

Supporting Museums – Serving Communities: An Evaluation of the Museums for America Program



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY / 2011



To create strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas...to sustain heritage, culture, and knowledge; enhance learning and innovation; and support professional development.

mission

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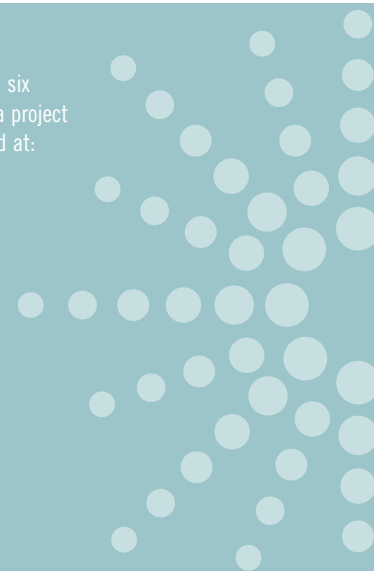
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The full report, appendices, and six exemplary Museums for America project video stories can be downloaded at: http://www.ims.gov/research/program_evaluations.aspx



The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation's museums. IMLS has a unique role. While other federal agencies support particular types of museums or particular types of museum services, IMLS is the only federal agency charged with defining and providing leadership for the entire US public and non-profit museum sector. IMLS takes a comprehensive approach by supporting museums of every discipline, in every budget size and in every state, DC, Puerto Rico, and the territories. Conservative estimates report that there are 17,500 museums in the US and that collectively they are visited over 1 billion times each year (online and onsite).¹

All types of museums, large and small, are eligible for IMLS funding, including aquariums, arboretums and botanical gardens, art museums, youth museums, general museums, historic houses and sites, history museums, nature centers, natural history and anthropology museums, planetariums, science and technology centers, specialized museums, and zoological parks.

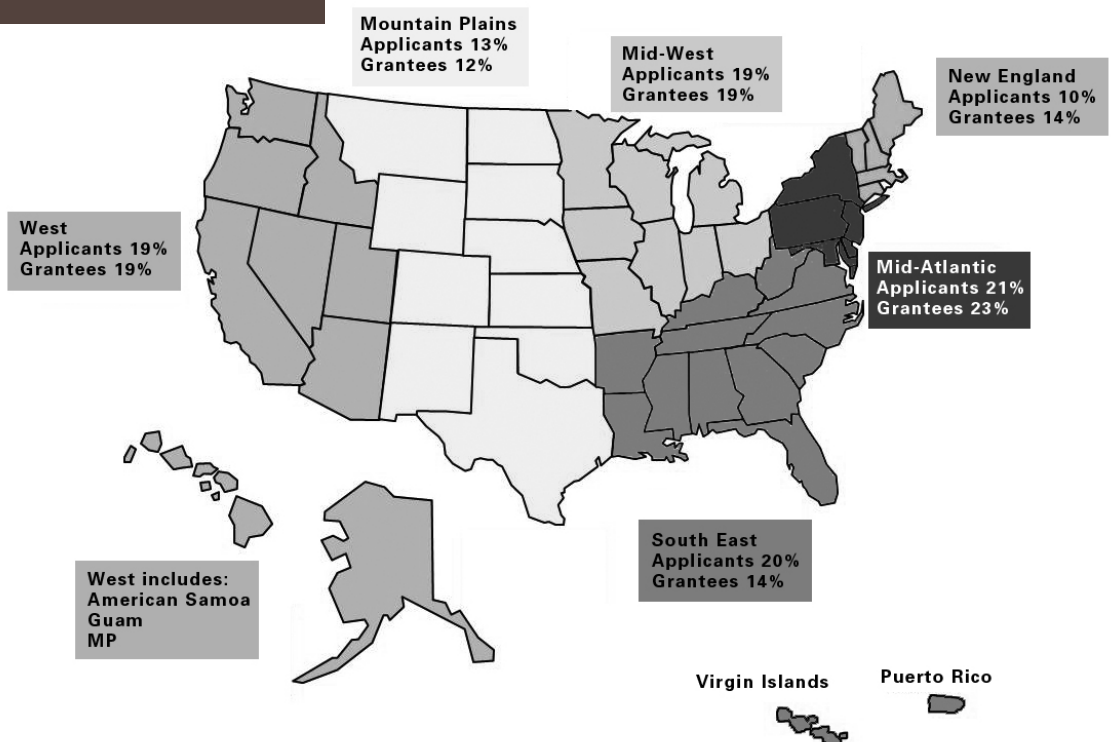
Museums for America (MFA) is the largest IMLS grant program for museums; it supports institutions by investing in high-priority, high-value activities that are clearly linked to the institution's strategic plan and enhance its value to its community. MFA grants situate projects within a framework of meeting three strategic goals: engaging communities, building institutional capacity, and collections stewardship.

