



LAURA BUSH 21st CENTURY LIBRARIAN PROGRAM

Sample Application RE-259806-OLS-26
Project Category: National Implementation

Association for Rural and Small Libraries, Inc

Amount awarded by IMLS: \$261,898
Amount of cost share: \$0

The Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL), in collaboration with the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies and an advisory committee of rural and state library representatives, will convert its successful IMLS-funded Leadership Institute into an online, asynchronous certification program for staff in rural and small libraries. Many of these libraries are led by staff with limited access to leadership development, and travel, scheduling, and staffing constraints can be barriers to in-person training. An online certification will retain the proven curriculum while addressing these challenges. ARSL will adapt existing content, build self-paced modules with peer engagement activities, and launch the certification with an initial national cohort. The resulting 12-month online certification pathway will provide increased access to leadership preparation for rural and small library workers.

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.

Online Certification Program: Rural and Small Library Leadership Institute

Introduction

The Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) requests \$261,898 in National Implementation funding from the IMLS to convert its successful small-cohort Leadership Institute into a fully online, asynchronous certification program for rural and small library directors, supervisors, managers, and emerging leaders. The project addresses the persistent challenge faced by rural leaders who lack access to high-quality, affordable professional development due to geographic constraints, limited staff coverage, and training costs. ARSL will build upon and scale our existing IMLS-funded cohort model to reach a significantly larger national audience. This workforce development offering will remove impediments to participation and position the certification as a premier professional designation to empower leaders to make a significant difference in their communities and inspire them to take on new challenges and greater responsibility. The project will result in an intentionally-designed, competency-based leadership certification with the real potential for long-term sustainability. ARSL will partner with the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) to gather their expertise and position the certification so that state library agencies can recognize it as a recommended qualification.

Program Justification

The most recent [IMLS Public Libraries Survey](#) (PLS) from 2023 reports that the United States is home to 9,200 public libraries. Nearly 83% (7,600) of those libraries are considered rural and/or small based on location and community size. Together, these institutions serve more than 83 million library patrons across all 50 states. These rural and/or small libraries are frequently led and staffed by individuals who have limited access to formal library training through higher education institutions as compared with their urban peers.

The PLS data also provided educational insights into the staff members of these 7,600 rural libraries. On average, 87% of staff in these libraries did not hold a Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS), and nearly 55% (4,200) did not employ a staff member with an MLIS. The median staff size of these small libraries was 3 full-time equivalent employees, with the most common staffing structure being a single (or solo) staff member. Among those solo-staffed libraries, 100% reported not holding a graduate level library degree. This calls into focus the stark realities that underscore the need for high-quality, job-specific professional learning to address the development of leadership and management skills which are currently being obtained unevenly and informally through primarily on-the-job experience.

Rural and small libraries provide essential community infrastructure but often must rely on “accidental” leaders when staff assume managerial and directorial responsibilities without being provided with formal leadership preparation or advanced degrees. Many come into the profession from various backgrounds and may not have an MLIS or formal library training.

Since 2020, ARSL has piloted two multi-yearlong cohorts of the Leadership Institute, receiving over 225 applications for the 30 spaces that were available in each group. The ARSL Leadership Institute pilot demonstrated through external evaluation that a tailored model (informed by Educopia Institute’s Nexus: Leading Across Boundaries framework) can measurably strengthen the skills and performance of the library workforce. Based on this model, the Leadership Institute program organized learning and practice around five domains of leadership tailored to rural and small library contexts.

1. “Leading self” focused on self-awareness, personal effectiveness, time and priority management, and resilience to help participants understand their own strengths, values, and habits so they can act more intentionally in their roles.
2. “Leading others” addressed supervising and developing staff, communication, delegating, giving feedback, and managing change within small teams where one person’s leadership has a visible impact on the daily operations.
3. “Leading in the library” emphasized aligning services, policies, and internal processes with community needs and organizational goals, which included planning, budgeting at a small scale, and setting clear directions for the library as an institution.
4. “Leading in the community” deepened skills for representing the library beyond the walls of the building by cultivating relationships with local partners, boards, and funders, and positioning the library as a key community resource.
5. “Leading in the profession” encouraged participants to see themselves as part of a broader field by contributing to network groups, sharing their knowledge, and staying engaged with evolving practices in their profession.

