

Expanding Education Options for Alaska's Library Workforce

Funding Opportunity Number: LB21-FY24, Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program

Introduction. The University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) (PI Jen Ward, Co-I David Cox, Co-I Jonas Lamb) in collaboration with the Alaska Library Association (AkLA) respectfully requests \$149,911 for *Expanding Education Options for Alaska's Library Workforce*. This two-year planning project will identify the training needs of the library workforce across the state of Alaska and develop coursework for their professional development. It addresses the 21st Century Librarian Program Goal 3 (*Enhance the training and professional development of the library and archival workforce to meet the needs of their communities*), and Objective 3.3 (*refine training programs...build skills and expertise...lifelong learning*).

In this project we will assess the training needs of library paraprofessionals in underserved communities throughout Alaska, through surveys and focus groups. As a result of this planning project, UAS librarians (project team of four: Cox, Lamb, Henrickson, Ward) will develop LIS workforce readiness curriculum, courses and an affordable online degree program (Occupational Endorsement/OE or Certificate) aligned with the ALA Core Competencies and with the AkLA *Culturally Responsive Guidelines for Alaska Public Libraries*.

UAS is a regional university serving all of Southeast Alaska through campuses in Juneau, Ketchikan, and Sitka. We offer programs of high academic quality—both on campus and online—that meet the needs of students and the communities we serve. UAS operates the regional William A. Egan Library. Four faculty librarians provide daily reference support for students and the public, information literacy instruction throughout the UAS curriculum, and serve in campus leadership roles through university, professional, and public service.

AkLA is a nonprofit for the employees, volunteers, and advocates at academic, public, school, tribal, and special libraries in Alaska. Although Alaska is the largest state in the nation, our library association is a close-knit and mutually supportive community. In this project we will seek other partners including the Alaska State Library which promotes and coordinates library services and professional development to the library community and serves as the primary research library for state government.

Project Justification. While AkLA offers robust professional development (PD) at its conference, a yearly conference can't adequately address the varied workforce needs. Many of Alaska's public, school/community, and tribal libraries are minimally staffed by employees without any formal LIS education. Among the 87 libraries; 42 have two or fewer total employees, while only 22 libraries have at least one FTE staff member with an MLIS (lam.alaska.gov/public-library-stats#, FY22). Travel in Alaska is a training barrier as many communities are only accessible by aircraft, boat, or snowmachine. Therefore, equitable access to meaningful skill building is a major challenge. The Alaska State Library offers limited, free PD and provides PD grants to libraries, however there are not any LIS degree pathways offered by Alaska colleges/universities. We propose an Alaska based program at UAS, because we know the challenges and have the experience to analyze and address the need. Collectively our grant team of four library faculty has 40+ years of teaching and library leadership experience in Alaska. We have taught 3 existing courses: Introduction to Academic Library Research, Special Topics in Library and Information Science, and Internet and Society. Project librarians have each taken part and led culturally responsive education training, including the popular Decolonizing Our Spaces Professional Learning Community, and we have all taught online and in-person

Each Alaskan community has unique information needs (e.g. educational, cultural, subsistence, or broadband access). Generational trauma resulting from forced relocations for education still has a lasting effect in 21st Century Alaska. Our surveys will ask Alaska library workers about their community needs and gaps in their ability to provide services. We will also ask about time and economic restrictions to training. We will conduct a cost analysis of courses and design a curriculum that is attainable and relevant here, in this place. We think it is important to include tuition waivers to increase access for Alaska paraprofessionals. This project addresses the LB21 goal to *support the development of a diverse workforce of librarians and archivists in order to meet the information needs of their communities*. LB21 Objective 3.3 is the heart of this proposal as we work to *refine training, build skills, and create new opportunities for Alaska's library workforce*.

