



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE  
**Humanities**

**DIVISION OF PRESERVATION AND ACCESS**

**SUSTAINING CULTURAL  
HERITAGE COLLECTIONS**

**FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

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**What are the humanities?**

According to the 1965 National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act, “The term ‘humanities’ includes, but is not limited to, the study of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism and theory of the arts; those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life.”

**What do you mean by sustainable preservation strategies?**

We realize that the word “sustainability” conjures up a variety of ideas from long-term financial stability to “green” buildings to reducing our carbon footprint. When we apply the concept of sustainability to preventive conservation practices, we mean preservation strategies that balance effectiveness, cost, and environmental impact. This kind of balance can contribute to an institution’s financial health, reduce its use of fossil fuels, and benefit its green initiatives, while ensuring that significant collections are well cared for and available for use in humanities programming, education, and research.

Just as the word sustainability has many meanings, a sustainable preservation strategy might take many forms, depending on the nature of an institution, its collections, and its location and climate zone. To identify sustainable strategies for your institution, planning is vital. It is more likely to yield useful results if you

- define preservation requirements based on an understanding of your collections, their conditions, and the particular risks that they face, rather than relying on ideal and prescriptive targets;
- understand the characteristics and performance of the building in which your collections are housed, its envelope and its systems, and their role in moderating interior environmental conditions;

- consider also the impact of the local climate on establishing relative humidity and temperature setpoints and managing interior environmental conditions;
- consider the potential effects of climate change on cultural property;
- weigh initial and ongoing energy use, costs, and environmental impacts of potential preservation strategies;
- look first for passive (that is, nonmechanical) ways to improve and manage collection environments;
- design mechanical systems, whenever possible, only after investigating and implementing passive approaches for achieving and managing desired conditions;
- develop solutions tailored to the capabilities of the organization and its staff; and
- evaluate and measure the effectiveness of a project's results through the collection of data on conditions, energy use, and costs.

Such planning requires a variety of expertise, so it is important to assemble an interdisciplinary team that works collaboratively throughout the process.

### **What do you mean by “institutional resilience”?**

Resilience is our ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, respond, recover from, and more successfully adapt to adverse events. When we apply the concept of resilience to preventive conservation strategies, we mean activities that support the ability of institutions to protect their collections from the effects of emergency situations resulting from natural or human activity. Such measures should be considered as part of a long-term, holistic, and interdisciplinary planning process which might include the following:

- performing a detailed risk assessment of the collection, including building envelope and exterior environment;
- considering the effect of climate change on local or regional weather patterns;
- evaluating existing preventive measures, such as fire suppression, security, storage furniture, and pest control;
- identifying passive ways to control collection environments in order to reduce reliance on electrical systems; and
- developing solutions that are tailored to staff resources and capabilities, and that are easily adopted by new staff.

When possible, these measures should be part of a detailed preventive conservation plan, which may include a combination of activities to improve both sustainability and resilience.

### **What do you mean by “passive” approaches to preservation?**

These are nonmechanical measures that can be implemented to improve conditions for collections. Possibilities may vary depending on the type of institution and structure, but these are a few examples of approaches that you might take:

- ensure that moisture is not entering your building because of improper site drainage, poorly functioning gutters, or problems with the building envelope;
- understand conditions throughout your building and assign more sensitive collections to spaces that are naturally more stable;
- explore how historic architectural features of a building can be used to moderate potentially damaging fluctuations in environmental conditions;
- use the buffering capacity of buildings, storage furniture, and object enclosures to moderate the effect of changes in relative humidity and temperature;
- organize collections by material type and specify tighter control of conditions only for collections that require them;
- employ the use of microclimates/sealed-case environments for sensitive items in a collection rather than conditioning large spaces to meet the needs of a small number of objects; and
- reduce lighting, heating, cooling, and ventilation loads by storing collections centrally and separately from work spaces.

For some kinds of collections and institutions, the implementation of passive measures might eliminate or reduce the need for mechanical systems; and for many institutions, implementing passive measures could mean that simpler and less costly mechanical systems would suffice. By employing more “passive” measures, often in combination with “active” mechanized systems, institutions may be able to achieve their preservation goals in ways that are more cost efficient and energy efficient.

### **Where can I read more about sustainable preservation strategies?**

Here are a few sources with information about sustainable strategies. They are intended as a starting point for further exploration and are by no means comprehensive.

The American Institute for Conservation’s Sustainability Committee maintains a Sustainability Wiki page addressing a range of topics for Sustainable Conservation, including material selection, solvent use, and recent publications on the museum environment:

[http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Sustainable\\_Practices](http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Sustainable_Practices)

Image Permanence Institute, Rochester Institute of Technology. Practices for Managing Storage Environments. [www.ipisustainability.org](http://www.ipisustainability.org)

Museums, Environmental Sustainability, and Our Future: A report from the American Alliance of Museums (PDF): <http://ww2.aam-us.org/docs/default-source/professional-networks/picgreenwhitepaperfinal.pdf>

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

Do not assume that the collections' significance will be evident to readers; the description of the content of the collections should enable evaluators to understand the humanities themes that could be explored through exhibitions, educational programs, and research. Discuss specific exhibitions, educational programs, and research projects that illustrate how the collections have been used in support of the humanities. Explain how the project may enhance your institution's ability to use the collections.

