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APPLICATION REVIEW UNDER THE
GENERAL OPERATING SUPPORT PROGRAM

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Background: The Institute of Museum Services is a Federal agency dedicated to expanding and improving museum services. Through its grant programs, it supports all types of museums, including, for example, aquariums, arboretums, art museums, historic houses, and science and technology centers.

The largest of the IMS programs is the General Operating Support (GOS) program. Grants from this program are used for all aspects of museum operations. The program is highly competitive: of the more than 1,300 museums which apply each year, about 30 percent receive grants. Awards are based on the effective use of the museum's resources in its operations and programs, as described in the museum's grant application.

Potential applicants frequently ask about the procedures IMS uses to determine which museums receive grants under this program. Some of the most commonly asked questions are answered below.

Question: How does IMS determine who receives GOS grants?

Answer: The competitive peer review system used by IMS is designed to ensure a thorough, extensive and professional evaluation of each application. It applies the criteria in the GOS guidelines, ranking each application in a series of steps.

First, IMS staff check each application to be sure that it is complete and that the museum is eligible for the program.

Second, the application is categorized by discipline and budget size, so that it can be assigned to the appropriate reviewers.

Third, IMS selects four museum professionals to review each group of applications. Each application is matched with reviewers that have expertise and experience related to the type and size of the applicant museum.

Fourth, following detailed instructions from IMS, the reviewers provide comments and numerical scores in nine areas for each application. These nine areas parallel the criteria listed in the application guidelines.

Fifth, IMS staff review all the comments and scores to ensure that IMS guidelines and regulations have been followed. The scores are also subjected to a computerized statistical test to identify discrepancies.

Sixth, any problems with the review are presented to a panel of museum professionals. This panel recommends how to resolve each problem. In some cases, scores may be discounted in determining the final rankings, if they are deemed inappropriate or unsubstantiated.

Seventh, museums are listed in the rank order of the average standardized scores they received. Grants are made by following this rank order, until all available funds have been awarded.

Question: My museum is very small, how can it compete with larger museums?

Answer: Small and large museums do not compete against each other; the size of the museum is not a factor in awarding GOS grants. The standards that are applied to your museum's application will be those that are appropriate for its discipline and size. It competes with museums of similar type and resources from all parts of the country.

Question: How are reviewers selected?

Answer: Reviewers are experienced museum professionals who volunteer to participate in the review process. Reviewers are recruited through many efforts, including targeted mailings, recommendations from other museum professionals, and staff presentations at museum meetings and conferences. IMS actively encourages professionals from all types and sizes of museums to participate and welcomes volunteers and recommendations.

Reviewers must be currently employed as a museum professional and have at least three years of professional museum experience. For the reviewers in our pool, the median amount of museum experience is about ten years, and 75 percent of the reviewers hold high level administrative positions in their museum.

Each reviewer's performance is evaluated by IMS staff each year, and reviewers are removed from the pool if their performance does not meet IMS standards. Many reviewers have had extensive experience in evaluating applications for IMS programs.

Question: Are the same reviewers used every year? Will the same reviewers look at my application each year?

Answer: Our pool of reviewers numbers about 1,200 each year. Of the total, about 420 are selected to review applications in that year. A computer-assisted process is used to select the four reviewers for each application, choosing reviewers whose experience is appropriate and relevant to the particular applicant.

About 60 percent of the reviewers used in any one year have previously served as reviewers, so there is a chance that one of the four reviewers of your application may review it in more than one year. However, it is very unlikely that all four of your reviewers will be the same from year-to-year.

Question: I've applied for IMS grants before, and found that some of the reviewers disagreed with each other or with my own assessment of what is most appropriate for my museum. What's going on?

Answer: It is inevitable that there will be some disagreement among reviewers, since there is debate within the museum profession about several subjects addressed in the GOS application.

We provide reviewer evaluations to applicants with the hope that these comments will help elucidate the factors reviewers consider when reading the applications. In some cases you may decide to disregard these comments, but they can also help you identify areas where you may want to clarify certain points when you next apply to the GOS program. The evaluations may also give you ideas for improving your museum operations.

Question: The IMS process for evaluating applications is complex, combining staff, field and panel review. Why did IMS select this particular process?

Answer: The IMS process evolved through more than ten years of experience and on-going evaluation. It is carefully designed to fit the nature and purpose of the GOS program.

The GOS program is very different from most other grant programs. It funds general operations, not just a specific project, and therefore requires use of reviewers who are capable of conducting a thorough, expert review of the full range of a museum's operations. It also requires involvement of enough reviewers to cover all the disciplines and sizes of museums which apply to the program.

GOS applicants reflect every imaginable type of museum. They include museums with annual budgets ranging from less than \$10,000 to about \$70 million. They encompass art museums, historic houses, zoos, science centers, and many other types of museums.

The current GOS review process, by accommodating this diversity, ensures a high quality, professional review. Approximately 430 museum professionals contribute their knowledge and experience to the review process each year, representing all types and sizes of museums.

Question: I've noticed that only a few museums in my state receive IMS grants each year. Why is the number so small?

Answer: The GOS competition is national, grants are not awarded on a state-by-state basis. Overall, only about 30 percent of the more than 1,300 applicants can be funded each year. Therefore, many high quality museums do not receive grants because of the limited funds available for the program.

However, IMS works hard to ensure an equitable, nationwide distribution of GOS funds. The number of grants to museums in each state generally reflects the number of applications received from that state. In turn, the number of applications from each state is closely related to the number of museums operating in that area.

Because the number of grants awarded to museums in a given state depends on how many museums apply from that state and on the quality of their applications, IMS makes many efforts to encourage museums in all areas to apply to the program and to contact IMS staff for information on completing an effective application. We make special efforts to ensure that museums in more isolated areas are informed about the programs.

Question: I got a grant for two years in a row, then did not get one this year. Why not?

Answer: Each year is a new, separate competition. Whether or not you received grants previously is not considered in determining whether you will receive one in the current application. Your funding status may be altered because of changes reflected in your own application, or because of changes in the number or quality of applications from other museums. Funding also depends on the amount of money the U.S. Congress provides for the program in a particular year.

Question: How can I increase my chances of getting a grant?

Answer: Remember that the reviewers evaluate your application only on the basis of the information it contains. To avoid bias, they cannot take into account any other source of information. It is therefore extremely important that you take the time to carefully develop your application materials.

Your ability to get a grant depends both on the quality of your application and the degree to which it addresses the criteria provided in the IMS guidelines. The IMS program office staff is always happy to help explain program requirements and to assist you in developing a good application. They can be reached by phone or mail, and also provide counseling at professional meetings.

The staff can be contacted at:

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