

Minnesota Arts Board Artist Initiative Grants

Brown Bag Lunch Presentation by Jenny Dunning, Assistant Professor of English
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Intro.

- I applied for an Artist Initiative Grant two years ago, and got close—but didn't get it.
- The MSAB Artist Initiative Grants are grants of \$2,000-\$10,000, funded in part by the Legacy Amendment (~20% goes to arts and cultural heritage).
- I still think I had a strong application. So I wanted to figure out why, and how to get one in the future. During my discussion with program director Erin McLennon she mentioned that I could apply to be on a review panel, and I did. That's why I'm here.

Broader relevance

- What I learned by being a panelist helped me understand what organizations in general might be looking for in a grant application. And I believe this goes for arts grants of all kinds, not just writing.
- There are grants based solely on an artistic sample, such as the McKnight Foundation Fellowships. I'm not talking about those types of grants.
- But there are a number of grants, such as the Minnesota Emerging Writers' Grant sponsored by The Loft Literary Center, that are decided on a similar basis. [does Melissa know of others?]
- If you're interested in this type of grant, you should also look at the Regional Arts Board grants—ours is based in Rochester (Southeastern Minn. Arts Council, or SEMAC); it's less money (\$2,000 for artist grants) but also less competition.
- I just submitted my application for the Anderson Center Residency, which is open to artists in various fields, and found my experience with MSAB grants helpful for putting together my "work plan."

The experience

- First, it was a ton of work—involved about 80 hours of prep time right at the end of 1st semester, plus 2 days of meetings.
- But it was a blast and I will definitely do it again. I helped give away \$80,000—what a rush! I learned a lot about what kind of work people in Minnesota are doing. And I made new contacts in the writing community, including George Rabasa, who is coming to St. Olaf for a publication reading of his new novel, *Miss Entropia and the Bomb*, on April 11 (4 p.m. in Viking). Even got an advance copy.
- I also got ideas to bring back to my classroom: as part of the evaluation process, each panel develops their own criteria by which to evaluate artistic quality, and that then becomes the standard by which we measure the quality of the application samples. Not only was it valuable to reflect on objective criteria, but I was inspired to ask my students to do the same thing for evaluating their work in my fiction workshop.

The application and how its evaluated

- **Project dates**—make sure this falls within the specified grant period.
- **One-sentence project summary**—this is important because panelists review 50 or more (our panel did 54!) applications and it's hard to keep them straight. You want something that nails your project but also conveys whatever is distinctive about it.
- **Project outcomes**—X's in the relevant boxes—artist able to expand or further develop artistic abilities, artist about to develop business skills to support professional art work, Minnesotans can engage with work of this artist
 - There's no need to check all of these—but in this grant cycle, the last one was essential (I'll get to that).

- **Artist Plan**—this is a really critical part of the application. In effect, your plan as stated in your application becomes your contract. This part of the application is evaluated for merit and feasibility.
 - This is where I went wrong in my failed application. My plan was too ambitious—I was going to write 15 hours a week and finish a draft of my novel, while teaching 2 classes (I asked for \$\$\$ toward buying myself a course release). Unrealistic! Make sure you set out a plan that you can actually accomplish AND provide as much evidence as possible that you can do so. It helps to mention any support you have such as a writers' group—another place I went wrong.
 - You also want to present your plan as part of a narrative about your artistic career: it's key that you convince the panel that your project will somehow move your career to a new stage, such as a first publication, a first book, a shift in genre, a new business or artistic skill, etc.
 - And you want to incorporate a narrative about this particular project—spell out what barriers now prevent you from achieving your goals and how you will get around those barriers (including of course how the grant \$\$\$ will help you do so).
 - In this year's grant cycle, applicants were asked to describe how the project will contribute to Minnesota's cultural environment. The administrators felt this elicited some pretty hokey claims, and will probably modify this part for future applicants. However, it's good to keep in mind that the Arts Board is very conscious of the responsibility they bear of spending public \$\$\$'s responsibly, and everyone is afraid that in this dire state-budget climate, Legacy Funds will be reappropriated. So any project with lots of VISIBILITY gets brownie points.

- **Project location**—you have to be based in Minn. Some of the funding has to involve projects within Minn, but not all. My panel funded a project that involved travel to China and also one that involved research on Katrina in New Orleans.
- **Project budget:** be as specific as possible here, and don't inflate costs. You can pay yourself "artist's fees." You can pay for further education—as long as it's not part of a degree program (lots of applications from U of M MFA students, so with those folks needed to be really clear that this was not related to their theses). It's also okay to budget for editorial services, whether a manuscript consultation or editing services; it looked good to have a specific consultant in mind. Capital costs, including a computer or specific software are limited to \$5,000 or less, and again, should be reasonable estimates of actual costs.
- **Certifications and signatures**—you can go through these on your own. You must have lived in Minn. for at least 6 months prior to the application deadline.
- **Artist resume**—this grant is open to artists at all different stages of their career. Our panel favored applicants with some kind of publication record, but this was because early-stage applications all happened to have a fatal flaw. Erin said the other prose panel did fund some early-stage projects.
- **Work Sample**—while the Artist Plan is evaluated for merit and feasibility, the work sample is evaluated for artistic quality. This is where each panel's individual set of criteria come in. [Show ours.]
 - It's best if your work sample has a clear relationship to your project—and you should explicitly state what that relationship is.
 - I went wrong here too, because I used a short story rather than the opening to my novel.

- It should be recent work unless you have a compelling reason to use something older (i.e. relationship to the project).

What projects got funded?

- The process works like this: first, we evaluated all the projects for for how well they meet the grant criteria. We eliminated about half the projects because we felt they did not meet the criteria of the grant. This took the whole first day (we started with training and the artistic quality criteria discussion, which last through mid-morning the first day) and half of the second. Second, we reviewed all the remaining applications, discussed them further if warranted, and “scored” them for artistic merit, feasibility, and value to Minnesota.
- The projects we funded all really stood out from the rest of the applications—the project itself was distinctive and original and filled what we thought was a hole in published work by Minnesotans.
- The top project was a Hmong memoir (by an Olaf alum, actually) dealing with the cultural conflict between American and Hmong values—and the sample was really well written.
- Next was a memoir project that involved a return to China where the author had taught 25 years ago. Then a really interesting project involving ASL. Next a “lost boys of Africa” young-adult project by a writer who teaches ELL children (this one involved travel to Africa). Next an Iron Range nonfiction project—especially compelling because it involved 1st generation immigrants who are now dying.
- Then a fiction genre I didn’t even know existed: medical fiction. Next a novel about the Katrina diaspora in Minn. (who knew?). Then humor essays. Then experimental essays.

- The projects that got funded all had really strong writing samples—original, high-energy, super competent (depending on the type of project) prose. They all were easy to summarize—it was really clear what the writers were setting out to do, where they were in the project, and what was distinctive about the projects. Many had cultural significance—they gave voice to experiences that have not been written about much, like the Hmong-American experience, or ASL.