

National Forum on Sustainable Models for Open and Equitable Systems of Education

The University of North Carolina System requests a two-year \$149,272 grant to convene an LB21 National Forum, titled National Forum on Sustainable Models for Open and Equitable Systems of Education, to identify gaps, opportunities, and best practices for assessing and critically engaging with educational technologies and content models that impact academic freedom, student privacy and agency, and the sustainability of higher education.

This Forum will gather librarians and administrators at the major university systems and consortia to develop collective, library-led models for evaluating and supporting more open and equitable systems of educational technologies. This program supports IMLS Objective 3.4 with a focus on privacy and security, as well as creating new processes and procedures needed to sustain a robust online learning environment.

Project Justification

Adoption of digital and online learning resources has radically accelerated in the past half-decade. From academic integrity solutions such as Turnitin and Proctorio to automatic billing bundles marketed as “inclusive access” programs, educational technologies increasingly dominate the landscape of higher education. While these systems promise improved outcomes and efficiency, it is easy for overtaxed educators and institutions to turn to closed commercial solutions that offer a quick fix and the promise of targeted learning analytics at the expense of students’ privacy, instructors’ authentic expertise, and institutional commitments to accessible, equitable education. (Lamden, 2022; Weller, 2018). As a result, “Schools remain unprotected against marketing rhetoric from edtech companies, and even big tech companies, who promise significant benefits for schools without supplying evidence that their product ‘works’ in the claimed ways.” ([Williamson, 2024](#))

One critical factor in this change has been that librarians and other information professionals such as instructional designers are often left out of institutional decision-making. Librarians should be the gateway to institutions and an indispensable broker for partnerships that center access, equity, and sustainability. ([Bignoli, et al, 2021](#); [Jones, et al, 2024](#)) Instead, commercial providers increasingly sell their products directly to administrators at the institutional, system, or even state level. While librarians have traditionally leveraged their expertise in collections and licensing to lead negotiations that center access, equity, and sustainability, today they often lack a seat at the table. This Forum will center librarian knowledge, expertise, and leadership within cross-functional project teams that will produce written recommendations.

For some librarians, this is an issue of expertise since many LIS programs offer limited training on the technical and legal questions implicated by these issues. Programs like the [Library Freedom Project](#) offer a powerful professional development resource for building knowledge and community that should be extended broadly. Unfortunately, even when librarians and peers in instructional design do have the necessary expertise they still face systemic problems. ([Zvyagintseva & Blechinger, 2023](#)). Institutional decision makers are often uninformed about or dismissive of library expertise, or even unaware of the fact that there could be problems that require that expertise to address. This project will place librarians at the

table with key IT and educational leaders to develop solutions and to foster on-going collaborative engagement amongst all stakeholder groups.

As a result of these systemic issues, many institutions are adopting closed, proprietary systems without the benefit of library expertise needed to fully evaluate the ramifications of adopting these tools. Controversial examples such as test proctoring services that track students’ eye movements, personal spaces, and private identities have faced criticism for being overly intrusive. Automatic billing-based “Inclusive Access” services continue to proliferate, challenging emergent OER initiatives. And proprietary surveillance tools such as Turnitin have become so ubiquitous as to become invisible. As commercial services explore the role of AI and large learning models for educational technology these trends are likely to accelerate in the coming years, opening the door to new types of algorithmic bias.

There is a better way to build digital education systems that maximize the benefits and limit the potential harms of educational technologies. But this requires collective action from large-scale systems and consortia that centers and amplifies the expertise of librarians as stewards of the shared values of the academy. This project aligns closely with the attention to the risk posed by commercial surveillance that is increasingly embedded in core academic learning and research technologies that has been outlined by both the White House and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB). A July 15, 2023 SPARC comment highlights the threat to student and researcher data privacy. Our project will provide a means for librarians to develop a shared framework with IT, instructional designers, and campus administrators to understand and begin to mitigate these threats. It also offers the opportunity to clearly lay out the value of library expertise in a public forum so it can be more readily accessible for those seeking to understand the issue and those who may need to be reminded that library expertise is significant, valuable, and actionable.

Project Work Plan

In order to prepare academic institutions to navigate these issues, the University of North Carolina System will convene a National Forum to identify gaps, opportunities, and best practices for assessing and critically engaging with educational technology systems that impact academic freedom, student privacy and agency, and the sustainability of higher education.

