



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES  
DIVISION OF PRESERVATION AND ACCESS

# SUSTAINING CULTURAL HERITAGE COLLECTIONS

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Updated October 30, 2023

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This document covers a variety of queries regarding the Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections program. In addition, program staff members are available to answer further questions. Please email [preservation@neh.gov](mailto:preservation@neh.gov) or call (202) 606-8570.

### **SCHC Project Content and Design**

#### **1. What should I do before applying?**

Read the Program Description section in the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) carefully to ensure your project aligns with the grant program. Evaluate your preservation assessment activities and planning completed to date and determine if they align with the grant program requirements for the level of funding you are considering. Request a consultation with a program officer to discuss your project and ask questions by emailing [preservation@neh.gov](mailto:preservation@neh.gov). Submit a draft proposal to [preservation@neh.gov](mailto:preservation@neh.gov) on or before the draft deadline, which is listed in section D4 of the NOFO. Ensure you are registered with SAM.gov.

#### **2. How should I organize my application?**

Carefully read the Narrative (D2) and Review Criteria (E1) sections of the Notice of Funding Opportunity. We recommend you use the Narrative section as an outline using each subsection (Introduction, Significance of Collections, etc) as a header. Include all the information requested under each subsection. The panel of peer reviewers will use the Review Criteria to evaluate your applications.

#### **3. What should I consider in discussing my project's significance to the humanities?**

Include all the information requested in the Significance of the Humanities section in the NOFO. Consider including specific examples of significant collections that will be preserved in the proposed project and how researchers, stake holder communities, and/or the public have used or benefited from the collections.

#### **4. Is completion of an NEH planning grant project a prerequisite for a larger "implementation" request?**

No. You do not have to progress from an NEH planning grant to an NEH implementation grant. But all implementation projects should be based on sound planning. Support for that planning might come from NEH, from other federal or foundation grants, or from an institution's own funds. An award from NEH for one stage of a project does not commit the agency to continued support. NEH evaluates applications for each stage of a project independently.

**5. I received and completed a Preservation Assistance Grant (PAG) award. Am I now ready to apply for an SCHC award?**

It depends on the activities and results of your PAG project. PAG projects that identify risks to the collection and guide your institution toward potential mitigation actions are often suitable pre-requisites for SCHC Planning or Implementation Level I projects. Contact a program officer at [preservation@neh.gov](mailto:preservation@neh.gov) to discuss your project.

**6. What distinguishes a Planning project from an Implementation project?**

The three levels of funding are distinguished by level of pre-project assessment, planning, and readiness to execute preservation actions. Planning projects are informed by preservation or collections management plans, which are often informed by having conducted a basic preservation and collections assessment. Applicants often understand the preservation and/or energy consumption challenges and are applying to develop plans or strategies for mitigation. Implementation projects have evaluated risks to the collection and preservation and/or energy consumption challenges, have completed thorough planning and are ready to execute the mitigation activities.

**7. What distinguishes an Implementation Level I project from an Implementation Level II project?**

Implementation Level I projects address discrete preservation challenges, risks to the collection, or energy consumption challenges. They require having completed planning focused on the proposed activities. For example, a project requesting a new lighting system to reduce energy consumption and allow for display light levels appropriate for the collection materials on display may require an assessment of the electrical system and the development of prepared plans and quotes for the new system provided by a professional lighting designer (or other appropriate professional) with expertise in cultural heritage display systems.

Implementation Level II projects are typically large and address more complex, multifaceted preservation challenges, risks to the collection, and/or energy consumption challenges. These projects require having completed planning with a collaborative interdisciplinary team appropriate to the proposed project. For example, a project to use passive environmental control by tightening the building envelope and planning shutdowns of the HVAC system may require an assessment by an architect, HVAC engineer, conservator, and curator (or other professionals appropriate to the project).

**8. Who should be on our collaborative professional team?**

Each project must have a conservation/preservation professional who works with collections on their team. Additional team members should be internal or consulting professionals with necessary skills to address activities in the proposed project. For example, collection climate control projects may require an HVAC engineer and an architect in addition to a conservator and curator. Projects that require moving collections may require a preparator, registrar,

curator, and conservator. Projects upgrading lighting systems may have a conservator, curator, and museum lighting specialist.

