



Preserving Endangered Cultural Memory at a Time of Heightened Risk:

Evaluating the Recordings at Risk Grant Program

Zakiya Collier, Lynette Johnson, and Gabriel Solís



Council on Library &
Information Resources

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CLIR

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Executive Summary

This report is the culmination of a two-year project assessing the Recordings at Risk program administered by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR). Supported by the Mellon Foundation, CLIR launched Recordings at Risk in 2017 to fund the preservation of rare and unique audio and audiovisual content of high public value recorded on degrading or obsolete media. Broadly, the purpose of this evaluation was to identify ways in which the Recordings at Risk program might better serve the needs of collecting organizations endeavoring to preserve historically or culturally significant content on at-risk audio and audiovisual media, particularly under-resourced organizations with insufficient capacity for long-term audio and audiovisual preservation.

The assessment, conducted by Shift Collective beginning in August 2023, focused on a set of research objectives outlined by CLIR, including:

- A critique of the program's history of award making and current implementation by looking at the program's language and guidelines and their interpretation, applicant-support services, and reviewer-engagement practices;
- Identification of any gaps in services and unmet needs affecting the capacity of collecting organizations to undertake successful audio and audiovisual reformatting projects; and
- Development of recommendations for potential future projects and programs, particularly those that would increase the capacity of collecting organizations that may have limited or no experience or capacity for managing preservation grants.

The research team based the findings and recommendations in this report primarily on data from the following sources: a mixed-methods survey of 170 grant applicants and non-applicants (those who considered applying but ultimately did not); semi-structured interviews with 22 program stakeholders—applicants, non-applicants, review panelists, third-party service providers, and CLIR staff and leadership; a review and critical analysis of Recordings at Risk program design, activities, processes, and documentation; live observations of a teleconferenced review panel meeting and an informational webinar; and question and answer sessions with CLIR leadership and Recordings at Risk program officers.

The key findings, organized around seven topic areas, are:

1. **Program appeal:** Recordings at Risk is highly valued because it serves a needed function in the cultural preservation field, standing virtually alone as a content-neutral preservation grant focused on audio and audiovisual digitization offered to collecting organizations across the US and (as of 2025) Canada.
2. **Core program values:** CLIR's language about Recordings at Risk in some instances has been inconsistent and contradictory, leading to misperceptions among constituents about the program's purpose, values, and intended audience.
3. **Application system:** The application system, which encompasses materials and processes that enable or facilitate the submission of grant project proposals, received high marks for its straightforwardness and for CLIR's responsiveness in offering support. However, many applicants and prospective applicants found the process to be unnecessarily rigorous and time-consuming.
4. **Grant requirements:** Making a case for a project's scholarly value and national significance, and resolving intellectual property issues are among perceived barriers that make it difficult for under-resourced, independent, and community-based collecting organizations to successfully navigate the application process.¹
5. **Program design:** Intentionally limited in scope to respond to the urgent need to digitally preserve audio and audiovisual content on degrading or obsolete media, Recordings at Risk is not structurally designed for small or under-resourced organizations that need support and resources for essential pre- and post-digitization access and preservation steps.
6. **Communications and outreach:** Stakeholders encourage CLIR to substantially increase its outreach to independent, community-centered archives to boost awareness of Recordings at Risk among organizations that most need funding.
7. **Program impacts:** Through Recordings at Risk, CLIR helps cultural preservation organizations understand not only the need and urgency for reformatting at-risk collections, but also the benefits of developing long-term digitization and preservation strategies.

¹ We use "under-resourced" to describe collecting organizations that have limited funding, digital preservation infrastructure, and staff capacity. We use "independent" to describe collecting organizations that do not depend on support from, or archival partnerships with, universities and institutions. We use "community-based" to describe cultural preservation where decisions about collecting, description, access and restrictions, and other considerations, are determined by the communities represented in the collections, not preservation professionals within universities or institutions, examples include culture bearers, community-based archives, and community memory organizations.

Our recommendations are divided into short-term, medium-term, and long-term categories. While the recommendations can be implemented on different timelines, we present them in a progressive order, where the start or completion of one activity might facilitate or inform the implementation of steps that follow. Topic areas are noted to facilitate assigning of responsibility and reference to findings on which they are based.

Timeframe	Recommendation	Program area
Short-term	1. Describe the program in clear and consistent language across CLIR's public platforms and communication channels and in announcements, reports, and program proposals.	Communications and Outreach
	2. Replace the term <i>scholarly value</i> (or <i>high scholarly value</i>) as it is currently employed as a criterion for funding.	Assessment Criteria
	3. Help audiences better distinguish between the Recordings at Risk and Digitizing Hidden Collections: Amplifying Unheard Voices programs.	Communications and Outreach
	4. Ease or clarify some application requirements to streamline the process where feasible.	Application System/Grant Requirements
	5. Improve the branding for Recordings at Risk.	Communications and Outreach
	6. Clarify how reviewers evaluate resubmitted project proposals.	Application Review Process
Medium-term	1. Offer more targeted support to less experienced applicants.	Program Design
	2. Improve strategies for reaching independent and community-based collecting organizations.	Communications and Outreach
	3. Develop communications that feature successful funded projects.	Communications and Outreach
Long-term	1. Collaborate with other field leaders to recruit new, dedicated funders.	Sustaining Recordings at Risk
	2. Grow and diversify program funding for Recordings at Risk.	Sustaining Recordings at Risk
	3. Restructure Recordings at Risk, creating tiers (or tracks) that support collections preparation and planning for long-term preservation, and to accommodate organizations with limited staffing, infrastructure, and resources.	Program Design
	4. Increase staffing to more fully support Recordings at Risk.	Sustaining Recordings at Risk

Table 1: Summary of Recommendations

Introduction

Recordings at Risk stands as one of the only programs of its kind—a national grant for those aiming to reformat publicly valuable content stored on at-risk, time-based media. The Shift Collective research team began working with CLIR in August 2023 to assess the program. For this report, we collected data through a comprehensive survey and a series of interviews with a combined total of nearly 200 Recordings at Risk program stakeholders. Even before federal grant cancellations and other new challenges imposed by the federal government on the cultural preservation field began in 2025, participants in this study advocated for increased funding for digitization projects to address rising costs, expressed concerns about “large institution” bias in the Recordings at Risk program design, and urged CLIR to better accommodate collecting organizations with limited staffing, infrastructure, and resources. Survey and interview participants—even grant recipients at well-resourced institutions—pointedly suggested more targeted outreach to and support of independent and community-based collecting organizations that struggle to secure resources.

In formulating recommendations for how CLIR can continue to evolve and improve the Recordings at Risk program, the research team considered how the rapidly changing sociopolitical landscape has impacted the cultural preservation field. Swift seismic change continues to impact funding in the field, leaving organizations and institutions racing to resolve sudden budget shortfalls and mitigate new threats. In January 2025, the federal government began attempts to defund and dismantle institutions that many cultural preservation organizations relied upon for funding for staffing, operations, collections care, and other vital functions. By spring, presidential executive orders had either eliminated, diminished, or threatened major sources of funding for many of the nation’s libraries, universities, museums, and institutional and independent archives, including the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. While some grants have been restored, the funding climate remains precarious.

Also of grave concern, many colleges and universities, under political pressure and in some cases, the force of law, have curtailed or canceled courses that amplify the histories of marginalized and oppressed groups, and have eliminated multicultural campus programs and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA)

initiatives. Many in the cultural preservation field are alarmed by the lack of resistance by leaders at large, well-resourced universities, and worry that continued partnerships between independent community-based collecting organizations and academic institutions that are actively suppressing knowledge may endanger access to—and existence of—archives of underrepresented communities.

At a time when so many institutional programs that once strongly supported the cultural preservation field have been halted, Recordings at Risk, which receives no financial support from the federal government, can be a vital source of funding for under-resourced and independent organizations seeking to preserve and provide access to culturally significant collections. The academic sector has consistently been the program's biggest beneficiary, comprising the largest percentage of awardees year after year. While many academic institutions continue to diligently gather and preserve collections of marginalized communities, in the evolving climate where more than 400 college campuses across the US have eliminated or rebranded programs and centers that promote DEIA (PBS News 2025), colleges and universities may no longer be dependable sites of cultural preservation for underrepresented communities.

CLIR has stressed the importance of preserving and providing access to a wide range of cultural perspectives:

The Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) envisions a world in which each person has access to knowledge and culture, and in which the wisdom and experience of all people are represented. CLIR believes that ethical access to knowledge and culture is a human right, as it allows us to understand our past and present selves even as we make our future. Fueled by this conviction, we build networks and partnerships to advance the preservation of, and connections to, the human record (CLIR 2022a).

We present our recommendations with the recognition that under-resourced organizations are experiencing severe setbacks and increased difficulties in fulfilling their missions due to the current sociopolitical climate. In the report's Looking Ahead section, we make a special appeal to funders and grant makers to prioritize under-resourced, independent, and community-based archives. To build a world where each person has access to knowledge and culture, the safeguarding and care of archives need to be held, where possible, in the hands of the communities reflected in the collections. At a time of heightened risk for the cultural preservation field, CLIR faces an important opportunity to evolve and improve Recordings at Risk as a valued and necessary preservation grant program.

1. Project Overview

In July 2016, the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), with the support of the Mellon Foundation, began a “regranting program in support of the preservation of rare and unique audio and audiovisual content” (CLIR 2016). CLIR envisioned Recordings at Risk as a complement to its Digitizing Hidden Special Collections and Archives program (launched in 2015) that would prioritize “long-term preservation of content over immediate, comprehensive access” (CLIR n.d.[a]). Recordings at Risk began in January 2017, providing grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$25,000 in its pilot cycle and \$10,000 to \$50,000 in subsequent program cycles. In its communications about the program, CLIR has described Recordings at Risk as being “dedicated to preserving ‘at-risk’ recorded content of significant importance to researchers and the general public” (CLIR 2025a).

In August 2023, CLIR engaged Shift Collective (hereafter referred to as “the research team” or “the team”) to conduct a retrospective assessment of Recordings at Risk. This report documents that assessment, which took place over two years. Broadly, the purpose of this evaluation was to identify ways in which the program might better serve the needs of organizations endeavoring “to preserve and create access to information recorded on fragile and obsolete audio and audiovisual media” (CLIR 2022a). More specifically, the goals of the project, as outlined in CLIR’s May 2023 Program Evaluator Statement of Work document, were to:

- Critique the program’s history of award-making and current implementation, looking at the program’s language and guidelines and their interpretation, applicant-support services, and reviewer-engagement practices;
- Identify gaps in services and unmet needs affecting the capacity of collecting organizations to undertake successful audio and audiovisual reformatting projects; and
- Develop recommendations for potential future projects and programs, particularly those that would increase the capacity to manage audio and audiovisual materials outside large institutional libraries or [within] archives that may lack significant experience in grant-seeking.

The research team conducted a mixed-methods evaluation that was stakeholder-centered, working closely with CLIR staff to identify constituents who would help determine how Recordings at Risk has

impacted collecting organizations, and point out challenges still facing those who steward fragile and obsolete audiovisual media. The program evaluation employed several qualitative and quantitative research activities, including the following, as outlined by CLIR (CLIR 2022b):

- A review and critical analysis of program documentation;
- Survey design and analysis;
- Observations at program strategy or review meetings; and
- Semi-structured interviews with program stakeholders (applicants, reviewers, etc.);
- A review of relevant scholarly and professional literature.

The survey was designed to capture the experiences of those who have considered applying for, applied unsuccessfully for, or received a Recordings at Risk grant. The research team was particularly interested in applicants' (and prospective applicants') perceptions of the grant program structure and decision-making processes regarding their project proposals. We conducted interviews with a broad range of stakeholders—successful and unsuccessful applicants, prospective applicants, independent application reviewers, third-party service providers (digitization vendors), and CLIR staff members—all providing their perspectives on the program. The results of this research are intended to inform possible future directions for CLIR as well as other organizations seeking to preserve or support the preservation of rare and unique audio and audiovisual content. The report is also meant to be meaningful for any organization addressing the challenges of cultural preservation.

To assess Recordings at Risk, the research team reviewed activities from the first eleven cycles of the program, extending from January 2016 to August 2025. Although the first cycle formally began in January 2017 with a limited pilot call for project proposals, we reviewed materials from 2016 to understand the evolution of the program's design. The eleventh cycle ended in August 2025, when grant recipients' projects for that cycle were due to conclude (and the twelfth cycle's grantees were set to be announced). In addition, we reviewed a limited number of program activities from the twelfth grant cycle, which opened on January 14, 2025. Awardees were announced August 4, 2025, with their projects set to conclude in August 2026.

2. Methodology

The research team carried out a range of activities over a two-year period beginning in August 2023. Principally, we designed and implemented a mixed-methods evaluation that included surveys of grant applicants (both funded and unfunded) and non-applicants (those who considered applying but ultimately chose not to do so), and conducted semi-structured interviews with various program stakeholders—applicants, non-applicants, reviewers, vendors, and CLIR staff members—to understand their experiences with the program, gauge the program’s effectiveness and impact, and create a basis upon which to formulate recommendations for future iterations of Recordings at Risk. To support these efforts, we met regularly with CLIR staff, who offered information and answered questions about the program’s history and administration. We examined internal documentation provided by CLIR and scanned application materials on the program’s website to familiarize ourselves with the program’s design and the kinds of support offered to recipients. Additionally, we reviewed professional and scholarly literature about the digital reformatting needs of collecting organizations in the US to gain a perspective on the program’s wider context.

2.1. Guiding Questions

The specific research questions guiding the project included:

1. How well do the design and execution of the Recordings at Risk program align with the current needs and priorities of the collecting organizations it aims to serve?
2. What have been the impacts of this program on collecting organizations, on digitization vendors, and on public engagement with audio and audiovisual materials?
3. How have the impacts of the program varied across different types and sizes of collecting organizations, and what aspects of the program’s design and external factors contribute to the differences in their experiences?
4. How have the total costs of audio and audiovisual preservation reformatting and related digital preservation changed over the program’s history, and how has the burden of those costs affected different types and sizes of organizations located in different regions of the United States?
5. What promising strategies are used by collecting organizations for building capacity to preserve and create access to audio and audiovisual content?

2.2. Data Sources

The findings and recommendations in this report are based primarily on data from the following sources:

- Surveys submitted by 170 program applicants and non-applicants.
- Semi-structured interviews conducted with 22 program stakeholders, including grant recipients, unfunded applicants, non-applicants, CLIR staff members, application review panelists, and digitization vendors.
- The research team’s informational Q&A sessions with Recordings at Risk program officers, using Zoom video conferencing software (January 2024).
- Live observations of a CLIR-hosted Recordings at Risk applicant Q&A webinar (March 6, 2024).
- Live observations of a Recordings at Risk review panel session held using Zoom (June 12, 2024).
- Program information and documentation provided by CLIR, including program reports, proposals, and guidelines; grantee applications and exit interviews; application review protocols; no-cost extension requests; and selected internal communications.
- Materials and information obtained through the program’s website, including application guidelines and instructions; program FAQs; sample grantee applications, and documentation of applicant informational and Q&A webinars.
- Scholarly and professional literature about the need for collecting organizations in the US to digitally reformat fragile and obsolete audio and audiovisual media.

2.3. Data Collection

One of the two main methods used to collect data for this analysis was an online survey powered by Survey Monkey that we launched on July 15, 2024, and kept open for five weeks. (See the survey instrument in Appendix A.) The “Recordings at Risk 2024 Survey” targeted individuals who represented organizations that fit into one of three categories: grant recipients, unfunded applicants, and non-applicants. The research team worked with CLIR staff members to create a list of potential participants, drawing from extensive program application data that identified organizations that had received grants and ones whose proposals were not funded. To identify non-applicants—those who had expressed interest in Recordings at Risk or considered applying but decided not to

complete an application—the research team consulted webinar attendee lists and cross-referenced those with applicant data to filter out attendees who did not apply. The team also added to the list of prospective applicants those in their professional networks who had expressed an interest in applying for a Recordings at Risk grant but ultimately did not complete the application process.

The survey was designed to collect both qualitative and quantitative data and contained a total of 43 questions (without conditional logic applied), organized within two main sections prompting respondents for organizational background data and Recordings at Risk program assessment. It contained mostly single-answer and multi-answer multiple-choice questions, with 24 questions requiring responses and all others optional. We applied conditional logic, or question branching, to customize participants' path through the survey, based on how they characterized their connection to the program: grant recipient, non-recipient, or non-applicant. The number of specific questions asked of each group varied.

Before distributing the survey to the target audiences, in May 2024 the team tested a draft version, soliciting feedback from four CLIR staff members and two colleagues of the research team. We validated and incorporated suggestions and devised a distribution strategy. Using the tool Yet Another Mail Merge (YAMM), we sent automated email invitations containing a survey link to more than 900 Recordings at Risk program contacts on July 15, 2024. To boost awareness of the survey, CLIR promoted and provided a link to it in its Grants and Programs newsletter. We sent a second round of invitations to 106 contacts (Cycle 11 non-applicants) on July 30, 2024. The survey closed on August 19, 2024, drawing 170 submissions. We did not incentivize survey participation.

One goal in administering the survey was to gather input from a participant pool including substantial numbers of both grant recipients and non-recipients, with at least 10 percent representing the non-applicant category. Initially, we were most concerned with attracting non-applicants because that key group had the least amount of investment in the program. Ultimately, slightly more than one-fourth of participants were non-applicants; this gave the research team considerable insight into perceived barriers to applying.

Distribution of Survey Respondents by Applicant Type (n=170)		
Applicant Type	Percent	Number
Grant recipient	44%	75
Non-recipient	30%	51
Non-applicant	26%	44

Table 2: Application type distribution

The survey drew a participant group that closely reflects the demographic distribution of the Recordings at Risk audience of the overall applicant pool and grant recipients. Nearly half of respondents described their organizations as belonging to the academic sector. The independent sector comprised nearly one-third of respondents, followed by the public, government, and Indigenous sectors. Academic sector representation in the survey tracks closely with Recordings at Risk program data showing that organizations from the academic sector have made up 46.4 percent of applicants and 54.7 percent of awardees across Cycles 1-11 (CLIR 2025b).

Distribution of Survey Respondents by Organization Sector (n=169)		
Organization Sector	Percent	Number
Academic	49.7%	84
Independent	27.8%	47
Public	16.6%	28
Government	4.1%	7
Indigenous	1.8%	3

Table 3a: Organization sector distribution

Distribution of Recordings at Risk Program Applicants and Awardees by Organization Sector			
Organization Sector	Applied– All Cycles	Awarded– Cycles 1-11	Survey Participants
Academic	46.4% (317)	54.7% (104)	49.7% (84)
Independent	40.1% (274)	32.1% (61)	27.8% (47)
Public	5.3% (36)	5.3% (10)	16.6% (28)
Government	7.3% (50)	5.8% (11)	4.1% (7)
Indigenous	0.9% (6)	2.1% (4)	1.8% (3)

Table 3b: Organization sector distribution of Recordings at Risk applicants and awardees compared to that of survey respondents

Libraries, archives, and museums were the leading organization types, followed by a variety of others, including historical societies, and arts, media, and community organizations. A significant number of respondents (17) chose to write in their organization type, with “research center,” “religious organization,” “nonprofit,” and “trust” included among the responses.