MFA grants are awarded to eligible museums annually through a competitive process. Allowable activities include a broad range of museum work, such as

¹Griffiths, José Marie & King, Donald W. (2006). *Interconnections: The IMLS National Study on the Use of Libraries, Museums and the Internet*. Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Percent of Eligible MFA Applicants (n=1817) and Grantees (n=837) by Regional Location

Source: Institute of Museum and Library Services, Museums for America Grant Program Administrative Data, FY 2004 – FY 2010



digitization and collections management, exhibit and program development and implementation, research and evaluation, and staff development. This evaluation covers the first year (2004) of the Museums for America grant program through 2010. During that period, IMLS received 3,404 MFA applications from 1,817 eligible museums, awarding 1,191 grants to 830 museums, a total of \$123 million in funding.

This Executive Summary presents findings from the two-year study conducted by RMC Research Corporation. The study looked at the program's efficacy in serving the museum community and the impact of the MFA program and MFA-funded projects. RMC's analysis drew on IMLS administrative data from applications and awards, responses to an online survey administered by RMC to a subset of MFA applicants and grant recipients, interviews with representatives of 26 completed exemplary projects, and site visits to six of those 26 museums.

A National Museum Program to Address Local Needs

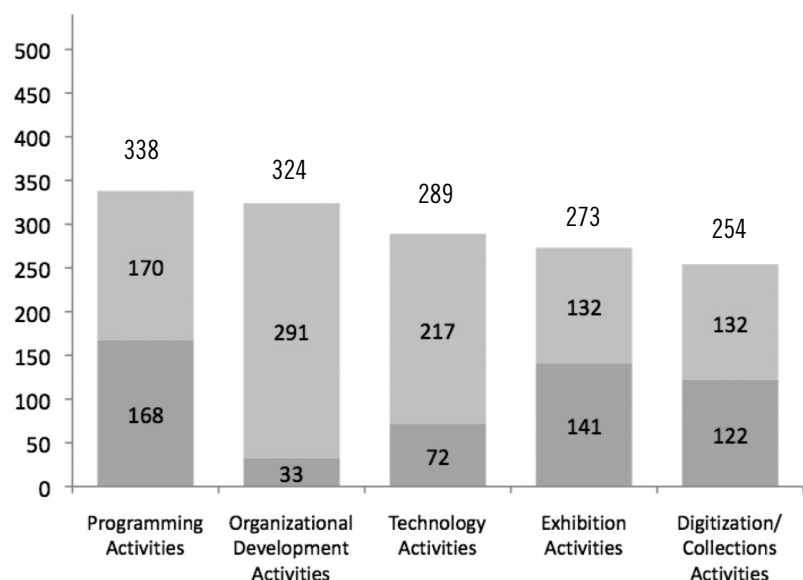
In interviews and survey comments, grantees identified the MFA program as unique in its approach to supporting US museums. The program requires applicants to develop projects that emerge from their strategic plans and helps museums respond to their specific institutional and community circumstances and needs.