### **9. What types of outreach activities should I consider?**

Cultural heritage environmentally sustainable preventive care strategies and initiatives are gaining momentum internationally. Discussing your successful project and how your institution reduced its carbon emissions, reliance on fossil fuels, and energy costs and/or became more resilient in the face of a changing climate will encourage other cultural heritage institutions to take steps towards being more environmentally sustainable. Many sustainable preventive care strategies that involve climate control or resilience against disaster are regionally specific. Other strategies like energy efficient lighting are more universal. Your outreach should be appropriate to your project and the capacity of your staff. The case study can be used as the basis for your outreach efforts. Present your project and results to your internal colleagues and Board of Directors. Publish your case study on your website. Present your project to your city council. Discuss your project at local and regional professional clubs, meetings, conferences, and symposiums. If you are able, consider presenting your project at a national professional meeting, conference, or symposium.

### **10. Is new construction an allowable expense in this grant program?**

No. This program does not support new construction nor the installation of climate control, security, lighting, storage equipment, and fire protection systems as a component of a project to construct a new building.

### **11. Do I need to complete the site conditions section?**

The site conditions help NEH staff in determining what federal regulations and laws apply to your project. If you do not complete the site conditions as part of your application, you will likely be asked to complete the form when funding is offered. Many SCHC projects require completion of site conditions, so it is good to complete the form to the best of your ability in the application. For example, if your building is fifty years old or older, site conditions will determine if you need to undergo Section 106 review. This review is required before your project can begin.

### **12. What is the difference between the Preservation Assistance Grants (PAG) program and the Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections (SCHC) program?**

Both programs support preventive care, but they differ significantly in scope. [PAG](#) is directed at small and mid-sized libraries, museums, and other cultural heritage institutions that seek to build their capacity to preserve and care for their humanities collections at a foundational level. Awards are capped at \$10,000 and in a typical project a single consultant offers basic advice on caring for humanities collections. The PAG program also supports the purchase of preservation supplies and staff training. Institutions of any size may apply to the SCHC program to plan or implement larger, more complex projects focused on environmentally sustainable preventive care strategies that pragmatically balance effectiveness, cost, and environmental impact. SCHC projects take a higher level of preparation than PAG awards.

## **Vocabulary Terms**

### **13. What is environmentally sustainable preventive care?**

Preventive care, also called preventive conservation or preservation, includes measures and actions aimed towards avoiding, slowing, or minimizing future deterioration or loss to cultural

heritage collections. Measures can include managing the climate (temperature and relative humidity), light, and pollutants or by providing proper storage enclosures and furniture. Environmentally sustainable preventive care are measures that protect the collection from deterioration or loss using reduced energy consumption (less fossil fuels) and improve resiliency against disaster. In the face of a changing climate, it is necessary for cultural heritage institutions to evaluate energy consumption and reduce energy consumption drastically as well as prepare for natural disasters that are increasing in frequency and severity. Read our blog, "[A Green Museum: Preserving Collections in Sustainable Ways](#)" for an example of sustainable preventive care. For more information read the following or the NOFO resources (H2):

Image Permanence Institute. *IPI's Methodology for: Implementing Sustainable Energy-Saving Strategies in Collections Environments*. Rochester, NY: Image Permanence Institute, 2017.  
[https://s3.cad.rit.edu/ipi-assets/publications/methodology\\_guidebook/methodology\\_guidebook\\_all.pdf](https://s3.cad.rit.edu/ipi-assets/publications/methodology_guidebook/methodology_guidebook_all.pdf)

Image Permanence Institute. *IPI's Guide to: Sustainable Preservation Practices for Managing Storage Environments*, Rochester, NY: Image Permanence Institute, 2012.  
[https://s3.cad.rit.edu/ipiassets/publications/sustainable\\_preservation\\_practices/sustainable\\_preservation\\_practices\\_all.pdf](https://s3.cad.rit.edu/ipiassets/publications/sustainable_preservation_practices/sustainable_preservation_practices_all.pdf)