Distribution of Survey Respondents by Organization Type (n=169)		
Organization Sector	Percent	Number
Library	27.8%	47
Archive	24.3%	41
Museum	19.5%	33
Historical Society	5.9%	10
Arts Organization	5.9%	10
Media Organization	3.0%	5
Community Organization	2.4%	4
Government Agency	1.2%	2
Other	10.1%	17

Table 4: Organization type distribution

Each of the US geographic regions referenced by CLIR in its data tracking is included in the survey sample, with the largest representation coming from the Northeast, followed by a fairly even distribution among the West, Southeast, and Midwest regions. Within those regions, 38 states and the District of Columbia are represented, led by California, New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania.²

Distribution of Survey Respondents by Location (n=166)			
Geographic Region	States	Percent	Number
Northeast	Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont	30.1%	50
West	Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawai'i, Idaho, Nevada, Montana, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming	22.3%	37
Southeast	Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia	20.5%	34
Midwest	Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, North Dakota, Nebraska, South Dakota, Wisconsin	18.1%	30
Southwest	Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas	7.2%	12
Territories	Five major territories include American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.	1.2%	2

Table 5a: Location distribution, survey respondents

² Geographic regions were assigned based on the [National Geographic Society's United States Regions](#).

Distribution of Recordings at Risk Program Applicants and Awardees by Location			
Geographic Region	Applied- All Cycles	Awarded- Cycles 1-11	Survey Respondents
Northeast	33.2% (227)	30.0% (57)	30.1% (50)
West	22.4% (153)	22.1% (42)	22.3% (37)
Southeast	23.0% (157)	24.2% (46)	20.5% (34)
Midwest	14.3% (98)	15.3% (29)	18.1% (30)
Southwest	6.0% (41)	7.4% (14)	7.2% (12)
Territories	1.0% (7)	1.1% (2)	1.2% (2)

Table 5b: Location distribution, Recordings at Risk applicants and awardees compared to that of survey respondents

The number of respondents reporting annual organizational or departmental budgets of \$1 million or more (66) was about equal to the number reporting budget amounts in all the lower brackets combined (65). A large number of respondents (34) were not sure of their organization's annual budget.

Distribution of Survey Respondents by Annual Budget (n=165)		
Annual Budget	Percent	Number
Less than \$20,000	12.7%	21
\$20,000-49,999	4.8%	8
\$50,000-99,999	3.0%	5
\$100,000-499,999	14.5%	24
\$500,000-999,999	4.2%	7
\$1 million or more	40.0%	66
Not sure	20.6%	34

Table 6: Budget distribution

The research team developed interview protocols after scanning survey results. Having the ability to review survey data first better prepared us to formulate interview questions that could yield greater insights into stakeholders' experiences with the program.

The other main method used to collect data for this study was a series of semi-structured interviews with Recordings at Risk program stakeholders. (See the interview protocols in Appendix B.) CLIR requested that the research team conduct up to twelve interviews with a mix of successful and unsuccessful applicants (about four and eight, respectively), as well as up to eight interviews with vendors who received contracts from successful applicants, for a total of as many as twenty interviews. In the end, the team interviewed twenty-two individuals representing six different

stakeholder groups, including five successful applicants (of whom four also had submitted at least one unsuccessful application), one unfunded applicant, three non-applicants, four vendors, three application review panelists, and six CLIR staff members.

Overview of Semi-structured Interview Groups		
Group Identifier	Group Description	Number of Interviewees
R	Grant recipients	5
NR	Unfunded applicants (“non-recipients”)	1*
NA	Prospective applicants who chose not to apply (“non-applicants”)	3
REV	Application review panelists	3
V	Digitization service providers (“vendors”)	4
C	CLIR staff members	6
Total		22
*Only one interviewee reported never receiving a Recordings at Risk grant. However, four of the five grant recipients also submitted at least one unsuccessful application and added their perspectives as “unfunded applicants.”		

Table 7: Interview groups

As with the survey, the team identified potential interviewees—non-applicants in particular—mostly from reviewing Recordings at Risk program contact lists. We identified other potential interviewees through the researchers’ professional networks and from a list of survey participants who consented to a follow-up interview. (Three interviewees also participated in the survey.) We took a strategic approach to attaining a balanced sample, identifying interviewees across the grant cycles who represented different organizational sectors, types, and locations. Acknowledging that the Recordings at Risk program has undergone several revisions to address applicant feedback and other issues, we determined that interviewing applicants with more recent program experiences would elicit more useful feedback.

In July 2024, we sent a first round of invitations to 15 people, 9 of whom agreed to participate. After launching a second round of invitations to prospects to potentially better balance the sample, by November 2024, we had conducted 21 interviews with members of each stakeholder group, adding a final interview in June 2025.

We formulated the interview questions with the following project goals:

- To “identify factors impeding applicant and recipient success and to solicit input on potential strategies for

building capacity to preserve and create access to audio and audiovisual content” (CLIR 2022a).

- To “determine the benefits and challenges of the program’s design for vendor operations and to solicit vendors’ perspectives on creating successful strategies for building capacity for audio and audiovisual preservation reformatting at the collecting organizations they serve” (CLIR 2022a).
- To understand the nature of the barriers for people who start but do not complete the application, or who consider applying but choose not to apply.

As a first step to creating interview protocols, the research team looked to the Recordings at Risk survey to ascertain which of those questions might be useful in an interview setting. We sought questions that, giving participants an opportunity to expand on and explain their responses, might yield deeper insight into the project goal topics, respondent experiences with program requirements, the application system, and program outcomes. We developed other questions based on the type of stakeholder’s experience or role in the program.

We conducted interviews using Zoom video conferencing software, recording the sessions with participant consent. Interview lengths ranged between 60 and 90 minutes. We transcribed the audio using Rev.com. Each interview was assigned a code number, anonymized, and ingested into Dedoose, a digital data analysis tool, for coding.

2.4. Data Analysis and Reporting

To code the qualitative data, the three research team members established one list of codes from which to begin labelling the content, and built in the flexibility to make changes as warranted by the data. As a first step, one team member developed a short, rough code list based on the project goals, research questions, survey topics, and interview questions. Based on that list and a preliminary review of the data, a second team member developed a more refined draft of codes and subcodes, and added definitions. Each team member selected a different set of qualitative data to test the draft code list; two chose interviews and one chose responses to an open-ended survey question. We met as a group to review our tests and further refine the code list term by term before proceeding with coding tasks.

We used the data analysis tool Dedoose to apply codes, compose memos of observations and insights, and later in the process, to categorize and organize data thematically. We conducted a Zoom teleconference session where together we coded one interview transcript to ensure that we were in alignment on how codes should

be assigned. Following that, one team member coded the qualitative survey data and a second team member coded the interview transcripts. We found the coding process to be smooth and adequately structured, with only minor adjustments needed to the codebook. Finally, the third team member reviewed all coded data to check for consistency, suggesting edits that the team evaluated together. Because we developed a highly detailed codebook, with multiple branches of subcodes, there was little need for further categorization of the coded data before proceeding to thematic analysis.

To integrate the data, we interpreted qualitative and quantitative results separately, then compared results to identify areas of convergence (or divergence). For the qualitative data, our analysis was guided by the codebook list, survey and interview topics, and research questions, which were all closely aligned. Using Dedoose, into which both qualitative survey and interview data was ingested, we sorted the data by topic areas such as “project timeframe,” “scholarly value,” and “vendor relationships,” and identified themes within each area. For example, within the “project timeframe” category, a theme of “not enough time” emerged. We attached general identifiers to indicate the source of each piece of data (grantee, vendor, etc.) to characterize and contextualize each input. We looked to further characterize data sources in cases where that might be pertinent, for example, “applicant from a well-established museum.” This categorization phase also highlighted which topic areas generated large amounts of feedback. We created a narrative, derived from querying how the data logically provided insight into this project’s research questions and objectives. For the quantitative data, we generated statistical data summaries in Survey Monkey and organized those responses into categories and themes, following the patterns set by the qualitative data analysis. Although we applied a mixed-methods approach to the research, using both quantitative and qualitative data collection, for our analysis we prioritized qualitative data collected from both the survey (which yielded a high volume of write-in responses) and interviews because the specificity of individual expressions and experiences—rather than potentially over-simplified quantitative data—could better inform development of recommended strategies for improving the program.

We chose to position recommended courses of action within a short, medium, and long-term implementation strategy, based primarily on complexity. This allows for the adoption of recommendations in a way that can build forward momentum. Within that framework, we present a logical progression of tactics based on urgency, and the foundational value each action can provide to steps that follow. For example, refining the program’s language (short-term recommendations 3.1.1 and 3.1.2) can aid in communicating distinctions between Recordings at Risk and Digitizing Hidden Collections (short-term recommendation 3.1.3).

We assigned a category for each recommended step to identify potential impact areas, directly align suggested measures with research findings, and facilitate the assigning of responsibilities. The categories used in presenting the recommendations—“Assessment Criteria,” “Application System,” “Grant Requirements,” “Program Design,” “Application Review Process,” and “Communications and Outreach”—connect to the main findings categories (except for the inclusion of “Sustaining Recordings at Risk,” which originally was not a research topic) for reference and support. Findings are presented logically, following a pathway one might take to experience or gain an understanding of the Recordings at Risk program.

2.5. Anonymity and Confidentiality

In administering the survey, we did not collect personally identifying information such as respondent names and email addresses. However, we advised participants in the survey’s introduction that any information they provided about their work or collections might be unique and therefore identifiable. Moreover, we pointed out that the Shift Collective team conducted the survey independently of CLIR and the Mellon Foundation, and that the information shared in this survey would not impact any current or future application to the Recordings at Risk program. Likewise, we advised interviewees prior to being interviewed that they would not be identified in the reporting.

2.6. Limitations

We designed the survey and interviews mainly to query grant recipients, non-recipients, and non-applicants about their experiences with Recordings at Risk. Although this report features the viewpoints of other key stakeholders, we interviewed relatively small numbers of vendors, application reviewers, and CLIR staff members.

We acknowledge that some participants’ comments about Recordings at Risk may have been based on experiences that occurred prior to programmatic changes that might have changed their impressions. However, survey data indicates that a large majority of respondents experienced the program in more recent years, with 72.9 percent applying or considering applying for a Recordings at Risk grant from 2021 through 2024, and only 21.7 percent doing so from 2017 through 2020. The remaining percentage of survey respondents were unsure about the timeframe of their organization’s interaction with the program.

We further acknowledge that the perspectives and priorities of the research team may have influenced some aspects of the design, analysis, and reporting of this evaluation.

3. Recommendations

Recommendations are divided into short-term, medium-term, and long-term efforts, positioning more immediately actionable tasks ahead of more complex, time-consuming ones, in a way that can spark forward momentum. While recommended activities can be implemented in any manner, within each timeframe we present the efforts in an order that suggests a progression, where the start or completion of one activity might facilitate or inform the implementation of steps that follow. The categories used in presenting the recommendations—“Assessment Criteria,” “Application System,” “Grant Requirements,” “Program Design,” and “Communications and Outreach”—connect to the main categories of findings (except for the inclusion here of “Sustaining Recordings at Risk,” which originally was not a research topic) for reference and context.

3.1 Short-Term

Recommendations that CLIR can implement in less than one year and within current staffing and budgetary constraints.

3.1.1. Communications and Outreach: Describe the program in clear and consistent language across CLIR’s public platforms and communication channels, and in upcoming announcements, reports, and program proposals. Perform an audit of program terminology to resolve discrepancies discovered during research conducted for this assessment (see Summary of Findings, section 4.2).

- a. Start with the application review criteria, confirming that each descriptor best reflects the program’s current standards.
- b. Align application review criteria and project evaluation rubrics with application guidelines so they are more consistently and fairly applied across different review panels, and so applicants can better anticipate what criteria will be used to assess their projects.
- c. Weigh the value of terms like *ownership and cost-effectiveness*, because they appear only sporadically across program documentation and because they are sometimes confusing to prospective applicants.
- d. Contextualize terms like *accessible*, because *accessibility* is sometimes used to describe digital platform standards

such as Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) that focus on making websites usable for people with disabilities. In open-ended comments about making content resulting from funded projects accessible, survey respondents offered differing interpretations. Some alluded to “ADA guidelines” while others referred to public availability. CLIR might consider using a modifier with the term when appropriate (for example, *publicly* accessible).

We recommend that CLIR review these online information sources in particular:

- Recordings at Risk home page and sub-pages
- Recordings at Risk Application Guidelines & Template
- Recordings at Risk Application Form
- Recordings at Risk FAQ
- Recordings at Risk Proposal Assessment Criteria and Reviewer Questions

3.1.2. Assessment Criteria: Replace the term scholarly value (or high scholarly value) as it is currently employed as a criterion for funding. Replace it with less restrictive language about Recording at Risk’s purpose and intended audiences, as CLIR has done in some program communications that refer to public impact or significance. Across four open-ended survey questions asking for comments about applicant experiences with the program, 37 of 275 responses questioned use of the term “scholarly,” with one awardee from an independent historical society calling for “recognizing cultural significance beyond scholarship.” In an interview with the research team, when asked how the focus on scholarly impact links up with CLIR’s intentional interest around shifting the scope of the grant making, one CLIR staff member said, “That’s a really good question. I’m not sure that it necessarily does. I guess it depends on how a person defines scholarly, which can be a very broad objective and personal view.”

On the home page of its website, CLIR describes the organization’s purpose: “CLIR forges strategies to enhance research, teaching, and learning environments in collaboration with libraries, cultural institutions, and communities of higher learning” (CLIR n.d.[b]). While we recognize CLIR’s longtime, mission-driven connection to scholarship and institutions of higher learning, use of the term scholarly value in the Recordings at Risk program often proves to be more restrictive than descriptive for prospective applicants, creates confusion and stress, and ensures the continued dominance of academic institutions in the applicant pool at the expense of under-

resourced and independent organizations that may conclude that their projects cannot meet that particular standard. The New Oxford American Dictionary defines scholarly as “involving or relating to serious academic study;” and “having or showing knowledge, learning, or devotion to academic pursuits” (New Oxford 2010). Emphasis on scholarly or high scholarly value as a core project assessment criterion is contrary to CLIR’s stated goals to include independent and community-based collecting organizations that are committed to cultural preservation, knowledge, and learning, yet do not aim to serve academic researchers and scholars.

CLIR can lean more on its stated mission: “CLIR promotes forward-looking collaborative solutions that transcend disciplinary, institutional, professional, and geographic boundaries in support of the public good” (CLIR n.d.[c]). Or CLIR can take inspiration from funders that have made program titles and descriptions more inclusive. For example, the Mellon Foundation’s “Scholarly Communications” program evolved to become the “Public Knowledge” program. In a 2023 interview published on Mellon’s website, program officer Patricia Hswe discusses that evolution:

For me, public knowledge means ensuring that knowledge access and production are treated as public and social goods: that is, goods in the public interest for purposes that matter to them, such as learning, justice, self-determination, and memory-keeping. This construct does not apply to one type of people, or—in the parlance of our program, because of its emphasis on libraries, archives, and presses—one type of “user.” As a result, through grantmaking in this area, Mellon embraces a variety of organizations, peoples, histories, and ways of knowing, which may include practices and customs that are inviolable, and must remain so, because of their cultural heritage context (Balas 2023).

3.1.3. Communications and Outreach: Help audiences better distinguish between the Recordings at Risk and Digitizing Hidden Collections: Amplifying Unheard Voices programs. In the survey, one participant wrote, “I know that the scope for the Digitizing Hidden Collections grant has narrowed to focus on minoritized voices (I’m not sure about the R@R program?).” Another respondent referred to the “first round” of the Recordings at Risk application process. (Digitizing Hidden Collections has two rounds: an initial application open to all eligible organizations and a final application for invited applications only. Recordings at Risk has only one application.) Such confusion is not uncommon. As a CLIR staff member pointed out:

We have a lot of applicants, or maybe prospective applicants, that don't necessarily make the distinction between the two programs that we make. And so sometimes I think people have collections that could go in either program and some of the vendor questions come up just because that is one of the biggest distinctions between the two programs. And I sometimes wonder if people are just confused because they've previously tried to go for a DHC and now they're trying to go for an RAR (Recordings at Risk grant)... Sometimes I think the programs kind of just bleed into one another in people's minds, but in a way that their rules really don't.

CLIR noted the issue in its 2019 program report to Mellon:

In presentations, grants team members consistently point out the emphasis on access as [a key] difference between Recordings at Risk and Digitizing Hidden Collections; the Hidden Collections program's design prioritizes openness, whereas Recordings at Risk is designed to accommodate a wider range of possible access strategies, in recognition of the complexity of the rights and ethical issues commonly associated with audio and audiovisual recordings. Nevertheless, CLIR's interviews with recipients indicate that confusion about this distinction persists, even among those who are quite familiar with CLIR and the Recordings at Risk program (CLIR 2019b).

One tool that might help audiences better distinguish between Digitizing Hidden Collections and Recordings at Risk is a features comparison chart, highlighting the salient distinctive attributes of each program. CLIR might devise the chart to compare the following characteristics and prompt prospective applicants to use the chart to help them determine the program that is right for them:

- Program purpose
- Intended audiences
- Application criteria
- Application process
- Acceptable media types
- Sample projects
- Grant amount range
- Grant term
- Access requirements

A model for a different type of tool—an “If-Then” flow chart designed to lay out a logical structure for decision making—is one

used by the Wenner Gren Foundation, which offers a “[Help Me Find My Grant](#)” feature to guide prospective applicants in determining which Foundation grant is best for them.

3.1.4. Application System/Grant Requirements: Ease or clarify some application requirements to streamline the process where feasible. In survey and interview responses, applicants and prospective applicants urged CLIR to reduce the complexity of the Recordings at Risk application process. Responding to a survey question that asked constituents how they would have changed their Recordings at Risk experience, one awarded applicant from an academic archives wrote:

For us, it was very positive. We worked very hard on our application and it was successful, but we also had three archivists splitting the work. The application does take a lot of work. I would encourage CLIR to consider if there are any sections or components that aren't required for assessment to ease this burden on applicants.” Another awardee, from a public sector media organization, commented, “It is a pretty extensive application process. I would say they could look for ways to merge the redundant sections of the application.

For some organizations, the application process was a main factor for deciding not to apply. One prospective applicant pointed to “lack of manpower to complete the massive application package, combined with the effort needed to gather letters of support regarding scholarly value. I do actually think that we could have/would be able to get them somehow but it honestly feels like a huge barrier.”

