



21st Century Museum Professionals

Sample Application 21MP-260160-OMS-26

Western Illinois University

Amount awarded by IMLS: \$249,694

Amount of cost share: \$261,060

WIU Museum Studies Graduate Program will enhance the quality of workforce preparation and expand the range of access to professional development across the Midwest museum sector. Project activities include hosting a series of micro-credential workshops to provide 250 museum professionals with applicable skills in critical areas such as digital collections management, community engagement models, governance and board relations, education programming design, and institutional sustainability strategies. A micro-credential workshop curriculum with session materials, facilitator guides, participant workbooks, hands-on activities, assessment instruments, and case studies will be created and made accessible via an online learning platform. The project also supports paid, year-long apprenticeships for eight graduate students who will contribute to collections, programming, education, and institutional initiatives at four host museums. A comprehensive apprenticeship curriculum that includes partnership templates, mentorship guidelines, assessment rubrics, and sustainability frameworks will be created and shared with partner museums. The project will generate opportunities for apprentices, graduate students, site mentors, content experts, and working museum staff to engage together in shared professional development, while producing environments in which graduate students learn from practitioners, practitioners engage with current research, and all participants build professional networks that extend beyond any single training event.

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.

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

The museum field has long recognized a persistent gap between academic preparation and professional readiness. Graduate students complete coursework with strong theoretical foundations but limited operational experience; working museum professionals develop deep institutional knowledge but lack structured access to current scholarship and evolving practices. Western Illinois University Museum Studies seeks support through the 21st Century Museum Professionals Program to close this gap — not by patching the existing system at its margins, but by redesigning the professional development pipeline itself. Through degree-integrated paid apprenticeships for graduate students and accessible microcredential workshops for working professionals, this initiative creates a workforce development model that produces genuinely field-ready professionals while expanding cultural institutions' capacity to fulfill their missions.

21st Century Museum Professionals Program Goals and Objectives

Through this initiative, WIU Museum Studies and its collaborating partners will advance two core goals of the IMLS grant program:

Goal 1: Support the professional development of the current museum workforce.

Objective 1.1 – Develop new or enhanced professional development and training programs for the museum workforce.

Goal 2: Recruit and train future museum professionals.

Objective 2.1 – Expand pathways into the museum field by adapting higher education programs to be more responsive to the needs of the museum workforce.

Responding to Need: Three Converging Workforce Challenges

This project responds to three interconnected challenges that together limit both the quality of workforce preparation and the breadth of access to professional development across the Midwest museum sector.

Challenge 1: The Training Gap Between Academic Study and Professional Practice

Museum employers consistently report that candidates arrive with theoretical knowledge but insufficient operational experience. Entry-level positions increasingly require two to three years of field experience — experience that traditional semester-long internships, even when available, rarely provide at the depth or duration necessary to develop genuine professional competence. A student who completes a twelve-week internship has observed museum operations; a student who spends eight months working as a paid apprentice has practiced them — navigating real institutional decisions, managing collections workflows, designing and delivering programs, and developing the professional judgment that only sustained, mentored practice can build.

Until 2025, WIU Museum Studies addressed this training gap through a Graduate Assistant program that placed up to eight graduate students per semester in Quad City-area museums under the mentorship of experienced professionals. These positions provided graduate students with sustained, compensated work experience while simultaneously contributing to partner museum operations — a model that produced both well-trained graduates and stronger regional institutions. In 2025, WIU's financial crisis led to the elimination of all Museum Studies Graduate Assistant positions, dismantling an effective dual-track training infrastructure. This project rebuilds and expands that infrastructure through a formal apprenticeship model that integrates paid professional practice directly into the MA curriculum.

Compensation is not incidental to this model — it is structural. Paid apprenticeships allow graduate students to commit fully to sustained professional training alongside their academic coursework, rather than treating field experience as an add-on they must fit around employment obligations.

Program data show that 65% of graduate students in the museum studies program currently work at least 20 hours per week, and 22% work 40 or more hours while completing their degrees. When professional training is uncompensated, graduate students in these circumstances cannot participate, meaning the graduate students who most need deep field experience to build competitive professional profiles are the least likely to get it. Compensation is the mechanism that enables dual-track professional development.