- MFA encourages a comprehensive project approach. A single project might bring exhibit design, program development, and evaluation activities into a new museum offering, or combine content research, collections management, and curriculum design in an entirely new educational program.

Distribution of Project Activities by Resource Allocation and Activity Type
Sample FY 2004 – FY 2009 (n=537)

■ Number of projects that focused resource allocation elsewhere but conducted activities in this area

■ Number of projects that focused resource allocation in this activity area



- The clarity of MFA goals, the ability to continuously integrate findings of formative or process evaluation into project design, and the prestige of the national award helped grantees overcome project implementation challenges.
- Grantees stressed in both interviews and survey comments that they felt trusted by IMLS in the process they used to shape projects in order to attain strategic goals.

While not required to form partnerships, 70% of surveyed museums worked with formal or informal partners to expand their audience reach, access special expertise, or secure additional resources. Partnerships with community-based organizations, such as health or family services organizations were the most frequent, noted by 75% of museums. Other partnerships were with educational institutions, local and state governments, and libraries.

Strengthening Audience Engagement

MFA had immediate and sustained impact on museum users. Interviews and case study research described projects that were designed to provide a wide range of audience experiences, from one-on-one and small-group interactions to community-wide events. Some projects were designed to engage multiple ages and diverse interests, while others targeted audiences with specific backgrounds and needs. Exhibitions funded by MFA were frequently designed to reach multiple audience groups; individual programming activities were more often aimed at specific audiences, whether defined by age, ethnicity, or topic. In some cases, an MFA project was one stage in an ongoing, long-term initiative designed to engage a particular community defined by location, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

MFA projects resulted in greater audience engagement in museum activities as evidenced by success in reaching new audiences and deepening commitment by existing audiences, particularly volunteers.

Impact

- Ninety-three percent of sampled grantees reported short-term audience impacts as a result of an MFA project, such as reaching new audiences, increased commitment from existing audiences, or increased museum access by audiences.

“““

The structure provided by the grant writing process and consultation with our [IMLS] contact really helps you define what it is you're trying to accomplish, what your outcomes are, all of that kind of stuff. So it gave us a really great focus.

— Kidscommon Children's Museum, Columbus, IN

KEY FINDINGS



Programming and Exhibition Activities Conducted (n= 537)

- 63% of surveyed grantees conducted some kind of programming activities. Most conducted educational programming (97%) or general audience programming (92%).
- 51% conducted work on exhibitions, with the large majority (81%) focused on developing new exhibitions.



The great thing about the MFA program is the flexibility that it allows. It allows the institution to be creative in the way it develops its own programs that respond to specific goals. I think that is a real strength of this program.

—Chicago Botanic Garden,
Glencoe, IL

- The most frequent audience impact reported was increased capacity to reach new audiences (73%), suggesting that the grant program enables museums to provide resources and services to a wider range of people.
- Even three or more years past grant completion, many sampled grantees (39%) reported audience impacts still in evidence.
- Interviewees were consistently enthusiastic about how the MFA project helped to strengthen the museum's relevance to its community. They cited enhanced community awareness and use of their institutions, particularly as they provided opportunities for greater engagement and more long-term interactions.

Unlocking the Power of Museum Collections

MFA funding has supported collections management, digitization, and research activities that contribute to sustaining heritage, culture, and knowledge in communities across the country. MFA grantees reported that these foundational stewardship activities allowed them to better use their collections and offer new learning opportunities and experiences for audiences.

Impact

- Grantee interviews documented that museums are adding depth to their collections through ongoing archival research, oral histories, and dialogues with other museum staff concerning the care and interpretation of their collections. Additional activities include linking digital collections and archives to resources at other institutions.
- 34% of all surveyed grantees completed collections or digitization activities.
- More than eighty percent of projects involved in digitization work created new digital content.
- Grantees often employed digital technologies to increase virtual access to the collections while preserving original materials from excessive handling.
- Among grantees who reported digitizing their collections, over one third digitized at least half of their holdings.

