

Through the proposed *Autism Informed School Library Educators (AISLE) Project*, the University of South Florida's School of Information, in collaboration with Old Dominion University's Special Education program, will address the knowledge gap that many school librarians report in their working with autistic students in their schools. This *Forum* project which plans to gather practicing school librarians across the nation to learn valuable information from autism experts, meets the **Laura Bush 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**, specifically through **Objective 3.2: Create and/or refine training programs that build library and archival workforce skills and expertise in contributing to the well-being of communities**. With an aim to raise autism awareness in school librarians that will ultimately lead to more opportunity for acceptance and inclusion in K-12 schools across the nation, the project team will develop and host a freely available online forum that engages autism experts, open to all school librarians and staff across the U.S. to provide professional development (PD) and act as an educational resource in the field. Resulting takeaways of best practices in offering inclusive library services for autistic students will be disseminated through conference presentations and practitioner publications and resources. Forum recordings and associated materials will be made freely available online.

Project Justification

Current Need

In a study of 11 communities, the CDC reports¹ the current prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as 1 in 36 children, demonstrating that autistic children are firmly situated in the communities in which school librarians serve. Yet this project team's recent studies indicate that school librarians, our *target population*, are not receiving training to optimally support members of this population.

While some schools have programs specifically designed for autistic children, most U.S. schools utilize an integrated approach to education, with autistic children in the same classrooms and programs as their neurotypical peers. Though school librarians are already working with autistic children and teens in their schools, most feel unprepared for this task². Based on the results of three survey studies performed by PI Amelia Anderson and co-PI Selena Layden, school librarians are not likely to receive education about autism or disability through their graduate MLIS programs, their schools, or PD offered through conferences^{2,3,4}. Additionally, school librarians are often excluded from students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), are challenged in describing inclusive programming they may provide for autistic students, and have little knowledge of effective evidence based practices (EBPs)⁵ for this population. However, when PD is provided, surveyed librarians do report more confidence in serving autistic students². This proposed project will fill this lack of autism education and PD by bringing autism educators together with school librarians, with an aim to increase knowledge, present effective EBPs, improve library pedagogy that supports teaching and learning, and increase workforce skills and confidence in school librarians in the U.S. Ultimately, autistic students across the US will be *beneficiaries* of this project from having more knowledgeable librarians.

Target Group

As noted, previous work with school librarians in the U.S. indicates that they are largely unprepared to work with autistic students in their schools, and this project seeks to address this issue by providing unique, targeted virtual sessions tailored for school librarians' educational needs. Based on data from the National Center for Educational Statistics' (NCES) Schools and Staffing Surveys, a 2018 fact sheet from the American Library Association (ALA) suggests 78,570 paid library staff work in public school libraries, 14,090 paid library staff work in private school libraries, and 90 paid library staff work in Bureau of Indian Education School Libraries^{6,7,8}. These numbers include both full and part-time staff. While we broadly define our project target group as "school librarians," our proposed forum will invite all who identify as situated within the school librarianship field. We believe the more who have access to this free education, the better our autistic children will be served in both the K-12 environment and beyond. As such, registration and forum activities will be free and accessible to any school librarian, school library

employee, or library school student (now collectively referred to as “school librarian” throughout this proposal) ensuring broader access and inclusion, and a wider scope of impact.

Autism is a lifelong disorder, and students of all ages will benefit from more knowledgeable educators. Forum activities will be widely open, allowing school librarians to attend regardless of grade levels served. Keyword descriptors will accompany all forum sessions to facilitate individual interest.

While school librarians have opportunities to gather through national conferences such as the American Association for School Librarians (AASL) annual conference, state conferences hosted by state chapters of AASL, and through virtual offerings such as webinars, no opportunities allow school librarians to gather live as a community of practice specifically to learn more about autism. This forum will allow school librarians to build community around a shared topic of interest while furthering their knowledge and advancing their own connections within the field. Offering recordings and complementary training materials and resources will support those unable to attend the live forum.

Beneficiaries

While the proposed forum and its complementary training materials are designed to educate school librarians, it is autistic students who are the intended *beneficiaries*, as they will benefit from a more knowledgeable, autism-informed school librarian base. According to the NCES, there were 980,272 students with ASD ages 5-21 years, receiving special education services during the 2022-2024 school year⁹. This means that just over 13% of students receiving special education services in the US ages 5-21 years are identified under the disability of autism. Studies show that increased knowledge about, and familiarity with, autism help to decrease stigma toward autistic individuals and increase acceptance and inclusive practices^{10,11}. This focus on inclusion is significant. Autistic school-age children are more likely to feel lonely when in a group of their peers¹², and autistic adolescents report higher levels of loneliness when compared to control groups¹³. With the knowledge that increased understanding and support are especially critical for developing children and teens, and necessary across an autistic person’s lifespan, a school professional’s knowledge and acceptance may have lasting impact throughout the lifespans of their students. Indeed, a study by PI Anderson found that many autistic librarians pursued a library science career facilitated, in part, from positive interactions with librarians throughout their youth¹⁴.