Challenge 2: Insufficient Access to Professional Development for the Regional Workforce

Rural museums in Illinois and Iowa face a critical shortage of accessible professional development. Most operate with small staffs — many entirely volunteer-run — and have sharply limited budgets for training and continuing education. The Fall 2025 Iowa Museum Association Pulse Member Survey, conducted by WIU graduate students, found that 18% of Iowa museums experienced cuts in state-level funding, 11% experienced cuts in federal funding, and 18% reduced or eliminated programming due to financial pressure (IMA, 2026). These institutions report urgent skill gaps in collections management, education programming, governance, and strategic planning, alongside rapidly evolving demands in digital collections systems, AI applications, and diversified funding models.

WIU Museum Studies — the only graduate-level training program for museum professionals from all disciplines in the bi-state region — offers flexible delivery through in-person and synchronous Zoom instruction. But the traditional 15-week academic semester remains a prohibitive barrier for working professionals who cannot step away from their institutions for extended study. Online training and webinars offer accessible knowledge transfer, but they cannot replicate the hands-on, relational, and collaborative dimensions essential to museum professional development. Collections management requires direct handling of objects and database navigation. Educational programming develops through facilitated interaction with visitors. Strategic planning benefits from collaborative problem-solving with peers facing parallel institutional challenges. The region needs accessible, in-person, skills-focused professional development that working museum staff can realistically access.

Challenge 3: Professional Isolation and the Absence of Mentorship Networks

A third challenge compounds the first two. Graduate students completing internships in isolation miss out on the peer learning and collaborative problem-solving that accelerate professional development. Working museum professionals — particularly those at small or volunteer-run institutions — rarely engage with peers beyond their immediate institutions or access scholarship informing current practices. These conditions produce professionals who are individually trained but collectively siloed, limiting both their institutional effectiveness and their long-term career resilience. No workforce development model focused exclusively on skills or access, without also building the mentorship communities and professional networks that sustain careers, will produce lasting results.

Solution: An Integrated Workforce Development Model

This project addresses all three challenges through two complementary interventions that function as a cohesive system — creating financial access, building skills, and cultivating the professional communities that sustain careers.

Intervention 1: Degree-Integrated Paid Apprenticeships

The apprenticeship model transforms professional training from an optional supplement to an integrated component of the MA degree. Eight-month apprenticeships (September–May) are structured to move graduate students progressively from foundational tasks to independent project management, allowing them to develop the operational fluency, specialized expertise, and

professional judgment that sustained mentored practice produces — and that semester-long internships cannot. They earn academic credit for their apprenticeship work and receive dual mentorship from both faculty and site supervisors, ensuring that theoretical understanding and practical expertise develop in a continuous dialogue.

Apprenticeships are jobs, and they are structured as such. This distinction matters. Unlike traditional internships — which position graduate students as observers or supplemental support — apprenticeships engage them as contributing professionals with defined responsibilities, performance expectations, and compensation that reflects the value of their work. Partner museums benefit from the sustained, skilled contributions of apprentices over eight months; graduate students benefit from the kind of deep institutional immersion that produces genuinely field-ready graduates. Both outcomes serve the workforce.

Intervention 2: Microcredential Workshops for Working Professionals

A series of one-day, graduate-level microcredential workshops will provide working museum professionals with targeted, immediately applicable skills in critical areas — digital collections management, community engagement models, governance and board relations, education programming design, and institutional sustainability strategies. The one-day format eliminates the scheduling and financial barriers of semester-long enrollment without sacrificing the hands-on, in-person collaborative learning that effective professional development requires. Participants engage in expert-led instruction, direct skills practice, and structured peer problem-solving — leaving with both new capabilities and the professional relationships that sustain ongoing learning.

The workshop structure also directly addresses the third workforce challenge by creating cross-pollinating learning communities. Apprentices, graduate students, site mentors, content experts, and working museum staff engage together in shared professional development — producing environments in which graduate students learn from practitioners, practitioners engage with current research, and all participants build the professional networks that extend beyond any single training event. This bidirectional knowledge flow is a design feature, not an incidental benefit: it is what distinguishes a learning community from a training transaction.

Why Western Illinois University Museum Studies — and Why Now

WIU Museum Studies is the only Master of Arts in Museum Studies program in the Illinois-Iowa bi-state region, and its track record demonstrates its capacity to lead this initiative. Since 2022, the program has achieved 43% enrollment growth, a near-100 % job placement rate, and more than \$85,000 in external support for museum studies scholarships and resources. WIU Museum Studies graduate students and faculty currently contribute more than 10,000 service hours annually to Quad City museums — institutions that serve populations on both sides of the Mississippi River — demonstrating operational commitment that cannot be manufactured for a grant application.

