

Young Researchers: Collaborating With Youth and Libraries for Community Based Scholarship

The Young Researchers project is a three year research study led by Rachel M. Magee, an assistant professor in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. This proposal is submitted under the Community Anchors project category, and is for early career research support of \$499,761 with no cost sharing. Young Researchers connects teens from diverse backgrounds to the research process, building on work conducted with youth in the state of Illinois. These teens helped pilot our approaches and confirmed the potential for impact on participants, as well as the viability of framing, designing, analyzing, and presenting research with our proposed timing. As one participant said *“I’m interested in doing more [research]...I like being able to formulate questions that I could relate to, that other people would also be able to relate to, and see how people would answer questions differently than I would.”* Through training staff at five partner public library sites across the U.S, this work will include up to 100 youth as co-researchers who will help design, implement, analyze, and report on original research, using a camp-based informal learning approach. This project will build to a public curriculum and workshop series for LIS professionals on implementing co-research, and contribute to LIS scholarship on youth literacy development and impacts of experiencing research.

Statement of Broad Need

Understanding the value and process of research is a crucial skill for youth, who need to navigate an information landscape that includes a significant amount of misinformation and disinformation. Numerous literacy approaches highlight the ability to create and share content as key for understanding, but youth have few opportunities to engage in the scholarly research process to focus on these skills. At the same time, researchers are increasingly recognizing the importance of including diverse voices in the development and implementation of research and are adjusting approaches to recruiting and retention. However, these approaches can take time to result in inclusion, and young people need opportunities to see themselves in the roles of researcher and scholar now in order to imagine pursuing these kinds of interests and career paths.

Various research traditions, including participatory action research, ethnography, and participant observation, work to acknowledge the need for research to understand community perspectives and practices. Dresang¹ encouraged “closer collaboration with youth themselves as partners in constructing research (rather than as objects of it)” as an opportunity that shifts “from investigations that assume adults will study children to one in which adults and children learn from each other” (p. 1123). This idea of learning and developing together is not just important in LIS research; libraries have long recognized the value of involving youth in the development of collections and programs designed for them with approaches like Teen Advisory Boards. This project will build on the shared community orientation that informs libraries and the traditions of co-research to engage youth in developing community-driven, community-oriented research. This approach presents unique opportunities to harness the expertise of libraries to drive innovative literacy development and progressive research and allows libraries to expand their techniques to engage with the youth they serve.

Project Design

Informed by the PI’s experience working in libraries and coordinating youth research in multiple states, this project will occur over three years with three main phases, discussed below by year. Two PhD students and two undergraduate students will support this project. We will publish and present research findings in scholarly venues during the full project timeline, including findings from our co-research developed with teen participants as well as work on youth perceptions of research, digital youth literacy and learning practices, and co-research methods. This project is built around the following research questions: 1) how can libraries and librarians support youth in engaging in complex skills development, specifically research and science literacies? and 2) how does exposure to the research process impact youth interest in and abilities to conduct original research?

Year One includes surveys and interviews with librarians and researchers from a variety of fields. This will extend our understanding of library needs and engagement practices, as well as what scholars see as key for learning how to carry out research. These studies will inform the next version of our curriculum module, which

¹ Dresang, E. T. (1999). More research needed: Informal information-seeking behavior of youth on the Internet. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 50 (12), 1123.

will be finalized in year one. We will also select and invite five partner sites where we will run research camps for youth. This process will involve careful sampling decisions to ensure our project reaches young people from backgrounds underrepresented in research (details in the Diversity Plan section). As sites are confirmed, we will train library staff on the basics of research, determine appropriate scheduling, and develop locally informed strategies for recruiting and participation, mitigating some of the regulatory complexities of youth research.

Year Two will focus on running camps across the five sites, with capacity for 20 youth at each location. The Young Researchers at each site will work with the research team and libraries during day long camps, held multiple weeks apart, with scheduling informed by local needs. Each site will conduct at least 5 day camps. In Camp One, teens will learn about qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research, as well as ethical considerations of this work. Camp Two will focus on learning from literature and generating research questions relevant to participant priorities. Camp Three will focus on research methods, with teens selecting a method and drafting research instruments. The research team will refine instruments after this camp, and coordinate and distribute materials to the Young Researchers, who will then conduct data collection (with the most time between camps here). In advance of later camps, the research team will collate and prepare the data for analysis and discussion, done collectively during Camp Four. Camp Five will focus on sharing findings. During this year, we will interview staff from the partner sites and travel for observations at one camp per site, which will inform the iterative assessment and revision of the curriculum. The Young Researchers will be considered both researchers and research participants, and we will invite their participation in a pre-study assessment of research knowledge and skills, as well as interviews and surveys about their experience throughout the camps.

During *Year Three*, we will debrief with the Young Researchers and libraries, including a post assessment survey to learn more about their experiences and what they learned. In this year, we will finalize the curriculum module and build online infrastructure to share these materials as well as content created by youth from each of the partner sites. We will launch this publicly available resource with workshops at a variety of LIS conference and meetings to encourage libraries to pursue this kind of work.

Diversity Plan

Including diverse youth and libraries is at the center of this project. Using data from the IMLS Public Libraries Survey in conjunction with the US Census, we will invite sites across the spectrum of population service sizes, specifically focusing on sites that serve youth of color who are often underrepresented in research. To ensure youth from all socio-economic backgrounds can participate, we include remuneration that recognizes the time commitment of participation, and will have food available during the camps. We will work with selected libraries to emphasize inclusion in recruiting strategies, accounting for local needs in planning.

Broad Impact

We are applying for support to increase scale and impact; these funds would support expansion beyond the state of Illinois and the iterative development of materials relevant for a national audience. This project will engage 100 teens in conducting original scholarly research and identify best practices for connecting youth to the research process. By participating, diverse youth will have the opportunity to see themselves as researchers with important perspectives to contribute and to develop literacy skills. This project promotes research as an activity and career path and will develop and assess a model for youth co-research in libraries, connecting practice and research. Library staff at national partner sites will receive extensive training, and their experiences will inform the creation of a publically available curriculum and accompanying workshops for LIS practitioners. In addition to our practice oriented outcomes, we will further LIS research on the perspectives and needs of youth. We will build knowledge of how best to introduce youth to the scholarly research process and how to design informal learning to support research and science literacies, and will innovate methods for co-research with youth.

Budget

We anticipate the total cost of the proposed project will be \$499,761 with no cost sharing. PI salary/wages will be \$19,910. Student support is a total of \$281,582 (2 full time PhD research assistants; 2 undergraduates). For conferences and site visits, we expect domestic travel will total \$19,500 along with \$2,450 for international travel. We include \$1,250 for remuneration, \$2,120 in materials/supplies/equipment, and \$13,000 for other costs. We anticipate \$7,577 in mandatory staff fringe benefits and \$152,372 in mandatory indirect cost.