This Forum will center the roles and expertise of librarians and connect them with instructional designers, administrators, and policy experts to develop shared buy-in on the forum and its outputs. In particular, we will gather librarians and their peers working in large-scale partnerships, systems, and consortia who are uniquely situated to evaluate the technical, pedagogical, legal, and economic quality of the various models under discussion. The Forum will leverage the diverse backgrounds of the attendees to develop scalable, high-impact, values-led responses to the rise of commercial tools and content models so that institutions can locally implement and widely share concrete solutions.

Participants include: representatives from DOERS3, EDUCAUSE, Every Learner Everywhere, ISKME, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), and SPARC, UNC System instructional designers and instructional design faculty, UNC system library faculty to serve as team facilitators and participants, and UNC system library and information science faculty and graduate students. These partners were chosen

for their thought leadership in the higher education learning technology field and their broad national reach.

The primary project activity will be an in-person two-day event (agenda below) that includes presentations on key topics by attendees, followed by small group discussion and facilitated breakout activity. Prior to the in-person meeting there will be framing activities (including having participants contribute to the agenda, pre-reading list, and discussion questions) with writing, commenting, review, and dissemination activities following. Participants will engage with all of the topics during the event and, at the conclusion of the event, will select one Topic Team to join to develop key practical pieces on that topic. Topic teams will be led by the library faculty facilitator and a strong effort to ensure teams are cross-functional and inter-organizational will be made.

Major activities include an online survey of perceived challenges; creation of a bibliography and set of use cases; creation of an extended reviewer and participant database; workshop preparation logistics; workshop hosting and facilitation; drafting of the workshop report with selected key participants; drafting of each team’s report and recommendations; dissemination of the workshop report for public commentary and expert review; team webinars (to involve broader audience and collect feedback that will be incorporated into final report/recommendations); publication of the teams’ report and recommendations; incorporation of public commentary and expert review; publication of the final report; and dissemination of summary reports through professional venues.

1. Two-day in-person meeting with presentations, breakout sessions, formation of teams, and library-led action planning (responsible: PIs)
2. Post-in-person meeting, there will be webinars by each team to share work-in-progress and to gather feedback from a wide audience (responsible: PI, via UNC System Learning and Technology Webinar Series)
3. Written reports from each team to be published in an open access journal (responsible: PI, via open access UNC System Learning and Technology Journal)
4. Workshop report (responsible: PIs)
5. PIs will share work via professional venues

The LB21 National Forum will include the following specific components:

1. A two-day in-person meeting that includes sessions on topics related to the forum theme (learning technologies [learning management systems, proctoring tools, GenAI, adaptive learning technologies], data privacy, digital equity, licensing, open education, inclusive access/equitable access.) The Forum offers an opportunity for librarians and other higher education thought leaders to collaborate and strategize on how they might collectively and individually (through their organizations) address challenges related to ensuring our systems of education remain open, equitable, and accessible.
 - a. Prior to the meeting: participants will receive a reading list and set of guiding questions developed by the grant Co-PIs. Participants will be asked to contribute suggested readings and guiding questions.

- b. The meeting will include sessions on key topics (listed above), small group discussions, and library-led action planning.
 2. Post-meeting webinars led by Topics Teams and open to the broader community
 3. Drafting and publication of recommendations by each Topic Team.
- What specific activities will you carry out and in what sequence?
 - Confirm participants: we have letters of support from key partners who have already confirmed participation; we will confirm participation by library students and faculty. We will identify library faculty to serve as facilitators of the working groups.
 - Plan logistics of the event- finalize agenda, reserve meeting space and accommodations, communicate with participants
 - Hold event in Raleigh, NC at the James B. Hunt Library, North Carolina State University
 - Conduct post-event survey of participants to gauge immediate feedback
 - Facilitate post-event working group meetings; four synchronous meetings per working group with asynchronous work throughout
 - Host post-event webinars through the UNC System Learning and Technology webinar series to share and disseminate ideas generated (conduct post-webinar surveys of attendees to gather feedback for the Working Groups/Teams to consider for their final reporting/recommendations and for the PIs to assess general response to the webinar.)
 - Publication of proceedings: in a Special Issue of the open access UNC System Learning and Technology Journal
- Who will plan, execute, and manage your project?
 - Heather McCullough, Ph.D., Project PI, will coordinate and oversee all aspects of the project, including coordinating with the NC State Conference Services team, hiring and managing administrative assistant, managing contractual services related to publication of proceedings, scheduling and hosting post-event webinars to disseminate work. She will coordinate the creation and distribution of the survey instruments. McCullough has 20 years of experience organizing, hosting, and administering large academic conferences and forums.
 - Will Cross, Co-PI, will support the development of the agenda, reading list, guiding questions, and manage communication with participants.
 - Administrative Assistant (to be hired): will follow through with NC State Conference Services on event details, coordinate travel arrangements with all participants, coordinate payments for all participants, coordinate with copy editing service, send and track completion of the surveys to be used, and provide other administrative support needed by the PIs.
- What time, financial, personnel, and other resources will you need to carry out the Activities?
 - Heather McCullough, Ph.D., Project PI, will dedicate 10% of her time to leading this project
 - Will Cross, Co-PI, will dedicate 5% of his time to leading this project
 - Administrative Assistant (to be hired): will dedicate 100% of their time to this project
- How have the perspectives and contributions of the target group(s) been incorporated into the Project Work Plan and how will ongoing external input, validation, and consensus building be accommodated in the project?

