

Transforming Libraries into Community Anchors in Rural Texas - Project Grant

Overview: Texas Woman's University's School of Library & Information Studies (TWU SLIS), in partnership with the Texas Library Association (TLA), requests \$476,025 from the IMLS for the education of 20 individuals who will earn MLS degrees with a focus on Community Informatics (CI) in order to serve small, rural communities in Texas. In CI, information and communication technology (ICT) is used to facilitate desired changes in communities. A pioneer in CI defines the discipline as "a technology strategy or discipline which links economic and social development efforts at the community level with electronic commerce, community and civic networks and telecentres, electronic democracy and on-line participation, self-help and virtual health communities, advocacy, cultural enhancement, and others" (Gurstein, 2000, p.1).

Key Personnel: At TWU, Dr. Ling Hwey Jeng (current TLA President) will serve as Principal Investigator (PI). Drs. Kathryn Masten and Will Senn will be Co-PIs, while Ms. Sarah Merrill will serve as the project Assessment Officer.

Why Community Informatics? Librarians trained in CI will be prepared to establish their libraries as anchor institutions within their communities by identifying assets and needs, and partnering with community organizations to bring about desired change. The use of CI in this fashion is particularly appropriate in Texas, due to its size, ethnic and geographic diversity: with nearly 26.5 million residents, Texas is the second largest state in terms of both population and size. 38.4% of the population is Hispanic and 11.9% Black. 172 Texas counties are classified as rural, home to nearly 11% of the state's population, and these communities are experiencing severe workforce shortages for teachers, social workers, and healthcare workers. Texas rural communities fare significantly worse than urban areas in terms of per capita income, education, health, and unemployment. In addition, Texas is vulnerable to acts of nature, reinforcing the importance of libraries during times of disaster. With enhanced broadband access, community coalition building, and a trained librarian as facilitator, small rural communities can engage in needed training and enhanced communication in support of health, education, and wellbeing.

Why TWU? TWU, a designated Hispanic-serving institution, is the nation's largest university primarily for women. One of three ALA-accredited library programs in Texas, SLIS is well known for its quality Master of Library Science (MLS) program conducted entirely online. With funding from a 2007 IMLS grant, **the Professional Education for Librarians in Small Communities (PELSC)** program supported 22 individuals in getting their MLS degree; of this number, 20 still serve as Texas librarians. In recent years, SLIS has expanded its traditional MLS to include a CI focus, with faculty explicitly hired for the purpose. As a result, 6 CI courses are cross-listed in a university-wide, interprofessional Informatics program. SLIS faculty are also engaged with those in other TWU departments for community informatics research, and have received funding to address mental health disparities in Texas communities, with Dr. Masten as PI. The Tocker Foundation has also provided funding to support TWU's CI efforts with small and rural libraries. **TWU's brand of CI is unique** because it benefits from our interprofessional collaborations, but also because it offers CI cohort members opportunities to conduct "real world" research and practice that impacts individuals, families, schools, and communities in an ethnically and geographically diverse state whose need is well recognized.

Recruitment: The Texas Legislature recently appropriated \$1 million to support broadband Internet in rural libraries. With these funds, a consultant hired by the Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC) will help up to 100 rural public libraries apply for E-rate funds to bring low-cost high-speed internet connections to their communities. We intend to identify our cohort from these rural public libraries with help from TSLAC, and to use the libraries as capstone sites. Recruitment efforts will be targeted particularly toward communities in 6 TLA districts encompassing West Central Texas, the Panhandle, South Texas and the Lower Rio Grande Valley, El Paso and the Rio Grande Valley, the Permian Basin, and the Middle Rio Grande Valley – most with substantial Hispanic populations. Students will be selected through a competitive process, with

deliberate effort made to recruit students who reflect the ethnic and geographic diversity of small/rural Texas communities. Demonstrated commitment to small/rural librarianship and an aptitude for CI will factor into the selection process.

Curriculum: The program is designed to emphasize experiential education. MLS/CI students will be required to participate in a capstone practicum to gain hands-on experience, which offers cohort students in small or rural libraries an opportunity to apply what they have learned in practice settings. As part of 12 courses (36 credit hours) required for an MLS, cohort students will complete six courses in the CI focus area including communities in the knowledge economy, community-based project design, grant writing, assessment, trends and issues in CI, and a capstone course.

Each student will be assigned a mentor, recruited from the original PELSC cohort of rural librarians. We have identified numerous opportunities for in-person orientation and presentation, including a consortium conference and the annual Texas Library Association meeting. Each student will receive a \$1000 travel stipend. Additional university funding will be available for students to present at conferences.

Evaluation and Impact Assessment: This project is designed to develop and support a cohort of students empowered to engage more effectively within their communities to broaden the reach of existing information services and create sustainable social networks, particularly in rural and Hispanic-dense areas. The project's success will be evaluated in terms of student retention and performance; student project documentation including community needs assessments, grant applications, publications, and presentations; graduate placement, career advancement, and professional engagement; and community impact based on feedback from appropriate personnel, including TWU faculty, host library site supervisors, and relevant stakeholders.

Resources and Timeline: The project will span a 3-year period from June 1, 2018 to May 31, 2021. \$476,025 is requested from the IMLS: \$327,320 for tuition and travel for 20 students; and \$148,705 in non-student support covering 25% summer faculty support, a graduate assistant (GA), staff time, travel for investigators and staff, supplies, and refreshments at the cohort orientation and TLA events. \$171,877 will be provided in matching funds from regular semester salaries and benefits for investigators and the GA, and in-kind support from TLA.

Works Cited

Gurstein, M. (2000). Community Informatics: Enabling Community Uses of Information and Communications Technology. In *Community Informatics: Enabling Communities with Information and Communications Technologies* (pp. 1-30).