KEY FINDINGS



Audience Effects

93% of surveyed projects served public audiences. Of these (n=442):

- 73% reached new audiences
- 64% increased commitment by existing audiences
- 46% increased audience access

Catalyst for Organizational Change

Grantees reported strengthening their institutional capacity with the MFA grants. Museum staff developed new skills and content knowledge in the course of MFA projects and frequently found new and productive ways to work internally. Interviewees often described their MFA project in terms of launching the museum into a new phase, establishing new and stronger community relationships and increasing the use of museum programs and resources, as well as helping the museum crystallize its purpose, or “turn a corner” in fulfilling a strategic plan.

Impact

- Almost all (98%) grantees reported positive impacts on organizational development. The most common organizational development activity, conducted by 65% of surveyed grantees, entailed staff, volunteer, or docent training.
- Interviews suggested that in the strongest cases, MFA grants extended beyond the intended projects and audiences and had ripple effects throughout the museum. For example, some museum staff found that the success of a specific program prompted a re-thinking of other programming or rose to the level of an institutional theme that was infused throughout the entire museum, encompassing even cafes and gift shops.
- The MFA program has enhanced participating museums’ capacity to serve communities. Most surveyed grantees (62%) reported greater staff capacity in developing new programming.
- 67% of grantees said the MFA grant had positioned their institutions to receive additional funding through other sources.
- Interviewees noted that a grant’s real value often did not depend on continuing a particular program or activity. They stressed that the grant’s greatest value was in lessons learned, ideas generated, and deepened engagement in a content area, audience strategy, or community.



I liked [the MFA Program] because it allows you to be creative and we were able to build in a lot of things that were helpful into this one project... it helped us to do things that the community wanted to see done; providing access – it was really a good project, a good program. And it was something that was doable for a small museum like us.

*–Akwasasne Cultural Center,
Akwasasne, NY*

KEY FINDINGS



Long-lasting Effects of Project Programming

Asked to characterize the success in sustaining grant-related programs (n=352) and audiences (n=395), surveyed grantees reported the following:

- 98% reported that they had been at least “somewhat successful” in continuing programming; 62% characterized their efforts as “very successful.”
- 99% reported that they had been at least “somewhat successful” in sustaining new audiences; 49% characterized their efforts as “very successful.”



Inquiry is so important... it is a proven methodology for engaging people in science. For us, this project set us down that path for our team to think that way....It did actually have legs throughout the museum...it engaged the whole institution.

— Denver Museum of Nature and Science, Denver, CO

Assistance, Equity, and Applications

Because there is currently no reliable source for information about the number, location and type of museums in the US it was not possible to compare the MFA applicant pool to the universe of museums in the US;² however, data on eligible MFA applicants and grantees suggest that IMLS has promoted the program successfully and maintains an active pool of applicants from a variety of museum disciplines, sizes, and geographic locations. In addition to grant awards, IMLS provides peer review of applications, robust technical assistance through both online and on-site consultation, and evaluation resources that enable museums to operate purposefully and effectively.

Impact

- 70% of MFA applicants were aware of IMLS outreach activities and materials, and of that portion, 95% rated these resources as somewhat or very helpful. Applicants who used IMLS application support resources were more likely to receive funding.
- 80% of respondents (including grantees and unfunded applicants) came away from the MFA application process with an improved ability to apply for other funding outside IMLS. Seventy-eight percent had a clearer sense of their own strengths, and 76% adopted some form of outcomes-based planning and evaluation.
- Unfunded eligible applicants reported positive impacts from the application process. Fifty-seven percent of surveyed unfunded applicants stated that their projects were ultimately implemented, either in modified form or through alternative funding.
- The more often a museum applied to the MFA program, the greater its likelihood of being funded in subsequent tries. Approximately 30% of all first-time applicants were funded compared with almost 50% of applicants making their fourth attempt. However, award rates for large museums increased with each re-application, while medium and small museum award rates increased at the second re-application, then leveled off in subsequent attempts.

