



MANITOBA ARTS COUNCIL'S

Peer Assessment Handbook

Manitoba Arts Council

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Overview

The Manitoba Arts Council (MAC) is an arm's-length agency of the provincial government, established in 1965 by the Arts Council Act "to promote the study, enjoyment, production and performance of work in the arts." MAC makes awards to individuals, groups, and organizations in all art forms including theatre, dance, music, literary arts, media arts, visual arts, and craft. Through these awards, MAC endeavours to balance the requirements of existing arts infrastructures with support for new artistic development. MAC is dedicated to preserving, supporting, and advocating for the arts as essential to the quality of life of all the people of Manitoba.

The governance structures and policies of MAC have been developed to ensure that funds are awarded in an objective, transparent, and equitable fashion. Grants are awarded on the basis of applications to programs with published guidelines, and granting decisions are made through a process of peer assessment, with artistic merit as the primary criterion.

This document outlines the goals and processes of peer assessment. It also includes information about MAC's policies on conflict of interest and confidentiality, two key components of a fair and transparent assessment process. These policies were developed to preserve public confidence in the integrity of the peer assessment process and the impartiality of MAC.

Vision

A Manitoba where arts and culture is at the heart of community life.

Purpose

The Manitoba Arts Council funds the creation and sharing of arts and culture for the benefit of all Manitobans.

Values

Equity

MAC strives for funding, programs, and policies that are equitable for all. We recognize that some groups face barriers and that achieving equity for these groups may require targeted measures.

Diversity

MAC embraces the differences of all Manitobans and seeks to have this diversity represented in the work we support.

Creativity

MAC values the original expression of ideas in our work and in the work we fund.

Collaboration

MAC seeks to develop partnerships to make efficient use of our resources, achieve common goals, and maximize our impact. We value a collaborative approach in the work of MAC funding recipients.

Accountability

MAC actively listens to stakeholders and makes our decisions on behalf of the citizens of Manitoba.

Governance and administrative structure

Board

MAC is governed by a 9-member board appointed for a term by the Lieutenant Governor-in-Council. This board develops policy for the benefit of the arts and of the public of Manitoba, using input from the community and key stakeholders. The Board has the authority and responsibility to approve the expenditure of funds that supports the mandate and reflects the public trust. The Board is also responsible for hiring an Executive Director to carry out policies and oversee operations.

Program staff

A team of program consultants with expertise in various artistic disciplines is responsible for the creation, assessment, development, and delivery of all MAC programs. Program consultants also provide information to the public about MAC programs, make decisions related to applicant eligibility in accordance with published guidelines, consult with applicants, recommend assessors, and facilitate the assessment process. Program administrators play a crucial role in the delivery of programs including managing the submission of grant applications; coordinating the distribution of applications to assessors; assisting in the planning and operation of assessment panel meetings; maintaining client database content; maintaining electronic and paper files; and processing correspondence.

The importance of peer assessment

Peer assessment is the cornerstone of the granting process. As a steward of public funds, the Board endeavours to make the wisest possible use of its resources. Judgments regarding artistic merit, impact, and feasibility are complex and depend upon the assessors' aesthetic and cultural perspectives and artistic experience. To ensure that such decisions are made fairly and are grounded in the artistic community it serves, MAC uses peer assessment.

Peer assessors are qualified artists or arts professionals with experience and knowledge relevant to the applications under consideration. They are individuals capable of making an informed assessment of the comparative merits of grant applications and advising on priorities for funds. Entrusting peers with granting decisions allows MAC to

involve the arts community directly in its operations, while making decisions at arm's length from the government and from the competing interests of the applicants.

The granting process

MAC uses peer assessment in the following ways:

Assessment panels are the primary way that grant applications are assessed. A cross-section of professional artists and, occasionally, other arts professionals, convenes as a group to review and discuss the merits of the applications. Both groups will rank them according to the criteria established in the program guidelines.

Award amounts are determined by assessors based on the rankings of the applications. The decisions of assessment panel, including the amounts of the awards, are final.

Independent/Outside Assessors are used to provide a written assessment of an application when it is believed that panel members lack specific expertise in language or artistic practice. MAC also engages **Production Assessors**, who are asked to attend and report on performing arts activities of those organizations receiving operating support. These assessments are brought to the panel and help to supplement the analysis of the convened assessors.

Internal Assessment by program consultants is used in a limited number of programs to respond to time-sensitive requests. These programs have restrictions on grant amounts.

Choosing assessors

MAC's peer assessment processes were developed so that applicants will have confidence their applications are assessed fairly. These processes ensure that Manitobans can trust in an accountable, effective, and transparent management of public funds.

To ensure diversity of opinion and artistic expression, MAC maintains an extensive database of potential jurors from Manitoba and from across Canada. Anyone with an active profile in MAC's Online Application System is included in this database. If you do not have a profile and would like to be considered, we invite you to submit an assessor profile in our system for inclusion in this database. The database is augmented through consultation with provincial art service organizations, funding bodies in other provinces, current and former assessors, and other professional artists.