The forum intends to feature sessions that are designed for school librarians who work with all grade levels to ensure that autistic students of all ages will benefit.

Contribution to the Field

Opportunities for autism education specifically designed for school librarians are rare and inconsistent across graduate programs, conference sessions, and online professional development. This forum project will bring together experts to provide a comprehensive autism training experience, tailored specifically for school librarians that will be housed permanently online through an eLearning platform. Additional training materials will be created and made available to complement the forum recordings. The proposed forum is expected to *complement* and *build upon* other autism efforts funded by IMLS. Five such projects have been funded through LB21 programs, and one through NLG: Syracuse University’s Project ENABLE (most recently funded as [\(RE-06-13-0071-13\)](#); the Illinois State Library’s Targeting Autism for Libraries project ([\(RE-40-16-0028-16\)](#)); Florida State University’s Project PALS ([\(RE-06-13-0059-13\)](#)), and Project A+ ([\(RE-31-16-0129-16\)](#)); and the University of Washington’s Autism-Ready Toolkit ([\(LG-246350-OLS-20\)](#)). Finally, an early career research project awarded to UNC-Chapel Hill ([\(RE-07-17-0048-17\)](#)) “focused on community assessment and information poverty and access,” aiming “to help libraries equip people with Autism Spectrum Disorders and their families with the skills they need to become self-advocates and to fulfill their own information needs.” Deliverables from this project consisted of tools and models for data collection and research. Our project *differs*, as while we will use data to inform our forum sessions, the intended output is for practitioners rather than researchers.

The five autism education programs funded by IMLS set a strong foundation for our *AISLE Project*, which will *complement* but not duplicate previous efforts. Our proposed *AISLE Project differs*

from all previously funded projects, as none developed a national, virtual, live forum specifically for school librarians, and specifically about autism.

Building from Project ENABLE

Project ENABLE has done impactful work, both for school librarians interested in accessibility and for all librarians in learning more about autism. Our proposed project *differs* from this approach in that it allows school librarians to come together in real time as part of a forum, with recordings later available for individual learning. Our project *builds upon* Project ENABLE's series of live workshops, now held more than 10 years ago, in providing a similar experience for currently practicing school librarians. Our project *differs* from the ENABLE workshops in that our project will hold forum sessions online, allowing greater opportunity for participation. Finally, our project *differs* from their autism specific training modules, created in partnership with Targeting Autism for Libraries, in that we will host a live forum, with live recordings and supplemental materials rather than an asynchronous certificate course. We will *build on* the success of Project ENABLE as our products will *complement* the trainings they have available and, with PI Dr. Ruth Small's support, will be indexed on their resource database.

Building from Targeting Autism

Targeting Autism for Libraries developed an autism training program for the state of Illinois; this project also created the online training modules referenced previously, in partnership with Project ENABLE, and held two in-person forums for practitioners and stakeholders. Our project *differs* from Targeting Autism in that our live forum will be held online, providing greater opportunities for national, broad participation beyond the span of one state. Additionally, our focus is only on the community of school librarians, not libraries more broadly.

Building from Project PALS and Project A+

Project PALS focused on rural library patrons in the Florida Panhandle region, and developed online training modules for all librarians. While these trainings are available freely online through OCLC's Webjunction, they *differ* from this proposed project as they are designed to broadly appeal to all librarians, meaning they are not tailored specifically to the K-12 educational environment and school librarians. Project PALS consists of training modules that librarians can access asynchronously. Our project *differs* from this approach in that it allows school librarians to come together in real time as part of a forum, with recordings later available for individual learning. Project A+, a research study to inform practices for academic librarians working with autistic students, also resulted in an online training manual. As with Project PALS, PI Anderson was deeply involved in the work with Project A+, serving as the project coordinator. Our *AISLE Project differs* from Project A+ in that we are targeting school librarians, rather than academic librarians. Additionally, our focus is on a forum that will bring school librarians together, with resulting recordings and associated content later made available to all, rather than conducting a large-scale research project.

Building from the Autism-Ready Toolkit

The Autism-Ready Toolkit developed through the University of Washington (LG-246350-OLS-20) focused on research "to improve libraries' capacity to include children with autism and their families in early literacy programming." The resulting training modules are described as "specific to the public library context, (but) can be used by anyone with an interest in autism inclusion and inclusive literacy practices." Our project *differs*, as we are focused on offering an online forum rather than conducting research and we are targeting school librarians specifically; our final deliverables will *complement* the Autism Ready Toolkit, providing similar support specifically for school librarians.

The AISLE Project New Contributions

As a whole, our project *differs* from these previous efforts in that it brings together school librarians to provide autism education specific to their unique needs in the K-12 educational environment. Information about autism and recommendations for best practices are updated frequently, and it is critical to continually update the autism information and education we provide for librarians. Our project will *complement* and *build upon* previous efforts in providing the most current information possible to school librarians.

