

The Ferguson Library, Stamford, Connecticut

Project Title: Reading for Accessibility and Inclusion

Summary

The Ferguson Public Library of Stamford, Connecticut, with partner nonprofit organization Benetech of Palo Alto, California, propose a 12-month Planning Grant of \$100,000 of IMLS funding to Build Capacity in our libraries. We propose to improve Continuing Education for librarians to increase equity and access in Lifelong Learning for people with disabilities and other reading barriers. During the Planning Grant we will conduct a comprehensive needs assessment; develop a strategic plan that includes continuity of learning through a community of practice; and pilot a sample online learning module that trains librarians in modern accessible reading technologies and digital services.

Broad Need

Libraries prioritize access and accessibility as a part of our core values and goals. Over the past five years we have seen revolutionary change in digital publishing and reading applications. These tools finally integrate the features that allow access for persons with reading barriers and disabilities of all kinds. Digital books and information are no longer locked in fixed formats that work only for the perceived mainstream. Improved file formats like EPUB 3 and customizable reading applications on all modern devices allow for personalized reading options for *all* readers.

Librarians can use these resources to strengthen reading services and to build an inclusive library environment. Our field must address librarians' needs for targeted information and support to understand these tools and their relevance for each library community. Training should improve librarians' knowledge of common reading barriers and of how different ways of presenting content, using accessible file formats and reading applications, can make it easier for people to read. This knowledge can inform library services such as helping customers identify reading applications and personalization that they might benefit from trying. Lastly, we need to build library collections to be accessible by prioritizing the purchase and/or licensing of accessible formats like EPUB 3, and by using metadata and third-party reviews to identify titles that will enable personalization.

Project Design

Customization options are now built into modern book formats and commercial reading applications. These options make possible the personalization that library customers, with and without disabilities and reading barriers, expect from all the digital tools in their daily lives. Personalization settings available in EPUB 3 books, for example, allow people with dyslexia to select a dyslexia-friendly font, and those with low vision to make color contrast and font size adjustments. Tools like "read aloud", which are only possible when text is tagged in the correct reading order, use Text-To-Speech engines to read content aloud. People who are blind use this audio content, and the read aloud function can provide extra language support to people with learning differences and people learning to read and write in English. Libraries can use these resources for equity, access, and inclusion of persons with disabilities and customers with many different types of needs.

A Steering Committee of 10 like-minded peers from public and university libraries, and relevant stakeholders such as eBook vendors, will support a 1-year collaborative pilot aimed at developing the skills and expertise of library professionals in the area of accessible and personalized reading supports. We will conduct a comprehensive needs assessment, develop a strategic plan that includes continuity of learning through a community of practice, and pilot a sample online learning module for librarian training in modern accessible digital services. We approach this planning process as the first phase of a long-term effort to catalyze new library practice. Subsequent projects will be explored to

develop additional training modules, structure training to reach thousands more librarians, and measure the growth of the use of accessible books and personalization tools to support people with diverse reading needs.

Diversity Plan

The needs of library customers in Connecticut reflect those of the nation. Even within high-resourced communities, disenfranchised populations such as recent immigrants who do not yet read and write in English and people with disabilities and learning differences struggle to gain access to resources. The Ferguson Library and the libraries we have approached for the project from Maine, New York, Montana, California, and our peer city Hartford, CT, are working in earnest to address this issue within the context of our local communities. We want to share our learnings and diverse perspectives across the Steering Committee and, eventually, the nation. Bridging available technology tools with targeted training will allow us to directly address the diverse reading needs of our customers, thereby improving the inclusive environment for library goers and for potential library volunteers and professionals alike.

Broad Impact

A Planning Grant will allow The Ferguson Library to lead a coordinated approach that will build understanding of how modern accessibility tools can best support customers with diverse needs. We will involve 10 institutions and at least 50 librarians in planning and piloting. The needs assessment, strategic plan, and training module curriculum will be publicly available and actively disseminated to at least 1,000 librarians through targeted digital and social media outreach and at least 2 conference presentation proposals. This includes promotion through the Connecticut Library Association's ADA Committee and State Library Division of Library Development, as well as parallel organizations in the states of Steering Committee members. This Planning Grant will become the foundation for a long-term effort to expand the use of accessible books and personalization tools and to build a network of libraries leading a renewed charge for accessibility and inclusion.

Budget Summary

The project expenses will be primarily driven by staffing time from the leading partners to coordinate the efforts of the Steering Committee, to direct outreach and analysis of the needs assessment, and to develop a training module. The Steering Committee will support thought leadership, the training pilot, and dissemination of ideas through each organization's network.

Project leadership: one designated Ferguson Library FTE to serve as liaison, budget manager, and lead Steering Committee representative	\$8,000
Project management: one designated Benetech FTE to coordinate all activities of the Planning Grant including data analysis of the needs assessment survey	\$25,000
Training module development: a team at Benetech to develop the module and refine it based on pilot feedback	\$40,000
Stipend for Steering Committee organizations: \$2,500 x 10 organizations for participation on the Committee and for librarians to pilot the training module	\$25,000
Use of digital tools such as Survey Monkey for anonymous needs assessment survey and Zoom for convening of the Steering Committee	\$500
Marketing/outreach: staff time from Ferguson and from Benetech to disseminate the learnings from the Planning Grant	\$1,500
Total IMLS Planning Grant funds	\$100,000