



NATIONAL LEADERSHIP GRANTS FOR LIBRARIES

Sample Application LG-259990-OLS-26
Project Category: National Implementation

University of South Carolina, School of Library and Information Science

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$297,537
Amount of cost share:	\$0

University of South Carolina, School of Information Science will implement a project to provide insights into the role of empathy in public library practice and how intentional community-building activities (like storytelling) influence staff attitudes and behaviors. The results of this study will deepen understanding of how public library staff perceive and experience empathy in their roles, particularly in interactions with patrons. Through the use of story circles and reflective journaling, the study assesses how these activities influence staff members' perceptions of empathy, their ability to connect with patrons emotionally, and their approach to providing support. Additionally, the study measures the long-term impact of story circles, specifically whether these experiences lead to more compassionate, empathetic interactions with patrons, especially those facing personal crises or challenges. Ultimately, the goal is to improve the quality of library services by fostering greater empathy among staff, benefiting both the workers and the communities they serve.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

Enhancing Professional Development for Library Professionals Through Storytelling

Introduction

Dr. Nicole Cooke, Professor and Augusta Baker Endowed Chair, Project Director, and Dr. Rachel Williams, Assistant Professor, Co-Investigator, both from the University of South Carolina (USC), request \$297,538 for a two-year National Leadership Grants for Libraries National Implementation Project entitled, “Enhancing Professional Development for Library Professionals Through Storytelling.” This project advances the NLG program goal to improve library services for the American public. The goal of this project is to enhance the capacity of library professionals to engage empathetically with patrons, ultimately leading to improved patron services. Thus, this work aligns well with IMLS agency-level strategic goal 1, objective 1.2 by developing and delivering innovative training to equip public library professional staff with the requisite skills to integrate empathy in patron interactions. This proposed project aids library professionals in demonstrating excellence in public service by promoting open and transparent communication through reflective practice. This project is part of the work of a newly established community engagement lab at the University of South Carolina’s School of Information Science that uses storytelling and other perspective-taking exercises to cultivate community engagement, recognizing these as essential communication skills in library worker-patron interactions. The co-PIs will implement a mixed-methods study that combines story circles, reflective journaling, and surveys to examine how public library workers perceive and use empathy as a skill in library work, specifically in their interactions with patrons. The study examines the following research questions:

Research Question	Method(s) Used
1. How do public library staff perceive and experience empathy in their overall roles, and specifically in their interactions with patrons?	Story circles; reflective journaling
2. How does the use of storytelling circles among public library staff influence their perceptions of their interactions with patrons?	Reflective journaling; follow-up survey

Overall, the project aims to provide insights into the role of empathy in public library practice and how intentional community-building activities (like storytelling) influence staff attitudes and behaviors. The results of this study will deepen understanding of how public library staff perceive and experience empathy in their roles, particularly in interactions with patrons. Through

the use of story circles and reflective journaling, the study assesses how these activities influence staff members' perceptions of empathy, their ability to connect with patrons emotionally, and their approach to providing support. Additionally, the study measures the long-term impact of story circles, specifically whether these experiences lead to more compassionate, empathetic interactions with patrons, especially those facing personal crises or challenges. Ultimately, the goal is to improve the quality of library services by fostering greater empathy among staff, benefiting both the workers and the communities they serve.

Project Justification

Public libraries are crucial community hubs, providing support, resources, and safe spaces for community members. They are sanctuaries for those facing mental health challenges, housing insecurity, substance use disorders, and other concerns, offering safety and comprehensible information (Elia, 2019; Hall & McAlister, 2021; Provence, 2020). Library staff, whether prepared or not, play a vital role in supporting these individuals, and it is essential for them to deliver services with confidence and empathy (Ogden & Williams, 2022). Developing empathy as a skill is critical in ensuring that library staff can effectively navigate complex interactions and provide meaningful support to patrons in need. Recent work has drawn attention to developing empathy as a skill, including the Empathy Project, which provides free training on empathy skill-development, and webinars on empathetic design in library practice (NNLM, 2022; Blair, 2021). Scherrer (2020) describes “empathy as a muscle, one anyone can develop over time with practice” (para.1). Library staff regularly encounter challenging situations that require empathy, such as assisting patrons experiencing homelessness who seek refuge in the library. They must also navigate interactions with specific populations, including survivors of domestic violence, neurodivergent individuals, and non-English speakers, to ensure that all patrons feel respected and supported as community members.