Personnel from many previous autism focused IMLS funded initiatives will continue to inform our project. Notably, PI Anderson worked on both Project PALS and Project A+ projects as a graduate assistant and project manager, respectively. She also served on the advisory board of Targeting Autism for Libraries. Project PALS/A+'s PI Dr. Nancy Everhart, Project ENABLE's PI Dr. Ruth Small, and Targeting Autism for Libraries' PI Suzanne Schriar have all agreed to serve on the advisory board of our proposed project, helping to further assure new work will *build upon*, rather than duplicate, previous products.

Project Work Plan

This project's high-impact *specific activities, in sequence*, will include 1) *planning* a national virtual forum to bring school librarians together for autism education; 2) *hosting* the national virtual forum; 3) *creating* high quality recordings, abstracts, and fact sheets from the national virtual forum; 4) *publishing* information on an eLearning platform, and 5) *disseminating* information about forum recordings and takeaways via platforms such as the Project ENABLE website, the Targeting Autism blog, conference presentations, and practitioner publications.

Personnel

All activities will be *managed* by PI Dr. Amelia Anderson, with support from co-PI Dr. Selena Layden, a graduate assistant from the USF MLIS program (to be hired), and an expert team of advisory board members. Notably, PI Amelia Anderson has IMLS experience as a managing co-PI (LG-246292-ols-20) and project director (RE-31-16-0129-16) and will take the lead in *project planning, execution, and managing*. Anderson, an assistant professor at the University of South Florida's School of Information, is a former practicing librarian who has conducted research at the intersection of autism and libraries since 2013. She has published a book through ALA Editions: *Library Programming for Autistic Children and Teens*, and has also published pieces in school and young adult oriented library journals such as *School Libraries Worldwide*, *Teacher Librarian*, and the *Journal of Research on Libraries & Young Adults*. She has presented about autism and libraries for audiences at national and international conferences such as those held by the American Library Association's (ALA), the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL), the Association for Library and Information Science Educators (ALISE), and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), among others. Additional details are available on her CV, attached.

Co-PI Selena Layden will assist and lead the project in content development as subject matter expert. Layden, an assistant professor of Special Education at Old Dominion University, is a leading expert on autism and has worked as a special education administrator in two different school districts. PI Anderson and co-PI Layden have a multi-year successful history of collaborative research, focusing specifically on the intersection of school librarians and autism^{2,3,4,5}.

The project will provide an MLIS graduate assistant (GA) with practical experience to include data collection and analysis, event planning, developing content for a professional audience, and presenting within the field. The GA will be hired upon grant funds awarded, and we will seek a student with an interest in school librarianship as a career. All current USF MLIS students will be invited to apply through standard GA application processes, and the call for applications will be promoted widely through student channels such as the program's LISTSERV and Canvas announcements, to which all students subscribe. Through opportunities provided through this project, the GA will be provided with mentorship to grow through their individual skills and interests while contributing meaningfully to project goals, developing as a future leader in the field.

Advisory board members will provide guidance and feedback through a series of four virtual meetings. Identified advisory board members are experts in school librarianship and autism services, including:

- Adriana White, a former school librarian, autism self-advocate and administrator of the "Autistics in Libraries and Their Allies" Facebook group;
- Heather Baucum, a school librarian and autism advocate with years of experience presenting and publishing about best autism practices for school librarians;

- Suzanne Schriar, the PI and project director of Targeting Autism for Libraries;
- Dr. Ruth Small, the founder and PI of Project ENABLE, and
- Dr. Nancy Everhart, a former AASL (American Association of School Librarians) president and PI of both Project PALS and Project A+.

The USF College of Arts and Sciences Office of Communication and Marketing will provide marketing support, and will liaise with a production team hired to help *plan and execute* an accessible event and professional, polished recordings.

Project Activities

Planning: Surveys

In planning for the virtual forum, surveys will be distributed to school librarians and autistic library users. While tailored forum sessions will be guided by previous studies indicating areas of need, these additional surveys will be conducted to further shape these sessions and ensure meaningful content.

In the first survey, school librarians will be asked what information they would like to learn about autism through the proposed forum. This survey will also serve to build anticipation and awareness of the upcoming event itself.

The second survey will ask autistic individuals what information they wished their librarians knew, or had known, about autism and the ways in which they think librarians might assist with their learning and library experience. Each survey will allow participants the opportunity to enter their information for a \$50 gift card drawing, helping to motivate participation and ensure adequate sample size.

