



LAURA BUSH 21st CENTURY LIBRARIAN PROGRAM

Sample Application RE-260272-OLS-26
Project Category: National Implementation

OCLC

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$299,807
Amount of cost share:	\$0

OCLC will partner with the Association of Rural and Small Libraries, the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies, and representatives from seven state library agencies, to define and promote current competencies and credentials for public library staff. The project will include a field scan of competency and credential sets currently in use, update and modernize an existing competency index, design a competency-based set of credentials mapped to this index, and identify content coverage gaps to inform a content development roadmap. These elements will reflect the realities of 21st-Century public library work, which faces a rapidly evolving environment driven by digital transformation, increased community service demands, and expanded workforce development responsibilities. The project builds on previous work in library competencies.

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.

Competencies and Credentials for Public Libraries

Introduction

OCLC, in partnership with the Association of Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL), the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA), and representatives from seven state library agencies, respectfully requests **\$299,807** for a 24-month LB21 implementation grant to update WebJunction's *Competency Index for the Library Field*, and design a competency-based set of credentials mapped to the *Index*. To ensure broad relevance, the project team will first conduct a study of current library competencies and credentials and how they are used across the public library field, especially in small and rural libraries. The project will also map the competencies to the over 390 learning resources in WebJunction's free Course Catalog and identify a prioritized roadmap for future course development to address any gaps. This project primarily aligns with LB21 Goal 2, Objective 2.1 and also addresses Objective 1.2, secondarily. It also reflects current IMLS priorities for alternative credentials, innovative continuing education (CE), and service to rural communities. The project deliverables will be made freely available via WebJunction's website (<https://learn.webjunction.org>) and further disseminated through WebJunction's and our partners' communication channels.

The study, updated *Index*, credentials, and content review will reflect the realities of 21st-century public library work and the evolving needs of community libraries. Together, these deliverables will also provide a roadmap for alternative credential pathways for library workers.

Project Justification

Contemporary competencies and credentials as alternative career pathways.

First published in 2009, the *Competency Index for the Library Field* was updated through rigorous research and consultation with library staff and consultants in 2014, with funding from IMLS. The updated *Index* emphasized new skills, accountability, and community engagement to help staff identify and gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) needed to effectively serve their organizations and communities. However, the public library environment has continued to change since then. Today's public library workforce faces a rapidly evolving environment of AI-driven digital transformation, broader demographics, more complex conditions, growing community service demands, and expanded workforce development responsibilities.

Public libraries are increasingly expected to deliver a widening array of high-impact services beyond traditional collections and reference—serving as community anchors, digital navigators, workforce and small business support hubs, civic engagement spaces, social service connectors, and youth development and lifelong learning providers.

At the same time, the library workforce is experiencing several challenges:

- **New skills are in demand.** Topics such as trauma-informed service, data-informed decision-making, AI literacy, privacy, and cybersecurity require new knowledge and ongoing training. ¹
- **Access to training is uneven.** This is especially true in rural and small libraries where staff often cover multiple roles and have limited time and budgets for CE.
- **Advancement pathways are limited.** Traditional credentials such as degrees, certifications, or state requirements can be expensive, time-consuming, and not always aligned with daily library work and career growth. ²
- **Competency frameworks vary widely.** Different states and systems use different models, which makes it difficult to standardize skillsets, design training, or support career mobility and professional development. ³
- **Staffing challenges continue.** Public libraries face high staff turnover, recruitment difficulties, and challenges with hiring, retaining, and developing staff in the midst of an aging workforce, shifting priorities, and budget pressures. ⁴

An updated competency framework, coupled with practical, competency-based credentials, can help address many of these challenges. Together they can provide a current structure to guide training and continuing education, a credential system for recognizing knowledge, skills and abilities, and a roadmap for future development of and credential applications and new learning content. As with earlier versions of the *Index*, this project will rely on research and direct input from library leadership, practitioners, subject matter experts, and staff across the field.

This project will deliver: (1) a national study of competencies and credentials and their value and applications in public libraries; (2) an updated *Competency Index for the Library Field*; (3) a defined set of modular, competency-based credentials that provide an accessible alternative pathway for documenting skills and learning; and (4) a summary of new learning content needs in the WebJunction Course Catalog. A dissemination strategy to raise awareness and drive adoption across the field will also be defined and implemented. These deliverables will address gaps and challenges by:

- clarifying the knowledge, skills, and abilities library staff need;

¹ Public Library Association. (2025). Public library staffing report: Results from the 2024 PLA annual survey (Staff survey summary report). American Library Association. https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/PLA_Staff_Survey_2025.pdf

² Kirschner, T. (2022, January 18). We all win — Training and advancement for non-MLS library workers. Public Libraries Online. <https://publiclibrariesonline.org/2022/01/we-all-win-training-and-advancement-for-non-mls-library-workers/>

³ EveryLibrary Institute. (2020, August 10). Requirements to be a librarian by state – Public libraries. https://everylibraryinstitute.org/requirements_to_be_a_librarian_by_state_public_libraries

⁴ Public Library Association. (2025).