A recent Public Library Association (PLA) webinar focused on building connections to combat loneliness, with one event goal to create an environment of empathy and action (PLA, 2025). This concern about loneliness reflects that of Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone* (2000). Putnam detailed the decline of social organization and social meetings within communities; referred to as a decline in social capital (the social ties that create the fabric of society). He surmised that communities became more lonely and disconnected as people increasingly engaged in solo activities. Loneliness has taken a toll on society, as further evidenced by the urgent calls for community and collective efforts in 2025, post-election. Public libraries are the powerhouse of the community and a central place for building connections and collective efforts (Charbonnet, 2024). To this end, one of the researcher’s prior scholarship emphasizes the need for collective care in LIS, among library staff, and between library staff and their communities (Cooke, Phillips, Eckert, and Kendrick, 2021).

One of the researcher’s prior scholarship emphasizes the empathy that public library staff already feel for their patrons (Williams and Ogden, 2021). Being able to intentionally focus on empathy

as a skill to develop will help library staff engage more successfully with patrons. Wahler, Rortvedt, and Saeker (2022) recommend offering professional development designed around creating empathy. This intentional focus on community and empathy facilitates the library's role as a third place (Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Wood, 2021), a place of connection and community-building. This project addresses this pressing and continued need by providing a space for public library staff to share their stories, bringing empathy and connectedness to the fore in a meaningful and nonjudgmental environment.

Defining Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. It means recognizing what someone else is going through and responding with kindness and care. Empathy is not about fixing problems but about being present, listening, and showing understanding. Empathy, as described by Cuff et al. (2016), involves both cognitive and emotional dimensions: recognizing and understanding others' emotions (cognitive empathy) and sharing those emotions (emotional empathy), which together lead to compassionate empathy. Compassionate empathy motivates actions in response to others' suffering (Decety & Yoder, 2016; Center for Responsive Schools, 2021). Teaching empathy as a skill to public library staff is essential for fostering positive patron interactions and enhancing service effectiveness. Some limited scholarship addresses the role of empathy in public library work (see, for example, Phillips, 2017). As Birdi et al. (2009) note, empathy is at the core of public librarianship that helps library workers foster relationships with their patrons "based on openness, trust and confidence" (p. 81). Training programs that focus on empathy development can improve staff's ability to manage challenging situations, reduce stress, and build stronger community relationships (Matthews, 2020).

Empathy enhances communication, fosters trust, and enables staff to respond with sensitivity and understanding, rather than judgment or frustration (Birdi, Wilson, and Tso, 2009). Focusing on building empathy in patron transactions helps improve the overall patron experience by fostering trust and making patrons feel understood and valued. It enhances communication, allowing library staff to better address patron needs and resolve conflicts, while reducing challenges to accessing resources (Dolamore, et al., 2021). Empathy also promotes job satisfaction for library staff, improving their resilience and sense of purpose in their work.

Story Circles and Reflective Journaling

The co-PIs will explore how story circles may enhance empathy among public library staff. Simply put, a story circle is a gathering of people, sitting in a circle, who share stories in a way that helps them build community, explore themes, and learn from one another. Story circles can enhance empathy by creating a structured space where individuals share personal experiences and actively listen to others' stories (Parks, 2023; Breazeale, 2021). This process fosters deeper emotional connections and understanding by allowing participants to see the world from different perspectives. Story circles rely on several key principles, which will be implemented in

this project. Those principles include: 1) valuing listening as much as speaking; 2) each participant has equal time to share a story on a theme identified beforehand; 3) participants can pass/decline to share a story; 4) there are no questions, criticism, or cross-talk; and 5) spontaneity is important (USDAC, n.d.).