Planning: Session Development

The forum itself will consist of two types of sessions: (1) *plenary sessions* developed and presented by the project team, and (2) *breakout sessions* presented from responses to our call for proposals. (1) *Plenary sessions* developed by the project team will be led by PI Anderson and co-PI Layden, whose subject matter knowledge will be critically important. Plenary sessions will be designed to appeal broadly to most in attendance, featuring information that all school librarians need to know about autism. Examples include information about general characteristics of autism, manifestation of those characteristics in the classroom, and strategies for working with IEP teams. These sessions will be developed from Anderson and Layden's research about autism and school libraries, with consideration of new survey data collected from school librarians and autistic library users during the planning period of this project. Advisory board members will be invited to take part in the planning, development, and presenting process for these sessions as well. (2) The project will also invite proposals for *breakout sessions*. This forum participation call will be distributed through national outlets and advisory board networks. Anticipated topics include collection curation to include neurodivergent characters, sensory story times, adapted books, and more. Breakout sessions may appeal to specific grade levels or age groups, and attendees will choose which sessions they prefer to attend. The team will develop and implement a rubric, with input from the advisory board, to ensure that high quality, interactive breakout sessions are chosen most in alignment with school librarian needs. Presenters will be compensated with stipends for their participation. PI Anderson and co-PI Layden, with support from the graduate assistant and advisory board members, will select presenters from those who submit, and will provide guidance and feedback during session development.

Breakout sessions, as they will be designed to appeal to different subgroups within school librarianship, may be presented concurrently, contingent on number of quality proposals. Plenary sessions, designed to appeal to most, will be presented with no other sessions also hosted at the same time. We anticipate allotting 30 minutes per breakout session, and 30-60 minutes per plenary session, in alignment with virtual event session best practices.

The USF College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Office of Communication and Marketing will provide marketing support with creation of professional promotional materials. Forum information will be distributed through LISTSERVs such as those hosted by state chapters of AASL, social media outlets, and

relevant groups on ALA Connect. Advisory board members will disseminate information through their networks.

Hosting

A free virtual forum allows for unlimited attendees. Attendees will be asked to register in advance so that we can provide them with important information, as well as collect post-event evaluation surveys.

The USF College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Office of Communication and Marketing will liaise with a production team hired to ensure an accessible event through a virtual platform such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. An estimate from the company DCE, which the CAS Office of Communication and Marketing has successfully worked with on previous virtual events, is included in the attachments. PI Anderson, along with the graduate assistant, will work closely with the CAS Office of Communication and Marketing.

The forum event will be held over the course of one day, with virtual sessions conducted throughout the day. Plenary sessions, those developed by the project team and with broad appeal for all attendees, will be held as the opening and closing sessions, with breakout sessions from selected proposals occurring in between. Each session will last approximately 30 minutes, with a short break in between each to allow attendees to attend to their needs and to account for any technical or user errors that may extend or delay individual session times. Plenary sessions will be scheduled for 45 minutes each. This timing has been determined to best meet attendee's needs in the virtual environment, based on online conference best practices. However, this may be adjusted based on advisory board input and individual session proposals (for example, a panel discussion with multiple presenters may require more time). Attendees can choose to attend the full day or select the sessions that most appeal to their individual needs. The full schedule will be finalized as the project develops, and with input from the school librarian survey and advisory board members.

A tentative schedule is as follows:

- 11-11:45: *Opening Plenary Session*
- 12-12:30: *Breakout Session*
- 12:45-1:15: *Breakout Session*
- 1:30-2: *Breakout Session*
- 2:15-2:45: *Breakout Session*
- 3-3:30: *Breakout Session*
- 3:45-4:15: *Breakout Session*
- 4:30-5: *Breakout Session*
- 5-5:45: *Closing Plenary Session*

Sessions will be listed in Eastern Standard Time (EST); the day is intentionally timed to be as inclusive as possible in accommodating attendees across a span of US time zones.

Events will be password protected, with the password shared in advance through the registration process, to help ensure a seamless online event. Measures will be put in place for feedback during sessions, with the graduate student working with the USF CAS Office of Communications and Marketing and the production team DCE to monitor chat boxes, online polls, and more during sessions. The forum will meet WCAG 2.0 accessibility standards at the AA level or include a WCAG 2.0 AA compliant accessible alternative version.

Creating

The USF CAS Office of Communications and Marketing will work with a hired production team to help produce professional, polished recordings. Along with these recordings, the project team, led by PI Anderson in collaboration with the graduate assistant, will create video abstracts and written abstracts as well as curate content related to presentations (e.g., materials referenced in sessions). Again, all created content will meet WCAG 2.0 accessibility standards at the AA level or include a WCAG 2.0 AA compliant accessible alternative version.

Publishing

Those unable to join for the synchronous sessions or who may wish to view sessions again can view high quality, professionally produced recordings posted online afterwards. These measures allow for broad national impact and access for the greatest number of people. Participants will also be encouraged to share the information with their networks.

Recordings and associated content will be hosted on an eLearning platform. These materials will then be housed and accessible for free by school librarians or any other interested parties in related fields.

Disseminating

Multiple steps will be taken to ensure school librarians are aware of and able to access information developed from the forum. Steps will be taken to share information about our eLearning site, and about key forum takeaways through conference presentations, webinars, and practitioner publications.

Dr. Ruth Small of Project ENABLE has confirmed support of sharing access to eLearning materials through their database and an invited blog post on their website. This post will be created by the project's graduate assistant, with oversight and support from PI Anderson.

