowledge of zoo and museum operations to prepare participants for successful entry into the zoo and museum workforce. Professional development sessions, led by the Training and Development Manager, will strengthen core competencies such as workplace communication, professionalism, and career navigation—skills essential for long-term career pathway advancement (see Supporting Document #7). Complementary industry-specific training, coordinated by the Director of Volunteer Programs and delivered by departmental staff, will provide applied, hands-on experience across functional areas, exposing Interns to a variety of roles and career trajectories within Zoo Atlanta (see Supporting Document #8). Evaluation data collected in Years 1 and 2, including post-training surveys and Intern interviews, will inform continuous refinement of training strategies, contributing to the identification and sharing of effective workforce education practices aligned with IMLS priorities.
- **Activity 2b: Intern Liaison Trainings and Coaching:** Intern Liaisons play a critical role in mentoring, supervising, and modeling professional behavior for Interns. Currently, Zoo Atlanta does not have a formal or standardized training program to prepare staff for the supervisory and mentorship responsibilities of this role. To address this gap, the Zoo will implement a comprehensive suite of professional development trainings for Intern Liaisons, led by the Training and Development Manager (see Supporting Document #9). These trainings will focus on building supervisory, mentorship, and leadership skills needed to effectively support Interns across departments. In addition to group training, the Training and Development Manager will provide 1-on-1 coaching opportunities for Intern Liaisons throughout the grant period and beyond. Coaching will support the application of training concepts to real workplace situations, strengthen confidence in supervising early career professionals, and promote more consistent, high quality Intern experiences across the organization. The Director of Volunteer Programs will also develop training modules to better define the Program and Intern Liaison role; establish best practices for selecting and evaluating Interns; create standardized policies and timelines; and reinforce core supervisory and mentorship skills. Training content will draw on feedback from past Intern Liaison surveys, lessons learned from comparable programs, and the stated goals of the Intern Program.

To further strengthen workforce development outcomes, Zoo Atlanta will also implement a learning objectives rubric for Interns that defines core competencies aligned with successful transition into full-time roles. The rubric will outline clear skill benchmarks in areas such as professional communication, collaboration, initiative, workplace conduct, and understanding of zoo operations. Intern Liaisons will use this rubric to guide mentorship, provide structured feedback, and assess Intern growth at mid-point and conclusion of the semester. This tool will both standardize expectations across departments and generate measurable data on Intern progress toward career readiness (see Supporting Document #10).

Component 3 – Evaluation: The three-year evaluation will be conducted in partnership with the Zoo Education team and the evaluation consultant, Inform Evaluation & Research (<https://www.informeval.com/>). To adhere to best practices in human subject research, the consultant will submit the data collection plan to the Lincoln Park Zoo Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review and approval. Dedicated to supporting zoos and aquariums in social science research, this IRB has a unique understanding of zoos. The following guiding questions will inform the data sources, methods, and analysis in this evaluation and reflect the Zoo's goals of assessing the Intern Program's effectiveness as an early-career pipeline, understanding long-term impacts, and supporting continuous Program improvement.

1. What professional skills do Interns report gaining or strengthening by participating in the Zoo's Intern Program?
2. To what extent do Interns feel better prepared for future employment or education in museum, zoo, or related fields?
 - a) How does participation affect Interns' understanding of museum and zoo career pathways?
3. What new skills or competencies do Intern Liaisons report developing through supervising and mentoring Interns?
4. To what extent does the Intern Program function as an early-career pipeline into museum or zoo professions?
 - a) What elements of the Program are most effective in supporting workforce development?
5. How can evaluation data be used to refine Program activities, training, and supervision?

