Uncovering Black Lives Project: Investigating the information community and collections of African American Genealogists

This three-year Laura Bush 21st century Early Career Development Research in Service to Practice Grant at Syracuse University, requests $315,383 (cost share an additional $153,412) for LaVerne Gray, Ph.D. Assistant Professor at the iSchool, to investigate the African American genealogical community. The project seeks to examine information behavior, explore familial collection building, and support dissemination of unearthed histories of African Americans and serve as a **Community Catalyst**.

Statement of Broad Need: African American genealogy became popularized in the 20th century with the publishing of *Alex Haley's Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976). The subsequent airing of the television mini-series became a catalyst for the active engagement of African Americans in the pursuit of family histories believed lost by the ravages of enslavement, segregation, and oppression. The genealogical path for African Americans is a distinct and intimate journey in the discovery of self through the use of personal, municipal and community archives. The research builds on previous work by the PI using genealogy as a catalyst to examine familial collections and their location in communities to uncover historic contributions made to society (Gray, 2019). In the previous study, the value of illuminating hidden figures through exploring the activism of an ancestor provides the foundation for understanding the information practices of the African American genealogical community, the stories of the lives they uncover, and the dissemination and use of their collections. It also builds on previous funded early career research projects on community archiving (Michelle Caswell & Katrina Fenlon), personal records (Edward Benoit), and African American history (Matthew Griffis). This research extends their work by documenting communal support in collections and research.

The research is framed by the informational behavior concept of *information community,* defined as a "partnership of institutions and individuals forming and cultivating a community of interest around the provision and exchange of information, or knowledge, aimed at increasing access to that information or increasing communication, and thereby increasing that knowledge"(Fisher, Unruh, & Durrance, 2005). The genealogical community is a catalyst for exchange of research processes and methods in the pursuit of self-acknowledgement in the oft-neglected histories of African Americans. In the context of the African American genealogical landscape, there is the sociological concept of *reconciliation*, signifying the restoration of "lineages, families, and knowledge of the past and to make political claims in the present" (Nelson, 2016, p. 6). Reconciliation occurs through the practice of collecting artifacts and building familial collections in order to contribute to the historic record. With this in mind, the Uncovering Black Lives Project seeks to address the following questions:
1. How do the information communities of African American genealogists support familial research?
2. What processes and mechanisms do the communities use in familial collection building?
3. What dissemination activities are employed to contribute to uncovering and reconciling the histories of African Americans?

Project Design: The three-year Uncovering Black Lives Project will engage with African American genealogists in their communities of practice. The researcher will examine three different geographical regions of active chapters of the Afro American Historical Genealogical Society (AAHGS) including Northern Illinois/Southern Wisconsin (NISW), Jean Simpson Scott Greater New York, and Memphis and the Mid-South. *Data Collection and Analysis:* This study utilizes a critical qualitative case study design to observe shared research practices and the development of collections that reveal hidden histories and contributions of African Americans. Case study is defined as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015 p. 37). The current case is bounded by organizational affiliation and select geographical areas of the South, Mid-west, and Northeast. The researcher will collect fieldnotes using unobtrusive observations of both online and physical meeting environments, document analysis of source collections and familial (personal) collections and encourage storytelling through the use of in-depth narrative interviews. Will use evidence inquiry analysis approach (Gray, 2019) to extract themes from documents to visualize meta-themes and also use

thematic narrative analysis ([Reissman, 2008](#)) to account for the research path taken by the genealogists interviewed. Extensive memos will be kept by the PI as a reflexive tool and to document processes.
Dissemination: Findings will be presented initially at Year 2 to receive feedback from the research community, and in Year 3 at both research and practitioner conferences. Three peer review articles on reflecting findings will be written and submitted. Additional dissemination will occur by establishing a piloted online communal space module through a partnership with [Blackpast.org](#) to both share and uncover family stories, share documents, and develop protocols to create a sharing space of unknown histories of black lives in the United States.

Project timeline:
Year 1:
- Obtain Institutional Review Board clearance for research with human subjects.
- Recruit and train full-time PhD level Graduate Research Assistant.
- Identify and take inventory of online communities on social media, websites, and blogs.
- Attend gatherings, meetings, conferences for unobtrusive observation and initial field notes collection (AAHS Annual Conference & Local Chapter Meetings) and
- Recruit 5-8 members from regional chapters to interview. An interview protocol will be created based on observation field notes.

Year 2:
- Continue observation at meetings and gatherings.
- Conduct 20-30 in-depth qualitative narrative interviews with members across ranks including leaders, and researchers with various levels of expertise (signified by years of engagement) at Chapter sites.
- Transcribe and analyze interviews.
- Present initial findings at ASIS&T.

Year 3:
- Create online pilot module for sharing African American familial histories and collection sources using online platform BlackPast.org.
- Write and Submit 3 peer review articles (Libraries: Culture, History, and Society; Libri: The International Journal of Libraries and Information Studies; Library Quarterly).
- Present findings at ALISE, ALA.

Diversity Plan: Because the research focuses on the African American genealogical community, it provides pathways for greater sharing of hidden and unknown histories. The findings support diversity and inclusion of familial collections from a community of color. The community-based research approach identifies how a minoritized information community supports reconciling a past that lacks inclusion of all voices. Once practices and protocols are identified they can be used for inclusion in all library collections to help them better serve their patrons more successfully and link libraries to organizations of color.

Broad Impact: The research will identify processes to surface and develop engagement mechanisms to help uncover the hidden histories of African Americans through familial collections. The findings will clarify the role of communal research support and familial collections practices. The piloted online module will help develop pathways for inclusion of online collections in libraries and provide mechanisms for collaboration with librarians and genealogists to make the histories available.

Budget Summary
The proposed total cost is $315,383. Support for personnel (Summer Support PI for $50,564, support for PhD Graduate Research Assistant $102,751); associated fringe benefits ($19,516); travel for data collection ($19,125); travel for dissemination ($9600); incentives for participants ($3,000); digital recorder ($300); transcription services ($5,400); and indirect costs ($105,127). SU will cost share $153,412 in PI academic salary and fringe and doctoral student tuition support.