Some stakeholders viewed the application process as properly requiring applicants to provide the type of information about collections preparation and digital preservation planning needed to successfully accomplish digital reformatting projects. Recommendations offered in Sections 3.2.1 and 3.3.3 suggest ways to increase training and support so that less-resourced collecting organizations with urgent needs for reformatting and digitization are not deterred by the complexity or time-consuming nature of the application process.

However, CLIR might still examine ways to streamline or adjust some application requirements, following the lead of funders in similar fields that have made grant requirements less stringent and application processes less cumbersome for both applicants and reviewers.

- a. **Require fewer vendor quotes.** Consider reducing the recommended number of third-party service provider proposals from three to two. In the interviews, vendors

consistently reported that they often had to perform uncompensated labor to assist applicants with portions of the application (for example, inventorying and risk assessment) and provide applicants with service provider proposals to meet the application requirement. As one vendor said, “I’ll ask somebody straight up, ‘Look, do I actually stand a chance with this or do you just need a second or third proposal? ... I’ll help you meet this [application] requirement, [just] don’t waste my time.’”

- b. **Clarify CLIR’s position regarding collections ownership and copyright.** Survey respondents expressed confusion about whether the application requires a commitment to provide public access to reformatted materials, thereby necessitating the resolution of ownership and copyright issues. For many reasons, it is advisable and advantageous for Recordings at Risk applicants to understand the intellectual property disposition of items in their collections before proposing them for reformatting. In the application review process, subtle (and not so subtle) differences in proposal elements can determine which project edges out another for an award. Intellectual property disposition is one condition that can matter greatly in a review. It has, however, been identified as a major deterrent for some prospective applicants, including under-resourced and independent collecting organizations that chose not to apply for a Recordings at Risk grant. CLIR might re-examine and make clearer its determination about the requirement for applicants to have resolved completely both ownership and copyright before digitizing. (Can a post-digitization starter grant help an organization meet some of the intellectual property requirements? See Recommendation 3.3.3.) Regardless of CLIR’s decision about the weight criteria such as ownership and copyright should carry in a proposal, ensure that the position on intellectual property is communicated consistently in application materials, webinars, and on the program’s web pages.

3.1.5. Communications and Outreach: Improve the branding for Recordings at Risk. Enhance the program’s visual identity by engaging a graphic design professional to create a logo. The Recordings at Risk home page, accessed August 27, 2025, displayed three different treatments of the program’s branding. A logo design need not be elaborate and can include stylistic variations while maintaining consistent typographical elements such as fonts and case. Consider adding a tag line; even if it is not used, the exercise of concisely describing the essence of the program is valuable. These actions will help audiences recognize Recordings at Risk as a distinct, and possibly more memorable, initiative.

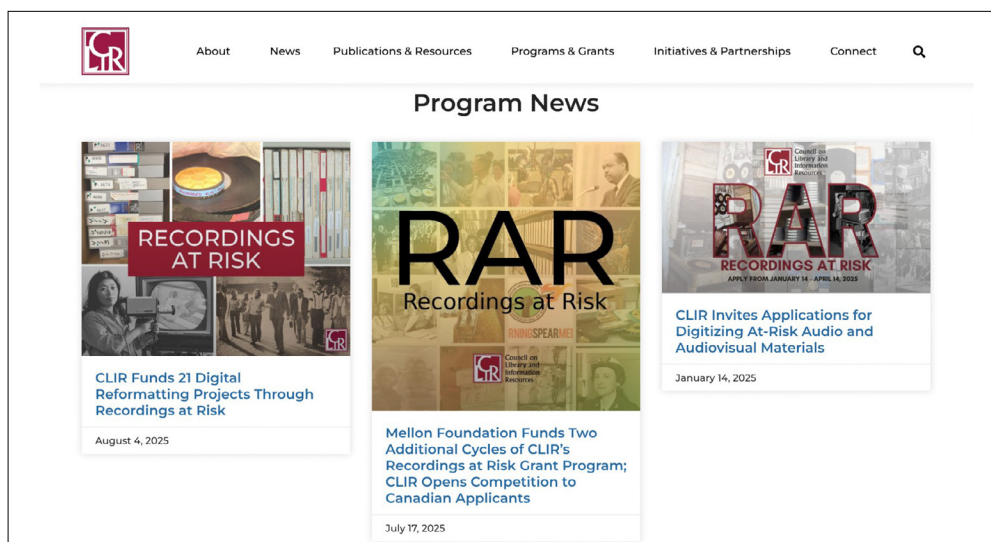


Fig. 1. Recordings at Risk branding on the program's home page, August 27, 2025

3.1.6. Application Review Process: Clarify how reviewers evaluate resubmitted project proposals.

Some survey participants expressed frustration with what they perceive as a lack of consistency in reviewing resubmitted proposals across grant cycles. For example, when review panel membership changes, organizations that are reapplying for a grant after following the recommendations of the previous panel may face new reviewers with different suggestions for how they could improve their project proposals. Review panel members interviewed for this report said that panelists have access to comments previously given to those reapplying for Recordings at Risk, and they do consider the efforts of applicants to address those comments. We recommend that CLIR articulate a resubmission policy and add it to the “Key Guides, Policies and References” section of the “Apply for an Award” page on the Recordings at Risk website.

A resubmissions policy statement can be brief and might include information such as the following, adapted from National Institutes of Health application resubmission policies (NIH 2024) and Hanover Research’s grant resubmission strategies (Ott et al, 2019):

- Applicants are asked in the Recordings at Risk application if their project has been previously submitted for consideration. Where prompted in the Recordings at Risk application, organizations reapplying for a grant should respond specifically to reviewer’s comments and point out any other changes made to strengthen the proposal.
- Reviewers look at resubmissions in the context of previous critiques, so an applicant is likely to be most effective if they can readily address all the reviewers’ concerns.

- Be aware that your application may still face some new reviewers who may disagree with previous comments or raise different issues.
- Responding to reviewer feedback may make your project proposal more effective; however, it does not guarantee success. Other project proposals competing for an award may be considered stronger by reviewers.
- See what has worked for others. We offer sample resubmitted applications here [insert links to resubmitted applications that scored well].

3.2 Medium-Term

Recommendations that may require some adjustment to program staffing and budgeting in order to be implemented in one to two years.

3.2.1. Program Design: Offer more targeted support to less experienced applicants. To address a need expressed by some prospective applicants for support geared to collecting organizations inexperienced in grant writing and digital reformatting projects, CLIR might continue providing accessible and useful resources (such as updating the Sample Applications section in the [Document Library](#)) as well as new resources, such as an applicant outreach webinar each cycle that features past grant recipients showcasing their successful projects and offering advice. We suggest targeting attendee outreach to prospective applicants at independent collecting organizations, however, keeping the session open to anyone interested in the program. Allow for audience questions, through the chat feature or verbally, if attendance volume permits. One potential model is an offering of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS 2025), which hosts a webinar series that includes both general information and topic-specific sessions to support prospective applicants of its [Digital Justice Grants competition](#). In one of ACLS' 90-minute webinars, previous cohorts discuss their funded projects and give advice about how to write a strong application. ACLS staff also hosts an informal "Office Hour" for anyone with questions about the program to "pop in and out [of] according to your availability" (ACLS 2025).

CLIR might engage grant recipients whose successful projects are relevant to the target audience, offering an honorarium for awardees' participation. For example, the perspective of recipients who had to apply more than once before submitting a successful application or who endured other special circumstances during their Recordings at Risk experience might be especially helpful to prospective applicants. The purpose of the outreach webinar would be to demonstrate to the audience, particularly those from under-resourced and independent collecting organizations, how they might navigate the application

process and potentially, their reformatting projects. This would also allow independent collecting organizations to have an opportunity to connect and share information. Additionally, CLIR would strengthen relationships with grantees whose stories about their experiences can be helpful in promoting the program.

A recent grant recipient representing an academic library offered this recommendation for improving the program:

I wonder whether there could be a way for applicants or recipients to get connected with peers or past recipients. Before applying to the program, I got a few helpful answers from a past grant recipient I knew. Maybe CLIR could support mentors or a discussion forum. As a past grant recipient, how can I offer my advice to potential applicants?

3.2.2. Communications and Outreach: Improve strategies for reaching independent and community-based collecting organizations. CLIR staff has worked to expand outreach for Recordings at Risk, increasing staff participation at a range of conferences and forums. When CLIR elected to continue conducting review meetings online rather than return to in-person meetings after the COVID-19 pandemic, the savings in time and travel costs allowed staff to promote the program more widely at conferences and events in an effort to “attract robust application numbers” (CLIR 2023).

Constituents have pointed out a need for CLIR to target outreach to new spaces and communities. As one reviewer noted in an interview: “I know [CLIR] does try to get a wide reach, but if you’re an independent org[anization], you’re not necessarily trolling grant sites. You’re not at SAA [Society of American Archivists]. You’re not at AMIA [Association of Moving Image Archivists]. So how the announcement is disseminated could also be a barrier.” For example, CLIR might prioritize communications and outreach to groups such as: the Community Archives Collaborative, a growing network of community-based archives; the Southern Memory Workers Collaborative, a network of organizers and cultural workers dedicated to documenting, preserving and stewarding stories, traditions, and liberatory practices in the US South; Asian & Pacific Islander Americans in Historic Preservation (APIAHiP), a national network advocating for the protection of cultural resources significant to Asian and Pacific Islander Americans; the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (ATALM), an organization supporting Indigenous cultural institutions; and Black Memory Workers, a network of Black-diasporic memory workers committed to practicing care and intention as they prioritize the documentation, long-term preservation, and celebration of Black life and culture.

3.2.3. Communications and Outreach: Develop promotional tools that feature successful funded projects.

A few survey respondents inquired about the possibility of communicating project impacts to CLIR after completing the program, noting that it can take some time for results to come to fruition. One possibility is to provide a templated means for awardees to upload project results on the CLIR website. CLIR might turn to its communications or technology team for help developing a portal through which awardees can share updates along with links to digitized collections. CLIR staff could review posts before publishing them. This likely will not elicit an onslaught of posts, but may generate some worthwhile promotional opportunities. In addition, compile case studies or design “one-sheets,” or produce both, about successfully completed projects, for display on the CLIR website, social media platforms, or distribution at conferences and other gatherings of prospective applicants. Doing this also would help address a desire expressed by some CLIR staff to improve CLIR’s ability to capture the positive impacts of the Recordings at Risk program.

3.3 Long-Term

Some of these recommendations require increased program staffing and budget for implementation within two or more years.

3.3.1. Sustaining Recordings at Risk: Collaborate with other field leaders to recruit new, dedicated funders.

With its longevity and reputation, CLIR is well-positioned to collaborate with other field leaders to recruit new funders supporting cultural preservation in light of the reduction of federal funding opportunities and the urgent need for more funding resources generally. In an interview with the research team, a CLIR staff member acknowledged that “CLIR must help lead a thriving ongoing national conversation about this problem of decaying and obsolescent media and how we have a very limited amount of time to address it and how this should be a national priority, and not just Mellon Foundation but other funders should be interested in it.” We encourage CLIR to catalyze recruiting funders into the cultural preservation field with the possibility of the creation of a coordinated funder network or funder collaborative as total costs for audio and audiovisual preservation continue to rise.³ Increasing the visibility of

³ It appears that the most recent comprehensive research on how total costs of audio and audiovisual preservation reformatting and related digital preservation have changed over time covers the period between 2006-2015 (Chandler 2016), the decade preceding the creation of the Recordings at Risk grant program. While that research found that digitization costs during that period were historically low, researchers hypothesized “that obsolescence, degradation, and market factors will begin to place the cost of digitization back on an upward trajectory.” Interviews conducted for this report have anecdotally confirmed increases in costs of audio and audiovisual preservation reformatting and related digital preservation over the last decade. The rapid growth of the field of artificial intelligence (AI) in recent years has also drastically increased digital preservation costs and resulted in shortages of critical hardware and equipment.

Recordings at Risk and its impacts through improvements to CLIR's outreach and communications strategies may also help make a case to funders for sustained financial support of the program and the field broadly.

3.3.2. Sustaining Recordings at Risk: Grow and diversify program funding for Recordings at Risk. We recommend that CLIR diversify its funding sources to scale Recordings at Risk to better meet the urgent need to save at-risk audio and audiovisual materials across the field of collecting organizations, and to grow program staff and organizational capacity to match that effort. Diversifying funding sources also will allow for more autonomy to improve how CLIR designs and administers their grant programs, including in ways that address staff workload issues (for example, by spacing out Digitizing Hidden Collections and Recordings at Risk grant cycles).

In our opinion, CLIR has a strong case as well for seeking increased funding for Recordings at Risk to expand the program's capacity to assist under-resourced and independent organizations whose at-risk collections make important contributions to a fuller, more complete telling of local, national, and global narratives. To better fulfill its mission, Recordings at Risk needs to more robustly support independent organizations that steward important historical and cultural records of local and national significance, filling gaps left by some large institutions wavering on their commitments to diversity and inclusion.

Additionally, the size of awarded grants needs to increase over time to meet the increasingly rising costs of digitization and to help organizations needing support for pre- and post-digitization work.⁴ As one CLIR staff member said in our interview, "The [Recordings at Risk] grant needs to be bigger... because stuff is getting more expensive and it increasingly feels like it's not enough." Additionally, one vendor commented, "In the audio department, we just raised our rates for the first time in eight years, just by \$10 an hour. We feel like we really had to. Labor costs obviously go up. The other thing that comes to mind is supplies... But I think for vendors to do this work, we rely on legacy equipment. It's harder and harder to find, and you're paying more for it, certainly. And so when we need to replace a piece of equipment, that is more expensive, [and] those are just our operating costs."

⁴ In 2025, CLIR raised the maximum Recordings at Risk grant amount to \$60,000, effective for Cycle 13.

3.3.3. Program Design: Restructure Recordings at Risk, creating tiers (or tracks) that support collections preparation and planning for long-term archival preservation, to accommodate organizations with limited staffing, infrastructure, and resources. Repeatedly, survey and interview participants pointed to what they saw as a disconnect between CLIR's stated aim to serve a broad, diverse constituency and the current design of the program. One vendor interviewed for this report recognized how CLIR, through Recordings at Risk, is struggling to fit community archives into a program that was not designed for them: "Why couldn't CLIR also have some at-risk collections [funding] focused on smaller community archives that aren't institutional? Why make all these very different types of organizations go through the same pathway? Maybe a... multi-year approach really works well with a community archive." Another vendor echoed this sentiment:

One weakness [of Recordings at Risk] is that it was designed to meet ideals and general specifications that are being defined by the biggest libraries in the world as best practices. You're trying to target smaller groups, but then you take them out of the running to actually be able to succeed in the grant because of all the requirements of the grant. The program itself is challenging for a smaller organization to actually get through and be successful in the application process, and then furthermore be successful in the follow through.

One successful applicant, responding to a survey question asking for suggestions to improve Recordings at Risk remarked:

This is a very strong program with very clear application guidelines. I appreciated the webinars and being able to view successful applications. The application does take a significant amount of work. We spent about two years getting inventories together, images of the source materials, and then drafting the application. I am not sure we would have applied before hiring an archivist for digital preservation. Ultimately, I think it was very helpful for CLIR to require all the required components of the applications, but I do question whether this is feasible for smaller organizations who do not have many staff and don't have a digital archivist to provide advice on proper storage of digital records.

Respondents shared the sentiment that "we as a society" should support independent and community-based collecting organizations more fully as we come to rely on them more and more for cultural preservation. As one recipient from a well-established art museum

responded: “It would be amazing. The community archive, wow. That’s where I would love to see this type of money going. I feel fortunate that we got the money, but we weren’t in the greatest need.”

One vendor advised that changing language alone will not better serve independent collecting organizations: “While the language about who [CLIR] wanted to reach and the kind of collections they wanted to digitize evolved over a decade or so, the infrastructure did not... evolve in the same ways.” Put another way, the structure of the program should fit the intended audiences. A recurring theme among survey and interview participants was this: CLIR cannot truly help community archives and independent cultural preservation organizations without helping them take the necessary first steps and without creating a way for them to develop a long-term digital preservation plan.

We recommend the following structural revisions to Recordings at Risk:

- a. Start with the application review criteria, confirming that each descriptor best reflects the program’s current standards.
- b. Create a collections preparation micro-grant of \$10,000 to \$25,000 for qualifying organizations to perform inventorying, cataloging, risk assessment, and digital preservation planning—essentially, necessary pre-application work. This type of starter grant can guide less experienced applicants from under-resourced organizations through the process of preparing their collections for digitization and can include allowances for compensating staff, vendors, or volunteers for performing that preparation work. Seek funders that are willing to support this particular component of Recordings at Risk aimed at helping the archival efforts of under-resourced and independent organizations.
- c. Within the existing framework of the program, continue to serve a wide range of collecting organizations responding to the urgency of reformatting at-risk media content, easing some requirements.

National significance: Emphasize that applicants can make an argument for local or community significance. Culturally significant local and community stories are often the necessary components of a larger, collective national story.

Materials: Consider supporting the reformatting of materials that may not form or belong to a cohesive collection if an applicant can make a strong argument for the significance of the materials.

- d. Establish a post-digitization grant for recipients to continue executing a long-range preservation plan. This award could

cover costs for digital preservation software and hardware, and also support cataloging and description, collections promotion, and public access accommodations.

Rather than solely increasing individual grant amounts, this tiered approach more specifically addresses the range of preservation needs and protocols, creating a pathway that can lead collecting organizations to greater success.

	Program Purpose	Audience/ Eligibility	Allowable Costs	Timeline	Grant amount
Collections Preparation Starter Grant Understanding Recordings at Risk	Pre-Application Work: inventorying, copyright/ rights assessments, risk assessment, and digital preservation plan development	Less experienced applicants from under-resourced and independent organizations	Compensating staff, vendors, or volunteers; purchasing software/ hardware to manage digitization	9-12 months	\$10,000 to \$25,000
Collections Digitization Grant (Current framework of RaR) Digitizing Recordings at Risk	Reformatting at-risk media content	A wide range of collecting organizations	Current allowable costs	12 months with the possibility of no-cost extension	\$10,000 to \$60,000
Post-Digitization Grant Preserving Recordings at Risk	Increasing access through cataloging, describing, and executing a long-range preservation plan	Less experienced applicants from under-resourced and independent organizations	Digital preservation software/ hardware; collections promotion and public access accommodations; operational planning	Report at 6 months	\$5,000 to \$15,000

Table 8: Proposed structural revisions to Recordings at Risk

3.3.4. Sustaining Recordings at Risk: Increase staffing to more fully support applicants' specialized needs. At its current staffing level, CLIR struggles to serve its broad applicant base. Initially, CLIR'S mission, coupled with the Recordings at Risk program's stated purpose of supporting the reformatting of at-risk media containing content of high scholarly value naturally attracted academic institutions, and that sector still makes up the largest percentage of applicants and grantees. CLIR's increased appeals to a broader applicant base (for example, tribal groups and community-based archives) attract independent organizations whose collections are not as digitization-ready as those of many academic institutions. In short, community archives and tribal groups tend to need more

help from outside preservation professionals and from CLIR. One CLIR staff member interviewed for this study said:

There are conceptions of staffing levels that are maybe rooted in the history of some of these programs... The history of DHC was cataloging and now it's digitization and with Recordings at Risk it really started as [an] R1 (research university) type of thing. And then we've pushed into working with these broader coalitions of communities, which I think is very worthwhile work, but brings a lot of complexity that is not being considered when staffing is looked at. If you want to work with tribes and small community archives, they need more from you and you in turn, have a higher workload than you would have when you just had to administrate [these programs].

