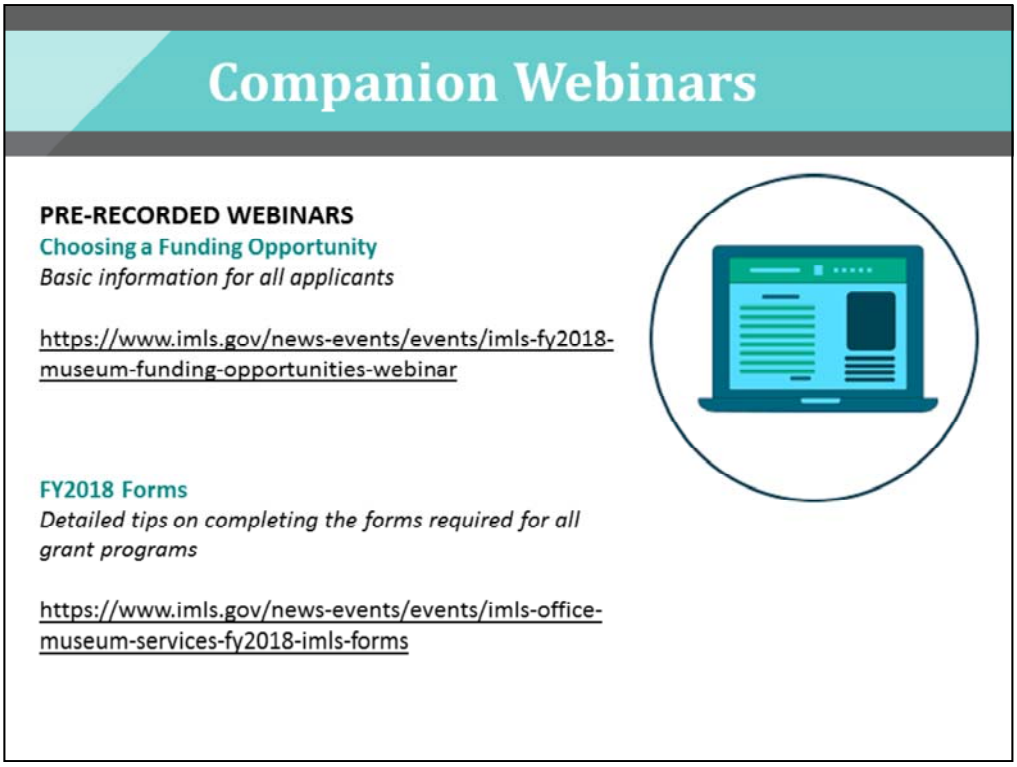
Welcome to the Institute of Museum and Library Services' webinar, "Museums for America Grant Program Fiscal Year 2018 Information Session."

My name is Connie Bodner, and speaking on behalf of rest of the staff in the Office of Museum Services, we are delighted that you could join us today and that you are interested in preparing an application for the IMLS Museums for America grant program.



This is one of a series of webinars designed to help you find the information you need to create a competitive application for IMLS museum funding.

“Choosing a Funding Opportunity” and “FY2018 Forms” have been pre-recorded and are available as recordings and as PDFs of the slides plus transcripts on our website at the links pictured here.

In the first, we cover the IMLS vision, mission, and strategic plan with an emphasis on how they influence our grant making. We also address institutional eligibility, provide a quick overview of all our funding opportunities, how to find information online with a focus on our website, and we cover the three places you must be registered in order to apply for an IMLS grant.

In the second webinar, we provide information to help you complete the forms required for all IMLS grant applications.

We strongly recommend that you take a look and/or listen to both of these to get the complete picture of preparing and submitting a competitive application to Museums for America.

FY2017 Museums for America

	Number of Applications	Number of Awards	Funds Requested	Funds Awarded
Learning Experiences	237	42	$47,269,681	$5,898,317
Community Anchors	88	25	$20,952,579	$4,799,972
Collections Stewardship	233	65	$36,315,899	$8,491,640
TOTAL	**558**	**132**	**$104,538,159**	**$19,189,929**

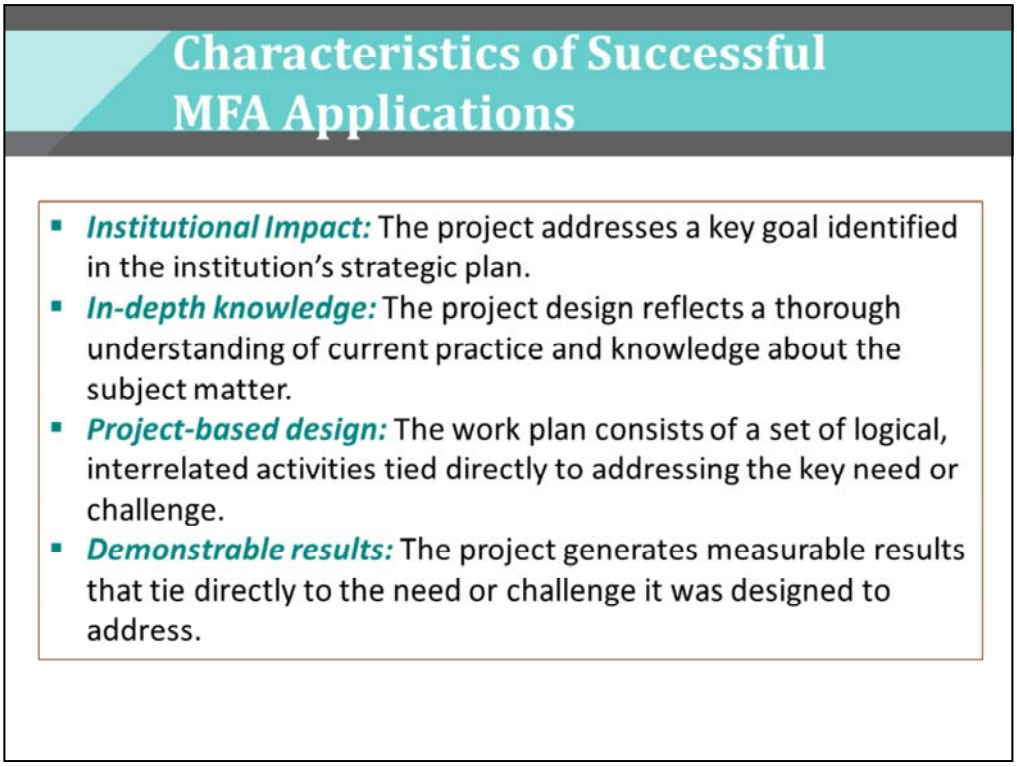
Before we jump into the details, we are often asked about numbers of applications and funding success rates, and so here are the figures for the just completed FY2017 Museums for America grant cycle. As you can see, with just over $19M available, we were able to fund 24% of the applications we received by number and 18% by dollar amount.