Additionally, forum takeaways will be shared through conference presentations (such as the AASL Annual Conference and the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) annual conference) webinars (such as for ALA eLearning and the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE)), and practitioner publications (such as for Knowledge Quest and a blog on the School Library Journal). Each dissemination avenue has been carefully chosen to reflect places where practicing school librarians and school library educators get professional information. The AASL biannual conference "is the only national conference devoted solely to the needs of school librarians," and describes itself as "a leading professional development event for school librarians." Internationally, IASL describes their annual conference as "a space for school librarians, public librarians, teachers, administrations, researchers and all others who hold an interest in reading, education and libraries to exchange ideas and practices, meet new colleagues, and reunite with friends." IASL 2024 is a virtual event, and we anticipate the same for 2025, helping to provide even broader reach for information about our project. AASL webinars are offered through ALA's eLearning department, and individuals may submit proposals that are then marketed widely to membership. ALISE webinars are available to members of the organization, which "serves as the intellectual home of faculty, staff, and students in library and information science," thus reaching educators of future school librarians. Knowledge Quest is the official journal of AASL and, according to their website, "is read by school librarians in elementary and secondary schools." It is available to all AASL members, which in 2019 consisted of 7,290 members. School Library Journal describes itself as "is the premiere publication for librarians and information specialists who work with children and teens," and they welcome submissions of feature articles and news, among others.

PI Anderson and co-PI Layden will work closely with the graduate assistant to prepare, submit, and present, when applicable, for these dissemination opportunities. The graduate student will be given mentorship to include as many opportunities as possible to grow professionally through these activities. Finally, a scholarly manuscript prepared by PI Anderson and co-PI Layden, detailing findings from initial surveys will provide insight into the needs of autistic library patrons that help shape this forum, adding to a growing body of research in this area.

Timeline

Grant activities will take place over the course of two years, from August 2024 through July 2026. Year one will consist of planning and hosting the virtual forum, with initial proposals sent for conference presentations. Year two will consist of material creation, publication, and information dissemination. An abbreviated timeline is as follows; a more detailed timeline can be found in accompanying documents.

Year 1: 9/24: Meet with advisory board. 9/24-4/24: Plan and organize virtual forum event. 9/24: Develop surveys to guide forum session programming. 10/24: Distribute surveys. 11-12/24: Analyze survey data; Distribute call for forum participation. 11-12/24: Develop plenary sessions. 12/24: Hire MLIS student for GA position. 1/24: Meet with advisory board. 1/24-4/25: Market virtual forum. 3-4/24: Develop session assessment instruments. 5/25: Hold virtual forum. 5/25-6/25: Collect and analyze evaluative data. 5/25-7/25: Write and submit external conference (e.g. AASL, FAME, VASL, IASL) presentation proposals.

Year 2: 8/25: Meet with advisory board. 8/25-10/25: Create video and written abstracts. 9/25: Develop external conference presentations. 10/25-11/25: Curate supplemental content. 10/25: Disseminate information through AASL conference presentation. 11/25: Disseminate information through FAME and VASL conference presentations. 11/25-1/26: Publish recordings and materials to eLearning platform. 2/26-3/26: Information dissemination broadly. 3/26-4/26: Write articles and blog posts. 4/26-5/26: Create and present webinars. 6/26: Meet with advisory board. 7/26: Disseminate information through IASL conference presentation. 7/26: Submit final IMLS report.

Financial Resources

The anticipated budget is \$149,957. This includes funding for: Salaries and Wages: (22,048); Fringe Benefits: (7,207); PI Travel: (3,791); Subawards and Contracts: (18,100 for event support; 34,036 for ODU subcontract/PI Dr. Selena Layden); Student Support to include Salary, Tuition, and Travel: (17,736); and Other Costs to include stipends, honorariums, survey incentives, and open access fees: (12,900). Total Direct Costs are: \$115,818. Total Indirect Costs are: \$34,139. Total Project Costs are: \$149,957.

Perspectives of Target Group

Contributions from school librarian input are an important aspect of this project, and opportunities exist to build in *ongoing external input* across the lifespan of this project. Their responses to our survey will help to inform forum sessions, ensuring the content we provide is meaningful and suits their needs. At the outset of the forum, school librarians in attendance will be surveyed once more to assess their takeaways from the sessions they attended. This process will help to inform how complementary material is presented alongside forum recordings, and what information is provided through subsequent presentations. School librarians who have experience and knowledge in implementing services for autistic children will be accepted to present at the forum through their session submissions. Additionally, two members of our advisory board are practicing or recently practicing school librarians, and one is a former president of the national school library association (AASL), who will provide *ongoing external input* and *validation* at all stages of the project, with *consensus building* opportunities during planned advisory board meetings.

Evaluation and Progress Tracking

The project team (Anderson, Layden, and graduate assistant) will meet regularly via videoconferencing to *evaluate* project process and chart *progress* toward project goals.

