



## Museums Empowered

Sample Application ME-260082-OMS-26

### New England Aquarium

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| Amount awarded by IMLS: | \$245,746 |
| Amount of cost share:   | \$354,387 |

The New England Aquarium will launch a multi-tiered professional development program for staff to learn new evaluation methods to enhance visitor experience. The project will establish a sustainable evaluation infrastructure, strengthen social science research and evaluation in informal learning, and expand professional development opportunities within and beyond the organization. Up to fifty staff, volunteers, and interns will participate in evaluation professional development activities through a series of cohort-based evaluation training and hands-on experiences, biannual professional development workshops, and a dozen applied evaluation projects. The project will result in a sustainable institutional evaluation framework and annual evaluation planning process that will improve the design of educational and community engagement programs at the aquarium as well as ensure visitor experiences are informed by audience feedback.

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.

## **OVERVIEW**

The New England Aquarium (NEAq) will launch a multi-tiered Evaluation Professional Development (EPD) program that will enhance the NEAq guest experience, contribute to the improvement of program and exhibit offerings, and develop a competitive workforce in the fields of informal science learning and social science research and evaluation. Housed in the Learning and Engagement Division at NEAq, the EPD program will serve Greater Boston-area youth and community members, existing NEAq Learning and Engagement, Visitor Experience, Community Engagement, and Youth Development staff, and local undergraduate and graduate students studying education. The EPD program will also create a new entry-level full-time position for a candidate who may have completed social science coursework but seeks real-world opportunities to work in non-profit program evaluation.

## **PROJECT JUSTIFICATION**

### **Statement of need and how the need was identified**

The New England Aquarium (NEAq) welcomes over one million visitors annually to its campus on Central Wharf in Boston, and serves countless audiences through community engagement initiatives, school partnerships, youth development programs, and digital learning resources. Despite this high level of public engagement, consistent visitor data has historically been collected from less than 1% of visitors through a passive post-visit email survey method. While this survey provides useful feedback about visitor preferences, satisfaction, and logistical challenges, it does not capture deeper learning outcomes, emotional engagement, or behavioral impacts that occur during the visit itself. As a result, NEAq currently lacks systematic, real-time visitor studies practices that can illuminate how guests interact with exhibits, how interpretation supports learning, or how educational and community engagement programs influence understanding of ocean conservation and environmental stewardship. Without this data, NEAq staff often rely on anecdotal observations or limited feedback when making decisions about exhibit design, interpretive approaches, and program development. This gap constrains NEAq's ability to fully assess its effectiveness as an informal learning institution and to iteratively improve experiences for a range of audiences.

NEAq identified the need for expanded evaluation capacity through several converging institutional developments in the past few years. In summer 2023, NEAq hired its inaugural Learning Impact Manager (internal evaluator, henceforth referred to as the Project Director), marking the organization's first dedicated investment in evaluation leadership. Following this hire, a structured process for creating front-end and formative evaluation studies was established within the Learning and Engagement Division. Early projects demonstrated immediate value by informing exhibit interpretation, refining educational and community engagement programming, and strengthening internal decision-making processes. Since then, evaluation efforts have expanded to include exhibits, live presentations, special events, and internal staff initiatives. These early successes revealed strong staff interest in evaluation participation and highlighted broader organizational need for shared evaluation literacy. Many staff members expressed enthusiasm for contributing to studies but lacked formal training or confidence in evaluation methods such as data collection and analysis. This demonstrated both an institutional readiness and a clear professional development gap.

In early 2024, NEAq established a relationship with a Boston-area university that enabled graduate students enrolled in a formative evaluation course to conduct a real-world evaluation project at NEAq, supported by the Project Director. Now in its third year, this collaboration introduced new methods, modeled collaborative inquiry, and demonstrated the value of embedding evaluation into program development cycles. Importantly, it also generated internal momentum: staff, volunteers, and interns showed increased interest in participating in evaluation activities and contributing to evidence-based practice. NEAq's youth workforce, a group of paid high school interns, also expressed interest in learning more about evaluation, and have participated in evaluation workshops and short-term studies. However, participation has remained largely ad hoc and dependent on individual projects rather than supported by sustained professional development. Providing structured opportunities and expanding participation across departments – including Interpretation and Engagement, Visitor Experience, Community Engagement, Volunteer Programs and Internships, and Youth Development – will build a shared foundation of evaluation skills. Developing this internal capacity will enable staff, interns, and volunteers to contribute meaningfully to evaluation efforts, strengthening both professional growth and institutional learning. For paid youth interns in particular, evaluation training offers valuable workforce development opportunities by introducing transferable skills in research, communication, and data literacy that support future academic and career pathways.

