



LAURA BUSH 21st CENTURY LIBRARIAN PROGRAM

Sample Application RE-260107-OLS-26
Project Category: Planning

Council on Library and Information Resources

Amount awarded by IMLS: \$200,000
Amount of cost share: \$0

The Digital Library Federation (DLF), a program of the Council on Library & Information Resources (CLIR), will strengthen leadership pathways and expand opportunities for early-career and paraprofessionals and contingent, contract, adjunct, grant-funded, and term-limited cultural heritage and knowledge professionals. These roles often face barriers to professional growth opportunities, including isolation and limited development funding, leading to career stagnation, low morale, and poor retention. The planning project will conduct research and community assessments to design a sustainable fellowship model that institutionalizes financial access, mentorship, leadership development, and sustained engagement within the DLF community. In the second year, DLF will pilot a 20-person cohort that benefit from structured mentorship, leadership workshops, and integration into DLF working groups.

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

The Digital Library Federation (DLF), a program of the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), requests \$200,000 from the IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program for a two-year planning effort to support the *DLF Forum Future Stewards Project*. This initiative will strengthen leadership pathways and expand opportunities for early career and paraprofessionals and contingent, contract, adjunct, grant-funded, and term-limited cultural heritage and knowledge workers. These roles often lack dedicated support for conference participation or professional growth, which can contribute to career stagnation, low morale, and poor retention. This is a planning and pilot-validation project designed to test, evaluate, and refine a sustainable fellowship model prior to long-term institutionalization. The project will institutionalize financial access, mentorship, leadership development, and sustained engagement within the DLF community.

During the first year, the initiative will focus on research, planning, and community assessment to inform program design. In the second year, it will implement and evaluate a pilot cohort of 20 fellows anchored by the 2027 in-person DLF Forum, the community's annual conference. This project advances LB21 Program Goal 2, Objective 2.1 by developing and enhancing national professional development opportunities, including virtual and in-person forums, mentoring, fellowships, workshops, and communities of practice, that equip library and archives professionals with the skills and collaborative networks necessary to meet evolving community needs in an era of emerging technologies.

Project Justification

The DLF Forum Future Stewards Project builds upon DLF's established fellowship infrastructure while addressing its structural limitations. The annual DLF Forum convenes digital library, archives, and museum practitioners from 146 member institutions and the broader cultural heritage community, serving simultaneously as a meeting place, marketplace, and congress. As a meeting place, it enables DLF's community members and 12 working groups to conduct business, advance collaborative projects, and present new research. As a marketplace, it fosters the exchange of ideas, practices, and solutions that strengthen the sharing of professional knowledge across institutions. As a congress, it offers a structured opportunity for collective reflection, allowing DLF to assess its programs, measure progress, and set future priorities in partnership with the DLF community.

The DLF Forum attendees are a multidisciplinary, cross-sector audience working in the digital library, museum, archives, and cultural heritage fields, including librarians, project managers, curators, technologists, developers, administrators, and service providers. The Forum welcomes practitioners from academia, the arts, cultural heritage, non-profit organizations, government agencies, and more. They come from across the country and around the world, representing all levels of professional experience. Forum attendees are inquisitive, engaged, and action-oriented with a focus on learning new skills and solving problems together. DLF provides a uniquely scalable platform for piloting and disseminating workforce development models with field-wide applicability.

This model sustains a national community of practice dedicated to advancing research, learning, and the public good through digital library technologies. The Forum's consistent draw-319 attendees and 58 Learn@DLF pre-conference participants at the 2025 conference alone-demonstrates strong and sustained demand for a national space that supports collaboration, professional development, and field-wide coordination. When offered online, the DLF Forum reaches a wider audience than in-person events, with 694 registrants at the fall 2024 virtual event.