With the program's expansion to Canada in 2025, serving the specialized needs of an even broader base will likely require more time and effort on the part of staff. In interviews with the research team, CLIR staff members almost universally mentioned burnout as an issue in administering the grant programs. In addition, frequent staff turnover across the program's lifespan has stressed the system, created continuity challenges, and negatively impacted Recordings at Risk. High turnover in recent years has sometimes meant that program officers are having to focus on overall grant management, pulling them away from essential outreach and communications work. Alleviating pressures on staff may aid staff retention and lead to greater programmatic success. We recommend that CLIR create additional outreach and program officer positions dedicated to serving the needs of independent and community-based collecting organizations.

4. Summary of Research Findings

This section of the report explores the most significant insights arising from the analysis of data collected for the retrospective assessment of Recordings at Risk. Clustered into seven topical groupings, these insights can help inform CLIR’s implementation of the recommendations made by the research team.

4.1. Program Appeal

Recordings at Risk is valued because the program serves a needed function in the cultural preservation field.

Interest in Recordings at Risk has remained steady over 12 application cycles. After a pilot cycle in 2017 that was limited in scope, the program has attracted an average of about 63 eligible applications per cycle, drawing its fewest number, 34, in Cycle 6 (2019) and its largest number, 96, in Cycle 8 (2022). In total, between 2017 and 2025, applicants submitted 753 project proposals seeking \$25.3 million in funding. Recordings at Risk has funded 211 projects, awarding nearly \$6.8 million. Applicants represent a wide array of sectors and organization types, indicating that demand exists across the cultural preservation field for grant-funded assistance to preserve 20th- and 21st-century audio and audiovisual content. Public and private academic institutions comprise the largest percentage of applicants (45.9 percent) and grant recipients (54.7 percent). However, increasingly over grant cycles, CLIR has intensified efforts to serve a more diverse constituency.

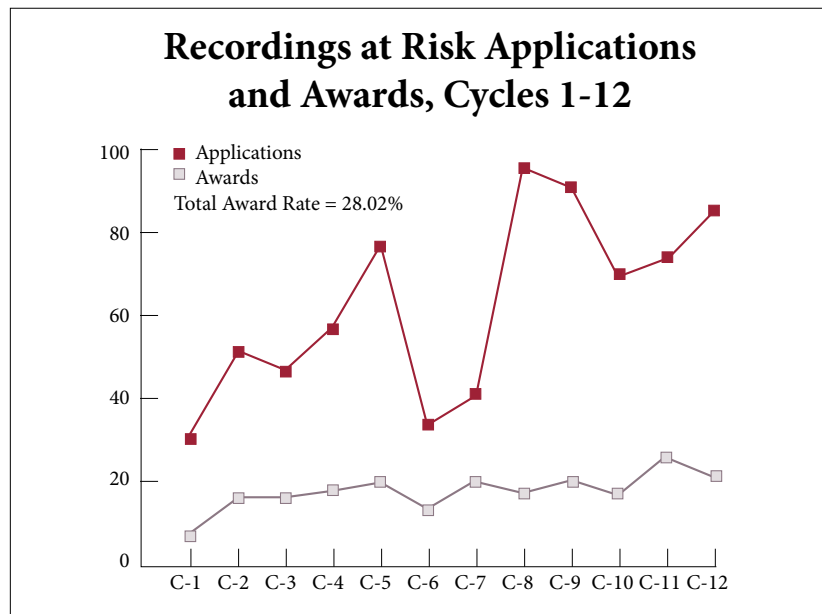


Fig. 2: Recordings at Risk applications and awards for all cycles, 2017 to 2025

As of 2025, Recordings at Risk is one of a greatly diminished number of national grants dedicated to cultural preservation. Furthermore, Recordings at Risk stands virtually alone as a content-neutral preservation grant focused on audio and audiovisual digitization serving collecting organizations in the US and Canada. For nonprofits seeking funding to rescue culturally significant content from physically degrading carriers, few other options exist. Of ten national and global preservation initiatives listed on the CLIR website in 2024 under the title “Related Grant Programs and Funders,” only three continue to award grants. Two grant programs have closed (one had been funded by the National Education Association), and the remaining five are federal or federally-affiliated programs that have exhibited a high degree of uncertainty about future program activities. In 2025, CLIR removed the list from its website.

In Recordings at Risk, CLIR has developed a powerful vehicle for knowledge sharing about strategic approaches to the care of vulnerable historical and cultural collections. As CLIR noted in its 2025 proposal to Mellon, its research, programming, and publications promoting audio and audiovisual preservation—all key contributions to the field—are informed by what is learned through Recordings at Risk about challenges cultural preservation organizations face as they manage their collections (CLIR 2025c). CLIR’s stated commitment to administering the program is strong: “Promoting the recovery of rare and unique historical content from fragile and obsolete media is and will remain an important service for CLIR to provide so long as the recovery of content from these media remains possible” (CLIR 2025c).

4.2. Assessment Criteria: Terminology Used to Define the Program

CLIR’s language about Recordings at Risk in some instances has been inconsistent and contradictory, leading to misperceptions among constituents about the program’s purpose, values, and intended audience.

A large majority of survey respondents (83.3 percent) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement: *The [Recordings at Risk] program guidelines explained the eligibility requirements in clear and accessible language.* Only 3.6 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. While survey respondents largely indicated that they found the application guidelines to be clear, some of the program’s constituents reported confusion about the program’s purpose, values, and intended audience. Discrepancies in terminology defining the program in documents and communications published by CLIR may have sparked some of the confusion.

The research team examined terminology CLIR used in its main narratives about Recordings at Risk to ascertain whether CLIR communicated an easy to understand and consistent message. Understandably, language describing an active, cyclical program changes over time to reflect refinements to policies and procedures. For example, to diversify an applicant pool typically dominated by the academic sector, CLIR revised the terminology describing Recordings at Risk to more emphatically reflect its objective “to serve an increasingly wide range of community-based, cultural heritage, and academic organizations” (CLIR 2022b). This type of intentional revision notwithstanding, we found discrepancies, inconsistency, and a lack of clarity in descriptions of the program’s primary purpose, values, and evaluation criteria that may contribute to confusion about the program’s mission.

4.2.1. “High Scholarly Value” as a Standard for Evaluating Content

In each of the four Recordings at Risk program proposals and reports submitted to the Mellon Foundation between 2016 and 2022, CLIR consistently used the descriptor “high scholarly value” prominently in narratives defining the program’s purpose and application assessment criteria. Below are some examples.

2016 Program Proposal	2017 Interim Program Report
<p>“In keeping with CLIR’s mission and with the goals of its established Digitizing Hidden Collections program, Recordings at Risk would also focus on the preservation reformatting of audio and audiovisual content of high value to scholars.” (from the CLIR President’s opening letter)</p>	<p>“Recordings at Risk is a national regranting program that supports the preservation of rare and unique audio and audiovisual content of high scholarly value.” (from the Page 1 narrative)</p>
2018 Interim Program Report	2019 Program Report
<p>“[Recordings at Risk is] a national regranting program that supports the preservation of rare and unique audio and audiovisual content of high scholarly value.” (from the Page 1 narrative)</p>	<p>“Recordings at Risk is a national regranting program that supports the preservation of rare and unique audio and audiovisual content of high scholarly value.” (from the Page 2 progress report)</p>

Table 9: Uses of scholarly value to describe Recordings at Risk’s purpose and focus in program proposals and reports, 2016-2022

In more recent grant cycles, CLIR has reduced or eliminated references to scholarship when describing Recordings at Risk’s

purpose. In its 2022 program proposal narrative, CLIR used the word “scholarly” only in reference to a provision about the eligibility of government agencies. In its Cycle 12 call for applications (emailed to program contacts and posted on its website on January 14, 2025), CLIR used the term only once, not in a general description of the program’s purpose, but as a factor in the program’s eligibility criteria, where scholarship remains a major consideration for reviewers assessing applications. Furthermore, CLIR did not use the word “scholarly” at all in its May 12, 2025, proposal narrative requesting financial support from Mellon for Recordings at Risk Cycles 13 and 14. As shown below, in proposals made in 2022 and 2025, CLIR employs language other than “high scholarly value” to describe the program’s purpose.⁵

2022 Program Proposal	2025 Program Proposal	2025 Cycle 12 Announcement ⁶
<p>“In keeping with CLIR’s mission and complementary to its Digitizing Hidden Collections: Amplifying Unheard Voices initiative, Recordings at Risk focuses on the preservation reformatting of audio and audiovisual content with the potential to benefit research, learning, journalism, creative arts, and community engagement.” (from the Page 1 grant summary/abstract)</p>	<p>“In keeping with CLIR’s mission and complementary to its Digitizing Hidden Collections: Amplifying Unheard Voices (DHC:AUV) initiative, Recordings at Risk focuses on the preservation reformatting of recorded content with the potential to benefit research, learning, journalism, creative arts, and public understanding.” (from the Page 1 grant summary)</p>	<p>“The Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) is now accepting applications for the digital reformatting of audio and audiovisual materials through its Recordings at Risk grant program. Funded by the Mellon Foundation, this program is dedicated to preserving ‘at-risk’ recorded content of significant importance to researchers and the general public.” (from the announcement’s first paragraph)</p>

Table 10: Language used to describe Recordings at Risk’s purpose and focus in program proposals and announcements, 2022 and 2025

⁵ Reports submitted to Mellon after 2019 did not contain program narratives describing Recordings at Risk’s purpose.

⁶ The 2025 cycle announcement does include the term “scholarly” in a reference to the review process: “Projects will be evaluated by an independent review panel based on their potential scholarly public significance, urgency, the viability of long-term preservation plans, and the suitability of the proposed approach to accessibility.”

In various documents produced over several cycles, including the December 31, 2017, interim program report, “public” appends scholarship to describe a key assessment criterion.

2017 Interim Program Report	2025 Cycle 12 Announcement
<p>“CLIR’s independent review panel assesses grant applications based on four factors: the potential <i>scholarly and public impact...</i>”</p>	<p>“Projects will be evaluated by an independent review panel based on their <i>potential scholarly public significance</i>, urgency, the viability of long-term preservation plans, and the suitability of the proposed approach to accessibility.”</p>
2025 Application Guidelines and Template	Recordings At Risk Home Page
<p><i>Scholarly and public impact</i> are primary criteria upon which applications to this program are assessed. CLIR instructs reviewers to prioritize projects that will either have a profound impact on a specific group of people or will have broad significance for a variety of disciplines and groups.</p>	<p>Recordings at Risk is a regranteeing program administered by CLIR to support the preservation of rare and unique audio, audiovisual, and other <i>time-based media of high scholarly value</i> through digital reformatting.</p>

Table 11: Uses of public to broaden the description of a key Recordings at Risk assessment criterion

However, the first sentence describing Recordings at Risk on the program’s current home page (accessed August 12, 2025) refers to “the preservation of rare and unique audio, audiovisual, and other time-based media of high scholarly value,” and does not include the term “public,” possibly blunting the presumed intention for use of “public” to reflect a broader focus and a greater potential for increased appeal beyond the academic sector. According to survey results, CLIR’s website and social media platforms are the most commonly used modes for its audience to find out about Recordings at Risk.

4.2.2. Communications About Application Assessment Criteria

In Recordings at Risk program proposals submitted to Mellon in 2022 and 2025, CLIR listed four criteria upon which review panelists base their assessments of applications.

2022 Program Proposal	2025 Program Proposal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The envisioned benefits of preserving the content for future generations; • The urgency of undertaking reformatting to avoid risk of loss; • The viability of the plans for reformatting and preserving the content over time; and • The viability of the approach to legal and ethical concerns within the proposed strategy for access. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The envisioned benefits of preserving the content for future generations; • The urgency of undertaking reformatting to avoid risk of loss; • The viability of the plans for reformatting and preserving the content over time; and • The appropriateness of the proposed approach to relevant legal and ethical concerns.

Table 12: Application review criteria, Recordings at Risk program proposals, 2022 and 2025

In both cases, the language is nearly identical except for the wording of the fourth criterion, which in the 2025 proposal may have been adjusted to de-emphasize collections access. CLIR strongly encourages, however, does not require public access to digitized content resulting from completed grant projects.

The primary assessment criteria listed above from 2022 and 2025 contrast markedly with differing concurrent lists available on CLIR’s website. For example, “scholarly or public impact” and “cost-effectiveness” although absent as assessment factors in the 2022 and 2025 proposals, are included in a July 17, 2025, press release posted on CLIR’s website announcing Recordings at Risk Cycles 13 and 14. And the provision of “access,” which had appeared in the 2022 but not the 2025 program proposal, is included among the assessment criteria listed on the Recordings at Risk home page (as of August 6, 2025).

Press Release, July 17, 2025	Recordings At Risk Home Page
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ...the potential scholarly or public impact of proposed projects, • the urgency of undertaking those projects, • the viability of applicants’ plans for long-term preservation, and • the overall cost-effectiveness of the proposals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact — The potential scholarly and public impact of the project. • Urgency — The urgency of undertaking reformatting to avoid risk of loss. • Potential for preservation — The viability of the work plan and deliverables for preserving the content over time. • Approach to access — The approach to legal and ethical concerns affecting access.

Table 13: Discrepancies in application review criteria, CLIR website, 2025

4.2.3. Communications About Ownership, Copyright, and Access

Intellectual property is a complex area of concern for Recordings at Risk constituents. On its main platform, the CLIR website, and through other means, CLIR has advised prospective applicants about its policies regarding providing public access to content digitized with Recordings at Risk grant funds. The website’s FAQ section is explicit about an organization’s potentially diminished funding prospects if it is unable or unwilling to provide access to materials. This seems to contradict CLIR’s guidance elsewhere that an inability to provide public access will not disadvantage an applicant’s proposal.

2018 Program Proposal	2025 Application Guidelines and Template, Section 5	RAR Program FAQ
<p>Because the purpose of the program is for the preservation of materials that are most likely under copyright, program guidelines will not require all applicants to provide access to digitized content openly. For many grant recipients, access will be limited to on-site use or require authentication on a secure server.</p>	<p>Imposing reasonable limits on access to digitized recordings because of well-justified legal or ethical considerations will not disadvantage a proposal in this competition.</p>	<p>...there are a lot of variables at play when it comes down to the review panel’s decision-making process, so any applicant who plans to place limitations on access should take care to explain the rationale for imposing these limits in the Rights, Ethics, and Re-Use Statement within the application. In cases where reviewers are comparing two otherwise evenly matched projects, a project perceived to have a stronger potential impact due to a broader access policy may receive preference.</p>

Table 14: Conflicting information about the requirement to provide access to digitized materials

4.3. The Application System

The application system, which encompasses materials and processes that facilitate or enable the submission of Recordings at Risk grant project proposals, received high marks for its straightforwardness and for CLIR’s responsiveness in offering support. However, many applicants and prospective applicants have found the process to be unnecessarily rigorous and time-consuming.

4.3.1. Clarity of Application Guidelines

As mentioned previously, overwhelmingly, survey respondents agreed with the statement: *The program guidelines explained the eligibility requirements in clear and accessible language.* A total of 83.3 percent agreed or strongly agreed while only 3.6 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. Thirteen percent neither agreed nor

disagreed. Unsurprisingly, awardees were more likely to give the application guidelines high marks. Of grant recipients, 50 percent strongly agreed that the guidelines explained the requirements clearly, while only 15.7 percent of non-recipients and 16.3 percent of non-applicants strongly agreed.

Responding to a survey question about their decisions not to apply, non-applicants referred to the application package as “overwhelming,” “massive,” or requiring “too much work.” One non-recipient whose organization operates a digital archive thought that CLIR’s national profile perhaps contributed to what they viewed as a complex application, saying “I think of them as a national grantor, and national grantors, I feel tend to just have more intense application processes.” An interviewee from a small museum whose project proposal was successful said:

If I didn’t have my colleague whose job is to seek out grants and manage grant applications, I don’t know if I would’ve pursued it for that much money. I think that the application could be a little bit less rigorous. I think that it doesn’t have to be that intense... It’s a lot. And I’ve done a lot of grants... They almost make it not worth the effort... We were like, “Wow, this is a really tedious application for a \$50,000 grant. We’ve done a lot less to get \$200,000.”

Conversely, other constituents viewed applying for Recordings at Risk as a smooth exercise. One grant recipient representing a community center serving the LGBTQIA+ community found the application process to be “pretty straightforward and understandable.” Another recipient interviewee said:

I thought their application was really straightforward. We applied for a lot of grants for a variety of programs. And I do find most of them are reading between the lines... I felt like CLIR was not that way, no pun intended, CLIR was clear. “Here’s what we fund. What do you have?” I thought that was really great.

A reviewer said of the process, “The CLIR grant to me feels a little more straightforward and easier to write for a first-time grant writer.” And a vendor offered:

As far as the application process [goes], grant applications are... time-consuming. But again, I think Recordings at Risk compared to some of those larger grants is a bit more approachable as far as [requiring] folks [to have] a decent handle on their collection. I think that’s just a responsible way to approach a preservation project... We hear a lot from applicants, if they weren’t awarded, that this was their

first time really giving their AV collection this attention and the application process forced them to do that and create an inventory... And I think that that's an important, responsible thing for someone to do before they embark on a project, have a reasonable handle on what they are proposing to digitize.

4.3.2. Application Support

Of the survey participants who reached out to CLIR about application or eligibility concerns (about 50 percent of all respondents), most were satisfied with the support they received. The large majority of those who reached out said they were very satisfied with the timeliness of CLIR's response (73.5 percent). As well, most were very satisfied with the clarity of the response (64.7 percent), and the resourcefulness of the response (64.5 percent). Others said they were somewhat satisfied or neutral about CLIR's support. Only about 3 percent of survey participants who reached out to CLIR reported feeling somewhat or very dissatisfied with the timeliness, clarity, or resourcefulness of the response.

