

The University of North Carolina Greensboro

Reading Nation Waterfall: Increasing Access to Literacy and Libraries for Native American Children and Families

Overview. The University of North Carolina Greensboro will serve as the lead institution and is seeking \$742,633.00 in IMLS funds and will provide \$742,633.00 in cost share along with its partners across three years. The project will have six partners: The National Head Start Association, Blackfoot Nation (Montana), Cherokee Nation (North Carolina), Crow Nation (Montana), Lumbee Nation (North Carolina), and Santo Domingo Pueblo Nation (New Mexico). Our Project Grant proposal is focused on the Lifelong Learning category and the primary goal is to increase access to literary resources and libraries for Native American children and families. The anticipated outcomes of the project will be increased convenience, access, and availability to free, librarian curated children's books for Native American children, increased culturally relevant library programming and resources, and formation of strategic local partnerships between cross-disciplinary organizations working collaboratively to assess and address this issue locally.

Statement of National Need. From 2000 to 2017, aggregate 4th grade reading scores in the United States continuously increased while American Indian/Alaskan Natives decreased by 12 points, 20 points below the national average; 80% of these children are reading below the proficient level and the average score of 202 is well below the 209 basic proficiency level ([NAEP](#), 2017). The academic challenges for American Indian and Alaska Native students continue at the high school level as they have the nation's highest dropout rate at 10.1% in 2017, over double the dropout rate of White students (4.3%), and almost double the national average of 5.4% ([NCES](#), 2017). Finally, they also have the lowest high school graduation rate at 72.4% of all racial groups and are least likely to attend college (19%) ([NCES](#), 2017).

According to a 10-year longitudinal, nationwide study of nearly 4,000 students conducted by the Casey Foundation (2011), "those who don't read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers. For the worst readers, those (below) basic skills by third grade, the rate is nearly six times greater" ([Casey Foundation](#), 2011, p.3). In 2015, a landmark study conducted by The National Indian Education Study ([NIES](#)) surveyed 8,500 AI/AN fourth graders and found statistically significant differences in high performing vs low performing students due to differential access to three main resources: a school library that contained materials about their own culture and people, access to more than 25 books at home, and owning a computer. In addition, higher performing children reported that reading was one of their favorite activities ([NIES](#), 2015). A 2018 international study of 31 countries also found that growing up with home libraries with 80 or more books had statistically significant benefits in adulthood, "... adolescent exposure to books is an integral part of social practices that foster long term cognitive competencies and...(that) home library size has a loglinear effect on cognitive, numerical, and problem-solving skills that endure throughout life" ([Sikorra, Evanish, & Kelley](#), 2018, p.15).

A Piloting and Scaling Project. Founded and informed by a 2018-2019 IMLS Planning Grant, the Reading Nation Waterfall project is at the piloting and scaling maturity level and seeks to directly respond to existing research along with the findings of our own year-long study that identified multi-faceted barriers to access to books and libraries for Blackfoot children and youth, collectively representing a *book desert*. Our study's sample included 84 interviews, 105 randomly selected surveys, 53 parent surveys, and four focus groups. There were seven main findings: 1) The Blackfoot community in general did not value or prioritize reading or libraries, 2) school libraries were not well funded and students did not have easy access to them, 3) most did not visit the tribal/public library often, 4) participants were not read to frequently as children, 5) only 25% had more than 80 books in their home libraries, 6) libraries were not considered a popular destination on the reservation, and 7) significant disconnects existed between library services and programming and needs of the community ([Chow, LaFrombosie, & Roy](#), 2019).

Three Little Free Libraries (LFL) were piloted and placed at their Head Start preschool and K-1 and 2-3 grade elementary schools (the school district separates elementary grades into separate schools). In collaboration with

The University of North Carolina Greensboro

the Glacier Public Library and their Friends Group, additional funding was raised and each LFL was curated weekly with 10 new and 10 gently used children and adult books each week; all donated books by the public were pulled, reviewed for appropriateness, and either placed back or removed entirely. All books at all three locations were taken over a four-month period (approximately 1,000 books circulated). Our project will seek to continue to pilot and scale different ways to disseminate books to Native American children as well as engage the tribal nations using a community-centered approach to help assess needs, identify priorities, and design and develop culturally appropriate resources and programming focused on local, context-specific needs.

Project Design. Our Reading Nation Waterfall project will have one primary goal, to increase access to literary resources and libraries for Native American children and families, and three primary outcomes: 1) Build library and community strategic partnerships to assess and address increased access to culturally relevant library resources and programming across the lifespan; 2) Pilot provision of convenient access to reading resources by disseminating free, librarian-curated books into the hands of children in an immersive fashion: at home, in their neighborhoods, at preschool, and at elementary school; and, 3) Develop a web-based toolkit to enhance replicability and dissemination. Our Reading Nation Partners will be a formal collaboration between tribal, public, school libraries, and a local Head Start program. The partnership will operate as follows: **Year 1:** Develop a community advisory board; conduct a community assessment; design, develop, and implement customized and collaborative programming and resources; pilot three librarian curated Little Free Libraries (LFL) at their Head Start, elementary school, and in a residential area; finalize and implement project logic model and evaluate and assess project performance. **Year 2:** Refine project activities based on evaluation results; assess reading scores at kindergarten and 4th grade; design, develop, and pilot test initial web-based toolkit to support replicability and dissemination. **Year 3:** Refine project activities based on evaluation results; assess reading scores at kindergarten and 4th grade; project wide participant evaluation; launch toolkit with support from library associations and partners. The University of North Carolina Greensboro, home institution of one of the Reading Nation co-founders, will serve as the project and administrative host including the project director, a project manager, graduate assistants, evaluation services, and grant administration.

National Impact. This project represents an innovative opportunity for different types of libraries to collaborate with community organizations and take the lead in directly addressing a complex societal problem. Native American children and youth need greater access to books and libraries. The latter has an important role in the innovation necessary to find ways to increase access to books and develop community-centered programming for this population. Our project proposes to address one of the seminal challenges faced by our nation's public libraries: *how do we deliver children and youth materials to those that do not visit our libraries?* We propose a plan that extends selection and curation of library materials to a targeted population by providing them for free in spaces children in poverty already reside to maximize convenience and accessibility. In addition, we will work with tribal nations to develop culturally centered library programming and resources. Our project will have national impact in seven ways: 1) It further pilots, scales, and extends activities previously funded and tested in the field through an IMLS planning grant, 2) Expands these activities to new audiences, 3) Is easily replicable and implementable across the field, 4) Addresses all three aspects of the core mission of IMLS - Promote Lifelong Learning, Build Capacity, and Increase Public Access, 5) Focuses on the Lifelong Learning project category by working with cross disciplinary partners working with children from 0-10, 6) Establishes a team with the expertise, experience, and culturally appropriate perspective to implement the project, and 7) Develops and disseminates, in partnership with local and national library associations and community organizations, a Native American literacy and library web-based toolkit for easy replication.

Budget. The estimated total IMLS budget for the project is \$742,633 (d+i). Personnel: \$172,131 to include PI effort, student and project support; \$43,505 associated fringe; \$9,000 travel costs to sites and conference; \$2,689 for supplies; \$355,000 for 5 partner subcontracts; \$160,308 indirect costs. Budget includes matching costs of \$742,633.