



Museums for America

Sample Application MA-249497-OMS-21
Project Category: Lifelong Learning

Brooklyn Botanic Garden

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$178,668
Amount of cost share:	\$441,176

The project description can be viewed in the IMLS Awarded Grants Search:
<https://www.imls.gov/grants/awarded/ma-249497-oms-21>

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

Brooklyn Botanic Garden (BBG, the Garden) requests \$199,677 over three years to accomplish a significant expansion of its Interpretive Master Plan (IMP). The project, ***Inclusive Interpretive Master Plan***, will add two new sections to this guiding document, moving the institution toward achieving its goal to become a more inclusive living museum. The project will formalize inclusive practices, provide professional development to staff, strengthen the presence of community voice at the institution, and expand storytelling about the Garden's history and collections by staff and docents. The new elements of the IMP will act as a rudder to steer the institution toward broadening its perspective, rooted in the process of co-creation¹ with its surrounding communities.

BBG aims to create and systematize the structures needed for staff to become better listeners and co-creators with a range of co-workers and external constituents so that a broader cross-section of perspectives are represented in the key stories BBG tells and its public-facing programs. Expanding the representation of diverse experiences in BBG's interpretation will increase the opportunity for visitors to find relevance and connection to the Garden and its mission. This work will strengthen BBG's ability to serve its public, a stated goal of IMLS' Museums for America Program.

What need, problem, or challenge will your project address, and how was it identified? • Who or what will benefit from your project and how have they been involved in the planning?

*... if you want to be FOR your whole community, you have to be representative OF them and co-created BY them. If people don't see themselves as part of your work, they won't see your work as an essential part of their lives. —Nina Simon, nonprofit CEO and author of *The Participatory Museum**

BBG's first Interpretive Master Plan was developed with funding from IMLS in 2006 [see Supporting Document 1: BBG's IMP]; in the time since, nearly all of its goals have been achieved. The activation of this plan coincided with BBG's *Campaign for the Next Century*, which added over four acres of new garden space, new amenities, and permanent exhibits to orient visitors to their botanic garden visit, and invested more than \$3M in new, uniform interpretive signage and rotating exhibitions that explore the intersection of art, science, and plants. The work of the IMP also activated dialogue-based live interpretation to support the Garden's new "living classrooms," complementing the Campaign's new one-acre Discovery Garden for families (IMLS-funded project *Living Classrooms*, completed in 2018). *Inclusive IMP* will further strengthen BBG's interpretive strategies by defining modalities for co-creation and developing multi-dimensional key stories that will impact the Garden's approach to program development and messaging for years to come.

This project is a response to the challenge of creating a more inclusive and welcoming urban botanic garden. BBG's mission to connect people to the world of plants and promote environmental stewardship and engagement in science sets an intention to include *everyone*, yet BBG's visitor demographics skew Whiter than those of its surrounding communities, the borough of Brooklyn, and New York City as a whole². Longitudinal studies by cultural researchers La Placa Cohen suggest that one of the main reasons people choose not to visit a cultural institution is that they feel it is "not for them."³ This sentiment has been echoed both anecdotally and

¹ For BBG, co-creation is understood as (1) seeking and effectively facilitating community participation to uncover where constituents find resonance in their visits and where feelings of personal connections are lacking or weak; (2) synthesizing community feedback and perspectives with expert knowledge (from within the community, BBG staff, or externally) to develop new offerings with new perspectives that remain centered on the Garden's mission and institutional priorities; and (3) evaluating with self-awareness to ensure that the process results in shared goals and ownership.

² As of BBG's most recent visitor demographics survey (2015), 34% of its visitors are people of color. According to American Community Survey's 2019 census data, 77% of Brooklyn Community District 9, 65% of Brooklyn, and 57% of New York City are people of color.

³ 2017 Culture Track report by La Placa Cohen in partnership with Kelton.

in formal surveys at BBG. Incorporating cultural relevance into interpretation is one way that a museum can increase its connection and relevance to prospective audiences. Co-creation is a way that BBG can bring the community into the process of its storytelling. This type of community collaboration can have a positive impact on museum visitor demographics⁴ and has been adopted by other museums (for example, the American Museum of Natural History in its revisioning of the Hall of Northwest Coast Indians).

