

## **Producing Productive Public Library Programming for Older Adults: A Participatory Design Approach**

### Introduction

The University at Buffalo requests \$306,800 (see budget) in the *LB21-FY19 Research in Service to Practice* category to investigate the use of participatory design (PD) as a guiding framework for public libraries to attract and engage older adults. Using participatory design methods, librarians and older adults will work together in design teams not only to identify programming needs but also in program planning and execution. For purposes of comparison the research will be conducted within three library locations (inner-city, suburban, rural) in the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library System. The findings will inform the development of educational resources for librarian professional development and LIS academic programs.

### Statement of Broad Impact

As the Baby Boomer generation ages, increasing the number of older adults, it intensifies the need for more library programs and services. However, previous research indicates that older adults tend to receive less targeted programming attention than other user groups (Bennett-Kapusniak, 2013). Indeed, unlike the specialized services available to children, differentiated according to age (e.g., pre-schoolers, elementary school children, tweens, young adults) older adults are often placed in mixed-group adult programming (Piper, Palmer & Xie, 2009) which might not necessarily meet their needs. The challenge for public libraries, then, is to identify and address through programming and services the information needs of a user group that is widely diverse in terms of culture, interests, and occupations (Glusker, 2014). This challenge is further exacerbated by the fact that many libraries cannot afford to hire librarians with specialized expertise in older adults. Perhaps the solution may lie in the tenets of participatory design, originally developed in Scandinavia based on research that revealed workers are in the best position to improve their own workplaces (Schuler & Namioka, 1993). Since then, participatory design techniques have been used in technology development to design more user-friendly systems with and for children (e.g., Large & Nettet, 2009; Yip, et al., 2016), in planning library spaces (e.g., McLaughlin, 2015), in higher education (Nettet & Bible, 2018), and in business (e.g. Nielsen Norman Group, 2018). Within the shared experience of the design team, participatory design's inclusive methods enable diverse and even disparate groups to meaningfully interact and learn from each other to achieve what could not be done alone or within their own peer groups (Large, Nettet, Beheshti & Bowler, 2007; Nettet & Bible, 2018). Therefore, it is proposed that this innovative approach could be used by public libraries to reach out to diverse groups of older adults to include them in meaningful collaboration to develop targeted and relevant programming.

### Project Research Questions

1. What participatory design methods best enable meaningful communication and interaction between older adults and librarians as they engage in collaborative inquiry to develop programs and services?
2. Will it be necessary to use different participatory design techniques depending on the location/type of public library (i.e., inner-city, rural, suburban)? If so, what conclusions can be drawn from observed differences?
3. How can RQ1 and RQ2 inform a general model or set of models and curriculum resources to educate public librarians working in all types of public libraries to launch similar initiatives for older adults?

### Project Description

This three-year research project proposes to extend and build upon ground-breaking work in participatory design at the University at Buffalo (UB). The Faculty IT Liaison Program (<http://www.buffalo.edu/ubit/news/blog/posts/building-edtech-possibilities-faculty-it-liaison-program.html>) uses participatory design methods to unite university faculty members and IT professionals, two disparate groups that seldom interact except when there is a problem with computer hardware or software. Participatory design techniques such as drawing individual mental models of technologies (design charrettes), presentation of each drawing followed by group discussion, brainstorming to generate ideas, and consensus building are used to inform recommendations for modifications to information technologies and related programs and services to make them more faculty-friendly (Nettet & Bible, 2018). In the collaborative environment of the design team, while all participants are considered equal, it is recognized that they each possess different perspectives and expertise – in this case, faculty are experts in what they *need* the technology to do, and IT staff are experts in knowing what the technologies are *designed* to do. Similarly, in the proposed study, the older adults, who possess diverse

knowledge, skills, and perspectives and librarians who have expertise in program development will engage in collaborative inquiry to produce targeted programs and services. The findings will inform curricula on participatory design for LIS education and professional development programs while at the same time providing further insights into the information needs and behaviors of older adults.

#### Proposed Study Design: Three-year project:

**Year 1:** 1) Recruit librarians from 3 library research sites (inner-city, rural, suburban) in the Buffalo & Erie County Library System. 2) Hold trainings for the librarians in participatory design and qualitative research data collection methods (e.g., survey design, participant observation, interviews). 3) Together with librarians, develop and distribute recruitment materials targeted to older adults for each library design team (limit of 3 design teams per library with a maximum of 8 sessions per team). 4) Identify necessary resources to conduct design sessions. 5) Recruit participants. **Year 2:** 1) Conduct the planned design sessions based on team decisions for topics and what “success” will look like. 2) Conduct ongoing data analysis throughout the design sessions (e.g., reviewing videotaped sessions for behaviors; surveys and interviews for perceptions of the process) and compare results from each type of library. 3) Informed by the results, develop a general framework/model and supplementary educational resources for librarians. 4) Begin recruitment of a second set of participants (one team per library). **Year 3:** 1) Implement the framework in the libraries with the new user participants and make modifications based on the results. 2) Finalize the framework/model and supplemental educational training resources on PD methods (e.g. online video tutorials, planning materials, manuals, and workshops) specific to each type of public library as indicated by the findings. The results will be shared throughout the project via scholarly and practitioner conferences such as ALISE, ALA, and PLA, and publications such as *Library & Information Science Research*, *Public Library Quarterly*, *Library Trends*, and *American Libraries*.

#### National Impact, Addressing IMLS Priorities, and Diversity Plan

The proposed project addresses two of the priorities identified in the 2018-2022 IMLS strategic plan, *Transforming Communities: Lifelong learning for people of all ages and strengthening the capacity of libraries to improve the well-being of their communities*. The project promotes the library as community catalyst by reaching out to older adults in 3 distinctly different types of libraries to identify and address their diverse information needs by actively engaging them in program planning and development through the inclusive methods of participatory design. The findings will not only inform professional development resources outlining how to plan and execute similar programs, enabling libraries around the nation to apply a unique method for attracting and engaging an ever-increasing segment of the population, but also more general curriculum resources on participatory design for inclusion in LIS programs.

#### Project Director and Partners

**PI: Valerie Nessel**, Associate Professor, University at Buffalo has extensive experience in participatory design with intergenerational teams and in higher education. **Co-PI: Mary Jean Jakubowski**, Director, Buffalo & Erie County Public Library system (responsible for 37 inner-city, rural, and suburban libraries) has extensive expertise in library operations management. **Advisory Board: Brice Bible**, Chief Information Officer, University at Buffalo, co-researcher, Faculty IT Liaison Program; **Leanne Bowler**, Associate Professor, Pratt University whose research includes PD, and makerspaces in libraries, **Jason Yip**, Assistant Professor, University of Washington, whose current research with PD and intergenerational teams is funded by a 2018 IMLS grant and **at least 1 more member (TBD)** with expertise in working with older adults and resource design.

#### Estimated Budget

Includes: 1 month per year summer salary (+fringe) +1 course buyout for PI (~\$55,000), dissemination of results including conference travel (~\$5,000), research software for data analysis (~\$3,000) stipends for 4 Graduate Research Assistants (one in years 1 and 3, two in year 2) (~\$79,000 – includes tuition + fringe); stipends for up to 50 participating users (~\$10,000), hiring of an instructional designer to help with the development of educational resources including online tutorials, workshops, and manuals (~\$5,000); stipends for advisory board members (\$4,200). For the B&ECPL, includes contributions to 3 participating public libraries, librarian stipends + fringe, equipment for the design sessions (e.g., smartboards), and administrative costs (~\$40,000). Plus, UB indirect costs of ~\$105,600. Estimated Budget Total: \$306,800.