Developing Extensible Methods for Provenance Research
Preliminary Proposal

I. OVERVIEW. The Library and Information Science Program at the University of Missouri respectfully seeks funding of $299,191 for a Research in Service to Practice Grant (**funding category**) to complete an Early Career Development (**project type**) empirical investigation. Developing Extensible Methods for Provenance Research is a three-year project (September 1, 2020 – August 31, 2023) that will be led by Dr. Sarah Buchanan at the University of Missouri. The project pursues three research questions: RQ1: How do practitioners complete provenance research? RQ2: Which methods best expand public engagement with collections? RQ3: What learning outcomes would undergraduate provenance researchers experience?

II. STATEMENT OF BROAD NEED. Provenance is a fundamental concept in archival practice, where it is defined as the origin of an item alongside information regarding the item's custody and ownership across time.[1] A key purpose of provenance research is to secure pending donations. Yet provenance research suffers from a problem of anecdotal and incomplete methodology that is incommensurate with the scale of descriptively-unprovenanced archives, requiring transformative development of an extensible toolkit to meet the needs of archivists and those of college-level archive users. Only 33% of a recent sample of EAD finding aids contain the <acqinfo> element (Bron, Proffitt, & Washburn 2013) and archivists lack protocols for gathering provenance approaching the level of those present for art curators in *The AAM Guide to Provenance Research* (2001), which sets a threshold without articulating inclusive methods. Pilot work by the researcher has guided undergraduate and graduate student contributions of original provenance research about departmental teaching collections and Native collections, respectively: two areas of the breadth and scope of archives to be studied in the project. Still thousands of nonaccessioned materials remain unexamined because archivists lack an extensible protocol that rises to "due diligence" when researching legacy collections and new acquisitions – one meant to ascertain provenance and avert frivolous, forged, or questionable claims of origin (Gerstenblith 2019). Through defining modular and lifelong learning-oriented (**project category**) skills, the project will create data-informed training and instructional materials to build capacity in the area of provenance research for working professionals – including career-changers new to provenance work, self-directed learners already embedded in the institution, and continuing education seekers. Broad need is asserted by the reach of provenance research into a wide array of cultural heritage institutions concerning the ownership of art and material culture – impacting, e.g., the disposition of hundreds of looted and smuggled masterpieces (Tsirogiannis 2016). This project will specifically examine the archival acquisitions stage: in particular holdings documentation and tiered methods for accessioning. It is anticipated that findings from the archival domain will be extensible to work in museums, especially since acceptance of a new museum collection very often rests on first securing archival provenance; such convergence will be interrogated in the special collections site visits (RQ1). Pressing need also exists to deepen an emergent and strategic collaboration with college students already interacting with collections in order to assess whether the outcomes of provenance research remain publicly accessible (RQ2) and generative for learning (RQ3). Information uses of a diverse population of students will thus directly inform the creation of a provenance research instructional toolkit for archivists and users. Our goal is ultimately to expand and diversify provenance research as a uniquely inclusive type of information work – capacity-building for which modular continuing education will play a large role. We acknowledge a dearth of trained full-time provenance researchers due in part to a lack of established, low-cost educational materials meeting the needs of would-be librarians and archivists. For this reason provenance research has nearly become the province of contracted specialists as the skill is not sufficiently addressed by traditional learning providers, contributing to a presently uneven and (static, high-profile) case-based body of practice. This Early Career Development project will build the theoretical base for provenance research in service to current library and archival practice by examining how its current practice is informed by professional guidelines, national

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[1] *SAA Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/p/provenance

regulations, due diligence resources, and diverse, qualitative user data to be collected.

III. PROJECT DESIGN. The project field sites are purposefully selected so as to uncover a broad range of issues and potential solutions related to whole-collection management for conducting provenance research. Sites include multiple academic special collections research centers, a comprehensive / encyclopedic art collection, a rural history collection, Native collections, and a law firm specializing in cultural heritage law. The site selection mutually supports the project's emphasis on expanding services to diverse populations, specifically by focusing on the information needs and interests of college students (20-25 years), and about diverse materials, in centering Native provenance study. Informed by the project director's experience working in archives and coordinating multi-sited research, this project will occur over three years with organized stages of data collection, analysis, member-checking, and open dissemination. In Year 1, IRB approval, student recruitment, interview protocol refinement and an environmental scan to identify practitioners engaged in provenance research in collaboration with the advisory board will be completed. In Years 1 and 2, data collection at the field sites and preliminary data analysis will be completed. Goals for this stage encompass the completion of at least six observational site visits to variably-sized collections during college-student interaction sessions in distributed geographical regions of the U.S. In Year 3, the project director and student researchers will use ATLAS.ti software to rigorously assess and synthesize qualitative data for publication and dissemination. Outputs of the project will include the publication of results in open access journals and conferences in the library and archival disciplines, including SAA and AAMG, an open educational resource (OER) accessible from an institutional repository intended for use by collection practitioners, and reports to IMLS. A collection professional at each field site has agreed to partner in this research by providing access to institutional manuals, collection records and documentation, lists of researcher publications, and routine work time availability for site visits and instruction observations. Designed as a sequential and cumulative study across field sites, the project director will employ qualitative ethnographic methods of observation, interviews, collection case study, and document analysis in support of the research questions. Two Student Researchers will be recruited to assist in visiting sites and analyzing the data. The project director Sarah Buchanan is an Assistant Professor at the MU iSchool where she teaches library acquisitions, data and records management, appraisal and archival systems, and archival practice. Buchanan's doctoral research on data curation activities with collections in archaeology received the ASIS&T ProQuest Doctoral Dissertation Award. Buchanan completed the Certificate in Provenance Research offered through Tulane University Law School, 2018. For the duration of the project, four experts have agreed to serve as advisors: Jinfang Niu (University of South Florida), Victoria Reed (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), Paul Davis (Menil Collection), and Elizabeth Campbell (University of Denver).

IV. DIVERSITY PLAN. The project will support the development of a diverse workforce of library and archives professionals by (1) broadening the availability of training resources, and (2) directly involving college student populations in identifying challenges related to communicating provenance information for collections housed and exhibited. Using a collective impact approach, project personnel will seek input from a diverse set of field site professionals and collections stakeholders, using the findings to create data-informed research outputs supporting effective provenance research skills development in practice settings.

V. BROAD IMPACT. While provenance research outcomes are commonly perceived to attract scholars and researchers, this project will bridge empirical data collection to best methodological practices, and assess their public and pedagogical use. Broadly, the project seeks to translate important knowledge about how to create object biographies and collection histories, into an open access toolkit and lesson plan supporting strategic collaborations between archival educators, lifelong learners, and multiple provenance stakeholders.

VI. BUDGET SUMMARY. University of Missouri indirect rate of 55% ($98,725 total indirect) suggest:

	Student Support	Director Support	Advisor Support	Travel, Supplies	
Year One	$19,875	$29,569	$3,000	$15,510	
Year Two	$20,473	$30,690	$3,000	$14,363	
Year Three	$21,088	$31,429	$3,000	$8,469	$299,191 total