- **Activity 3a: Baseline Understanding (Year 1):** The first year of evaluation will establish a baseline understanding of Interns' and Intern Liaisons' professional development needs, existing skills, and career interests. This needs assessment will identify current strengths, gaps, and opportunities related to workforce preparation and training, particularly in relation to museum and zoo career pathways. Quantitative analysis will use descriptive statistics; qualitative analysis will use thematic analysis with open coding. Methods include: (1) Pre-surveys of current Interns and Intern Liaisons to document baseline characteristics and assess workforce-related knowledge, skills, and interests; (2) Embedded career-interest questions in existing Intern interviews at three intervals (pre-, mid-, and post-Program) to understand how Interns' knowledge of museum and zoo careers evolves over time; (3) Interviews with staff and Intern Liaisons to examine Program implementation, track Program evolution, and identify training, supervision, and mentorship needs; and (4) Interviews with Intern Liaisons to understand how supervising Interns affects their own skills and what support they may need. Findings from Year 1 will inform refinement of Program activities, training structures, and Liaison support.
- **Activity 3b: Long-Term Effects (Year 2):** The second year will adopt a retrospective approach, engaging Intern alumni from the past five years to capture long-term effects on leadership skills, professional competencies, and interest in or attainment of museum- or zoo-related careers. Both quantitative and qualitative methods will be used, including: (1) Retrospective alumni survey to assess long-term effects on leadership skills and career pathways; (2) Participatory method (e.g., photovoice) to deepen understanding of participants' experiences and identify what contributed to change; and (3) Staff interviews to continue monitoring Program evolution and identify how best to support the Intern experience. Quantitative analysis will include descriptive and inferential statistics; qualitative analysis will involve open coding to identify themes. Alumni will receive gift card incentives for participation.
- **Activity 3c: Monitoring Program Evolution (Year 3):** The final year will monitor Program evolution and explore the experiences of recent Intern alumni who have moved into academic or career pursuits. Methods include: (1) Interviews with recent alumni to understand which aspects of the Program supported their career pathway and what areas did not work; and (2) Interviews with staff to monitor ongoing Program evolution, assess how the Intern Program model is functioning, and identify areas for further development. Qualitative data will be analyzed using thematic analysis with open coding to identify emergent themes across participant groups. This process will allow evaluators to systematically examine patterns related to program strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. In this final year, Inform will also collaborate with Zoo Atlanta's new full-time Evaluator to orient them to prior evaluation activities and co-develop a long-term plan to support ongoing Program monitoring and longitudinal tracking of Intern alumni.

Component 4: Program Improvements (Years 1, 2, and 3): With the baseline data gathered from interviews with the Interns and Intern Liaisons in Year 1, the Education team will begin to propose changes to adaptively manage the paid Intern Program based on participant feedback. The Education team and contract Evaluator will also assess the impact of Intern Liaison trainings. The Education team will continue to assess challenges to the paid Intern Program and make recommendations to adjust the Program for Year 3. In the project's final year, the Education team will implement changes to the paid Intern Program based on the evaluation results from Years 1–2. The team will continue to assess the functionality of the Intern Program and the impact of all trainings. While more substantial changes are likely to occur in Year 3, the Zoo team plans to meet quarterly to review feedback from Interns and make modifications to the Program so that each Intern can play an integral role in designing and shaping this Program.

Component 5: Create *Career Connections* Sustainability Plan (Year 3): Zoo Atlanta will hire a full-time Program Evaluator in 2028 who will work closely with the evaluation consultant Inform Evaluation & Research in the project's final year and transition the evaluation work after the grant period.

- **Activity 5a: Hire Full-time Program Evaluator:** To continue the work of the *Career Connections* project and expand the impact of the Program into other facets of the Zoo, a full-time Program Evaluator will be hired in Year 3. This in-house position will have the ability to assess the Program using the evaluation reports from Years 1–3 and make recommendations for how to scale up and grow the Zoo's impact on workforce development. While the contract Evaluator will manage the evaluation in the short-term and develop Zoo Atlanta's capacity for future evaluations, an in-house full-time position is needed to provide in-depth knowledge of the Zoo's Education Programs and project manage their evaluation in the long-term. Zoo Atlanta plans to budget for this position beyond the project period to ensure evaluation continues for Education and aligns with the Strategic Goals of the organization.
- **Activity 5b: Program Sustainability:** Using evaluation reports from the first two years, the Zoo team and the Evaluator team (contract Evaluator and full-time Evaluator) will work together to formulate a plan that will include

recommendations for Program updates; additional trainings for Intern Liaisons and Interns; new guiding research questions; and ways to leverage the *Career Connections* project into other education and training opportunities.