When asked about the helpfulness of CLIR's applicant resources, responses were similarly positive. We found that large numbers of survey respondents made use of applicant resources, including the applicant guidelines (91.6 percent), the FAQ (84.2 percent), the webinars (70 percent), and email correspondence with CLIR staff (54.5 percent). Among respondents who made use of application resources, most found the application guidelines (72.4 percent), the email correspondence with CLIR staff (65.5 percent), and the FAQs posted on the website (64.7 percent) to be very helpful. A slight majority (56 percent) found the applicant webinars to be very helpful. Others chose somewhat helpful to describe the application guidelines (22.4 percent), email correspondence (26.7 percent), the FAQ (24.5 percent), and webinars (30.2 percent). Very few respondents said the resources were unhelpful or neither helpful nor unhelpful.

Although a majority of respondents who made use of CLIR'S applicant resources viewed them as very helpful, of the four resources we inquired about, the applicant webinars scored the lowest in terms of perceived effectiveness. Replying to questions about their overall experience with Recordings at Risk, respondents offered these comments about the webinars:

I found the webinar to not always be in layman's terms. I'm a fundraising professional and attended with our collections manager who is more versed in the technical aspects of our recording archives, but I think it would help to know not everyone attending has a technical collections or media background.

We wish that the webinars were a bit more substantial than just going over the form that needs to be filled out. It would have been helpful if they went over past winners of the grant and cited examples of what those individuals did to be successful. Or included past winners in the webinars to share their experiences in applying and what they did to be successful.

4.4. Grant Requirements

Grant requirements, such as making a case for a project's scholarly value and national significance, make it difficult for independent collecting organizations to successfully navigate the application process.

4.4.1. Program Fundamentals: Understanding "Risk," Gauging Eligibility

Determining one's eligibility for Recordings at Risk begins with comprehending the program's most basic requirements. In survey responses, CLIR's constituents demonstrated a solid understanding of the intended primary meaning of one of the Recordings at Risk program's defining terms—"risk"—as used in the program's title. CLIR generally has described "risk" as the potential loss of valuable recorded content due to the obsolescence or degradation of audio and audiovisual media. Most survey respondents interpreting the word "risk" closely matched the way CLIR mainly uses the term, illustrated in these examples:

I understand risk to mean the media format of the recording is at risk of deterioration which would result in a loss of that recording.

My understanding of the term "risk" is any loss that could occur due to natural degradation of magnetic materials, unavailability of older playback equipment, or environmental disasters. Basically, any reason the recorded material may not be accessible in the future.

At-risk materials, as in obsolete materials that need to be digitized before the playback equipment and expertise no longer exists.

Among the 163 (of 170) survey participants who offered their interpretations of the word "risk" as used in the program's title, these are their most cited risk factors and the number of times each factor was mentioned:

Risk Factor	# Times	Risk Factor	#Times
Media degradation/ deterioration	123	Endangered culture	8
Loss of content (without intervention)	80	Organization lacking resources	8
Media obsolescence	54	Rarity of content	6
Loss of availability of playback/digitization equipment	20	Lack of description	3
Environmental threats	9	Loss of expertise	2

Table 15: Survey participants' interpretation of "risk" as used in the program's title

Some of CLIR'S recent communications employ a more expansive meaning of the word "risk." In the 2025 "Recordings at Risk Cycle 12 Application Guidelines & Template," a primary definition—"risk of loss of information recorded on the audio or audiovisual carrier"—is accompanied by "other risk factors" that may be taken into consideration by reviewers: environmental factors, age or health of the content's origination, the likelihood of securing immediate financial support for the project within the organization's existing annual budget, and access to native speakers of endangered languages (CLIR 2025d).

Although Recordings at Risk constituents widely understood media degradation as a primary factor of risk, as CLIR stated in the Cycle 12 applicant webinar presentation, because the Recordings at Risk review panel "considers many factors when evaluating risk... we encourage you to think beyond the physical condition of your materials" (CLIR 2025e). Describing how reviewers might assess a proposed project's urgency, CLIR suggests to prospective applicants that "if your materials are in good condition, you aren't necessarily going to be looked at unfavorably... Sometimes good condition is a reason why the recordings should be preserved now." Some constituents may not have grasped this differing, perhaps counterintuitive view of risk. One survey respondent, describing their organization's hesitation to apply for a Recordings at Risk grant said, "High scholarly value gave us the most pause in applying as well as the risk for loss because our media was relatively new (VHS tapes)."

Other survey respondents demonstrated an understanding that the assessment of proposed projects may look beyond the physical condition of at-risk media:

I understand "risk" in this use to be primarily about the risk of carrier failure for audio and AV recordings. In our application, we also addressed the risk of losing access due to technical obsolescence, the politicization of certain topics, and the rarity of content.

It seemed to me like the point of RAR when I applied in 2021 was a focus on material risk, such as degradation and obsolescence and those risks to losing the content of the recordings, so I focused our application on the most at-risk formats throughout our collections: open-reel video tapes and video tapes with severe mold. It was rather frustrating to see projects with far less at-risk media... such as audiocassettes and VHS tapes, being awarded. That was when I realized the grant was more about content than material preservation. A compelling application is more about telling a full story than choosing the materials that need the most help.

For audio and audiovisual preservation grant programs, it may be best to balance the importance of compelling cultural narratives with the urgent need to digitize materials on the most rapidly deteriorating formats, given that “active degradation and the rapidly advancing obsolescence of audio and video recordings require immediate, and ongoing, preservation action” (Casey 2022).

In a January 14, 2025 press release announcing the open application period for Recordings at Risk Cycle 12, CLIR published this summary of eligibility criteria:

Applicants must be U.S.-based nonprofit academic, research, or cultural heritage organizations.⁷ The applicant and collections must be located in the United States. Projects will be evaluated by an independent review panel based on their potential scholarly public significance, urgency, the viability of long-term preservation plans, and the suitability of the proposed approach to accessibility (CLIR 2025a).

In terms of gauging their organizations’ eligibility for a Recordings at Risk grant, a slight majority of survey respondents (51.2 percent) were completely confident that their organization and proposed project aligned with the scope and goals of the program after reviewing the prospective applicant resources provided by CLIR. Only 13.7 percent were slightly or not at all confident, and the remaining 35.1 percent felt somewhat confident. When assessing confidence based on application status, respondents who ultimately received awards reported feeling more confident about their eligibility after reviewing applicant resources. Of awardees, 70.1 percent said they were completely confident, while 52.9 percent of non-recipients felt completely confident beforehand. Only 16.3 percent of non-applicants expressed complete confidence.

⁷ CLIR has since opened Recordings at Risk to Canadian applicants.

4.4.2. Perceived Barriers to Success

The research team investigated eligibility confidence levels as a springboard to examining reasons why applicants might feel less confident about their prospects. The survey and interviews provided several opportunities for participants to register perceived barriers to success. Below we explore factors that respondents say gave them pause after reviewing eligibility requirements and applicant resources. Barriers cited most often by Recordings at Risk constituents included scholarly and public impact criteria; conditions about national significance, collections ownership, copyright, and access; perceived bias toward academia and large institutions; and the external vendor requirement.

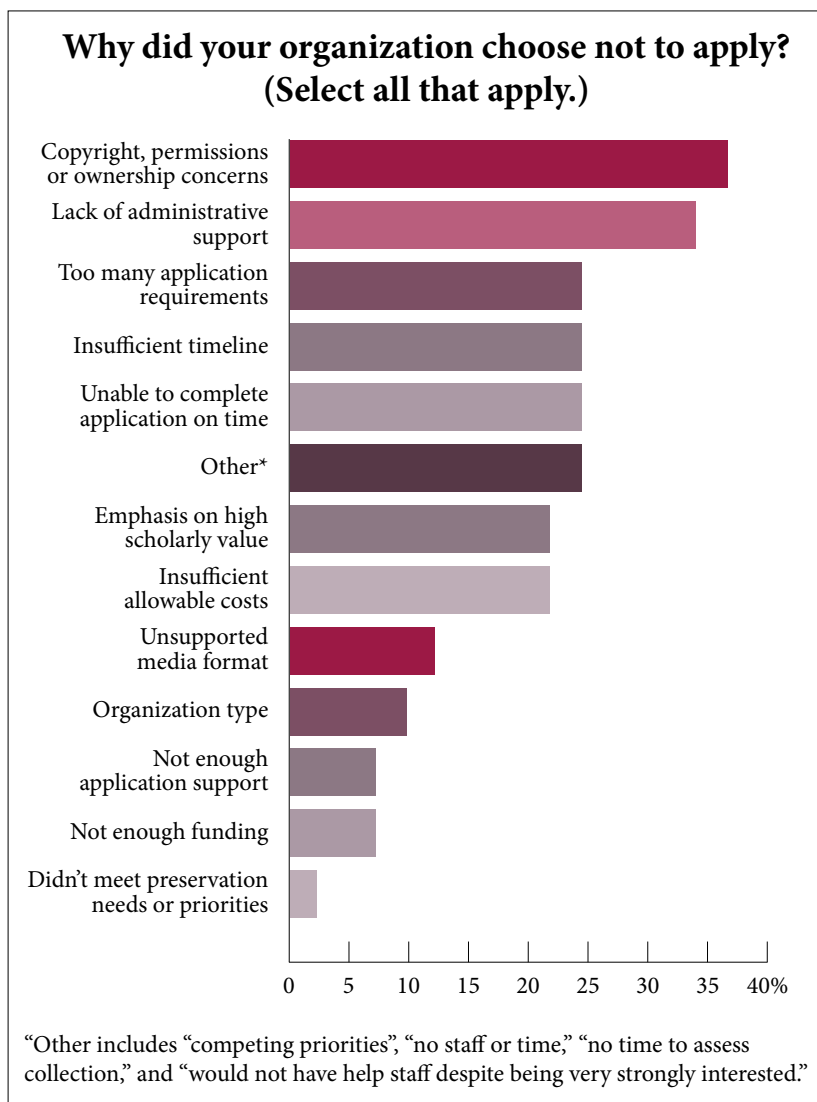


Fig. 3: Intellectual property concerns topped the list of reasons non-applicants chose not to apply for a Recordings at Risk grant. Non-applicant survey question Q22, n=41

• Scholarly and Public Impact

Although a large majority of survey participants (88.7 percent) indicated that they understood the high scholarly value criterion and how their collections might meet that standard, some said it posed a formidable barrier to success. Across four survey questions asking about difficulties with application requirements, 37 out of 275 responses (13.4 percent) mentioned the scholarly value measure as a pain point. Several respondents expressed a concern that their collections might qualify as culturally, but not scholarly significant or contain subject matter that might otherwise be considered outside the scholarly realm. One survey participant hesitated to apply because the organization's collection was based on psychic phenomena and holistic health, "work that is not greatly represented in the scholarly literature." Some indicated that a core problem was their inability to view or listen to recorded content, coupled with an absence of accompanying metadata, to determine its potential for scholarship. Others pointed to high scholarly value as being a "relative" or "highly subjective" benchmark that seemed like a "moving target" with reviewers.

When asked for an explanation of the "high scholarly value" factor, one Recordings at Risk application reviewer offered this assessment:

I don't feel like scholarly value actually has meaning as a term, nor do I think cultural value really does, but [they have] different signifiers, I guess, because at the end of the day, everything has scholarly value if you make that argument. So, that never really came up in the discussions. There was never anything [of which we thought], "I don't know the value of this."

A CLIR staff member explained that "scholarly value" becomes especially relevant as a potential deciding factor when proposed projects are similarly worthy and must be evaluated side by side:

Scholarly... can be a very broad objective and personal view. I think I have an understanding of how the panel evaluates that... Within a given pool there is a way in which similar projects will get evaluated next to one another... And I think what ends up being termed as scholarly is stuff that's important historically, more broadly representative, or perhaps really thorough for some reason, like, "this is the largest recording of whale sounds in the globe."

An archivist whose organization was awarded a Recordings at Risk grant proposed that what is important to a community using an archive should matter more than what is important to scholars.

I do love being connected to the energy of young people and youth. To really see the connectivity with the archive, a place [that] sometimes students might not know, but once they have come and been connected, then they get inspired and fired up and they get excited about it. Memory work, it's not just like you have to be a trained [expert] or whatever. We can all be engaged, and [the young people] see those connections sometimes more clearly than scholars or others that come.

• National Significance

Related to high scholarly value as a perceived barrier to applicant success was the concern that a collection's value might be limited to a local area or even a single institution, given that Recordings at Risk application guidelines state the importance of broad or national appeal as an assessment criterion for proposed projects. The following excerpt is from the "Recordings at Risk Cycle 12 Application Guidelines & Template," available on the CLIR website (revised on January 7, 2025):

CLIR instructs reviewers to prioritize projects that will either have a profound impact on a specific group of people or will have broad significance for a variety of disciplines and groups. Proposals nominating content likely to have national or international import are generally more competitive than projects with narrow local or regional relevance, except in cases where content is culturally sensitive and narrow access is appropriate. (CLIR 2025d)

Among the questions reviewers are asked to consider when evaluating project proposals is one addressing the topic of broad significance: *Does the applicant identify how the nominated collection will spark the interest of scholars from diverse disciplines; contribute to meaningful public discourse; and/or make a national or international impact upon scholarship, policy, culture, or the lives of communities?* (CLIR 2019a)

In the Cycle 12 applicant webinar Q&A document available for downloading on its website, CLIR responds to the question: Why is local significance not enough?

In addition to your own statement in this section, the application also requires that you provide at least one and up to three external letters of support from experts familiar with the collection to help you make your case. The letters cannot come from individuals directly connected to the project, and it is strongly recommended that you get support letters from individuals outside your home institution and, when possible, outside the local region to

help demonstrate wider interest. That being said, if there is a local scholar who is really the best person to support your project, then it likely makes sense to ask them for a letter. (CLIR 2025f)

Although the survey did not include any specific questions about the national significance criterion, two respondents who did not receive Recordings at Risk grants commented about the issue in questions asking about their applicant experience:

We were told that our collection was too niche for our state and that it did not meet the needs of helping a larger scholarly community. What's tough is that our mission is to preserve our state's history, so we were kind of doomed from ever even getting the grant...

CLIR's emphasis on projects needing to have national or international impact to qualify for funding is unfair to small local institutions whose history they are preserving is just as important. CLIR should be more clear that small organizations need not bother to apply.

One vendor, offering an opinion about the funding landscape for small and mid-size collecting organizations, agreed that the national significance criterion might hinder success for worthy projects:

I understand that... Recordings at Risk is funding collections of national significance. Because we work with a lot of small and mid-size institutions, [we see] there's kind of a donut hole in the funding available out there for the historical society that has this amazing oral history collection. And it's incredibly valuable locally, maybe not nationally significant... It's difficult for them to make an argument, but it's maybe a \$10,000 project, or it's an \$8,000 project, let's say. It doesn't quite meet the minimum for Recordings at Risk... There aren't a lot of [other] grant options out there for them. And yet a big enough amount of money [is needed] that it won't get done without external funding. And so that's something I encounter a lot where I'm [thinking], "It's not quite going to be competitive for Recordings at Risk because there's not an argument for national significance." But my heart breaks when I see the list of grants that are awarded and maybe [see] a large university [and think], "Really, you couldn't pay for that yourself?" Obviously, they had to make an argument for the need for funding, but I would love to see funding options out there that are really geared towards these other audio collections... There's a lot of it being missed because there's this donut hole.

• Collections Ownership, Copyright, and Access

For participants in this study, stipulations about ownership of at-risk media and providing public access to digitized content constituted perhaps the most confusing aspects of applying for a Recordings at Risk grant. When asked in the survey to name “the requirement(s) that posed the greatest barrier(s) to your application,” about one-third of respondents (50 of 146) mentioned provisions about collections ownership, copyright, or access as barriers. Prospective applicants referenced the complexity of navigating intellectual property rights and access issues as reasons they refrained from submitting a proposal.

Evident in comments that indicate differing interpretations of ownership, copyright, and access requirements, the Recordings at Risk audience lacks clarity regarding the program’s intellectual property provisions. Some respondents surmised that their organization needed to agree to provide public access to all the digitized content as a prerequisite to applying for a grant:

The greatest barrier and part of the application I was concerned about was the open access part. I was afraid that we would be rejected since we aren’t able to put everything online and public facing because of copyright issues within the collection...

We did not apply because the program requires full copyright. While we own the collection and [have] all the rights of a producer, we do not own all the copyrights embedded in the recordings. Therefore, we could not make them accessible widely.

A few applicants indicated they thought the requirements compelled them to turn over to CLIR the copyright for their digitized content. In response to a survey question asking about the “greatest barrier to your application,” one prospective applicant wrote: “release of copyright to CLIR.” Another explained their organization’s hesitation to apply this way:

This is complicated. The guidelines did not seem to specify specific copyright and continued ownership questions. I have hundreds of important oral history interviews [done] over 40 years... I was not sure if the requirement was for me to hand over everything... I was hoping someone would discuss this with me.

Other prospective applicants expressed concern about a seeming disconnect between what was relayed in the guidelines and stricter assessment criteria actually applied to applications by reviewers:

Rights ownership was a persistent barrier. We believed, from application guidelines and workshops, that if we had a legal reason for not being able to make the recordings public, that such reasoning would be considered, but it was not. The effect was that the guidelines, iterated in various ways, seemed misleading since our application was denied several times—clearly and solely on the rights issue—until we got the rights sorted out.

Locating and obtaining permission from copyright holders was extremely time-consuming and costly for an institution with limited resources but it was part of the feedback we received the first time we applied. They wanted most of the permissions to be in place already.

Some applicants said they targeted Recordings at Risk precisely because of its emphasis on preserving rather than owning copyright or providing public access to digitized content:

I knew the films would contain PHI and PII (Protected Health Information and Personally Identifiable Information). There are also a lot of ethical concerns regarding consent of those shown in the films. But I figured I could give enough rationale regarding the restrictions that will be in place and it's why I went for this grant which was more about saving the materials than making them widely accessible. Just because these films won't/shouldn't be distributed widely, doesn't mean the information contained in them isn't vital to protect for various reasons.

RAR did NOT pose any barriers for us. In fact, it was the one grant that enabled the project as it did not require material to be posted online. Our material is under copyright, and we would not be able to get permission to post the material online.

As pointed out previously, for the Recordings at Risk program, CLIR strongly encourages but does not require public access to digitized collections. Currently, the program asks that applicants agree to produce and dedicate to the public domain metadata for all content digitized using grant funds during the grant term, with exceptions granted for culturally sensitive metadata. Publicly available metadata makes researchers aware of the existence of important content that they then can seek permission to access or reuse. Further acknowledging some fluidity regarding intellectual property stipulations, CLIR states in webinar documentation dated February 12, 2025: "Recordings at Risk is grounded in the need for preservation through digitization and the recognition that materials will have varying levels of appropriate access given legal and ethical concerns" (CLIR 2025e).