During the program, participants applied this framework through an integrated mix of workshops, mentoring, journal reflections, and real-world projects which took concepts and turned them into actionable decisions in their libraries. Both cohorts have now completed their educational journey, taking their places at the front of the room during ARSL’s annual conference programs. Many cohort members have since received promotions, or accepted elevated positions at new libraries. Several members have gone on to serve in leadership positions within ARSL and other state and national library associations, as elected Board members, major committee Chairs, facilitators of peer networking groups, and winners of national professional awards. The eagerness of these recent graduates to step into these roles is a testament to their professional growth and mirrors the trajectory of those who came before them.

Cohort participants rated the Leadership Institute very highly and described it as a turning point in their development as leaders, with survey and interview data showing strong satisfaction with the content. Findings indicate that participants reported substantial gains in confidence, clarity about their leadership role, and ability to apply concepts in areas such as communication, managing staff, planning, and working with boards.

Many highlighted the value of learning with peers who face similar constraints in small libraries, reporting that the curriculum, mentoring, and applied projects combined “gave me language and frameworks for decisions I was already trying to make” and “made me feel less alone and more capable in this work.” Testimonials emphasized that the institute “changed how I approach my job every day,” “helped me tackle projects I had avoided for years,” and “gave me a network I will carry throughout my career.” These findings underscore that the program did more than provide information, it directly impacted day-to-day work and supported long-term commitment to library leadership. These evaluation findings were consistent across the first and second cohorts, confirming that the curriculum, structure, and applied project model are effective and relevant for rural and small library leaders.

At the same time, the evaluations identified a significant limitation of the current format. The in-person, residential and synchronous components required multi-day travel, careful coordination of staff coverage, and dedicated funding for professional development. Participants and prospective applicants cited these factors as substantial barriers, especially for solo or very small libraries. As a result, the Leadership Institute has been able to serve only a limited number of participants per cohort, despite strong interest and clear need. In other

words, the evaluations show that the model works very well for those who can attend, but its format inherently restricts a large portion of the profession from participating.

This National Implementation grant will support the adaptation of that proven model by converting it into an online, asynchronous certification program that preserves the core leadership domains (leading self, leading others, leading in the library, leading in the community, and leading in the profession) while dramatically reducing barriers that prevent library workers from taking part. This method of delivering remote, flexible education directly addresses the key concerns highlighted in the evaluation related to travel, scheduling, and cost. This adaptation will provide a low cost method for participants to engage with the content, complete assignments, and participate in peer interactions without needing to leave their communities. This shift creates an opportunity to move from serving dozens of participants to reaching hundreds or even thousands of rural library workers nationwide.

Building directly on the prior IMLS investment (RE-246425-OLS-20), this funding will create an opportunity to deliver on the strengths that the pilot results identified by providing relevant content, practical tools, and meaningful peer support. Through this effort, ARSL will convert, adapt, and expand the completed institute content into micro-courses, asynchronous peer interaction, and structured practice activities that leaders will execute at their own pace within their libraries and communities. The certification will create a scalable pathway for rural library workers to develop leadership skills that directly advances Goal 2 (to train and retain current library professionals, faculty, and staff) and meets Objective 2.1 (to enhance professional development and training programs to enable the library workforce to meet the needs of their communities). As participants apply the learning in their own libraries, communities will benefit from more consistent, strategic, and responsive services in areas such as digital inclusion, early literacy, workforce development, and access to health services, extending and amplifying the positive outcomes already documented in the Leadership Institute evaluations.

Program Work Plan

The following 2-year, three phased approach will adapt the previous pilots that were structured as an annual cohort that combined a residential intensive, synchronous online workshops, and conference experiences. By adapting to a fully online, self-paced program that is designed to be completed over 12 months, it will increase flexibility and scalability and address the limitations uncovered in the pilot. This will give participants more control over when and how they engage with the program content. The online program will open quarterly, ensuring multiple opportunities for entry throughout the year rather than a single, annual event. To preserve the relationship-building strengths of the original institute, each quarterly launch group will be organized into small peer pods of approximately 4–6 participants, matched primarily by time zone, to provide chances to interact and build connections. These pods, together with an online community forum, will provide structured spaces for engagement, ongoing check-ins, and sharing of applied leadership work, allowing participants to build peer connections and support one another over time.