For the last decade (2016-2025), DLF has remained committed to expanding access and professional participation across the field at the annual Forum. Over those years, fellowships have been structured in various ways to serve a wide range of people in the profession. Fellowships funded by grants,

partnerships, and DLF have brought in students, new and emerging professionals, public librarians, staff at HBCUs, TCUs, and museums, and international library workers. DLF has also traded registration awards with affiliated organizations such as the Association of Research Libraries (ARL); Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA); Electronic Resources and Libraries (ERL); Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA); and the Visual Resources Association (VRA), among others. These categories, sponsored by a variety of CLIR institutional members and affiliates, reflect thoughtful experimentation and responsiveness to community needs. The ongoing demand for these opportunities reveals a clear and persistent gap: early career professionals lack a stable support pathway.

Between 2016 and 2019, fellowship participation reached its highest levels and expanded to include a broader range of job titles, institutions, and professional perspectives. In 2017, DLF supported 40 Forum Fellows. In 2018, 133 applicants competed for 23 awards, an acceptance rate of nearly 17%, reflecting 171 award requests in a single cycle.

By 2019, fellowship models had evolved toward more targeted, mission-driven approaches, including the Authenticity Project, which emphasized structured mentorship and cohort-building to expand participation across a broader range of institutions and professional contexts. This shift aligns with the challenges identified in Kaetrena Davis Kendrick's "The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study" (2017)¹, which documents issues such as professional isolation, unclear advancement pathways, and limited access to sustained mentorship within academic librarianship. These concerns are further elaborated in the 2022 *Journal of Library Administration* article,² "Viewed as Equals": The Impacts of Library Organizational Cultures and Management on Library Staff Morale, which addresses the experiences of contingent academic library workers, highlighting employment precarity, limited institutional integration, and restricted access to professional development and advancement opportunities. Together, these studies highlight the value of structured mentorship, funded conference participation, structured networking opportunities, and intentional cohort-building as practical strategies to address documented professional barriers affecting both permanent and contingent library professionals.

Feedback from Authenticity Project participants underscores the impact of this design. As one member of the second cohort in 2022 shared in a post-program survey, "Attending these sessions helped me to realize how important it is to stay current on issues and trends in the profession. Working at an institution that has little to no funding for professional development, this conference helped me make connections within the profession and to introduce me to new concepts and projects taking place in the field." Experiences like this demonstrate that cohort-based, mentorship-centered models can be deeply transformative. However, these efforts remained program-specific rather than fully embedded within the Forum's overall structure.

Students and new professionals consistently appear in fellowship categories across program years; however, their support has remained inconsistent because it often has depended on sponsorship. There were no fellows in 2024, and in 2023 and 2025, DLF directly supported only two fellows per year. Those fellows received a \$650 travel stipend (funds provided directly), complimentary registration (valued at \$800), and hotel accommodations covered by DLF (approximately \$600-\$750 before tax). Additional fellows in those years were supported by external sponsors and partners. Mentorship has also been offered inconsistently, available only in select programs. Overall, most awards have focused on covering

¹ Kendrick, K. D. (2017). The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study. *Journal of Library Administration*, 57(8), 846–878. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2017.1368325>

² Glusker, A., Emmelhainz, C., Estrada, N., & Dyess, B. (2022). "Viewed as Equals": The Impacts of Library Organizational Cultures and Management on Library Staff Morale. *Journal of Library Administration*, 62(2), 153–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2022.202611;9>

expenses related to registration, travel, and accommodations, with limited investment in sustained professional development, mentorship, leadership preparation, or post-Forum engagement.

At the same time, the profession faces increasing precarity, particularly among adjuncts, contingent faculty, community archivists, and early-career professionals working in financially constrained or capacity-limited institutions. Virtual participation has expanded geographic access, but financial and structural barriers remain. Attendance alone does not ensure meaningful professional integration, mentorship, or pathways to leadership. *The DLF Forum Future Stewards Project* responds to this challenge by piloting a cohort-based professional development model that brings together three elements historically offered separately: structured cohort engagement, mentorship and facilitation, and leadership development through participation in DLF working groups. A cohort of 20 fellows will receive stipends and participate in structured mentorship, leadership development, and engagement with working groups. Rather than launching a permanent program immediately, the project will pilot and evaluate a single cohort to determine how best to structure a sustainable fellowship model that can be embedded within the DLF Forum.

