

Outstanding in Their Field: Leadership for Rural and Small Libraries

Introduction

As the premier organization representing rural and small libraries, the Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) seeks funding to develop a leadership institute, “*Outstanding in Their Field*,” for those working in rural and small libraries. ARSL recognizes the uniqueness of rural and small libraries and is committed to providing professional development that builds capacity and excellence within this community of practice. To this end, ARSL will develop an immersive institute tailored to elevate those in rural and small libraries to step confidently into leadership roles in their libraries, in their communities, in our association, and in the larger library field.

With \$229,000 over three years, the IMLS grant will fund a year of planning, curriculum design, and participant selection. ARSL will pilot the curriculum in the next two years with 30 - 35 individuals from across the country, representing a broad range of rural and small libraries. Key priorities for this project are to grow strong library leaders, strengthen community leadership, increase diversity and inclusion in library leadership, build ARSL organizational capacity, and evaluate the pilot for future effectiveness and sustainability. Over the two years, participants will learn and practice leadership skills while gaining capabilities to become community catalysts.

Statement of Need

According to the 2017 American Library Association paper, “*Rural Libraries in the United States: Recent Strides, Future Possibilities, and Meeting Community Needs*,” roughly one-third of all U.S. public libraries serve areas with populations of 2,500 or fewer people. Of these, two-thirds of the library directors have not earned a Master’s in Library Science. The average Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) member comes from a library with less than three employees and the median salary for the library director is \$28,508. The salary, in particular, can have an impact on the ability to recruit and hire staff with leadership and/or managerial experience. Even when libraries have strong leadership, the small number of staff results in a limited ability to grow new leaders within those rural and small libraries. In addition, when staff from rural or small libraries have participated in leadership institutes for larger libraries, they have reported to the ARSL board that the content and examples often have not directly informed the issues they face in rural and small libraries.

In addition, rural and small library staff are seeking support and professional development from ARSL. In the last four years, ARSL membership has increased by 225% to over 1,800 members and conference attendance increased by 50%. By 2019, the conference venue had to be expanded to fit 750 attendees and it sold out within one week. At the same time, the ARSL board is taking on more national leadership and seeking savvy leaders to represent the interests of rural and small libraries on the national stage.

Project Design

In the first year, an ARSL task force will select and work with contractors on the needs assessment and curriculum for the two years of content. All content will be framed for a small community environment and address issues specific to rural and small libraries. In tandem with curriculum development, an external evaluation firm will develop an evaluation plan in order to measure participant learning and performance change, as well as any improvements to their libraries and/or communities as a result of their participation in the institute. To empower every participant, their individual learning goals will be addressed throughout the evaluation process. In addition, the task force will recruit and select a diverse cohort of emerging leaders, called “The Outfielders.”

In the second year, 30 Outfielders will attend a 2 ½ day residential “Spring Training” camp. ARSL task force members will serve as “coaches” in support of the instructors. The curriculum will focus on leadership imperatives such as understanding self, influencing others, and developing skills to make meaningful change both in the library and within the community. Day one will focus on topics such as leadership theory, leadership styles and methods, and library values and ethics. Day two will begin practical applications, such as coaching, reframing issues, leveraging data and organizational structure, community development, and project management. The last half-day will focus on strategies for working with other community leaders and assessing community needs as defined by the community. In addition, the Outfielders will gain methods for measuring equitable social wellbeing.

Over the two years, the diverse cohort of Outfielders will gain insight from each other via monthly meetings using a software platform. Each quarter, additional professional development will be offered online to Outfielders based on topics they identify during the residential ‘Spring Training.’

Year three will launch with an additional ‘Spring Training’ camp in-person and prior to the ARSL conference. Outfielders will be involved in conference proceedings and begin to deepen their involvement in ARSL. With stronger leadership skills, Outfielders will continue the monthly cohort meetings, quarterly learning, and a deeper dive into the evaluation of their individual growth, library and community improvement, mentoring, and other outcome-based results.

Diversity Plan

Outstanding in Their Field will reach diverse participants while adding curriculum on implicit bias, equity, and inclusion. Using strategic partners, including the American Library Association’s Office of Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services, the Public Library Association, and the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA), ARSL will reach each geographic location, and recruit from a broad spectrum of ethnicities, orientations, and political views that comprise the rich tapestry of rural America.

National Impact

ARSL has a national reach with members in every state. In addition, 80% of public library systems are in rural and small communities throughout America. The “*Outstanding*” grant leverages our reach to take three paths to national impact. The initial path is to select Outfielders from throughout the country to lead change in their libraries and communities. The second path is the national ARSL Annual Conference and ARSL membership participation. Outfielders will be given opportunities to take to the stage by presenting at the national conference, to get involved in committees, and engage with members via the often-used email list. The third national impact is longer range. In subsequent years, as Outfielders take on leadership positions within ARSL, they will step up to broader leadership and influence. They will bring the voice of rural and small libraries to the table on national issues, with national partners, and at national venues.

Budget

The grant budget of \$229,000 will be used over a three year period. In the first year, \$35,000 will be allocated for the design and development of curricula, design of the evaluation, and online meeting software to select participants and meet with partner organizations. In the second year, travel, lodging, instructor costs, meals, materials, and meeting space for the 3-day Residential Institute, plus online monthly meetings, quarterly professional development, evaluation of the institute, and developing the online platform for cohort engagement will cost \$98,350. Year three will have the evaluation of the second residential institute, the final evaluation report, travel, lodging, instructor costs, meals, materials, and meeting space for the 1 1/2 day Residential Institute, plus registration for the participants for the ARSL Conference and pre-conference costing \$95,650.