Project Team

ARSL has assembled a project team and partner network with the experience needed to design, implement, and sustain a national rural-focused certification program. The project will be led by Executive Director Kate Laughlin, who was deeply involved in the prior Leadership Institute cohort program development and execution, has a long history of presenting at national and state conferences, and has extensive experience developing professional development programs through her prior roles with Seattle Public Library, Kitsap

Regional Library, Port Townsend Public Library, and many others. A Project Coordinator staff position will be hired to bring strong project guidance, logistical support, and communication skills to manage timelines, coordinate with staff and online development of coursework, and support participant and evaluation data collection. ARSL will contract with an experienced Instructional Designer & Facilitator with a demonstrated track record in adult learning, curriculum design, and facilitation to translate prior training assets into a sequenced, competency-based curriculum and certification framework.

Year 1

Phase 1: September 2026 – June 2027

Objective: Adapt the existing small-cohort Leadership Institute into a competency-based, fully online, asynchronous certification model to be delivered at a national scale.

Staff: Program Coordinator (PC), Instructional Designer & Facilitator (IDF), Executive Director (ED), Advisory Committee.

Activities:

- Executive Director (ED) will complete the hiring process for Program Coordinator (PC) and contracted Instructional Designer & Facilitator (IDF)
- The PC with guidance from the ED will form an Advisory Committee of 10 participants (including Leadership Institute alumni, rural library directors, COSLA representatives, etc.) to refine goals and competencies, target audiences, and provide feedback.
- The PC and IDF will manage the review and adaptation of existing curriculum, documentation, and evaluation findings to identify the core content and practices that will function for asynchronous, self-paced courses.
- The IDF with input from the Advisory Committee, will define the leadership coursework and certification structure (modules, estimated hours, pacing, assessments, completion criteria, and certificate documentation).

Resources:

- Executive Director hours
- Program Coordinator hours
- Instructional Designer & Facilitator contracted hours
- Advisory Committee honorariums

Progress Tracking:

- Drafted certification structure and assessment framework
- Approved core coursework and timeline
- Advisory Committee roster and meeting minutes

Year 2Phase 2: July 2027 – February 2028

Objective: Build, test, and refine the certification curriculum and learning environment.

Staff: Program Coordinator (PC), Instructional Designer & Facilitator (IDF), Advisory Committee.

Activities:

- The IDF will oversee development of approximately 10 training modules (readings, videos, activities, reflective prompts) in alignment with 5 domains of leadership (see above)
- The IDF will design workplace practice assignments that participants can utilize to complete activities and apply learnings in their own libraries and communities.
- The PC will coordinate and complete the build-out of the full course sequence in the Learning Management System (LMS), ensuring easy to follow navigation, clear instructions. Interface will support both desktop vs. mobile experiences
- Modules will be piloted with the Advisory Committee and feedback will be collected.

Resources:

- Program Coordinator hours
- Instructional Designer & Facilitator contracted hours

Progress Tracking:

- Completed module outlines and content drafts
- Fully built coursework in the LMS
- Feedback details from pilot testing and revisions

Phase 3: March 2028 – August 2028

Objective: Pilot the online certification program, evaluate outcomes, and document a national model for ongoing use.

Staff: Program Coordinator (PC), Instructional Designer & Facilitator (IDF), Executive Director (ED), Advisory Committee.

Activities:

- The PC will lead the recruitment and enrollment of at least 25 pilot participants from rural and small libraries nationwide in the initial implementation cohort, with guidance from the ED and Advisory Committee.
- The PC will collect and analyze pre- and post-survey data, reflections from participants, system analytics of program-level outcomes (e.g., completion rates, application of learning, changes in practice), and will prepare summary reports of outcomes.
- Based on collected data, the IDF will refine curriculum, platform features, and support strategies based on evaluation findings and pilot member feedback. A formal peer pod toolkit will be created for ongoing oversight and management of networking activities to build community for participants.
- IDF will define and document the process for ongoing review and updates of curriculum going forward.

