

**Measuring Success:**

***A Process for Strengthening Planning and Evaluation in the Grants to States Program***

**Progress Report**

**October 2011**

The December 2010 Federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) reauthorization brought changes to the LSTA Grants to States Program priorities that strengthen opportunities for State Library Administrative Agencies (SLAAs) to substantively and positively impact the lives of the public. Susan Hildreth, former State Librarian of California, began her four-year tenure as IMLS Director in February 2011 and has identified transparency and evaluation as intended hallmarks of her administration. At the same time, Director for Libraries Mary Chute and other IMLS leaders began to collaborate with SLAA colleagues about ways to maximize the effectiveness of the upcoming State 2012-2017 Five-Year Plans and the capacity of the associated Five-Year Evaluation Reports to show program impact. Both goals align with mandated changes in Federal Agency reporting.

IMLS’s commitment to strengthen planning and evaluation across its programs is evidenced by the recent creation of an Office of Policy, Research, and Evaluation that is staffed by a group of highly qualified professionals. The agency’s commitment has been matched by strong voices from the SLAAs. Acting on these fortuitous circumstances, IMLS and the SLAAs have begun a new collaboration to look closely at pragmatic strategies to strengthen planning and evaluation associated with grants to States nationally. The supporting IMLS initiative is titled *Measuring Success*.

This report provides background on *Measuring Success* and describes achievements since its launch at the SLAA conference in Baltimore in March 2011. The final section describes future steps in transition to the new federal grants performance management system. Changes will build on previous outcomes-oriented planning and reporting efforts by IMLS and the SLAAs and incorporate advances widely advocated by the evaluation and planning professions at large. Appendix A provides a detailed description of the process of designing and implementing *Measuring Success* to date. Appendix B provides a concrete sample that includes a streamlined “results chain” that will form the foundation of future performance reporting.

**Background**

The current political and economic environment is marked by heightened sensitivity to public funding for many services. This extends to support for libraries, especially in this digital age. It is no longer enough to argue that strong libraries are important to a vibrant democratic society. The critical current concern is to demonstrate that the cost to US households for library services is more than compensated by concrete benefits to the US public. Overall public demand for library services shows no evidence of decline, but public funding continues to decrease, resulting in an even greater need to show objective evidence for effectiveness and efficiency in program administration, as well as valued impact from the resulting programs and services. The only reliable source of such data is systematic, objective evaluation applied to clearly defined and generally valued goals.

In response, IMLS created *Measuring Success in order to* closely align SLAA planning and evaluation processes with a strong system of “results-based management” that demonstrates heightened accountability for the public benefits of library programs and services. IMLS hopes to provide additional tools to help library administrators increase effectiveness and efficiency of the complex array of library programs and services demanded by the public. This process should be understood as iterative and evolving—it is open to change as IMLS and the SLAAs gain experience in its practicality and implementation.

IMLS knows that performance assessment processes used in the Grants to States Program need updating. The online, self-filled State Programs Report (SPR) served important needs when it was initiated in 2003, but technology, libraries, and communities have changed substantially in the past ten years. The priorities in IMLS’s new Grants to States Program reauthorization allow the states greater latitude to meet their extraordinary variety of characteristics and needs, but this very flexibility makes it difficult to design performance reporting strategies that show results IMLS can aggregate across local or state programs to demonstrate national value. It has been a long-term challenge to collect detailed enough information to document the impacts that library programs and services achieve for different segments of the US public.

The SPR has collected much information, but that information has not provided either IMLS or the SLAAs with an evidence base strong enough to communicate the importance of this program to policy makers, or to provide sufficient detail to help libraries or SLAAs use lessons learned and best and promising practices. In short, the existing system no longer meets IMLS or State needs, but the challenge of improvement is daunting.

We need to preserve the flexibility of SLAAs to address the unique circumstances in their jurisdictions while enabling a system that allows IMLS and the states to: (1) track performance of programs and services funded by grants to States over time and across different program areas, (2) show how grants to States impact the public and their communities by state and nationally, and (3) identify and foster best practices and improve shared learning across SLAAs.