The DLF Forum Future Stewards Project also adapts to evolving professional realities by integrating digital storytelling and emerging-technology training, including ethical technology practices, into both the 2026 virtual and 2027 in-person Forum programming. In doing so, it aligns with current scholarship and national conversations about the role of cultural heritage institutions in shaping public understanding through digital media. Digital storytelling serves as a practical framework through which fellows will engage ethical technology practices, public scholarship, and collaborative digital project development. The project will strengthen the profession's capacity to respond to emerging technologies and evolving community needs by ensuring that the next generation of professionals is not only present in the DLF community but also prepared, connected, and positioned to lead upskilling and retooling within it. The training and outcomes from this initiative will help improve academic practices and visitor experiences. The project ensures users of information have access to highly trained knowledge professionals at their institutions, working to advance the quality of use and education for the benefit of digital libraries, archives, and museums, positioning American institutions for today and the next 250 years.

The group most directly affected by the proposed project is the 20 selected fellows who will receive structured mentorship, leadership development, and sustained professional engagement. For the purposes of the program, “early career” will be defined as individuals with less than seven years in a professional role, and “contingent” will refer to those in non-tenure track, term-limited, contract-based, or grant-funded positions. The program will also recognize paraprofessionals without MLIS degrees who work in museums, public libraries, and other library-adjacent roles, where professional pathways may be less formalized yet closely aligned with the field. Eligibility will be confirmed through self-attestation rather than formal documentation to reduce barriers to participation and support equitable access for contingent workers who may lack formal institutional endorsement.

Secondary beneficiaries include the broader DLF community, which will gain a stronger leadership pipeline and broader institutional representation; participating institutions, which will benefit from enhanced staff expertise in digital storytelling, ethical technology use, and emerging digital practices; and the wider library and archives field, which will be strengthened through improved workforce retention, increased cross-sector collaboration, and expanded geographic and institutional participation in national conversations. Additionally, new 40-minute Digital Storytelling Presentation sessions will be introduced to the DLF community for the 2026 Virtual DLF Forum, an interactive, installation-inspired format showcasing collaboratively developed digital storytelling projects (such as exhibits, platforms, or collections). These sessions feature up to three presenters and include dedicated time for audience Q&A and discussion.

Project Plan

Project Leadership and Staffing

The DLF Forum Future Stewards Project will be managed by Shaneé Yvette Willis, Senior Program Officer for the DLF, who brings seven years of experience coordinating national professional development initiatives and managing distributed professional communities. Project implementation will be supported by CLIR staff, who will handle communications, research and evaluation, and program administration; in particular, Christa Williford, Director of Research and Assessment at CLIR, will guide the development of the project's assessment tools, ensuring that evaluation instruments, data collection methods, and analysis frameworks are rigorously designed and aligned with project goals. One part-time consultant, a former DLF Forum Fellow, will be recruited as a part-time consultant to support program planning, fellow outreach, and working group integration, while also contributing lived experience as an early-career professional who has benefited from DLF mentorship pathways. Engaging a former Fellow ensures that project design remains responsive to emerging professionals while simultaneously creating a tangible leadership pipeline within DLF. The project will begin on September 1, 2026, with an initial phase focused on research, planning, and community consultation. During the fall of 2026, the project team will:

- Review historical fellowship data;
- Consult with DLF working group leaders;
- Facilitate listening sessions with early-career and contingent professionals; and
- Make recommendations for curriculum resources and development for both the fellowships and the Forum.

These activities will inform the development of an 8-10 page design brief detailing the fellowship model, curriculum, partnerships, preliminary findings, and recommendations for sustaining and adapting the program for ongoing engagement.

Research Questions and Evaluation Rationale

The research questions guiding *The DLF Forum Future Stewards Project* are designed to evaluate both the alignment of the fellowship program with community needs and its impact on participants' professional development. The project's theory of change posits that structured mentorship, financial access, and intentional cohort-building will increase professional integration, leadership readiness, and workforce retention among early-career and contingent practitioners.