#### **14. What are best practices in environmentally sustainable and resilient collection care?**

Best practices reduce energy consumption and improve resiliency against current and future disaster. They may include: defining preventive care requirements based on an understanding of your collection materials, their conditions, and the particular risks they face, rather than relying on prescriptive targets (broadening collection environment temperature and relative humidity ranges using a dynamic approach); understanding the characteristics and performance of the building that houses your collections, its envelope and its systems, and their role in moderating interior environmental conditions; considering the impact of the local climate on establishing relative humidity and temperature setpoints and managing interior environmental conditions; evaluating current and future risks to collections associated with changes in average weather conditions, natural disasters, climate change, and/or other emergencies; weighing initial and ongoing energy use, costs, and environmental impacts of potential preventive care strategies; prioritizing passive and nonmechanical ways to improve and manage collection environments and risks; evaluating and measuring the effectiveness of a project's results through the collection of data on conditions, energy use, and costs

#### **15. What is a preservation needs assessment?**

A preservation needs assessment identifies risks to your collection and helps develop strategies for collections care. Assessments are conducted by conservation/preservation professionals and result in a written report that identify priorities for improving collections care, provide recommendations to improve storage and care of collections, and help develop a preservation plan.

#### **16. What are "passive" preservation approaches?**

These are non-mechanical measures that can reduce energy usage and improve environmental conditions for collections and are considered environmentally sustainable preventive care approaches. Passive measures include modifications to your building such as tightening the building envelope by installing insulation and vapor barriers, sealing doors and windows, filling holes or gaps in the building's exterior, brick pointing, roofing, adding door sweeps, and

ensuring gutters are draining properly and away from the building. These measures ensure outside air is not coming in and inside air is not getting out, help HVAC systems run more efficiently, and mitigate ingress of water. With a tight building envelope, it is often possible to modify how your HVAC system is run to save energy and costs. Turning off, or shutting down, the HVAC system for short periods of time (nights, weekends) when the building is vacant may result in little change in temperature and relative humidity (RH) in collections storage and display spaces. The temperature can be adjusted in gallery, public, and office spaces during non-occupancy hours. Changing how the HVAC system is running such as reducing fan speeds, reducing outside air intake, and allowing for a wider range of temperature and RH swings (dead bands) can also save energy. A conservation or preservation professional can assist in determining appropriate temperature and humidity ranges and degree of fluctuations for your collections. For more sensitive objects, you can create microenvironments to maintain a steady RH using enclosures or retrofitted, gasketed cabinets rather than establishing your ambient RH set points to meet the needs of these few objects. Interior modification to the building can also reduce energy usage, such as installing energy efficient lighting throughout the building, such as LED lighting. Other light sources draw energy and give off heat causing the mechanical cooling system to work harder. Installing window shades will also reduce the heat load coming into your building.

### **17. What are mechanical system shutdowns, setbacks, and seasonal setpoints?**

Shutdowns entail turning off your HVAC system for short periods of time such as nights and weekends when the building is vacant. With a tight building envelope and a storage space with proper insulation and vapor barrier, your collections space may experience little change in temperature and relative humidity (RH) during shutdowns. Setbacks involve adjusting temperature and RH setpoints to non-human comfort levels during non-occupancy hours. For example, you might reduce the temperature in gallery, public, and office spaces during the winter. Seasonal setpoints are regional and climate specific and involve setting temperature and RH setpoints higher or lower depending on the season. For example, an institution in the Northeastern US might store collections at a higher temperature and RH in the summer and lower temperature and RH in the winter, keeping within safe and appropriate parameters for the collections materials. These strategies can reduce energy usage and costs. For more information read:

Image Permanence Institute. *IPI's Methodology for: Implementing Sustainable Energy-Saving Strategies in Collections Environments*. Rochester, NY: Image Permanence Institute, 2017.

[https://s3.cad.rit.edu/ipi-assets/publications/methodology\\_guidebook/methodology\\_guidebook\\_all.pdf](https://s3.cad.rit.edu/ipi-assets/publications/methodology_guidebook/methodology_guidebook_all.pdf)

Image Permanence Institute. *IPI's Guide to: Sustainable Preservation Practices for Managing Storage Environments*, Rochester, NY: Image Permanence Institute, 2012.