Simultaneous with launching *Measuring Success*, IMLS was beginning its own 2012-2017 Strategic Plan. Key priorities of this plan closely complement priorities for the Grants to States Program. IMLS’s plan includes greater achievements in (1) lifelong learning, (2) enhancing the roles of libraries (along with museums) as community anchor institutions, and (3) preserving the nation’s cultural heritage through smart investments in digitization and related practices.

As IMLS strategic planning has occurred, the agency has begun to revamp its entire grants management system in response to heightened federal requirements. These give IMLS an opportunity to work with the SLAAs to streamline and improve the annual performance reports as well as the Institute’s ability to show the importance of the grants to States and the relationship between IMLS and the SLAAs.IMLS could have done what federal agencies traditionally do: use the best minds in-house with contract vendors and and a small number of stakeholder advisors to develop a new system to push down to grantees to implement and administer. Instead, IMLS believes it is critical to engage SLAA partners in the process of developing a solution, despite the concomitant investment of time and effort. We opted to use SLAA expertise to help redesign grants to States evaluation and reporting.

*Measuring Success* has held more than 60 webinars, with ten different working groups engaged in increasingly narrowing tasks, and involving representatives from almost every SLAA. While IMLS has taken the lead in facilitating the process, SLAA participants have shaped the content. Continuous feedback from these SLAA representatives through the webinars and the complementary wiki (http://imlsmeasuringsuccess.wikispaces.com/) has been essential. This feedback has shown that the SLAA participants have valued the opportunity for engagement, have valued learning from the process, and are using the interactions to foster communities of practice with colleagues in other SLAAs.

Has the level of participation been worth the cost of time and energy? As the next section will show, the emerging plan looks very different in shape and form from the current SPR. We believe it will increase the capacity of IMLS and the SLAAs to communicate the benefits of library services to various segments of the public more powerfully. It also is helping shape a system of strengthened planning and implementation of library services, using data that shows what practices help meet the goals libraries envision, what programs need rethinking, and how to achieve potentially greater administrative efficiencies.

**Achievements to Date**

When we began the *Measuring Success* initiative at the Baltimore conference, IMLS did not fully understand what objectives SLAAs would tie to the newly phrased Grants to States Program priorities, or how to best represent the importance of these in reporting on the wide array of library programs and services supported by federal funds to SLAAs.

Following the conference, we identified six SLAA volunteer teams, comprised of an average of a dozen members each, representing some 48 states. These teams began to “reverse engineer” key library programs and services that could represent the legislated priorities nationally. Each team focused on one priority. We assumed that Priority 4, partnerships, would be essential to all priorities, so no team was created for it. Priority 8 is essentially “everything else included in high-quality library service,” so no team was formed specifically for it—we assumed that this would be addressed by results in the other priorities.

IMLS built a *Measuring Success* wiki to support communication, particularly participant discussion. We identified a Web-based graphic application to map key steps needed to achieve desired results (including outcomes)(Popplets, http://popplet.com/), and implemented a Web-based group-work tool (MegaMeeting, <http://www.megameeting.com/>) as a base for our webinars. We scheduled the initial “webinars.”

All meetings were Web and phone-based, facilitated by IMLS’s senior evaluation officer, Matt Birnbaum; State Programs and other OPRE staff were “listeners” in each meeting, but left discussion almost entirely to SLAA team members. The process began by identifying key objectives of each priority and steps to achieve them, and then prioritizing the most important barriers and opportunities that should be addressed achieve the objectives

The teams then mapped more than 20 “results chains” (“logic maps”) that connected actions for each key program or objective with short- and long-term results. Somewhat to IMLS’s surprise, many programs (e.g. support for lifelong learning) were identified as key by multiple teams. Teams then identified points on each chain that would best serve evaluation, benchmarking, and reporting.

