

**Rare Book & Manuscript Library (RBML), Columbia University Libraries
Curatorial Duties, Ethics, and Best Practices in Archives and Special Collections for the Next Century
IMLS - Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program's Forum Grant**

Introduction: This proposal foregrounds the knowledge, expertise, and experiential wisdom of curators of color in articulating contemporary collective knowledge and ethics about the curatorial role in archives and special collections. Columbia University Libraries' Rare Book & Manuscript Library (RBML) application to the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program's Forum Grant requests \$106,400. Aligned with program goal number one and objective 1.1, this grant will be used to convene a forum of curators charged with collecting, preserving, and exhibiting special collections and archives materials. The forum will: 1) consolidate knowledge about the curatorial role and professional development needs, 2) foster conversations about the ethics and best practices for stewarding collections, and 3) troubleshoot pathways and barriers into the position.

Project Justification: In archives and special collections, the curatorial role is unexamined. Best practices are diffuse. Curatorial duties are situated at the nexus of museum curation (e.g. acquisition, collecting, and exhibitions), archival science (e.g. appraisal, cataloging, and metadata), and archives management. Library & Information Science programs offer few training opportunities in curation as its own distinct specialization.¹ Additionally, absent a governing body of its own, such as the Society of American Archivists or the American Library Association, there is no centralized venue for curators to discuss the state of the field nor articulate common ethical standards.

Contributing to exclusivity in the curatorial role is the workforce's homogeneity in its race and gender composition. White women overwhelmingly hold curatorial positions.² While there are notable moves to increase accountability and diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in the field, those efforts are largely geared toward collecting and describing materials, and diversifying archival staff. Less attention is paid to the overwhelming lack of diversity in the curatorial role and how prestige accorded curators evades critique for perpetuating elitism and exclusivity in collecting and stewardship. This proposal's goal is to have curators who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC)—whether stewarding collections from communities or color or curating broadly—lead from the front. This is not to assume that curators of color are without biases in need of dismantling or that they do not hold other types of privilege. Neither does prioritizing curators of color participation discount the importance of allyship in broadening the field. Instead the intention is to begin the conversation from a place of solutions to shortcomings in the field which are already evident.

Columbia and peer institutions informally adopted the curator role for special collections and archives since the mid-1980s, with a rise in designated positions in the early-to-mid-2000s. In that respect, this form of curation is nascent and in need of greater definition. While the Principal Investigator and the institution's strategic directions are supportive in creating opportunities for continuing education and DEIA-focused initiatives, Kimberly Springer (she/her), the Project Director, is well-positioned to guide the discussion around defining special collections and archives curation as the sole African American curator amongst a group of nine and the sole African American staff member in the RBML. For example, the Project Director has collaborated with an RBML archivist colleague on an "equity collecting plan," which prompts curators to articulate how proposed acquisitions will benefit an inclusive research community and remain connected to creator communities, especially marginalized ones. Additionally, as a Privacy Advocate with the [Library Freedom Project](#), the Project Director brings a similar, trust-building ethos to creating accessibility opportunities that will expand and deepen curatorial practice and occupational outlooks for an inclusive future.

¹ In archives and preservation, the concept of curation is typically applied to "digital curation" or data management.

² A forthcoming study by Amy Hildreth Chen of the top 25 Association of Research Libraries (ARL), finds 123 curators with advanced degrees are employed by ARL institutions. Of the curators included in Chen's data set, 63% were women. Race and ethnicity were not queried in this survey. The predominance of white women in libraries and archives can be inferred, as indicated by the American Library Association's most recent "[Diversity Counts](#)" 2012 data—approximately 72% of librarians are white women—and the Society of American Archivists's recent [A+Census II results](#)—the profession is 84% white and women are 71% of the archival profession—which places white women librarians and archivists as the largest demographic by far. This can be assumed to be the case for curatorial staffing.

Project Work Plan: Work for this project will take place over the course of 18-months in four phases.

Phase one (August - November 2024) will focus on hiring a core team of an archivist well-versed in both archival and curatorial functions, a DEIA consultant with a proven track record in improving the hiring and retention records of organizations, and a graduate student project assistant to help research, locate, and conduct personalized outreach with curators of color. Outreach to DEIA-focused organizations and committees, such as the Historically Black Colleges & Universities' Libraries Alliance, SAA's Native American Archives, Accessibility and Disability, Diverse Sexuality and Gender, Latin American & Caribbean Cultural Heritage (e.g., SAA committees) to solicit the names of curators of color will be critical at this stage. This phase's outcome will be a database of potential forum participants.

Phase two (December 2024 - April 2025) will focus on forum planning and logistics, including creating a survey of 20 - 25 potential attendees to introduce the forum's goals, gauge interest in participating, develop themes for experiential lightning talks, and create opportunities for shaping the final deliverables. Day one's sessions will include large-group opportunities for networking and sharing lightning talks about the history and context of our curatorial practices at our institutions, an assessment of curatorial responsibilities and skills, and aspirations for continued professional development. Day two will focus on applying the previous day's insights to four smaller working groups: a group tasked with developing a survey of the current curatorial field (e.g. composition, educational background, skills used, etc.), an ethics and best practices group, an online resource network building group, and a group devoted to conceptualizing the summer institute for MLIS students interested in curation.

Phase three (May - August 2025) finds the core team summarizing and creating an online home for the forum findings. Possible audiences for the findings website will be LIS curriculum developers, current curators, and aspiring curators. During this time the core team will also assist working groups in producing the forum's deliverables, e.g. drafting, formatting, and publishing the handbook, looking ahead to collaborations and funding for the summer institute, and/or assisting with establishing infrastructure for the online networking space.

Phase four (September - January 2026) will be used to finalize and launch deliverables by January 2026, including a webinar to disseminate outcomes.

Project Results: This proposal aims to harness the considerable talents of curators of color in organizing diverse communities. The impact will be documenting and implementing thinking beyond traditional structural boundaries to help the curatorial profession live up to the 21st ideals espoused in most archives and special collections. The forum's findings will be a strong foundation for establishing and revisiting curatorial standards. Documenting standards and best practices will benefit archives and special collections users by improving collecting and care for materials. Finally, working toward diversifying the workforce and retaining talent rooted in shared ethics will generate new ideas for greater accessibility and outreach in archives and special collections.

Budget Summary: The total amount requested from IMLS is \$106,400. Budget estimates include: \$18,684 for salaries and wages, \$5,136 for fringe, \$11,000 for consultants, \$2,230 for supplies, materials, and equipment (e.g. survey subscription, deliverable design, web hosting), \$42,950 for forum related costs (e.g. travel, attendees' meals/lodging for working groups during forum, and classroom rental) and \$26,400 for facilities and administrative costs.