Yet, as one reviewer noted, those organizations with the ability to provide full public access to digitized content may be at an advantage over applicants who for technical, legal, or ethical reasons cannot:

Sometimes that's the nature of the material. Maybe [by] nature [it] has a lot of PII (Personally Identifiable Information), or it's very sensitive, but it's so limited that [we say], "Well, is it worth it to spend the money if only two out of 100 recordings are going to be available for people to see?"

The intellectual property issue is further complicated by a lack of specific reference to ownership in the latest Recordings at Risk application guidelines (Cycle 12, 2025). Rather, emphasis is placed on the location of the collections; they must be in the United States or an associated entity, or, per a recent program expansion, Canada. However, an eligibility requirement listed in a downloadable Cycle 12 webinar document states: "The materials nominated for digitization must be owned and held by the eligible organization and cannot come from an individual's personal collection or one held by a for-profit organization" (CLIR 2025e).

• Perceived Bias Toward Academia and Large Institutions

The research team did not directly address bias as a survey topic; however, the subject arose in replies to questions about respondents' overall program experience. Several prospective applicants pointed to a bias they believed favors academic and other large institutions in the Recordings at Risk application process as a barrier to submitting a proposal. One respondent said, "This grant seems to be for archives with more operational support than our more community-centered archive." Another said, "It seemed too difficult for smaller nonprofits, and geared for those with bigger collections, more support with grant writing, and more experience with the grant process." Yet another said, "The application is complex and seemingly preferential to larger, more traditionally established institutions."

Some applicants whose grant proposals were unsuccessful said they perceived a reviewer bias that favors large academic institutions over small, local historical organizations:

Many, many recipients of this grant are from academic or well-supported repositories. I believe many of the most at-risk recordings are sitting on shelves in historical societies and small museums/archives.

I have applied for this grant, similar subgrants by CLIR and never received a grant. I feel that their grants go to much larger notable academic libraries, and smaller libraries with a staff of one to five that serve underrepresented

communities are excluded. I found more support for digitization with other entities like the HBCU Digital Library Trust and the Smithsonian because I felt our institution mattered to them.

How can this grant truly be made accessible for those with zero budget, zero funding but with definitely a collection that is at risk of vanishing and could enrich the lives of the public. I felt that one particular reviewer's comment showed a sense of entitlement and epistemic injustice. Once again, every institution applying is different. Not everyone has the same access to staff, support, grant writers, training, or knowledge. A rejection should give a sense of empowerment to try again.

Some research participants opined that "large institution" bias exists, but not necessarily because these institutions are inherently or automatically favored over other applicants, but because they are better positioned for success due to resource and infrastructure advantages. One grant recipient commented on what they saw as a bias toward academia that favored their own organization:

Part of the reason we were able to get the grant is that we were a pretty big-name organization with a very famous artist attached to it, a track record of archival success with processing and archival projects and support institutionally, staff and resources in place. A budget that I already had in my department that allowed me to do all this pre-work to get it done... And I noticed with a lot of the other projects that were selected, they're universities and people that also have similar kinds of resources and infrastructure in place. So, I wonder, is this only going to be geared towards organizations that can do it that way or is there a different way they want to frame it?

One reviewer offered an example of how some independent organizations may be disadvantaged:

[A] big barrier for independent [archives] is the [need for] long-term physical storage. They're not going to have a climate-controlled vault. They may not have the money to rent space in a climate-controlled area... They don't want to partner with [archival institutions] for storage. But in some cases, that might be the only way they can get a CLIR application through, because they haven't addressed the ongoing physical storage of the items, and the ongoing digital storage, because they just don't have the resources.

Moreover, one vendor commented that any bias toward large institutions might be structural, in that the program was designed to

“meet standards set by the world’s biggest libraries as best practices. We’re sending community archives through this pathway that’s really not built for them, and they’re, of course, frustrated.”

Despite challenges that may be present for independent organizations, a CLIR staff member said the organization works to attract diverse applicants:

We always are happy if we have more independent applicants. We basically look every year at that breakdown, and we would like to see every org type go up. But the R1s (research universities) basically [compete better]... Honestly, for Recordings at Risk, I sometimes get surprised that they find it to be big enough to compete for at times. But they seem like they certainly do.

• External Vendor Requirement

Some survey respondents expressed frustration with the requirement to engage an external vendor for collections digitization, citing an organizational ability to do such work in-house:

The third-party vendor requirement gave us some concern. Our collection is on many formats, and we have done work over the years both in-house and with vendors. As we also produce a national PBS show, we have a media production facility and professional staff and we have found our resources and staffing to be able to do most work in-house which is of equal quality to sending it to outside vendors, and cheaper as well. Our ability to control the quality has been better in-house too.

However, CLIR has iterated across its communications about Recordings at Risk that the program is designed primarily for organizations without the resources and expertise to digitize collections in-house.

While the external vendor requirement gave some organizations with in-house digitization resources pause, many other applicants cited the recommendation to obtain cost estimates from multiple vendors as a burden for their under-resourced organizations and potentially for vendors as well:

We submitted the application, and we thought all the requirements were met. Getting actual estimates from third-party vendors presents obstacles to short-staffed and poorly funded institutions.

I felt bad reaching out to multiple vendors and getting their hopes up that we would work with them when we already had a great working relationship with a vendor. It was

somewhat helpful to learn about other vendors again, which I had previously done before developing the relationship with my vendor, but it was also a waste of everyone's time, just checking boxes on the application so to speak.

Please eliminate the recommendation for multiple vendor quotes! Trust us to make the right choice!

4.5. Program Design

Intentionally limited in scope to respond to the urgent reformatting needs of collecting organizations, Recordings at Risk is not structurally designed for under-resourced and independent organizations that need help with essential pre- and post-digitization steps.

4.5.1. Grant Period

CLIR has required that applicants plan to complete all project work within twelve months. A majority of survey respondents (62.7 percent) thought the 12-month project term was “just the right amount of time.” However, about one-third of respondents (35.8 percent) said the project timeframe was “not enough time.” Only 1.5 percent said 12 months was “more than enough time.” Awardees who found the timeframe too short pointed out activities they were unable to complete in the 12-month period, including metadata and transcript creation, and promotion and outreach pertaining to the digitized collections. To meet the deadline, some grant recipients narrowed the scope of their projects or shortened community outreach periods.

Even those who completed their planned project activities on time advocated for a longer grant period. One awardee urged, “We completed the project in time, but the vendor took slightly longer to complete the reformatting than expected. Fifteen to eighteen months may be a more reasonable timeline.” Prospective applicants also suggested a longer timeline, including one non-applicant who explained, “The third party vendor and 12-month timeline stopped us from applying. We don't have enough paid staff to manage this quick of a project turnaround.”

Many grant recipients said they requested and received no-cost extensions to deal with project delays. Several awardees shared a similar reason for delays: the digitization process taking longer than expected due to vendor backlogs or unforeseen difficulties with reformatting, which stalled other project activities. Other awardees said their own staffing issues or lack of organizational infrastructure and preparedness slowed their projects' progress.

4.5.2. Adequacy of Grant Funds

Survey responses were more or less evenly distributed in terms of the perceived sufficiency level of grant funding for Recordings at Risk awardees. When asked to consider the funds available to grant recipients (\$10,000-\$50,000⁸) and the program goals, 26.9 percent (n=18) of grant recipients thought the program was sufficiently funded and 28.4 percent (n=19) thought it was somewhat sufficiently funded. One grant recipient from an academic library who found the program sufficiently funded commented that “relatively modest investments can have really valuable outcomes.” A significant portion of respondents (19.4 percent) were neutral, while 12 percent found the program to be underfunded and 13.4 percent said it was somewhat underfunded. Another awardee representing an academic library found the program to be underfunded, encouraging, “more money for small organizations to support work related to digitization like cataloging and promotion.”

Respondents who reported feeling unprepared to cover costs not allowed by the program met gaps in funding in a variety of ways, including by relying on volunteers and student workers to complete tasks and re-allocating funds from other projects. Some organizations chose to delay applying for Recordings at Risk until securing a second grant to meet immediate costs. Other organizations reported that they needed support from large institutions. One respondent from a small, independent archive took that approach: “Luckily we were able to transfer the materials to the university archive and they were better suited to handle long-term maintenance and preservation.” Another respondent was less precise: “We planned to muddle through as we always do.”

4.5.3. Application Review Process

Reviewers and other stakeholders generally gave high marks to the Recordings at Risk review process, citing its timeline, reviewer resource materials, and feedback given to applicants among its positive attributes, although several applicants who had reapplied unsuccessfully for Recordings at Risk grants voiced frustration about shifting reviewer concerns in critiques they received across grant cycles. Below is a synopsis of the main components of the review process and discussion of some of the challenges to consider addressing.

• Review Panelist Recruitment

CLIR invites volunteers interested in reviewing opportunities to complete the “CLIR Expression of Interest Form” on its website,

⁸ CLIR raised the upper limit for grant awards to \$60,000 for Recordings at Risk Cycles 13 (2026) and 14 (2027).

and keeps information about prospective reviewers on file, making contact as needed. CLIR also solicits prospective review panelists for Recordings at Risk through networks connected with their other programs or contacts met at conferences.

CLIR has identified and worked to ameliorate several challenges presented by the review process, most notably the difficulty of recruiting and retaining panelists who can offer a diversity of perspectives, and reviewer management, which consumes a large amount of staff time. CLIR wrote in its 2023 program proposal to Mellon:

Recently, prospective reviewers have declined invitations to serve more frequently. The sizable commitment and relatively modest compensation (which has remained at \$600 per cycle since 2017) are major barriers. CLIR continually seeks out more early-career panelists who can bring perspectives underrepresented in the library and cultural heritage professions. These same prospects are in high demand for other service opportunities, and many cope with heavy workloads or personal obligations that leave them with little capacity outside their regular schedules... Relatedly, reviewer management has consumed increasing shares of staff time. For the same reasons that many are reluctant to serve, panelists have often missed deadlines or offered overly brief, unhelpfully generic feedback. Staff routinely endeavor to supplement and clarify the weakest comments (CLIR 2023).

To increase the appeal of panel membership, CLIR has incrementally revamped some aspects of panel service over Recordings at Risk's 12 cycles, growing the number of reviewers to better handle the application load (from 10 reviewers in Cycle 1 to 18 in Cycle 12) and increasing honoraria to \$1,000 per reviewer per cycle.

• Review Panelist Selection

CLIR keeps information about reviewer prospects in a spreadsheet which they use as a starting point for each new cycle. Rules for Recordings at Risk stipulate that a panel includes no more than one member from a single organization. CLIR seeks specialists to serve on panels – in particular, subject experts such as music historians, anthropologists, archivists, and librarians and technical experts such as audiovisual preservationists and legal professionals. CLIR keeps subject expertise in mind when assembling review panels, as one staff member noted:

We've built our panels over time, and we have everybody categorized as either a subject expert, a technical expert,

or both. When we roll someone off the panel, we look for someone with similar expertise to replace them... When we do the assignments of the applications, we assign keywords to the applications and then try to match [prospective panelists'] expertise by keyword.

CLIR staff members said they have been diversifying Recordings at Risk panels by including more reviewers from outside academia and recruiting reviewers from varied relevant disciplines and levels of career experience. Although CLIR says it seeks to closely reflect its applicant pool in its panel composition, recent review panels have been overly represented by those affiliated with academic institutions. The non-academic sector, which comprised about 54 percent of the applicant pool across Cycles 10, 11 and 12, and according to CLIR's designations, includes independent, government, public, and Indigenous organizations, is not adequately represented. More improvement is needed to better reflect Recordings at Risk's applicant pool.

	Academic sector representation in applicant pool	Academic sector representation on review panel
Cycle 10	28.6% (26 of 91)	57.9% (11 of 19)
Cycle 11	38.6% (27 of 70)	50% (10 of 20)
Cycle 12	45.9% (34 of 74)	61.1% (11 of 18)

Table 16: Academic sector affiliation in the Recordings at Risk applicant pool and among review panelists

CLIR retains panel members, often over several application cycles, which has both benefits and disadvantages, as reviewers point out in comments below. In assembling panels, a distinct challenge is to achieve an optimal balance of long-time and newer panelists to maximize potential benefits. In both Cycles 10 and 11, four first-time panelists joined panels totaling nineteen and twenty reviewers, respectively.

Having more of a balance between new and old is good. I think for CLIR, the advantage of having older reviewers coming back is there's less onboarding. They don't have to explain the process... But the disadvantages... sometimes you remember past applications, and then you're almost putting up past applications against [the current] cycle, which can be a detriment. You're not looking with fresh eyes.

I don't usually get invited back two years in a row for other grant reviewing panels. Whereas with CLIR, because I've been there for a little while, I bring a lot of knowledge with me to the process, and I get clearer every time [about] what's actually relevant to consider.

A disadvantage is if you [repeat] many times, sometimes you can get stuck in what you think is a good application versus what isn't. [An advantage is] the new person. They're bringing a new perspective.

• Review Process Orientation and Preparation

To make the best use of panelists' time, CLIR has worked to create efficiencies in the review process, preparing reviewers for the award deliberations by providing access to a number of informational guides and other resources, including:

- The *Recordings at Risk Reviewer Guide* (using the SM Apply platform)
- The *Recordings at Risk Reviewer Proposal Assessment Criteria and Reviewer Questions* document
- The *Reviewer Instructions* document
- The *Review Panel Guidebook*
- Shareable documents for the virtual meeting and comments editing
- A Score spreadsheet

Two reviewers commented on the materials provided:

The portal is super easy to use. It has the evaluation questions in [it], so I don't have to reference another document... The application is also fully loaded. So, I don't have to download a separate application. And it's a split screen, so I can look at things and type my comments at the same time. I think the shorter review process also helps with the cohesiveness, because by June, you haven't forgotten.

I feel like CLIR has [made] very thoughtful use of its technology tools, so that a distributed group of geographically separated people can actually effectively, genuinely assess applications.

• Grantee Selection

A selection process that lasts approximately 12 weeks begins with a technical review to affirm that submitted proposals meet basic program requirements. Following this, three reviewers are assigned

to each application. Through the program's history, reviewers have handled up to 15 applications per cycle. Reviewers read and assess proposals assigned to them, responding to questions based on the following (as of Cycle 11) "Primary Application Assessment Criteria":

- Potential scholarly and public impact
- Urgency, to avoid risk of loss
- Viability of the work plan for preservation
- Approach to legal and ethical concerns affecting access

CLIR provides reviewers with an assessment rubric based on the four primary selection criteria to score submissions, a technique informed by insights from previous review cycles and from Recordings at Risk's sister program Digitizing Hidden Collections: Amplifying Unheard Voices. Reviewers assess the overall project, write comments, and rate proposals using the following scale:

- Highly recommended: 3.0
- Well recommended: 2.0 – 2.99
- Not well recommended: 1.0 – 1.99

In review panel meetings usually held over two days, panelists discuss the merits of each proposal. During this time, reviewers have an opportunity to change their scores as they consider assessments of other panelists; one reviewer described this as "becoming better informed." Reviewers reach agreement on the grantees, with awards going to projects achieving the highest scores that best fit the assessment criteria. The number of awards depends upon requested grant amounts and available funds. Within about two weeks, reviewer comments are revised and prepared for applicants, and notifications are sent. Reviewers provided insights about what has resonated with them when assessing Recording at Risk proposals:

The number one thing I see that makes an application "not recommended," because either they have no plan, or their plan is just hard drives... I do find it unethical to digitize things if there isn't a long-term plan for their preservation, but a lot of independent archives don't have the [needed] infrastructure, or even the money to buy it. So, hitting that benchmark of preservation, fixity, and integrity is really hard for them.

[Applicants say,] "We just want to digitize our whole organization's holdings," but you haven't really constructed a narrative of why it's important and why it's at risk. Then the other big barrier for independents is long-term physical storage.

It's very frustrating as a reviewer sometimes because you have to reject projects that you really want to fund because they're not demonstrating they will be able to be successful... But the reason—one emblematic of something that happens a lot—is that a community organization does not understand what it takes to do the work they're proposing to do, and/or they are not ready. What they need is actually a prep grant, so they can talk to an AV archivist or somebody who can help them understand the terrain.

I think it's a great program. I do think they made a lot of efforts to expand access, and even when we were making final adjustments, [CLIR program officers] would prompt us: "Okay, so we funded this many East Coast institutions, academic institutions this year. Maybe we should take another look at these other ones."

• Communicating Reviewer Feedback to Applicants

Applicants whose projects are not awarded grants in a given cycle receive review panel comments intended to share insights about how they might strengthen their project proposals to better meet Recordings at Risk program criteria in a possible future submission. Application feedback can help organizations better develop their preservation plans regardless of whether they reapply. The survey asked unsuccessful applicants whether the feedback they received from reviewers was helpful in continuing to develop their audio or audiovisual digitization project. Of the 48 non-recipients who replied to the question, slightly more than half (52.1 percent, n=25) agreed or strongly agreed that the feedback was helpful. A large number of respondents (31.2 percent, n=15) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 16.7 percent (n=8) disagreed or strongly disagreed that the comments were helpful. Some unawarded applicants, responding to a question about the main reason they thought their application was not successful, pointed to what they perceived as inconsistent or conflicting reviewer feedback given to those reapplying for a grant:

It feels as if satisfying the reviewers is a moving target. I improved the responses in the areas which were criticized on my first application, only to find that new areas were pointed out on my second application.

We applied twice; following the first attempt, we made adjustments based on reviewer comments and resubmitted. The second attempt failed with no clear evidence the project did not meet the criteria...

In our resubmitted application we corrected the deficiencies pointed out by the reviewers. The corrections were

acknowledged by 2 of 3 reviewers, but the third reviewer felt the project was still unworthy of an award.

A reviewer who has served on Recordings at Risk panels for several cycles offered this perspective:

I like that we will consider applications for a second or a third time... Often we prioritize funding those projects, because people have come back to us. We really do look back at what we said last time, and we evaluate whether you've addressed that, so you're not in this cycle of just spitting in the wind. I don't know if people know this when they apply but at least from our perspective, we're not just [giving] feedback to applicants that's going to be ignored next time around. There's consistency.

Some survey respondents questioned CLIR's reliance on external reviewers to determine awardees, arguing that CLIR staff members, with their institutional knowledge of the program and its goals, are better positioned to make final decisions aided by recommendations from an external panel of advisors. In interviews, CLIR staff members maintained that the program is better served with grant award decisions made by panelists representing a diversity of backgrounds, disciplines, professional experience, organization types, and geographic locations. One reviewer echoed that point: "I felt much more involved in the process. [Another funder's review process] felt very opaque in terms of what their criteria was, whereas CLIR is really very clear about what the scores mean, how you evaluate. To me, it feels very community oriented to have actual people, professionals in the fields, award these grants instead of a [program] officer."