The program's longstanding partnerships with the Figge Art Museum, German American Heritage Center, Putnam Museum, and the Quad Cities Botanical Center provide the collaborative infrastructure an apprenticeship model requires: experienced site supervisors (including several alumni of the WIU program), established institutional relationships, and a shared commitment to developing the next generation of museum professionals. A formal partnership with the Iowa Museum Association creates a regional network through which microcredential workshops can reach rural professionals and volunteer-run institutions that need accessible professional development most urgently.

The simultaneous contraction of higher education resources and museum operating budgets has disrupted what was, until recently, a functioning professional development ecosystem in this region. This project does not simply restore what was lost — it builds a more intentional, more sustainable, and more inclusive model in its place. WIU Museum Studies has the partnerships, track record, regional positioning, and program architecture to make that model work. This grant would make it possible.

Primary Audience

This project was developed in direct response to feedback from current WIU Museum Studies graduate students, recent alumni, museum professionals, and partner institutions, and will serve the following audiences:

Graduate Student Apprentices (n=8): Eight students accepted into the Museum Studies MA program will be selected over Years 2 and 3 for paid, part-time apprenticeships (720 hours at \$16/hour = \$11,520 annually, September–May). These positions integrate sustained, compensated professional practice directly into the MA degree, providing the dual academic–professional training experience that produces field-ready graduates.

Museum Studies Graduate Students (n=60): Enrolled graduate students will participate in two microcredential workshops per semester (four annually, plus an optional summer workshop), building documented competencies, professional networks, and portfolio artifacts alongside working museum professionals.

Museum Professionals (n=250–300): Emerging and established professionals from rural communities in Illinois and Iowa will access targeted, hands-on professional development in an accessible format. Participants will include WIU Museum Studies alumni, volunteer coordinators, educators, small-museum directors, cultural heritage staff, and career changers seeking to advance within the field.

Partner Museums in Illinois and Iowa (n=4): The Figge Art Museum, German American Heritage Center, Putnam Museum, and the Quad Cities Botanical Center will host apprentices in Years 2 and 3 of the project. These sites were selected for their long-standing commitment to the program, as evidenced by their hosting of WIU interns and graduate assistants. All have agreed to contribute significant staff time, including 360 hours of mentoring per assistant, for a total of 2,880 mentor hours across all four museums.

Beneficiaries

Rural and regional museums gain access to a larger pool of qualified, experienced candidates and a stronger regional professional development infrastructure. The museum field nationally will have access to a replicable apprenticeship model and microcredential workshop resources. Communities across the Midwest benefit from a more capable, diverse, and sustainably employed museum workforce that strengthens cultural institutions for long-term vitality.

Benefits to the Workforce

This project delivers tangible workforce benefits across the museum sector. Partner museums gain 5,760 hours of skilled apprentice contributions over two years. Museum gains and access to skilled and experienced emerging professionals, creating a direct pipeline to job-ready graduates.

Microcredential workshops will serve 250–300 working professionals and 60 currently enrolled graduate students (20 per year) with affordable, skills-based training in foundational and emerging competencies. Discounted rates for IMA members ensure that staff from small museums and rural institutions — the professionals who most need accessible development and have the fewest existing options — can participate. The project creates lasting regional impact through a replicable apprenticeship model, workforce research on paid training pathways, and a strengthened collaborative infrastructure connecting WIU Museum Studies with the IMA's 200+ member institutions. By demonstrating a sustainable model for integrated professional training,

the project contributes to diversifying the museum workforce and reducing the hiring costs associated with underprepared entry-level candidates across the regional museum ecosystem.

PROJECT WORK PLAN

Year 1, Sept 1, 2026 – Aug 31, 2027

Activity 1: Design, market, deliver, and evaluate 5 microcredential workshops.

Activity 2: Develop training materials, evaluation frameworks, and partnership agreements; recruit apprentices for Year 2.

Activity 3: Track milestone completion (monthly) and quarterly IMLS progress reports.

Year 2, Sept 1, 2027 – Aug 31, 2028

Activity 4: Design, market, deliver, and evaluate 5 microcredential workshops.

Activity 5: Launch, monitor, and evaluate 1st cohort; recruit apprentices for year 3.

Activity 6: Track milestone completion, quarterly IMLS progress reports, conference presentation.

Year 3, Sept 1, 2028 – Aug 31, 2029

Activity 7: Launch, monitor, and evaluate the 2nd apprenticeship cohort.

Activity 8: Design, market, deliver, and evaluate 5 microcredential workshops.