Project Resources Needed: The project budget is \$1,130,213.00 with \$487,085.00 being requested from IMLS. IMLS funding will support Intern stipends, contract evaluation fees, and the salary and fringe benefits of the full-time Program Evaluator in Year 3. Zoo Atlanta is contributing \$643,128.00 in staff wages, with staff contributing their time as follows: Vice President of Education (5%), Director of Volunteer Programs (40%), Intern Liaisons (50% each semester per Intern), and Training and Development Manager (7%). Inform Evaluation & Research will manage the evaluation and transition to the full-time Program Evaluator in Year 3.

Goals, Risks, and Assumptions: This project leverages Zoo Atlanta's educational and workforce training infrastructure to strengthen career pathways into the zoo and museum field through a paid Intern Program, training for Interns and Intern Liaisons, and a comprehensive evaluation framework. The long-term goal is to institutionalize a sustainable, evidence-informed Intern Program model that supports recruitment, preparation, and retention of future museum professionals. The Zoo has identified four areas of risk with strategies for mitigation. **(1) Sustainability of the Program Evaluator Position:** As Zoo Atlanta's operating budget is significantly supported by admissions revenue, which can be variable, the hiring of an in-house Program Evaluator in Year 3 presents the primary financial risk. Years 1 and 2 will utilize a contract Evaluator to build evaluation systems, demonstrate measurable workforce outcomes, and document the value of the position. Zoo Atlanta will simultaneously explore diversified funding streams, including community contributions and organizational budgeting, to support long-term sustainability. Evaluation outcomes will be integrated into strategic planning to strengthen the case for permanent funding. **(2) Sustainability of Paid Intern Program Post-Grant:** The project assumes continued organizational investment in Intern compensation after the grant period ends. The Zoo will incorporate the paid Intern Program into annual operating budgets and seek supplemental philanthropic and corporate sponsorship support. Demonstrating measurable workforce and hiring outcomes will strengthen the organizational case for ongoing investment. As Zoo Atlanta already secured local philanthropic funding to support a successful, though smaller, inaugural semester in Fall 2025, which has resulted in at least one Intern hired at Zoo Atlanta as a Bird Keeper to date, the team is confident that community support could help sustain the Program if needed. **(3) Staff Capacity and Competing Priorities:** The project assumes Intern Liaisons have sufficient time to engage in training and mentorship. To mitigate competing operational demands, supervisory expectations will be clearly defined, managers will formally support participation, and positions will rotate across departments to balance workload. **(4) Participant Engagement:** The project assumes consistent engagement from Interns and Intern Liaisons in training and evaluation activities. Compensation, defined learning objectives, competency-based rubrics, and regular feedback checkpoints will promote accountability and sustained participation. By the end of the project period, Zoo Atlanta will embed workforce development practices, including the paid Intern Program, competency-based training, supervisory development, and evaluation systems, into standard operating procedures to ensure long-term sustainability.

Tracking Progress: The project team will create a management plan to ensure the project stays on track. The team will meet monthly to review progress and make any necessary adjustments to the project development, implementation, or timelines. With the contract Evaluator's support, the Zoo will use the following approaches to gauge success:

- **Gathering baseline data to understand Intern challenges, opportunities for change, factors that limit engagement in the Program, and perceived obstacles to entering the workforce:** This information will be collected through Intern surveys, which will include targeted questions around career interest; interviews with staff to monitor evolution of the Program and identify needs as it pertains to workforce development training; and surveys of staff post training to understand how trainings influenced their knowledge, skills, and confidence in mentoring Interns.
- **Capturing the long-term effects of the Program and how they influence participants' leadership skills and interest and attainment of zoo and museum careers:** This information will be collected through a retrospective survey of alumni to gather a breadth of understanding of long-term effects on leadership skills and zoo and museum career attainment; a participatory method that engages alumni to deepen understanding of these effects and identify drivers of change; and staff interviews to continue to monitor evolution of the Program.
- **Monitoring Program evolution via Intern experiences and staff perspectives to understand how the Intern Program acts as a career entry point:** Interviews with recent Intern alumni will aim to identify successful and less-successful aspects of the Program, and interviews with staff will continue to monitor the evolution of the Program and understand how it is working, what needs further development, etc.