4.5.4. Working with External Vendors

CLIR stipulates that Recordings at Risk grant recipients must employ service providers external to their organizations to reformat project materials. This has frustrated some prospective applicants with in-house digitizing capabilities, however, as noted previously, CLIR has stressed that Recordings at Risk was built specifically to serve organizations without such capabilities. CLIR has promoted Recordings at Risk as a vehicle for cultural preservation organizations to build relationships with the most qualified external professionals who can best handle specialized cases when content is most "at risk." Grantees observed the value of the outside vendor requirement:

It helped us establish a relationship with a good vendor. Now when we have a specific need for AV digitization (such as a customer request for an item not reformatted, or

an internal need like an exhibit that needs to use an un-reformatted item) we just go directly to that vendor and we don't need to repeat the research.

This program helped solidify the value of using a vendor and the ability to receive funding for this type of work. We have a strong oral history program, and knowing there was this option for funding is quite helpful!

The survey asked grantees to describe their relationship with their digitization vendor in each of six categories: communication, collection management, cost effectiveness, costs as advertised, support, and timeliness of deliverables. By a large margin, grant recipients reported some degree of satisfaction with service provider collaborations. On average, 63 percent of respondents said they were “very satisfied” with their vendor experience across the categories, and another 24 percent, on average, were “satisfied” with their collaborations across the categories. On average, less than 1 percent of respondents said they were “very dissatisfied.”

Survey respondents nevertheless pointed to difficulties they experienced while working with vendors. Of 24 awardees who found the 12-month grant term insufficient time to complete their project activities, 12 said they needed extensions because of service provider delays. One awardee expressed frustration: “We can't control the vendor's timeline—if they have delays we can't change that.” Another explained, “We completed the project in time, but the vendor took slightly longer to complete the reformatting than expected.” One other said, “Our vendor was unexpectedly very backed up and it took MUCH longer to get our files than planned.”

4.6. Communications And Outreach

Stakeholders encourage CLIR to intensify outreach to independent, community-centered archives to boost awareness of Recordings at Risk among organizations that most need funding.

The most common way survey respondents found out about the Recordings at Risk program was through CLIR'S website and social media accounts (50.3 percent, n=84), followed by tips from colleagues (37.1 percent, n=62) and listservs (29.3 percent, n=49). To a much lesser degree, other means included previous applicants (9.9 percent, n=16) and conferences (7.8 percent, n=13). Of the 22 respondents who specified other sources, several found Recordings at Risk through online searches for grants, while some credited vendors, funders, and public libraries.

One reviewer urged CLIR to further extend its outreach into under-represented communities:

I have talked to a lot of organizations that weren't aware of what CLIR is, what they do. There are so many different regional archivist associations... There are networks that [CLIR] could tap into, especially if they're trying to reach certain states that [they] haven't hit. I saw [the Recordings at Risk announcement] maybe once on our [Association of Moving Image Archivists] LISTSERV, but to me it could be an opportunity to actually talk to [the LISTSERV manager], and say, "Can you put this on the front page of your website?"—not just through the AMIA LISTSERV. Same with ATALM (The Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums).

In an interview, a member of CLIR acknowledged one of the challenges associated with outreach to under-represented communities:

When you begin to reach out into communities with which you're not so familiar, one of the challenges is trust. Who are we, coming in to help? Why are we dictating, "This is the procedure. These are the protocols"? So trust is a key element, and that takes time. A snap turnaround into an all-inclusive program is difficult in the sense of human nature, and we understand that. So I think that is a challenge.

4.7. Program Impacts

Through Recordings at Risk, CLIR helps cultural preservation organizations understand not only the need and urgency for reformatting at-risk collections, but also the benefits of developing long-term digitization and preservation strategies.

In survey comments and in interviews, Recordings at Risk stakeholders voiced appreciation for the program and pointed out its positive impacts on their organizations and on the cultural preservation field. The most commonly acknowledged impacts of Recordings at Risk on its constituents were raised awareness of the urgency of reformatting content on at-risk media, increased knowledge about collections management and preservation, greater familiarity with collections content, strengthened cross-departmental relationships within their organizations, and improved and solidified internal strategies and processes for digital reformatting.

Through Recordings at Risk, this grant recipient was able to convince their organization of the need to prioritize collections digitization:

[Recordings at Risk] helped bring a larger awareness to our overall archive situation. We have so many tapes that are going bad and have limited time left to sit in storage before a decent copy can be made of them... The grant allowed us to do something big, which received a good amount of outside attention, which helped bring attention to the situation internally, and hence the continued digitization of our archives has been given more ongoing priority.

For awardees relatively new to collections digitization projects, the Recordings at Risk program provided education and practical experience:

Our institution is too small to do much in-house digitization so we always outsource to a vendor. But writing the grant required us to educate ourselves on digital preservation, and then design and implement a workflow, which has been greatly helpful to us and our collections.

The grant gave our young digitization program a huge boost. In carrying out the project, we established local best practices and integrated our preservation and access platforms. The workflows that we followed for the grant were adapted for a similar donor-funded project a year later... I think the application itself helped us think through the project needs and workflows before we began.

The RAR program allowed us to learn how to start a digitization program and workflow. Additionally, we learned how to manage files, troubleshoot, explore digital options, explore and find people to help us, make connections and build relationships with resources and partners, learn from trial and error, establish a workflow, and create a foundation for our priorities when it comes to digitization projects.

Unawarded applicants also found value in their Recordings at Risk experience. One non-recipient commented on the need to know what is contained in one's own archive: "I learned what it takes to be awarded a grant this large, [to perform] the extra steps necessary to justify the funding. It has taught me how unfamiliar I am with this part of our collection and I can't sell it to anyone if I don't know it."

For some respondents, navigating the grant program fostered the building of partnerships among colleagues at their organizations:

While my organization had processes in place for preserving digital files, I think it helped our technical staff and me to work together on this project and develop shared understandings of our work.

It had a huge impact on our digitization program and workflows. We finally were able to adequately address challenges related to data storage. It also established internal communication/collaboration between units at our institution that were previously siloed.

Internally, it helped different units and curators work together better.

Many organizations developed and implemented strategies for improving and solidifying digitization processes, building institutional confidence in internal workflows and practices:

This was the first project of this type we had undertaken, and [we] have used the metadata spreadsheets and upload processes for many collections since.

This was a major undertaking for our organization. It spurred ideas for [how future] digitization and workflows [need] to be handled... We have discovered that multimedia content is more heavily used than traditional print digitized collections.

The grant project offered an opportunity to revisit our digitization standards, vendor protocols, and appraisal criteria for legacy media.

The project provided us with a model to work from to commit to other reformatting/digitization projects.

So far, this grant has helped to improve our collections digitization program and workflows. We feel much more confident about approaching similar projects in the future.

5. Concluding Observations

The following are the research team's key concluding observations, based on the project's review questions.

1. How well do the design and execution of the Recordings at Risk program align with the current needs and priorities of the collecting organizations it serves?

Regarding its design and execution, Recordings at Risk received high marks from applicants for the sufficiency of its application support, total funding amount, supported media formats, and application feedback. One awardee explained how the grant met organizational needs: "We had a lot of infrastructure already in place. The grant really only needed to cover the digitization vendor, so we were able to make a lot happen with not a huge amount of funding." However, of the most cited difficulties for those choosing not to apply, prospective applicants indicated that insufficient internal organizational capacity and resources made it difficult to complete the Recordings at Risk application; copyright and permissions requirements seemed unachievable; an emphasis on scholarly value seemed daunting; and allowable costs insufficiently matched their needs. While acknowledging that Recordings at Risk is intentionally limited in scope to respond to the urgent reformatting needs of collecting organizations, the research indicated that the program is not structurally designed for under-resourced and independent organizations that need help with essential pre- and post-digitization steps.

2. What have been the impacts of this program on collecting organizations, on digitization vendors, and on public engagement with audio and audiovisual materials?

The most commonly acknowledged impacts of Recordings at Risk on collecting organizations were raised awareness of the urgency of reformatting content on at-risk media, increased knowledge about collections management and preservation, greater familiarity with collections content, strengthened cross-departmental relationships within their organizations, and improved and solidified internal strategies and processes for digital reformatting. Some grant recipients indicated in their project reports to CLIR that they were able to fundraise around the success of their digitization projects. For awardees relatively new to collections digitization projects, the Recordings at Risk program provided valuable education and practical experience.

For digitization vendors, a grant program like Recordings at Risk raises awareness of the urgency to reformat materials on at-risk media. Through the program, vendors have built relationships with collecting organizations that have helped keep their businesses viable. As one awardee noted, “this program helped solidify the value of using a vendor.” One vendor acknowledged, “This work just is expensive for most of our clients [and] does not get done without grant funding.”

Public engagement with digitized materials has been difficult to gauge because of the time it takes to measure such activity and post-program contact with awardees is limited. However, in exit interviews and project reports submitted to CLIR, grant recipients have cited numerous examples of digitized materials being used in external projects, including online publications and television programs. Grant recipients have also presented digitized materials directly to their audiences through public programs and conferences.

3. How have the impacts of the program varied across different types and sizes of collecting organizations, and what aspects of the program’s design and external factors contribute to the differences in their experiences?

Throughout the report, we have noted how under-resourced collecting organizations tend to be disadvantaged in the application process. One respondent wrote: “This grant seems to be for archives with more operational support than our more community-centered archive.” This type of sentiment led some respondents to perceive that a “large institution” bias exists, not necessarily because these institutions are inherently or automatically favored over other applicants, but because they are better positioned for success due to resource and infrastructure advantages that indicate a greater likelihood of sustained stewardship of digitized collections. They are also more likely to have internal hands-on support to complete the application. A prospective applicant whose organization chose not to apply offered: “For a community organization, it is difficult to find the resources and expertise at the level at which the grant requires for the initial application.”

4. How have the total costs of audio and audiovisual preservation reformatting and related digital preservation changed over the program’s history, and how has the burden of those costs affected different types and sizes of organizations located in different regions of the United States?

As stated earlier in footnote number three, while we attempted to locate updated research on how total costs of audio and audiovisual preservation reformatting and related digital preservation have changed over the Recordings at Risk program’s history, the most

recent comprehensive research covers 2006-2015, the decade preceding the creation of Recordings at Risk (Chandler 2016). While researchers at that time found that digitization costs during that period were historically low, they hypothesized “that obsolescence, degradation, and market factors will begin to place the cost of digitization back on an upward trajectory.” The stakeholders interviewed for this report confirmed that, with the exception of decreasing costs of digital storage, overall digitization costs have increased over the last decade, including labor, inflation, and equipment costs.

5. What promising strategies are used by collecting organizations for building capacity to preserve and create access to audio and audiovisual content?

Respondents’ strategies for building capacity mainly revolved around the idea of forming partnerships and joining established collaboratives to support preservation efforts:

We have a good long-standing relationship with a major university archive. Their infrastructure supports long-term preservation and maintenance for our group. Previous to the pandemic, our community organization had an annual budget of up to \$160,000 per year so at that time we were able to purchase the equipment and software needed.

Luckily, we were able to transfer the materials to the university archive (they were held in a small independent archive at the time of the CLIR grant) and they were better suited to handle long-term maintenance and preservation.

We recognize a gap in our long-term preservation plans, so we’ve been working to remedy that. At this point, we feel more confident, since we’ve joined a consortium that lowers the costs of LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe) back-ups for at least the highest-value objects in our digitized collections.

We’re working on setting up a better DAMs (Digital Asset Management system) for the long-term preservation and looking at other funding to assist with vendor costs.

6. Looking Ahead

In light of data collected for this report, which indicate an urgent need for increased support for under-resourced and independent collecting organizations, and the actions of the current presidential administration to change the focus of knowledge and culture institutions to diminish or suppress the histories of marginalized groups, we make the following appeal:

We strongly encourage CLIR, and other grant makers, to more vigorously support under-resourced, independent, and community-based collecting organizations, whose important role in cultural preservation will only become more vital in the coming years. It will be critical for collecting organizations representing marginalized and oppressed communities to continue their important work contributing to the preservation and telling of a fuller, truer American story, given the significant pressures placed upon large, government-dependent institutions to limit public access to certain historical and cultural information. Community collections are not discrete or of limited interest. If well supported, they can be in dialogue with collections around the world to contribute to a larger human story.

We recommend that grant makers better address gaps in preservation funding that compel collecting organizations to partner with large academic institutions as their most attainable long-term maintenance and preservation option. In the survey, one applicant expressed relief to have a good, long-standing relationship with a major university archive because “their infrastructure supports long-term preservation and maintenance for our group.” Others described feeling forced into such relationships because they cannot afford equipment and software. One Recordings at Risk review panelist described the conundrum for under-resourced and independent collecting organizations: “They don’t want to partner with [large institutions]... But in some cases, that might be the only way they can get a CLIR application through, because they haven’t addressed the ongoing physical storage of the items, and the ongoing digital storage, because they just don’t have the resources.” Essentially, the long-term storage problem for under-resourced and independent collecting organizations often

forces them into partnerships with larger universities at a time when universities in the US are less dependable archival partners. As one survey respondent wrote, “that can’t be the only sustainability plan that small institutions have is to fold into a larger institution.” Small, under-resourced, and independent organizations need funding to create infrastructure for long-term preservation, and to create alternatives to partnering with large institutions.

The nature of partnerships between large institutions and independent collecting organizations, particularly community-based archives is changing. As report co-author Gabriel Solís noted in a keynote plenary at the Society of American Archivists annual meeting in Anaheim, California, in August 2025:

While it’s true that universities and institutions can continue to provide cover and provide resources to community archives, it really has now become a two-way dynamic. The arrangement where community archives were so reliant on universities and institutions, that dynamic was shifting even before the election. What’s happened since then is [that] increasingly universities and large institutions are coming to small community archives like ours for guidance and for advice. That’s a fascinating trend, and it points to the reason why we have to seriously bolster the capacity of independent community archives (Solís 2025).

We also urge funders to build grant programs that accommodate the audiences they seek. If your grant program aims to serve a diverse constituency across multiple organizational sectors and types, where possible, be flexible, adapt, and minimize “best practices” that can exclude deserving applicants from under-resourced and independent organizations. Ensure that application systems and grant requirements are navigable and achievable for small and independent organizations without the resources and support of large institutions. Archivist Kelly Haydon, in a 2016 speech given at the Association of Moving Image Archivists conference in Pittsburgh, made a case for adaptability:

Not all best practices are, shall we say, unjust. They are, at best, a framework or a set of guidelines that is people-based, open to modification, and adaptable... At worst, best practices are rigid standards that are technically and financially insurmountable for many

institutional archives to implement, not to mention those that are volunteer-run and [perhaps] living in the basement of an alt-bookstore. They unnecessarily complicate and confuse the relationship between the community and a well-meaning professional archivist. In other words, they cause more problems than they solve.

Haydon went on to explain:

I hope that I'm not sending a message that (best practices) are not well-intentioned, or developed by smart, hard-working people who have dedicated their careers to researching the best methods for preserving technically complex media. But they are often developed in a vacuum of authority and resources, of privilege if you will. "Best practices" is a misnomer. These are ideal practices, unjust when their implementation stalls a community archive's ability to maintain momentum. (Haydon 2016)

As well, we advise CLIR to develop a comprehensive strategic plan to cohere an effective approach to administering its digital preservation grant programs. We recommend developing a strategic plan, not only to consider the long-term financial sustainability of Recordings at Risk, but for clearer articulation of the programmatic vision and mission as well, given the nation's current volatile political and social environment and the potential for continued threats to cultural preservation. In an interview for this study, CLIR leadership acknowledged that CLIR needs to "step up" as an organization dedicated to the preservation of knowledge, as some universities and other institutions shrink from their roles in that capacity. In our opinion, CLIR would benefit greatly from a holistic, collaborative strategic planning process that includes leadership, staff, and field experts. Considerations might include:

- How might Recordings at Risk and Digitizing Hidden Collections: Amplifying Unheard Voices better complement and reinforce one another? Using existing comprehensive assessments of each program, CLIR might conduct a comparative analysis of Recordings at Risk and Digitizing Hidden Collections to ensure the two programs are effectively aligned.
- How might CLIR best design and deploy operations and staff to meet programmatic demands and constituent needs of Recordings at Risk and Digitizing Hidden Collections?
- At what point must Recordings at Risk accommodate post-custodial stewardship and at-risk "born-digital" materials?

- How might CLIR react if pressured to refocus Recordings at Risk's goal to serve underrepresented communities? Would CLIR consider modifying program language or otherwise adjust its communications?

Our findings show that Recordings at Risk stakeholders view the program as a vital grant initiative that raises awareness of the urgent need to reformat audio and audiovisual content stored on deteriorating or obsolete time-based media and recognize CLIR as a trusted and respected program administrator. CLIR, for its part, has articulated well in its proposals and publications compelling justifications for continued support of programs that are in a race against time to digitize historically and culturally significant content that may otherwise be lost. One vendor we interviewed stressed the importance of immediate action:

There's an urgency to digitize now, and as much as possible now. As the equipment continues to get used, then it's in need of repair. There are fewer people to do that work. So it's definitely part of the reason that programs like Recordings at Risk are so important. This work just is expensive for most of our clients, [and] does not get done without grant funding, and yet the longer they wait, the more expensive it will become. As the tapes deteriorate, it'll become more costly to digitize them. They will need more treatment; they will need more attention. Doing the digitization before the onset of damage is also the cheapest way to do it. Certainly these grant programs are so important. I think there's so much work that wouldn't get done without grant funding.

With current staffing at CLIR perhaps at or near capacity, and funding sources scarcer in the current sociopolitical environment, we recognize that it will be a formidable challenge for CLIR (or any grant maker) to execute some of the recommended steps—particularly structural changes—to improve its grant program. We have observed that, over the course of the program's history, CLIR has been responsive to the needs of its constituents, making changes such as consolidating parts of the application, increasing the maximum grant award, and directly engaging under-served communities at conferences and other gatherings. We encourage CLIR to extend that work, using recommendations that are primarily based on stakeholder perspectives about their experiences with the program. We received an enormous amount of constructive feedback, reflected in the findings and recommendations sections of this report. We believe that with its experience and knowledge of the field, CLIR can evolve Recordings at Risk so that it better meets the needs of constituents who need it most.

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Appendix A. Survey Instrument

Shift Collective is evaluating Recordings at Risk, a grant program conducted by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) with the support of the Mellon Foundation. We are conducting this retrospective evaluation to better understand the program's history of award-making and current implementation, and to identify gaps in services and unmet needs affecting the capacity of collecting organizations to undertake successful audio and audiovisual reformatting and preservation projects.

We are interested in learning more about the experiences of those who have considered applying for, applied for, or received a Recordings at Risk (RaR) grant. We are particularly interested in your audiovisual preservation needs, application process, decision-making, and perceptions of Recordings at Risk. We are requesting your feedback because you expressed interest, applied to, or participated in the Recordings at Risk grant program.

This survey should take about **15-20 minutes** to complete. Thank you for sharing your feedback!