Story circles are adopted here because they are a valuable approach for developing empathy. First, as a form of *perspective taking*, story circles allow participants to hear firsthand accounts of others' experiences and help participants step into someone else's shoes, strengthening cognitive empathy. Additionally, they help *build emotional connections*, because sharing and listening to personal stories fosters emotional empathy by allowing participants to connect with the feelings behind the experiences. They also help create a *space that supports openness and vulnerability*, where participants feel heard and validated, reinforcing mutual respect and trust. Finally, story circles are helpful for building empathy that can *motivate change*, because by deepening emotional and cognitive understanding, they can inspire individuals to take compassionate action in their work and community. Thus for public library staff, story circles can be a powerful tool for enhancing their ability to empathize with patrons, leading to more supportive and responsive services.

The American Psychological Association defines perspective-taking as adopting another's viewpoint through reflective exercises, active listening, or role play (APA, [2024](#)). This approach helps build empathy by enabling individuals to imagine others' experiences. Decety (2005) highlights that perspective-taking can enhance empathy by shifting how individuals relate to others. Reflective journaling, in addition to story circles, will be used to elicit empathy among public library staff and deepen their capacity to take on the experiences of their patrons. Reflective journaling is a standard practice in many fields, including education, and is also an important tool for influencing personal and professional growth (Hubbs & Brand, 2005; Northeastern University, n.d.). Simmons et al. (2021) demonstrated that collaborative reflection among researchers in various roles informed graduate program design and improved curriculum, while also addressing the challenges and opportunities of collaboration in educational practices. Reflective journaling encourages active engagement with one's thoughts and emotions, leading to increased self-awareness and more effective decision-making. This practice can be particularly beneficial in library work, where being able to leverage empathy as a skill is key to providing meaningful services. Reflective journaling enables library staff to process their experiences, fostering empathy and potentially enhancing their professional skills over time.

This project extends existing scholarship (Birdi, Wilson, and Tso, 2009; Phillips, 2017) by explicitly considering how empathy is currently enacted in library worker-patron interactions and providing training for library workers on leveraging empathy as a tool that encourages change. This project is novel because it explores both the perception and practical application of empathy in public library settings, particularly in staff-patron interactions, through a combination of storytelling circles, reflective journaling, and a follow-up survey. The use of storytelling circles

as a method to develop empathy among library staff offers a unique approach to fostering emotional connection and motivation to act, which has not been widely explored in library studies. By combining these methods, the project aims to bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical action in library services.

The **target group** for this project is public library staff who interact with patrons and work at a large, urban public library in the United States. The **primary beneficiaries** of this project include 1) public library staff and 2) public library patrons. Library staff will gain a deeper understanding of empathy in their professional roles and develop skills to improve their interactions with patrons. Library patrons will indirectly benefit from improved service quality, as staff members become more attuned to their needs and able to respond with greater empathy and care. Additionally, the project could enhance staff job satisfaction and resilience, contributing to a more positive and effective work environment.

Project Work Plan

This mixed methods project incorporates story circles, reflective journaling, and follow-up surveys to consider how public library staff perceive and activate empathy in patron interactions. The project work plan consists of two years and will be completed by the Co-PIs in collaboration with a graduate student worker. The study will be conducted at public libraries throughout the United States. Prior to completing all portions of the project, the research team will work with the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board to acquire appropriate human subjects approvals. Table 2 details the project timeline and major research activities.

