

Records of Refuge: Supporting Refugee Communities' Archival Needs | University of North Texas (UNT)

Overview: Records of Refuge: Supporting Refugee Communities' Archival Needs (RoR) is a three-year research project conducted by Dr. Ana Roeschley, an Assistant Professor in the College of Information at the University of North Texas. This Early Career Development project proposal requests \$489,287 from the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program, addressing Goal 2, Objective 2.3: "Support the research of untenured tenure-track library and information science faculty, furthering the faculty member's long-term research agenda, career trajectory, and professional development." This research project will serve refugees, public librarians, archivists, records managers, community memory workers, and other individuals working with refugee communities through an investigation of best practices and protocols in the use and care of vital records upon entry into life in the United States and the creation and long-term preservation of their personal digital archives.

Project Justification: While the Ukraine and Afghanistan refugee crises have made the plights of refugees more visible recently, there is a long history of refugees settling in the United States with the aid of sponsors, refugee services, and multiple agencies (including public libraries) in the United States Government, state governments, and local governments. With or without media and public attention, refugee families have faced and continue to face a barrage of challenges upon entering the United States. A primary obstacle to many refugees is a [lack of access to vital records](#) necessary to accessing essential services and establishing their new lives in the United States. Due to their forced displacement, [refugees are often forced to leave their home countries without the records that document their identities](#) and their ties to their families, making a simple process—like enrolling a child in school—feel like an impenetrable bureaucratic feat. While refugees establishing their new lives in refugee resettlement processes are aided by their sponsors and refugee services, many of the processes occur in compartmentalized sections without clear understanding of which records will be needed from step to step. This leads to piecemeal solutions that are applied on an individual basis, rather than clear protocols. There is a serious need for investigation into best record-keeping and record-use practices in refugee resettlement that provide answers to questions including: Which records can substitute for others when establishing new lives, how can vital records be created in the United States, and how can vital records be preserved and easily accessed throughout the resettlement processes?

Additionally, while the loss of vital records like birth and marriage certificates is painful for refugee families, the loss of intimate personal records and artifacts like family photo albums, personal journals, and other heirlooms can be even more crushing. Personal archiving in some form is a [universal practice](#) that can be [vital to self-understanding](#). As [Hobbs argues](#), personal records "are in many senses creations of the self and participate in a process of storytelling and de facto autobiography." The loss of records through forceful displacement compounds feelings of loss for individuals who have lost not only their homes but their home countries. Personal records act as connections to the past, and the loss of personal records for refugees is a secondary act of displacement in both time and place. However, with the shift toward digital cloud technologies over the past twenty years, refugees can both come to the United States with some access to their personal records and also the ability to create new digital family archives. The proposed project will develop a user-centered framework to establish protocols for record-keeping practices in refugee resettlement and create best-practice digital preservation protocols for assisting refugees with preserving their personal records.

[Grant projects](#) and other [existing research](#) examine [library resources for refugees](#) as well as [the ties between refugees and archival records](#). However, too few focus on protocols for both immediate records-use in refugee resettlement and the preservation of long-term personal digital archives of refugees. Current work on refugee rights to records by [Carbone, Gilliland, and Montenegro](#) shows that "it is important to increase knowledge among refugees about how they can, within the limits of their own circumstances, best manage their own documentation." The proposed project addresses this need and builds off the PI's experiences as a war refugee and [previous research with immigrant participants in community-based archives](#). The PI's previous findings showed that immigrant participants felt deep affective connections to their records and that the archival preservation of these records brought forth feelings of validation and affirmation of their roles in their new communities. Additionally, this project is grounded in scholarship on refugees and prior archival research on refugee records, digital preservation, personal archiving, and community-based archives. This includes, but is not limited to, the work of Y en L  Espiritu, Rumana Hashem, Victor Bascara, James Milner, Edward Benoit, III, Anne Gilliland, Jeannette Bastian, Michelle Caswell, Sue McKemmish, and Eric Ketelaar.

Project Work Plan: Occurring over three years, the project will incorporate two phases with three years of graduate student support. Graduate research assistants will be recruited from UNT graduate students who study archives, cultural heritage, and/or digital records management. The research will address the following questions:

- 1.0 What are the record-keeping roadblocks to successful refugee resettlement in the United States?
- 1.1 What protocols can be created to allow refugees, archivists, refugee sponsors, and others working with refugees to fulfill the documentation requirements of resettlement activities in the United States?
- 2.0 What are the record-keeping and digital preservation concerns of refugees living in the United States?
- 2.1 What are the technical and descriptive requirements to meet these needs?
- 2.2 Which existing open-source tools and practices can be adapted and modified for assisting digital preservation, where are the gaps, and how can they be filled?

