



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." The Manitoba Arts Council makes awards to professional arts organizations and professional individual artists in all art forms and disciplines. Through these awards, the Manitoba Arts Council endeavours to balance the requirements of existing arts infrastructures with support for new artistic development. The Manitoba Arts Council 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 the Manitoba Arts Council 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 the Manitoba Arts Council.

Vision

Artists, organizations, and communities working together to create a vibrant, innovative, and inclusive Manitoba.

Mission

We champion excellence in the arts through support for professional artists and arts organizations in Manitoba.

Values

Excellence

In the arts and the administration and delivery of our programs.

Diversity

Fostering greater inclusion in the arts.

Innovation

Designing our impact creatively and with a long view.

Governance and administrative structure

Council

The Manitoba Arts Council is governed by a 15-member board appointed for a term by the Lieutenant Governor-in-Council. This board ("the Council") develops policy for the benefit of the arts and of the public of Manitoba, using input from the community and key stakeholders. The Council has the authority and responsibility to approve the expenditure of funds that supports the mandate and reflects the public trust. The Council is also responsible for hiring a Chief Executive Officer 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 Manitoba Arts Council programs, make decisions related to applicant eligibility in accordance with published guidelines, consult with applicants, recommend assessors, and facilitate the assessment process. Program assistants 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 jury 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 Council endeavours to make the wisest possible use of its resources. Judgments regarding artistic merit 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, the Manitoba Arts Council 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 the Manitoba Arts Council 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

Manitoba Arts Council uses peer assessment in the following ways:

Assessment Juries and 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.

In the case of an **Assessment Panel**, assessors' roles end after the ranking. They do not determine award amounts. However, the ranking assigned by the assessment panel is accepted as final by Council. The program consultant, in deliberation with management, then recommends grant amounts based on these rankings and the program budget.

Where there is an **Assessment Jury**, award amounts are determined by assessors based on the rankings of the applications. The decisions of juries, including the amounts of the awards, are also final.

Independent/Outside Assessors are used to provide a written assessment of an application when it is believed that jury or 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 jury or 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

Manitoba Arts Council's peer assessment processes were developed so that artists 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, the Manitoba Arts Council maintains an extensive database of potential jurors from Manitoba and from across Canada. All professional Manitoban artists and arts professionals are invited to submit a Peer Assessor Registration Form to the Manitoba Arts Council 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. Juries and panels may be composed of individuals from one artistic discipline or from various disciplines, depending on the nature of the program and the applicants.

The Manitoba Arts Council 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 jury or 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 assistant contacts assessors regarding their availability and builds a jury or panel from the list. The exact composition of the final assessors will depend on the availability of appropriate assessors. The Chief Executive Officer approves the final list of assessors for each jury or panel. The Manitoba Arts Council pays travel expenses for assessors who travel from their home city or town to attend the jury/panel, so cost considerations also have an impact on the size of juries and panels, and on the numbers of out-of-town assessors employed during any year.

The assessment process

All assessors receive access to copies of the applications and support material for review prior to the jury or panel. Assessors are provided with a program-specific rubric which will aid them in creating a preliminary assessment prior to the meeting. This assessment will inform group discussion, and often changes over the course of a jury or panel meeting.

Assessors generally discuss each application at least twice; first to share their individual perspectives on the merits of the application and, on the second discussion, 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 or jury, as well as being provided in advance to the assessors with the applications. Assessors complete a questionnaire at the end of the jury or panel. This helps MAC evaluate the granting process, programs and its staff.

Council accepts the decisions of a jury as final and ratifies the recommended awards.

Applicants are normally advised of the results within 12 weeks of the program deadline.

French language assessment

Where 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 jury or panel 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 jury or 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 jury or 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 jury or 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 sign agreements regarding conflict of interest and confidentiality. These policies are outlined below.

The applicant's eligibility 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 application. They do not consider financial need or grant history in their assessment discussions.

The main criterion for determining awards is the artistic merit of the application. Other criteria considered include impact, feasibility, educational and 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 the Manitoba Arts Council 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 jury, may be provided to applicants.

Conflict of interest

For the purpose of peer assessment, the Manitoba Arts Council 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 receive the Assessor Agreement Form in advance of the jury or panel meeting. This form outlines confidentiality and conflict-of-interest policies. 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 jury or panel. Questionable involvement of a jury or assessment panel member shall be resolved in favour of Council's credibility in the community.

Where the program consultant has determined that a potential conflict can be managed without rescinding appointment on the jury or 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 jury or panel regarding the application.

Conflicts of interest that have been declared by assessors are recorded on the Peer Assessment Report of the results of the meeting, which is signed and dated by assessors, the program consultant, and the Chief Executive Officer 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, Council and staff at the Manitoba Arts Council are also bound by conflict-of-interest policies. Prior to appointment to Council, any individual under consideration for either Council 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 Council and staff at the Manitoba Arts Council are available on request.

Confidentiality

Manitoba Arts Council'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 are asked to sign a confidentiality agreement that precludes them from revealing that they have been selected as assessors for a forthcoming panel or jury. They cannot contact applicants prior to, or after, the jury or panel meeting, and cannot disclose any information about the panel or jury deliberations and decisions. If an assessor is contacted by an applicant about a decision, they will refer the applicant to the Manitoba Arts Council office and notify the appropriate program consultant immediately.

The Chair and Chief Executive Officer will take appropriate action in the case of assessors who breach this agreement.

All members of Council and staff of the Manitoba Arts Council sign a Pledge of Confidentiality at the time of appointment or hiring, precluding them from disclosing the private affairs of the Council 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 Council 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 Council members cannot release any other information.

As a government agency, the Manitoba Arts Council 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

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

- Assessors will have the ability to evaluate the work of others, articulate opinions, and debate respectfully in a group decision-making environment.
- 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 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. A jury or panel has the right to appoint a chair from its members to direct the proceedings.
- Assessors are governed by Council'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 Chief Executive Officer of MAC.

Role of the program consultant

During the peer assessment process, the program consultant serves as a resource person for the jury or panel 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 jury or 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. In this situation, a chair shall be appointed from among the assessors.

- In the case of a jury, advising the jury of budgetary considerations after the ranking of applications so that award decisions are based on available funds. For panels, the consultant is charged with facilitating the ranking of applications.
- Recording the decisions of the jury and the recommendations of the panel. Assessors sign off on these decisions and recommendations on the Peer Assessment Report following the meeting. In the case of a panel, allocations are made based on the panel's recommendations and available funds. Results are then distributed to all applicants and MAC.

Declined applications

Although artistic merit is the primary criterion of assessment, a jury or 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 jury or 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 juries or 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, Council will ask the next jury or panel to review the application, in conformity with Council's published procedures.