

## **Inverting Colonial Archival Authority: Increasing Access for Indigenous Communities in SNAC**

In an Early Career Research Development project, Dr. Diana Marsh (College of Information Studies, University of Maryland, College Park) requests \$457,225 from the Laura Bush 21<sup>st</sup> Century Librarian program for a three-year investigation into [SNAC](#)—a platform for aggregating distributed archives—as means to increase discovery of Native and Indigenous archival records. Making this colonially-held material discoverable to communities is the crucial first step in (digitally or physically) returning these collections to further language revitalization, land reclamation, and Indigenous sovereignty. In light of the loss of many Tribal culture bearers and language speakers, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to make these archival collections accessible to community users. The project will answer the following **research questions:** **1)** How can aggregated discovery tools increase archival discovery for Native and Indigenous community researchers (in culturally-appropriate ways)? **2)** How can colonial archives and Native and Indigenous communities work together to design and implement new tools, while centering communities in the design and implementation process? **3)** What are the specific affordances of [SNAC](#) for reconnecting Native and Indigenous communities to collections dispersed in colonial archives across the US, and what technical infrastructures and training modules need enhancing for this purpose? **4)** How can SNAC facilitate repatriation and stewardship for Indigenous communities?

This project fits within major goals of the program: 1) enhancing the training of the LIS workforce to meet the needs of communities, in particular by (Objective 3.4) supporting library and archives training “to advance digital inclusion for the benefit of community members,” and by developing culturally-responsive digital infrastructures for discovery and access; and 2) (Objective 3.1) by developing open-access training to allow colonial repositories “to engage in sustained community development.”

**I. Project Justification:** Archives and museums hold invaluable collections documenting Indigenous peoples’ languages, culture, and lifeways, taken from these communities during a period of colonialist assimilation and cultural genocide; later, these fieldnotes, photographs, recordings, and other media were deposited in geographically distant archives, universities, societies, and museums. Today, these colonially-held collections are sometimes the only extant documentation of Indigenous language or knowledge. As such, Native and Indigenous archival collections are increasingly being mobilized by community-based researchers in cultural-revitalization initiatives, artists’ projects, language-immersion programs, or land claims research. Digitizing collections increasingly allows them to be found, downloaded, shared, and repurposed remotely, especially where barriers to physical access (time, cost, distance, etc.) exist. Yet, the [PI’s research](#) shows that Indigenous collections are *least* accessible to Indigenous users partly due to the non-intuitive nature of the finding aids for navigating archives, the colonial nature of archival description, and issues associated with the curation crisis facing many institutions (e.g. processing backlogs, histories of mismanagement, inadequate collections description). The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has further restricted any physical access to these collections. The archival field has an ethical responsibility to Native and Indigenous communities across North America to revolutionize how collections can be accessed and searched, in pursuit of creating sustainable pathways for information equity and community-led archival repatriation and stewardship.

Momentum is building to change the relationship between communities and archives. In August 2018 the Society of American Archivists adopted [Protocols for Native American Archival Materials](#), making ethical stewardship of Indigenous collections a mandate. Collaborative projects between Indigenous communities and cultural heritage institutions show the importance of shaping digital projects to fit Indigenous information needs, contexts, and values. Yet many of these efforts are localized and small in scale. Indigenous communities should have access to *everything* relating to their community, no matter how geographically or institutionally dispersed.

**II. Project Work Plan:** [SNAC](#) is an initiative with over 50 institutional partners working to aggregate all archival collections in the US. SNAC works by authority control—standardizing headings used in catalogue records, and linking all records by that heading. Users can search SNAC to locate, for example, every archival institution that contains records about [Ernest Hemingway](#) (427 entries). Most Indigenous archival knowledge is buried in the collections of white, male historical figures, and is therefore underrepresented in SNAC. For example, a search for Jim Thorpe yields only 15 entries. Our current project is piloting SNAC for Indigenous discovery via an [edit-a-thon](#), [working closely with an Indigenous Advisory Board](#). We have shown both the potential of SNAC for this work, and the need for a more expansive effort to tailor the platform to better serve researchers seeking to identify which archives contain information of value to their communities.