BBG aspires for its audiences to reflect the diverse cultures of its surrounding communities. Strong communities of color and Orthodox Jewish, Chinese, Bengali, and Caribbean cultural neighborhoods (for example) all exist within blocks of the Garden's gates, yet these communities are not proportionally represented in the Garden's visitation. At the same time, BBG has cultivated deep relationships in Brooklyn neighborhoods with urban gardeners, families, and volunteers through its community greening, children's education, and docent programs. These programs acknowledge the power of community-held wisdom and create platforms for sharing that wisdom with a much more diverse public than Garden visitors in general. These programs outperform the Garden's visitation on diversity measures because their design was grounded in community building, respect for cultural knowledge, shared wisdom, personal relevance, and empowerment. BBG seeks to expand this design ethos to its IMP by establishing a tested process for co-creation with its most engaged participants, weaving their voices into the stories that BBG tells about its history and collections.

The successful completion of Inclusive IMP will result in a new level of inclusivity in BBG's Interpretive Master Plan and expanded narratives for the Garden's key stories that will help the institution align storytelling across departments and public communications. One example of a story BBG would like to expand is its origin story. When asked to tell the origin story of BBG, many staff and volunteers will begin this tale with the fact that the Garden's site was once an ash dump for 19th-century apartment dwellers or a beloved shortcut to Ebbets Field baseball stadium, home of the famed Brooklyn Dodgers. BBG's history webpage starts its timeline in 1837 with an act of state legislation that sets the land aside for a botanic garden. However, these beginnings skip over the rich geological history of BBG's 52 acres and do not acknowledge indigenous people's history as stewards of this same 52 acres for centuries, for example. This truncated story is emblematic of a pattern found throughout the Garden and indeed many botanic gardens: plant stories are predominantly Eurocentric and specimens are at times conferred importance for past owners rather than their botanical, cultural, or horticultural significance. Through a co-creation process, BBG now seeks to add dimension to the Garden's key stories to better reflect its surrounding communities. This approach will also help staff ensure that a multiplicity of stories and experiences are shared rather than suggesting singularity.

• ***How will your project advance your institution's strategic plan?***

This project connects to BBG's mission, strategic plan [see Strategic Plan, goals #2 and #3 in particular], and core values. It also advances BBG's diversity, equity, access, and inclusion plan, *Investing in Inclusion*, that sets goals (among others) to (1) Adapt BBG's outward facing messages, actions, and communications to authentically welcome and represent the full diversity of the audience BBG aspires to serve and (2) Create an organization-wide equity lens that cultivates inclusion. Investing in Inclusion is a direct response to issues identified in NYC's first Cultural Plan (2017), which asks the City's cultural institutions to take significant steps to support participation in NYC's cultural life among underrepresented groups.

⁴ Pamela Barnes and Gayle McPherson described the impact of community collaboration, writing, "Allowing different members of the community to engage with the development of the museum and gallery planning will allow the site to move away from being represented by a small section of the community who are often older, wealthier and who hold higher formal education levels." (Barnes, P. and McPherson, G. (2019), Co-Creating, Co-producing and Connecting: Museum Practice Today. Curator: The Museum Journal, 62: 257-267. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12309>)

Project Work Plan

• *What specific activities, including evaluation, will you carry out?*

To achieve the goals of this project, BBG will (1) expand its IMP, (2) prototype new interpretation elements, and (3) engage staff in professional development.

The expansion of the IMP will be led by the project leads and BBG's Interpretation Committee [see Key Staff]. It will be guided by feedback from community roundtables—focus groups that gather BBG staff, program participants, and docents [see Supporting Document 2: BBG Stakeholders and Constituents]. This work will result in two new sections of the IMP:

(1) Inclusive Community Engagement Guide: a step-by-step guide to co-creation with staff and community constituents. The design of this section will be undertaken in partnership with consultants at Public Policy Lab, who specialize in human-centered public service delivery. The Guide will include a listening tool kit comprising recommended facilitation techniques, survey methods, equity tools, conversation prompts, etc. and protocols to ensure that inclusion and equity are prioritized in the process of co-creation.

(2) BBG Key Stories: a set of guiding, more inclusive narratives for the institution. The development of this section will utilize the tools laid out in the Inclusive Community Engagement Guide to solicit feedback from staff and constituents. Key stories could include indigenous land recognition of BBG's 52-acre site, heritage plant uses, cultural explorations of ecology, and the cultural and political context of agriculture, for example.

With these new sections in hand, BBG's Interpretation team will prototype 4–6 different interpretive content elements that explore the identified Key Stories, based on collaborative work with community roundtables and curatorial advisers who have content-specific expertise (e.g. folklorists, ethnobotanists). Prototypes will be iterative and could include Garden tours (audio, video, guided, or self-guided), interactive discovery carts, public programs, or web features, for example. BBG's Interpretation Committee will evaluate and user-test prototypes to ensure that stories and themes resonate and evoke personal relevance for visitors. Results will be shared and further developed with community roundtable groups.