Following consensus on the results chains and identification of key evaluation points, parallel results chains from multiple teams were grouped. Again, lifelong learning is a good example—6 teams created 13 results chains for programs supporting this objective. Since shortly after Labor Day, a group of 16 particularly active volunteers from the original six working groups has continued to work with IMLS to streamline the results chains. This process is strongly grounded in the diversity of programs and services SLAAs support with funding from grants to States. Results chains are now consolidated into six focal areas: (1) lifelong learning (aB), (2) community services, (3) employment and small business development, (4) civic engagement, (5) digitization and statewide databases, and (6) library staff and leadership development.

The smaller technical review advisory teams are now focused on helping IMLS develop practical metrics and/or qualitative methods to answer important questions for the points of the results chains identified by SLAA participants as most important for evaluation and reporting. As the groups continue this work though Thanksgiving, they will return to the initial steps of the process (reflection, discussion, revision) to ensure that what we are now calling a “framework” for evaluation and reporting adequately covers the highly diverse programs and services that SLAAs use Grants to State Program funds to address targeted legislated priorities. It is important to point out, that the process identified many different areas of work. However, IMLS does NOT expect states to report progress in all areas at all times. Per the legislation, the decision of how to best address state needs is left to the states themselves. Our work over the last four months was an attempt to develop a framework to characterize the many different initiatives using a clear and consistent vocabulary developed by SLAA staff themselves.

This work is a logical precursor to the developing a more rigorous assessment of the national program’s achievements through while preserving the broad diversity of library service across States. While the technical advisory group has been engaged in developing the core content of the new performance assessment system, seven SLAA Chiefs who have also been engaged in the process have just begun to work with IMLS on the first round of reality checks for the content and processes to date. They have reviewed and provided feedback for this report and will provide guidance as the states look to a 12-month horizon that includes submission of the Five-Year Evaluation reports and submission and implementation of the next Five-Year Plans.

**Next Steps**

Our immediate focus is on completing the evaluation framework. This includes reality checking the results chains and the proposed evaluation and the benchmarking methods that are the next step. IMLS will work closely with the SLAA Chiefs team as well as consult more broadly with the other Chiefs of State Library Agencies (COSLA). It will also include participation of external experts in library and information services and planning and to provide independent peer-review of the proposed framework. A more detailed follow-up report will be presented to all of the SLAAs to finalize the current plan in early winter 2012. A reminder—this process is iterative and evolving, and open to change as IMLS and the SLAAs gain experience in its practicality and implementation.

As framework planning winds down this fall, IMLS will begin the next phase. This will involve piloting identified metrics and qualitative data collection. Our goal is to minimize the disruption and burden imposed on the SLAAs. IMLS will review the SPR (with input from SLAAs) and identify desirable changes intended to streamline annual reporting and grants to States administration on both sides. We expect to vet new protocols at the next COSLA meeting. We intend to continue the spirit of the entire *Meeting Success* initiative in fostering open collaboration and cooperation between IMLS and the states and among the SLAAs themselves.

While IMS conducts internal review of the SPR, it will also reach out to volunteer states to pilot the new framework as a precursor to changes to the reporting process . Self-selected SLAAs will interact closely with IMLS staff. We hope to further the communities of practice and other SLAA networks resulting from this initiative. Our intent is not only to further use of evaluation for planning;we also hope to enable greater dissemination and sharing of lessons learned and best practices among the SLAAs and to ease the transition to meet new federal mandates. Piloting is expected to go through Fall 2012 to align with new state Five-Year Plans. When the pilots end, and before any substantive changes are made to the SPR, lessons learned though this phase of the process will be vetted with COSLA and other individuals responsible for planning and evaluation in the SLAAs.

The final phase will involve transition to a new, more efficient SPR and Five-Year Evaluations. We expect this to begin in the late fall and early winter when piloting gets underway. It will become more substantive in Fall 2012 when the next Five-Year Plans are implemented. Changes will be introduced in increments to ease the burden and maximize the likelihood of success.

Testing and evaluation of the new system will continue of the new system after the new Five-Year Plans are launched to ensure that we are meeting our two primary objectives: (1) increase the capability of IMLS and the SLAAs to produce convincing bodies of evidence to communicate the impacts of the Grants to States Program to federal and State legislators, and (2) to enable library administrators and managers to increase the effectiveness of their programs and services, meeting high public demand, despite straitened economies.