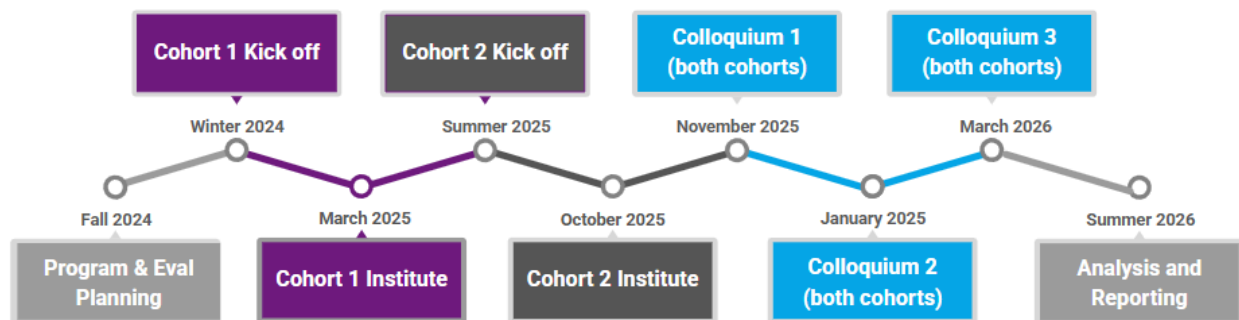


IMLS MUSE Final Evaluation Report

Project Overview

Museums in the Upper Midwest Strategizing for Equity (MUSE) is an IMLS funded grant at the Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM) focused on supporting small museums in the upper Midwest region in bringing about lasting institutional change. MUSE provided professional development to 42 individuals from 18 organizations in two cohorts from small to mid-sized museums, primarily in the Upper Midwest. MUSE consists of 11 programming days facilitated by the IDEAL Center including two separate cohorts experiencing a 5 day institute program and three colloquiums where both cohorts attend together. Cohort kick offs included recruitment, applications, and virtual listen sessions to meet before the institute began. MUSE programming ran from Fall 2024 through Summer 2026 as seen in the visual below:



The evaluation of MUSE focused on understanding the extent to which the program supported both individual and team growth and learning as well as the creation of a durable support network among small, Midwest museums. In addition, MUSE aimed to support early career museum professionals in learning about program facilitation through shadowing IDEAL Center staff both during the program activities and in behind-the-scenes preparation. The evaluation of this activity focused on understanding how involving early career professionals in MUSE impacted their growth and development and future career goals.

The evaluation data in this report is from five main data sources:

- Program applications: completed by MUSE program teams before programming (n=15)
- Post-institute survey: completed individually at the end of the week long institute (n=38)
- Post-colloquium 3 survey: completed individually at the end of the last program day (n=31)
- Program observations: evaluation staff observed portions of each program day (n=11 days)
- Early career professional debrief: debrief conversation after the last program day (n=1)

Key Findings

1. Program participants had an overall positive experience (97% rated the program experience as “excellent” or “outstanding”) and appreciated the program structure, supportive environment and staff, and the impact it had on them.

2. Participants reported individual growth in knowledge and skills from MUSE. 100% rated that the program increased their learning “some” or “a lot” in all prompted topic areas after the institute and at the end of the program, with the majority selecting “a lot”.
3. Teams also reported growth in shared understanding and skills as well as stronger relationships to continue supporting each other in applying ideas and concepts from MUSE.
4. Participants were able to apply learning from MUSE at their organizations during the program and 97% agreed or strongly agreed that they intend to continue doing so. Several teams shared explicit plans for changing specific organizational practices or approaches.
5. MUSE supported participants in creating connections within their teams and to the participants from other museums. This foundation prompted some interactions outside of the program days (68% connected at least once with a participant from another museum) but there is room for improvement. Participants were interested in support for connecting between program days and in time spent in specific groupings such as similar museum types or roles.