Activity 9: Complete a comprehensive program evaluation; share results through final IMLS report and WIU/IMA communication channels, and identify program sustaining models.

Project Management

A list of Project Staff Members and their resumes is included in the application.

Project Director: Dr. Heidi Lung, Director of the WIU Museum Studies Graduate Program, will provide overall project oversight and IMLS reporting; curriculum development and quality assurance; coordination with museum sites; apprentice recruitment, selection, and mentorship; budget management and speaker contracts; evaluation coordination and data analysis; and dissemination and sustainability planning.

Graduate Assistant: A WIU Museum Studies graduate student will support all activities under Dr. Lung's direction (20 hours per week, Years 1–3).

Microcredential Workshop Instructors: Facilitators will be contracted 3–6 months in advance of each session. Angela Stanford, Independent Museum Registrar, has confirmed she will lead the Foundations in Collections Management microcredential.

Supervisory Mentors from Partner Museums: Experienced professionals from each partner site will mentor apprentices through weekly meetings, providing on-site professional guidance.

Needed Resources

A full description of the resources needed to successfully complete the project, as well as the in-kind resources, can be found in the budget narrative.

Personnel Costs (3 years): Project Director (0.15 FTE × 3 years), Project Graduate Assistant (0.5 FTE × 3 years), and Apprentice salaries (8 positions).

Microcredential Workshop Costs (15 sessions): Facilitator honorarium, materials and supplies, catering.

Other Project Costs: Marketing/promotional materials, conference registration, and travel for dissemination activities.

In-Kind Contributions (WIU and Partner Museums): Portion of the Project Director's salary, Apprentice Mentor hours (360 hours per apprentice × \$40 per hour), access to museum collections and facilities, administrative support, Project Director local travel to museums, and additional faculty time during microcredential workshops.

Selection and Recruitment of Participants

Apprentice Recruitment & Selection: Announce to newly admitted graduate students; promote through admissions materials and program website; hold information sessions explaining the apprenticeship structure and benefits. The application deadline is April 1 for a September start. Applications include a statement of purpose, a transcript, and financial need documentation. Selection will be completed by the Project Director and museum staff. Criteria will consider alignment of career goals, academic performance, and commitment to completing the full term.

Microcredential Workshop Participant Recruitment: Embedded program requirement for all Museum Studies graduate students; automatic enrollment; scheduling will be coordinated with the course calendar. Recruitment of museum professionals will include IMA member communications, direct outreach to regional museums, WIU Museum Studies alumni network email campaigns, and social media. IMA member pricing (\$75 vs. \$100 per microcredential workshop) with enrollment on a first-come, first-served basis up to capacity (25–30 participants/session); waitlists apply when sessions reach capacity.

Risk Mitigation

Risk 1: Apprentice Retention: While this risk cannot be fully eliminated, creating a positive environment and maintaining communication between site mentors and faculty advisors will help identify and address potential challenges early. Regular review of apprentice satisfaction with the experience will support formative adjustments as needed to ensure success.

Risk 2: Museum Partner Capacity Constraints: Detailed partnership agreements that clarify expectations, regular communication and problem-solving meetings, and backup partner museums are in place to address museum partner withdrawal from the program.

Risk 3: Low Enrollment: Early marketing 6–8 weeks before the microcredential workshop date; strategic scheduling (avoid holiday periods and major conferences), and offering IMA member discounts to incentivize participation will support enrollment. Allowances for a hybrid format option may be considered if travel barriers arise.

Risk 4: Expert Facilitator Availability: Contract facilitators will be identified 3–6 months in advance of sessions. WIU will maintain a backup facilitator list for each topic area if a replacement is needed.

Tracking Progress

The Project Director will develop assessment instruments, analyze data annually, and produce reports with recommendations to guide project implementation.

Microcredential Workshop Assessment Evaluation Strategies: Pre/post-session surveys measuring knowledge gain and satisfaction; follow-up surveys tracking application to practice, attendance, and demographics; and facilitator debriefs after each session.

Apprenticeship Monitoring Evaluation Strategies: Apprentices meet with site mentors weekly and submit monthly progress reports, reflective journals, and check-ins using competency-tracking rubrics; supervisor evaluations (mid-year and final); and project completion documentation.

PROJECT RESULTS

Intended Results

Result 1: Graduate Students Enter the Workforce Career-Ready: Eight graduate students will complete paid, year-long apprenticeships that eliminate financial barriers while building the hands-on competencies employers require — graduating with skills and professional experience the field typically demands. Through mentored practice in professional museum settings, students will demonstrate measurable growth in confidence and professional identity, entering the field not just qualified, but ready.

