Equitable Access for the Blind, Visually Impaired, and Print-Disabled (BVIPD) Students in Online Learning: A Study of BVIPD Services Among Southeastern Conference (SEC) Institutions

Project Description: This project addresses Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Grant program Goal 3, Objectives 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4. The University of South Carolina, School of Information Science (UofSC/iSchool) requests $245,472 for a two-year research and implementation grant under the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Grant program. The project is aimed at developing a campus partnership and training model between Disabilities Services Offices (DSOs) and university libraries in the Southeastern Conference (SEC) institutions built around the existing legal infrastructure for providing accessible content to the **Blind, Visually Impaired, and Print-Disabled (BVIPD)** students enrolled in online courses (Laura Bush Program Goal 3, Objectives 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4). This project is centered around DSOs as the legally designated entities for determining student eligibility for accessibility services with university libraries as the main service entities most qualified to support DSOs in curating, storing and providing access to accessible content. The main problem addressed by the project is the lack of timely and equitable access to accessible content, content that is otherwise more readily available to non-BVIPD students (Scott & Aquino, 2020). The proposed Campus Accessibility Partnership and Training model will specifically address four service points recently identified by Butler, Adler and Cox (2019) as opportunities for maximizing opportunities to better serve BVIPD students and to improve equity of access. These are **Request** (student requests content); **Remediation** (accessible content is prepared or created); **Delivery** (accessible content is delivered); **Retention** and **Sharing** (accessible content used regularly is retained for future use and shared as needed). By their nature and expertise academic libraries can support the work of DSOs at each point of the **RRDRS** service framework, especially the Retention and Sharing stage. In turn, DSOs can provide continuous training to academic libraries on the legal and policy frameworks that regulate the provision of services to BVIPD students, especially the highly technical area of copyright and related legal frameworks. This project is focused primarily on copyright issues because copyright law is the primary legal framework implicated in the provision of accessible content to BVIPD students. That in no way devalues the importance of other areas of law and policy like privacy and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Project Justification: The BVIPD population is historically underserved by libraries (Epp, 2006; Copeland, 2011; Copeland, 2012; Bonnici et al., 2015). Most published literature is not available to the BVIPD students, with only 5% of published works available in BVIPD accessible formats (National Federation for the Blind, 2018). In a recent study, BVIPD students were frustrated by the lack of a variety of accessible formats available (Beyen, 2018). Also, the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) survey found that amidst course format changes, students with disabilities are having greater overall difficulty adjusting to online learning environments due to inaccessibility of content (Scott & Aquino, 2020). The proposed research will focus narrowly on the needs of BVIPD students and the legal provisions that make it possible for DSOs to expand services to these students. This proposed research project comes after the United States ratified the Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print Disabled (hereafter, Treaty) in 2018. In 2019, Congress 'domesticated' the Treaty as the Marrakesh Treaty Implementation Act (MTIA) of 2019 by amending section 121 of the US Copyright Act. In a recent analysis of the legal infrastructure for accessible content in institutions of higher education (IHEs), Butler, Adler and Cox (2019) noted that the MTIA has greatly expanded the legal provisions in the US Copyright law permitting use of accessible content. They also made a strong argument for IHEs to utilize the fair use doctrine in section 107 on top of or alongside the MTIA. Butler, Adler, and Cox (2019) identified four areas where IHEs can take action to serve the BVIPD students specifically noting that IHEs can maximize service opportunities and efficiencies for BVIPD students by addressing the Request of accessible content (a BVIPD student requests for an accessible copy); Remediation (the DSO or service unit like the academic library prepares or creates an accessible copy including anticipating "future requests by preparing accessible texts of works that are likely to be in demand" (p.18); Delivery (the DSO or service units like the academic library delivers an accessible copy "in file formats appropriate for their use, without technological protection measures" (TPMs) (p.19), and Retention and Sharing of accessible copies (creation of databases of highly or regularly used accessible content, which Butler, Adler, and Cox's (2019) study found to be lawful. Woods et al (2017) recommended that "repository services would be an effective way to assist IHEs with providing accessible instructional materials to students with disabilities" (p. 3). Woods et al further note that "With notable exceptions, U.S. [academic] libraries are doing very little to address disability concerns on campus. The majority of efforts are reactions to specific barriers for specific individuals." (p. 4). Although DSOs have historically served BVIPD students well, the expansion of online learning has created backlogs necessitating the need for other service units like academic libraries to support BVIPD students services in their areas of specialty.

