

**Expanding Collaboration to Serve Library Patrons Behind Bars**

Ithaka S+R requests \$93,577 for a 12-month planning grant that will support building relationships and collecting evidence for exploring how Public, Prison, Academic, and Law libraries can more effectively collaborate to provide services to patrons who are currently and formerly incarcerated. This National Leadership Grant will advance Goal 2: Objectives 1 and 2 by identifying the most promising collaboration opportunities between siloed library types and between libraries and Departments of Corrections with the long-term goal of fostering the development of sustainable and replicable services for incarcerated library patrons.

*Project Justification.* Public, prison, law, and academic libraries all serve America's approximately 2.2 million incarcerated people, though each may approach this work with a different understanding of the goals and mission they are aiming to fulfill and often operate in isolation from each other. Opportunities to collaborate and coordinate library services are further complicated by the Department of Corrections (DOC), whose focus on security and control is antithetical to the library's commitment to the free flow of information. That various state DOCs are highly idiosyncratic and that policies can be enforced in widely different ways at the facility level also mean that libraries may need to "reinvent the wheel" on a case by case basis as they seek to develop services for incarcerated people. Despite growing interest from public and academic libraries in serving this population, there is little understanding of what makes for successful collaborations with prison libraries and prison law libraries or the DOC itself. However, given their relative positions within and outside of the correctional system and their reputations as trusted resources, libraries are ideally situated to provide a suite of services to a population that suffers from profound information needs. The national need that this project will fulfill will include supporting effective collaboration between these types of libraries so that they can offer seamless services to benefit incarcerated and formerly incarcerated patrons. Furthermore, growing bi-partisan support for prison reform and increasing public awareness of mass incarceration means that we are now at a critical juncture in which libraries can expand their services to reach this chronically underserved population.

*Project Work Plan.* Our long-term vision is to develop and pilot wrap-around services capable of supporting the information needs of people who are currently incarcerated and that will support their reentry and community reintegration upon release. However, given the logistical challenges and philosophical differences that impede effective collaboration across the prison walls, we believe it is wisest to take a measured approach to achieving this goal. We therefore propose a 12-month planning grant to build relationships and collect evidence to explore how best to design a larger project in this area. This work will include surfacing and studying examples of collaboration, best practices and barriers, hosting community meetings to surface stakeholder priorities and promising opportunities for developing collaborative services, and identifying partners.

Ithaka S+R will begin by conducting desk research to surface existing literature on how libraries have collaborated with external partners to identify the critical components of success, including studying other projects funded by IMLS. We will also build on Ithaka S+R's previous work with higher education in prison programs that have run successful, long term programs to extrapolate relevant lessons for the library community.<sup>1</sup>

Ithaka S+R will then convene a series of community calls with different stakeholder groups to further explore collaboration challenges, identify stakeholder priorities for providing services to incarcerated people (e.g. reference services, lending materials, digital literacy instruction), the most promising or likely opportunities for implementation, and respective needs of each partner to ensure success (e.g. sustainable funding, staff capacity, administrative buy-in). We will then conduct follow up calls with select attendees to explore their perspectives and experiences more deeply and capture any information not suitable for sharing in a public forum. We will invite a wide range of stakeholders to the community

---

<sup>1</sup> Tanaka, Kurtis, and Danielle Cooper. "Advancing Technological Equity for Incarcerated College Students: Examining the Opportunities and Risks." Ithaka S+R. Ithaka S+R. 7 May 2020. Web. 24 September 2021. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.313202>. See also our current work here: <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/increasing-access-to-quality-educational-resources-to-support-higher-education-in-prison/>.

calls, leveraging our existing networks to recruit participants from the various library types as well as relying on ongoing work conducted by other stakeholders to map this landscape.<sup>2</sup> We will also host a session for currently or formerly incarcerated individuals to understand their specific needs, practices, and priorities for library services. Finally, recognizing that successful collaboration and implementation of services will rely on sufficient buy-in from corrections staff, we will also hold sessions specifically for this group, relying on our existing network of DOC state education directors to recruit prison library staff as well as the directors themselves. A known challenge of fostering collaborations that can sustain the implementation of services is the already noted idiosyncrasy of the state DOCs. Previous Ithaka S+R research suggests that the ability to point to successful collaborations and service implementations elsewhere can carry great weight with the DOC—provided they feel the comparison is appropriate. A major priority for these sessions will, therefore, be to work with this group to think through what makes a compelling comparison for DOC officials and other strategies that will empower public and academic libraries to secure buy-in from corrections and collaborate with prison and prison law libraries.

The exploratory research and community calls will result in an issue brief that covers the collaboration challenges faced by libraries and summarizes library, patron, and corrections priorities for providing services. We will use this information to identify service areas where there is the greatest alignment between all stakeholder groups and choose one service to pilot in a future implementation project. To support the future piloting of this service, we will develop an implementation plan that will build on the collaboration research conducted in the first phase as well as the collaboration strategies surfaced in the community calls. We will also use the information gathered in this planning grant to recruit a partner(s) that will implement the service we develop as we progress to implementation.

*Diversity Plan.* This project represents the initial step in a larger agenda that seeks to improve services for incarcerated and justice impacted people. This population is disproportionately made up of marginalized and chronically underserved groups. We endeavor to keep the lived experiences of these individuals central to this project by involving formerly incarcerated individuals in the community calls. This project also seeks to engage a diverse set of libraries, including prison libraries that are themselves under-resourced and underserved in the library sector, as well as other stakeholders engaged in supporting incarcerated people. Through this work, we also hope to help libraries strengthen their commitment to diversity by giving them needed information to better serve a stigmatized population with profound needs and for whom libraries are accessible, trusted partners.

*Project Results.* This project will provide space for the library community to identify its priorities for serving incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people and how it might best approach providing those services. By bringing the relevant stakeholders together, Ithaka S+R aims to identify what services libraries can provide to meet patron needs and, critically, what services are actually possible to provide given the significant collaboration challenges that exist when working inside of prisons. By engaging all of the relevant stakeholders, especially corrections staff, we will surface where the greatest alignment of priorities exists and therefore what areas hold the most promise for the implementation of a sustainable service. Finally, identifying successful strategies for collaborating across the prison walls also has the potential for wider impact beyond libraries themselves. This research can help inform colleges, arts programs, and other community initiatives that seek to support incarcerated people.

*Budget Summary.* We estimate that this project will cost a total of \$93,577 over a grant period of 12 months, including \$66,982 for personnel, \$4,000 for travel, \$1,000 for honoraria to support formerly incarcerated patrons participate in the project, and \$21,595 for indirect costs (negotiated rate 30.0%).

---

<sup>2</sup> E.g. for academic libraries we will use the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison's directory of college programs: <https://www.higheredinprison.org/national-directory>; for other libraries, see the survey recently launched by Chelsea Jordan-Makely and Jeanie Austin: <https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=Outside-and-In-Services-for-People-Impacted-By-Incarceration>.