Early in 2026, NEAq launched a new two-year strategic plan that emphasizes evidence-based decision making, inclusive visitor engagement, and continuous improvement of learning experiences. The plan identifies evaluation as a critical organizational function needed to measure learning impact, understand audience needs, and ensure programs effectively advance the NEAq's mission. Building evaluation capacity across roles directly supports implementation of this strategic vision and ensures evaluation becomes an integrated and sustainable organizational practice rather than a specialized or isolated activity.

To address these needs and opportunities, NEAq requests funding over three years to support professional development and capacity building in evaluation practices for its paid youth interns, Visitor Experience staff, the Learning and Engagement division including volunteers, and the Community Engagement team. Funding will support structured training, mentorship opportunities, and hands-on participation in evaluation projects. These activities will strengthen NEAq's contribution to the broader museum field, including aquariums, zoos, and libraries, while improving the quality and accessibility of learning experiences for visitors and community members.

This proposal aligns with IMLS Museums Empowered Goal 2, Evaluation: Strengthen the ability of museum staff to use evaluation as a tool to shape museum programs and improve outcomes, and Objective 2.1: Increase staff knowledge of program evaluation methods and the usefulness of evaluation reports, tools, data, and metrics. By embedding evaluation practices throughout the institution, NEAq will enhance its ability to understand visitor learning, respond to community needs, and deliver impactful, mission-aligned experiences grounded in evidence and continuous improvement.

**Strategic Plan Advancement:** The Learning and Engagement division operates under NEAq's institutional strategic plan as well as a complementary interpretive master plan completed by division leadership in 2026. The

latter includes measurable outcomes that act as the foundation of ongoing evaluation work, helping to inform improvements in programs, exhibits, and visitor experiences. Furthermore, our organization is launching a new 2-year strategic plan in 2026, so the timing of an award in this fiscal year will ensure steady progress towards achieving stated outcomes by the end of 2027 and into the 2028-2029 plan. Currently, Learning and Engagement work primarily falls into two pillars of the NEAq strategic plan related to inspiring and developing advocates and building resilient communities. In service of these pillars, the division completed both a Community Needs Assessment (CNA) and a Community Engagement study in 2025, which will result in the launch of new programs in 2026. Future NEAq programs that will be prioritized for evaluation when additional resources exist through an IMLS award include:

- Real-time in-person visitor experience surveys to extend an existing post-visit email survey;
- An evolving youth development program;
- Enhanced programming for guests and staff that contribute to increased and meaningful engagement;
- Improvements to exhibits to continue fostering exceptional animal care and enhanced guest and staff accessibility;
- Integration of technology into understanding NEAq guests;
- Supporting recommendations from a Community Needs Assessment and a Community Engagement study to develop new community programming;
- Efforts to make NEAq buildings and campuses more welcoming, fostering a two-way sense of community onsite and offsite;
- An advocacy strategy co-developed between NEAq and community members.

**Project Need:** The impact of this project extends beyond NEAq and addresses broader challenges facing informal learning institutions working to engage communities in environmental and ocean literacy. Despite Boston's proximity to the ocean, many local communities have limited access to meaningful ocean engagement opportunities due to economic, geographic, cultural, and educational barriers. For many residents, particularly youth and families from historically underserved neighborhoods, visits to the waterfront or participation in marine science learning experiences may be infrequent or inaccessible. As a result, opportunities to develop personal connections to ocean ecosystems remain unevenly distributed.

By strengthening evaluation capacity and embedding participatory evaluation practices across programs, NEAq will be better positioned to understand and respond to the range of needs, motivations, and lived experiences of our audiences. Rigorous evaluation will allow NEAq personnel to move beyond assumptions about visitor learning and instead design experiences informed by community perspectives, cultural assets, and audience feedback. Through this project, NEAq will enhance our ability to develop educational and community engagement programs that are responsive, inclusive, and effective in fostering meaningful outcomes.

This project also addresses an important workforce development need within the informal learning and conservation sectors. Evaluation skills are increasingly recognized as essential competencies for educators, interpreters, and conservation professionals, yet opportunities for applied training remain limited. By integrating evaluation training into staff development and youth workforce programming, NEAq will cultivate transferable skills in research design, data literacy, communication, user experience, and reflective practice. These

experiences will prepare participants for future careers in museums, education, social science research, and conservation fields while strengthening the broader professional pipeline.

NEAq's existing relationships with area colleges—from four-year universities to technical community colleges—position the institution as a strong training ground for emerging professionals seeking hands-on evaluation experience in informal learning environments. Building on these relationships, the proposed project will expand opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to engage in applied evaluation projects, collaborate with practitioners, and contribute to real-world evaluation that informs public-facing educational experiences. Continued development of these relationships may also create new pathways for interdisciplinary collaboration, internships, and mentored research opportunities that extend the project's impact beyond the grant period.