1. How well do the pilot fellowships address community priorities for professional development and training for early career and term-limited employees working in libraries and other cultural heritage organizations?
2. How well do the personal priorities of applicants and selected recipients of the fellowships reflect those community priorities?
3. How satisfactory are the different elements of the fellowship program (financial support, cohort training experiences and discussions, mentorship, working group participation, conference participation) for the participants?
4. Are the different elements of the program helpful to individual participants in refining and pursuing their career goals?
5. Does the fellowship program lead to new projects, inter-institutional collaborations, publications, or other career advancement opportunities (such as promotions, presentations, expanded duties, new job searches, or new hires) for participants?

Integrated Data Analysis Plan

A comprehensive, multi-phase data gathering and analysis process will directly inform the design brief and overall program development. This approach ensures that the fellowship model is responsive to community needs, priorities, and real-world outcomes.

Phase One (Program Planning and Design)

The program team will:

- Consult with DLF Working Group leaders will identify and justify a list of high-priority skill areas for the fellowship to address (Q1);
- Conduct listening sessions with potential fellowship candidates to surface candidate perspectives, needs, and aspirations (Q2); and
- A community feedback session to refine and help prioritize this skills list, ensuring alignment with broader community priorities (Q3).

Analysis of this feedback will inform the 2027 DLF Forum Call for Proposals (CFP), the design of the fellowship application process, and curriculum, ensuring that program content is evidence-based and community-driven. Outcomes from this phase will include the fellowship application and an initial goals-and-skills self-assessment survey for fellows.

Phase Two (Implementation and Formative Assessment)

The program team and facilitators will:

- Administer brief post-activity surveys to capture immediate impressions of fellows' satisfaction, learning, and perceived applicability to their work (Q3-4); and
- Solicit periodic structured reflections from participants (Q4-5).

Analysis of these data will inform ongoing refinements to the fellowship curriculum, Forum programming, and planning for future iterations of the Future Stewards program.

Phase Three (Summative Assessment and Reflection)

The program team will:

- Administer an anonymous post-fellowship program evaluation survey to participants (Q3-5);
- Repeat the goals and skills self-assessment for fellows (Q4); and
- Conduct a series of facilitated focus groups (four for fellows, one each for facilitators and staff, Q1-5).

An analysis of these data will be incorporated into a revised, public design brief that synthesizes all project findings. Proposed elements of this brief are:

- A prologue summarizing personal insights from the fellowship experience (by 1-2 fellows);
- An executive summary (by the Director of Research and Assessment);
- A summary of community priorities and their impact on curriculum design (by the part-time consultant);
- A summary of survey feedback (by the part-time consultant);

- An analysis of post-fellowship focus group findings (by the Director of Research and Assessment); and
- A summary of the planning process, major findings, and future implications (by the Senior Program Officer).

In addition to the final public brief, fellows' self-reflections will be featured on the DLF blog, if permitted, to help the DLF community more fully understand the value and potential impacts of professional development and mentoring.

This rigorous, participatory evaluation plan will ensure that the project's public deliverables clearly demonstrate the fellowship's outcomes and process logic, providing a strong foundation for future program adaptation and broader field impact.

Facilitator Roles and Responsibilities

Four facilitators recruited from within the DLF community will support the project by leading small-group meetings with cohorts of five fellows each, contributing to one cohort-wide session, attending three quarterly planning calls, and participating in an end-of-program focus group. Over the nine-month pilot fellow cohort period (September 1, 2027 – May 31, 2028), facilitators will commit an estimated 18–22 hours total, including:

- Six hours for small-group sessions
- Three hours for planning calls
- Six to eight hours for session preparation
- Two hours for the cohort session contribution
- One hour for the evaluation focus group

The four bimonthly 60-minute small-group mentorship sessions (October, December, February, April) will help fellows set and revisit professional goals across the pilot term and support their engagement with DLF Forum activities and working groups. The facilitators will not conduct evaluations, administer surveys, or analyze data. Their primary role will be to provide mentorship, foster peer engagement, and model sustained professional participation within the DLF community.

Fellow Cohort Experience

In Summer 2027, a cohort of 20 fellows will be selected to participate in the nine-month pilot program. Fellows will receive structured mentorship and professional development opportunities, including:

- Four small-group mentor sessions led by facilitators;
- Guidance in setting and revisiting professional goals;
- Discussions of early-career and contingent role challenges; and
- Interactions with experienced DLF community members at the Forum and in DLF Working Groups.