In this presentation, we'll be addressing the following topics:

- MFA Program Goals
- Characteristics of Successful MFA Projects
- Important Dates
- The questions of How much and How Many?
- Project Categories
- Allowable and Unallowable Costs—what you can and cannot include in your project
- Application Components
- Application Tips
- The Review Process
- IMLS Staff Contact Information

Let's begin with MFA's program goals. Museums for America is structured to support projects that strengthen the ability of an individual museum to serve its public. This might be through activities that reflect museums as active resources for **lifelong learning**, as important institutions in the establishment and maintenance **of livable communities**, or as **good stewards** of the nation's collections. The key concepts here that distinguish MFA from other IMLS funding programs are that the focus is on an **individual museum, its particular community or public**, and **its collections**.

MFA is all about what your museum needs in order to better serve your public. It may well be exactly the same as what the museum across town or in a neighboring state needs, and that's ok. The important thing here is that our support should help you make a local impact and improve your service to your public.

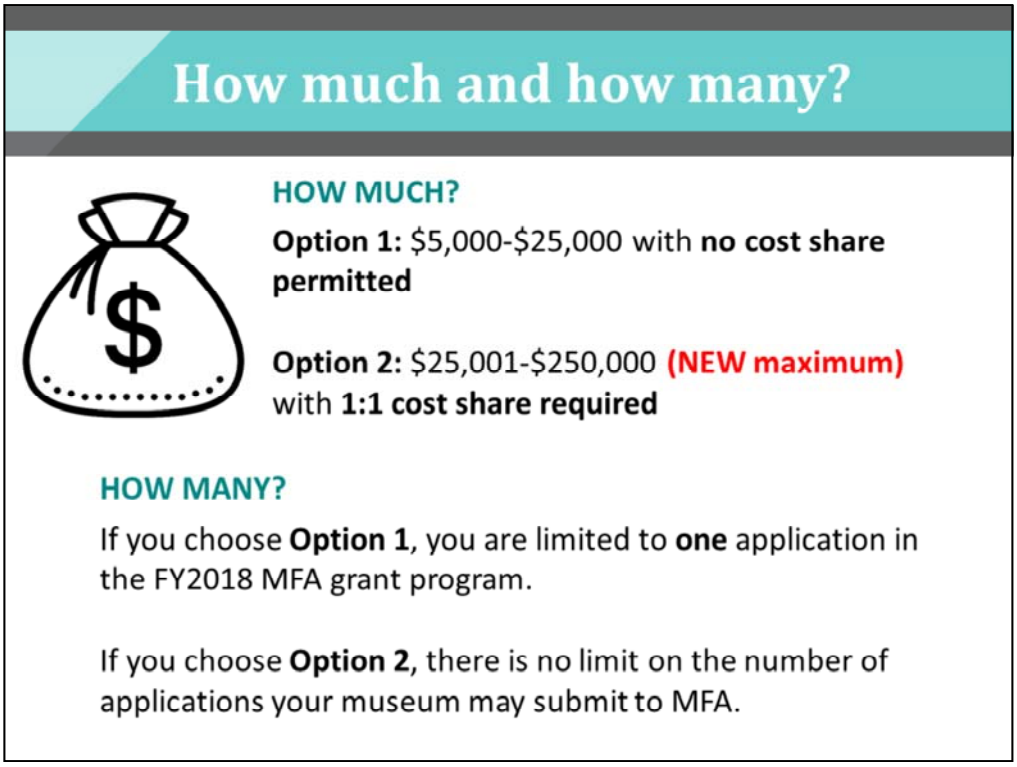


With this focus on supporting the individual museum, what are the characteristics of successful Museums for America applications? There are four, and successful projects exemplify all of them well. As you prepare your application, then, you should keep these characteristics in mind.

It has been our experience that an unfunded application is one that has failed to deliver convincingly on one or more of these, so it is wise to think hard about how to structure your application to show how your project will be strong in each.

We want to remind you of important dates for MFA applications. They are due by 11:59 pm Eastern Time on December 1, 2017. That is non-negotiable, and the time stamp is auto-generated by the Grants.gov system. We will say this over and over again, but **start early** and **submit early.** That way, if you encounter a difficulty of any kind when submitting your proposal, you'll have some time to resolve the problem.

MFA awards will be announced in September, 2018. And MFA projects must be scheduled to start on the first day of October, November, or December, 2018. The choice is yours. If you feel you might need a breather between the date you find out about funding and the start of your project, then you might want to opt for a November 1 or December 1 start date. If you can gear up in a few days, then October might be your choice.



Our next topic has to do with how much funding may you request and how many applications are you allowed to submit.

Regarding how much money may you request, there are two options. Option 1 is to apply for an amount between $5,000 and $25,000. If you elect Option 1, then you do not need to provide a cost share, and in fact, you may NOT provide a cost share. When we say no cost share is permitted, we mean that your application will be removed from consideration if you provide one. That's major, so let me say it again. If you apply for $25,000 or less, **DO NOT INCLUDE A COST SHARE IN YOUR BUDGET OR REFERENCE ONE IN YOUR PROJECT.**

Option 2 is to apply for an amount between $25,001 and the maximum $250,000. If you elect Option 2, then you must provide a 1:1 cost share. This cost share may be in the form of cash, staff or volunteer time, or third-party contributions. It may not be funds from another federal source.

Please note that the $250,000 maximum is new this year. You may not request more than that from IMLS.

The second question is how many applications may you file? If you choose Option 1 and request between $5,000 and $25,000 with no cost share, then you are limited to one MFA application in the FY2018 round. If you choose Option 2 and request between $25,001 and $250,000 with a 1:1 cost share, then there is no limit on the number of applications your museum may submit this round to MFA.

Our next topic is that of MFA project categories. Second to choosing to apply to Museums for America, this is likely to be your most important decision about your funding application.

Much like your own institution's strategic plan, IMLS's identifies goals that help us achieve our vision and accomplish our mission. What is most important to you as a potential applicant is that there are three programmatic goals that drive our grant-making. We require applicants for Museums for America to align their projects with one of these goals.

Why is your decision about which category to choose so important? For one thing, your application will be reviewed by museum professionals who have experience and expertise in these general categories. And for another, your application will be competing against others who have chosen the same category. In short, the entire review process incorporates an assumption that your project aligns with the category you've identified. It's an important choice, and it's important to get it right.

Project Categories: Learning Experiences

MFA Learning Experiences projects might include:

- Interpretive and educational programs
- Exhibition development, design, and fabrication
- Digital media
- Public programs
- Digitization activities designed to provide greater access and stimulate engagement for audiences with different learning styles
- Professional development for educators
- Publication of curriculum-support materials
- Visitor studies that help guide the design and development or reassessment and realignment of current educational programs
- Training for staff, volunteers, and interns
- Learning partnerships with schools and development of museum resources and programs in support of school curricula

Successful projects provide high-quality, inclusive educational opportunities that address particular audience needs.

So let's take a look at what kinds of activities a project in each of these categories might include.

A project in Learning Experiences might include all or part of an exhibit, programs, media, training for teachers or your staff, or elements of visitor studies that will help you assess and possibly realign your offerings.

As you plan your project in this category, we strongly recommend starting with the concept of "learner at the center" and build around it. Spend time really thinking through who your learners in this project are and what their needs are. It's not likely going to be "everybody," so who is it really? What do they want to learn, what do you want them to learn, and what's the best way to go at that? We'll get to the whole idea of problems and needs in a few minutes, but a major takeaway here is to be focused in identifying your audience and in thinking about how you are going to serve them.