Dates	Research Activities	Responsible Personnel
August 2026-October 2026	Study preparation; human subjects approval; onboarding of graduate student; select partners and data collection sites; recruit participants	Dr. Cooke, Dr. Williams, GA
November 2026-January 2027	Story circle training with consultant; finalize study instruments and pilot test story circles; finalize data collection sites;	Dr. Cooke, Dr. Williams, GA, and Story circles consultant
February 2027-January 2028	Travel to public libraries to conduct story circles; facilitate journal exercises and follow-up survey six weeks after story circle sessions; analyze story circle, journal, and survey data; submit to professional conference	GA-facilitate story circle exercises with support from PD Dr. Williams-survey data analysis Dr. Cooke-qualitative analysis

		Project team-conference submissions
January 2028-July 2028	Update the <i>Patron Insights Playbook</i> and share via project website; submit professionally focused and research articles; present at professional conference (such as ALA)	Dr. Cooke, Dr. Williams, GA

Table 2. Major research activities, timeline, and responsible personnel.

Year 1 is focused on understanding public library workers' perspectives on the role of empathy in their overall work and in their interactions with patrons (RQ1). To address RQ1, the Co-PIs will facilitate story circles with public library staff to gather qualitative data on their perceptions and experiences with empathy with patrons in their roles. By the end of the first year, the co-PIs and graduate research assistant (GA) will recruit 6 public libraries in the United States (including Northeast, Southwest, Northwest, West, and 2 in the Southeast) to participate in the story circles. To recruit participants, the research team will purposively select 6 libraries from the Urban Libraries Council membership by first categorizing libraries into "larger urban" and "smaller urban" groups based on factors including size and population served. Then the researchers will randomly select libraries from each group, ensuring that larger urban libraries are represented in the final sample and enough library staff will be able to participate in the study. Up to 100 library staff may participate, depending on the number of staff at each of the libraries.

Before implementing story circles, the research team will invite a consultant (expert in story circle methodology) to the University of South Carolina. The consultant will host a training on use of the method and help the researchers finalize the study instruments and approach. The story circles will follow a simple structure that includes the following activities. First, the researchers will introduce the exercise to the participants, sharing the prompt and guidelines for length of time each participant will have to share a story, and setting up ground rules for the activity. Then, participants will have the opportunity to share their stories based on the prompts provided. Before facilitating story circles with participants, the research team will pilot them with LIS graduate students who are working in public libraries. Prompts are open-ended and designed to elicit stories rather than participants explaining their ideas about a concept. Examples of the prompts may include the following:

- Describe a time when you worked with a patron and struggled to show empathy within an interaction.
- Describe a time when you worked with a patron and were able to successfully demonstrate empathy toward them.

Using story circles to gain a deeper understanding of how public library workers view their work and their interactions with patrons will provide insights into the types of approaches they may take in practice.

Through the second half of Year 1 and the start of Year 2, the research team will facilitate story circles, which include no more than 12-15 people at a time in a given session. Depending on the size of the library, there may be 2-3 sessions per library location to account for the number of staff. A typical story circle session takes 1-2 hours and consists of the following activities. Each circle will have a prompt that includes a scenario (for example, describe an interaction with a patron that did include empathy), and each participant talks for up to 5 minutes to tell their story in response to the prompt. During this time, the participant is not interrupted. People are allowed to pass if they would like to. After everyone has told their story, the researchers will host a debriefing session where participants talk about the stories they heard, what they learned. One round focuses on one specific question.

After the story circle session, participants will engage with one reflective journaling exercise immediately after that is focused on initial impressions of the story circle exercise and how it was relevant for understanding the role of empathy in public library practice. Consistent with the methodology, the project team will take notes and debrief after each session, but will *not* take notes or record during the session. Qualitative data from the reflective journaling and the notes taken by researchers after the sessions will be analyzed thematically.

Additionally, in Year 2, to assess the extent to which storytelling circles influence perceptions of empathy, participants will complete follow-up reflective journaling entries for three additional weeks after the initial session. Public library staff will also complete a final email survey six weeks after their participation in the story circle. The reflective journaling exercises will encourage participants to reflect on their experiences, identify personal and organizational action steps for developing empathy, and track changes in their thoughts and behaviors over time. Journal entries will be uploaded using a Google form. Examples of prompts that may be used for the reflective journaling exercises include:

Prompt 1: Thinking about the story you shared and your experience in the story circle, if you could redo that interaction another time, what would you do differently, or how would you include empathy? Is there anything you would change with that experience, and if so, why?