[https://s3.cad.rit.edu/ipi-assets/publications/sustainable\\_preservation\\_practices.pdf](https://s3.cad.rit.edu/ipi-assets/publications/sustainable_preservation_practices.pdf)

### **18. What is a dynamic approach to collections environmental management?**

A dynamic approach refers to establishing safe temperature and humidity ranges (RH) for collections storage and display appropriate to the collection materials and allowing conditions to fluctuate within those ranges. For example, most hygroscopic materials (paper, wood, textiles, etc) can be safely stored and displayed between 30%RH and 55% RH and conditions can fluctuate within this range weekly, monthly, or seasonally. Likewise, storage temperatures can

be lower in cooler months and higher in warmer months within the safe ranges for the materials in the collection. This is opposed to maintaining strict, static set points such as a static 70°F and 50% RH. For more information read:

Image Permanence Institute. *IPI's Guide to: Sustainable Preservation Practices for Managing Storage Environments*, Rochester, NY: Image Permanence Institute, 2012.  
[https://s3.cad.rit.edu/ipi-assets/publications/sustainable\\_preservation\\_practices.pdf](https://s3.cad.rit.edu/ipi-assets/publications/sustainable_preservation_practices.pdf)

### **19. What is a climate action plan?**

A climate action plan is a strategy for measuring and reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Activities may include measuring energy usage and calculating greenhouse gas emissions to get a baseline for your institution, understanding collection risks and vulnerabilities due to climate, predicting future risks due to climate change, identifying mitigation actions, and recommending strategies for implementation. The NEH [Climate Smart Humanities Organizations](#) grant program offers funding to undertake comprehensive organizational assessments that lead to strategic climate action and adaptation plans.

## **Federal Laws and Regulations**

### **20. What is Section 106 Review and do I need to comply?**

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and its implementing regulations is a law that requires federal agencies to consider the effects of federally funded projects on historic properties (i.e., listed, or eligible for listing, in National Register of Historic Places), and when applicable, provide other consulting parties and the public an opportunity to comment on such projects prior to the expenditure of any federal funds. The review process addresses two key issues: 1) whether the proposed project has an effect on historic properties; and 2) whether any effect on the historic property will be adverse.

If your project involves planning or implementing lighting upgrades, HVAC replacement or upgrades, storage furniture, modifications to the external or internal building structure of any kind and your building is fifty years old or older or is historically, architecturally, or culturally significant, you will need to comply with Section 106 review. We recommend submitting site conditions as part of your application. This will allow NEH to evaluate if you do indeed need to comply with Section 106 Review. Build at least four months into your work plan for review. Your project cannot begin and NEH cannot release federal funds until Section 106 Review has been completed. For more information read NEH's FAQ on [Section 106 Review](#).

### **21. What is the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and do I need to comply?**

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and its implementing regulations require NEH to consider the potential effects of a funded project on the natural and human environment prior to the expenditure of NEH funds. All NEH-funded projects involving alteration of a building such as construction, renovation, repair, rehabilitation, or ground disturbances are actions that are subject to review under NEPA and, its implementing regulations. Recipients cannot begin NEH-funded work involving construction, renovation, repair, rehabilitation, or ground or visual disturbance, and NEH cannot release federal funds, until NEH concludes its NEPA and related Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act reviews. For more information see the NEH's FAQ on [NEPA](#).

## **22. What is Build America, Buy America (BABA) and do I need to comply?**

The Build America, Buy America Act (BABA). Pub. L. No. 117-58, §§ 70901-52, requires Federal agencies to ensure the funds made available for a Federal financial assistance for infrastructure are not obligated for a project unless all of the iron, steel, manufactured products, and construction materials used in the project are produced in the United States. If your project involves using any kind of construction materials or storage furniture, it must be produced in the United States. When receiving quotes from suppliers and contractors, be sure to communicate BABA requirements to them. You will need to read the [Build America, Buy America Act Award Term](#) and the [Recipients and Subrecipients Assurance](#) and agree to abide by the BABA contract and certification requirements.

## **Budget**

### **23. Are indirect costs allowed?**

Yes. Indirect costs represent administrative expenses associated with the cost of doing business that are not readily identified project activities. Indirect costs, also referred to as [facilities and administrative costs \(F&A\)](#), are incurred for the benefit or joint objectives of a specific project and organizational activities. These costs are allocated equitably across all of your organization's activities. Examples include costs for clerical and managerial staff, depreciation, office space rental, and utilities.