- The participants have been selected based on their work in the field of open and equitable digital learning. Select participants will be asked to present their work in one of the sessions. The pre-event reading list will include reports and publications, including from the invited partners. All participants will be invited to contribute discussion questions and suggested readings prior to the event. During the event, small group discussions will be facilitated by Library and Information Science faculty with a goal to incorporate varied ideas and approaches in order to prepare for the post-event writing by individual Teams. Participants will choose a topic (or Team) to join at the conclusion of the event. The Teams’ post-event work will be facilitated by the Library and Information Science faculty who served as discussion facilitators. After the event, Teams will facilitate webinars that are open to the public on their work-in-progress in order to gather input broadly as they are developing their written report. Each Team will collaboratively develop a written report that includes recommendations and resources related to their topic.
- Have you included evaluation or an iterative design, where appropriate?
 - Yes. Prior to the event, participants will contribute suggested discussion questions and recommended readings that will be shared. Prior to the event, participants will complete a survey to suggest topics and key issues they wish to ensure are included in the in-person agenda. Immediately post-event, there will be an evaluation of the Forum and all its aspects (organization, communication, activities and agenda, accommodations, and travel support). Mid-way during the writing phase (after the in-person event and between the synchronous Team meetings), an anonymous survey will ask participants to comment on the progress of their team’s work and what, if any, additional support they need to be successful. After each Team webinar, there will be a survey of the attendees to gather feedback on the quality of the presentation and to invite feedback on the topic. Webinar feedback will be shared with the individual team making the presentation so that they can consider incorporating it into their writing. At the conclusion of the project, all the Forum participants will be surveyed to determine their satisfaction with the program and to ascertain if they intend to continue to collaborate/coordinate/communicate with Forum participants.
- How will you track your progress toward achieving your intended results?
 - We will track if the forum occurs and if all invited participants attend and join a Team.
 - We will track if post-forum individual teams meet four times and if they present a webinar via the UNC System Learning and Technology webinar series.
 - Will will also track if each team contributes to the final deliverable, a Special Issue of the open access UNC System Learning and Technology Journal.
- How and with whom will you disseminate your project findings, coursework, or training content?
 - Post-event webinars by each of the Teams: these webinars will be open to anyone. We will publicize them broadly and ask our participants to help distribute and publicize them as well.
 - Publication of a special issue of the open access UNC System Learning and Technology Journal that will include the final recommendations and findings by each individual team as well as additional possible contributions by our partners (DOERS3, EDUCAUSE, Every Learner Everywhere, Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in

Education [ISKME], the Southern Regional Education Board [SREB] Ed Tech Cooperative, and SPARC).

- We will encourage our partners to share their experiences and new ideas generated during the forum in their own dissemination channels.

Diversity Plan

The disproportionate impact of algorithmic bias and surveillance capitalism on underrepresented and marginalized communities has been extensively documented. Uncritical reliance on digital systems disadvantages or simply locks out students and faculty caught in the digital divide, particularly those who are low-income or first-generation. Librarians and other information professionals are dedicated to addressing these concerns through field-shaping work on digital access and equity as well as practice on the ground raising awareness and negotiating for more open and inclusive terms.

