Promoting Diversity Through a Shared and Inclusive Curriculum

Introduction: Simmons University School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) Professor Laura Saunders and co-PI Sanda Erdelez, Professor and SLIS Director, seek a 2-year IMLS National Leadership Grant of $247,255. In support of objective 1.2, "support the training and professional development of the museum and library workforce," the grant will implement a nation-wide system to develop, audit, and share LIS courses with an equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) focus. A lack of attention to EDI in LIS degree programs is a barrier to recruiting and retaining students from historically marginalized backgrounds and thereby further diversifying the profession, and limits the ability of all students to engage in social justice and EDI work. The challenge of developing and delivering such courses is exacerbated by efforts in some states to curtail diversity-focused programs and curricula. The current program will begin to address these challenges by: 1) refining and sharing tools for diversity audits of LIS curricula, along with training for the tools; 2) developing a program similar to WISE consortium. whereby LIS schools can share EDI-focused courses and students can seamlessly take and transfer credits for these courses across participating schools; and, 3) engaging SLIS EDI and Library Fellows in providing curricular and program feedback from the perspective of students from historically marginalized communities. The project team will be guided by a review board of current students and alums from historically marginalized backgrounds, including the current SLIS Library Fellows, and an advisory board of LIS program faculty and directors to consult on policies for the course-sharing platform.

Project Justification: The field of library and information science is severely lacking in diversity[1], and programs to increase diversity have met with limited success[2],[3]. Systemic barriers to recruiting and retaining people from marginalized backgrounds include: length and cost of master's degree; unpaid internships; lack of representation in the field and degree programs; and lack of confrontation of systemic bias of the field within LIS curricula[4],[5],[6],[7] In 2020 SLIS applied for a planning IMLS grant to develop a program to begin to address these barriers. Although the grant was not funded, SLIS used internal resources to move forward with the following aspects of the program: 1) launched the Library Fellows Program which offers talented students from marginalized backgrounds tuition support; meaningful, paid work in an LIS setting at either half or full-time for the duration of their program; and mindful mentorship; 2) engaged a Ph.D. student as a EDI Fellow to develop, test, and implement a process to conduct a diversity audit of the SLIS curriculum; and, 3) developed a partnership with San Jose University's School of Information on iLead project, funded by the IMLS planning grant to develop a leadership program with an EDI focus. The proposed project will build on these existing resources to address two outstanding issues in the field: a lack of diversity in LIS program curricula, and a lack of access to EDI courses for students especially in areas facing regional pressures to curtail diversity programming. The project will result in several concrete deliverables: 1) an open-access set of tools to undertake a curriculum diversity audit; and training/mentoring on undertaking an EDI curriculum audit; 2) a system for sharing EDI courses across LIS programs nationwide. An additional outcome will be to use a participatory design process to engage MSLIS students and recent alums from historically marginalized backgrounds to inform the development of the project and especially of the curriculum. By increasing access to EDI courses, and establishing replicable practices and support for developing and improving EDI-focused courses, this project directly supports objective 1.2 and will provide mechanisms for increasing the cultural competence and social justice practice of emerging LIS professionals.

Project Work Plan: The high-level activities and overall sequence of work for this project are as follows: In year one, PI Laura Saunders will work with the PhD-level EDI Fellow to complete testing and implementation of the curricular audit tools already in development and organize mechanisms and licenses to share the tools and begin developing a project website. Concurrently, co-PI Sanda Erdelez will hire and work with an administrator to develop a system similar to WISE Consortium and establish any necessary work-flows and procedures. She will also work with the advisory board to recruit LIS programs to participate in the new course-sharing platform. In years one and two, Dr. Saunders will work with the EDI Fellow to begin soliciting and reviewing EDI courses from LIS programs to be shared on the course-sharing platform. In year two, Dr. Saunders and the EDI Fellow will also develop and deliver training for LIS faculty to implement the curriculum audit tools and offer consulting on such audits. During this time, Dr. Erdelez will continue to oversee administration of the course-sharing platform, recruit participants, and promote the curriculum audit tools and training.

Immediately upon funding, the PI and co-PI will recruit and convene a student review board and a faculty/director advisory board (Heidi Julien, University of Buffalo; Lisa O'Connor, UNC Greensboro; Anthony Chow, San Jose State; Denice Adkins, University of Missouri; Lenese Colson, Valdosta State; and Jamie Nadoo, University of Alabama have expressed willingness to join). Both Drs. Saunders and Erdelez will work together with the student review board to develop a participatory process for reviewing and providing feedback on courses submitted to the platform. The

EDI fellow will train student review board members on use of the curriculum audit tools with assistance from Dr. Saunders. The advisory board will consult on policies and procedures for the course-sharing platform, including alignment with their respective schools. The project team will have monthly check-ins to track progress toward goals and will have quarterly meetings with the advisory board to gather input and feedback on the overall project and its deliverables.