Prompt 2: In the past few weeks, have you had any experiences with patrons where you did approach things differently?

Prompt 3: After participating in the story circles, reflect on how you can apply empathy in your work moving forward. What new approaches or strategies might you try to better connect with patrons?

While participants may feel motivated in the moment to respond to feelings of empathy, the longitudinal assessments are designed to assess whether those feelings quickly fade or are

sustainable over a longer period of time. Does the use of story circles encourage public library staff to find new ways or manners of approaching their interactions with patrons? The research team will analyze the qualitative data from both the journaling and session debriefing notes, looking for thematic patterns in how participants' empathy perceptions evolve as a result of the story circle experience. Finally, participants will receive an email survey six weeks after the story circle session to share final thoughts on the experience and how perceptions of empathy shifted over those weeks. Questions on the follow-up survey will address whether the story circles prompted growth in areas such as: increased emotional awareness, improved communication skills, stronger relationships with patrons, more personalized service, and a greater ability to respond to patrons' needs with understanding and compassion.

Project Personnel

Principal Investigator, Dr. Nicole A. Cooke: Nicole A. Cooke, PhD, is the Augusta Baker Endowed Chair and a professor at the School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Carolina. Dr. Cooke brings 13 years of experience as a practicing librarian in public, medical, and academic libraries before earning her Ph.D. Dr. Cooke's teaching and research revolve around community literacy and community care, and focus on developing and encouraging library professionals to effectively and compassionately serve a wide variety of community constituents. Her current projects include preparing LIS doctoral students for the classroom, and recounting the stories of historical figures in librarianship.

Co-Principal Investigator, Dr. Rachel Williams: Rachel D. Williams, PhD, is an assistant professor in the iSchool at the University of South Carolina. Dr. Williams' research examines public librarianship as a profession. Her work gives attention to supporting patrons and communities in crisis, developing healthy boundaries and professional resilience, and exploring the connections between social work and librarianship. Dr. Williams' current research projects are centered on adoption of well-being practices in public librarianship, boundary management in public library work, and the use of innovative technologies such as virtual reality (VR) for research on training and workforce development.

Graduate Research Assistant: A doctoral student will serve as a graduate research assistant for this project. Key responsibilities of this student include project administration; development, piloting and administration of study instruments; data collection, management, and analysis; and support for dissemination of research findings. The PI will serve as a mentor for the doctoral student in this role.

Story Circles Consultant: A scholar with expertise in the use of story circles will be recruited to provide consultation and training in using story circles for this study. The consultant will travel to USC to facilitate training on the use of the story circles methodology and provide expert advice to the project team as they finalize their study.

Stakeholder Engagement

This project will dedicate the entire first year to stakeholder engagement, focusing on deeply understanding public library workers’ perspectives on the role of empathy in their work and interactions with patrons (RQ1). During Year 1, Co-PIs will facilitate story circles with public library staff to gather qualitative data on their experiences and perceptions of empathy in their roles. This foundational year will assess library staff’s baseline views on empathy and its significance in shaping their interactions with patrons, ensuring that the project is rooted in the needs and insights of those directly involved.

Project Evaluation

The evaluation of this project will assess the effectiveness of professional development activities in enhancing empathy skills among library professionals and improving patron interactions. The evaluation will use a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative measures to capture changes in perceptions, skills, and interactions over time (Table 3).

Evaluation Activity	Method	Responsible Personnel
Assess story circle prompts and journal entries	The research team will recruit graduate library science students who have public library experience to pilot test the story circle prompts and journal prompts. They will also work with the story circles consultant to ensure the methodology is appropriately designed.	GA with Co-PI oversight
Conference presentations	Conference presentations at venues such as ALISE and ALA to gather qualitative, informal feedback on the use of story circle prompts and to foster conversation around empathy skill development in librarianship.	GA with Co-PI oversight
Follow-Up Journaling and survey	Conduct post-program follow-up survey and journaling to measure changes in participants’ empathy skills, confidence, and perceived effectiveness in patron interactions.	Project Co-PIs and GA

Table 3. Evaluation Activities.