Project Categories: Community Anchors

MFA Community Anchors projects might include:

- Creating environments for community learning, debate, and dialogue
- Community-driven and co-created exhibitions, programs, and events
- Audience development and community outreach
- Community-focused planning activities
- Audience-focused studies and evaluation
- Training for staff, volunteers, and interns in proactive and sustained community outreach and engagement strategies

Successful projects strive to create a better quality of life within communities.

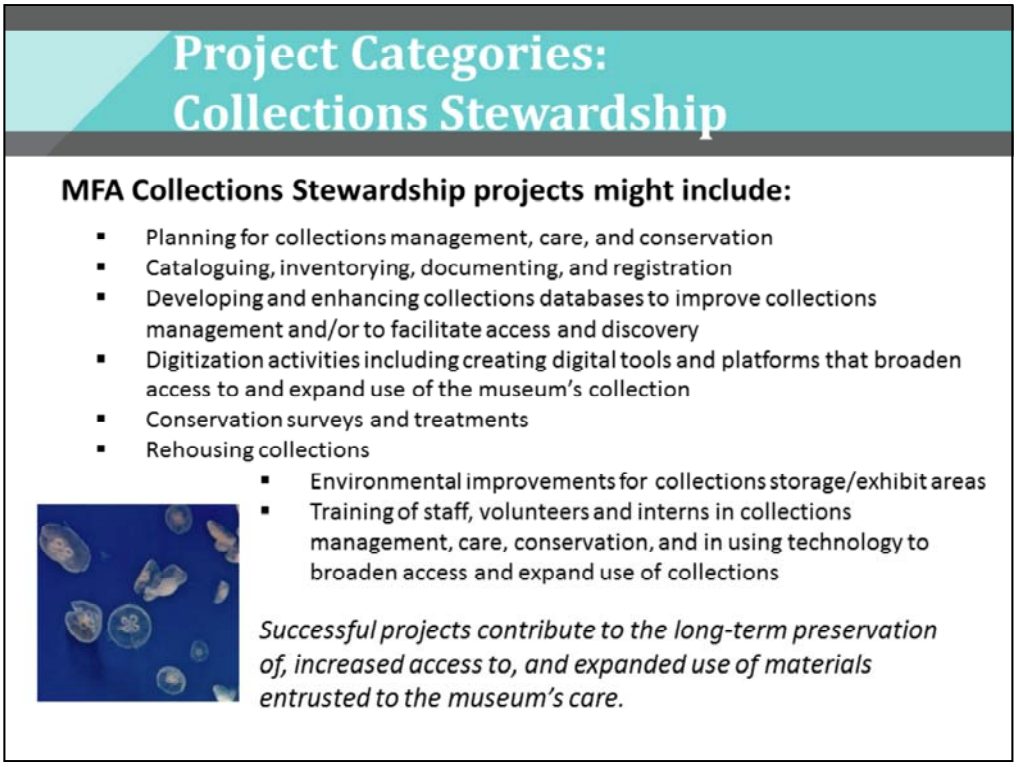
A Community Anchors project is likely to include activities that contribute directly to the institution's functioning as an essential partner in addressing community needs. As you scan this list, you'll see the word "community' in nearly every entry. Simply saying you plan to be welcoming to your community or you plan to serve your community is not likely to be enough. Reviewers should be able to see clearly that you have involved members of your community in planning your project and that you'll continue to involve them in its implementation and evaluation.

So, if your project involves exhibitions/programs, how do you know if your project fits best within Learning Experiences or Community Anchors? We get this question frequently. After all a significant part of museum work involves creating exhibitions and delivering programs. Which category should you pick?

We suggest this test: If the motivation for doing the project comes from **within** your institution—perhaps your vision or your mission directs you to create these things—then you might well be looking at a Learning Experiences project. If the motivation for doing the project comes from **outside** your institution and in your community and you "raise your hand" to say, in essence, "Our resources, our position, our skills, etc. put us in a great

position to address this need. We can make a difference and be part of the overall solution," then you might have a Community Anchors project.

Both approaches are legitimate, and both are fundable. Ultimately, it's your choice. What's important is that you choose one and write your application that way. Hybrids don't work as well as sharply focused applications.



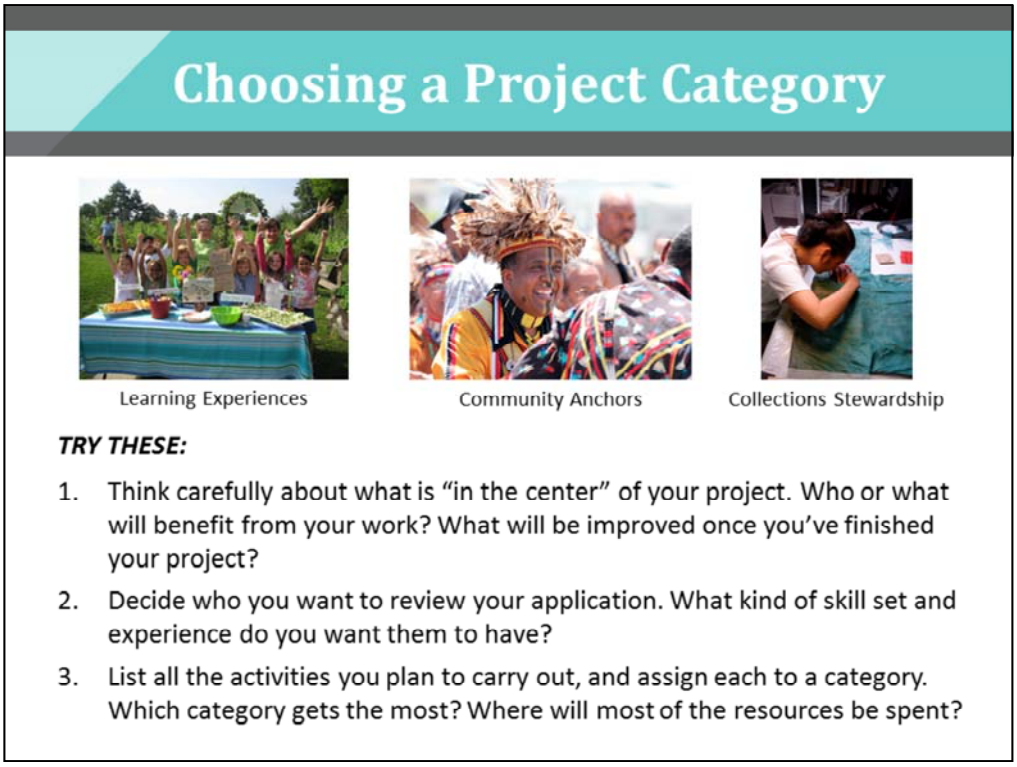
Our third project category is that of Collections Stewardship, and this includes just about anything you need to do for and with collections, except acquire them.

We are very open to projects that have multiple components configured in ways that make sense for you. One project might consist of cataloging, updating database records, and taking digital photographs, while another might combine digitization with rehousing. We support conservation projects of all kinds—general, detailed, and environmental surveys as well as treatments and environmental improvements. And you are welcome to incorporate aspects of training and/or collections management into these projects if doing so makes sense for your situation.