Project results will be *tracked* using a Gantt chart throughout the two-year grant period through a continual process of assessment. Weekly meetings to *evaluate* project processes with the GA will ensure detailed tasks are met, and biweekly meetings between the PI and co-PI will add to project accountability and ensure *progress* toward broader goals are on track.

A biannual meeting with advisory board members will further ensure the team is on schedule to meet project goals. Detailed agendas for advisory board meetings will be distributed, as will meeting notes. Advisory board members will provide additional feedback outside of these planned meetings through email and consultations as necessary.

The forum itself, and associated training materials, will be developed through an *iterative* process, in which data collected from surveys will inform plenary session offerings and rubrics will be developed to evaluate breakout session submissions.

Post-forum assessment surveys will be given to all forum attendees for two purposes. First, these surveys will collect feedback about session highlights which will inform how the project team compiles abstracts and features information in subsequent presentations and publications. And second, session attendee will be asked to reflect on what they learned, and create an action plan for implementing improvements in their own libraries to better serve autistic students.

Diversity Plan

It is critical that autistic individuals are *involved in defining the needs* of autistic people as presented of this forum. A common saying in disability self-advocacy is “nothing about us without us,” and this has been adopted as the motto of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN). It is not enough for us to prescribe appropriate approaches for school librarians to take without consulting autistic library users themselves. As such, the initial data collection from autistic library users is an important pillar within this project and will help to inform forum sessions and information provided within. Additionally, our advisory board, all with diverse areas of expertise, includes members of the autistic community, helping to ensure we are accurately and appropriately representing their needs at all steps of *creating and implementing the project*.

Autism is a neurodiversity, just one of many ways in which a person’s neurological functioning may be different from another person. In framing it as such, we reject the idea that autism is something to be fixed or cured, and will ensure that the sessions we include in the forum represent this mindset as well. Autism is also intersectional, and we will work to ensure a *diversity of perspectives* from autistic lived experiences are represented. The stereotypical image of a young, white, male does not accurately represent the true nature of how autism is present among every demographic group. We will ensure we have broad representation of autism across demographic groups, both in the data we collect to inform sessions and in the forum sessions themselves.

Forum attendance and the resulting recordings will be free for all to access, thus removing barriers associated with cost and travel for potential attendees. Acknowledging that needs differ by community, particularly in rural and underserved locations, anyone affiliated with school libraries is invited to attend, not just those with an MLIS or with the official “librarian” title. The virtual environment further lends itself to inclusion, particularly for individuals with disabilities. Multiple accounts detail the challenges of in-person conferences for librarians with disabilities, and as one librarian noted, “it takes a lot of extra effort for me to manage my health during professional events.”¹⁴ Offering sessions online will help to alleviate those concerns, making them more accessible to wider audience.

The *AISLE Project* will strengthen the *field’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion* practices. By increasing knowledge about autism, this project will help to ensure school librarians are cognizant of autism as diversity, and they will be able to implement more equitable, inclusive practices in their school libraries.

This project will contribute to *development of a diverse workforce* in LIS as, at least one forum session, guided by advisory board member Adriana White, will focus on the experiences of autistic school librarians who will present best support practices for peers to follow. Autistic librarians have chronicled their experiences as being both rewarding and challenging, with a call for better understanding within the field¹⁵; this project’s forum will provide an avenue to spread this information specifically within the school library subfield.

Project Results

Tangible *results intended to advance knowledge* will be the live forum gathering and the resulting high-quality recordings. Additional associated materials will be developed from forum sessions, including fact sheets, infographics, and short video abstracts. Together, these live and recorded sessions and complementary materials will *help to address the need* for more autism-informed school librarians.

High level project *results intended to benefit society* include a more informed school library workforce, ultimately leading to more inclusive and accepting school libraries for autistic children. In providing accessible training, both synchronous through a virtual forum and posted online for later viewing, this project seeks to advance school librarian knowledge about autism. By developing more

autism educated school librarians, autistic children and teens will benefit through a more inclusive and knowledgeable school environment.

Forum recordings will be posted through an eLearning platform and indexed on the Project ENABLE website. Forum recordings and associated materials will be *readily usable* by school librarians or others in the community who may benefit. While this forum will be tailored specifically for school librarians, some sessions will feature information about autism more broadly and be *generalizable* to a greater population. As each session will have an abstract and will be categorized by keywords, librarians and library staff serving other populations may also find value from such content. As such, these recordings and materials will be promoted widely both within and beyond the school library context. To ensure reach beyond the school library community, information will also be shared broadly through platforms such as ALA Connect.