**a) Methods and Timeline:** The project uses a collaborative co-design process including an Indigenous Advisory

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Board, five regional Tribally-based Project Archivists (working part-time on Indigenous entities in SNAC and identifying SNAC limitations) and Indigenous Focus Groups (4 groups of 7 participants, video-recorded and analyzed in NVivo), in six phases to investigate and implement an Indigenous approach to [SNAC](#): **i) Year 1, Part 1 (Aug 2022-Jan 2023)**: We will obtain UMD and Tribal IRB, work with the Advisory Board and Tribal Project Archivists to shape work with SNAC technical infrastructure, and hire a contract developer to enhance SNAC's Indigenous metadata and thesauri; **Year 1, Part 2 (Feb - Jul 2023)** we will work with Focus Group A (Previous Indigenous participants in the [2021 edit-a-thon](#)) to glean feedback on SNAC and shape Indigenous SNAC Training. **ii) Year 2, Part 1 (Aug 2023-Jan 2024)** We will glean feedback from Focus Groups B (Indigenous Archival & Library Professionals, to provide a critical lens on SNAC cataloguing fields, metadata, information relationships) and C (Indigenous students from a range of fields to provide insights on content and affordances of SNAC for contemporary Indigenous research), as well as the Advisory Board and Project Archivists on technical and cultural improvements to SNAC; in **Year 2, Part 2 (Feb 2024-Jul 2024)**, we will work with SNAC staff make any further enhancements and develop an Indigenous SNAC training module. **iii. Year 3 Part 1 (Aug 2024-Jan 2025)** We will work with the Advisory Board and Project Archivists to finalize Indigenous SNAC Training, and begin to test SNAC with Focus Group D (Indigenous community members who have not used SNAC, to evaluate SNAC as Indigenous research tool); in **Year 3, Part 2 (Feb-Jul 2025)**, we will test project outcomes with Focus Group D, launch Indigenous SNAC Training, hire an Indigenous Film Student to produce a video on SNAC as an Indigenous discovery tool, and prepare at least two publications and presentations (e.g. [ATALM](#), [NAISA](#)) on the project.

**b) Project Director and Partnerships:** [Diana Marsh](#) is an archives and digital curation professor who has worked with Native American and Indigenous community partners at the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives and American Philosophical Society. Our GA is Lydia Curliss (Nipmuc Nation), UMD Ph.D. student. The current Indigenous Advisory Board includes: Taylor Gibson (Cayuga), Gāhshronih; Margaret Bruchac (Abenaki), University of Pennsylvania; Eric Hemenway (Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians); Alan Corbiere (M'Chigeeng First Nation), York University; Keahiahi Long, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Stephen Curley (Diné), National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. We will add four more members to cover additional Indigenous regional areas. Additional partners include SNAC staff and NARA liaisons, and archivists at the Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, all of whom have worked on our 2021 [edit-a-thon](#).

**III. Diversity Plan:** This project increases the diversity of users who can access archives in historically inaccessible institutions. It takes seriously the needs, opinions, and cultural worldviews of Native and Indigenous users seeking to use their own historical knowledge for contemporary community work. By co-designing this project, hiring community-based staff, and gaining community feedback throughout, the project will create a model for other archival platforms and repositories.

**IV. Project Results:** **a) increase public access i)** through community collaboration **ii)** to address access barriers to Indigenous archival collections, **iii)** using new cultural, descriptive, and technical tools and **iv)** open access community-oriented training; **b) develop an iterative, community co-design process** that benefits community members, technologists and digital humanists working with other marginalized communities; **c) create evidence-based, culturally-relevant approaches** to increasing digital access for the broader cultural heritage field; we will promote **d) new Indigenous SNAC training** and promotional video via the community networks built during our [2021 Indigenous SNAC edit-a-thon](#) (which yielded 80 volunteers and 30 Indigenous participants), including Indigenous information list-serves (e.g. [GRASAC](#), Big Ten Native Alliance, Knowledge River program), and conference networks (e.g. NAISA, ATALM). SNAC Training modules will be online permanently and offered live periodically by NARA SNAC staff.

**V. Budget Summary:** The \$457,225 covers costs related to stipends for Indigenous Advisory Board (\$15,000), compensation for Native and Indigenous virtual Focus Groups (4 groups of 7 members, each meeting twice = \$14,500), compensation for five Tribally-based Project Archivists part-time for three years (\$22,500), a three-year GA-ship and tuition for Lydia Curliss (\$178,204), a part-time consulting developer in year 1 (\$34,000); summer support for the project director (\$39,541), UMD networked storage space to store recordings and data sustainably (\$120/yr = \$360); transcription of Focus Group recordings (\$1800), Indigenous Film Student support to produce a promotional video (\$2100), project website (\$660); PC laptops and hard drives for Project Archivists (\$3500), Mac computer for GA (\$3000), and negotiated 54.5% indirect cost (\$141,190).