



LAURA BUSH 21st CENTURY LIBRARIAN PROGRAM

Sample Application RE-259006-OLS-25
Project Category: Forum

Vanderbilt University, Division of Sponsored Research (Jean
and Alexander Heard Libraries)

Amount awarded by IMLS: \$121,925

Vanderbilt University will expand and enhance the Southern Library Support Staff (SLSS) Conference, founded at Vanderbilt University in 2019, by providing full scholarships for 60 of 200 anticipated attendees and helping the SLSS to expand nationally. While librarians receive standardized training through ALA-accredited programs, support staff enter the field through multiple pathways with varied educational backgrounds. As vital contributors to library success, they require ongoing training, yet funding for their professional development is often scarce. The SLSS Conference offers keynotes, panels, workshops, and excursions, helping attendees fulfill continuing education requirements and will benefit attendees 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.

Introduction

Advancing the Southern Library Support Staff (SLSS) Conference: Developing Strategies and Opportunities for All Library Workers to Succeed. Honora N. Eskridge, Jean and Alexander Heard Libraries, Vanderbilt University.

We seek a Forum Project Grant which will support LB21 Program Goal 2, Objective 2.1 to enhance the Southern Library Support Staff (SLSS) Conference, a conference for library support staff created at Vanderbilt University, which is currently in its sixth year of operation. The goal of the conference is to help create a more diverse and competent 21st century workforce through the development of paraprofessional staff. With IMLS support, we seek to expand the conference's reach beyond the southeastern United States and to a wider variety of libraries. We are requesting \$122,028 over a one-year period (August 2025 to July 2026) to fully fund a cohort of 60 first-time attendees. This project aligns with both Agency Goal 1, Objective 1.2 as well as with LB21 Program Goal 2, Objective 2.1 because it enhances training and development of the library workforce and supports the growth and life-long learning of experienced library practitioners.

Project Justification

American libraries are operated by teams of credentialed librarians who work alongside library support staff. While librarians benefit from receiving a shared and comprehensive training program within ALA accredited degree programs, support staff become library workers through many different career pathways and possess varied educational backgrounds. Within one library, there may be early career support staff with advanced degrees working alongside long-tenured teammates with no post-secondary education. Library support staff roles often require limited prior experience, as the expectation is that key skills will be acquired on the job. While this approach to hiring creates accessible pathways into the field of library work, many library support staff positions have a focus on fundamental library building and service operations. The daily workloads and workflows of these operations-focused positions limits the ability of support staff to invest time into learning and developing the new skills they need to keep up with the ever-changing technologies that continually redefine libraries service portfolios.

This highlights the importance of training and professional development for library support staff. Support staff workers hold positions throughout library organizations and often enjoy long tenures at a single institution. As a result, these library workers have significant effects on the success of library organizations. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2023 there were over 169,200 people working in library support staff roles across the USA. The future of libraries depends on a skilled workforce, and creating a skilled library workforce is contingent upon facilitating the growth and recognizing the impact of our paraprofessional colleagues.

While many libraries dedicate portions of their budget to supporting the development of their credential librarians, similar budget carve outs for support staff is comparatively very limited.

This lack of funding can send a message to support staff that their life-long learning is not an organizational priority. If they do seek professional development, they must choose opportunities that involve no travel and have low registration fees. This has also resulted in a dearth of opportunities for these workers. Before Vanderbilt created the SLSS conference, only two conferences expressly for support staff existed: one at East Carolina University (ECU) and one sponsored by the Illinois Library Association (ILA). Both are regional events in locations that are difficult to travel to, are short in length, and limited in their focus: ECU's is designed for academic libraries; ILA's is for public library staff in Illinois.

The SLSS conference was born when its founder, Machel Keen, a Vanderbilt Libraries employee with over 30 years of experience, sought different and better development options. She proposed and created a conference for Vanderbilt Libraries support staff in 2019, which was sponsored by the University Libraries. Six months later, the same program was offered to the local Nashville library community after discovering that most library support staff in the region are required to have a minimum of 20 hours per year of continuing education (a need that was at that time hard for people to fulfill). Since then, the SLSS conference has continued to grow into a three-day event with sessions covering topics such as leadership, lifelong career management, supervising student and volunteer workers, practical skills for 21st century workers, as well as new and innovative ideas from other libraries.

The SLSS conference features a variety of session formats over the three-day period including keynote speakers, panel discussions, workshops, and excursions. The conference has helped support staff meet a substantive portion of their annual continuing education requirements. Through post-session surveys, attendees of previous iterations of the SLSS conference have given overwhelmingly positive feedback. Attendees most appreciated the breadth of topics covered, the quality of the speakers and presentations, and the conference's well-organized set up and delivery. Many have communicated that their coworkers would benefit from the SLSS conference if they had financial support. Past conferences have been deliberately designed to be very affordable, but we have learned that even these costs are too high for many local library workers and long-distance travel is out of the question.