The Alaska Occupational Forecast 2020-2030 (live.laborstats.alaska.gov) predicts growth in: Educational Instruction and Library Workers (+8%), Library Technicians (+2.44%), and Librarians and Media Collections Specialists (+4.6%). The course sequence will include a course providing an introduction to the libraries and archives professions and may also provide a pathway to pursue an MLIS degree at an accredited program. This planning grant will provide time to (a) gather data, (b) identify educational gaps and training needs, and (c) create a program plan and learning outcomes for our teaching activities.

Project Work Plan. Year One (8/1/2024-7/31/2025): Aug-Dec: project personnel will: (1) develop interview questions and a survey to gather further data for our needs assessment, (2) conduct an environmental scan (articles, recent years position description/job postings, courses and sequences in similar undergraduate or pre-professional programs), and (3) hold initial meetings with potential partners including Alaska State Library and the Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL). Jan-Apr: distribute surveys, prepare for and attend AkLA conference, conduct a pre-conference focus group, interviews, and meet/network with partnering organizations in order to assess existing workforce data. May-July: project personnel will analyze survey and interview responses related to professional and curricular needs and begin curriculum development and related collection development (review and purchasing of textbooks, ALA publications, and curricular materials).

Year Two (8/1/2025-7/31/2026): Aug-Dec: curriculum development will continue, alongside running a pilot of a newly proposed course (LIS career exploration course). Jan-Apr: survey and focus group findings will be synthesized as a report, to be shared at the AkLA conference and published as a white paper or other resource. May-July: will include a presentation at ALA annual or another national conference on findings, as well as the finalization of curriculum proposals to be submitted by the October 1, 2026 institutional deadline. Tracking Progress: Ward will keep a central database / spreadsheet of activities to manage the project tools, documentation, and agency reporting requirements. Lamb will serve as the main contact to students. In this project we will systematically assess education needs and design a curriculum in response to the needs. Cox and Henrickson will take lead on the organization and sequence of new courses. Over Summer 2025 and Summer 2026 Co-I Cox will serve as lead in finalizing course and curriculum requirements for submission to the UAS Curriculum Committee for review in Fall 2026 (post award period). In the final months of the award, two project personnel will present project findings/deliverables at ALA Annual in Chicago.

Diversity Plan. Alaska is home to 231 Federally recognized Indigenous tribes and 20+ distinct Indigenous languages. Southeast Alaska is the ancestral home of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples. Their presence extends back thousands of years. Some twenty percent of UAS students are Indigenous Alaskans. The advancement of Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures and languages are increasingly reflected in UAS programs. The field of library and information science (LIS) and the composition of Alaska's library workforce are not racially or ethnically diverse. The project will identify the unique training needs of the workforce with an emphasis on empowering existing rural library staff to remain in their communities, and to incorporate cultural competency content into any curriculum to ensure all staff are better positioned to serve in rural and Indigenous serving communities. The project will look to integrate existing curricular resources developed through two IMLS supported projects; *Bridging Knowledge: Supporting Indigenous Scholars Into the Field of Librarianship* (RE-250081-OLS-21) and *Raven Reads at the Library* (RE-254936-OLS -23). In addition we are guided by Culturally Responsive Guidelines for Alaska Public Libraries.

Project Results. By the end of the two year planning grant we will have conducted a needs assessment, developed partnerships, presented findings at state and national conferences, and designed coursework to present to the UAS Curriculum Committee. Project findings will be shared as an openly licensed report and include analysis, survey questions, focus group and interview questions, methodology and aggregated data related to the scope of the Alaskan library workforce (total workforce, position vacancies, annual turnover, qualifications, and training needs). The report will inform development of LIS classes leading to a credential. Project survey, interview, and/or focus group instruments will be shared for re-use by other academic institutions and communities to identify any unmet training needs of their library workforce.

Budget Summary. Total expense for the two-year project is \$149,911. Salaries: \$73,063; Benefits: \$22,276; Travel: \$10,341; Supplies: \$2,000; Subawards/Contracts: \$400; Student Support: \$8,758; Other Costs: n/a; UAS Indirect Costs (30.6%): \$33,073.