

Pathways to Librarianship

The Syracuse University School of Information Studies (iSchool) and New York Library Association (NYLA) request \$286,598 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program and will costshare \$70,176 for a collaborative applied design-based research project investigating barriers to entrance, retention, and advancement in the library workforce, especially for minoritized groups, and using research findings to design and prototype initiatives and activities that reduce equity gaps and address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the recruitment, development, and retention of faculty, library, and archives leaders from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds (IMLS goal 1, program objective 2.1).

Project Justification

In January 2021, NYLA convened a task force with the aim of addressing the well-known lack of diversity in the library profession ([AFL-CIO 2021](#), [ALISE Statistical Report 2020](#)), with a specific emphasis on issues and challenges faced in New York state. After town hall meetings with practitioners across the state, literature reviews, and task force discussions, we noted that while many initiatives focusing on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) have been proffered (see IMLS grants from [the Black Caucus of the ALA](#), [Association of Research Libraries](#), [Hampton University](#)), a gap in work concretely addressing systemic inequities exists. Borrowing from principles of mechanism design and reverse game theory (e.g. [Maskin 2008](#)), our project begins with the belief that a diverse and inclusive profession is the most desired good and works to simultaneously remove systemic barriers to education, employment, and retention, and designs new incentives through innovative policy creation. Many initiatives are local or focus on individual people or organizations rather than systemic contexts across state and local systems that affect the hiring and education of library and information science professionals (e.g. state and local civil service, the New York State Education Department, LIS graduate education programs, etc.) While IMLS has a strong record supporting DEIA, they have traditionally funded the creation of frameworks, competency guidelines, and metrics rather than systemic governance change. Additionally, many projects have focused on LIS student recruitment without addressing other systemic challenges affected by higher level governance, such as pay equity, retention and advancement. While these projects should be lauded, it is time to move forward with actionable changes. Using New York state as a case study, our collaborative applied research project will build a foundational understanding of systematic governance barriers that people of minoritized identities (e.g. BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, people with disabilities, etc.) face in the library profession to develop and pilot meaningful products and solutions for change across state and local systems. The following research questions guide our work:

- What are people's current experiences of pathways into and within the library profession in New York?
- What are the challenges or barriers people face along their pathways to and within the library profession in New York?
- How, if at all, do those challenges vary among library types and settings?
- How can we reduce or eliminate these barriers to increase diversity & representation in New York's library workforce?

Project Work Plan

This applied research project draws on the research methodology of design, a theoretical and epistemological worldview rooted in the generation of knowledge via problem solving, and accordant processes of activities and methods that reflect and support that worldview ([Clarke 2020](#)). As a framework rooted in applied fields of practice (e.g. architecture, fashion design, graphic design, software, etc.), design is a highly appropriate approach to applied research. Unlike other more traditional social science approaches, design seeks to directly address problems, rather than merely generate research findings. Our research process follows the design thinking model, an iterative process that cycles through phases of empathetic discovery, problem definition, idea generation, product creation, and reflective evaluation, as follows:

Empathetic discovery and problem definition (year 1): This first phase draws on research methods in design to elicit empathetic understanding of people's current experiences of pathways in the library profession with a specific focus on identifying and defining the complex and wicked problems preventing entry, retention, and advancement in the library profession. This phase harnesses methods of contextual inquiry ([Beyer & Holtzblatt 1998](#)) commonly used in design, including focus groups, individual interviews, and visual elicitation methods such as journey maps--graphical and textual representations from an individual's perspective of the overall story about an experience over time ([Kalbach 2016](#)). Participants will be asked to draw, annotate, and describe a map of their pathway through libraries, including how they first became interested, through various work and educational experiences, and also their goals and thoughts for the future describing a prospective ideal situation ([Bitner et al. 2008](#); [Grocki 2014](#)). Purposeful, stratified sampling will allow to us gather data from participants in all career stages and professional levels, library types, and geographic regions across the

