

### **College Fluency Capacity Building: Empowering librarians to serve students navigating college**

The Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), with support from Ithaka S+R, requests \$364,145 for an *Applied Research grant* to build the capacity of librarians and library workers to help students successfully navigate institutional resources and services for their holistic needs. This project will advance *LB21 Goal 3 - Objective 3.2* by increasing “college fluency” for staff and students through the development of workshops, reports, and collaborative consulting to turn evidence into action.

**Project Justification:** Recent Ithaka S+R research has demonstrated how [students struggle with non-curricular challenges that affect their success](#), such as balancing family, work, and school responsibilities, having enough money to pay for courses and basic needs, and navigating college resources and services. These challenges, which have been [exacerbated by COVID-19](#), are particularly relevant to first generation and low income students [who are disproportionately served by community colleges](#). When presented with [possible interventions to address these needs](#), students—particularly historically underserved students with less prior exposure to the vocabulary and norms of higher education—indicated that a priority would be greater support in navigating information related to the college experience (e.g., advising, financial aid, career planning). Other researchers have also documented that first generation students find [non-academic information needs to be a bigger concern than academic ones](#).

These survey data also [indicate that students see library information professionals as an important source of support for navigating college resources](#), and some librarians are already playing this role. For example, BMCC librarians connect students to information about admissions, technology services, building closures, student affairs services, and taking online classes. However, providing support to students for non-curricular information needs is not a straightforward task for librarians. Services are offered by myriad institutional providers that may not be in close coordination with one another, posing barriers to developing a shared understanding of existing services. The field has seen positive outcomes, however, when schools have proactively addressed these barriers. For instance, the president of one community college tapped the library to lead the creation of a [campus-wide online knowledge base](#). Dedicated librarian roles for liaising with student affairs are also being created elsewhere. Data gathered by Ithaka S+R [from hundreds of community college library directors nationally](#) indicates that a majority would highly value additional capacity building efforts towards new models like these for connecting students with information from other college services or departments.

**Project Work Plan:** We propose a multi-site, librarian-led project to explore strategies to help scale up the delivery of “college fluency” library services, which we define as those that *enhance the ability of students and staff to effectively locate and use relevant college services, programs, and resources*, through the following research questions: 1) What structures, capacities, and relationships currently exist to foster the development of college fluency within and in collaboration with community college libraries?, 2) What cultural and structural challenges exist for developing college fluency among librarians and students, both for in-person and virtual support?, and 3) What are possible new and expanded roles for librarians and other support providers in developing college fluency?

**Phase I: Profiling institutions with existing roles and models (Sep 2022–Feb 2023).** We will identify 3–5 institutions with compelling librarian-led models for supporting non-curricular information needs by leveraging existing relationships, listserv outreach, and desk research, including institutions with both newly implemented as well as mature, large-scale models.<sup>1</sup> Once identified, we will virtually interview library and non-library staff (5–10 per institution, including staff in advising, financial aid, and disability services) on their model, challenges, opportunities, and measures of success. We will publish a synopsis of each model and host a panel webinar with members from each partner institution to immediately share findings with the library community and help recruit site visit locations for the next phase of work.

**Phase II: Conducting site visits (Mar–Dec 2023).** We will conduct site visits at 3–5 colleges that do not presently have formalized roles or models in place, to examine challenges and opportunities associated with directing students to the resources they need. To select these colleges, we will issue an open call for applications, employing social media, library listservs (e.g., ACRL’s CJCLS), and relationships with professional associations. Sites will be selected based on expressed interest, ability to act on findings, and diversity of selected institutions (based on student body, geographic location, size, etc.). During site visits, we will interview librarians, non-library staff such as advisors, and institutional leadership (approx. 5–10 per site) to develop a mapped visualization of how they are directing students and interacting with colleagues in other offices; these interviews will inform the development of the survey in the next phase.

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<sup>1</sup> Several prospective models and parent institutions, including those mentioned earlier in the proposal, have already been identified.