It's important to note that in this project category, we encourage a step-by-step, progressive approach to collections work, including conservation. This means assessing needs, creating a prioritized list of activities, and following through by **doing the most important things first.**

Keep in mind that just as learners are in the center of Learning Experiences projects and the community plays the central role in Community Anchors projects, Collections Stewardship projects place the collections in the

spotlight. The improvement that comes about as the result of your project should directly involve them.



Before we close our discussion of project categories, we want to mention our guidance for projects that could belong logically in more than one. Sometimes it's tough to choose, and you might be tempted to think that the best strategy would be to align with more than one—two, and maybe even three! We advise against that for several reasons.

First, the project categories have different goals, and we expect that projects aligned with each will address different problems, use different approaches, and will measure success in achieving the intended results in different ways. Second, not only do our instructions for applicants differ for each category, but so does our guidance for reviewers. In other words, we've gone to considerable effort to make distinctions among these three categories, and it's better if you do too.

So how can you choose the best category for your project?

Here are three things we suggest you try. **Think carefully about what is "in the center" of your project.** Is it the learner? Will people who engage with you as a result of your project to create a new exhibition and programming to go with it acquire new knowledge, develop a skill, experience a change in attitude about the subject of your exhibit? Or is it the community that's in the

center of your thinking? Is your project one that will address an important community need, and are you doing it because you believe your museum can make a difference? Or is your project about the collections? Will your project result in a better managed, better cared-for, or more accessible set of objects?

A second way to go at this might be to think about **who you want to review your application.** If you apply under Learning Experiences, we will put your application in front of educators, learning theorists, and professionals with deep experience in understanding how people learn in museum environments. Would you rather we put it in front of a a combination of experts in civic engagement, community outreach, and collective impact? If that sounds “right,” then it may push you toward Community Anchors. And if you apply under Collections Stewardship, you can be confident that your application will be reviewed by some combination of registrars, collection managers, curators, conservators, or collections information specialists.

Still undecided? A third strategy to try might be to **make a list of all the activities** you plan to carry out. Then assign each to a category, and then count to see where MOST of these activities occur and where MOST of the time and money will be spent. That might well provide your answer.

Our most heartfelt advice, then, is to choose one project category, study the instructions for preparing an application as well as the review criteria for that category, and write your proposal accordingly. As always, if you have questions, call the IMLS staff to discuss them.

We'll turn now to allowable and unallowable costs for your project. Be very careful in preparing your proposal and include only allowable costs in both your IMLS ask and your cost share. To do otherwise can hurt your chances of getting positive reviews and being recommended for funding.

We'll go through some common expenses that are allowable and unallowable, but for details, please see Title 2, Subtitle A, Chapter II, Part 200 of the Code of Federal Regulations covering Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards, or "2 CFR 200" for short.

Fortunately, the regulations are available online in a searchable format on the U.S. Government Publishing Office website listed on the screen**.**

Of particular interest is Subpart E—Cost Principles, a small section of which is shown on the right side of the screen.

Allowable Costs

Examples of allowable costs

- personnel salaries, wages, and fringe benefits
- travel expenses for key project staff and consultants
- materials, supplies, software, and equipment related directly to project activities
- equipment to improve collections storage and exhibit environments
- third-party costs
- publication design and printing
- staff and volunteer training
- internships/fellowships
- indirect or overhead costs

In the MFA Notice of Funding Opportunity, we provide a partial list of the most common examples of allowable costs as pictured here.

These costs may be part of what you ask IMLS to pay for and/or what you will pay for as part of your cost share, if one is required. The rules about allowability apply to both sides.

Unallowable Costs

Examples of unallowable costs

- general fundraising costs, such as development office staff or other staff time devoted to general fundraising
- contributions to endowments
- general operating support
- acquisition of collections
- general advertising or public relations costs
- construction or renovation of facilities
- social activities, ceremonies, receptions, or entertainment
- research projects
- pre-award costs

We also provide a list of generally unallowable costs, again both for IMLS funds and for cost share. These costs may NOT be part of what you ask IMLS to pay for, NOR can they be part of what you will pay for as part of your cost share. In fact, unallowable expenses can't show up anywhere in your proposal.

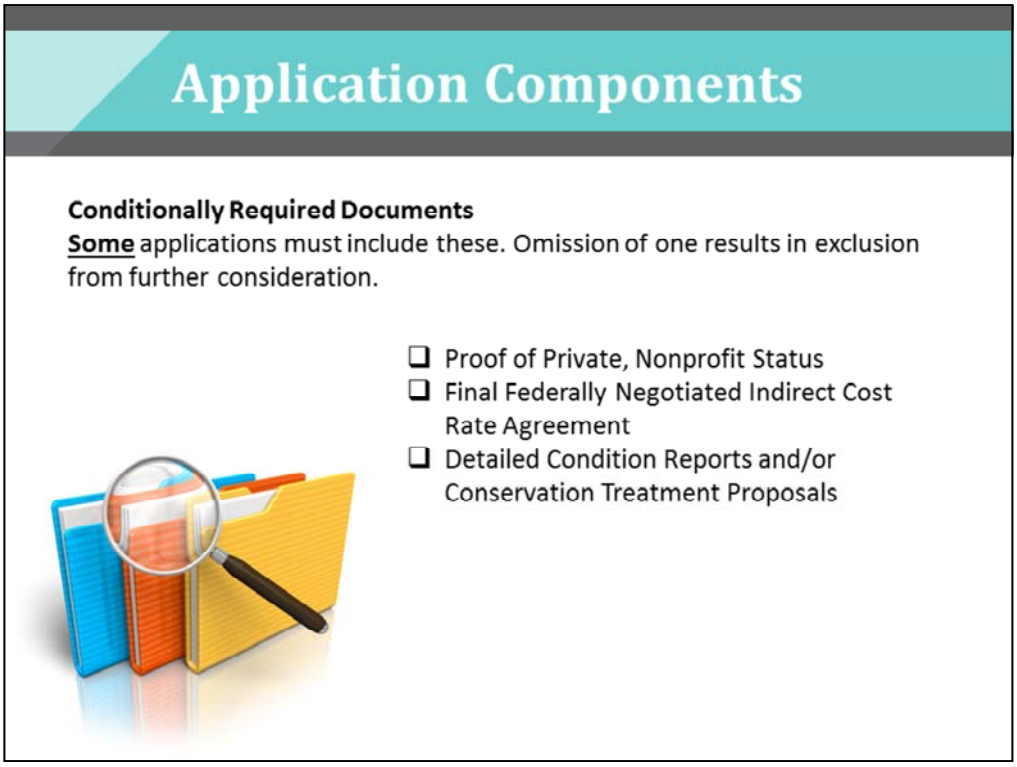
As you prepare your application, it's a good idea to compare your list of proposed expenses against these lists of allowable and unallowable costs and against the appropriate set of cost principles. If after that you have specific questions, please contact us and we'll be happy to help.

Next up are application components. Your application will consist of a series of individual documents, and it's very important to make sure you prepare and submit everything you should.