Project Work Plan: The project plan is divided into five phases. **PHASE 1 (8/23 to 12/23):** The groundwork for the project will be carried out by expanding on an ongoing literature review on services for BVIPD students, developing research instruments, developing a project website, and seeking IRB approval. This research will be guided by the following research questions: *1. How familiar are DSOs with current legal infrastructure to facilitate access for BVIPD students (Copyright - fair use, MTIA, DMCA and relevant case law) and how is this evidenced in the request, remediation, delivery, and retention and sharing processes? 2. What perceptions do academic libraries and CTEs have about services and support provided by their DSOs? What perceptions do DSOs have about services and support provided by academic libraries and CTEs? 3. How do BVIPD students perceive the services from DSOs and academic libraries provided to them in online environments? Are BVIPD students' needs met? 4. How do faculty members (especially BVIPD faculty members) perceive accessibility services provided by DSOs to BVIPD students? 5. How might IHE entities (DSOs, academic libraries, CTEs, etc) better coordinate to effectively and efficiently serve the needs of BVIPD students in online learning environments? 6.Based on the findings from question 5, what training modules could be designed to offer academic librarians needed professional skill development in serving BVIPD students?* The theoretical framework used in this study is the <u>information poverty and information outsiders</u> initiated by Dr. Elfreda Chatman. This theory regarding information poverty and information outsiders contextualizes disability as a social construct that creates barriers to access of information for differently-abled people, including BVIPD populations. Chatman argued that information poverty was closely linked to socially determined attitudes and norms, many of which disenfranchise marginalized populations (Thompson, 2008). **PHASE 2 (1/24 to 5/24):** The research team will deploy web-based surveys to DSOs (of which there are typically approximately 1-2 per institution) and conduct preliminary analysis of the collected data. The sample size for DSO surveys will come to 28 DSOs, which is 2 DSOs per institution. **PHASE 3 (6/24 to 12/24):** Preliminary DSO survey data will be presented over summer at conferences such as AHEAD and ACRL and garner input from participants. In the fall, the research group will visit SEC institution campuses to conduct interviews and FGDs over a two-day period. On day one interviews with individual participants will be conducted first followed by FGDs on day two. One FGD will take place for BVIPD students and another will be conducted with DSO staff, academic librarians, CTE staff, and university faculty. FGDs will be the final step in data collection to verify data gathered via surveys/questionnaires and interviews. **PHASE 4 (1/25 to 5/25):** Data collected in the previous phase will be analyzed and various reporting mechanisms will be prepared. The research team will also begin the distribution of research findings (conference presentations, journal publications, webinars for targeted groups) as opportunities present. The first iteration training modules for the Campus Accessibility Partnership and Training model will be developed and pilot tested at UofSC. **PHASE 5 (6/25 to 8/25):** The project team will complete a final research report and continue the distribution of findings. The Campus Accessibility Partnership and Training Model will be finalized and shared with SEC institutions as well as at the AHEAD and ACRL Conferences.

Diversity Plan: By its very nature, the proposed project fulfills IMLS diversity goals and initiatives. Persons who are differently abled have been marginalized from library services (Epp, 2006; Copeland, 2011; 2012; Bonnici et al., 2015; Majinge and Mutula, 2018). Although situations continue to improve, much remains to be done. The proposed project focuses on increasing access and information use for and among the BVIPD students and bringing equity to historically marginalized groups. It is a social justice and human rights issue. All project materials and FDG notes that do not breach participants' confidentiality will be made available in accessible formats. AbleSC, a federally-recognized disability-led advocacy organization, has agreed to review all materials to ensure they are accessible and meet the needs of BVIPD students.

Project Results: The proposed project focuses on increasing access and information use for and among the BVIPD students and bringing equity to historically marginalized groups. Ultimately, this project is developing a Campus Accessibility Partnership and Training model designed to address inefficiencies in the **Request, Remediation, Delivery, Retention** and **Sharing (RRDRS) framework for** accessible content. If implemented in SEC institutions and beyond, this model has the potential to improve equity of access for BVIPD students and directly impact their degree completion rates and overall quality of education experience. The model and research findings will be widely shared at professional and academic conferences, such as AHEAD and ACRL, scholarly and popular publications. Findings will also be shared with participating institutions and will be broadly available via an openly accessible project website.

Budget summary: The funds requested for the project amount to $**245,472**. This includes salary and wages for the PI and co-PI of $47,318; fringe of $15,137; student support for graduate assistant pay, fringe, travel and tuition supplement $49,320; AbleSC for $6,000; Copyright Legal Consultant for $5,000, and web designer and consultant for $3,000, travel support of $41,709 and supplementary materials and others $2,425. Total project direct costs are $**169,909**. Indirect costs are assessed at a rate of 49% for a total of $**75,563**.