

### **Summary**

The University of Iowa School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) seeks to investigate community memory practices for small, rural, and tribal libraries and integrate these practices into a curricular training program for rural library professionals. A Forum grant of \$150,000 will fund a series of meetings with an expert advisory panel of rural librarians who will collaborate to inform the development of a lightweight, affordable, online certificate program designed to train and network working library professionals in rural information environments nationwide. This network of professionals, we hope, will intensify community bonds using memory practices as inclusive and activating agents of citizenship and belonging; and, further, diversify community memory records, leading to greater equity in community narratives.

Our project leverages partnerships with the UI Office of Community Engagement, the Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities, and the Iowa Small Library Association, and builds on past collaborations between our program and small and rural memory institutions such as Washington Public Library (IA), Kendall Young Library (Webster City, IA) and others. These projects have revealed the dire need for training in community memory practices, as rural libraries' distance from other memory institutions often positions these libraries to be the sole inheritors and stewards of community memory records, from genealogical documents to newspaper archives to oral histories. The planning period for this project was supported by a \$12,000 research grant from the University of Iowa's Obermann Center for Advanced Studies.

### **Project Justification**

We endeavor to meet Objective 3.5 of the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program Goals and Objectives by supporting training of the library and archival workforce in small, rural, and tribal libraries to manage community-engaged archives sustainably and equitably. Nearly four in ten public libraries in the US are located in rural communities and serve more than 30 million Americans, and one-third of public library buildings serve populations of 2,500 people or fewer and are staffed by, on average, two full-time-equivalent persons (IMLS, September 2013). Yet rural librarians have been neglected in the iSchool movement of graduate education in library and information science, which privileges computer and data science and "big data" paradigms that largely do not scale down into the practices of smaller memory institutions. Further, professionals interested in rural library work often follow curricular tracks in public librarianship that exclude archival practices. Our project responds to the struggles of rural library professionals, who constitute our target group. Aligned with recent research by Michelle Caswell and others, we view community memory archives as crucial sites for place-making and for engendering feelings of engagement and belonging (Bastian & Alexander, 2009; Bastian & Flinn, 2020). Moreover, community memory records tell important stories that should include community denizens who have been historically excluded from such archives (Kelland, 2018; Flinn, Stevens & Shepherd, 2009; Bettine & Mattock, 2019). Often such records go unmanaged and underused, and reflect only the narratives of majority or dominant populations represented by, for instance, self-selecting local historical societies. We will also draw from culturally situated practices of rural knowledge-sharing (Qi Tianjiao, Marisa Duarte) and Indigenous ways of knowing (Sandy Littletree) to inform a training program that will condition professionals to become aware and inclusive of the cultural pluralities that constitute the often vast service areas of small libraries. By fall of 2024, we aim to assemble a cohort of twelve rural library professionals—six working professionals and six full-time SLIS students—with whom to launch our new program, scaling each cohort accordingly thereafter based on program capacity.

SLIS is uniquely situated to provide training in rural community memory practices, not only as an ALA-accredited program in a rural-library-rich region of the Midwest, but also as a department supported by the University of Iowa's abiding commitments to community engagement, digital humanities, and public humanities. Our alumni network covers a Midwestern region with the highest percentages of rural libraries in the US outside of Alaska and Vermont (Iowa, 78%; North Dakota, 81.6%; and South Dakota, 78.6%) (IMLS, September 2013). Our unique curricular offerings at the intersection of community engagement, library practice, archives and media, and special collections position us felicitously to serve community memory needs for small, rural, and tribal libraries. The co-PIs for this project are, together, specialized in archives, digital records management, rural communities, community engagement, and volunteer management.

