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Museum Services Act (1984): Correspondence 02

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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
DIRECTOR, INSTITUTE OF MUSEUM SERVICES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20202

OCT 3 1979

October 2, 1979

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The Honorable Claiborne Pell
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Pell:

Thank you for your inquiry about the philosophy of the Institute of Museum Services' grants program.

The Institute of Museum Services' (IMS) broad Congressional mandate to fund museums of all disciplines coupled with the unique type of IMS assistance termed General Operating Support (GOS) resulted in a policy decision by the National Museum Services Board (NMSB) to address the needs of all types and sizes of museums found in every state and region of the country. It was also determined that IMS should serve the interests of developing and needy institutions as well as long-established ones which provide quality services and programs to the public.

A recent survey by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, in cooperation with IMS, determined that there are approximately 5,500 U.S. museums which qualify for IMS support. Given these facts and the current FY 1979 appropriation of the Institute (\$7.4 million), there are approximately 76% of IMS applicants and 93% of the museum universe not currently being supported.

Because IMS is charged with serving such a large and varied museum audience, the agency must be responsible for providing as equitable a distribution of funds as possible. At the same time, quality or the ability to obtain it must be a consideration when Federal dollars are involved. In order to accomplish its purpose, IMS has designed a review system which utilizes over a hundred professionals from the museum field and other areas of expertise related to GOS, such as financial management, planning, and analysis. Each museum submitting an application to the Institute has its application evaluated by three reviewers who are assigned on the basis of type of museum, budget size and

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geographic area of the country. At least one of the three reviewers represents the region from which the application originates. The effect is that applications from small history museums are evaluated in relation to each other, rather than against large science or art museums. Likewise, large art museums compete against large art museums and the best applications are funded.

Another effect is that upon close comparison of the quality of two applications of differing discipline and budget size, one may appear to be of lesser quality and be funded while the other application of better quality may go unfunded. Again, this is because like applications are reviewed in competition with like applications and museums of certain disciplines may have submitted more applications than others, thereby, making the competition stiffer in the "theoretical" categories established through the review process.

While IMS does not have separate categories for developing and established institutions, the needs of both are again reflected in the reviewers who evaluate applications. This means that upon occasion, a major established institution in a metropolitan area may go unfunded while a less prestigious one in the same community still struggling to establish a strong base of local support and striving for more excellence in educational programming will be funded. This is the manner in which the Institute has built all of the factors for consideration into the review system.

Inherent throughout the review process is the fact that the application itself must be an accurate and well-defined description of the institution, its activities, budget situation, community orientation and long-range plans. An excellent institution may submit a poor quality application while an institution of questionable quality may submit an excellent application.

Evaluation for GOS is a different and unique problem, which involves assessing the value of providing Federal GOS for the institution derived from an application form, often without the benefit of direct on-site experience evaluating a single project within an institution which is more easily evaluated from an application form or has been the usual type of government award.

When reviewers evaluate each application, they do so using the Institute's published criteria:

- a. Museum Services. Are the applicant's museum services of high quality? How will their quality be improved by the general operational support requested?
- b. Collection and exhibits. Are the museum's collections and exhibits of high quality and importance? How will the conservation of the collections be enhanced if the general operational support is granted?
- c. Accessibility. How accessible to the public are the museum's services, collections, and exhibits? How accessible will they be if the general operational support is granted?
- d. Population served. To what extent does the museum serve persons who otherwise have limited access to the type of services which it provides?
- e. Financial management. What is the quality of the financial management of the museum?
- f. Long-range plans. What is the quality of the museum's long-range plans for financial and program development?
- g. Community commitment. How committed to the museum are its users and supporters? Does the museum have a substantial base of non-Federal support?
- h. Use of IMS Funds (when applicable). Has the museum used effectively its IMS funds, if it has received any?

Each criteria is scored and the total is averaged with those of the other two reviewers. This average becomes the "rank order" number which "places" the application in respect to all others evaluated. In 1979, this list for GOS contained 1,470 applicants. A numerical calculation of the dollars requested in relation to our FY 1979 funds, \$7.4 million, provided the cut-off point (353 for General Operating Support and 51 for Special Projects) for those applications which could be funded. This meant that many worthy applications, while they may not have ranked "highest" in terms

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of quality, were still of "high" quality; however, IMS had insufficient funds to make additional awards.

The Institute is sorry that it was not able to fund all the worthwhile museums which requested funds. As IMS continues to grow, it will be able to better serve the nation's museums.

Please be assured that your concerns are uppermost in our considerations.

Very truly yours,


Lee Kimche (9)

LK/cp