This project will bring broad professional development opportunities to BBG's staff of ~150 full-time employees.

- Staff are important contributors to community roundtables. As a diverse group with connections to several cultural communities surrounding the Garden and intimate knowledge of the visitor experience, staff members at BBG have an average tenure of nine years and hold valuable wisdom in the listening and co-creation process. Their inclusion will bring new perspective to BBG's interpretation work with congruous aim of authentically engaging and acknowledging the contributions of all employees to the Garden's mission. For many, this will be the first time they are included in discussions of how BBG communicates and tells stories.
- Staff in key program and communications areas—Education and Interpretation, Horticulture, Marketing, Public Programs, Digital, Development, and Visitor Services—will learn about the development, tools, and preliminary outcomes of the Inclusive Community Engagement Guide. Public Policy Lab will lead the first of these trainings, using a train-the-trainer model so managers can train their staff on use of the tool kit, which will offer practical new strategies for inclusion that can be used by other teams for content development and listening projects.
- Key Stories, along with information on the co-creation process, will be disseminated to all staff and 150 docents through seminars and workshops on specific themes. These sessions will be worked into the Garden's annual schedule of staff and volunteer learning to encourage adoption and alignment of Key Stories over time.

As part of project evaluation, Public Policy Lab will measure the efficacy of the listening tool kit and co-creation process for community roundtable participants. This includes mentoring BBG staff in using the tool kit. This work will result in a summative evaluation of the tool kit's implementation and the co-creation process. BBG will administer surveys to staff following trainings to understand their impact, as well as annual surveys to all staff and docents to gauge IMP adoption, beginning with a baseline survey in Year 1. Garden visitors engaging with prototypes will be interviewed following their visit to collect demographic and experiential data.

• ***What are the risks to the project and how will you mitigate them?***

At the time of writing, BBG is open to the public following nearly five months of closure due to COVID-19; however, most on-site programming is suspended, and most non-operational staff continue to work remotely. Inclusive IMP is designed to adapt to the public health situation as it evolves. BBG's staff is accustomed to facilitating internal and external meetings and classes using Zoom and Microsoft Teams with closed captioning and ASL/language translation (included in the project budget). BBG has learned that virtual offerings can yield increased participation as they lower some barriers to participation (e.g., transportation and childcare). Interpretation prototypes can be designed for social distancing should on-site access be restricted by health and safety guidelines.

The iterative nature of creating the new IMP sections and interpretation prototypes will yield many unknowns. BBG does not want to make assumptions about what will resonate with co-creators, and there may be points in the process where redirection makes sense. For example, if it becomes clear through Public Policy Lab's evaluation that the listening tool kit is not creating an environment where people can share freely, or it seems too complicated for staff to implement, adjustments to the timeline will need to be made. To mitigate this, the Schedule of Completion has time built in for adjustments.

• ***Who will plan, implement, and manage your project?***

Kate Fermoile, director of Interpretation and Exhibitions, and her supervisor, Sonal Bhatt, vice president of Education and Interpretation, will be the project leads, convening Interpretation Committee meetings and community roundtables, managing consultant and curatorial adviser relationships, designing and testing new interpretation modalities, and spearheading professional development and staff and visitor surveys. Fermoile and Bhatt are staff leads for *Expanding BBG's Welcome* (IMLS-funded 2018-2021), a project of similar scope and ambition aimed at increasing the Garden's accessibility and are experienced in creating and implementing IMPs (including at the Wildlife Conservation Society, Brooklyn Historical Society, and the Tenement Museum), interpretive prototyping, and testing of interpretive elements. Additionally, Bhatt is a diversity, equity, access, and inclusion expert and heads the Garden's work in this area. Key supports for the project are the members of the Interpretation Committee, and in particular, Elizabeth Peters. As the director of Digital, she will be included in the prototyping of any digital interpretive experiences that arise. Please see the Key Staff and Resumes attachments to further review qualifications and expertise.

• ***Will partners be engaged and, if so, for what purpose?***

In terms of external partners, the Garden will engage roundtable participants and docents, a consulting firm, and curatorial advisers [see Budget Justification].