Participant and Organization Characteristics

MUSE included 42 individuals from 18 organizations. Cohort 1 was 15 participants from 6 organizations. Cohort 2 was 27 participants from 12 organizations. Additionally, one early career professional from SMM participated in many programmatic and evaluation activities. The participating organizations were a variety of museum types, primarily science and natural history museums. The participating museums were also from a variety of states. The goal of MUSE was to have museums from the Upper Midwest and almost all (14 organizations) were from these states. Cohort 1 was almost entirely from museums in Minnesota, while Cohort 2 was from across 8 different states. MUSE was focused on small museums and the participating museums were mostly small with a few mid-sized. 6 of the 15 organizations we had staffing data around had 10 or less staff at their museum.

There were 42 individuals who participated in MUSE programming. Cohort 1 was smaller with 15 participants while cohort 2 had 27 participants. Each museum organization was required to have a team of 2-4 individuals to participate in MUSE, with a Team Lead who is a senior executive such as a CEO, President or direct report to this position. Other team members came from a range of departments including education, visitor services, advancement, human resources, and curatorial. Almost all museums had teams of 2 (n=10), one museum had participants in both cohorts totaling six total participants in MUSE, one museum had a single participant, and one museum had a Staff transition during the PD series, leaving the remaining team member to complete MUSE alone. Participants also shared some additional information about themselves on the post-Institute survey (n=38) including that:

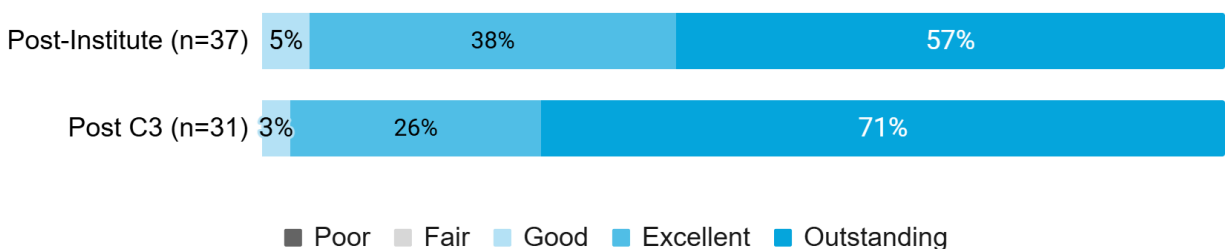
- Most participants have been in their current role for five years or less (76%) with 47% of those having been in their current role for less than two years

- Almost all participants participated in MUSE as an optional choice presented to them (78%). Only 5% felt it was required for them and 16% independently sought this opportunity out.

Overall Experience

57% of respondents rated their program experience as outstanding after the institute. Cohort 1 rated their experience slightly higher than cohort 2. By the end of the program, the overall experience ratings were even higher with 71% rating it as outstanding (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Participants rated their overall experience highly throughout the program but even higher after the last program day



When asked to expand on why they selected that overall experience rating, participants most frequently shared that high ratings were due to program planning and environment, content, program community and connections, changes that happened in themselves or their work, program staff, and acquired skills and tools. The majority of comments related significant praise on the experience and impact of the program including:

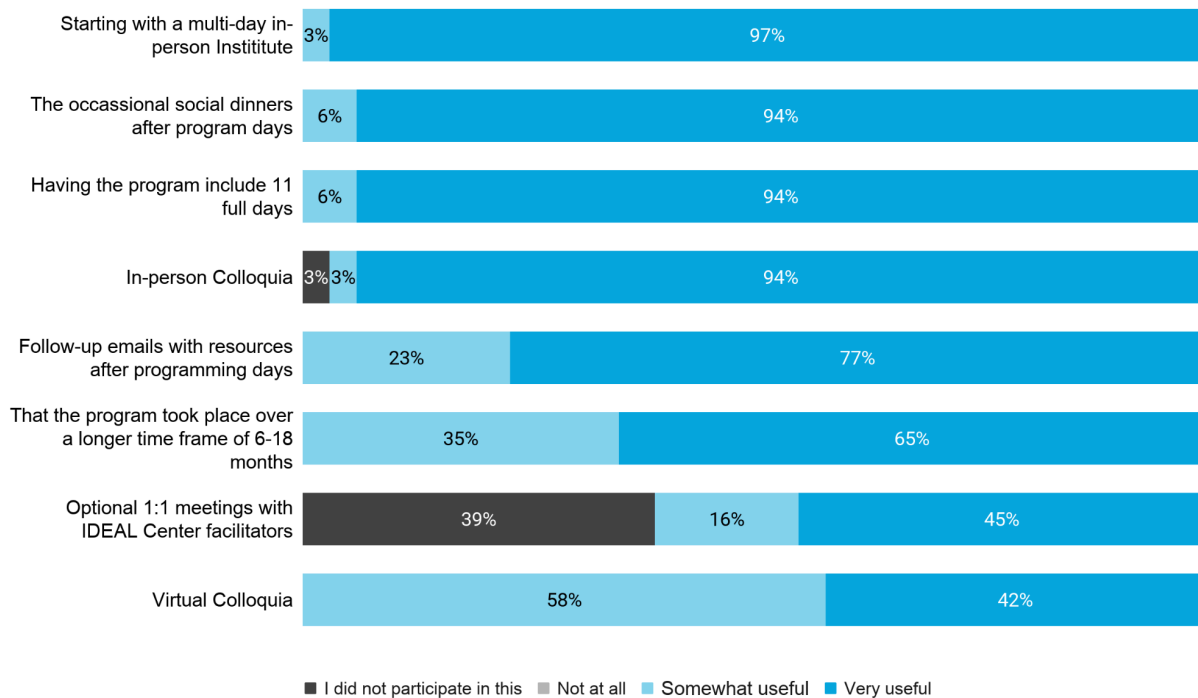
- *This has been a life changing year. The connections and relationship building that was able to be achieved throughout the year is priceless both in our organizational team but also in the MUSE team as well.*
- *Transformative experience, excellent content and resource exchange, and the network & capacity building have profoundly improved my experience within the field.*
- *MUSE has shifted my paradigm, the way I think and act feels different after going through group activities and the learning sessions. It is such a great sense of community as well that we established in such a short time together.*

Program Structure

The IDEAL Center has years of experience in facilitating multi-year cohort based professional development in programs such as iPAGE and PAGE. MUSE continued many of the foundational elements of these programs. Participants shared their reflections on what was most useful to them with 97% of survey respondents feeling the usefulness of starting with a multi-day in-person institute (Figure 2). Although most core program components were rated as very useful by almost all participants, the virtual colloquia was rated the lowest with only 42% selecting very useful. Additionally, participants noted in the open-ended follow-up about appreciating the time to learn

through conversations and community with others and reiterated that in-person sessions were more effective than virtual sessions.

Figure 2. Participants rated the multi-day institute, social dinners, 11 days of programming, and in-person colloquia highest in terms of usefulness (n=31)



Participants highly rated the facilitation of MUSE by IDEAL Center staff and frequently brought this up in their open-ended responses about the program's success. They also appreciated having the evaluation team embedded into the program transparently. Below are some additional related quotes describing participants' view of the staff and facilitation of MUSE:

- *Everything was thought out and executed with intention and care. The team met people where they were at and fostered the community to allow the learning to take place*
- *The facilitator team was amazing. They listened to concerns, made every activity accessible, we're encouraging, kind, and took time to get to know us as individuals. Also have the Research & Evaluation team as part of the process the entire was really cool to see that side of how this data is used. It made for a transparent, amazing, and eye opening experience.*

Throughout the open-ended responses on the post-C3 survey, participants shared suggestions and ideas for improvement in the program structure. They saw the value in having museum leadership included to experience and support the application process (Table 1). Participants also shared concerns with the program pace, a desire for more skill practice time, and reiterated the importance of the in-person sessions.