- Working with the ED, the IDF will design and document a future sliding-scale fee structure for the certification program to support the ongoing sustainability to support content hosting and updates.
- The IDF, with support from the ED, will develop a shared communications toolkit for use by COSLA, ARSL, and other organizations to disseminate information about the certification through communication channels (e.g., e-lists, newsletters, social media assets, and conference presentations) and will develop language for recognizing the certification as a preferred qualification in job postings, leadership pathways, and professional development plans.
- The ED will encourage states, through partnership with COSLA, to allocate or promote existing professional development funding for participation costs.

Resources:

- Program Coordinator hours
- Instructional Designer & Facilitator contracted hours
- Executive Director hours
- Pilot Participant honorariums

Progress Tracking:

- Enrollment and completion data
- Interim and final reports documenting outcomes and lessons learned
- Documented commitment to ongoing delivery
- Defined pricing structure for ongoing sustainability of the program

Evaluation and Impact Measurement

- Formative evaluation will use advisory input, pilot testing, participant feedback, and milestone tracking to refine modules, LMS, and peer-pods for rural and small library workers.
- Summative evaluation will compare pre- and post- leadership competency data, completion rates, and satisfaction to assess overall outcomes for the first online certification cohort.
- Key impact indicators will track gains in knowledge and confidence, application of skills and expanded responsibilities, wider access for rural workers, and COSLA/state adoption of the certification work.

Project Results

Through this initiative, ARSL aims to drive professional growth and enhancements for participants, their libraries, and the library field at large. For current and emerging library leaders, the certification is expected to increase confidence in their leadership role and deepen their knowledge of practical skills for supervising staff, operational planning, and communicating with boards and community partners. These outcomes will be measured through pre- and post-program surveys that use rating scales to track shifts in confidence and perceived skill, as well as brief reflective prompts where participants describe specific situations in which they applied their learnings.

At the library level, results will be visible in the form of executed projects and changes initiated by certification participants. Each participant will gain the skills to design and implement enhancements in their library or community through activities such as revising a process or policy, strengthening an internal workflow, launching or expanding a program, or building a new partnership. Participants will be asked to share brief feedback on how their approach to leadership has shifted and how that translates into practical improvements in library operations and services.

Program-level results will focus on reach, persistence, and the effectiveness of the online model. ARSL will track how many library workers enroll in the certification and their completion rates. Data will track geographic distribution of participants, their community sizes, and staffing sizes. Learning management system (LMS) analytics will provide insights into content interactions and progress which will provide ARSL with the ability to further refine pacing, instructions, and module content as needed.

For the wider profession, the project will result in a clearly articulated leadership competency framework and certification structure that state library agencies and other stakeholders can incorporate into their own professional development offerings. Documentation will explain the competencies, program sequence, assessments, and completion criteria, making it easier for supervisors, hiring managers, and state-level partners to interpret the value of the credential. Evidence of effectiveness will include the number of state library agencies and library systems that promote the certification, reference it in job or training materials, or use of professional development funds to support their staff's participation.

ARSL performed a landscape review of state, association, and university library leadership institutes and certificate programs and found programs with an existing focus on leadership specifically for rural/small library staff at a national level. Of the available offerings, most are offered infrequently, serve small cohorts, and assume levels of staffing, credentialing, and institutional capacity that many small libraries simply do not have. By developing a targeted rural leadership program, ARSL is working to directly address this mismatch, providing sustained, practice-based learning specifically designed for directors who are simultaneously responsible for frontline service, administration, and community leadership and more often than not, are the only full-time professionals in their library.

These results will address a long-standing gap in which staff are asked to lead without access to structured, affordable leadership preparation. When library staff gain practical skills in leading teams, planning services, and working with partners, they are better equipped to design and sustain programs that respond to local needs. As leaders become more confident and effective in managing resources and relationships, their libraries can make more strategic decisions, communicate more clearly with boards and funders, and build stronger collaborations with schools, local government, faith communities, and community organizations. Over time, this educational foundation will help libraries remain stable, responsive anchors in their communities, able to adapt and deliver high-quality services as community needs change and evolve.

Year 1

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