We seek a Forum Project Grant which will support LB21 Program Goal 2, Objective 2.1 by providing scholarships that will fully fund the conference for 60 of the anticipated 200 in-person attendees by paying registration, room and board, and providing a stipend to cover travel costs. This grant will also allow the SLSS conference to grow into a national event for all types of libraries. Planned topics for our proposed conference include mental health and self-care of library workers, learning new and innovative ways to provide library services, leadership at all levels, managing today's library workforce, facilities management, and time/resources management on finite budgets.

Project Work Plan

The project timeline will be from August 2025 to July 2026, with the conference held May 27-29, 2026. The timeline will have two distinct phases.

Early Planning Phase (August 2025 – February 2026): Planning for the conference will start with the formation of a planning committee made up of volunteers from the Vanderbilt Libraries, chaired by Machel Keen under the leadership of Project Director Honora Eskridge. The committee's initial tasks will include:

- Choosing a conference theme
- Researching and inviting keynote speakers
- Creating and disseminating advertising
- Developing scholarship application form
- Issuing a call for speaker proposals (and reviewing proposals as they come in)
- Issuing a call for scholarship applications
- Researching and booking excursions and learning experiences in the Nashville area
- Determining food and transportation needs
- Securing event spaces
- Ordering swag and preparing information packets
- Arranging for library vendors to attend
- Issuing a call for volunteers and session moderators
- Designing the conference session feedback forms

Conference Phase (March – July 2026):

In the months leading up to the conference, the committee will:

- Disseminate advertising via library listservs with registration and before the registration period starts which will include scholarship information.
- Open online registration
- Launch the conference app (Sched)
- Finalize the conference schedule and build the accompanying web site.
- Review scholarship applications and award scholarships based on the quality of their application materials (applicants will be asked to provide a personal statement of why they want to attend the conference and how they think it will benefit their professional growth, as well as a letter of support from a supervisor)
- Ensure that rooms, seating, catering, volunteers, and registration items are ready for attendees the day before the conference starts
- Hire student workers to assist with administrative duties from April – May 2026
- Hire student workers to provide dedicated IT support during the conference

All conference sessions will be held in Vanderbilt Library spaces and will begin each day at approximately 8:45 am and continue until approximately 5 pm on the first two days, and ending

at 12:00 pm on the last day, depending on proposal submissions and planned excursions. During the conference, committee members will:

- Coordinate volunteers
- Assist with wayfinding
- Serve as session moderators
- Administer feedback forms

After the conference, the committee will:

- Compile feedback data and share it with presenters and the committee
- Post presentation slide decks and keynote recordings to the conference web site
- Send personalized thank you notes to all presenters, vendors, volunteers, and the committee for helping with the success of the conference
- As Project Director, Eskridge will make sure that all financial responsibilities are attended to and reported accurately

Machelle Keen will be the lead for the event and work closely with the Project Director, planning committee, and Vanderbilt University Conference Services. As in prior years of the conference, volunteers on the committee will agree to work on the conference up to 8 hours per month for the first six months of planning (August 2025 – January 2026); 10 hours per month from February – April 2026; and between 25-30 hours for May 2026, including the conference days. Volunteers serving as moderators or navigators can work a few hours or as many as 10-12 hours over the three-day period.

Project Results

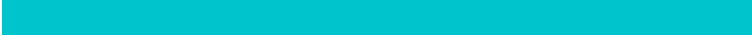
With support from IMLS, this project will enable more library workers to attend the SLSS conference and will bring this conference's support staff centered programming to a national audience of library workers. Attendees will be empowered to keep up with new advances in library services, which will in turn help create a more skilled and dynamic library workforce. The SLSS conference also provides a venue for support staff to share their ideas and experience as speakers and presenters. Lastly, attendees will gain a new network of contacts and mentors in the library community, and they (and others) will be able to access presentation and speaker materials on the conference web site permanently after the conference has ended.

Beyond growing the SLSS conference, our goal is to communicate to library administrators the value and impact of life-long learning opportunities for support staff. We further hope that, when scholarship recipients return to their home institutions having had a positive learning experience, managers will be more willing to fund development and even be inspired to create their own regional conferences. As a final step, we plan to deliver a webinar on the SLSS conference to show how other libraries could create experiences similar to the SLSS conference in their own region and demonstrate how anyone in a library organization can step forward and be a leader.

SCHEDULE OF COMPLETION

JEAN & ALEXANDER HEARD LIBRARIES

ADVANCING THE SOUTHERN LIBRARY SUPPORT STAFF (SLSS) CONFERENCE: DEVELOPING STRATEGIES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL LIBRARY WORKERS TO SUCCEED.

TASKS	AUG 2025	SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN 2026	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUNE	JULY
Form Committee												
Create website, forms, advertising												
Call for proposals/ scholarship applications												
Plan catering, housing, spaces, activities												
Review proposals/ schol applications												
Award scholarships												
Finalize schedule & launch app												
Open registration												
Hold Conference												
Compile Feedback Data												
Share out all session materials												
Plan and propose webinar												
Pay final bills												