**Phase III: Taking it to scale via survey (Jan–Mar 2024).** We will survey librarians, academic advisors, counselors, enrollment specialists, and financial aid staff at community colleges nationally about their practices and perspectives on developing greater college fluency across students and staff. Areas of interest include who students approach for information on services provided by other offices, how familiar staff are with these services, and how aware they are of when students receive or do not receive the help they need. The information gathered in this phase, which we estimate will represent the perspectives of approximately 1,000–1,500 individual respondents across different geographic regions, college sizes, and student bodies, will be used to identify relative areas of strength and opportunities for greater support to build librarian capacity to assist with college fluency.

**Phase IV: Amplifying college fluency (Apr–Aug 2024).** We will issue a public capstone report with recommendations for community college library leaders to utilize in building capacity to support students' wide-ranging information needs. We will also host three public workshops independently and alongside relevant conferences (e.g., ACRL, Achieving the Dream) to share strategies for staff to bring back to their own libraries. Participants will assess current capacity to address non-curricular information needs and develop roadmaps for building this capacity through collaboration and service implementation. A project website will be established to organize all workshop materials and project reporting for librarians across the country to access in the long-term.

**Project Team:** Jean Amaral, co-principal investigator and Associate Professor at BMCC, has been the PI on two community college studies and collaborated on several others, including two national projects. In her role as Open Knowledge Librarian, Amaral has extensive experience designing and delivering professional development for librarians, faculty, and staff. Christine Wolff-Eisenberg, co-PI and Manager of Surveys and Research at Ithaka S+R, leads a team in studying research, teaching, and learning support services, student and faculty needs, and organizational leadership in collaboration with educational organizations. Melissa Blankstein, Ithaka S+R Analyst, will also provide day-to-day project management and lead the development of research instruments. This project team has collaborated successfully on a recent [IMLS-funded project on community college libraries and student success](#) that directly informed the development of this proposal.

We will engage closely with an external advisory board comprised of 4–5 community college library directors, student affairs leaders, and other leading experts. The following professionals with experience in the area of holistic student needs have agreed to serve and additional advisors will be sought out to represent community college library leadership perspectives: Laurie Fladd, Director of Holistic Student Supports, Achieving the Dream; Dallas Long, Dean, Milner Library, Illinois State University, and [scholar on library and student affairs collaborations](#); and Mark McBride, Library Senior Strategist, Office of Library and Information Services, SUNY System Administration.

**Diversity Plan:** This capacity building initiative is ultimately designed for community college librarians to serve their students, a diverse constituency predominantly from low-income households. We are also addressing inequities within higher education, where attention, [funding](#), and [research](#) is directed more substantially to four-year institutions than two-year. In selecting site visits, we will consider geographic representation and student profiles to ensure diverse representation, including minority-serving institutions. For interviews, we will seek diverse participants across roles, including individuals from offices such as veterans services, accessibility services, and offices focused on first generation students, students of color, as well as LGBTQ students. When inviting additional individuals to the advisory board, we will strive to ensure diverse representation, including a range of individual identities.

**Project Results:** Project findings will empower librarians to establish cross-institutional relationships and envision new and expanded roles, ultimately leading to more effective support of holistic student needs. Associated deliverables include: 1) profiles of service adopters, 2) collaborative consulting for non-adopters, 3) open webinars on interim findings and ways to get involved in future capacity building opportunities, 4) a capstone report with qualitative and national survey findings, and recommendations for librarians and non-library audiences, and 5) workshops to help librarians assess and enact readiness for greater service provision. We expect blog posts and reports on Ithaka S+R and BMCC websites to reach several thousand readers across higher education and workshops to directly engage with several hundred librarians.

**Budget Summary:** We estimate that this project will cost a total of \$364,145 over a grant period of 24 months. Of this total, BMCC will receive \$73,477 for personnel, \$13,500 for travel, \$10,000 for advisor and site visit stipends, and \$52,168 for indirect costs (negotiated rate 71%); \$215,000 will be a subaward to Ithaka S+R (including \$147,000 for personnel, \$15,500 for travel to conduct site visits and attend conferences, \$2,000 for survey incentives, \$2,500 for survey invitee lists, and \$48,000 in indirect costs).