Invitations to the live forum will be shared widely, including with LIS educators for distribution to their graduate students through the JESSE listserv. Additionally, forum recordings and associated materials, as housed within an eLearning platform, will be shared with and *usable by other institutions* providing LIS education to add to the MLIS curriculum as appropriate. PI Anderson leads “Introduction to Library Administration” for MLIS graduate students at USF, a required course for all students. Recordings and associated content relevant to all librarians will be embedded within a “Serving Diverse Users” module of this course, and Dr. Natalie Taylor, USF’s program director and school library advisor, has agreed to embed content within school library specific courses as well. Assistant, associate, and full professors from four MLIS programs with strong school library tracks have also agreed to feature forum content within their online coursework for graduate students: Dr. Kevin Mallery at Old Dominion University, Dr. Jennifer Luetkemeyer at Appalachian State University, Dr. Abigail Phillips at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and Dr. Laura Clark-Hunt at the University of Southern Mississippi. Finally, information about the eLearning platform will be shared with all LIS educators through the JESSE listserv, the “primary electronic discussion list for library and information science educators worldwide,” so other programs may embed and share content with LIS students as appropriate. These initiatives will help to ensure we are not just reaching those currently in the profession but future librarians as well, helping to ensure a more autism informed workforce.

The project benefits will be *sustained* beyond the grant funding period as, though the forum will be live, the eLearning site will feature recordings and materials for asynchronous, independent learning for school librarians to access for years to come.

Schedule of Completion

Grant activities will take place over the course of two years, from August 2024 through July 2026.

This project's high-impact activities will include 1) **planning** a national virtual forum to bring school librarians together for autism education; 2) **hosting** the national virtual forum; 3) **creating** high quality recordings, abstracts, and fact sheets from the national virtual forum; 4) **publishing** information on an eLearning platform, and 5) **disseminating** via platforms such as the Project ENABLE website, the Targeting Autism blog, conference presentations, and practitioner publications.

Year one will consist of planning and hosting the virtual forum, with initial proposals sent for conference presentations. Year two will consist of material creation, publication, and information dissemination.

2024-2025

Meet with advisory board.	X												
Plan and organize virtual forum event with CAS Office of Communication and Marketing		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				
Develop surveys to guide forum session programming.		X											
Distribute surveys to guide forum session programming.			X										
Analyze survey data				X	X								
Develop plenary sessions				X	X								
Distribute call for forum participation				X	X								
Hire a USF MLIS student as graduate assistant					X								
Develop rubrics for proposal evaluation						X							
Meet with advisory board; evaluate and select breakout sessions from submissions and notify session presenters						X							
Market virtual forum to wide US audience						X	X	X	X				
Develop session assessment instruments								X	X				
Hold virtual forum										X			
Collect and analyze evaluative data										X	X		
Write and submit conference presentation proposals										X	X	X	
	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	

2025-2026

Meet with advisory board to review forum outcomes/ evaluations and plan material creation/information dissemination	x											
Create video and written abstracts for recorded sessions	x	x	x									
Develop conference presentations to disseminate key forum takeaways for school librarians		x										
Curate content related to recorded sessions			x	x								
Disseminate information through AASL conference presentation			x									
Disseminate information through FAME and VASL conference presentations				x								
Work with ALA eLearning to professionally post all recordings and associated supplemental materials				x	x	x						
Disseminate information about eLearning platform widely, including with practitioner and MLIS programs/educators							x	x				
Write and submit blog posts and practitioner articles								x	x			
Create webinar content									x	x		
Meet with advisory board to provide final updates and conclusions											x	
Disseminate information through IASL virtual conference presentation												x
Submit final IMLS report												x
	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J

Digital Products Plan

Digital products created within this project will be: survey instruments and data; audio, video, and text recordings of online forum sessions; video and written abstracts of session recordings; infographics and factsheets to highlight forum session takeaways; webinar content; written publications; flyers for calls for forum participation. Each type of product, along with information about availability, access, and sustainability, are described next.

Content Type: Survey Instruments and Survey Data

Resources used to create and collect associated digital survey data will be Qualtrics software, available through the University of South Florida to all faculty members. We anticipate receiving responses from 100 individuals: 50 school librarians and 50 autistic library patrons. Survey data will be downloaded as an SPSS (Statistical Analysis Package) file, which will then be analyzed through SPSS software, also available through USF resources. Final documents will be stored in PI Anderson's Box account, the official cloud storage account for USF and only accessible through login. Metadata will include files that write up findings from survey results, to help inform forum sessions. These files, created in Microsoft Word as .docx files, will also be stored in Box.

Availability: Survey instruments will be included as attachments on written publications that result (see "written publications" entry below).

Access: Survey data will not be shared publicly in the interest of confidentiality, but findings will be presented in aggregate through written publications (again, see "written publications" entry below).

Sustainability: See "written publications" entry; survey instruments will accompany written publications with a copy placed in the open access USF digital repository, ensuring open access for years to come.

Content Type: Marketing Materials

Flyers will be created in coordination with the USF College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Office of Communications and Marketing. We anticipate creating one flyer, which will be shared widely online. We also will create one flyer for promoting the forum event itself. These will be using a resource such as Canva, available through USF, and saved as a .pdf and an image file, such as .jpeg.

Availability: Marketing materials will be shared with a wide audience of Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals. While some will be through paid subscriber-only platforms (examples include ALA Connect) to reach targeted groups, we will also share to broad public avenues, such as through relevant public Facebook groups.

