Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums: Frequently Asked Questions

This set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about Grants for Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums has been prepared with input from prospective applicants through two informational webinars, emails, and phone calls. Questions and answers are grouped thematically. Please do not contact YOUmedia at the Chicago Public Library with requests for information for your proposal; this active working facility is under separate funding and does not serve in an advisory capacity for the Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums Grant program. Applicants may access a website prepared for the Learning Labs program by the MacArthur Foundation: youmedia.org.

PROGRAM INTENT

Q. What is the Learning Labs Program?

A. In support of President Obama’s “Educate to Innovate” call to action, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and IMLS are working together to support the planning and design of youth Learning Labs in libraries and museums across the country. Inspired by an innovative space for young people at the Chicago Public Library called YOUmedia and innovations in science and technology centers, these Labs will help young people become makers and creators of content, rather than just consumers of it.

The design and construction of YOUmedia, which was supported through the MacArthur Foundation’s Digital Media and Learning Initiative, was guided by research about the role digital media plays in kids’ learning today. The new Learning Labs will be part of a network of libraries and museums throughout the country that use best practice principles, based on research and evidence about how young people learn today. The Labs will be spaces for experimentation for middle- to high-school age youth to engage with digital and traditional media to promote creativity, critical thinking, and hands-on, interest-based learning.

Q. What is the intent of the program?

A. This national collaboration will support the planning and design of up to 30 Learning Labs in libraries and museums based on current research of how young people learn through new media, and building a community of practice around digital learning for youth in out-of-school time setting. The program is administered by two cooperator associations: Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC) and the Urban Libraries Council (ULC).

Desired outcomes are to promote museums and libraries as hubs of innovation for middle-and high school youth, to incorporate current research, design and programming principles to develop 21st century skills, and to build capacity of museum and library professionals through the creation of new models for the field.

Q. Are the grants restricted to planning and design or can the funding be used to implement a Lab?

A. Awards may also be used to prototype certain Lab activities or experiences. Grants may be used to support emerging Learning Labs that are already in the process of serving middle- and high-school aged youth with innovative digital media and learning and need additional funds to
Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums: Frequently Asked Questions

enhance the institution’s efforts, provided the activities are aligned with the program criteria as presented in the grant guidelines.

Q. If we have already planned our Learning Lab, can we use the funding for implementation?

A. Grants may also be used to support emerging Learning Labs that are already in the process of serving middle and high school aged youth. In this case, it should be made clear that the grant funds do not merely replace a current existing funding source for ongoing activities. Rather, the Learning Lab grant can be used to allow a facility to move to the next level and to enhance their efforts, provided they are aligned with the program criteria as presented in the guidelines.

Q. Must the key activities planned for the Learning Labs be Science Technology Engineering Math (STEM)-focused? Can the focus be artistic and/or cultural?

A. Learning Labs activities are intended to foster and support the development of 21st century skills, including STEM: information, communications and technology literacy, critical thinking, problem solving; creativity; civic literacy; and global awareness. Individual grants should make the links between the proposed program content areas and the overall program goals.

Q: Is there an expectation or planning for networking among the funded Learning Labs?

A. Yes, the program includes a goal of building a national network of Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums. The professional development activities planned for grantees (and in which they are expected to participate) include convenings and online activities to build relationships and share practices and resources.

Location

Q. Does a Learning Lab have to be located in a museum or library?

A. Yes, a Learning Labs should be located in a physical space that is in a library or museum. Parameters of the physical spaces for the Lab should be discussed in the project design portion of the narrative.

Q: Within a host location must it be a permanent location or can it be portable from room to room?

A. See the physical space characteristics described on www.youmedia.org. An applicant proposing a portable Lab would want to clearly explain to reviewers how the Lab site is accessible in non-school hours and ways in which different kinds of interaction and engagement of youth with digital media (HOMAGO) would be supported.

Q: Can you address the meaning of accessibility that is referenced in the Learning Labs guidelines? Does this describe ability and economic issues?

A. Yes, a Learning Lab should allow youth participation with a minimum of barriers, and ensure accessibility based on factors including open hours, ability levels, socioeconomic background, affordability, etc.
Target Audience

Q. Must the Learning Lab be used for middle- and high-school aged youth or can it also cater to children, university students, or adults?

A. The target age group is middle- and high-school aged youth. The needs assessment of your proposal should directly address any specific community-based activity related to this target audience and describe the programs intended to fill this community need. University students and adults are not included in the target audience for this program.