Why Should I Participate?

This study will contribute to research about the impacts of the program on funded and unfunded projects; how those impacts differ across the breadth of organizations the program has served; and promising strategies currently used by collecting organizations for building capacity to preserve and create access to audio and audiovisual content.

There are no substantial risks related to participating in this research study. You can choose to skip questions that you prefer not to answer. You may choose to withdraw your participation at any time.

Confidentiality

We are not collecting identifying information in this survey but be mindful that any information you provide about your work or collections may be unique and therefore identifiable. The results of the survey, however, will not be connected directly to you or your organization in any way.

This survey is being conducted by a research team from Shift Collective independently of CLIR and the Mellon Foundation. The information shared in this survey will not impact any current or future application to the Recordings at Risk program.

Contact Information

If at any time you have questions regarding the research or your participation, please contact the research team at research@shiftcollective.us.

If at any time you have comments regarding the conduct of this research or questions about your rights as a research participant, you should contact Christa Williford, Senior Director of Research and Assessment at CLIR. Her email address is cwilliford@clir.org.

GENERAL INFORMATION

The questions in this section asked all respondents general questions about their organization and their experiences with the Recordings at Risk program.

Q1. Organization Sector

Academic
Public
Independent
Government
Indigenous

Q2. Which best describes your organization type?

Archive
Historical Society
Gallery
Government Agency
Museum
Library
Community Organization
Media Organization
Arts Organization
Other (please specify) _____

Q3. What is your organization (or department's) annual budget?

Less than \$20,000
\$20,000-49,999
\$50,000-99,999
\$100,000-499,999
\$500,000-999,999
More than \$1 million
Not sure

Q4. Where is your organization located?

American Samoa	Indiana	North Carolina
Guam	Iowa	North Dakota
Northern Mariana Islands	Kansas	Ohio
Puerto Rico	Kentucky	Oklahoma
U.S. Virgin Islands	Louisiana	Oregon
Alabama	Maine	Pennsylvania
Alaska	Maryland	Rhode Island
Arizona	Massachusetts	South Carolina
Arkansas	Michigan	South Dakota
California	Minnesota	Tennessee
Colorado	Mississippi	Texas
Connecticut	Missouri	Utah
Delaware	Montana	Vermont
District of Columbia	Nebraska	Virginia
Florida	Nevada	Washington
Georgia	New Hampshire	West Virginia
Hawaii	New Jersey	Wisconsin
Idaho	New Mexico	Wyoming
Illinois	New York	

Q5. Have you applied for any other CLIR grant before or after Recordings at Risk (RaR)?
If so, which program?

- Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives (2008-2014)
- Digitizing Hidden Special Collections and Archives (2015-2020)
- Digitizing Hidden Collections: Amplifying Unheard Voices (2021-present)
- Have not submitted an application for any CLIR grant, including RaR

Q6. When did you most recently apply or consider applying for RaR?

- 2017-2020
- 2021-2024
- Not sure

Q7. How did you find out about the Recordings at Risk program? (Select all that apply.)

CLIR website or social media

Colleague

Conference

Listserv

RaR previous applicant

Other (please specify) _____

Q8. Regarding the program's title "Recordings at Risk," what is your understanding of the term "risk," as CLIR uses it?

Q9. How would you describe the recordings to be digitized in the project you nominated or considered nominating as a part of your application for RaR? (Select all that apply.)

Represents a marginalized community

Contains an endangered culture or language

Contains history of organizing or movement work

Contains oral histories

Demonstrated community interest

Demonstrated student or faculty interest

Documents historical events

Documents institutional/organizational history

Other (please specify)

Q10. Has your organization attempted to create access to this collection before becoming aware of Recordings at Risk? If so, which of the following activities did you undertake? (Select all that apply.)

Applied for funding for the collection from another program

Prepared the collection for digital reformatting (e.g. stabilizing, inventorying, researching potential vendors, etc.)

Created catalog records and/or finding aids for the collection

Digitally reformatted some of the collection

Reformatted the collection in another way (e.g. film-to-film preservation)

None of the above

Q11. How would you categorize your organization’s experience with audio or audiovisual digitization outside of the Recordings at Risk program?

- We have digitized some items in-house
- We have digitized some items with a vendor
- We have digitized one or more large collections in-house
- We have digitized one or more large collections with a vendor
- We have not completed an audio or audiovisual digitization project Not sure
- Other (please specify) _____

Q12. Please respond to this statement: The program guidelines explained the eligibility requirements in clear and accessible language.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

Q13. How confident were you that your organization and proposed project aligned with the scope and goals of the Recordings at Risk program after reviewing the prospective applicant resources provided by CLIR?

Not confident at all	Slightly confident	Somewhat confident	Completely confident

Q14. The Recordings at Risk program emphasizes the preservation of rare and unique audio, audiovisual, and other time-based media of high scholarly value through digital reformatting.

Please respond to this statement: After reviewing the program description and prospective applicant resources provided by CLIR, my organization and I clearly understood the “high scholarly value” criteria and how our collection might fit into it.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

Q15. Did any of the RaR eligibility requirements (collection ownership, third-party vendor, 12- month timeline, etc.) or evaluation criteria (high scholarly value, risk for loss, mitigating legal or ethical concerns) give you or your organization pause in submitting the application or lead you to believe you’d be denied? Which requirement(s) posed the greatest barrier(s) to your application?

Q16. How prepared did your organization feel to accomplish tasks or cover costs not allowable for funding through the grant program (for example: software and hardware costs, equipment costs, copyright assessments, long-term maintenance and preservation, etc.)?

Very unprepared	Somewhat unprepared	Neutral	Somewhat prepared	Very prepared

Q17. If your organization felt unprepared, how did you plan to or how did you handle those gaps?

Q18. If you reached out to CLIR about any application or eligibility concerns, how satisfied were you with the support you received?

	Very dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neutral	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied	N/A
Timeliness						
Clarity						
Resourcefulness						

Q19. How helpful did you find CLIR’s applicant resources? If you did not use a resource, choose “N/A.”

	Not helpful	Somewhat not helpful	Neither helpful nor unhelpful	Somewhat helpful	Very helpful	N/A
Application guidelines						
Consulting vendors						
Email correspondence with CLIR staff						
FAQs						
Webinars						

Q20. How has this application process differed from other cultural heritage-oriented applications you have prepared? (For example: The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), NEH Division of Preservation and Access, Association for Recorded Sound Collections, National Film Preservation Foundation, Bay Area Video Coalition)

	Much less	A little less	About the same	A little more	Much more
Application difficulty					
Application length					
Application support					

Q21. Was your organization awarded a CLIR RaR grant?

Yes

No

Did not apply

If response to Q21 = “did not apply,” display Questions 22-25

The following questions were shown to respondents who answered, “did not apply” to Q21.

NON-APPLICANTS

The questions in this section will ask about your experiences as a prospective applicant that decided not to apply.

Q22. Why did your organization choose not to apply? (Select all that apply.)

Too many application requirements

Not enough application support

Not enough funding

Insufficient timeline

Insufficient allowable costs

Unsupported media format

Organization type

Emphasis on high scholarly value

Copyright, permissions, or ownership concerns Didn't meet preservation needs or priorities Lack of administrative support

Unable to complete application on time

Other (please specify) _____

Q23. What was the main factor in your organization's decision not to apply?

Q24. Will you apply for this grant again in the future? Yes

No

Not sure

If no, why not? _____

Q25. Is there any other information about your experience as a prospective RaR applicant that you would like to share with the evaluation team?

If response to Question 21 = “no,” display Questions 26-30

The following questions were shown to respondents who answered “no” to Q21.

NON-RECIPIENTS

The questions in this section will ask about your experiences as an applicant that was not awarded a Recordings at Risk grant.

Q26. If you were not awarded a grant, what do you perceive as the main reason your application was not successful?

Q27. Please respond to this statement: The application feedback we received from reviewers was helpful in continuing to develop our audio or audiovisual digitization project.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

Q28. Will you apply for this grant again in the future? Yes

No

Not sure

If no, why not? _____

Q29. If not awarded, were you able to digitally reformat the collection with other sources of funding?

Yes

Somewhat

No, attempted but was not successful

Did not attempt

Q30. Is there any other information about your experience as a RaR applicant that you would like to share with the evaluation team?

If response to Question 21 = “yes,” display Questions 31-42

The following questions were shown to respondents who answered “yes” to Q21.

RECORDINGS AT RISK AWARDEES

The questions in this section will ask about your experiences as a participant in the Recordings at Risk program.

Q31. Given the funds available to grant recipients (\$10,000-\$50,000) and the RaR program goals, do you feel the program is:

Underfunded	Somewhat underfunded	Neutral	Somewhat sufficiently funded	Sufficiently funded

Q32. Did you find the scope of allowable costs reasonable given your organization’s needs throughout the program?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

If “no,” what other needs were unmet by the grant program?

Q33. Do you feel that 12 months was sufficient time to complete your digitization project goals?

Not enough time	Just the right amount of time	More than enough time

If it was not enough time, what activities were you unable to complete in the 12-month timeline?

Q34. How has your collection been used by community members since the granting period?

Q35. How would you describe your relationship with your digitization vendor?

	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Communication					
Collection management					
Cost effectiveness					
Support					
Costs as advertised					
Timeliness of deliverables					

Q36. Did you rely on any outside resources or consult with colleagues to support your digitization project? If yes, what resources did you use?

Q37. Did you encounter any significant challenges during the granting period (vendor collaboration, significant preservation concerns, rights and copyright issues)?

Q38. Did you reach out to CLIR about these challenges? How satisfied were you with the support you received?

	Very dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neutral	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied	N/A
Timeliness						
Clarity						
Resourcefulness						

Q39. Has your organization continued work on this collection after the grant term?

Yes, we have continued digital reformatting on this collection

Yes, we have continued other work on this collection

No, we haven't continued work on this collection after the grant term

Other (please specify) _____

Q40. The RaR program aims to help organizations identify priorities and develop practical strategies for digital reformatting, build relationships with partners, and raise awareness of best practices. How did the grant impact your organization's collections digitization program and workflows?

Q41. Based on your experiences, how can CLIR improve the Recordings at Risk program?

Q42. Is there anything you would change about your CLIR RaR experience?

The following question was shown to all respondents.

INTERVIEW INTEREST FORM

Q43. Would you be open to being considered for an interview to discuss more of your experiences? If so, please complete this form: <https://forms.gle/DCbHLLTLTzuT6uzx8>

Yes (I completed the form.)

No

Appendix B. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The following were working questions guiding our interviewer. The interviewer did not ask each question nor followed the order in the interview guide. Each interview was fluid, and the interviewer modified or skipped questions depending on participant responses and time constraints.

Questions for Grantees

1. How did you learn about the Recordings at Risk (RaR) grant opportunity?
2. Were the mission and goals of the RaR program clear to you?
3. Can you describe your funded preservation project?
4. Can you describe your organization (type, mission, budget, size)?
5. Did you attend webinars about the RaR program? If so, how useful did you find them (or in what ways were they useful)?
6. Could you describe your experience with the application process (i.e., troubleshooting issues such as copyright and ownership, interactions with CLIR staff, etc.)?
7. Did the grant guidelines allow for all necessary work and labor to complete funded preservation projects? Did you complete the work in the allotted time?
8. The RaR program supports the preservation of “rare and unique audio, audiovisual, and other time-based media of high scholarly value.” What is your understanding of this? How does your project collection meet this criterion?
9. Did you find the feedback/comments provided by the proposal reviewers to be helpful?
10. How would you describe your organization’s technical capacity as it related to in-house digital preservation?
11. What are your thoughts on the RaR grant allowable expenses related to labor and other possible project expenses?
12. Have you sought funding from other sources to digitize this collection before applying to RaR? Was it awarded?
13. What has been the impact of participating in the RaR program on your organization? How has creating access to this audio/audiovisual content impacted your audiences and/or communities?
14. Did the design (and implementation) of the program align with your organization’s needs and priorities around preserving and creating access to your collection(s)? What additional needs do you have in this area?
15. Do you believe the RaR program is a valuable resource for preservation fields?
16. What strategies are you using to be able to preserve and create access to your organization’s audio and audiovisual materials going forward?
17. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experience with RaR?

Questions for Unsuccessful Applicants

1. How did you learn about the RaR grant opportunity?
2. Was the mission, values, and goals of the RaR program clear to you?
3. Can you describe the proposed preservation project?
4. Can you describe your organization (type, mission, budget, size)?
5. Did you attend webinars about the RaR program? If so, did you find them useful?
6. Did the application process require significant troubleshooting in any of these areas: (copyright, ownership, project plan, application system, medium, etc.)?
7. Did the grant guidelines allow for all necessary work and labor to complete proposed preservation projects?
8. The RaR program supports the preservation of “rare and unique audio, audiovisual, and other time-based media of high scholarly value.” What is your understanding of this? How does your proposed project collection meet this criterion?
9. Did you find the feedback/comments provided by the proposal reviewers to be helpful?
10. Why do you feel your application was not successful?
11. Do you feel the review criteria were represented in the decision about your application? Why or why not?
12. Have you sought funding from other sources to digitize this collection before applying to RaR? Was it awarded?
13. If you haven’t received funding for your AV digitization, have you developed strategies to preserve and create access to audio and audiovisual content? If so, what?
14. Did you reach out to CLIR/RaR staff with any questions or about any issues? Was that helpful?
15. Do you believe the RaR program is a valuable resource for preservation fields?
16. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experience with RaR?

Questions for People/Organizations that Self-selected out of Applying

1. How did you learn about the RaR grant opportunity?
2. Was the mission, values and goals of the RaR program clear to you?
3. Can you describe the prospective preservation project?
4. Can you describe your organization (type, mission, budget, size)?
5. Did you attend webinars about the RaR program? If so, did you find them useful?
6. Did the grant guidelines allow for all necessary work and labor to complete funded preservation projects?
7. The RaR program supports the preservation of “rare and unique audio, audiovisual, and other time-based media of high scholarly value.” What is your understanding of this? How do your collections meet this criterion?
8. Why did your organization decide against applying for an RaR grant?

9. Was it related to funding requirements (ownership, copyright, third-party vendor requirement, etc.) or other issues (award amount, etc.)
10. Have you sought funding from other sources to digitize this collection before applying to RaR? Was it awarded?
11. If you haven't received funding for your AV digitization, have you developed strategies to preserve and create access to audio and audiovisual content? If so, what?
12. Did you reach out to CLIR/RaR staff with any questions or about any issues? Was that helpful?
13. Do you believe the RaR program is a valuable resource for preservation fields?
14. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience with RaR?

Questions for Vendors

1. Tell me about your preservation business (size, areas of expertise, types of clients).
2. Are the mission and goals of the RaR program clear to you?
3. The RaR program supports the preservation of "rare and unique audio, audiovisual, and other time-based media of high scholarly value." What is your understanding of this?
4. What are the benefits and challenges of how the RaR program is currently designed to support the preservation of rare and unique audio, audiovisual, and other time-based media.
5. Does the RaR program allow for all necessary work required to adequately preserve grantee materials/collections?
6. Are the grant award size, allotted time of the grant period, etc sufficient to adequately preserve grantee materials/collections?
7. Tell me about your experiences working with RaR program grantees.
8. What is your level of technical capacity and skills?
9. Do you have plans and capacity for long-term preservation of your materials/collections?
10. Do you offer grantees/clients resources of advice on how to help avoid obsolescence of the materials in the long-term?
11. What are the most successful strategies and effective practices for grantee organizations to build capacity for audio and audiovisual preservation?
12. In your view, what are the most pressing needs, challenges, and opportunities in audiovisual digital preservation fields? How can the RaR program be responsive to these trends?
13. What is the long-term outlook for the need for digital preservation of at-risk audiovisual materials? (Research/resources/concerns about this?)
14. Are there other funders that you work with in addition to CLIR that provide funding support for digital preservation of at-risk materials? If so, how do they compare?
15. How can CLIR improve the RaR program? How can RaR continue to be a valuable resource for digital preservation?
16. Do you find the vendor guidelines helpful or adequate?

17. What happens when your bid is not chosen? How does that impact vendors? Does the process of relationship building with prospective clients pay off for them in the long run?
18. What happens when the actual cost does not match the cost of the bid? What do vendors do in this situation?

Questions for CLIR/RaR staff

1. How long have you been with CLIR? What is your staff position/title?
2. What is your involvement with the RaR program?
3. How long have you been involved with the RaR program (grant cycles)?
4. What is your understanding of the mission and goals of the RaR program?
5. What is your understanding of “highly significant time-based media at risk of loss”? “High scholarly value”? Public impact?
6. Does CLIR have internal metrics, work plans, outreach strategies, etc to help ensure you achieve the stated goals for improving the RaR program?
7. How are staff recommendations about the RaR program received, deliberated, and/or acted upon by CLIR supervisors and leadership?
8. What is the internal decision-making process for updates/changes to the RaR program?
9. Are there internal challenges, obstacles, or barriers to improving and meeting the stated goals/outcomes of the RaR program (e.g. efforts to encourage submissions from an increasingly diverse array of potential applicants, expand its outreach and build relationships with under-represented constituencies)? If so, what is your view on how to address them?
10. What are patterns of feedback you’re getting from prospective applicants? (Ownership, third party requirement)
11. What is the relationship between RaR and DHC?
12. What would you change about RaR if you could?
13. How would you articulate the values of the RaR program?
14. Are there missing communities among the RaR constituency?
15. What is appealing to you about RaR?
16. Anything else you’d like to share as part of the evaluation?

Questions for CLIR Leadership

1. What, in your view, are the strengths and areas of improvement for CLIR’s Recordings at Risk (RaR) grant program?
2. The RaR grant program supports the “preservation of rare and unique audio, audiovisual, and other time-based media of high scholarly value through digital reformatting.” What do “rare and unique” and “high scholarly value” mean to you? What do they mean for the RaR grant program?
3. In what ways are you involved in the administration (e.g. reviewing applications, assisting applicants and grantees) and assessment (e.g. program evaluation, strategy, making adjustments) of the RaR program?

4. Much has changed in the fields of digital preservation, cultural heritage, federal funding, and higher education since the reelection of Donald Trump in November 2024. In your view, how must the RaR grant program—and CLIR more broadly— adapt or change to be responsive to the current moment? How do you think the RaR program and CLIR will be impacted in the coming months and years, and how is CLIR preparing for these impacts?
5. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us as part of our evaluation?

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Gabriel Solís (he/him) is a researcher, writer, strategist, and consultant with two decades of experience working at the intersection of documentation, archives, community memory, and government violence. Since 2015, he has served as the Executive Director of the After Violence Project. He consults for foundations, archives, social justice organizations, and universities. His writing has appeared in *Texas Monthly*, *Oxford American*, and *Scalawag*, among other publications. He is the recipient of the 2018 Pushcart Prize. Currently, he advises several national initiatives to mobilize

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