To recover indirect costs related to an NEH award, your organization must either negotiate an indirect cost rate with its cognizant agency prior to a federal award or elect to use a de minimis rate of 10% of modified total direct costs (MTDC) ([2 CFR § 200.414\(f\)](#)). In your application, you must include your project budget and the base, rate, and amount of indirect costs you will recover during period of performance.

To learn more, read [General Guidance of Calculating Indirect Costs](#), [Guidance for Negotiating an Indirect Cost Rate Agreement with NEH](#), and the blog from the Office of Digital Humanities, [Indirect Costs: Tips for ODH Applicants and Grant Officers](#).

### **24. Is cost sharing required?**

Cost sharing is not required. NEH will make awards of up to \$50,000 in outright funds for Planning awards, \$100,000 in outright funds for Implementation Level I awards, and \$350,000 in outright funds for Implementation Level II awards. If your total project costs exceed the maximum amount, please indicate the other source(s) for the funds in the budget justification. The funds from other sources would constitute voluntary cost sharing. See C2. Cost Sharing in the NOFO.

### **25. If I receive NEH funding, may I also accept money from other sources?**

Yes. Applicants are encouraged to seek other financial support. We do ask that you tell us about proposals to other funding sources, so that we can better understand the project's financial picture. Per [2 CFR § 200.403\(f\)](#), you must not include the same project costs in more than one application for federal funding and/or approved federal award budget.

## Application assistance

### **26. What help is available for preparing the proposal?**

You may email us any time during the grant preparation and writing process to ask questions or request a consult with a program officer. Email us at [preservation@neh.gov](mailto:preservation@neh.gov). Once you have been connected with a program officer, feel free to contact them directly with questions as you prepare your application. You may also submit a draft proposal on or before the draft deadline date. We are here to support you!

### **27. Does my draft for review need to be a complete draft?**

Your draft does not have to be complete to submit for review. You may submit an outline, abstract, or partial draft. We are happy to read and offer comments on anything you submit.

### **28. How do we submit a draft for review?**

To submit a draft, send a narrative, preliminary work plan, and/or preliminary budget as a single attachment (one file) to [preservation@neh.gov](mailto:preservation@neh.gov). In the body of the email, indicate the proposed funding level, lead project director, institution name, and preliminary title for the project. Your draft does not have to be complete to submit for review.

## Submitting your application via Grants.gov

### **29. When is the deadline for submitting the application?**

Applications for NEH Humanities Connections grants must be submitted through and validated by Grants.gov by the deadline stipulated in Section D4 of the NOFO. Grants.gov will date- and timestamp your application after it is fully uploaded. Applications submitted after that date will not be accepted, except for limited situations covered by the NEH [late submission policy](#). NEH suggests that you submit your application 48 hours prior to the deadline. Doing so will leave you time to contact Grants.Gov Applicant Support, should you encounter a technical problem. Grants.Gov Applicant Support is available seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day (except on [federal holidays](#)), at 1-800-518-4726. You can also send an email message to [support@grants.gov](mailto:support@grants.gov). Always obtain a case number when calling for support.

### **30. How do I know if I have submitted my application successfully?**

Grants.gov provides guidance on checking the status of your application:  
<https://www.grants.gov/help/html/help/Applicants/CheckApplicationStatus/CheckApplicationStatus.htm>

## Review and notification

### **31. How will NEH review our application?**

NEH uses a peer review process based on the review criteria listed in Section E1 of the NOFO to review applications. Humanities scholars, conservators, and facilities specialists convene in panels to read and rate the applications. NEH staff will compile a slate of recommended applications based on the panelists' comments and ratings. The [National Council on the Humanities](#) will review the recommendations and provide additional insights. All advice – from the panelists, staff, and National Council – will be sent to the NEH Chair. By law, only the Chair is empowered to make an award. More details about NEH's review process are available [here](#).

**32. How long must we wait to learn the outcome of our application?**

NEH will notify you of its decision by email at the time indicated in section E4 (Anticipated Announcement and Award Dates) of the NOFO.