These application components fall into three categories in Museums for America. The first is that of **required documents**. **All applications must include the documents listed here.** Omission of even just one can result in the exclusion of your application from further consideration. Also important to note are page limits. If you exceed the page limit specified in the Notice of Funding Opportunity, we must remove the extras before your application goes out for review. That means your reviewer may well see a paragraph or sentence end in mid air and will wonder about your planning skills and your attentiveness to detail. Make sure your content fits into the page limits specified and make sure the number of pages holds when you convert your document to a PDF.

Our pre-recorded webinar, "IMLS Office of Museum Services, FY2018 Forms," provides detailed guidance on completing the forms highlighted here in red: The Application for Federal Assistance, the IMLS Program Information Sheet, the IMLS Budget Form and associated Budget Justification, and the

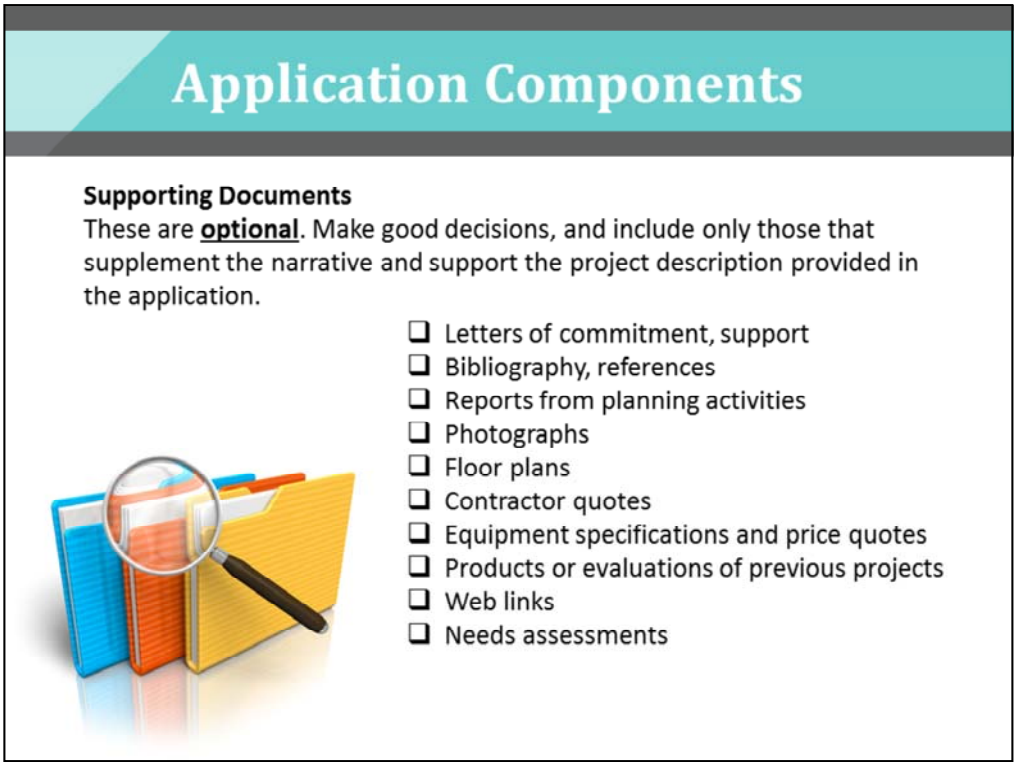
Digital Product Form. We strongly recommend that you listen to and/or read the transcript of that webinar. The link to it is on the slide at the beginning of this webinar and on the landing page for the Museums for America Notice of Funding Opportunity.



The second category of application components is that of **conditionally required documents**. **Some** applications must include one, two, or all three of these, and it's your job to figure out which are required for yours.

- If you are applying as a nonprofit, then you must include your proof of nonprofit status issued by the IRS.
- If you are using a federally negotiated indirect cost in your budget, then you must include a copy of your final rate agreement.
- If you are requesting support for conservation treatment, then you must include detailed condition reports and/or formal conservation treatment proposals.

Just like the required documents, omission of even one can result in the exclusion of your application from further consideration.



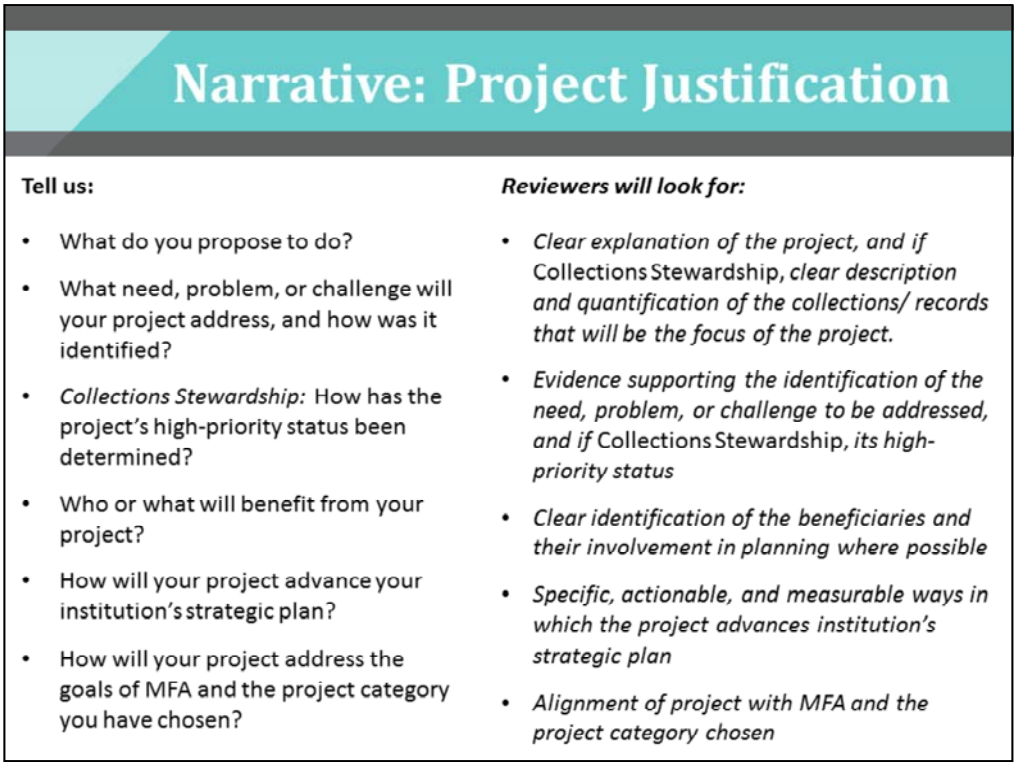
The third group of application components is **supporting documents, and here is a partial list of examples**. Supporting documents are completely optional. You may submit some or none. We urge you to make good decisions here and include only those that supplement the narrative and support the project description you provide in your application. This is not the place to introduce new information. We also recommend that you be respectful of your reviewers' time and avoid any temptation to include hundreds of pages of extraneous material that is not directly relevant to your project. Being judicious really does work to your benefit. **Include what is important and helpful … and stop there.**

Let's turn to two specific documents that you will need to prepare from scratch, and by that we mean they are not forms. As you've seen, these are not ALL the documents you will need to submit, but they are very important ones and the ones about which applicants seem to have the most questions.