²IMLS is developing Museums Count, a web-based census of museums that will provide current and reliable data on the scope, size, and distribution of the US museum sector, to which data on the MFA applicant pool can be compared.

KEY FINDINGS



Organizational Capacity Effects

Among grantees reporting institutional capacity effects (n=464):

- 81% helped institution fulfill its mission
- 80% strengthened museum's public image
- 67% increased ability to attract outside funding
- 64% increased visibility of institution as a center of community learning
- 59% raised institution's prestige in the community
- 45% improved staff cohesion and commitment to mission

Recommendations for Broadening MFA Impact

Evaluation findings suggest that the Museums for America program is highly effective in strengthening museums and serving communities. Given the overall success of the program, the following recommendations concern (1) expanding access to the MFA program, (2) sharing best practices, and (3) supporting museums' efforts to evaluate programs to measure and affirm their public value.

Expanding Access to the MFA Program

The MFA application process itself appears to have a positive impact on applicants, whether or not they receive funding. It is itself a valuable contribution to the museum field and could be made available to more museums.

- IMLS might want to explore which outreach activities and delivery mechanisms are most effective in reaching potential applicants. Nearly 70% of surveyed MFA applicants were aware of IMLS outreach activities; 47% received information about MFA from national, regional, and state museum associations.
- IMLS might consider offering greater assistance in navigating the online application system, especially for small museums with less technical capacity.
- Because the funding rate for reapplications to the MFA program is strong, IMLS might encourage reapplication more explicitly.

Sharing Best Practices throughout the Project Life Cycle

Evaluation findings suggest that there are valuable lessons for museums that participate in the MFA program. IMLS is uniquely positioned to facilitate knowledge exchange and share best practices among applicants and grantees in the areas of project design, implementation, and evaluation. This could benefit institutions participating in MFA, and be shared more broadly across the museum sector.

- IMLS could connect potential applicants to grantees who have demonstrated skill in effective project planning and who are more seasoned in the design and development of grant proposals. This could be particularly valuable for first-time applicants to the program or to museums that are resubmitting a proposal.
- Throughout the project life cycle, some museums have struggled to conduct their MFA projects as comprehensively as originally proposed. IMLS might consider creating online platforms where cohorts of grantees at similar stages of development might share resources on project management, budgeting, outreach, evaluation, and other planning areas in order to improve implementation and expand evaluation skills.

“““

IMLS is unique in that it understands... the importance of museum work and the way we do it. You can go to IMLS for everything. The program is critical to us surviving; there aren't other grants out there focused on museums and on engaging communities.

—Pratt Museum, Homer, AK

Supporting Museums in Evaluation Practices that Measure and Affirm Public Value

Survey findings suggest that museums have benefitted from the outcomes-based planning and evaluation materials IMLS provides. Interviews revealed increasing expertise in process and summative evaluation and a strong interest in expanding evaluation knowledge and skills. IMLS has an opportunity to take a lead in developing templates that museums could use to articulate indicators and impacts and facilitate field-wide conversations about measuring the cumulative impact of museum projects.

Evaluation findings suggest that the MFA model – rigorous application guidelines, clear grant categories, high standards of accountability, and the provision of evaluation and other supports – is highly successful in producing engaging audience experiences, enhancing learning, and sustaining heritage, culture, and knowledge through museum offerings around the country. At the same time, additional opportunities exist for expanding the program model and extending supports to museums.

- The MFA grant categories—Engaging Communities, Collections Stewardship, and Building Institutional Capacity—clearly reflect the program’s goals and appear to help applicants direct their proposals accordingly. The diversity and number of project activities conducted suggest that while individual projects may touch on all three categories, the categories identify areas of emphasis and could be useful in tracking and documenting project outcomes. The categories could serve to structure templates or indicators of success for a range of museums within

a given category. Tools such as implementation logs, structured in terms of major evaluation benchmarks, could facilitate reporting and help museums stay on track and make corrections as needed.