After careful review of the applications for a particular deadline, the program consultant selects a preliminary list of potential assessors. This list is made up of individuals with expertise in the various categories of artistic expression to be assessed at that program deadline, taking into consideration possible conflict of interest. Potential assessors must be capable of providing a fair and just evaluation of artistic styles and

practices, and able to work effectively in a group. Assessment panels may be composed of individuals from one artistic discipline or from various disciplines, depending on the nature of the program and the applicants.

MAC is committed to critical diversity in the decision-making process. Critical diversity helps ensure that the understanding of artistic excellence draws from multiple perspectives within a broader context.

Program consultants make every effort to ensure that each assessment panel fairly and adequately represents the applicants with respect to:

- Age
- Gender
- Region
- Official languages
- Indigeneity
- Cultural diversity
- Disability
- Membership in the Deaf community
- Membership in other underserved communities

The preliminary list of potential assessors is then reviewed by management staff and amended if necessary. After the preliminary list is approved, the program administrator contacts assessors regarding their availability and a panel is built from the list. The exact composition of the final assessors will depend on the availability of appropriate assessors. The Executive Director or Senior Consultant approves the final list of assessors for each panel. MAC pays travel expenses for assessors who travel from their home city or town to attend a panel, so cost considerations also have an impact on the size of panels, and on the numbers of out-of-town assessors employed during any year. MAC conducts panels virtually via zoom in this time of physical distancing and may continue to engage out-of-province assessors this way in the future.

MAC engages assessors for approximately 50 panels each year and generally does not engage any assessor who has served on a panel within the past two years.

The assessment process

All assessors receive online access to copies of the applications and support material for review prior to the assessment panel. Assessors complete a preliminary assessment online prior to the meeting. This assessment will inform group discussion, and often changes over the course of a panel meeting.

As a group, assessors discuss each application, to share their individual perspectives on the merits of the application and to reach a decision regarding funding. The assessors are asked to score the applications, and these scores provide an accumulated ranking of the applications. Awards are then determined based on these rankings. Assessors are required to sign off on assessment awards and rankings.

The assessment process is facilitated by the program consultant, who is responsible for ensuring that each application receives due consideration. A Charge to the Assessors, which explains the assessment process, is presented at the beginning of each panel. Assessors complete an online survey following the panel. This helps MAC evaluate the granting process, programs, and its staff.

Board accepts the decisions of an assessment panel as final and ratifies the recommended awards.

Applicants are normally advised of the results within 3 months of the program deadline.

French language assessment

When an application is submitted in French, MAC will engage a bilingual assessor who is familiar with the discipline. Portions of applications in French will also be translated into English for use in the assessment process, in addition to being provided in the original language. The artistic sample provided is not translated. A written assessment in French may also be completed by an outside assessor and translated into English, and both the French and English assessments will be made available to the panel. Where the number of French applications warrants (two or more), MAC will endeavour to engage two or more bilingual assessors to sit on the panel considering these applications. Wherever possible, MAC will select bilingual assessors, considering the actual discipline specific experience and knowledge required. MAC intends to select assessors with an understanding of and sensitivity to the challenges of the Francophone community in Manitoba. If French applications in a particular program comprise over 50% of the applications, MAC will endeavour to conduct the panel in French.

When portions of an application are to be translated, the applicant has the option of having MAC provide the translation or of hiring a translator of their choice and being reimbursed for their expenses. These options are described in the published guidelines.

Terms of reference for assessors

All assessors agree to our policies of conflict of interest and confidentiality. These policies are outlined below.

The eligibility of each applicant is determined by the consultant prior to the assessors' meeting, and therefore not part of the assessors' discussions. In all their deliberations, assessors are asked to confine their discussion to the merit of the applications. They do not consider financial need or grant history in their assessment discussions.

The main criteria for determining awards are the artistic merit, impact, and feasibility of the application. Other criteria considered may include educational and/or project merit. These criteria are weighted differently across programs. Works of artistic merit are often characterized by such qualities as experimentation, clarity, rigour, relevance, and cultural integrity, but MAC recognizes that notions of artistic merit evolve and that decisions based on aesthetic values will vary from one peer to the next.

Some feedback, as determined by the assessment panel, may be provided to applicants upon request.

Conflict of interest

For the purpose of peer assessment, MAC defines "conflict of interest" as either technical or perceptual. A technical conflict of interest is a situation in which an assessor could benefit from an assessment decision, whether that decision is to award or decline an applicant. This benefit may be personal, professional, or financial. A perceptual conflict of interest is a situation where an assessor could be perceived as having a bias towards or against an application.

Assessors are advised of the conflict of interest stipulations and complete an online confirmation regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest in advance of the panel meeting. Assessors are advised to contact the program consultant about potential conflicts of interest.

Program consultants assess the nature and extent of the interests declared by the assessor. If conflict exists, the program consultant may rescind membership on the panel. Questionable involvement of an assessor shall be resolved in favour of the Board's credibility in the community.

Where the program consultant has determined that a potential conflict can be managed without rescinding appointment on the panel and that the assessor's involvement is crucial, the assessor will:

- declare the conflict of interest at the meeting;
- withdraw from the meeting during discussion of the application in question; and
- not attempt to influence the decision of the panel regarding the application.