- providing structure for accessible learning pathways;
- helping library systems, trainers and supervisors plan and implement training;
- creating portable documentation of knowledge, skills and abilities; and
- identifying gaps in training content

Project audiences and beneficiaries

Public library staff are the primary target audience for this project. The project will place special emphasis on, but not limited to, small and rural libraries who may lack clear guidelines on modern library skills or access to relevant training.

Rural public libraries face unique challenges. Research using IMLS and Digital Inclusion Survey data shows that rural libraries often operate with few staff and limited budgets, which makes it harder to provide professional development and maintain a comparable range of services as larger libraries.⁵ Peer reviewed analysis further concludes that rural libraries can lag behind more populated areas in service and training offerings, driven by limited funding, small and aging facilities, and weaker regional/state support structures.⁶

This project also targets and will benefit state library agency staff and public library system trainers who seek guidance on competencies, certifications, and relevant resources for training and professional development of their library workforces. The long-term beneficiaries of this project will be the communities these libraries serve, who will have access to well-trained and skillful library staff who can more effectively and efficiently fulfill essential day-to-day library tasks, provide relevant services to help them meet their information needs, and deliver impactful programs that address community interests and priorities. Rural and small libraries will be prioritized throughout the project, recognizing that these institutions face disproportionate barriers and are often overlooked for training access, staffing capacity, and professional development funding.

As a state where many librarians do not have library science degrees, we rely on up-to-date competencies to help library staff know what skills they need to meet the evolving needs of their communities and what curriculum should be included in our Certificate of Public Librarianship program.

~ Joy Worland, Consultant for Continuing Education and Small and Rural Libraries, Vermont Department of Libraries

⁵ Real, B., & Rose, R. N. (2017). *Rural libraries in the United States: Recent strides, future possibilities, and meeting community needs*. American Library Association Office for Information Technology Policy. <https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/advocacy/content/pdfs/Rural%20paper%2007-31-2017.pdf>

⁶ Real, B., & Rose, R. N. (2017).

Alignment with LB21 Goals and current IMLS priorities

The project primarily advances IMLS LB21 Goal 2.1 by providing a framework for improved and relevant training, supporting staff development and career pathways, thereby enabling library staff to more successfully meet community needs. In doing so, the project also advances IMLS LB21 Goal 1.2 by strengthening professional development resources and infrastructure that can be openly accessed and widely shared in both traditional and non-traditional educational settings for library students, faculty and workers, alike.

The project also closely aligns with current IMLS interests in “innovative alternatives to traditional credentialing and librarian education” and “cutting edge tools and fresh topics in the content and provision of continuing education”, as well as focuses on prioritized rural public library staff and communities.

Building on past projects with intention and synergy

WebJunction has been a leader in researching and developing library staff competencies since the first *Competency Index for the Library Field* was published in 2009. This proposal builds on a strong foundation of research and practice, and a proven framework for updating and modernizing competencies for the immediate and future needs of library workers.

For example, the 2014 edition of the *Competency Index* identified the need for stronger core library skills training. That work helped lead to the integration of the Alternative Basic Library Education (ABLE) program from the Idaho Commission of Libraries (ICfL) into the WebJunction Course Catalog, thereby making this valuable content available to a much wider audience.

In just the last year, WebJunction and ICfL have partnered again to reimagine this program through a three-year IMLS grant. The new program, rebranded as Library Foundational Training (LiFT), has already been highly successful with an initial set of 12 courses published in the last year, followed by nearly 10,000 enrollments in these new courses – more than three-times the goal of 3,000 set in the grant proposal. This work has been critically important in providing current core skills training and sets the groundwork for defining and addressing newer competencies and credentials that can further advance the public library workforce.