### **What kind of detail should I include in the work plan?**

Explain the tasks for the project staff and consultants and provide a schedule for the completion of the work, which may be presented as a narrative or a chart. Depending on the project, the description of the work plan may be organized by type or duration of activity (for example, three- or six-month intervals). The plan should be presented in enough detail to demonstrate that you have thoroughly considered each step of the project and that you are ready to begin. By describing in detail the responsibilities of the project personnel, you will justify the corresponding allocation of staff time, as shown in the project budget, and the qualifications and experience required of the project staff, as reflected in résumés and job descriptions.

### **We would like to seek a planning grant. Is it necessary for us to engage advisers outside our own institution?**

This grant program seeks to support planning projects that bring together a variety of experts, including architects, building engineers, conservation scientists, conservators, curators, facilities managers, and others. Although the most important consideration is to assemble a qualified team appropriate to the project, reviewers tend to look favorably on teams that include experts from both within and beyond the applicant institution.

### **We are planning to construct a new building that will house humanities collections and would like to assemble a team to help us develop realistic plans for providing the necessary environmental conditions for our collections. May we apply for a planning grant for this purpose?**

Yes. Although NEH cannot support the construction of new buildings or the installation of systems in new buildings through Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections, we are able to support planning related to the preservation needs of collections that would be housed in new buildings.

**We need less than \$10,000 in grant funds to help identify the kinds of storage furniture we need to rehouse our collections. Should I apply for a planning grant through this program?**

No. You should instead apply to NEH's [Preservation Assistance Grants for Smaller Institutions](#), which offers awards of up to \$10,000 for preservation assessments and consultations on a variety of preservation issues. Planning grants through Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections are best suited for relatively complex projects that would require a team of specialists.

**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.

**Our building houses exhibition galleries, collection storage rooms, administrative offices, classrooms, a gift shop, and a restaurant. Will NEH support the costs of climate control for the entire building?**

No. You should determine the percentage of the space in your building that is occupied by humanities collections. If humanities collections occupy 60 percent of the building, then 60 percent of the costs of climate control are eligible for support and may be included in the project's budget.

**If we are also planning to upgrade the security and fire protection systems in our existing building, should we use this same percentage to calculate eligible expenses for the grant request?**

It is not necessary to prorate the costs of security and fire protection systems, which must function building-wide to be effective.

**Is there a limit to the size or the types of appendices that I can submit?**

We have not defined precisely the kinds of supplementary materials that applicants should submit as appendices. You should submit supplementary materials that are appropriate for your project. We urge you to submit only limited appendices, because reviewers must read many applications. Include only material that is directly relevant to the proposed activity. You might summarize more general reports or plans. Because evaluators receive all applications in electronic form, you may wish in some cases to use hyperlinks within the body of the narrative to relevant online sites or documents.

**May the project director also serve as the institutional grant administrator?**

No. The project director may not serve as the institutional grant administrator. The role of the project director must be distinguished from that of the institutional grant administrator, who functions as the representative of the recipient organization with authority to act on the organization's behalf in matters related to the administration of the award. All financial reports

and prior approval requests such as budget revisions, extensions of the period of performance, and changes in key personnel must be signed or countersigned by the institutional grant administrator. Similarly, official correspondence from NEH to a recipient (for example, an offer letter, the award document, an extension, a supplement or amendment) is addressed to the institutional grant administrator and copied to the project director. The project director is the person directly in charge of the conduct of the funded project. Because the project director's involvement in the project is normally critical to its success, the replacement of the project director or the co-director or a substantial reduction in the level of their effort (for example, an unanticipated absence for more than three months, or a 25 percent reduction in the time devoted to the project) requires prior written approval from NEH.

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

Yes. Applicants are encouraged to seek other financial support. As a reminder, overlapping projects costs between two or more applications for federal funding and or approved federal award budgets is not permitted.

**Who will read my grant application?**

Your proposal will be evaluated by a peer review panel composed of humanities scholars, preservation and conservation professionals, museum curators, librarians, archivists, and administrators of cultural organizations. It is just as important to articulate the significance of your collections to the humanities by describing your collections and their uses as it is to present a detailed work plan based on solid planning and the advice of appropriate consultants. NEH staff also comments on matters of fact or on significant issues that otherwise would be missing from the reviews of outside evaluators and then makes recommendations to the National Council on the Humanities. The National Council meets at various times during the year to advise the NEH chairman. The chairman takes into account the advice provided by the review process and, by law, makes all funding decisions. More details about NEH's review process are available [here](#).

**My application was unsuccessful. Is there anything I may do to increase my chances for success next time?**

You may request copies of the comments by evaluators. A revised application should take into consideration the issues that they raised. However, a resubmitted application will be reviewed by persons who will not have knowledge of or access to the previous application.