Access: No reuse restrictions will be placed on marketing materials.

Sustainability: Marketing materials will be retained short term, as they are specific to a time-bound event.

Content Type: Audio, Video, and Text Recordings of Online Forum Sessions

While the virtual forum will be live, all sessions will be recorded to capture audio, video, and text. The forum will be held in a platform such as Microsoft Teams, a resource available through USF. The USF CAS Office of Communications and Marketing will liaise with The DCE vendor group to host these sessions, make sure they run smoothly, and ensure professional recorded results. Audio files will be saved in formats such as M4A; video files will be saved in formats such as MP4, and text files will be saved in formats such as .docx. We anticipate having 10 sessions total, with 3 types of recordings (audio, video, and text) for each. Metadata created for these session recordings will include keywords indicating what type of audience each is appropriate for (e.g. grade level), using relevant taxonomy. These will be created in an Excel file (.xlsx), a resource available through USF.

Availability: Recordings will all be posted to an eLearning platform. To ensure fair access, accessibility measures will be taken such as providing media alternative transcripts, using audio descriptions, adding captions, and removal of autoplay. Additionally, by providing multiple means of access through video,

audio, and text, we are adhering to basic principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), further ensuring access.

Recordings on the eLearning platform will be available for free to all. Information about these recordings will be disseminated widely through multiple communication channels to ensure the greatest number of school librarians and those in surrounding fields are aware and have access.

Access: LIS educators will be encouraged to reuse recordings within their individual course content for educational purposes.

Sustainability: We anticipate that the eLearning platform will be available for years to come, and content provided there will as well. We will also save backups of all content in case content needs to be migrated at any point in the future.

Content Type: Infographics, Factsheets, and Abstracts To Highlight Forum Session Takeaways

For each forum session, we will create video and written abstracts to complement recorded material.

Videos will be created using software such as Adobe Premiere Pro and saved as MP4 files, and written materials will be created using Microsoft Word, a resource available through USF, and saved as .docx files. We anticipate creating both types of abstracts for all sessions, so 10 total video and 10 total written abstracts.

For each session recording, we will also create infographics and factsheets to highlight important takeaways. Infographics will be created using a software such as Canva, and written materials will be created using Microsoft Word and saved as .docx files. We anticipate creating infographics and factsheets for all sessions, so 10 total infographics and 10 total factsheets.

Availability: All content created to complement forum recordings will be housed alongside the recordings in the eLearning platform. To ensure fair access, accessibility measures will be taken as previously described. By providing multiple means of access through video, audio, and text, we are adhering to basic principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), further ensuring access.

Access: All content on the eLearning platform will be available for free to all. Information about these recordings will be disseminated widely through multiple communication channels to ensure the greatest number of school librarians and those in surrounding fields are aware and have access.

Sustainability: We anticipate that the eLearning platform will be available for years to come, and content provided there will as well. We will also save backups of all content in case content needs to be migrated at any point in the future.

Content Type: Webinar and Conference Presentation Content

Key information from forum sessions will be distributed through dissemination channels such as conference presentations and webinars. We anticipate developing at least 4 conference presentations and 1 webinar, with material adapted to match each specific audience. Presentations will be developed through Microsoft Powerpoint, a resource available through USF, and saved as .ppt files.

Availability: Presentations and webinar content will be provided as accepted. We anticipate submitting to school library associations from the local to the international level. Presentations given for conferences and through professional associations as webinars are typically limited to those who pay a registration fee. We will mitigate this by posting our .ppt slide decks to the eLearning platform as allowed.

Access: We will not place any additional restrictions on access to slide decks.

Sustainability: Presentations given for conferences and through professional associations as webinars are typically hosted by the professional associations themselves. We will be held to their standards as to whether these sessions are recorded for posterity or are only given once. Again, we will mitigate this by posting our .ppt slide decks to the eLearning platform as allowed, assuring both open access and greater control over longevity.

Content Type: Written Publications

Key information from forum sessions will be also distributed through written dissemination channels such as papers published in practitioner journals, online blog posts and manuscripts. We anticipate

submitting five such pieces. All of these written documents will be created in Microsoft Word, a resource available through USF, and saved as .docx files.

Availability: Publications will be openly available through multiple measures. Publications will first be targeted toward open access journals as possible (for example, the *School Library Journal* blog and *Children and Libraries*: the official refereed journal of the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC). For publications accepted in non-open access scholarly journals, we will work with the USF Library to place a copy within the institution's digital repository. Additionally, a copy of all publications, regardless of initial publication channel, will be placed in the repository when possible.

Access: The USF digital repository is fully indexed through Google Scholar to ensure broad access.

Sustainability: Publications will be long-lived. Again, by placing a copy of each publication within the USF digital repository, we will ensure that copy of each written work has longevity, regardless of journal or magazine future status. We will submit to reputable, established avenues for publication, but an additional copy in our local repository ensures these written works will be available for years to come.