III. Project Results

Intended Results: Completion of the project will have immediate short-term results for the Interns, Intern Liaisons, and Zoo Atlanta, with other long-term results additionally impacting Atlanta and the broader AZA and museum community.

- **72 Interns** will build professional competencies and foundational knowledge of zoo and museum operations.
- As measured through pre- and post-assessment, **85%** of Interns will improve career readiness skills, **80%** will report increased clarity about career pathways, and **90%** will report greater confidence in pursuing employment in the field.
- Long term, the *Career Connections* project will strengthen a sustainable workforce pipeline into the zoo and museum field, with at least **75% of Interns** securing employment or pursuing advanced degrees in zoos, museums, or related fields within 12 months of earning their post-secondary degree.
- Simultaneously, Zoo Atlanta will strengthen internal workforce capacity through targeted supervisory development. **100% of Intern Liaisons** will complete mentorship training, at least **80%** will demonstrate measurable growth in leadership self-efficacy, and **50%** will assume expanded responsibilities or pursue advancement within 12 months.
- The project will establish a scalable workforce development model, evaluation-informed training curriculum, and dissemination of results through at least **two professional networks or conferences by the end of Year 3**.
- Additionally, the project will strengthen local workforce participation and economic mobility, with sustained partnerships between Zoo Atlanta and at least **three local institutions annually** to support ongoing recruitment.

Intended Target Group Change: Program participants will develop the knowledge, professional competencies, and workplace behaviors necessary to successfully enter and advance within the zoo and museum workforce. Through paid on-the-job training and targeted professional development, Interns will gain applied experience, career readiness skills, and expanded professional networks that position them for entry-level roles and long-term career pathways in the field. At the same time, Zoo Atlanta staff serving as Intern Liaisons will strengthen their supervisory, mentoring, and leadership skills through formal training and applied experience. By building staff capacity to effectively train and support emerging professionals, the Program reinforces sustainable career pathways and strengthens the organization's overall workforce development infrastructure.

Project's Products: This project will produce durable workforce development tools that strengthen Zoo Atlanta's Intern Program and contribute to the broader museum field. The contract Evaluator will develop a comprehensive Education Evaluation Plan with standardized tools for measuring recruitment, training, and career pathway outcomes, advancing the Zoo's Strategic Plan. The project will also result in a formal competency-based learning objectives rubric that defines benchmarks for Intern growth toward full-time roles. Evaluation reports will document Intern skill development, employment outcomes, and supervisory growth, creating an evidence base for continuous improvement. By Year 3, evaluation systems will transition in-house to ensure sustainability. Findings and tools will be shared through professional networks, contributing to local and national efforts to strengthen recruitment and workforce training in zoos and museums.

Sustainability: This project embeds a paid Intern Program, training, and formal evaluation into Zoo Atlanta's ongoing workforce development infrastructure rather than positioning them as temporary initiatives. By the end of the project, all aspects of the Intern Program, including the Interns' learning objectives rubric, the Intern Liaisons' supervisory training model, and formal evaluation, will be integrated into standard Education Program operations, creating consistent expectations for Intern growth and career readiness. Workforce development is a priority within Zoo Atlanta's 2023–2027 Strategic Plan, and this project formalizes recruitment pathways, mentorship practices, and competency benchmarks that will remain in place beyond the grant period. The Program also strengthens Zoo Atlanta's role within the Atlanta workforce and higher education ecosystem by deepening partnerships with local colleges and universities to create sustained recruitment pipelines and expand opportunities for career-connected learning for local students. Sustainability is further reinforced through evaluation capacity. In Year 3, systems and tools developed by the contract Evaluator will transition to a full-time Program Evaluator, ensuring ongoing assessment, continuous improvement, and longitudinal tracking of workforce outcomes. By institutionalizing evaluation, supervisory development, and career pathway frameworks, and sharing findings with peer institutions, Zoo Atlanta positions this initiative as a sustained, scalable model aligned with IMLS 21MP priorities to recruit and train future museum professionals while supporting the long-term vitality of Atlanta's cultural workforce.