Conflicts of interest that have been declared by assessors are recorded on the Final Ranking Sheet which reports the results of the meeting, and which is signed off on by assessors, the program consultant, and the Executive Director at the end of the meeting.

Because of their roles in shaping policy and in ratifying and awarding grants or in administering the granting process, the board and staff at MAC are also bound by conflict of interest policies. Prior to appointment to the Board, any individual under consideration for either board or staff must make written disclosure of conflicts of interest. These written statements are updated annually or as conflicts of interest arise. Conflict of interest policies for board and staff at MAC are available on request.

Confidentiality

MAC's confidentiality policy is designed to protect the applicants to its programs, the assessors, and the integrity of the peer assessment process. Specifically, this policy protects the private information of the applicants, protects the assessors from reprisals, and protects the granting system from unwarranted allegations of favouritism and the abuse of private information.

Assessors agree to confidentiality that precludes them from revealing that they have been selected as assessors for a forthcoming panel. They cannot contact applicants prior to, or after, the assessment meeting and cannot disclose any information about the deliberations and decisions. If an assessor is contacted by an applicant about a decision, they will refer the applicant to MAC office and notify the appropriate program consultant immediately.

A breach of confidentiality may mean removal from the panel.

All members of board and staff of MAC sign a Pledge of Confidentiality at the time of appointment or hiring, precluding them from disclosing the private affairs of the Board or its clients. This restriction is in effect during the term of appointment and at all times thereafter. Any breach of confidence is considered a serious matter. Staff will be disciplined and could be dismissed. In the case of Board members, the Chair will report the breach of confidence to the Minister and request that the Minister consider the termination or withdrawal of the appointment.

Information authorized for release

Names of awarded applicants and amounts of awards are posted online. The names of declined applicants are not released. All assessors used in a fiscal year are listed in alphabetical order in the annual report for each year. Assessors, staff, and Board members cannot release any other information.

As a government agency, MAC is subject to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. Through the Act, anyone can request documents, correspondence,

applications, and reports, particularly as they relate to an applicant's own files. However, exemptions under the Act, particularly with regard to third-party information, prevail unless the third party specifically agrees to the information's release.

Roles and responsibilities

Responsibilities of the assessors

An assessor must have an active profile in MAC's online granting system. Individuals who already have an active applicant profile may be automatically considered as a potential assessor and do not need to create a separate assessor profile.

Prior to reviewing grant applications or nominations for prizes, assessors will need to indicate agreement with MAC's safeguards to the integrity of the MAC peer assessment process, to ensure that our clients' data is handled with confidentiality.

The assessment panel is responsible for selecting those applications of highest merit in the current competition for awards. This process includes the following requirements:

- Assessors will read and consider, in advance, all material received (applications and support materials) so they can arrive at the meeting prepared to fully consider each individual application. This includes reviewing and understanding the program guidelines.
- Assessors will have the ability to evaluate the work of others, articulate opinions, and debate respectfully in a group decision-making environment.
- Assessors are expected to be open, articulate, and committed to making consensual decisions while considering each application individually. If consensus cannot be reached in particular cases, the majority opinion is communicated to the program consultant.
- Assessors are governed by Board's Code of Ethics and are expected to declare any conflict of interest and take appropriate action. They are also expected to express any concerns about the integrity of the proceedings in writing to the Executive Director of MAC.

Role of the program consultant

During the peer assessment process, the program consultant facilitates the discussion and serves as a resource person for the jury, and is responsible for the following activities:

- Circulating all information and support documents and materials to the assessors before the meeting. If the assessors request additional material or information, the program consultant will provide it, if it is available and/or appropriate.
- Providing the assessors with whatever guidance they need for the proper completion of the assessment process, and for ensuring that the purpose and process of the program are clearly understood by all members of the panel.

- Facilitating the assessment process. Program consultants assist in facilitating discussions but abstain from expressing any personal opinions that might influence the assessors' decisions. If there is some reason the program consultant cannot maintain neutrality with respect to an application, the program consultant leaves the room during discussion.
- Advising the panel of budgetary considerations after the ranking of applications so that award decisions are based on available funds.
- Recording the decisions of the panel. Assessors sign off on these decisions and recommendations on the Final Ranking Sheet following the meeting. Results are then distributed to all applicants and MAC.

Declined applications

Although artistic merit, impact, and feasibility are the primary criteria of assessment, an assessment panel may decline an application for many reasons. It is important to understand that the competition is of a very high standard. Not all applications recommended for funding will be awarded any or all of their request. The applications are ranked by the panel and funded within the budget allocation for that particular deadline. In the event of insufficient budget funds, applications may be declined with merit.

The appeal process

Unsuccessful applicants can resubmit a proposal to subsequent assessment panels for reconsideration. However, if an applicant formally appeals, in writing, the result of their application and it is found that an application was not reviewed according to the peer assessment guidelines, the Board will ask the next panel to review the application, in conformity with the Board's published procedures.