Table 1. Program Structure Suggestions

Ensure leadership participation	<i>While the information and knowledge has been fantastic, and I feel like as an individual I'll be able to make small changes, I know I'll be fighting an uphill battle because our leadership was not in attendance. I really do think that while it was encouraged for someone from leadership to attend, it should be almost mandatory.</i>
Adjust program pace or revisit past material	<i>Revisiting some of the learning from past sessions would have been helpful. Also hearing examples of those other methods would have been helpful.</i>
More skill practice	<i>The pace was grueling at times. I often wished for more time to process and practice in the MUSE setting, because I wasn't comfortable enough to try things out at my institution yet.</i>
Prioritize in person	<i>I wasn't looking forward to spending all day on a screen for the virtual colloquium but I was surprised at how well I was still able to connect with colleagues. I still prefer in-person by far, but I understand it was helpful for people living far away from the Twin Cities."</i>

Growth and Development

Throughout the program, participants are prompted with content and activities for them to explore, reflect on, and consider in relation to their current understandings and work in order to prompt individual learning. Individual growth and development was captured during program observations. During program observations, participants shared moments of learning and changes in their understanding from the program. This included growth in understanding of content, the practice of new skills, and in understanding why these changes make a difference (Table 2). Because not all program areas were observed, the examples below are not reflective of all areas where individuals had growth.

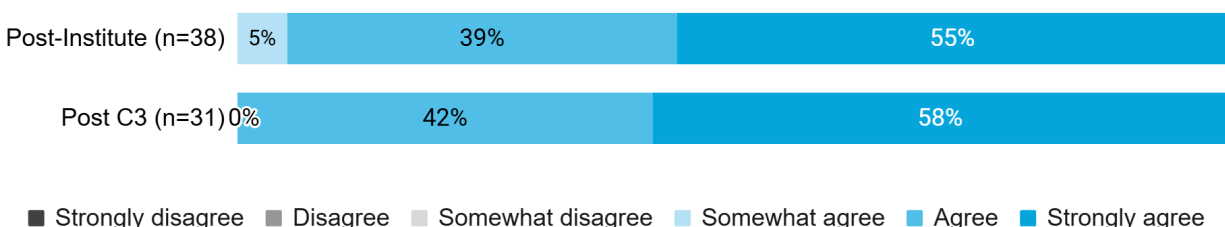
Table 2. Observations related to participants' individual growth and learning

	WHAT	HOW	WHY
Definition	Growth in understanding of a content topic	Growth through the practice of new skills	Growth in understanding of why these changes make a difference
Examples	- Systems thinking - Status - Mental models	- Orbits - Spending time on O of ORID - Roles in groupwork	- Help get everyone on the same page - Allow for multiple perspectives - Understand systems to disrupt them
Quotes	"We looked at our	"Self-reflection on my	"[MUSE] has allowed me to

	work status and brainstormed ideas on how to enact change”	behaviors, body language, and how it may impact my colleagues”	interrogate my own ego, sense of worth & ability to accept learning as an ever growing process”
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Participants come to MUSE with a variety of previous experiences with professional development programs related to their work and they work in really varied areas of their institutions from education to operational to curation. The IDEAL Center aims to have the program content be varied so that all participants find it relevant to them and their work. At the end of the program, 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that “the ideas and concepts explored in the program were relevant to my work” (Figure 3).

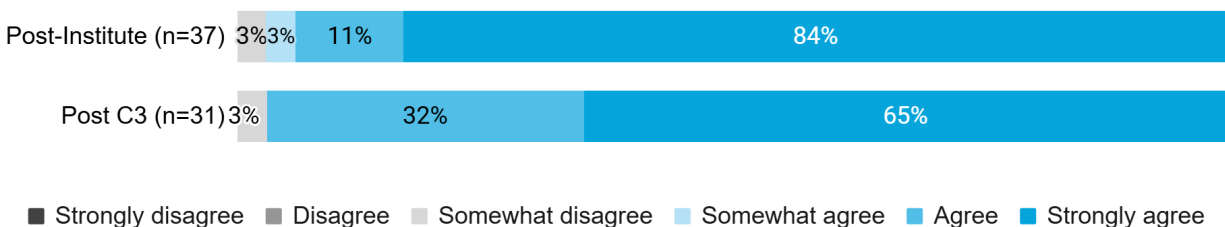
Figure 3. By the end of the program, all participants agreed or strongly agreed that the program content was relevant to their work