The UNC System is well positioned to center the outstanding work done by leaders at a diverse set of System institutions from nationally recognized HBCUs at NC Central, Fayetteville State, and NC A&T as well as North Carolina's American Indian and Alaska Native-Serving Institution, UNC Pembroke. We have a strong track record of collective work led by and in service of marginalized students and faculty such as our award-winning Math Pathways project as well as deep work on open and equitable education such as the [Scholarly Communication Notebook](#) and the [SUM Institute](#). We will continue this commitment to work by and for inclusive educational communities at each stage, from developing the initial proposal to hosting the Forum with a diverse set of speakers and participants, to sharing the final outputs openly.

How will you include a diversity of perspectives and practices in the project?

This project involves participants from a variety of professional organizations and consortia that each have strong diversity and equity stances, particularly related to learning technologies and higher education. Having their varied perspectives around how diversity and equity are shaped and impacted by learning technology development, selection, and implementation will foster rich conversations. Our partners in this project will be invited to contribute to shape the agenda and discussion questions and, through their work on the cross-functional Topics Teams, will deliver the mid-point webinars and write the final team reports.

Diversity of Perspectives and Practices

- DOERS3: DOERS3 developed and published the DOERS3 OER Equity Blueprint. The purpose of the Blueprint “is to define, unpack, and explain the multiple dimensions of equity and foreground the role of OER in closing equity gaps.” In 2022-23, the DOERS3 Collaborative piloted the Equity Through OER Rubric with postsecondary education partners across the United States and Canada. Their work was funded by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.
- EDUCAUSE: EDUCAUSE identifies data privacy and information security as an equity issue. The 2021 Horizon Report: Information Security Edition names student data privacy and governance as the “highest-rated practices for supporting equity and inclusion.”

- Every Learner Everywhere: ELEW focuses on how digital learning tools and pedagogies can address equity gaps, especially by addressing student success in gateway courses where minoritized student groups traditionally skew disproportionately disadvantaged. ELEW’s report “Strategies for Implementing Digital Learning Infrastructure to Support Equitable Outcomes: A Case-based Guidebook for Institutional Leaders (2021)” describes important elements of a Digital Learning Infrastructure that include two elements relevant to this National Forum, namely “Leadership, budget, and policy” and “Technology infrastructure.”
- ISKME: ISKME’s mission is to make learning and knowledge sharing more participatory, equitable, and open. ISKME believes that the development of equitable and inclusive learning environments will contribute to the creation of a more just society.
- SREB: SREB, via the SREB Ed Tech Cooperative, monitors and reports on educational technology topics to help states use technology wisely. It has a special focus and programming on Open Educational Resources as a means to support student success from K12 through higher education.

Diversity Among Participants

In addition to a wide range of perspectives brought by the organizations and consortial participants, library faculty and graduate students from several LIS programs will ensure a broad range of library experience and expertise are represented. Further, graduate students from these programs will benefit from the rich learning and networking opportunities. The webinars will be open to the public, widely publicized, and invite feedback from attendees that will shape the final written recommendations.

The following LIS programs will provide faculty participants, faculty facilitators, and graduate student participants:

- North Carolina Central University: NCCU is an HBCU whose Fall 2022 enrollment included 56.6% Pell Grant eligible students and a student body with 86.83% Underrepresented Minority Students.
- UNC Greensboro: UNCG is a Minority Serving Institution for African American Students, with 47.52% of the undergraduate enrollment for Fall 2022. UNCG is a Title III Part A institution, based on the significant enrollment of students that are eligible for need-based federal grants. (e.g., Pell Grant eligible is 47.1% [n=6,687 recipients], as of Fall 2022).
- UNC Chapel Hill

How will the relevant participants and communities be involved in defining the needs, problems, or challenges and creating and implementing the project?

As described in the Project Work Plan, all participants will be invited to contribute to a list of suggested pre-readings and discussion questions for the in-person meeting. The deliverables of this project will be created by cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional teams.

How will the project strengthen the field’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion practices?

The project will foster inter-organizational conversations and the development of new recommendations that incorporate DEI concepts as related to the topic of open education by the participants. Those recommendations should reach a very broad audience across the higher education landscape.

How will the project contribute to the recruitment, development, and/or retention of a diverse workforce of library and archives professionals?

