

Public Library Support of College Literacy in Appalachia

Africa S. Hands, PhD, Principal Investigator, seeks funding in the amount of \$153,254 through the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program for *Project CLiA*, a three-year Early Career Development research project to investigate and strengthen central Appalachian public libraries' support of college literacy. *Project CLiA* extends the PI's past research, conference presentations ([Green, et al., 2020](#); [Hands, 2020](#)), and practitioner-oriented book ([Hands, 2015](#)) by examining the research questions with a regional sample using content analysis and interview methods.

Statement of Need - This research will address the following questions:

RQ1: To what extent do public libraries in central Appalachia support the community's college literacy?

RQ2: What college literacy information, services, programs, and partnerships exist in public libraries?

a. Who is the target audience for programs and services?

b. What is the nature of libraries' partnerships with local, state, or regional organizations working to increase college enrollment in central Appalachia?

The PI defines *support* as the availability of resources, programs, services, or partnerships at the library as determined first, by the presence or absence of this information on library websites and second, through interviews with library staff. *College literacy* is defined as the possession of knowledge that assists one in making informed decisions about and to navigate higher education systems. Prospective college students in Appalachia face barriers to advancing their education: academic under-preparedness, lack of information about college and financial aid, lack of internet access, and few families members who attended college and can serve as advisors ([Hale et al., 2017](#)). The PI's past research on services and programs to college bound patrons in rural North Carolina found that college literacy efforts were mostly aimed at teens, rather than the wider prospective student community (Hands, 2020, forthcoming). According to [Shapiro et al. \(2019\)](#), 36 million Americans fit the category of "Some College, No Degree". In Appalachia adults age 25-64 attain bachelor's degrees at a rate 7% below the U.S. average, though the rate of those with high school diplomas was just 0.1% less than the U.S. average between 2014 and 2018 ([Pollard and Jacobsen, 2019](#)). Because college enrollment and demand for workforce training among adults increases in times of economic turbulence, e.g., the Great Recession ([Barshay, 2020](#)) and the COVID-19 pandemic, public libraries can be an important resource for adults seeking to retool their skillset or earn a certificate or degree. In central Appalachia circumstances are dire with unemployment higher and median household income and attainment of undergraduate degrees lower than other Appalachian subregions. Libraries can support prospective students by providing space for students to study or meet with college representatives, preparing staff to answer frequently asked questions about higher education, promoting (in-person and online) college prep materials in the collection, providing information literacy trainings to students, and partnering with local and regional organizations or agencies that prepare adults for the new careers. Such services or programs will be an added value in communities where the library is already a community hub. Given the complexities of academic systems, library users of all ages will benefit from the library's intentional engagement with this topic.

Project Design - The research questions will be addressed through a multi-case study of public libraries across 4 states (KY, TN, VA, WV) comprising the [central region](#) of Appalachia. *Project CLiA* begins with a website content analysis of a purposive sample of public libraries. Based on findings from the content analysis, the PI will select cases (i.e., libraries) for further examination and invite for interviews library staff responsible for programs, services, and/or partnerships. The PI aims for a minimum of 2 cases per state. Cases will be selected based on the existence of information, programs, partnerships, and/or services specific to college literacy with an emphasis on those with information-richness as revealed in the website content analysis. The cases will be augmented with relevant supplemental materials (e.g., brochures) provided by each case. The PI will create a semi-structured interview guide. After securing informed consent from participants, the interviews will be scheduled and conducted by phone or using a conferencing platform. The PI will digitally record interviews. A graduate assistant will assist with data collection and processing, scheduling interviews, obtaining informed consent, and data analysis. Interviewees will receive gift cards as incentive to participate. The PI will produce a resource guide for stakeholder communities highlighting cases and insights from this research.

Year 1 activities:

- Create data collection form and conduct content analysis of public library websites
- Clean and analyze data
- Produce manuscripts to disseminate initial findings

Year 2 activities:

- Create interview protocol incorporating insights from content analysis
- Select information-rich cases for interviews
- Conduct interviews and collect any supplemental materials that detail the library's work on this topic
- Transcribe interviews and conduct within-case and cross-case analyses
- Produce manuscripts to disseminate findings

Year 3 activities:

- Develop a resource guide that highlights programs, partnerships, and services at case study libraries positioning the public library as a viable partner for supporting college literacy and, in turn, economic development
- Create a plan to promote the guide to the library community and organizations such as the Appalachian Regional Commission, the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals, and the National Association for College Admission Counseling

Data Analysis - In addition to conducting descriptive statistics, a qualitative content analysis will be conducted on data generated from library websites. As appropriate to the data, a previously developed codebook (Hands, 2020, forthcoming) may be consulted as a starting point in this analysis. After transcribing and cleaning interview data, within- and cross-case analysis will be conducted ([Merriam & Tisdell, 2015](#)). Document analysis will be conducted on any supplemental materials.

Dissemination - Research findings from *Project CLiA* will be shared throughout the grant period with library professionals, state library agencies, professionals working in college recruitment, and workforce development programs. Papers will be submitted for presentation at national, state, and regional library conferences. Manuscripts will be submitted to peer-reviewed journals and practitioner publications for librarians, college personnel, and workforce developers. An online, printable resource guide highlighting library programs, partnerships, and services will be created and hosted on the PI's institution's website.

Broad Impact - This research will assist public libraries in developing programs and resources to serve educational interests in the target communities and position the library as a partner to organizations like the Appalachian Regional Commission with its 'Ready Workforce' [focus area](#). More public libraries serving as an educational resource for adults is a valuable economic and workforce development asset to any community. Insights from this project will also extend lifelong learning programs currently available at public libraries. *Project CLiA* will lay a path for other initiatives to address any needs expressed by library staff that would help further their work in this area.

Diversity Plan - The driving impetus for *Project CLiA* is the lack of college planning awareness among adult students ([Genco, 2007](#)). *Project CLiA* aims to strengthen information equity for college planning for those who were under-prepared as youth and carry that under-preparedness into adulthood to increase college enrollment and training participation. There is a growing population of African Americans and Latinxs in Appalachia. The guide will be promoted to libraries in these communities and those serving low-income households in addition to broader promotion to library professionals.

Budget - The requested funds of \$153,254 for *Project CLiA* will support personnel (2 course buyouts for PI, summer support for PI and a graduate assistant + fringe benefits (\$88,643); incentives for participants (\$400); digital recorder and headphones (\$150); conferencing platform (\$200); transcription services (\$100); travel for PI conference attendance (\$10,000); online resource guide design (\$2,000); and indirect cost (\$51,761) based on the negotiated on-campus rate of 51%.

PI - Dr. Hands is an assistant professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary Professions at East Carolina University. She employs qualitative methods to study college literacy in public libraries, public library services to underserved communities, and the experiences of first-generation LIS students. Her recent work investigates college literacy services in public libraries in rural North Carolina. She has previously worked in higher education admissions and academic advising.