Diversity Plan: Diversity is central to this project. MSLIS degree students will be the direct beneficiaries of broader access to well-vetted courses with an EDI focus. However, the project will also impact the field and the communities served by these librarians by graduating students with a stronger grounding in EDI and, along with the other programs implemented by SLIS and SJSU described above, helping to increase representation of historically marginalized and underrepresented communities in the field. Upon successful completion, this nation-wide course-sharing platform will democratize access to EDI-advancing MSLIS courses for graduate students, regardless of their geographic location and political landscape. It will empower students of marginalized backgrounds by incorporating their perspectives in the audit process. The IMLS funds will be utilized to establish the system (i.e., platform, workflows, administrative protocols). The project team will foster and leverage strategic partnerships between SLIS, SJSU, and other potential partners to secure the sustainable growth and stability of the platform. This sustainable access to EDI-advancing courses will make MLIS programs more just and sensitive to the nuances of serving diverse communities. Consequently, the graduates from these programs are better equipped to serve these communities. Furthermore, this initiative will enhance the appeal of participating MSLIS programs to students of marginalized backgrounds who otherwise might not feel they belong in the field of LIS. By bridging geographical and political gaps, this project embodies our commitment to creating a more inclusive and equitable LIS discipline and profession.

Project Results:

1. Curricular Audit Tools & Faculty Training: Tools and training materials for inclusive pedagogy and anti-racist education (e.g., a rubric to review syllabi, checklist of language and policies that promote inclusiveness, accessibility checklists; a process to identify curricular gaps; and protocols for surveys and listening sessions with faculty, students, and alums to further understand how EDI topics are integrated into courses beyond what is visible in the syllabus) to be shared on the project website through open access licenses and through conference presentations, social media, free online webinars (e.g., through ALISE webinar series and LIS Pedagogy Chat), and other outreach. **Goal alignment:** Openly licensed curriculum audit tools will help programs review and improve their own curriculum, while free training will assist in the use of the tools. Diversity audits can result in specific recommendations for improving attention to EDI in the curriculum, leading to LIS programs with stronger attention to EDI areas such as cultural competence and social justice and LIS program graduates better prepared to work with diverse populations. A more EDI-focused curriculum also addresses one of the barriers to diversifying the profession and could, along with other initiatives, help recruit and retain a more diverse student population.

2. Curriculum Sharing Program: National platform for sharing EDI curricula similar to the WISE consortium. WISE is an existing platform developed to facilitate sharing of courses and transfer of credits across LIS programs nationwide. As of 2023, UNC is relinquishing administrative oversight of the program. SLIS, in partnership with SJSU through their collaborative iLead project, will adapt, extend, and rebrand this system as a platform focused on sharing EDI courses. Working with the curriculum audit materials and the advisory board, the project team will develop a set of outcomes and a rubric for vetting courses. Submitted courses will go through a review using the audit tools, and programs will receive feedback on their courses. Accepted courses will be made available to students in LIS programs across the country, with streamlined transfer of credits. **Goal alignment:** Similar to 1) Curricular audit tools above, this will increase EDI in the curriculum and make that curriculum more accessible to students in LIS programs across the country.

3. Engaging Students from Historically Marginalized Backgrounds: Students and recent alums from LIS schools across the country will be recruited to serve on a review committee that will consult on development of the project deliverables and engage in audits of curricular materials, especially courses submitted to the shared platform. This participatory approach will honor and value the knowledge and experience of students from historically marginalized backgrounds and will recognize their labor through stipends. SLIS Library and EDI fellows will be engaged, along with students/alums from other programs. **Goal alignment:** Centers, honors, and remunerates voices from historically marginalized communities to inform EDI curriculum in a participatory approach.

Budget: $247,885: PhD support ($13,767 stipend + fringe). Stipend/salary/fringe benefits for co-PIs ($108,923); stipends for student review board ($20,000); conference travel for project staff ($7500); materials ($500); temp admin support ($25,175); advisory board stipends ($10,000) indirect costs ($81,519).

References (http://slis.simmons.edu/blogs/lsaunders/imls-proposal-references/)