National Leadership Grants

2006 Panelist Handbook

THE NATIONAL LEADERSHIP GRANTS REVIEW PROCESS

Thank you for agreeing to serve as a National Leadership Grant panelist. We have selected you to review this year's applications because of your expertise in one of the competitive categories of funding for libraries and/or museums.

The staff at IMLS has prepared this handbook specifically for panelists to ensure fair and candid review of all eligible applications. It will provide you with the procedural information you need. Please use it in conjunction with this year's *National Leadership Grants Guidelines and Application Forms*. Even if you are an experienced reviewer, you'll need to refresh your memory and note any changes.

THE NLG PROGRAM

The National Leadership Grant (NLG) program provides Federal grants through an annual, competitive process. In the NLG program:

- Applications are evaluated by peers;
- Evaluations are based on the application's strength in proving that the applicant:
    - Meets applicable evaluation criteria as outlined in the *NLG Guidelines*; and
    - Addresses the priorities for this funding cycle as explained in the *Guidelines*

THE NLG PROCESS

1. Applicants review the *National Leadership Grants Guidelines and Application Forms* and submit proposals to IMLS.
2. IMLS receives the grant applications, checks them for eligibility and completeness.
3. IMLS chooses panelists and matches grant applications to those with appropriate expertise.
4. Panelists review the applications and complete evaluation comments.
5. Panels meet to discuss proposals and make funding recommendations.
6. Staff conducts administrative review.
7. Overview Panel considers recommended proposals.
8. IMLS Director makes final funding decisions.
9. IMLS staff notifies successful applicants.
10. IMLS provides feedback to all applicants.

I. First Steps

This handbook outlines an approach to help prepare for the panel review process. Contact IMLS at once and notify the appropriate staff contact if you have questions after reading the following information.

QUALITIES OF A GOOD PROPOSAL

A good NLG proposal should:
- Demonstrate National Impact as defined in the *Guidelines*
- Successfully address each criterion
- Address priorities for the appropriate category (Refer to the section on priorities in the *Guidelines*.)

TIME REQUIRED

Experienced reviewers estimate that it takes two to three hours to evaluate one application. If you are a first time NLG reviewer, you may need more time. We recommend the reviewing process outlined on the following pages.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Read the "Conflict of Interest Statement" carefully. Then read your list of applications to see if there are any potential conflicts of interest. If there is a potential conflict, contact IMLS immediately. Once you have reviewed an application, you should *never* represent the applicant in dealings with the IMLS or other Federal agencies in regard to this grant application or award.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information contained in grant applications is strictly confidential. Do not discuss or reveal names, institutions, project activities or any other information contained in the applications. Contact IMLS if you have any questions concerning an application—do not contact an applicant directly.

APPLICATION COMPLETENESS

Check your applications to make sure that all required information is included. We only check the original application. We do not check every page of each reviewer copy for completeness. ***If any application appears to be incomplete, contact IMLS immediately.***

SCHEDULE OF COMPLETION

The chart on the following page presents a week-by-week guide to completing the review process. You may want to use this chart as a model for your own schedule.

FOUR-WEEK SCHEDULE OF COMPLETION

	WEEK 1	WEEK 2	WEEK 3	WEEK 4
ACTIVITY 1	**1)** Upon receipt of panel materials, • Check each application for completeness • Contact IMLS with any problems • Read the Conflict of Interest Statement			
ACTIVITY 2	**2) Read** the *NLG Application and Guidelines NLG* and the *Panelist Handbook.*			
ACTIVITY 3	**3) Evaluate** applications: 1st read to understand range of responses.			
ACTIVITY 4		**4)** 2nd read-through: **write comments** for Preliminary Notes. (The form is on the enclosed CD-ROM.)		
ACTIVITY 5				**5) Review** comments and make Preliminary Funding Recommendations.
ACTIVITY 6				**6) Prepare** brief outline to facilitate leading discussion of assigned proposals.
ACTIVITY 7				7) **Prepare** all information to bring to panel meeting

II. Evaluating Applications

IMLS asks you to express your professional judgment of each proposal in the following ways: (1) Assess if the proposal addressed the priorities; and (2) Write comments for each of the criterion. These may be found on pp.3.3-3.5 of the enclosed *2006 National Leadership Grants Guidelines and Application Forms.*

Your judgment should reflect how well you think the information provided in each proposal addresses the goals and stated criteria of the specific NLG category.

Read Applications

Read your applications to develop a feel for the range of responses. Take notes as you read. Read each application again.