The LiFT project also demonstrates a successful model for identifying new learning content needs for the public library community. LiFT centered the experiences and perspectives of rural and small library staff, as guided by an Advisory Board of state library agency continuing education leaders from Idaho, Vermont, Montana, Texas, Nevada, Iowa, Kentucky, and representation of the Association of Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL). These advisors have agreed to continue contributing to this effort in order to bring continuity, experience, and expertise to the new focus areas of competencies and credentials. Additionally, a content

consultant and editor for the 2014 *Index* has agreed to serve in the same role for the updated version.

LiFT Advisory Board to contribute to *Competencies and Credentials for Public Libraries*

*Colet Bartow, Continuing Education
Coordinator, Montana State Library*

*Samantha Bouwers, Consultant for
Continuing Education, State Library of Iowa*

*Annie Gaines, Continuing Education
Consultant, Idaho Commission for Libraries*

*Rachel Lunden, Nevada State Cataloger
Nevada State Library, Archives and Public
Records; ARSL Advisory Board Member;
ARSL Continuing Education Committee Co-
Chair*

*Elizabeth Mikeska-Benfield, Library Staff
Consultant, Continuing Education and
Consulting, Texas State Library and Archives
Commission*

*Joy Worland, Consultant for Continuing
Education and Small and Rural Libraries,
Vermont Department of Libraries*

*Hilary Witt, Workforce and Adult Services
Consultant, Kentucky Department for
Libraries and Archives*

Project Work Plan

The work plan has four phases. Phase 1 will consist of a field scan of current library competency sets and credentials, including their scope, how they are written, and how they are used in libraries, to determine the content and approach for updating the *Index*. Phase 2 will be focused on updating the existing *Competency Index for the Library Field*. Phase 3 will create a comprehensive set of credentials based on the competencies of the *Index*. Phase 4 will consist of matching existing WebJunction courses with the updated competencies and identifying future course content to fill gaps between the competencies and the course catalog collection.

Key staff

Project director Andrew Harbison (Director of WebJunction) will oversee the project and the team, which will include WebJunction staff and contractors.

Phase 1: Study of competencies and credentials in public libraries (Sep 2026 – Mar 2027)

WebJunction will conduct a field scan to identify competency frameworks and credential systems currently used in public libraries. The study will examine what competencies and credentials exist, how they are structured, and how libraries actually use them.

Focus groups of state library leaders and training professionals will help clarify how credentials are used and where they provide value. In addition, it will be important to identify where competencies and credentials are not currently used but could potentially provide benefits.

Questions that this study will attempt to address may include:

- Where and how are credentials currently used in libraries (e.g. state, consortia, associations)?
- Where credentials are most valuable to staff and employers (hiring, promotion, pay differentials, role changes)?
- What governance and quality assurance models are required or beneficial? For example, how is issuer credibility assessed? How are learners assessed? For how long are credentials valid, and what is involved in renewal?
- What barriers prevent rural and small libraries from utilizing competencies and credentials, and how can they be mitigated?

Outputs: A published report summarizing findings, recommended models, and implementation considerations.

Phase 2: Update WebJunction's Competency Index (Mar 2027 – Oct 2027)

WebJunction will convene an advisory board representing public libraries, state libraries, rural library leaders, CE coordinators, and subject matter experts. As noted above, advisory board members that contributed to the LiFT project will represent their respective state library agencies and ARSL. In doing so, they will provide both professional experience and expertise, and continuity and synergy between the two projects. The advisory group will guide the revision of the *Index* using a structured process grounded in existing standards and research while prioritizing contemporary public library needs and real-world, practical applications. This group will hold the KSAs needed to work in public libraries front and center as they advise the process. The group will focus on new and emerging competencies now essential in public libraries, including community engagement, digital literacy, data and AI literacy, program facilitation, outreach, partnership, and cultural competence. Traditional areas such as reference, cataloging, and collection management will also be updated to reflect current practice. WebJunction will hire Brenda Hough, Staff Development Coordinator, Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library, as a content consultant and editor (*Index* editor); Brenda served as a co-editor for the 2014 *Index* and will bring additional continuity, value, and professional perspective to the project. WebJunction will also conduct several focus groups as the *Index* is drafted to test the validity and relevance of both the framework and individual competencies.

Key Activities:

- Gap analysis comparing the 2014 *Index* to current practice and emerging needs with a focus on the KSAs needed in public libraries today. Assess efficacy of the 2014 format and approach
- The *Index* editor in consultation with project staff and the Advisory Board will draft and validate competency domains and performance indicators

- Solicit expanded feedback with targeted reviewers (including rural/small library staff and supervisors). Publish and promote the updated *Index* making it freely and widely available to the field, in close collaboration with national partners ARSL and COSLA.