First is a **strategic plan summary**. As you read the MFA Notice of Funding Opportunity, you will see frequent references to your organization's strategic plan or strategic goals. IMLS wants to help you achieve your goals, and indeed, we've seen that one of the characteristics of a successful MFA project is addressing a key need or challenge that faces your museum and whose resolution is identified in your strategic plan. We ask for a summary of your plan—no more than two pages—so that reviewers will be able to understand how your proposed project's activities will further your institutional goals and objectives. To verify its legitimacy, we ask that you indicate when and by whom the plan was approved. For some institutions this might be the Board of Trustees. For others it might be someone or a group representing the authority for a division or a department.

Inside advice: Use a narrative format for your strategic plan summary. Although infographics and cleverly designed imagery might be just the thing for communicating your strategic plan to some audiences, it typically doesn't

work well for our reviewers. These two pages are all they have, and they tell us they find a well-constructed thoughtful summary the best way to confirm connections to your project. Make it easy for them to see it.

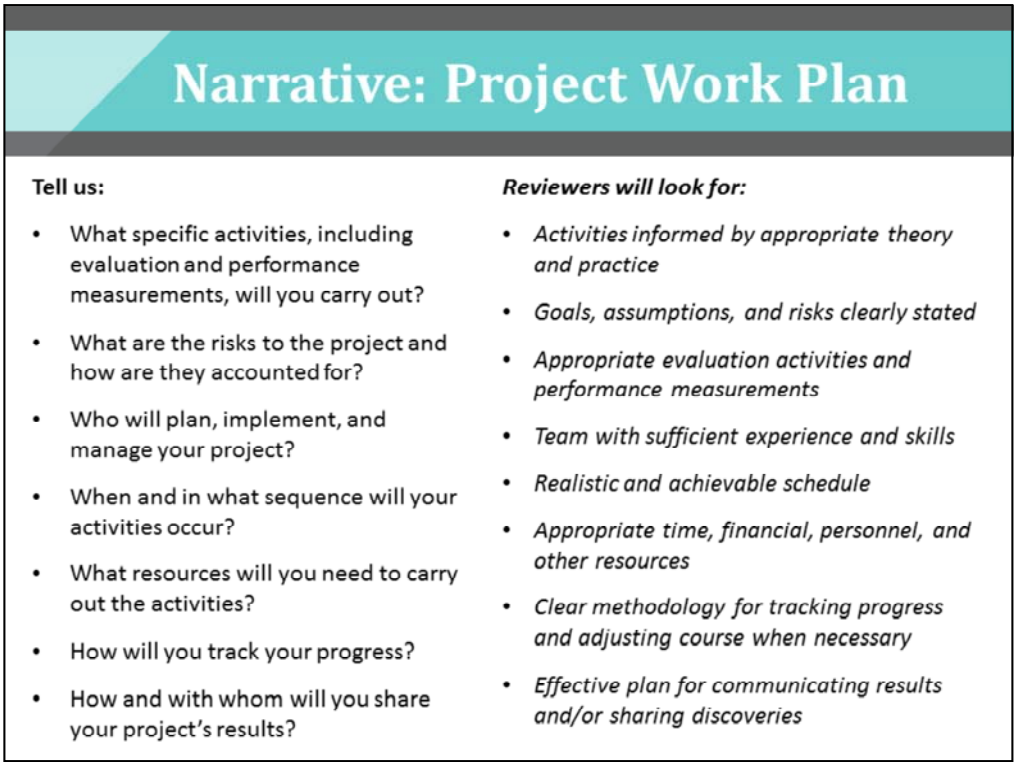


Now let's talk about the narrative of your proposal. You have seven pages to cover three very important issues, and the Notice of Funding Opportunity provides lengthy guidance on what the narrative should cover. The specifics differ for each project category (i.e. Learning Experiences, Community Anchors, and Collections Stewardship), and so you should make sure you're following the guidance for the category you've chosen.

On the left side of the slide are the questions we ask you to address in your narrative, and on the right side are the points we ask reviewers to evaluate. It's good practice to consider both sides.

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

In this section of the narrative, you should lay out the reasoning for your project. This is where you describe the problem that you're setting out to solve or the need that you're going to address, and you tell us how you know it deserves attention. You might do this by citing published research, previous studies, or data gathered by your organization or by others. You should be crystal clear in identifying who or what will benefit from your project, because every activity that you identify in the work plan and every result that you propose to achieve should have an obvious connection to this problem and the beneficiaries you identify.



PROJECT WORK PLAN

This is where you identify who will do what, when, and using what resources. We also ask you to think about risks that are inherent in your particular project and to tell us how you've taken that into account in your planning. Think of it as answering the question, "What if?"

Let's talk about some examples of risk.

- A project may be dependent upon fundraising to generate the cost share, but it isn't complete by the time the application is submitted. That applicant needs to tell what they will do if that money doesn't come in by the time the project gets underway.

- Another project may be structured around university interns, who will be selected and trained according to well thought-out processes. What will they do if one or more interns drops out? What's the plan for replacing them mid-project?

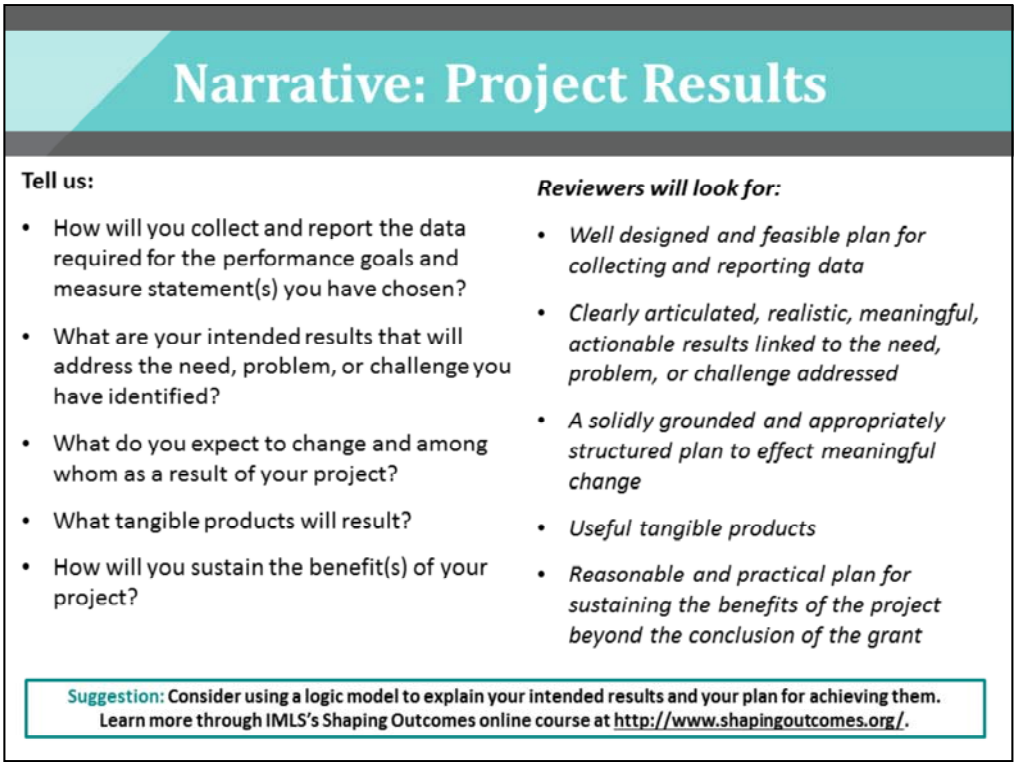
- A project involving rehousing collections into new museum-quality

collections storage furniture might run into delays in preparing the space or in the delivery of the cabinets. What happens to the collection items then? How will they remain safe and secure?

