

The Kansas City Public Library
Preliminary Proposal Narrative

Learning circles in public libraries: community-based online learning

On behalf of the project team, the Kansas City Public Library (KCPL) respectfully requests the opportunity to submit a full proposal for a \$240,000 2-year National Leadership Community Anchors Project Grant. The goal of the project is to introduce and propagate community-based online learning programs in libraries across the country using the learning circle model developed by Peer 2 Peer University (P2PU). Work will be conducted along three lines: refining the learning circle software tools, conducting research into the affordances and limitations of learning circles, and articulating the value of the program to the public library community for wide scale adoption and adaptation. KCPL and P2PU will be joined by 5 diverse library systems (Charlotte, Chicago, Cleveland, Milledgeville, and Tampa), a Kansas City-based researcher (Nailah Mbiti), and strong dissemination partners (PLA, OCLC WebJunction). The diverse experience of the project team will ensure that the project achieves national impact, growing a movement of libraries to serve as both anchors and catalysts for community-based online learning experiences.

National Need: The growth of online learning in the past decade has promised that anybody can learn whatever they want, whenever they want. Yet, as a library that welcomes patrons to our computer labs and to our H&R Block Career and Business Center every single day, KCPL knows that this promise has fallen short. Currently, to be a successful online learner, patrons must have strong digital literacy, self-motivation, and perseverance in the face of neither social support nor contextualized course content. These barriers prevent many of our patrons from meaningfully engaging with online learning opportunities. However, libraries are well positioned to mitigate these barriers, offering trained staff, digital resources, strong community ties, and a culture of lifelong learning that can transform online courses into engaging and empowering learning experiences for millions of Americans who are currently excluded.

To test this theory, Chicago Public Library (CPL) partnered with Peer 2 Peer University, an organization with experience developing peer-supported online learning communities, to run a 2015 pilot for adults to take online courses together in library branches across Chicago. Over just 18 months, these “learning circles” grew from 2 to 24 CPL branches, demonstrating that adults with low digital skills and without higher education can succeed at Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and that libraries play a vital role in ensuring this success. Meeting once a week for 6-8 weeks, library patrons worked together through course materials in subjects ranging from resume writing to web design to public speaking. These learning circles were facilitated by a librarian, who is not expected to be a content expert, but who was trained by P2PU to be proficient in online courseware and skilled in facilitating peer learning groups. In the fall 2015 learning circle pilot, retention rates over 6 weeks were close to 50%, compared to ~10% for MOOCs. Furthermore, 65% of participants were first time online learners and many came from traditionally underserved communities including unemployed adults, immigrants, English language learners, and senior citizens. Following the Chicago pilot, P2PU released a collection of software tools and .pdf resources (collectively, the learning circle toolkit) designed to help librarians start their own learning circle program.

Project Design: Now, P2PU will continue its work in Chicago and expand the pilot and toolkit to five additional library systems: Kansas City, Missouri; Charlotte, North Carolina; Cleveland, Ohio; Milledgeville,

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Georgia; and Tampa, Florida, each of which has already piloted (or will soon pilot) a learning circle program. This Community Anchor project will begin with a virtual training for librarians in each city and a small pilot. Following this first pilot, librarians will meet in person in Kansas City to suss out the major opportunities and setbacks of learning circles and sketch out designs for improvement. Winter 2017 will be spent refining the learning circle toolkit for a second, larger round of learning circles in spring 2018. Following a second iteration in summer 2018, a third round of learning circles will run in fall 2018. By the end of the third round, we expect a high level of saturation across each of the partner systems, with learning circles running in at least 40% (67) of the 168 library branches in these cities.

For the duration of the program, participating librarians will interface with a growing virtual community of learning circle facilitators from around the world, ensuring that this project contributes to and benefits from a global network of participants. Additionally, Nailah Mbiti will conduct formative and summative evaluation of the program, design evaluation tools for librarians to assess their own programs, and ensure that P2PU is collecting useful data for library organizers and future researchers.

National Impact: By the end of this project, the team will have transformed the learning circle toolkit from a viable yet niche program in Chicago to a flexible, intuitive tool that librarians around the country can easily pick up and activate in their communities. To ensure the broadest distribution of this work, the project team has a three-part dissemination plan. First, all tools and resources generated within this grant will be packed into the latest version of P2PU's learning circle toolkit, which is freely available online and licensed under MIT Open Software and Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0 licenses. Second, project evaluation research results will be packaged as a series of publicly-disseminated case studies that provide librarians with tips on starting learning circles in new communities. Finally, KCPL and P2PU will attend two conferences in the library, open ed, and/or adult ed space, and the project team has secured a commitment from Public Library Association and OCLC to disseminate the results of this project through their respective channels.

Budget Justification: Approximately \$155,000 will support P2PU salaries dedicated to training librarians, gathering feedback, designing and deploying new learning circle features, supporting a growing network of learning circle facilitators, and overseeing dissemination and project management. \$25,000 will support KCPL salaries dedicated to implementing learning circles, planning the learning circle summit, and leading the submission and management of the IMLS grant. Each library system will be awarded a \$3,000 community catalyst fund to help get learning circle programs off the ground, as well as funding to send two participants to Kansas City for the summit. Funds will also be allocated to our researcher, Nailah, as well as for conference attendance. KCPL will receive 10% indirect costs.