Students Taking Center Stage:
Developing a Student-centered Outreach Model for Academic Archives

Introduction

Towson University, in collaboration with Central Michigan University and Georgia State University, seeks a two-year Forum project grant totaling $149,998 from the IMLS National Leadership Grants for Libraries program to bring together students, faculty, and practitioners at a series of virtual forums to discuss student-centered outreach programming in academic archives. These forums will inform a data-driven, cost-effective, and generalizable student-centered outreach model for academic archives that will be disseminated to librarians, archivists, educators, and undergraduate and graduate students across the country. Our project builds on existing research conducted at Towson University and aligns with NLG-L goal 5, objective 5.1 by inviting students, practitioners, faculty, and allied professionals to work collaboratively and share decision-making to gather perspectives on and suggestions for student-centered outreach.

Project Justification

Academic archivists and librarians dedicate significant time, energy, and resources to outreach programming with the goal of encouraging students to visit, donate to, and make use of campus archives, because archives are essential evidence of our communities' histories and a primary resource in empowering students to combat misinformation. But the literature consistently shows that student awareness of archives is low, which means that students are highly unlikely to engage with archives as researchers or donors. A primary goal of this project is to increase all students' sense of belonging within academic archives. Students are important agents and collaborators in accessing, preserving, and contributing to history, and their intellectual and material contributions to the archives have value. Though there are many types of archives, A*CENSUS II noted the plurality of U.S. archivists (38%) work at academic archives, meaning that low levels of student awareness and engagement is a challenge faced by a significant portion of the field. Traditional forms of outreach such as exhibits, class visits, and lecture series too often position students as passive recipients of information rather than collaborators and agents. Some archivists have implemented outreach programs that engage students as active participants; however, these programming examples are case studies that reflect the experiences of single institutions, not replicable models. Our project will result in a generalizable model for student-centered outreach programming that recognizes students' needs and perspectives and will increase awareness, engagement, and a sense of belonging in the archives among student populations of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and varied educational goals.

The project team includes Dr. Ashley Todd-Diaz (PI), Peyton Cleary (Co-PI), Brittany Newberry (Co-PI), and Bryan Whitledge (Co-PI). Dr. Todd-Diaz is Assistant University Librarian for Special Collections and University Archives at Towson University. Peyton Cleary is a first-year MLIS student at Simmons University. Brittany Newberry is an archivist and curator for Special Collections and Archives at Georgia State University. Bryan Whitledge is the Public Services Librarian and Archivist at the Clarke Historical Library at Central Michigan University. Together they possess nearly 40 years of archival experience. The project team will also benefit from the expertise of a six-person advisory group including first- and third-year undergraduate students; graduate student Jasmine Malone; HBCU archivist Tiffany Atwater Lee; former chair of SAA's Reference, Access, and Outreach section Jay-Marie Bravent, and a faculty member. As a student-faculty-practitioner research team, we are uniquely qualified to bridge the gap between students and archivists.

Project Work Plan

High-level activities include quarterly virtual advisory board meetings, a forum for undergrad and graduate students (Winter 2025), a forum for faculty and library and archives professionals (Summer 2025), a forum for all participants (Fall 2025), and a period of data analysis, model development, and dissemination (Fall 2025–Spring/Summer 2026).

In August 2024, the project team will submit an IRB application for this project. The advisory board will convene for quarterly meetings starting in September 2024, with meeting agendas set and disseminated by the project team. The purpose of the first meeting will be to plan the student forum. Student forum participants will be recruited via Handshake, job boards, campus email, and university communications departments across all partner institutions. Interested students will provide demographic data as well as their current awareness of archives via a brief Google Form. Upon reviewing the responses, the advisory board will invite 20 students representing diverse backgrounds, disciplines, academic years, and experiences with archives to participate. The half-day virtual forum using video conferencing software will gather student perspectives on libraries and archives, outreach initiatives,

interest in collective memory, and preferred methods of engagement. The forum will include whole-group discussion and breakout sessions. Breakout sessions will consist of five students and at least two project team members or advisors to facilitate. All breakout sessions will be formatted around the same set of discussion prompts. Facilitators will explain the prompts, answer questions, and take notes; the objective is to hear from the students. A graduate assistant will take notes during the whole-group sessions. Each forum will also be recorded with the consent of participants.

The second half-day virtual forum, consisting of 20 faculty and professionals, will be planned by the advisory board in Spring 2025 and held virtually in Summer 2025. It will follow a similar structure as the student forum. Faculty and professional participants will be personally invited by the advisory board with the goal of bringing together voices representing a wide range of research areas, disciplines, and roles within the field to ensure a rich discussion. The forum will gather perspectives on student engagement and awareness, existing outreach efforts across institutions, and the concept of student-centered outreach via whole-group discussion and breakout sessions.

The final, full-day virtual forum will convene *all* project participants to discuss student-centered outreach. Prior to this forum, the project team will analyze the qualitative data collected from the first two forums to identify where the two groups' perspectives align and diverge, as well as any questions that were posed. These themes and questions will act as the basis of discussion points for the final forum It will follow a similar structure as the preceding forums. The project team will offer a brief overview of the preceding forums, moderate whole-group discussion, and oversee four breakout sessions of five students and five professionals. The goal of this forum is facilitating dialogue and collaboration between students and professionals regarding how to foster positive student engagement with the archives through student-centered outreach.

Following the conclusion of the final forum, the project team will again analyze the data collected to identify themes, persistent barriers, and emerging recommendations. Then, in consultation with the advisory board, the project team will spend the remainder of the funded period developing a best-practice model for student-centered outreach at academic archives directly informed by the forum discussions. The model will include data-driven and cost-effective guidelines for academic archivists and librarians interested in implementing student-centered outreach, recommendations for measuring and increasing student awareness, and resources for students to guide their engagement with the archives and enhance their information and primary source literacy skills. The project team will author a white paper to brief readers on the issues of student awareness, engagement, and sense of belonging and explain the student-centered outreach model and its benefits to stakeholders. The white paper, model, and data will be made publically available and widely accessible to all stakeholders via a project website, the SAA Dataverse, professional publications such as *American Archivist* and *College & Research Libraries,* and national and regional archives and library conferences beginning in Spring 2026.

Diversity Plan (Optional):

Our project will engage a wide array of student voices representing different races, ethnicities, academic backgrounds, and extracurricular engagement, which will enrich the resulting model and ensure its replicability. By involving students as forum participants as well as in advisory capacities, their diverse perspectives will be centered in every phase of the project, including in the model that is ultimately produced. Furthermore, because our institutions have highly diverse student bodies and represent varied geographic areas and enrollment size, we are confident that the project and its deliverables will represent diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Project Results:

The primary result of this project will be a model for student-centered outreach directly informed by the input of students, faculty, and practitioners. Following the conclusion of the funded period and the publication of the model in Spring 2026, the project team will continue to solicit feedback and refine the model. Though the initial model will chiefly address the needs of undergrad and graduate students and academic librarians and archivists, we plan to expand the scope of the project over time to benefit other types of cultural heritage institutions, such as government and community archives that also seek to strengthen their relationship with college-age students. By intentionally listening to more voices and incorporating more viewpoints into outreach planning, we aim to greatly increase students' sense of belonging and agency with respect to archives of varying kinds.

Budget Summary:

This project's request for $149,998 includes (1) Salaries and Wages ($17,288); (2) Fringe Benefits ($3,952); (3) Travel ($3,265); (5) Subawards and Contracts ($80,722); and (8) Indirect Costs ($44,771).