ArtCenter College of Design

Reimagining the User Experience in Archives & Special Collections:
Best Practices for Library Collaborations with Designers

ArtCenter College of Design's College Library proposes a Sparks! grant to develop and test best practices for archivists and librarians working with designers in developing digital tools/interfaces for archives and special collections. The project will bridge the disparate perspectives and vocabularies of librarians/archivists and technology designers with the aim of distilling essential expertise from both fields. The results, in the form of practical, easily understood pointers and sample work processes, will be shared in a national white paper and online content to be disseminated widely through targeted channels to the library and design sectors. The grant request is $25,000.

1. Statement of National Need: As noted in IMLS' National Digital Platform report (2015), America has a pervasive need to reimagine its library services from the perspective of the "user at the center"—i.e., making "services and tools easy to use." While digitization has improved accessibility to archival collections, it remains a challenge for end users to discover and interact with the materials. Today's user demands personalized, data-rich interactivity; incorporating user perspectives into product development is the traditional métier of designers. Increasingly in their practice, designers craft human-centered digital services and tools. But best practices for technology designers' collaboration with library professionals are scarce and nascent, as evidenced by an initial literature scan conducted by ArtCenter's College Library staff.
   - In 2014 IDEO developed a Design Thinking for Libraries toolkit, which gave a thoughtful introduction to design principles but did not delve into designing library technologies.
   - A compelling recent IMLS project at Savannah College of Art Design focused on developing a user experience assessment tool for libraries, but not necessarily on distilling best practices for library/design collaboration.

The IMLS report also identified inclusive "contributions from all types of cultural institutions," "radical collaborations," and "cross-training" as top needs. These underscore the potential value of bringing an atypical factor—a school specializing in design education—into the equation.

2. Project Design: The project leverages a format tested in ArtCenter's previous IMLS grant, Critical Content Making: Zine Makerspaces in an Academic Library (2014-2015), which piloted design/library collaborations geared toward identifying best "makerspace" practices. The current project will adapt that format for identifying best collaboration practices in library/archive technology design. A curated team of internal and external library professionals, designers and design educators will work together in structured, replicable sessions. The sessions will simulate designers/firms being hired by a library for a discrete assignment: to design new digital tools to improve access to the institution's Archives. The project will take the team from initial challenge to prototypes (which could take the form of mid- to high-fidelity prototypes of user experiences including, where relevant, user interfaces, apps and online services, possibly virtual reality). Attention will be paid to cross-disciplinary communication: as one example, the term "access" has very different meaning to a librarian or archivist than to a technology designer. In the end, both the resulting product and the process (what went well and what didn't, and why) will be evaluated to identify key lessons learned from design and library perspectives. A white paper, written for a broad audience of both library professionals and designers, will share the format/structure of the interactions, a description of the prototype(s), insights from qualitative primary user testing, and pointers/protocols (i.e., "do's and don'ts") learned from the project. This will be supplemented with online visual content such as short video vignettes or animated presentations.

ArtCenter is an optimal test setting with a professionally staffed library and institutional archive along with a captive population of technologically savvy Millennial designers (high-caliber design students)

and seasoned design educators. An industry-focused school, ArtCenter excels at creating studio settings that mimic real-world situations, led by instructors who are working designers. Robert Dirig, College Archivist, will serve as PI, with Maggie Hendrie, Chair of Interaction Design, serving as Co-PI. Advisors from external archives/libraries will also participate to maximize the relevance of the findings.

Work Plan/Outcomes: The primary outcome we aim to achieve is to develop initial guidelines for preparing collaborations between librarians/archivists and designers en route to incorporating user experience design into library/archive projects. A secondary outcome will be the development and early prototyping of a new digital tool or method for providing access to archives and special collections materials. The key overarching question posed to the team will be, "How can the Archives better meet users' needs through digital technologies?" The project will unfold in four major stages: (1) initial 1-day brainstorming workshop that will bring designers together with library/archive staff to explore user needs in the Archives and to frame the designers' assignment; (2) a 14-week development period in which the combined library-design team generates and refines concepts into prototypes; (3) assessment and evaluation of results; and (4) writing/dissemination of white paper with accompanying visuals.

Stage 1 and the early part of stage 2 will emphasize cross-disciplinary orientation: library/archive staff and designers will learn about each other's disciplines, methodologies and perspectives on using archives. The team will explore the relationships between the physical and digital aspects of collections, reference, and access. The core development period (stage 2) will be organized as follows:
- *Weeks 1-3*: User research by team on the needs of on-campus library users (students) as well as users in an external community library (non-students);
- *Weeks 4-6*: Generative concept development including personas (archetypical profiles of users), key use cases and iterative user-experience prototyping and evaluation;
- *Week 7*: Midpoint critique of concepts by team along with external advisors/experts to identify the strongest concepts;
- *Weeks 8-11*: Refine mid- to high-fidelity prototypes, conduct user testing;
- *Weeks 12-14*: User Experience Prototypes (in the form of relevant user interfaces, apps or online services, as relevant) presented for final evaluation/assessment by team and advisors/experts.

The design process will be the key to understanding how other libraries/archives can adapt this model into their work. Throughout the year, we will document the project with photography and video and extensive notes on the discussions and working sessions. An internal project blog will be created where we will address the steps taken and provide up to date feedback. All of the documentation will feed into the white paper.

Budget: The $25,000 IMLS grant will fund: project personnel (flat fees; $10,500), supplies/materials ($3K), photo/video documentation ($2K), graphic designer for white paper ($1K), external library advisor honoraria ($3K), student assistants (library & teaching assistant; $3K) and travel ($2,500). No indirect costs.

3. National Impact: The white paper and supplemental visuals will be shared through the web and social media and throughout the library and design fields through professional conferences such as the Society of American Archivists and Digital Initiatives Symposium. If, as we anticipate, the findings reveal ways to improve library/design collaborations, ArtCenter will use the dissemination of its findings as an urgent call to action for both sectors. In keeping with the priority of user-friendliness, results will be described in accessible terms (e.g., "Libraries/archives must work more closely with designers. Here are the Top 10 Things You Need to Know before engaging a technology designer at your library.")