Regional Network of Support

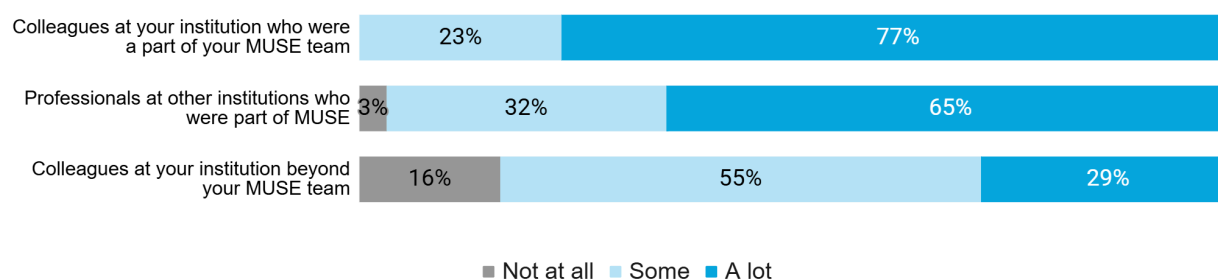
One goal of MUSE is the emergence of a regional network of support that starts from participants feeling connected with each other during the program. IDEAL Center staff focus on creating a program space where participants get to know each other and develop trust and community as well as facilitating after program social time. We asked participants after the institute and at the end of the program if their interactions with other participants felt like a network of support they could draw on. Almost all participants agreed and strongly agreed with this at both points, however more participants strongly agreed with this after the institute (84%) compared to at the end of the program (65%; Figure 4).

Figure 4. Almost all participants agreed that their interactions with other participants during MUSE felt like a network of support they could draw on



Participants came to MUSE as part of a team from their organization and engaged with participants from other organizations as well. They were encouraged to share back formally or informally from their experience with colleagues back at their institutions about their MUSE experience or about content from MUSE. Participants rated the strengthened relationship between themselves and their colleagues from their organization who were a part of their MUSE team the highest with 77% rating that these relationships were strengthened a lot (Figure 5). Almost all participants felt that the program strengthened their relationships with other participants at MUSE from different organizations (97% rated some or a lot). Many participants (84% some or a lot) felt the program strengthened their relationships with institutional colleagues who did not participate in MUSE, indicating how far the spread of this program's impact can go. When asked about how many staff back at their organizations they had involved in their efforts from MUSE, most respondents (67%) had shared with 10 or less other staff and 30% had shared with more than 11 other staff (n=27).

Figure 5. A majority of participants felt that MUSE strengthened their relationships with the other program participants, both from their institution and from other institutions (n=31)



Participants shared additional information about what would have supported them to build connections towards a regional community of practice. The most common response was for IDEAL Center to facilitate sharing of contact information earlier in the program (Table 3). Also, a couple participants expressed uncertainty as of whether it is the role of IDEAL Center to facilitate this or if it should be on participants to organically create this or not.

Table 3. Ideas to continue supporting developing a regional community of practice

Share contact information earlier	Visual contact list, contact information with role and organization, guide book to each org and team, contact list shared after institutes
Embed more into the program	Introduction of organizations at program beginning, organization names on name tags, stronger connections across cohorts, space during program to discuss how we want to stay in touch after C3
Options between program days	Optional virtual check-ins, group chats with occasional discussion prompts, virtual activity between colloquia, quarterly outings

Supporting Early Career Professionals

A secondary goal this project addressed was to support up to 5 STEM Justice interns - young museum professionals of color - to work as facilitators during the project. Working with STEM Justice interns was a previously successful model for how the IDEAL Center can support early and future museum professionals. However, after the project began there were internal changes at SMM that presented new challenges. There were no longer STEM Justice interns and the unionization of staff curtailed potential work roles. It was not possible to complete this aspect of the grant as written and instead the work was shifted to include one KAYSC staff to participate in MUSE programming and observe behind-the-scenes planning of the project team before and after program days.

The early career professional who participated in MUSE was familiar with some iDEAL Center programming but noted that by participating in this program they were able to continue learning. They appreciated seeing new tools like the accessibility grid, hearing others' perspectives, and diving into content areas like ableism. Overall, they felt that MUSE prepared them to understand teams, leadership, communication and build a foundation for how to work with others effectively so that everyone feels safe and engaged.