Importantly, the benefits of this work will extend beyond NEAq through active participation in the broader informal learning field. Through conference presentations, professional networks, and dissemination of evaluation methods and findings, NEAq will contribute practical models and lessons learned to peer institutions seeking to build evaluation capacity within their own organizations. In doing so, the project advances shared field-wide goals of strengthening evidence-based practice, supporting professional growth, and improving the quality and accessibility of informal learning experiences nationwide.

#### **Project Beneficiaries:**

1. **New England Aquarium personnel:** Over three years, this project will directly benefit approximately 50 staff, volunteers, and interns across multiple departments. NEAq will build evaluation capacity as an organization through increased evaluation activities, as well as widespread communication and reporting.
2. **New England Aquarium Guests and Program Participants:** This group will benefit from the project by having improved and more meaningful experiences due to an increase in program alignment with best practices in informal science learning including exhibit design, interpretive programs, outreach, and digital assets. Individuals and groups purchasing tickets to visit NEAq, guests utilizing our various access programs, free public event attendees, focus group participants, NEAq members, and others are included in this group.
3. **Emerging museum, aquarium, zoo, and library professionals:** Individuals who may have completed coursework or an internship related to program evaluation but are seeking entry-level work will have an opportunity to build an evaluation portfolio and work with other professionals in the evaluation field.
4. **Area partners:** Identified by the Community Needs Assessment and a Community Engagement study, including but not limited to businesses, schools, civic organizations, visitors, experts, and advocates.

This project aligns with the IMLS agency mission, and the Museums Empowered evaluation category in the following ways:

1. **Workforce development:** By hiring and mentoring an Evaluation Assistant, this project will support entry into the museum workforce by providing hands-on experience in evaluation design, data collection, analysis, and reporting within an informal learning environment. The position will include opportunities for professional growth through conference participation, mentoring, networking, and collaborative publication, strengthening career pathways in evaluation and museum practice.

2. **Expansion of institutional evaluation capacity:** Staff across multiple departments will increase their understanding of evaluation and build skills in methods and the practical application of findings, enabling more effective strategies to address institutional priorities and audience needs.
3. **Strengthening a resilient, learning-centered organizational culture:** NEAq staff, interns, and volunteers will gain opportunities to understand evaluation as an integral component of organizational learning and continuous improvement. Cross-departmental collaboration will embed evaluation practices into initiatives spanning education, visitor experience, and community engagement, supporting data-informed decision-making across the institution.
4. **Contribution to field-wide evaluation practice and professional standards:** The project will contribute to evaluation best practices established by professional organizations such as the American Evaluation Association, Visitor Studies Association, American Alliance of Museums, and IMLS. Through active participation in conferences, publications, and professional networks, NEAq will share methods and lessons learned, advancing evaluation practices across museums, libraries, aquariums, and zoos.

## PROJECT WORK PLAN

This project will take place over three years (September 2026–August 2029) and is organized into three sections. The project will address the following areas of impact and proposed outcomes:

- Increased knowledge and understanding of evaluation best practices;
- Development of a culture of evaluative thinking across departments;
- Deepening evaluation skills through structured professional development and conference participation;
- Active engagement in authentic evaluation projects with community partners and NEAq audiences; and
- Establishment of sustainable evaluation practices that continue beyond the grant period.

**Section I: Project Launch, Annual Planning, and Evaluation Specialist Hiring.** The project will launch in September 2026 with the development of a Year 1 evaluation calendar and planning with internal Learning and Engagement (LE) and Visitor Experience (VX) leaders, as well as project Consultants 1 and 2. The recruitment, hiring, and onboarding of a grant-funded Evaluation Specialist will take place at the end of Year 1. Working closely with the Project Director, the Evaluation Specialist will support implementation of evaluation studies while co-developing a structured professional development program for staff and interns for Year 2 and Year 3. The Project Director and Evaluation Specialist will meet weekly for the duration of the project to monitor progress toward short- and long-term goals, coordinate evaluation activities, and adapt project implementation as needed. Quarterly check-ins with organizational stakeholders—including department leaders across Learning and Engagement, Community Engagement, Visitor Experience, Membership, and Marketing and Communications—will ensure alignment with institutional priorities and promote cross-departmental engagement.

Project learning and outcomes will be disseminated internally as well as through participation in the Visitor Studies Association (VSA) annual conferences. Findings from Evaluation Cohorts 1 and 2 will be shared at the July 2028 in-person VSA conference, and from Cohorts 3-7 at the July 2029 virtual conference along with final project

outcomes. The Project Director and Evaluation Specialist will attend and present at the 2028 in-person VSA conference, and participants from Cohorts 1–7 will be invited to attend the 2029 virtual conference, expanding professional exposure and knowledge-sharing opportunities.