Schedule of Completion – Year 1												
Grant Period 9/1/26 to 8/31/29	2026				2027							
	Sep ‘26	Oct ‘26	Nov‘26	Dec‘26	Jan’27	Feb’27	Mar’27	Apr’27	May’27	Jun’27	Jul ‘27	Aug’27
Intern Program Recruitment, Implementation, Training												
Recruit Interns		For Sp’27				For Sum’27				For Fall ‘27		
Interview & Onboard Interns			Interview		Onboard		Interview		Onboard		Interview	
Intern Program Semester						12-week semester				12-week semester		
Conduct professional development trainings for Interns												
Intern Liaison Selection & Training												
Interview & select Intern Liaisons as needed	For Sp’27				For Sum’27				For Fall ‘27			
Train Intern Liaisons												
Evaluation – Baseline Understanding												
Interview staff to monitor Program evolution												
Conduct Needs Assessment of Interns & Intern Liaisons												
Survey Intern Liaisons after trainings												
Gather baseline data on accepted Interns												
Conduct Intern mid-term 1:1 interview												
Conduct Intern exit surveys and interview												
Intern Program Improvements												
Propose initial changes to Program based on participant feedback												
Revise and implement changes to Intern trainings												

Schedule of Completion – Year 2												
Grant Period 9/1/26 to 8/31/29	2027				2028							
	Sep ‘27	Oct ‘27	Nov‘27	Dec‘27	Jan’28	Feb’28	Mar’28	Apr’28	May’28	Jun’28	Jul ‘28	Aug’28
Intern Program Recruitment, Implementation, Training												
Recruit		For Sp’28				For Sum’28				For Fall’28		
Interview & Onboard Interns	Onboard		Interview		Onboard		Interview		Onboard		Interview	
Intern Program Semester		12-week semester				12-week semester				12-week semester		
Conduct professional development trainings for Interns												
Intern Liaison Selection & Training												
Interview and select Intern Liaisons as needed	For Sp’28				For Sum’28				For Fall’28			
Train Intern Liaisons												
Evaluation - STEM Long Term Effects + Program Evaluation												
Conduct retrospective survey of Intern alumni												
Conduct participatory evaluation with Intern Alumni												
Survey current Interns												
Interview staff to monitor Program evolution												
Survey staff after trainings												
Conduct Intern mid-term 1:1 interviews												
Conduct Intern exit surveys and meetings												
Intern Program Improvements												
Adjust Program based on Year 1 feedback and evaluation results												
Revise and implement changes to Intern trainings as needed												

Schedule of Completion – Year 3												
Grant Period 9/1/26 to 8/31/29	2028				2029							
	Sep ‘28	Oct ‘28	Nov ‘28	Dec ‘28	Jan’29	Feb’29	Mar’29	Apr’29	May’29	Jun’29	Jul ‘29	Aug’29
Intern Program Recruitment, Implementation												
Recruit		For Sp’29				For Sum’29						
Interview and Onboard Interns	Onboard		Interview		Onboard		Interview		Onboard			
Intern Program Semester		12-week semester				12-week semester				12-week semester		
Conduct professional development trainings for Interns												
Intern Liaison Selection & Training												
Interview and select Intern Liaisons as needed	For Sp’29				For Sum’29							
Train Intern Liaisons												
Evaluation - Monitoring Program Evolution + Program Evaluation												
Survey current Interns												
Interview staff to monitor Program evolution												
Survey staff after trainings												
Conduct Intern mid-term 1:1 interviews												
Conduct Intern exit surveys and meetings												
Interview Interns from Year 1 & 2 for career growth												
Intern Program Improvements												
Incorporate Intern feedback into program modifications												
Update Intern Program based on evaluation results												
Implement Intern Program updates												
Career Connections Sustainability Planning												
Hire full-time Program Evaluator on Zoo staff												
Transition evaluation work from contract evaluator to full-time Evaluator												
Create post-project program sustainability plan												