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Phase One: Years One and Two will address questions 1.0, 1.1, 2.0, and 2.1 through [grounded theory](#) and [user-centered design](#) (UCD) approaches, mainly a series of comprehensive focus groups with refugees and individuals who work with refugees. As the resettlement process is not uniform in each location, the focus groups will be held in 10 cities with comparably high refugee populations, including Houston, San Jose, Oklahoma City, New York City, and Minneapolis, among others. Additionally, because resettlement experiences are shaped by both refugees and those who work with them, it is important to ensure the project team gathers data on experiences of varied refugees who have gone through the resettlement process and individuals who have gone through these processes in the aid of refugees as part of their careers or community volunteer experiences. The focus groups with refugees will be open to non-English speaking refugees. To ensure their needs are met, translators will be provided. It is also important that multiple locations are addressed as there may be different resettlement procedures and documentation challenges based on the resettlement location. Working with the graduate research assistants, the PI will create and test focus group protocol, including methods to ensure privacy and confidentiality of all participants, and submit it for IRB approval. Each focus group location will include separate sessions for refugees and individuals working with refugees to ensure candid answers. Additionally, the focus groups will be recorded and transcribed for grounded theory coding analysis. The grounded theory and UCD methods will allow the research team to respond to findings as they arise in initial focus groups and incorporate them into future focus group protocols. Participants in the focus groups will be compensated for their time and will be selected based on the process detailed in the Diversity Plan section.

Phase Two: During Year Three, to address question 2.2, the PI and graduate research assistants will identify existing open-source tools, such as APIs, that could be adopted to meet the technical requirements. Subsequently, the PI will analyze digital curation models and emerging research for additional methods to fill the areas without existing support. Based on this analysis and the phase one analysis, the PI and graduate research assistants will update and finalize the best practices and protocols to fully address questions 1.1, 2.1, and 2.2. The project findings will be shared at several national and international conferences, including Society of American Archivists, the Archival Education and Research Institute, the Personal Digital Archiving Conference, the annual meeting of the Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, and the Roundtable of the Refugee Highway Partnership - North America; multiple journal articles; and an open report. Finally, and most importantly, protocols for best practices will be available via the project website, which will be hosted by UNT. The protocols will be designed so that they are easily accessible via mobile technology to ensure individuals who do not have regular access to computers can have an easy user experience using the project resources.

Throughout the project, the PI will meet regularly with advisory board members to receive feedback on the project's progress and development. The advisory board will include individuals who have experienced forced displacement as refugees, archival scholars and practitioners, records management experts who deal with immigration records, and individuals who work directly with refugees—including social workers, refugee sponsors, and community volunteers. The panel members will be compensated for their time with a small stipend. We will also host periodical online forums and publish project blog posts on our project website to keep both the wider public and our project focus group participants aware of and engaged with our progress throughout the project.

Diversity Plan: The project focuses on refugee communities and individuals who work with refugees. Additionally, the PI will use the UNHCR [Refugee Data Finder](#) reporting of refugee demographics to ensure proportional and equitable gender and ethnic representation in the focus groups and advisory board. Finally, refugees will be given hiring preference for the project's graduate research assistant positions.

Project Results: The findings from the focus groups will illuminate the information needs and the information practice behaviors of refugees. The proposed project will bring forth much-needed answers to questions regarding the archival needs of refugees—both in the short term as they experience resettlement and in the long term as they create and preserve their personal archives. The project deliverables, including protocols for best practices, will aid refugees and those who work with them to meet their archival needs. The anticipated findings will be used to secure additional funding from governmental or private sources to develop and implement workshops that focus on vital records in resettlement and personal digital archiving for refugee communities, individuals, and organizations that work with refugees. Though this project aims to address the specific needs of refugees, its findings could easily be adapted for personal information management (PIM) and personal digital preservation needs of others.

Budget Summary: The proposed project costs will be \$489,287 with no cost sharing. This includes \$14,506 in PI summer salary, \$148,802 in graduate student support, fringe benefits of \$16,691, and tuition remission of \$52,551. The budget includes \$66,733 for faculty and staff to travel to focus groups and conference travel, \$3,666 for software subscription costs, \$5,500 for materials and supplies (including recording equipment and computer equipment for the use by graduate research assistants), \$1,200 for translation costs, \$3,000 for participant recruitment costs via [social media advertising](#), \$15,000 for participant payments, \$4,000 for focus group meeting space fees, and \$15,000 for advisory board stipends. Finally, indirect costs of \$142,638 are included, using UNT's federally negotiated off-campus rate of 48.5% MTDC.