Similar to MUSE participants, our early career professional appreciated that they were able to meet people from other organizations and roles and learn specifically from small museums about how they are able to be adaptable and so much with a much smaller staff. It felt like a great networking opportunity for them and they hoped to stay in touch.

In addition to taking away learning and connection with others, our early career professional was able to learn from IDEAL Center about how to facilitate programs like MUSE. They reflected that observing IDEAL Center staff helped them learn more about how to teach no matter the content area, which they can apply to their current education role in the KAYSC and their potential future career in education. They felt the experience was awesome and that being involved with the IDEAL Center and programs like this is incredibly motivating and encouraging.

Recommendations

Continue program structural elements

Participants highly rated many of the structural aspects of professional development programs led by IDEAL Center. Starting with a multi-day institute to have a shared experience and time together to develop as a cohort was key to starting the program off strong. Participants felt that, despite potential challenges in attendance, time spent in person was the most meaningful and should be prioritized as much as possible. Experiencing MUSE as a team from an organization with a team lead that holds a leadership role was beneficial in ensuring there was clear buy-in and direction for continuing application during and after the program. Finally, the intentionality

and skill of the expert IDEAL Center facilitators was a recurring theme for why the program was successful. It was not just the plan for MUSE but how the staff executed it.

Consider tweaks to programming to allow for more processing time or slower pacing

Throughout the observations and open-ended responses, there would be a few participants who expressed that MUSE had a lot of content and was at times overwhelming. This sometimes happened on specific days or was shared as a reflection of the overall program. It was frequently shared as a challenge with the pace of the content and an interest in more processing time before engaging in conversation on a topic. Additionally, some participants struggled between program sessions when a lot of time had passed and were asked to recall past learnings. They were interested in more space to revisit past topics or reduce the amount of new content during programming.

Increase opportunities for connection outside programming time

If there is continued interest in supporting the development of regional networks of support as a part of IDEAL Center professional development programming, there is space to increase opportunities for additional connections outside of the designated programming time. Participants appreciate the work IDEAL Center does during programming to create connections among participants and are interested in additional supports that would make it easier for them to engage more. This could include sharing participant contact information sooner and sparking additional interactions between program days through other meet ups or virtual check ins. Participants didn't share that the IDEAL Center needed to facilitate these but expressed appreciation for any supports they could provide to make it easier.

Consider tweaks to programming to increase opportunities for specific connections

Participants shared that they developed many close relationships with the other MUSE participants but that there are some relationships they would have appreciated more time with. First is that participants appreciated the dedicated time spent in their organization teams in colloquium three and were interested in having more time together to reflect throughout the program. Another grouping was to more intentional introductions to the participating organizations and people at the beginning of the institutes and when the two cohorts come together. Finally, participants would have appreciated dedicated time with those in similar job roles or with those from similar museum types (i.e. children's museums) to learn and process within those contexts.

Continue evaluation activities for future projects with adjustments

The evaluation of MUSE included a variety of methods as well as participating in end of day reflection debriefs for each program day with IDEAL Center staff. Although all methods provided data to understand the extent to which the program goals were reached, the evaluation team sees room for improvement if evaluating a similar project in the future:

- Application data: Reduce the analysis of the open-ended responses. The key information that was used by evaluation was the organizational info (location, size, museum type),

current efforts, challenges, and strengths. The organizational info questions could be adjusted to ask about organization size more explicitly.

- Surveys: The surveys were a key method for understanding where participants were at, gathering quotes, and comparing similar questions at two points in the program. The response rate was 100% when completed during the program period and not as high when emailed after to non-attendees to colloquium 3. Prioritize surveys being completed during the program days.
- Observations: Observation protocols during colloquia days should be adjusted due to the large number of attendees to either focus on marking occurrences where evaluators rotate throughout the whole room or more in depth observations on only a portion of participants.
- Early career professional debrief: This conversation was useful to help understand the experience and takeaways from participating and observing the MUSE program. Having a similar conversation before engaging in the program could help understand context and provide areas to follow-up on at the end of the program. For example, knowing how they are thinking about their future career and career goals before and then after the program.