Project Results

This project’s intended results include the following:

- Increased awareness and understanding of empathy among library professionals,
- Improvements in confidence and resilience in patron interactions,
- Positive changes in patron perceptions of library staff engagement, and
- A model (*The Empathy Playbook*) that other libraries can adopt and replicate, amplifying benefits to additional communities and maximizing the impact of federal investment.

The story circles and initial journaling exercise will provide insight into the perceptions of empathy in public library work (RQ1) through storytelling. Additionally, the subsequent reflective journaling exercises and follow-up survey will help identify the ways in which public library staff perceive empathy as a skill, recognizing its importance in building resilience and confidence for interacting successfully with patrons (RQ2). During Year 1, the research team will share emerging findings via their lab's website. The website will also allow visitors to respond with their own stories anonymously using Padlet, a digital bulletin board that will allow people to read others' stories. This will include development and dissemination of *The Empathy Playbook for Public Library Workers*, which will share recommendations for the use of story circles, a list of story circle prompts and further readings and resources that public libraries can adopt for use among their staff. Study findings will be disseminated through conferences, peer-reviewed journals, and professional publications, and result in recommendations for incorporating empathy exercises, including story circles, into library practice. The playbook will be readily available beyond the project period, as will any articles or other resources produced by the research team. By sharing this playbook on the research lab's website and through practice-based and research-focused venues, it can continue to be a tool for library professionals seeking to integrate empathy into their practices. The playbook will also be regularly updated based on the experiences of library staff who use it.

To bring the study findings to the field, the research team will present preliminary and key findings and the playbook at conferences such as the American Library Association (ALA) or PLA. In Year 2, The team will also submit a paper to *Public Libraries* and *Public Library Quarterly*, and op-eds to *Public Libraries Online* and *The Conversation*. Furthermore, the research team will present findings for at least one key academic conference, for example the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE); and will also schedule two-three webinars that will be free and open to the public. Finally, the team will submit a journal for publication in an academic journal such as *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* and *Library Quarterly*.

Broader Impact

The broader impact on the wellbeing of communities from this project lies in the enhanced ability of public library staff to provide empathetic and responsive services. As library staff develop stronger empathetic skills, they can better support individuals in the community, contribute to healthier, more connected environments, and help address challenges faced by patrons, ultimately benefiting the overall wellbeing of their communities.

Study Activities	Year 1 2026-2027				Year 2 2027-2028			
	Sep-Oct	Nov-Jan	Feb-Apr	May-July	Aug-Oct	Nov-Jan	Feb-Apr	May-July
<i>Management of the Project</i>								
Secure IRB Approval	X							
Hiring/onboarding of project GA	X							
Contracting with a Story Circles consultant for methodology training	X							
Story Circles Methodology training		X						
Initial creation of website	X	X						
Ongoing website maintenance			X	X	X	X	X	X
Recruit participants	X	X						
<i>Data Collection</i>								
Select partners and data collections sites	X	X						
Site visits (6) to conduct story circles			X	X	X			
Four reflective journaling exercises				X	X			
Follow up survey				X	X	X		
<i>Data Analysis</i>								
Transcription, field notes			X	X	X			
Data analysis of interviews and focus groups				X	X	X		
Analyze journal entries					X	X	X	
Analyze follow-up survey data						X	X	
Data management			X	X	X	X	X	
<i>Practitioner Focused Dissemination</i>								
Share project updates on website				X	X			
Provide resources for facilitating story circles					X			
Practitioner presentations							X	X
Practitioner focused publication							X	X
<i>Research Dissemination</i>								
Share project updates on website						X	X	X
Research conference presentation							X	X
Research journal publication							X	X