- Community roundtables will take place with three external cohorts (in addition to the frontline staff group): families (adults and teens) participating in Children's Education programs, participants in community greening programs, and docents. These cohorts have been selected because the programs that they represent—which have been in existence for between 10 and 25 years—are designed to activate audiences from diverse backgrounds and forge community ties. Inclusive IMP is a natural extension of BBG's work with these groups, who can serve as a bridge to audiences that

seem less likely to visit BBG now who may be more likely to do so if they feel the Garden offers connection and relevance to their lives.

Members of each of these cohorts will generate ideas for stories and prototypes that they would like to see and experience at the Garden. The listening tool kit will be piloted with these groups and their participation in co-creation will serve as the model for the Inclusive Community Engagement Guide.

- Public Policy Lab will support the project through the full grant period, developing new listening tools for the institution, facilitating and observing focus groups, training BBG staff, and evaluating project success [see Supporting Document 3: PPL Proposal].
- Curatorial advisers will be selected based on interests expressed in community roundtables and will lend content expertise to the creation of interpretation prototypes in years 2 and 3. Stipends for advice will be offered to specialists such as folklorists, cultural community leaders, ethnobotanists, and/or agricultural historians, for example.

• ***When and in what sequence will your activities occur?***

Inclusive IMP is a three-year project that will be supported by Public Policy Lab in years 1 through 3 and curatorial advisers in years 2 and 3.

Pre-grant: BBG will establish an interdepartmental Interpretation Committee. This includes key content creators from Interpretation and Education, Horticulture, Digital, and Marketing so institutional stories align and work coherently. This group will meet bimonthly throughout the three years to review the current IMP and discuss expansion. This working group will continue to meet post-grant to ensure that the IMP is used to guide the institution as appropriate.

Year 1: Public Policy Lab will work with BBG project leads to design the listening tool kit and develop a realistic and productive framework for working on co-creating content. BBG will administer a baseline survey to all staff measuring awareness and usage of the current IMP (currently assumed to be low) and to solicit Key Stories of the institution as currently told: BBG's origin and history, favorite plant stories, and guiding themes, for example. Public Policy Lab will facilitate one community roundtable for each of the four cohorts of stakeholders with members of the Interpretation Committee and project leads as observers. The listening tool kit will be evaluated and adjusted iteratively throughout Year 1. Project leads will facilitate staff and docent workshops to introduce Key Stories. The Interpretation Committee will meet bimonthly to work towards creating a framework for the work of Year 2.

Year 2: Public Policy Lab and the Interpretation Committee will synthesize gleanings from community roundtables and the staff survey. A second round of community roundtables (two with each of four groups) will be held, this time facilitated by BBG. Public Policy Lab will observe and collect data to evaluate and refine the tool kit. The focus of the first session of community roundtables will be to refine the Key Stories and make suggestions for interpretation prototypes. Once defined, BBG will enlist curatorial advisers and begin prototyping new content elements in an iterative process. As prototypes are piloted, BBG will conduct audience interviews. Results will be shared with community roundtable groups. BBG leadership will formally add the Inclusive Community Engagement Guide and Key Stories section to the Interpretive Master Plan and publish on staff intranet. Public Policy Lab will train staff and docents on how use the tool kit (introducing the tool kit broadly to staff both as professional development and formative testing) and BBG will continue to train staff on Key Stories. The Interpretation Committee will meet bimonthly.

Year 3: BBG will facilitate community roundtables (two with each of the four groups) to gain feedback on the interpretation prototypes. The Interpretation Committee will continue to meet bimonthly to consider staff and community roundtable feedback and to refine the document and interdepartmental processes. BBG will continue to create and/or refine prototypes with the support of the curatorial advisers. As part of

understanding and promoting the integration of the IMP in the Garden's institutional work, the Interpretation team will conduct a staff survey to assess the depth of the plan's adoption and integration into day-to-day work as well as the use of Key Stories and the Inclusive Community Engagement Guide, including the listening tool kit. Public Policy Lab will deliver a summative presentation to BBG on the success of listening tool implementation and the community roundtable experience and the tool kit will be updated based on the summative evaluation findings. The tool kit, once developed and fully tested, will be shared broadly with the field. BBG will train staff and docents on tool kit updates/refresher information.

