

University of Alabama and Chicago State University

Towards Racial Justice and Antiracist Actions in Public Libraries of the American South (RJ@PL-South)

Project Justification: *Project Summary*--“Towards Racial Justice and Antiracist Actions in Public Libraries of the American South” (RJ@PL-South) is a three-year proposal (Implementation – Project Type) that meets the requirements specified in IMLS’ National Leadership Grants for Libraries – FY 2022 Guidelines to achieve its Goal 2 (Objective 2.1 and Objective 2.2). This proposed project will build the capabilities of public librarians located in the seventeen regions of the American South¹ to confront racism and promote positive social change in their communities and within their work settings. The University of Alabama’s (UA) School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS) and the Chicago State University’s (CSU) Department of Computer, Information and Mathematical Science and Technology (CIMST) in partnership with committed state and public libraries, including Alabama Public Library Service, Athens Regional Library System (GA), Austin Public Library (TX), Georgia Public Library Service, Kentucky Department for Libraries & Archives, Mobile Public Library (AL), Richmond Public Library and Suffolk Public Library (VA), Library of Virginia, and others request \$339,152 IMLS funds (with an additional \$343,033 cost shared). They will collaborate to meet the following project goals: 1) Assessment of southern public library efforts to dismantle racial oppression externally as a community agency and internally as a workplace; 2) Operationalization of a responsive and participatory strategic planning process to develop action plans that further racial justice; 3) Implementation of key strategic components that support antiracist actions in select domains of community life (e.g., agriculture, economy, education, environment, public policy, health, information technology, law and justice, manufacturing/retail, social welfare, and youth/family learning). In the process, alliances between public libraries (local, county, regional, and state) with external stakeholders (e.g., farming communities; chambers of commerce and economic councils; schools, colleges, and universities; medical and health centers; criminal justice systems; businesses/corporations, etc.) will facilitate the development and implementation of information-based offerings in six/eight library settings to promote racial equity and antiracist initiatives. Intended impact of increased community wellbeing as a result of improved racial climate are anticipated using a theory of change.

Statement of National Need--Racism is a human rights issue and it is a problem in the United States. The nation experienced racial trauma in the recent killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Aubrey, Rayshard Brooks, Walter Wallace Jr., and other racial/ethnic minorities, while the American South sparked ongoing racial tensions that attracted international shame in its mistreatment of refugees and immigrants [5, 6, 7, 8]. A June 2021 report by the United Nations (U.N.) described U.S. shortcomings related to racism and racial justice [9]. The U.S. Department of State confirmed the U.N.’s finding and reiterated a renewed national commitment towards promoting racial justice and equality in the U.S. [10]. The Public Library Association issued a recent “Statement Condemning Systemic Racism and Violence Against BIPOC People” that “acknowledge[s] that public libraries have been—and still are—complicit in systems that oppress, exclude, and harm Black people, indigenous people, and people of color” (BIPOC) [11]. This collusion has recently involved libraries’ trepid response in confronting law enforcement and demanding the accountability of political authorities for social injustices toward minorities while they espoused outdated practices of neutrality, passivity, and internalized focus as bystanders to community-centered dynamics [12, 13, 14]. This proposed project will address and implement select solutions to the call for transformative change and racial justice put forward by the U.N., U.S. government, and public libraries associations as an institution. RJ@PL-South is a multipronged action research project that analyzes professional experiences and behaviors in the southern library communities and workplace and operationalizes tangible deliverables while implementing select externally and internally centered components of strategic action plans and programs. If funded, RJ@PL-South will begin August 1, 2022, and be completed by July 31, 2025.

Project Work Plan: Libraries have the potential to serve as community catalysts and create, develop, and advance racial justice in their communities. This includes furthering antiracist library collections, spaces, programs and services in support of communities. It also means that libraries as workplaces need to become more antiracist. *Project Goal(s)*—The overall project design includes the following phases over the three-year period: **Phase I (Year 1):** [Assessment] Collecting

¹ The United States Census Bureau’s [1] demarcation of the “South” region and its three divisions include groupings of sixteen states (i.e., Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia) and the District of Columbia. This proposal adopts the definitional scope of the region based on geography following the national classification, while acknowledging the diversity in their varied history, dissimilar environmental conditions, and diverse cultural characteristics of political and economic conditions, among other aspects [2, 3, 4].