ELIGIBILITY

Q. Are public, private and boarding schools; 501 C-3 community development organizations; universities and colleges; interactive science centers; zoos, non-collecting art museums, museum and library friends groups; and tribal groups eligible to apply?

A. The IMLS Learning Labs for Libraries and Museums Program Guidelines list the full set of eligible institutions (pp. 8-9 of PDF version). This program is intended to support the planning and design of Learning Labs in libraries and museums; reviewers will want to see that a parent organization is applying on behalf of a library or museum in its system.

Q. Must a public library comply with Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) requirements?

A. No, the Learning Labs program does not require that a public library comply with CIPA requirements. The CIPA provisions attach specifically to the IMLS Grants to States Program, which is different from the Learning Labs program.

APPLICATION PROCESS

Q: Could you detail the elements of a sample application? For example, can you describe an expected percentage of funds to be used for planning, and percentage of funds allotted for purchasing equipment?

A. Because this is a new program, there are no sample applications to view for comparison. The elements of the narrative are fully described in the Program Guidelines beginning on p. 18 (PDF version), along with the review criteria to keep in mind for each portion.

Q: Please discuss the degree of specificity needed in an application, e.g. specific schedule of programs, activities, locations, and partners.

A. Please consult the Program Guidelines for specific requirements for all applications. All applications will need details about project design, the project’s leadership team and key personnel, partners, the planning process, and the nature and allocation of project resources. The nature of these grants, as planning and design, allow some organizations to explore very basic questions about how to structure resources for a Learning Lab, while others may be
Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums: Frequently Asked Questions

prepared to design and prototype programs. Remember that these proposals will be read by panelists with complementary expertise and different perspectives. Applicants need to provide evidence of a solid and realistic plan. Be sure to articulate what is important about your proposal in your narrative, don't leave dangling questions. Remember to strike a balance between detail and the big picture.

Q: Most IMLS grants require the submission of a strategic plan. Is this a requirement for this application?

A. No, not for this program

Q: If an applicant has video/pictures of existing programs that they believe are relevant to the grant guidelines, should they be submitted?

A. Grants.gov will only accept documents in PDF format. If an applicant wishes to include images they must be imbedded in a PDF document. Applicants may include web links to supporting external material such as web pages, videos, etc.

PARTNERSHIPS

Q. Are partnerships required?

A. Partnerships are not required, but are strongly encouraged; appropriate partnerships may strengthen the competitiveness of an application. Showing collaborative relationships with one or more related community organizations could strengthen your application, and may add a critical element for effective programming and the sustainability of a Learning Lab. Please see the statement about partnerships in the Program Guidelines (p. 10 of the PDF version).

Q. What types of partnerships will strengthen an application?

A. Municipal governments and community-based organizations (e.g. youth development services or out-of-school providers) can be critical allies in designing a Learning Lab that has strong commitment for future support past the period of the original grant. Learning Labs might also seek higher education, business, or industrial partners for mentors and resources to help support their activities. NOTE: please refer to the Program Guidelines for specific restrictions applying to federal and international partnerships.

Q: What is the vision for collaboration and partnerships?

A. Partnerships are encouraged in the Learning Labs program because they can embed the Lab more effectively in the community, ensure that the Lab addresses the needs of the community’s youth, and provide important connections for programs and activities. In addition, strong partnerships will support the long-term sustainability of the Lab by creating more community stakeholders for its work. IMLS encourages consideration of appropriate partners, including community organizations, other cultural and educational organizations, and municipal
governments. Please refer to IMLS for any special considerations that pertain to federal partnerships.

**FUNDING CYCLES**

Q: I thought the deadline was August 15. What is the deadline for spring 2012?

A. There are two funding cycles and program deadlines: August 15, 2011 and spring, 2012 (date to be confirmed).

Q: Will the second round of funding in spring 2012 maintain the same focus and guidelines?

A. The second round of funding is anticipated to be very similar to the first. Both groups of grantees will participate in the professional development network and community of practice that is planned for this program.

Q: If I apply for the August 15 deadline and I am not funded, may I reapply in spring 2012?

A. Applicants may rework and resubmit an unsuccessful proposal in the second grant cycle. However, if an applicant is awarded in the first round, they are not eligible to apply in the second round as each site may be awarded only one grant.

Q: Is the second submission deadline, in the spring 2012, for funding that may or may not be available, depending on the amount awarded with the first round of applications?

A. Funding in the second cycle will depend on the amount remaining after the first round of grants is awarded.

Q: Will there be another webinar before spring 2012?