state. We will prioritize and purposefully recruit participants who identify with minoritized populations to ensure their voices are heard; however, we will not limit recruitment to these populations as there may be additional identity-based or other unknown barriers. In addition to NYLA's resources, we have preliminary arrangements to partner with state agencies, the 9 NYS regional library councils, and ethnic affiliate groups (e.g. [NYBLC](#), etc.) for recruitment. To support the large amount of qualitative data collection needed from a wide geographic area, we propose a unique "train-the-trainer" model in which an experienced researcher from the iSchool trains a team of practitioner-researchers to conduct interviews, moderate focus groups, and solicit journey maps in their assigned geographic region, as well as collaboratively analyze the resulting qualitative data. The team will comprise 2 representatives from each of NYS' 9 regional library council areas who will undergo multiple web-based training sessions for each of these skills. Each of these trained assistants will then collect data from at least 5 local participants, enabling us to reach a large number of people, many of whom may be in rural or otherwise challenging areas. All research procedures, including training of research assistants, will be guided by feedback from the advisory board and approved by the Syracuse University IRB.

Idea generation & product creation (year 2): Based on findings from phase 1, the project team will undertake participatory design activities to generate possible solutions to the barriers and challenges uncovered. Drawing on NYLA's resources as well as the relationships and connections with additional partners, we will recruit participants to engage in day-long participatory design workshops intended to generate ideas for implementable solutions. The co-PIs will lead 5 workshops across the state, allowing for diverse mingling among previously siloed regions. Based on the outcomes of these workshops and feedback from the advisory board, a minimum of 3 potential solutions will be selected for piloting. Criteria for selection will be based on (but not limited to) factors such as potential for feasibility, access to resources, representation of library types, and potential for greater impact.

Deployment & reflective assessment (year 3): The final phase of the project sees deployment of the pilot projects in the field, with feedback sought from stakeholders including library workers, employers, state agencies, and others. Specific data and mechanisms for feedback will be developed appropriate to each of the pilot projects. During this phase, the project team will also develop frameworks and models for each pilot program and disseminate findings and results.

Diversity Plan

Pathways To Librarianship is founded on the premise that diversity in librarianship must be treated as a critical and urgent focus. Justice and equity are central to our praxis and scholarship. The makeup of the advisory board and research team will represent a diversity of expertise, personal identities, professional domains, and service areas (rural, urban, etc.). Working with partner organizations to develop an own-voice constituency will help to ensure the character and integrity of our research and subsequent policy advocacy. We acknowledge and understand the difficulties that arise when marginalized people are asked to relive trauma for the sake of research and implementation. Sensitive discussion about identity and potential trauma of career barriers requires careful, empathetic support. We will provide training for the project team and be in frequent contact with our advisory board regarding how to manage these challenges in a compassionate, humane way.

Project Results

In addition to traditional publication and dissemination venues (such as journals and conferences), a key aspect of this work is the ability for it to be used as a model across the nation. A graphic map and associated images of the pathways to librarianship in New York will be commissioned and shared widely as a digital gallery as well as at in-person events. Accessible venues such as workshops, webinars, toolkits, and other formats will help ensure that practitioner stakeholders learn about findings and have access to the frameworks and models for the pilot programs, with advice and resources to adapt them in local contexts. A communication guide will also be developed to give practitioners language to persuade decision-makers in each of the specified domains of practice.

Budget Summary

A total budget of \$286,598 is requested for this applied research project to support salary for PI Dr. Clarke who will train the research team (\$24,181); student assistance (\$68,637); travel support for focus groups, workshops and dissemination efforts (\$12,000); workshop participant support (\$4,800), participant incentives (\$3,060); artist fees (\$10,000); honorariums for the research team (\$9,000); a subaward to collaborator NYLA (\$78,980) for co-PI Furgal's project manager salary, advisory board honoraria, focus group facilitator fees, and workshop costs (including facilities rental, materials & supplies, and catering); and indirect costs (\$75,939). Additionally, Syracuse University will costshare \$70,176 in salary, fringe and indirect costs to support half of the graduate assistant assigned to the project.