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quantitative (surveys for 60-100 public librarians) and qualitative feedback (interviews/focus groups in each region with 50 library staff [white and BIPOC] and their communities) about antiracist initiatives (existing/future) within and beyond the public library. **Phase II (Year 2):** [Strategic planning] Developing external and internal community engagement frameworks, strategic action plans, and roadmaps based on the above feedback with public librarians in 12 monthly strategic planning workshops. **Phase III (Year 3):** [Actualization of information-based solutions]: Implementation of social justice actions (external and internal) in supporting development of racially just communities in various domains (e.g., commerce, health, education, public policy, etc.) is proposed at six/eight exemplar libraries through library-enabled antiracism activities, dialogues, and offerings that support community mobilization around antiracist concerns and issues. Experiences will serve as pilot testbed for developing national-level antiracist strategic planning promising praxis (e.g., action plans and resources) to be disseminated via professional conference presentations and peer-reviewed publications.

*Project Objectives and Outcome--*RJ@PL-South includes various objectives. Objective 1: To implement two quantitative surveys (print/online) and collect feedback from library staff about race-based concerns in their communities (1A) and within their work settings (1B). Objective 2: To conduct qualitative interviews/focus groups with library staff from each region about their challenges to further racial justice in their external communities and in their internal work settings (2A). At least two focus groups with representative members of communities of the South to elicit their viewpoint will also be conducted (2B). Objective 3: To develop and refine an Antiracist Framework & Strategic Action Plans for external and internal relationship building during 12 strategic planning workshops (online and in person) that will include prototype designs for particular domains with potential actions, resources, and promising practices. Objective 4: To implement select information-based solutions and antiracist programming for external and internal constituencies in six/eight exemplar libraries. The project outcomes will help develop the public library as an antiracist community anchoring institution that promotes community development by addressing racialized experiences in the American South.

*Key Personnel & Strategic Collaborations—*PIs: UA SLIS [Bharat Mehra (Professor & EBSCO Endowed Chair in Social Justice)] and CSU CIMST [Kimberly Black (Associate Professor)] will strategically collaborate with state and public libraries from all the 16 southern states (and Washington, D. C.) to facilitate all grant activities. Library representatives will serve on the RJ@PL-South advisory board (15 members), diversity taskforce (10 members), and domain-specific committees (10 members) to assist in work plan success and implementation. The PIs are co-editing a forthcoming book entitled *Antiracist Library and Information Science: Racial Justice and Community* as part of the *Advances in Librarianship* series. Chapter contributors have provided informal commitment (if proposal is funded) to serve in various project management roles. The PI/co-PI have collaborated effectively on multiple IMLS-funded projects in the southern region; we will select personnel from our networks based on past demonstrated expertise.

Diversity Plan: With its focus on racial justice and antiracist actions the entire RJ4PL-South project is closely aligned to concerns of diversity, social justice, and the role of southern libraries in extending their impact on the lives of racial/ethnic minorities, amongst others. It provides opportunities to be inclusive of all voices, perspectives, and experiences, particularly of people of color. It offers solutions that emerge from their realities and experiences to make us stronger as a profession and community. The project team is committed to actively fostering diversity, inclusion and cultural competency throughout this project by ensuring that: 1) Individuals from diverse and underserved populations serve as participants/respondents and are also well-represented on all project boards; 2) Project deliverables reflect and advance the perspectives of a diverse society for its transformation and liberation in racial justice; 3) Research and project dissemination advances the interests and concerns of diverse and underrepresented populations.

Project Results: The benefits of the grant help translate collected data from southern librarians towards development and select implementation of antiracist frameworks and action plans to consolidate their role as community anchors. We will develop valuable information products, programming, strategies, and promising practices tailored to select regions intersecting with specific domains (e.g., health, education, economy, etc.).

Budget: Funds requested from IMLS = \$339,152 (direct = \$241,557, indirect = \$97,594). An additional \$343,033 (direct = \$230,223, unrecovered indirect = \$112,809) will be cost shared. The budget includes: 1) salaries and wages, including those for the PI and two graduate assistants, at \$93,108 (cost share = \$98,952); 2) fringe benefits at \$14,064 (cost share = \$31,665); 3) subaward to CSU at \$25,481 (cost share = \$99,606); 4) other direct costs includes materials/supplies, diversity consultant costs, graduate assistant tuition, marketing/social media costs, website design, summit planning, library implementation stipends, interview and focus group honoraria, domain-specific committee stipends, advisory board stipends, and diversity task force stipends, at \$108,904; and indirect costs at the University's federally-negotiated indirect rate of 49%, applied to modified total direct costs, at \$97,594 (cost share = \$112,809 unrecovered indirects).