A. Yes, there will be informational webinars before the second grant deadline.

**PROJECT AWARD DATES AND NEW LIBRARIES OR MUSEUMS**

Q: I am unclear about whether a new museum or library has to be operating before applying.

A. The answer is different for museums and libraries.

Museums: A museum needs to have been open for 120 days of the past year prior to the award start date. This also applies to an institution closed for construction. If the museum has some off-site regular exhibit and/or programming space during construction it would be considered open. If the museum has not been open 120 days in the past year and has not been operating in another location, it is not eligible.

Libraries: A library must be providing collections and services by the grant award date.

Q: We are building a new library, slated to open in 2014, but are planning to get started on a digital media lab in our existing building so that we can build momentum and then when new
Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums: Frequently Asked Questions

doors are open can transfer the already grown program into an even better space. How do we explain this in our proposal?

A. You should describe this planned transition in your proposal, and how you will allocate costs and resources given a shift from an original to a new facility.

EVALUATION

Q. Can you advise as to how to handle the evaluation portion of this project?

A. There is a paragraph on program evaluation expectations on page 11 of the Program Guidelines (PDF). Applicants should formulate, as part of their planning and design process, an evaluation plan for their proposed Learning Lab. Provide goals and objectives for your proposed lab, as well as any specific learning objectives that are grounded in current research on youth development and digital media.

Q: Can evaluators be internal evaluators for the project or do they need to be external from the organization?

A. Individual Learning Labs can use evaluators that are internal to their organization, if an appropriate person is on staff. The important thing is to have a plan for identifying and assessing your site’s progress.

Q: Will someone conduct research on the outcomes of the Learning Labs and publish a summative report?

A. A program evaluation will be conducted by an external evaluator.

BUDGET

General

Q: How specific should the budget and budget justification be? Should I be explaining the costs of equipment, planning activities or both?

A. These are planning and design grants, which will allow some organizations to explore basic questions about how to structure resources for a Learning Lab, and enable others to design and prototype programs. Both types of costs need to be listed in the budget and explained in the budget justification, depending on the extent to which each is a component of your project.

Q: How many forms are needed for the budget?

A. The application requires three elements to describe the costs of a proposed project: Detailed Budget (two: one for the period January 1, 2012 through December 2012 and a second for January through June 2013); Summary Budget form (one); Budget Justification. Please refer to the Program Guidelines (pp.19 – 21) for instructions for each element.
Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums: Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Are budgets available with regard to sustainability available from YOUmedia or other existing models?

A. Not at this time. There are current studies collecting data on the operating costs of YOUmedia; these data will be available for grantees during the award period.

Q: Are there restrictions on the percent of the budget spent on supplies, equipment, personal, etc.?

A. There are no specific restrictions or guidance, except for the restrictions on allowable costs explained in the Learning Labs Program Guidelines. All costs shown in a proposal budget should be explained in a supporting Budget Justification document, both in terms of how the costs were calculated and how these resource expenditures directly support the project goals and project design. Please note that if any individual piece of equipment, for which IMLS funds are requested, costs $5,000 or more, such a purchase may place additional financial and administrative obligations upon the grant awardee, and it is strongly advised that applicants contact ULC/ASTC prior to submitting the application.

Cost Share

Q: How do I calculate the suggested one third cost share? What if my total project budget is larger than the amount I am requesting from IMLS?

A. The budget should reflect the total project costs and clearly show the amount being requested from IMLS. Any additional allowable costs contributed to the project can be considered cost share. The Learning Labs Program Guidelines suggest that applicants contribute at least one third of their IMLS request (p. 21). Federal funds may not be used for cost-share. Only costs incurred between the start and end date of the award may be counted as cost share.

Construction/Renovation

Q: Can grant funds pay for construction and renovation?

A. Construction and renovation of facilities, generally, any activity involving contract labor in the construction trades, is not an allowable cost.

For non-construction modification of physical spaces for program needs, applicants should: explain the costs for this activity within the context of the entire project; clearly relate any plans to the Learning Lab; ensure that this activity is within the timeframe and allowable expenses of the program; and make the logic for this expense clear for reviewers to understand.

Q: Can we use funds to draw up building documents (blueprints)?

A. Allowable expenses are explained on page 11 of the Learning Lab Program Guidelines. If the cost of preparing the documents described is clearly separate from general construction costs,
and if the document production takes place within the tenure of the grant, this could be an allowable expense. You would want to make sure that a reviewer can clearly see the link between any document preparation and the rest of the program activities that you are seeking to fund with this grant.