Small cohorts of five fellows will foster peer engagement, relationship-building, and a supportive environment for reflection and growth. Fellows will also take part in a cohort-wide session and be encouraged to engage with DLF Forum activities and working groups, helping to build networks and develop pathways for long-term participation and leadership.

The pilot cohort will culminate at the 2027 in-person DLF Forum, where fellows will participate in networking activities, leadership programming, and community engagement opportunities. This

experience will allow fellows to connect with leaders and peers, present ongoing work, and contribute to conversations shaping the future of digital library practice.

Dissemination and Sustainability

In the final months of the project, the team will focus on broad dissemination and long-term sustainability. A public 8-10 page design brief, along with facilitation guides and assessment tools, will be published and openly available on the DLF website (<https://www.diglib.org/>). These resources will describe the fellowship model, curriculum, partnerships, evaluation findings, and recommendations to support continued engagement and program adaptation.

Project updates and the design brief will be shared through established channels, such as the CLIR Digest and the DLF Digest, to reach a national audience. Participants and facilitators will be encouraged to present at the DLF Forum and related conferences, as well as at local and public library events. Recordings and materials will be available on the DLF shared drives and in the [Zenodo.org](https://zenodo.org/) open access repository, where the DLF community uploads DLF Forum products for ongoing access. The team will also seek opportunities to join podcasts and publish reflections to share lessons learned. These efforts will ensure broad visibility, support evaluation, and lay the groundwork for future cohorts beyond the grant period.

Project Timeline

Project start: September 1, 2026

Year 1: Research, listening sessions, fellowship model design

Virtual DLF Forum: October 14–15, 2026

Year 2: Pilot cohort of 20 fellows (Sept 2027–May 2028)

Cohort Anchor Activities: Fall 2027 In-Person DLF Forum (Date to be determined by CLIR Staff)

Final Deliverable: Public Design Brief, Fellow Reflections, and Evaluation Instruments

Project Ends: August 31, 2028

Year 1: Planning, Research, and Program Design

September 2026: Project Launch

- Official project kickoff
- Senior Program Officer begins project oversight
- Engage part-time consultant (former DLF Fellow)
- Hold internal project planning meetings
- Establish evaluation framework and data collection plan
- Confirm 2027 in-person DLF Forum details

Fall 2026 (September–November): Research and Community Assessment

- Review DLF fellowship data (2016–2025)
- Consult DLF Working Group leaders
- Gather community input via feedback sessions and surveys
- Begin developing fellowship structure and curriculum model

October 14–15, 2026: Virtual DLF Forum

- Integrate themes of emerging technology and digital storytelling
- Promote the upcoming fellowship opportunity
- Collect additional community input
- Observe community engagement patterns to inform planning

Winter 2026–Spring 2027 (December–March): Fellowship Design

- Analyze data from listening sessions and surveys
- Refine fellowship goals and learning outcomes
- Develop the following:
 - Application process
 - Selection criteria
 - Mentorship model
 - Working Group integration plan
 - Stipend structure
- Draft evaluation instruments (self-assessments, surveys, focus group protocols)
- Begin drafting 2027 DLF Forum CFP language aligned with pilot

Spring–Summer 2027 (April–August): Pilot Preparation

- Release Call for Applications
- Recruit and confirm four facilitators
- Review applications and select 20 fellows
- Fellows complete initial goals & skills self-assessment
- Facilitator orientation and training
- Finalize mentorship session schedule
- Finalize leadership and Forum engagement activities

Year 2: Pilot Implementation and Evaluation

Pilot Cohort Term: September 1, 2027 – May 31, 2028

September 2027: Cohort Launch

- Official welcome and orientation session
- Hold cohort-wide kickoff meeting
- Fellows set initial professional goals
- Establish small groups (four groups of five fellows)

October 2027: Key Activities

- First small-group mentorship session (60 minutes)
- Fellows attend and participate in the in-person 2027 DLF Forum, including:
 - Participate in networking activities
 - Engage in leadership programming
 - Participate in working group engagement
 - Join community events

