University of Tennessee
Rural Libraries for Digital Inclusion of Farming Communities

Summary: This $149,974 one-year planning grant, which aligns with the Laura Bush Program's Goal 2 and Objective 2.1, addresses information and broadband challenges in rural communities by partnering the School of Information Sciences at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville (UTK) with the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture (UTIA), rural public libraries in Tennessee, and statewide 4-H network agents. The partners will (1) collect and analyze information and technology (I&T) needs of farming communities, (2) gather and assess the willingness, capabilities, needs, and challenges of rural public libraries to meet the I&T needs of farming communities in Tennessee, (3) identify challenges and solutions for rural public libraries to collaborate with 4-H network to better serve farming communities, and (4) identify interdisciplinary courses, guest speakers, and practicum opportunities as part of building a certificate program on "Digital Inclusion of Farming Communities" for public librarians.

Project Justification: Public libraries are expected to serve as anchors of communities in rural America (IMLS, 2016). Rural public libraries, for example, can serve as centers for accessing broadband. They can demonstrate the value of broadband to the local communities through innovative, I&T-enabled services and programming. Rural America, especially farming communities, can realize, experience, and benefit from broadband's potential of democratizing socioeconomic opportunities. However, due to low financial and human resources, public libraries struggle with meeting changing I&T needs of farming communities. Farming communities are key to influencing the socioeconomic landscape of rural America (US Department of Agriculture, 2021), but our preliminary survey of rural public librarians in Tennessee shows that most of the rural public libraries do not have any specific programming initiatives to serve farming communities. Our survey also suggests that the possibility of reaching a patron base like farmers, who might not be aware of all the library's services, can motivate librarians to pursue the proposed certificate program housed in UTK's School of Information Sciences, the only ALA-accredited school in the state. None of the library and information science (LIS) graduate programs offer certificates on this topic.

Dr. Devendra Potnis, Principal Investigator (PI), has published research on the types of innovations in public libraries (Potnis, Winberry, Finn, and Hunt, 2019), managing innovations in public libraries (Potnis, Winberry, Finn, 2020), and challenges and solutions for planning and implementing social innovations in public libraries in the US (Winberry & Potnis, 2021). This research identifies gaps in the innovative services offered by public libraries and guides them to efficiently and effectively plan and implement innovations for better serving local communities. Building on this guidance, Dr. Potnis, Dr. Suzie Allard, Dr. Jamie Greig, Daniel Collins, Jamie Harris, and Dr. Shelli Rampold propose leveraging the popularity and pre-established network of 4-H, rural America's largest youth development organization that empowers nearly six million young adults with the skills to lead for a lifetime. The partnership with 4-H agents can help public libraries involve rural youth (i.e., people in the age group of 15 to 24) to meet the I&T needs of local farming communities. Our preliminary survey with 4-H agents in Tennessee found that 15 of them are already working with an equal number of rural public libraries for attracting and training youth with information literacy and technology skills, but an in-depth investigation is required to (a) understand the gaps and solutions for equipping the 4-H youth to help farming communities with their technology needs, and (b) design, establish and promote a programming initiative in public libraries where public librarians would work with the 4-H youth for meeting the I&T needs of local farming communities.

Project Work Plan: Phase 1: In the first two months, we will collect and analyze the I&T needs of farming communities in rural Tennessee. **Phase 2:** In 3-6 months of this planning grant, we will survey and interview librarians and administrators of rural public libraries in Tennessee to understand their willingness, capabilities, needs, and challenges to meeting the I&T needs of farming communities. This phase will help us understand how embedded rural public libraries are in farming communities. **Phase 3:** In 7-9 months of this planning

grant, we will identify and assess the existing collaborations between 4-H and rural public libraries. We will also identify challenges and solutions for rural public libraries to collaborate with the 4-H agents and the youth trained by them for better serving farming communities. This phase will also explore and assess the possibility of involving the youth trained by 4-H agents for helping public librarians meet the I&T needs of farming communities. **Phase 4:** The findings of the first three phases will help us design a certificate program, "Digital Inclusion of Farming Communities," for public librarians. In 10-12 months, we will identify interdisciplinary courses, practicum opportunities, and guest speakers for the proposed certificate program.

Diversity Plan: Public librarians trained using our newly proposed certificate program can bring a new lens to rural libraries for developing and nurturing novel partnerships with local youth, 4-H agents, and farming communities. Most of the farms in Tennessee employ less than 500 employees, and hence, represent small businesses. This project will create an opportunity for rural libraries to offer their spaces, human resources, technology resources, and information resources for creating value for small businesses in rural America. Rural youth's engagement with and training of farming communities to meet their I&T needs can generate employment opportunities for the youth. New connections, diverse perspectives of people from different age groups and races, and new information related to I&T needs, resources, and solutions, shared at social events and meetings in rural libraries, can lead to long-lasting, symbiotic relationships among public librarians, 4-H agents, rural youth, and farming communities. Rural libraries can experience an increased footfall and patronage of local young adults and members of farming communities. As a result, these libraries might design and develop new programming initiatives dedicated to serving farming communities.

Project Results: The symbiotic partnership among the rural youth, farming communities, 4-H agents, and rural public libraries can lead to (a) building a community of practice for generating and sharing I&T-related challenges and local solutions for rural communities, (b) strengthening the social fabric of rural America, (c) economic prosperity led by the agriculture industry, (d) helping farmers make decisions by accessing the right information at the right time using technology solutions, (e) better utilization of library resources including space, (f) strengthening ties through increased engagement with youth and farmers, (g) elevate the perceived value and utility of public libraries for rural America, (h) a template of collaboration between public libraries and 4-H to help farming communities, (i) a new area of service for rural libraries, and (j) help rural libraries better articulate their significance and value for local communities. Our preliminary survey with public librarians shows that public librarians are expected to attend a certain number of hours of professional development training. The proposed certificate program can inform, train, and equip librarians with the necessary skills and knowledge needed to better serve their farming communities. The certificate program will strengthen the partnership between public libraries and the 4-H network to benefit public libraries, local farming communities, the 4-H network, and rural youth. Thus, this planning grant will help us design a certificate program for training public librarians to strengthen rural libraries' engagement with farming communities where youth trained by 4-H agents would help along with public librarians to meet the I&T, especially information and broadband-related needs of farming communities, thereby meeting Goal #2 and objective #2.1 of the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program.

Budget Summary: The requested budget is $149,974. The requested budget for UTK is $106,728. This includes: 1) PI salary and fringe benefits $24,877; 2) Co-PI salaries and fringe benefits $10,218; 3) Travel and registration cost for the PI and GRA to present findings at a LIS conference and an agriculture-related conference for a total of $6,650; 4) One graduate research assistant for the PI for a year for $29,090; 5) research subject incentives for $5,000; and 6) indirect costs @ 53% on-campus research for $30,893. The requested budget for UTIA is $43,246. This includes 1) PI/Co-PI salary and fringe benefits of $27,616; 2) Contractual services of $1,000; 3) Conference travel of $4,500; and 4) indirect costs @ 45% for PI salary and fringe, travel, and contractual services and 20% for Co-PI salary and fringe for $10,130.