### **Project Work Plan**

During the first month of the grant, the co-PIs will hire a graduate assistant, targeting an incoming SLIS student interested in committing to the project for the two-year grant period. During August of 2022, the advisory panel will assemble for

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the first of six meetings scheduled over the first year of the grant period. Our advisory board will include practitioners and experts from tribal libraries as well as from rural-library-rich areas outside the Midwest (Alaska, Vermont, and the South). Our graduate assistant will plan all meetings of the advisory board and facilitate data collection and analysis under the supervision of the co-PIs during this year. Semi-structured interview questions elaborating on the following queries will facilitate conversations with the advisory board members to assess the current and future needs of cultural heritage collections in rural libraries.

- Meeting #1, September 2022: Introductions—What challenges are unique to rural libraries? Meeting #2, October 2022: Collections—What cultural heritage collections exist? Who do collections represent, and who is missing? Are the collections accessible?
- Meeting #3, November 2022: Staffing—What skills are critical to their work? What do potential rural librarians need to know? What do volunteers need to know? What do librarians wish they knew?
- Meeting #4, February 2023 Infrastructure—What resources are needed to provide access to collections? What are libraries' technological needs for digital preservation and access?
- Meeting #5, March 2023 Community—What communities are rural libraries serving? How are those communities changing? How do collections represent communities?
- Meeting #6 April 2023 Summary—How would you design a curriculum for LIS professionals in training? What best practices need to be modified to better suit your collections?

From May–August 2023, co-PIs and the graduate assistant will work together to evaluate the responses from the advisory board and draft a proposal for curricular changes to be implemented for the 2024-2025 academic year. Drafts of the curriculum will be circulated digitally with the advisory board for additional feedback. SLIS faculty will vote on proposed curricular changes during the September 2023 faculty meeting, and a proposal for a graduate certificate will be submitted to the Graduate College for approval during the 2023-2024 academic year. The graduate student and co-PIs will work with faculty to revise and develop syllabi for new courses, identify community projects and collaborators, and publish the curriculum and associated documentation openly through the SLIS website and University Institutional Repository. We will openly share our findings in a webinar hosted by SLIS during the Spring of 2024 semester. The free seminar will be open to current students, alumni, the research community, and professionals working in small and rural libraries. This event will promote the work of the project team and advisory board, our research findings, and serve as a recruiting mechanism for the new graduate certificate. In addition, the project team will draft an article for the *Journal of Library and Information Science* and submit proposals to present at the Association of Rural and Small Libraries Conference (Fall 2023), ALISE annual conference (Fall 2023), and SAA annual conference (Summer 2024). The IMLS grant will be credited on all curricular materials, presentations, and publications.

The \$150,000 budget will support summer salary for co-PI Micah Bateman in years one and two of the grant (\$33K salary/fringe); a half-time appointment for a fiscal year graduate assistant in year one and an academic year appointment in year two (\$64K salary/fringe and \$24K tuition); five \$1,500 stipends for advisory panel members in year one (\$7,500); and conference travel for co-PI Micah Bateman during year two (\$4,500). Mattock will support her travel expenses and summer research with her University research funds and salary.

### **Diversity Plan**

Our research and curriculum will reflect memory practices that de-center white, Western archival methods. In particular, we aim to attend to the rural memory practices of certain demographics who have been largely excluded from LIS research, such as Asian Americans and Black Americans living in rural communities. The Forum grant will also allow us to recruit and compensate an advisory panel who will represent region-specific and culturally situated memory practices. We also hope that our research and curriculum will be used widely in LIS programs to help include non-dominant populations in library engagement as well as to include their voices in community histories.

### **Project Results**

The growing body of literature about community archives demonstrates the need for scalable best practices for cultural heritage preservation and access. This project is an opportunity to include the perspectives of the librarians who are tasked with preserving community memory as collaborators in the development of a curriculum that serves their needs and increases their capacity. We'll provide an adaptable model for community memory and engagement that is directly applicable to the most remote communities. Our enduring deliverables from this Planning grant will include an open-source curriculum with open educational resources, a whitepaper, and a recorded webinar. Professionals who do not enroll in our proposed program will still have access to our materials. We will maintain these resources in the University of Iowa's open digital repository.