- IMLS might provide models for working with outside evaluators, or support museums in working with them, possibly through evaluation intermediaries. A subset of projects with a common theme might work with a single evaluator with expertise in that area.
- IMLS might consider strategies and indicators related to meeting broad, socially transformative goals that will necessarily encompass a longer time horizon than current evaluations. Interim evaluation measures—co-created by museums, IMLS, and other stakeholders—might help museums articulate stages of such social change or generate ideas for tracking impacts such as the growth of social connections (e.g., social network maps).
- IMLS might also look to expand thinking about assessing community-wide impacts in conjunction with activities conducted by other public institutions such as libraries. Such an approach might encourage greater collaboration between museums and other organizations.

Conclusion

The RMC study of Museums for America finds it a highly valued program. The extraordinarily strong survey response rate by grantees (70%) suggests its significance to individual grantees. IMLS is the sole federal funding source designed to improve museum service nationwide. The MFA program represents this inclusivity, charged with supporting all types of museums in building their institutional capacity for public service.

Through its rigorous application process and focus on strategic goals and plans, Museums for America is valuable, whether or not an institution receives funding, in clarifying goals and identifying internal strengths.

The process of conducting an MFA project has strong impacts on institutional capacity, not only in terms of immediate gains in staff knowledge and skills, but in longer-term influences on museum management, collections stewardship, community engagement, and shaping future strategic directions.

IMLS can improve the Museums for America grant program by increasing awareness of the program across the museum field, providing additional venues for support in the reapplication process, and facilitating the development of evaluation resources and networks that will enable museums within and outside of the MFA program to better articulate and measure the short and long-term program impacts in communities. The MFA program is a substantial resource for museums from application to well beyond the grant period as projects close, playing a valuable role in facilitating public access to museum services.

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Methodology Overview

RMC Research Corporation conducted a mixed methods evaluation of the MFA program as of 2010, including MFA administrative data analysis, data collection via online surveys, telephone interviews, and site visits.

In cooperation with IMLS, RMC developed an online survey for collecting data from MFA grantees and unfunded applicants. The MFA administrative data served as the sampling frame from which applicants and funded projects were drawn. Purposive sampling strategies were used in order to select:

- 1) a recent pool of eligible applicants (2007-2010) to obtain current perceptions of the MFA application process based on the museum's latest application (2007-2010);
- 2) a recent pool of eligible unfunded applicants to gather current opinions on the MFA award process, based on the museum's latest unfunded application (2007-2010); and
- 3) a subgroup of grantees to obtain project activity data, and effects data, (if appropriate) based on the museum's earliest grant (2004-2009).

Upon receiving approval from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), survey administration took place from November 2010 thru December 2010 and resulted in an overall response rate of 65%. The table below describes each

Evaluation Survey Section Sample and Response Rates

Survey Section	Survey Sample – Museum\Application	Sample n=	Respondents n=	Response Rate
A. Museum Background	Survey Respondents	1322	865	65%
B. MFA Application Process	Museums' most recent application from 2007-2011	1124	747	66%
C. MFA Unfunded Application	Museums' most recent unfunded application from 2007-2010	779	464	60%
D. Funded Project Activities and Partnerships	Museums' earliest funded project from 2004-2009	758	537	71%
E. Same Funded Project Immediate Effects	Museums' earliest funded project from 2004-2009 and completed in 2010 or before	682	464	68%
F. Same Funded Project Post-Grant Effects	Museums' earliest funded project from 2004-2009 and completed in 2007 or before	302	140	46%

survey section, the museum and application sample, number of survey respondents, and survey response rates.

The analytic characteristics of museum discipline grouping, museum size, and regional location of the museum were examined to identify patterns or trends in how museums perceived the application process. In addition, the evaluation examined potential differences in a museum's overall experience in applying to the MFA program, a museum's history of receiving MFA project grants, and when an application was submitted. Analysis of data from funded projects used museum disciplines, museum and grant size, and area of primary resource allocation to identify patterns in funded MFA projects.