Phase 3: Define Competency-Based Credentials (Oct 2027 – Jun 2028)

Using the updated *Index*, the project team will define modular credentials constructed from the competencies and designed to meet the needs identified in the initial study. In this phase, we will create small scale credentials that map competencies to individual tasks, services, or workflows. The credentials will be attainable and practical for defining job roles, recognizing skills, and career development, and will serve as a tool for quantifying and documenting skills, experience, and learning achievements that can, in turn, be applied to professional development, certification, and career advancement. A competency-based credential system provides an opportunity to empower public library staff, modernize workforce development, provide an alternative to traditional credential programs, and strengthen the role of libraries as community hubs.

We view credentials as a crucial linkage between the detailed and specific identification of KSAs described in the *Competency Index*, and the job or service role of formal certifications. By pairing competencies with credentials, we will build a system that offers both flexibility for institutions to shape certifications to their job roles while also providing more universal definition of the KSAs needed for a public library career.

By making them both modular and freely available, we also seek to offer alternative pathways to library careers and career advancement.

Key Activities:

- Define credential types (role-based, foundational vs. advanced levels) and relationships (individual, blocked, sequenced)
- Map competencies to credentials
- Create and publish a competency-based set of credentials for libraries.

Phase 4: Identify New Learning Content Needs (Feb 2028–Jan 2029)

Once competencies and credentials are defined, the project team will review existing training resources to understand what existing training is relevant and readily available to address them. And, if there are gaps in available training, they will be used to create a roadmap for future learning content development. Project staff will also map the learning content in WebJunction's Course Catalog to the updated competencies and display this in our learning management system in order to clearly link competencies associated with the learning content. One additional output will be a prioritized list of course topics needed to address those missing competencies deemed most critical.

Key Activities:

- Audit and competency mapping of WebJunction Course Catalog
- Prioritized list of missing content

Project Results

The project will build on a strong foundation of previous work in library competencies and learning content development to deliver immediate and lasting value to public libraries and the communities they serve by defining and promoting current competencies and credentials for public library staff. Public libraries and adjacent state library agencies and library-serving organizations will be better informed and more effective in their provision of relevant training and continuing education that reflects the changes society, culture, and technology are undergoing.

Updating the *Competencies for the Library Field* will give Texas library staff a modern framework that reflects today's evolving skills and technologies, with clearer pathways for professional growth in the library. New competency-based credentials will give staff clear, recognized proof of their skills that will benefit both individual careers and library hiring practices.

~ Elizabeth Mikeska-Benfield, Library Staff Consultant, Continuing Education and Consulting, Texas State Library and Archives Commission

This project is designed for durability and continued benefit to the library field beyond the grant period.

Sustainability Strategy:

- Hosting and ongoing free access through WebJunction's stable, free platform used by over 27,000 unique learners annually
- Credential framework designed for incremental implementation and alignment with existing state CE systems
- A content roadmap that supports continued development through partnerships and future funding
- Ongoing promotion through WebJunction's established communications channels
- Potential for periodic updates to competencies as the field evolves (maintenance plan to be finalized)

Anticipated Long-Term Impacts:

- More consistent, current competency expectations across public libraries, with significant and lasting impact in small and rural public libraries
- More equitable access to recognized skill documentation, especially for staff without traditional degree pathways
- Stronger staff retention and advancement through clearer development pathways

- Improved service quality in areas of high community demand (digital inclusion, engagement, emerging tech literacy)

If funded, the investments made will build on, improve, and enhance past work that was broadly recognized as influential and practical to deliver meaningful and lasting impact for public libraries. OCLC's WebJunction program, which has been providing accessible learning resources such as courses, webinars, and other training material for over 20 years, intends to collaborate closely with ARSL and COSLA to align project goals with key stakeholder interests and priorities, and to distribute and promote project results and deliverables widely. OCLC, ARSL, and COSLA are grateful for the opportunity to propose this project, and we look forward to your review.

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	Key Activities	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug
Phase 2	Update Competency Index												
	Review and revision												
	Publication new Compeency Index edition												
Phase 3	Define Competency-Based Credentials												
	Define types, roles, framework?												
	Draft credential set												
	Review credential set												
	Revise final set												
	Publish credentials												
Phase 4	Link Competencies to Courses, Create Roadmap												
	Connect competencies to courses												
	Draft course content roadmap												
	Finalize roadmap												
Promote	Dissemination and Promotion												
	Publicize Competency Index												
	Publicize Credentials												
	Webinar												
	Evaluation												
	Final evaluation report												