In short, there is no checklist of risks, but every project has them. The best proposals will show that the staff are aware of them and have thought through a plan for dealing with them.

Inside advice: When you are describing the activities you'll carry out, be as concrete as possible about it. You should know when you've started an activity, and you should know when you've finished it. That will make it easy to put on a schedule of completion (another required document) and to report on it in your performance reports. It will also help you with tracking progress and measuring success. **An activity in this sense is not a goal; it's a thing you do as part of striving to achieve a goal or an outcome.**

Aim for a reasonable level of granularity in identifying your activities. If you are too general and all encompassing, it will be hard to track real progress. If you are too detailed, you can get lost in the minutiae and this makes it difficult to see the bigger picture.



PROJECT RESULTS

The third section of your narrative should be devoted to articulating your project's intended results. This is your chance to convince the reviewers that your project will result in something getting better. The need or problem you identified in your project justification will be addressed, and it will be diminished or eliminated altogether.

This is also the place where you will describe how you will collect and report the data that will document this improvement, and it will connect to the performance goals and performance measure statements you choose on the IMLS Program Information Sheet.

Inside advice: Consider using a logic model to explain your intended results and your plan for achieving them. Many MFA applicants use them, and reviewers appreciate their conciseness and focus. There are many excellent resources available to help you construct a logic model. Among these are IMLS's "Shaping Outcomes," a free online course that is available at the URL shown here.

So, to recap: Your narrative has three sections—Project Justification, Project Work

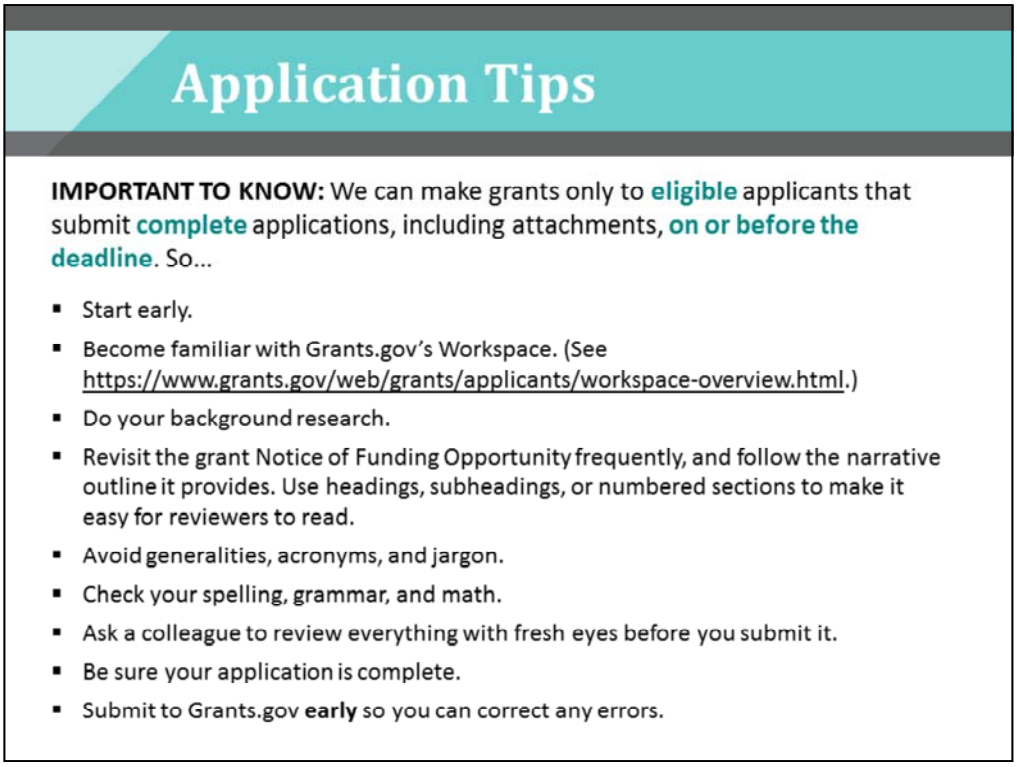
Plan, and Project Results. They're all equally important, so don't give any of them short shrift. Write clearly, address what we ask you to address, and keep an eye on those review criteria. We're telling you here exactly what the reviewers will look for, so make it easy for them to find it and understand it.

At this point, we'd like to share a few tips gleaned from our collective experience in working with applications submitted to the MFA program each year.

First on the list, make sure your registrations are complete and your passwords and user names are current. You must have a DUNS number, an active SAM.gov registration, and a current and functional Grants.gov registration, and if you are just starting out, you'll need to acquire them in that order. In other words, you must have a DUNS number to register with SAM.gov. You must have an active SAM.gov registration to register with Grants.gov.

It's crucial to remember that your SAM.gov registration expires each year and you must renew it. You can check your status at any time by going to www.sam.gov. In addition, your Grants.gov password expires every 60 days, and leaving accounts inactive for a year or more can result in the removal of all account roles. So … make sure you know who your Grants.gov Authorized Organization Representative is and be sure the username and updated password are in place.

Both websites have robust help features and FAQs.