• ***What time, financial, personnel, and other resources will you need to carry out the activities?***

This project combines BBG's internal expertise with that of compensated consultants, advisers, and constituents. Staff members on the Interpretation Committee will devote time to bimonthly meetings and relay pertinent information to the staff they supervise. Paid consultants, Public Policy Lab, will develop a listening tool kit, facilitate and train BBG staff in how to conduct community roundtables and become trainers for other staff, and conduct project evaluation. Curatorial advisers will receive stipends for their knowledge and content creation. To ensure community roundtable participation is equitable and accessible, the project budget includes participant honoraria, ASL interpretation, captioning, and language translation (staff will not receive honoraria for participation; it will be part of their workday). This project involves training for all staff that will occur during the workday at intervals defined in the Schedule of Completion.

• ***How will you track your progress toward achieving your intended results?***

BBG will track activity benchmarks including attendance and frequency of Interpretation Committee meetings and community roundtables. Timetables for prototyping, working with Public Policy Lab, and staff workshops and seminars will be managed by Kate Fermoile.

• ***How and with whom will you share your project's results?***

If successful, the Inclusive Community Engagement Guide will be broadly shared with the field. BBG will host four online workshops in Year 3 to share successes, challenges, and resources. BBG will share project results with peers at conferences and webinars offered in Year 3 by the American Alliance of Museums and the American Public Gardens Association. The Inclusive Community Engagement Guide and findings from Public Policy Lab will also be shared with 18 informal science institutions nationwide through the IDEAL Center at the Science Museum of Minnesota [see Supporting Document 4: Letter of Support Science Museum of Minnesota].

Project Results for Lifelong Learning

• ***What are your project's intended results?***

Through this project, BBG aims to incorporate a new level of inclusivity into its Interpretive Master Plan and to integrate its themes and messages throughout BBG's operations. The two new sections of the IMP will be developed through an inclusive process meant to bring BBG's staff and surrounding community together to expand the stories and perspectives shared by the Garden. This work will also bring staff into alignment around unified and expanded narratives of BBG's history and guiding messaging for years to come. The results of the Community Engagement Guide and listening tool kit, if successful, can be adapted for other areas of the Garden's operations and have potential to be useful to the field of informal science institutions.

Ultimately, this project's success will advance the Garden's strategic goal to become a more inclusive museum by putting structures and professional development in place that will help staff better incorporate and reflect multiple perspectives in their work. The inclusion of locally sourced and expertly verified cultural, historical, and scientific perspectives will provide new context and connections for people who visit the

Garden now, and offer welcome to those who would be more likely to visit if they felt a sense of connection. If BBG is to include more people in its mission to connect people to the world of plants and promote environmental stewardship and engagement in science, it must seek out these new perspectives in a methodical way. Inclusive IMP will set the Garden on a path to broadening its audience to better reflect its surroundings, locally and citywide.

• How will the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and/or attitudes of the intended audience change as a result of your project? • What data will you collect and report to measure your project's success?

This project includes both external (program participants, docents, and visitors) and internal (staff) audiences.

- Community roundtable participants will feel that they actively contributed to the project's goals and that their input was instrumental in shaping the content of the institution. As a sign of success, roundtable participants will better “see themselves” in the stories of the Garden.
- Interpretation staff will learn and be prepared to use the tested techniques and tools for listening and incorporating co-development with community stakeholders, and to teach these skills to other staff.
- A majority of BBG’s staff (150 full-time) and docents (150) will have positive feelings about new Key Stories and will indicate usage of new narratives in their work.
- Staff in Horticulture, Marketing, Digital, Education, Interpretation, Public Programs, Development, and Visitor Services will demonstrate an understanding of the Community Engagement Guide and feel ready to incorporate the listening tool kit into their work, as applicable.
- Via interaction with prototypes, visitors will feel a deeper connection to plants and personal relevance to content, expressing interest in environmental stewardship and/or science.

Data collected will include demographic and program-related information from staff, docent, and co-creator surveys.

• What tangible products will result from your project?

This project will result in an expanded Interpretive Master Plan that will guide the institution, a listening tool kit that can be adapted for use by any department seeking to include community feedback in developing programs and will be shared with a broad range of museums, and 4-6 prototypes for new interpretation at BBG.

• How will you sustain the benefit(s) of your project?

BBG’s IMP is a living document that guides the institution. Incorporating practices of inclusion into this document will ensure that this ethos is carried forward, widely. It is also anticipated that the practices and principles set forth in this expanded and inclusive IMP will set a foundation for BBG’s next strategic planning process, slated to commence in 2021-22. The benefits of this project will also be sustained through the professional development of all full-time staff and docents. Public Policy Lab’s train-the-trainer model will empower BBG staff to train all staff and docents on the Inclusive Community Engagement Guide on an annual basis.

Thank you for your consideration.