December 2027

- Second small-group mentorship session
- Distribute short post-activity surveys
- Fellows revisit and refine goals

February 2028

- Third small-group mentorship session
- Continue working group participation
- Engage with structured reflection prompts
- Complete ongoing formative assessment surveys

April 2028

- Fourth small-group mentorship session
- Facilitators lead cohort-wide session
- Fellows reflect on leadership development and community integration

May 2028 – Cohort Culmination

- Final self-assessment survey (goals and skills reassessment)
- Complete anonymous post-fellowship satisfaction survey
- Conduct focus groups
- Begin data analysis

Final Phase: Analysis, Dissemination, and Sustainability

June–July 2028: Synthesis Activities

- Evaluator synthesizes findings including survey results, focus group finding, skills assessments
- One or two fellows draft prologue reflections
- Facilitators summarize skill priorities and curriculum impacts
- Staff team compiles survey findings
- Senior Program Officer drafts planning summary and future recommendations

July–August 2028

- Complete public design brief including:
 - Fellowship model
 - Curriculum framework
 - Evaluation findings
 - Sustainability recommendations
 - Appendices (participant lists, sample deliverables)
- Publish design brief and tools on the DLF website
- Disseminate through: DLF Digest, CLIR Digest, blog posts, conference presentations, podcasts

- Archive materials in DLF shared drives and Zenodo.org open access repository

Project Results

The DLF Digital Stewards Project will provide a professional development and mentoring experience for a cohort of 20 early career, paraprofessional, contingent, contract, adjunct, grant-funded, or term-limited cultural heritage and knowledge workers. These types of employees often have limited access to professional development and career support, and this limited access can contribute to low morale and career stagnation. The curriculum for the fellowship will be developed through a planning process that will gather fresh insights and recommendations from the DLF community, and DLF community members will also serve as mentor-facilitators for the fellows. Insights from both the planning and implementation phases of the project will be incorporated into a final public design brief organized so that other organizations and communities can adapt and implement their own approaches to providing professional development and training within the library, archive, and cultural heritage sectors. The brief will be disseminated widely both within and outside the DLF community, and its recommendations will inform ongoing iterations of the program that will serve as a pipeline for skill development and leadership for DLF member organizations and the broader information and cultural heritage sectors.

Evaluation will assess both the effectiveness of the planning process and the outcomes of the pilot fellowship cohort, in close alignment with the integrated data analysis plan. During Year 1, the project team will document community consultations and feedback from planning activities, including discussions at the 2026 Virtual DLF Forum, listening sessions, and survey results. These findings will inform the design of the fellowship structure, the facilitator model, and the program curriculum. Demographic and institutional data, where available, will be collected to assess the program's reach.

As the pilot launches, ongoing reflective surveys and interviews with fellows and mentors will evaluate participants' experiences, mentorship effectiveness, and professional growth. Post-activity and post-fellowship surveys, structured reflections, and focus groups will be used to capture both quantitative and qualitative insights across the cohort's term. The evaluation approach intentionally accounts for potential response bias and the influence of timing and participants' perspectives on reflective survey results. To address this, the team will also analyze engagement patterns, qualitative feedback, and areas where input may be limited or absent, thereby providing a fuller understanding of participants' experiences and unmet needs. A mixed-methods approach will ensure the evaluation is actionable, credible, and directly informs future iterations of the fellowship within the DLF community.

Findings from all phases will be synthesized in a final design brief, featuring outcome data, lessons learned, and recommendations for future implementation. The design brief will include:

- Reflections from fellows on personal and professional impacts
- Executive summary by the external evaluator
- Facilitator perspectives on community priorities and curriculum design
- Survey, focus group, and assessment data
- Commentary on planning process and implications for sustainability
- Appendices with participant lists and sample deliverables

Sustainability

Following the pilot, CLIR+DLF will assess how to integrate core fellowship components into the annual Forum budget structure and pursue a blended sustainability model that includes member institutional sponsorships, designated fellowship sponsorship tiers, foundation grants, and incremental allocation of DLF membership revenue. Evaluation findings will guide right-sizing of stipend levels and facilitation models to ensure financial feasibility without compromising access.

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