

Curating Community Digital Collections

Wisconsin Library Services (WiLS) seeks a grant of \$177,000 for a one-year initiative to provide library school students with practical experience in digital stewardship while increasing the capacity of small libraries and cultural heritage organizations to curate their digital collections. Ten graduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS) and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Information Studies (SOIS) will take part in eight-week summer residencies to help under-resourced memory institutions in Wisconsin manage, preserve and provide access to their digital content.

Statement of Need and Impact

The 2015 *National Agenda for Digital Stewardship* asserts that “As the stewardship of digital materials becomes a responsibility for an increasing number and variety of institutions, education, training, and workforce development are key elements in supporting the expertise necessary for building a competent base of current and future digital stewards.” Moreover, as the 2015 *Agenda* goes on to state, “knowledge about standards and practices in an evolving field is best gained through direct, practical experience.”

While library school students are eager to gain critical 21st century skills in digital stewardship through experiential learning, staff at small organizations are in desperate need of practical assistance to establish basic control of their digital assets. These organizations are actively creating digital content documenting their communities – recording oral histories, scanning archival collections, hosting community digitization events, building web-based exhibits – yet few are equipped to effectively manage this digital content. For the “lone arranger” in a local history archives at a public library or the part-time archivist for a technical college, let alone the retired volunteer at a community historical society, little expertise, time or institutional support is available for the largely invisible work of digital preservation.

Over the course of twelve years as project manager for Recollection Wisconsin, the collaborative statewide digital program, WiLS has seen much evidence of the need for improved stewardship of digital assets in small organizations – for example, the oral history interview with a World War I veteran from Neillsville, transferred to a single DVD that is no longer playable; or the more than 10,000 digitized historical photographs from the community of Mayville, accessible only on an external hard drive. The 2015 *IMLS Focus Report on the National Digital Platform* suggests that one way to reduce barriers to smaller institutions’ participation in the NDP is to “offer services rather than tools.” This service-oriented strategy is in line with WiLS’ experience that providing consulting, interns or other direct assistance to small organizations has a more immediate impact and lasting resonance than offering workshops, webinars or other one-time training opportunities.

Many graduates of the MLIS programs at UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee who choose to remain in the state are likely to land their first professional position in a small, under-resourced library. Nearly 80% of Wisconsin’s 380 public libraries and almost 20% of the state’s 68 academic libraries, including University of Wisconsin System schools as well as private colleges and technical colleges, are located in communities of fewer than 10,000 people. Bringing future library and archives professionals into these small organizations will deepen students’ understanding of the types of communities many of them will serve in their careers, lay the foundation for strong local communities of practice and foster engagement across the urban/rural digital divide. Furthermore, establishing students’ professional networks within the state prior to graduation is a powerful way to inoculate against “brain drain.”

Project Design and Work Plan

This project adapts the model refined over numerous iterations of the National Digital Stewardship Residency (NDSR) program while scaling the NDSR model to eight-week summer residencies. This shorter timeframe enables small institutions to benefit from services and partnerships without the significant commitment of resources required to host a year-long resident. This model also offers graduate students opportunities to develop professional skills in real-world settings prior to entering the workforce.

As indicated in CLIR's recent assessment of the NDSR programs, *Keepers of our Digital Future*, a dedicated staff position is a key feature of a successful residency for residents and host institutions alike. For the proposed project, a Program Coordinator role is essential not only to support students and manage logistics, but to act as a liaison to and resource for host institutions. In the months leading up to the summer residencies, the Program Coordinator will collaborate closely with each host to assess needs, design a project that makes effective use of a student's skills and abilities, identify potential partners, and help ensure that the organization is positioned to carry the project forward following the residency period.

WiLS will recruit ten host sites from among our 500 members around the state, aiming to identify digital stewardship projects that will enhance access to and preservation of digital materials documenting underrepresented groups, such as Hmong or Latino immigrants, and/or underrepresented areas of the state, such as the rural Northwoods. Each site selected to participate in the program will designate a staff member who will supervise the resident and work with the Program Coordinator throughout the grant period. WiLS will partner with UW-Madison SLIS and UW-Milwaukee SOIS to recruit, through a competitive application process, a diverse cohort of ten graduate students and match them with appropriate hosts. Each student/supervisor team will be paired with a professional mentor – a mid-career librarian, archivist or curator at a larger institution – who will not only provide the students with guidance in career development and connections to professional networks, but will also offer digital curation expertise to both students and hosts as relevant.

At the start of the summer, all students and supervisors will take part in a one-week immersion workshop, adapted from NDSR curricula and consisting of presentations and applied skills training from SLIS and SOIS faculty, AVPreserve consultants and other experts. During the eight-week residency, each student will work closely with their host site to implement basic digital stewardship practices. Projects will emphasize activities aimed at the adoption of minimum best practices, the use of open source tools and the creation of well-documented workflows that can continue to be carried out by the organization at summer's end. Potential projects might include migrating data from optical media to a regional university's preservation system with the Exactly application; using Omeka to create metadata and provide access to digitized archival materials through Recollection Wisconsin and the Digital Public Library of America; or rescuing data from ZIP disks with a PROUD (Portable Recovery of Unique Data) kit, currently being developed by UW-Madison SLIS with an IMLS Sparks! Ignition grant.

As a result of the residencies, both residents and hosts will gain skills in specific tools, actions and processes for improved access and preservation, following the incremental and iterative digital stewardship philosophy of the Digital POWRR project. Workflows and other documentation produced during the residencies will be made available through libraryworkflowexchange.org for reuse by other organizations. In addition, to encourage other library consortia to adopt similar programs, WiLS will share workshop curricula and other program resources through the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) and other consortial communication channels.

Numerous opportunities for general professional development will be built in throughout the residencies. Mentors will facilitate job shadowing, informational interviews and behind-the-scenes tours. Students will be expected to blog regularly about their experiences, share their work with fellow students at symposia hosted by SLIS and SOIS, and share their work with the Wisconsin library community in a panel session at the annual conference of the Wisconsin Library Association.

Budget

The total amount requested from IMLS for the proposed project is \$177,000. This includes \$60,000 salary and fringe benefits for the Program Coordinator (1.00 FTE, to be hired at the outset of the grant period); \$40,000 in student stipends; \$20,000 travel and housing for students during residencies; \$17,000 travel, accommodations and related expenses for immersion workshop; \$9,000 honoraria for mentors and workshop instructors; \$5,000 supplies and materials for host sites; \$4,000 travel and supplies for Program Coordinator; \$6,000 stipends for conference attendance; and \$16,000 indirect costs (10% indirect cost rate).