By including a diverse group of faculty and graduate students in the field of library and information science, by positioning them as leaders on the topic of open education and by providing training around open education, this project will contribute to the development and retention of a diverse workforce of library professionals.

Project Results

The goal of the project is to develop shared understanding, common workflows, and best practices for providing educational resources that are accessible, inclusive, and sustainable. It will address concerns that closed, commercial tools built on surveillance can lock institutions into extractive, inequitable models that hamper or even foreclose open education and infrastructure. The primary output of the project will be information and guidance including a white paper summarizing the significance and areas of need for open and equitable systems; identifying high-impact principles that are accepted and emerging in the broader community; characterizing approaches and methods for applying these principles to institutional decision making; and identifying potential next steps for software developers that develop these systems and for library institutions that adopt and deploy them. We will also develop a website for the project, offer a series of workshops through the [UNC System Learning and Technology webinar series](#) and publish an edited volume in our new open access [UNC System Learning and Technology Journal](#). Project outcomes will be integrated into curricula of the three major LIS programs in the System (Chapel Hill, NC Central, and Greensboro) through local programming and incorporation into courses and seminars.

Regionally we will partner with the [Southern Research Educational Board](#) to explore developing a task force to create guidelines in this area. We will invite representatives from regional compacts in other parts of North America including [NEBHE](#), [Open Oregon](#), and [LOUIS](#) in order to support comparable actions in their communities. We will also include representatives from SPARC, which has done pathmaking work in this area and will be able to assure that these results are disseminated widely so they can have an impact at the national and policy level. This project will benefit from dissemination through the wide networks of our partners, particularly SPARC, EDUCAUSE, and ISKME.

If the project is funded and successful, we would also be excited to develop a proposal for a grant to implement the results and develop a plan for wide and sustainable work across the field. In addition, we will encourage and support participants in the event as they develop their own IMLS proposals that build on and amplify this work.

We will evaluate the results of this project using quantitative and qualitative measures before and after the workshop, and after the release of the report draft and final report. Measures will include participant satisfaction surveys; bibliometrics; social media mentions; downloads, and media coverage. The longer-term impact of this project will be in the influence that it has in institutional support and engagement with educational systems and the extent to which educational institutions adopt and employ the recommendations. The broadest impact will be to support systems of education that open up, rather

than foreclose, opportunities to make education more affordable, inclusive, and sustainable for all students and for the institutions that serve them.

Applicant Name: The University of North Carolina System

Project Title: Sustainable Models for Open & Equitable Systems of Education

Digital Products Plan: Sustainable Models for Open & Equitable Systems of Education

Type (What digital products will you create?)

Pre-Forum Materials - survey instruments and data, bibliography, and similar informational materials will be gathered to prepare participants for the Forum and shared widely to inform national and field-level discussion about sustainable models for open and equitable systems of education.

Framing Materials - such as agendas, pre-readings, and discussion questions will be developed in consultation with participants in order to make the Forum itself successful and will be shared at the end of the project so others can use them as models for their own gatherings and discussions.

Workshop Report and Team Recommendations - Materials developed during and coming out of the Forum will be developed as a key product.

Webinars and Scholarship - will report out from the event, sharing outcomes and insights for audiences that may not engage with the report itself.

Availability (How will you make your digital products openly available as appropriate?)

All digital products will be openly licensed and stored in open repositories. Where relevant and appropriate, materials will also be stored in other repositories such as the Open Textbook Library or our individual institutional repositories. Materials will also be presented at relevant conferences and professional gatherings.

Access (What rights will you assert over your digital products, and what limitations, if any, will you place on their use? Will your products implicate privacy concerns or cultural sensitivities, and if so, how will you address them?)

All materials will be openly licensed. Where possible we will use either a CC BY 4.0 or CC BY-NC 4.0 license so that access and uptake can be done as widely as possible. All materials will be intentionally designed for cultural sensitivity, particularly the localized teacher's editions which are designed to reflect the needs and experiences of specific communities such as HBCUs and smaller regional institutions. The project will employ thorough procedures to minimize any risk and protect the participants' confidentiality and anonymity where necessary.

Sustainability (How will you address the sustainability of your digital products?)

We will attend to sustainability throughout the lifetime of the award-funded activity. All public-facing materials will be deposited in sustainable repositories including appropriate scholarly and data repositories. Materials will also be available on the project page and shared as supplemental materials when connected to scholarly venues such as journals.