Result 2: Working Museum Professionals Build Skills, Confidence, and Community: Over three years, 250–300 museum professionals across the Illinois-Iowa region will access affordable,

flexible training in critical competencies without the barrier of semester-long commitments or prohibitive costs. Participants will leave with greater confidence and satisfaction in their professional practice, and will build lasting networks with peers and emerging professionals that strengthen the regional museum community.

Result 3: Graduate Students Build Competency, Confidence, and Professional Connection: Enrolled graduate students (approximately 60 over the course of the grant) will engage in microcredential workshops directly aligned with MA learning outcomes, gaining documented, hands-on experience that builds skills and shifts attitudes about their own professional capabilities — moving from uncertainty to confidence across core competencies. Participants will report increased confidence and a stronger sense of preparedness for the field, while forging meaningful networks with working museum professionals and peers that support their growth well beyond graduation.

Result 4: Partner Museums Gain Sustained, Skilled Support to Advance Their Missions: Four Quad City museums will each benefit from 1,440 hours of dedicated apprentice support, contributing meaningfully to collections, programming, education, and institutional initiatives. Museum staff will report shifts in attitudes toward mentorship and the value of emerging professionals as contributors to institutional capacity. This sustained presence allows museums to take on projects, deepen community engagement, and build capacity in ways that would otherwise be out of reach, creating a lasting impact on their ability to serve their communities.

Resulting Products

The following components will be developed as part of the varied project activities. A digital products plan is included in the grant application.

Comprehensive Apprenticeship Curriculum: A comprehensive handbook including partnership templates, mentorship guidelines, assessment rubrics, and sustainability frameworks will be shared with partner museums and the IMA for free dissemination to member organizations.

Microcredential Workshop Curriculum: Session materials, including facilitator guides, participant workbooks, hands-on activities, assessment instruments, and case studies, will be organized by competency area and accessible via an online learning platform. Select resources and videos will be shared at no cost with the Iowa Museum Association for member access. Competency certificates and digital badges will be issued to participants who complete the requirements.

Student Portfolio Artifacts: Apprentices and graduate students receive microcredential workshop resources, competency certificates, and digital badges.

Research & Dissemination Evaluation Reports: These reports will include apprenticeship outcomes, workforce impact data, and financial sustainability analysis. They will be shared through conference presentations (Year 2 & 3) and the Iowa Museum Association network. Possible publications in industry journals.

Sustaining the Project

The microcredential workshops include a fee structure that covers some of the direct costs. We will seek sponsorship from regional foundations and donors to further support guest speaker honoraria beyond the grant period. We will explore permanent funding for apprenticeship continuation or the reinstatement of the cost-share approach used in previous Graduate Assistantships, with support from partnering museums and external funding sources. All evidence of impact will be used to support future grant applications and funding conversations.

SCHEDULE OF COMPLETION

Building Capacity Through Apprenticeships and Microcredentials: An Integrated Workforce Development Model for Museum Professionals
Western Illinois University Museum Studies Graduate Program

KEY:	Active / Ongoing	Evaluation / Data Collection	Milestone / Reporting	Dissemination
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YEAR 1	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG
Activity 1: Microcredential Activities	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing
Activity 2: Apprentice Program Planning	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Evaluation / Data Collection	Milestone / Reporting	Milestone / Reporting
Activity 3: Measurement & Evaluation	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Milestone / Reporting	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Milestone / Reporting	Evaluation / Data Collection	Dissemination

YEAR 2	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG
Activity 4: Microcredential Activities	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing
Activity 5: Apprentice Cohort #1	Active / Ongoing	Evaluation / Data Collection	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Evaluation / Data Collection	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Milestone / Reporting	Milestone / Reporting
Activity 6: Evaluation & Dissemination	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Milestone / Reporting	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Milestone / Reporting	Evaluation / Data Collection	Dissemination

YEAR 3	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG
Activity 7: Microcredential Activities	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing
Activity 8: Apprentice Cohort #2	Active / Ongoing	Evaluation / Data Collection	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Evaluation / Data Collection	Active / Ongoing	Active / Ongoing	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Milestone / Reporting	Milestone / Reporting
Activity 9: Evaluation & Dissemination	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Milestone / Reporting	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Evaluation / Data Collection	Milestone / Reporting	Evaluation / Data Collection	Dissemination