**Other Expenses**

Q: Can funds be used to underwrite admissions to the museum and its Learning Lab?

A. Because accessibility during the life of the Learning Lab is a critical goal of this grant program, a competitive proposal will avoid requesting admissions costs for youth participants.

Q: Is use of iRemix a requirement of participation? Is this software provided? Are there costs associated with managing or using iRemix? Is there a way applicants can log in and explore the iRemix environment?

A. iRemix is the social media platform created for Learning Labs to facilitate youth and mentor communication and sharing of program activities. Grantees are required to use iRemix to enable cross-site communication and collaboration, as well as program evaluation. Grantees will not have to budget costs for the use of iRemix during the award period. Awardees will have access to a testing environment at the start of their grant.

Q: Would asking for a 15 seat van to assist in safe accessibility permissible?

A. In principle, there is nothing in the Learning Labs Program Guidelines to prohibit funding the purchase of a vehicle. However, there can be complications if this represents a large equipment expense, as such large purchases may impose additional financial and administrative obligations on a grant recipient even after the grant ends. In addition, reviewers might question whether the primary use of this vehicle would be to transport youth to the Lab, or if there might be alternative ways to provide transportation to program participants.

Q: How specific do we need to be in describing the types of technology, its cost, and its purpose?

A. Your budget needs to be complete enough for reviewers to evaluate the appropriateness of your resources (including digital media equipment or software) to the proposed work plan for your Learning Lab. A competitive proposal will include references to the pertinent research about digital media and youth learning. See page 11 of the Program Guidelines for use of funds and a list of allowable expenses.

**Indirect Rates**

Q: What is the percentage of indirect or overhead costs covered?
A. Proposals for Learning Labs may include request for funds to support indirect costs, often called “overhead” or “administrative costs.” The actual percentage depends on a number of factors, all of which are detailed in the Program Guidelines (pp. 22-23 of the PDF version).

Staff

Q: Can funds be used for speakers and presenters?
A. Allowable expenses include project personnel (contract or in-house) as well as consultants.

Q: Is there a limit on the amount of staff time that can be included in the proposal? Can current staff be paid if they work on this new project?
A. There is no fixed percentage of staff time that can be allocated to the grant. The amount of staff time included in a proposal should match the amount of work to be completed. Salaries of permanent staff should normally be contributed as cost-sharing. If funding is requested for salaries of permanent staff, the proposal should explain why funds are requested for this purpose and how the regular duties of these individuals will be performed during the grant period.

Q: Can funds be requested to hire someone to staff the new Learning Lab?
A. Each proposal should address staffing needs and have a plan for filling them.

Q: Is there a provision related to percentage of staff time vs. equipment/software costs?
A. Each applicant should identify the correct proportions of personnel and other resources needed to complete their activities under the “Project Resources” section of the narrative (p. 29).

Travel

Q: How many trips for convenings should we budget?
A. There will be a maximum of three program-organized convenings during the 18-month grant period; the Program Guidelines ask you to identify this under a separate budget line with an associated cost of 10,000. You may budget for other travel, for instance, travel to related conferences or visits to other pertinent organizations. You will want to justify these appropriately.

Q: The guidelines say we should budget up to $10,000 for travel to grantee meetings. Do we have any idea where the in-person meetings will take place yet?
A. Tentative but likely locations for professional development meetings are Chicago, IL, and Washington, DC.

QUESTIONS OR MORE INFORMATION
Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums: Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Is there anyone available to answer questions after the webinars are over?

Contact Margaret Glass (mglass@astc.org) or Erin Downey Howerton (edhowerton@urbanlibraries.org)

Q: Where can we find their phone numbers to call regarding eligibility?

A. IMLS staff contacts for eligibility include Chuck Thomas (libraries) and Helen Wechsler (museums). Their contact information can be found on the IMLS website.

Q: May I have the contact email and a list of the panel and conference call (webinar) attendees and their institutions?

A. To respect the confidentiality of applicants, we are not distributing the contact information or institutions of the attendees.

Q. I was not able to log in to either webinar. Am I able to view what was communicated?

A. Yes, you can access and download recorded versions of the webinars at www.learninglabswebinar.tumblr.com.

Q. I have questions about how a working Learning Lab functions. Should I contact YOUmedia at the Chicago Public Library?

A. No. YOUmedia is an active working facility under separate funding and does not serve in an advisory capacity for the Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums Grant program. However, applicants may access a website prepared for the Learning Labs program by the MacArthur Foundation: youmedia.org