**Section II: Rotating Evaluation Cohorts for Staff and Youth Participants.** Beginning in September 2027, rotating quarterly cohorts of Learning and Engagement (LE) and Visitor Experience (VX) staff will participate in structured evaluation professional development. Each cohort will receive foundational training in evaluation methods and will apply these skills through participation in active evaluation projects conducted during regular work shifts. Evaluation activities may include administering on-site exit surveys using the Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies (COVES) platform, conducting visitor observations during exhibit or program prototyping, and collecting feedback through interviews or surveys at public programs and free community events. This applied model ensures participants gain practical experience while contributing meaningful data to institutional decision-making.

Cohorts will overlap with summer and academic-year youth evaluation interns, including high school students and recent graduates participating in NEAq workforce development programs. Collaboration will support peer learning while introducing youth participants to research and evaluation career pathways. Twice annually in Year 2 and Year 3, Contractor 1 will facilitate combined cohort workshops focused on data literacy, ethical and effective uses of artificial intelligence (AI) in social science research, and the transferability of evaluation skills beyond aquarium, zoo, and library settings. These workshops will deepen participants' analytical skills and broaden their understanding of evaluation applications across professional contexts, and will serve as a professional networking opportunity with local experts and scholars. In August 2028 and August 2029, Contractor 2 will provide 12-month retrospective data analysis workshops with the Evaluation Specialist, Project Director, and leaders from LE, VX, Community Engagement, Marketing and Communications, and other interested NEAq departments. An executive summary from these workshops will be shared with Cohort participants.

**Section III: Collaboration with Local Colleges and Universities.** NEAq will expand and formalize collaborations with local colleges and universities to integrate applied evaluation learning into higher education partnerships. Building on existing relationships, undergraduate and graduate students will participate in real-world evaluation projects aligned with course requirements, internships, or mentored research experiences. Each year, 1-2 university evaluation projects will be sponsored by NEAq, and students will be invited to learn from and with the Evaluation Specialist, Project Director, and Cohort participants. Students will contribute to evaluation design, data collection, analysis, and reporting while working alongside NEAq personnel, providing additional project capacity and fostering experiential learning opportunities. These partnerships will strengthen regional training pathways in informal learning evaluation and create sustainable opportunities for continued collaboration beyond the grant period. Findings and methods developed through these collaborations will be shared with academic and professional communities, supporting broader dissemination of effective evaluation practices.

## PROJECT RESULTS

### Measurable Outputs and Outcomes

The project will track progress using the following measurable outputs and outcomes:

| Outputs                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Outcomes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Approximately 50 staff, volunteers, and interns participate in evaluation professional development activities over three years</li><li>• Seven rotating Evaluation Cohorts complete structured evaluation training and hands-on experience.</li><li>• Biannual professional development workshops delivered by Contractor 1 and university affiliates.</li><li>• Development of a sustainable institutional evaluation framework and annual evaluation planning process.</li><li>• Minimum of 12 applied evaluation projects conducted or supported during the grant period, which include a proposal, logic model, and final report.</li><li>• Two conference presentations at the Visitor Studies Association annual meetings (2028, 2029)</li><li>• At least one professional publication or publicly shared case study describing project methods or outcomes.</li><li>• Structured Evaluation Professional Development training module.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Documented increase in staff, volunteer, and intern confidence in evaluation literacy.</li><li>• Increased staff, volunteer, and intern skill development in social science research.</li><li>• Increase in number of departments engaged in evaluation activities.</li><li>• Adoption of evaluation practices into routine departmental workflows by the end of Year 3.</li><li>• Institutional commitment to continue evaluation activities and staff, volunteer, and intern training beyond the grant period, supported by internal planning and resource allocation.</li></ul> |

Project outcomes are expected to produce lasting benefits for staff participants, institutional partners, and the broader NEAq community through improved understanding of visitor experience and program impact. By demonstrating the value and applicability of evaluation across departments, the project will support continued investment in evaluation activities beyond the grant period. NEAq plans to sustain this work by maintaining opportunities for professionals and students to participate in applied evaluation through paid internships and university partnerships that support training for future aquarium, zoo, library, and museum professionals.

Overall, this project will establish a sustainable evaluation infrastructure at NEAq, strengthen social science research and evaluation in informal learning, and expand professional development opportunities within and beyond the organization. Through public dissemination of findings, engagement with professional networks, and the development of ongoing training pathways, the project will contribute meaningful knowledge to the field while fostering a long-term culture of evaluative thinking aligned with the mission of IMLS.

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