Alongside the quantitative study, RMC also conducted a qualitative study of 26 MFA grant projects to create exemplary project profiles. The projects were chosen in collaboration with IMLS to reflect different regions of the country, museum disciplines, grant and museum sizes, and project types. Interviews were conducted with museum representatives of each of the 26 museums for best practice profiles. Further research was conducted with six of the 26 museums for more extensive case studies through site visits that included videotaped interviews and other documentation.

Thank You

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Thank you to the 865 museums whose representatives participated in the online survey.

Thank you to the following museums whose staff participated in evaluation interviews:

Akwesasne Cultural Center • Saving Our Basketry for the Next Seven Generations • Akwesasne, NY

Chester County Historical Society Linked Electronic Collections Access Catalog • West Chester, PA

Children's Museum of Oak Ridge • Appalachian Heritage Project • Oak Ridge, TN

Connecticut Children's Museum Inc. • Museum Multiple Intelligences Inclusion Project • New Haven, CT

COSI Toledo • Science Cafe: Inquiry for Families • Toledo, OH

Denver Museum of Nature and Science • Project Curiosity • Denver, CO

Genesee Country Museum • Our History Revealed: A Master Plan for Interpreting 19th Century American Life • Mumfordsville, NY

Kidscommons Columbus' Community Children's Museum • Kidscommons: Building Buildings • Columbus, IN

Lincoln Children's Zoo • Bug Buddies Inquiry Center • Lincoln, NE

Maryhill Museum of Art • Sustaining Change on The American Farm: A Farmer-Artist Exchange • Goldendale, WA

Mission Inn Foundation • Hands On History • Riverside, CA

Monticello/Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation • Thomas Jefferson's Libraries, An Annotated Bibliographic Database • Charlottesville, VA

Mount Vernon Hotel Museum and Garden • "Fare for All at the Mount Vernon Hotel" & "People of our Past" • New York, NY

Museum of Fine Arts • Boston, Fine Art of Service • Boston, MA

Pacific Asia Museum • Chinese Textile Collection Access Project • Pasadena, CA

Peninsula Fine Arts Center • ARTreach: Experience Mali • Newport News, VA

Round Lake Area Prairie Grass Nature Museum • Traveling Ecosystems • Round Lake, IL

Mystic Aquarium • Seal Rescue Clinic Innovative Exhibit Enrichment • Mystic, CT

Suquamish Museum • Digitization of Oral History Tapes Project • Suquamish, WA

USS Constitution Museum • Mining the Records: Bringing "Old Ironsides" Crew to Life • Charlestown, MA

Special thanks to the following museums whose staff and stakeholders participated in evaluation site visits:

Chicago Botanic Garden • North Lawndale Career Training Program • Glencoe, IL

Johnson County Museums • Johnson County's Photographic History on the Web • Shawnee, KS

Magic House, St. Louis Children's Museum • Star-Spangled Center Interpretive Exhibits • Saint Louis, MO

National Aquarium in Baltimore • Watershed Moments • Baltimore, MD

Pratt Museum • Kachemak Bay: An Exploration of People and Place Education Project • Homer, AK

Queens Museum of Art • Corona Plaza: Center of Everywhere • Queens, NY

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Cover Photos:

Top left: Children participate in PlayWorks™ at the Children's Museum of Manhattan, New York City, New York.

Top center: A gathering at the Pratt Museum, Homer, Alaska.

Top right: The Corona Street Fair, part of the Corona Plaza: Center of Everywhere project at the Queens Museum of Art, New York.

Bottom left: A family views a cabin from the Appalachian Heritage Project at the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Bottom center: Two girls play and learn in the Vietnamese Round Boat at the Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose, California.

Bottom right: An animal specialist cares for Beluga whales in the Oceanarium at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, Illinois. Photo by Brenna Hernandez.



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