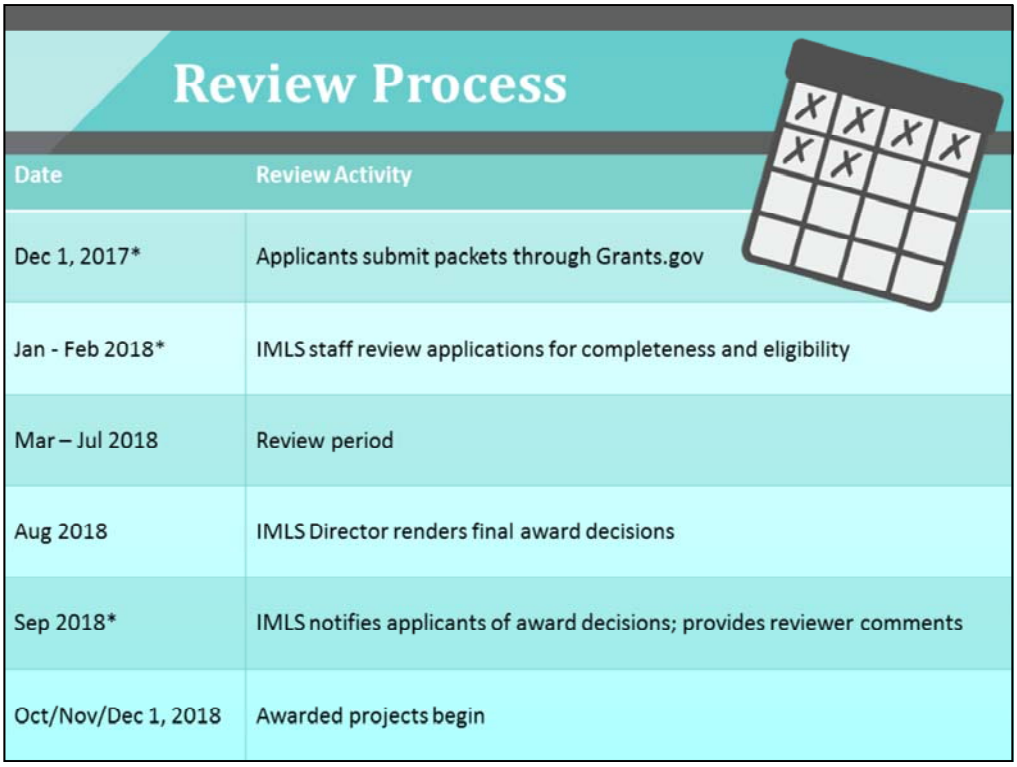


IMPORTANT TO KNOW: Our regulations state that we can make grants only to **eligible** applicants that submit **complete** applications, including attachments, **on or before the deadline**. Those are the concepts we must live by. So here are some tips to help ensure that your application is aligned with these concepts.

- Start early.
- Become familiar with Grants.gov's Workspace. This has been available as an option for a couple of years now, and it will be the only option after December, 2017. It has many good features, including upfront validation, which allows you to correct errors prior to submission, and the opportunity to collaborate with others in creating your application. Check out the tutorials on www.grants.gov now.
- Do your background research. Make it easy for the reviewers to see that you are up to date and know what you're talking about.
- Revisit the grant Notice of Funding Opportunity frequently, and follow the narrative outline it provides. Use headings, subheadings, or numbered sections to make it easy for reviewers to read.
- Avoid generalities, acronyms, and jargon. The people who will review your application are experts, but they may not be totally familiar with your particular field's shorthand. Make it easy for them to understand

what you mean.

- Check your spelling, grammar, and math. It counts with reviewers!
- Ask a colleague to review everything with fresh eyes before you submit. Ask them to act like a reviewer who's seeing this for the first time.
- Be sure your application is complete. Check it against the Table of Application Components in the Notice of Funding Opportunity…and then check it again.
- Submit to Grants.gov early so you can correct any errors and avoid any trauma created by technology challenges.



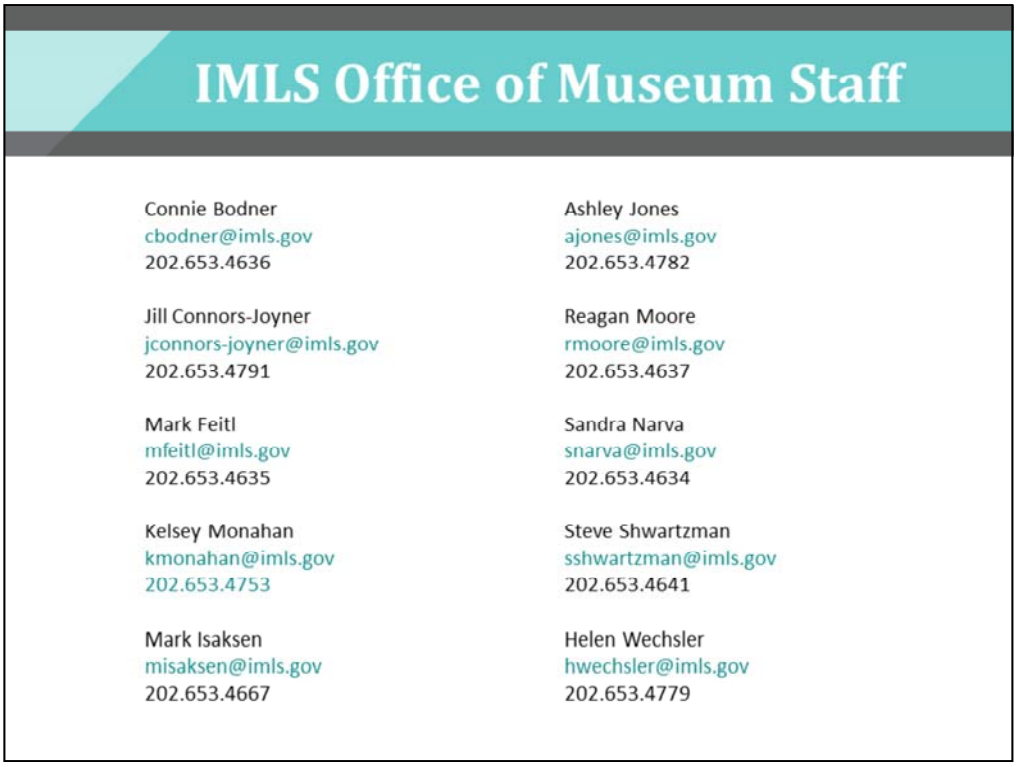
This is the general schedule of events to show what happens to your application once we receive it. The times that you will hear from us are marked with asterisks--in December, when you'll receive email acknowledgements that your application has been received by Grants.gov (either successfully or unsuccessfully) and that it has been forwarded to IMLS; in January, when you'll receive an email from us providing you with basic summary information that we ask you to review and an application log number, which is what we will use to track your application. If your application is found to be incomplete or your institution is ineligible, you'll hear from us in January/February.

From March through July, your experienced and knowledgeable peers will provide scores and comments based on the criteria outlined in the MFA Notice of Funding Opportunity, and IMLS staff will examine budgets, financials, and your track record with past and current grants. We then prepare materials for the IMLS Deputy Director for Museums and the Director. By law, the IMLS Director is charged with the authority and responsibility to make final award decisions, and this happens in August.

In September, we notify all applicants by email of the award decisions and provide the scores and comments created by the reviewers. Project

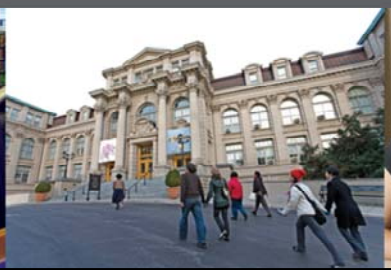
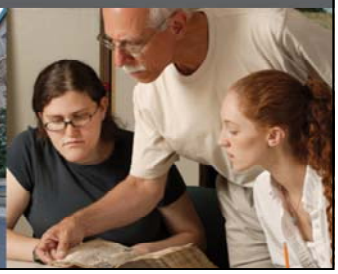
Directors and Authorizing Officials of funded applications receive award packets.

And on October 1, November 1, or December 1—whichever date the successful applicant chose at the time the application was filed—the projects begin.



Thank you very much for your interest in IMLS and in Museums for America, and we hope you have found the information in this webinar helpful. Here is a listing of the names, email addresses, and direct phone numbers for program staff in the Office of Museum Services, and we encourage you to contact us with any questions you might have about what you've heard or seen in this webinar or in the online MFA materials. We'll be very happy to help.

Good luck and we look forward to seeing your application in December.

INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES

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