III. Preparing For Panel Discussion

- You are expected to write comments on the **Panel Preliminary Notes** forms for each application assigned to you. (The form is on the enclosed CD-ROM.)
- These forms are sent to both successful and unsuccessful applicants and are used to improve awarded projects or future applications.
- In the proposals assigned to you, you are expected to both lead discussions for and give input to discussions for those proposals.
- The discussions are important in the review process and culminate in funding recommendations from the panel.
- After you have completed the preliminary forms, review them and prepare a very brief description of what the project proposes to do, give your preliminary evaluation, and support your recommendation through a brief description of the proposal's strengths and weaknesses. The ratings are:

___**E**   Excellent; Recommended for funding – Use only for the highest quality applications

___**VG**   Very Good; Highly recommended. Use for projects that may have very minor problems that the panel could recommend fixing within 5 working days

___**G**   Good; Recommended, but not high priority. Use for a project that is not outstanding but could be funded this year, if funds are available. Do not use for projects that are a good idea but have flaws that render them unfundable without major revision. Do not use just to be nice.

___**SM**   Some Merit, but not recommended for funding. Use for projects that are not ready this year, but have good ideas or address important issues. Encourage the applicant to return with a revised proposal next year. Do not use just to be nice.

___**DNF**   Do Not Fund. Use for projects that have major flaws that render them unfundable without major revision; that have serious conceptual flaws; or that the applicant is unable to perform. This category is for projects that you would not want to see brought back to IMLS by this applicant. This does not mean that the

idea itself was necessarily bad or that the issues raised were not important, but that this particular application is not fundable by IMLS.

- As the assigned Discussion Leader, you will be given a **Final Evaluation Form**. You will be responsible for compiling the recommendations and writing a brief commentary explaining the **Funding Recommendation** on this form.
- As Leader, you also collect the signed preliminary comment forms from each reader.

Sample Comments

The next few pages contain comments from field reviewers. Those comments labeled as "good" comments, based on evidence provided in the application, are substantive, tactful, and helpful to the evaluation. Remember that these are samples only. Feel free to use the good ones as models when preparing your own but DO NOT copy or paraphrase our samples. Each application is unique and deserves its own unique comments.

Good Comments

Some of the characteristics of good comments are:
- Presented in a constructive manner
- Concise, specific, easy to read and understand
- Specific to the individual applicant
- Reflect the professionalism of the reviewer
- Correlate with the score that is given
- Acknowledge the resources of the institution
- Reflect the application's strengths and identifies areas for improvement
- Directed to applicants for their use

Remember: Successful and unsuccessful applicants use your comments to improve their awards or future applications!

Each of the sample comments listed below is followed by an explanation of its good characteristics.

National Impact: "This project provides a means by which libraries can move beyond only providing access to digitized collections. This project can provide a model that supports the incorporation of artifacts and library information sources utilizing multi-media for undergraduate courses. The Web site, with the images, library resources, and additional pieces to be added by students enrolled in the credit courses, should serve as a model for demonstrating how classes can be improved and collections enriched via application of the Internet." (Provides a good explanation of how this project serves as a model)

Budget/Contributions: "The budget is realistic for the number of trainers and trainees. Compensation of consultants and the number of hours for their

assistance are reasonable for this project." (Provides specific information) Note: Consider whether, in your experience, the costs are realistic and reasonable.

General Comments: "Addresses an area of critical concern for museums, but two major barriers exist: Not enough planning is in evidence in the evaluation and dissemination steps, and more evidence of institution support is required—their commitment is not clear in this application." (Identifies strengths and areas for improvement)

POOR COMMENTS

Listed below are "poor" comments from past reviews. Comments that are considered poor are vague, irrelevant, insensitive, or unclear. These comments actually hinder the evaluation process rather than help it.
To avoid making poor comments, DO NOT:

- Penalize an applicant because of missing materials, unless you have determined that the materials are missing from the original application. If you are missing *required* materials, contact IMLS immediately.
- Penalize an applicant because you feel the institution doesn't need the money—remember, any eligible institution may apply for and receive NLG funds, regardless of need.
- Make derogatory remarks—offer suggestions for improvement rather than harsh criticism.
- Question an applicant's honesty or integrity. You may question the accuracy of information provided by the applicant, but if you are unsure how to raise your question, contact IMLS.
- Offer or ask for irrelevant or extraneous information—your comments should concern only the information IMLS requests of applicants.
- Penalize an applicant because their institution has a high indirect cost rate if they have included their agreement negotiated with the Federal Government. The institution has a right to use the negotiated agreement and the Project Director usually has no say in what rate is used. While some institutions are willing to cost share some of their indirect costs, they are not required to.

Each of the sample poor comments listed below is followed by an explanation of why it is a poor comment.

Adaptability: *"The project is obviously attempting to make the work adaptable—good work."* (Vague)

Evaluation: *"Weakest part of the proposal. Could be strengthened."* (Vague)

Personnel: *"The project personnel seem to be well qualified, but this institution does not have a national reputation."* (Insensitive and irrelevant)

Budget: *"I might question some parts of the budget, but they probably know what they're doing."* (Not evaluative; vague, and irrelevant)

National Impact: *"Addresses issues of digitization crucial to most cultural institutions."* (Does not address how those issues are presented or what their impact is on the proposals—vague)