

Democratizing online learning: developing e-learning platforms for community archives

Summary

The South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), in partnership with the Texas After Violence Project (TAVP), requests \$100,000 for a one-year National Leadership planning grant (Community Catalyst category) to explore the most effective methods, processes, and models for community archives to a) develop accessible educational materials based on their archival collections, and b) develop e-learning (formalized learning opportunities using online resources) formats so educational materials can be easily and widely accessed by the public. Our project goes to the heart of the IMLS Strategic Plan goal of increasing public access to information by breaking down barriers to access to archival collections. While large educational institutions have made great strides in offering e-learning opportunities for their students, community archives with limited funding often do not have the time or resources to develop educational materials based on their collections or sophisticated e-learning platforms to host those materials.

Statement of National Need

Community archives hold some of the most valuable materials documenting the lives of marginalized people, and mostly reside in spaces outside of traditional academic and government-run cultural heritage institutions. By disrupting the hierarchical models in place in traditional archives, these repositories prompt community members to view collections as belonging to the community and challenge dominant practices and conceptions of custody, description, and ownership. In community archives, archival work is done *by* and *with* the community, and not just *for* the community. Despite their importance to collecting, preserving, and sharing stories of marginalized people, many community archives face difficulties growing their operations, keeping their doors open, and enhancing their programming and collections activities. Often formed in response to being shut out of dominant historical narratives, the stark reality is that materials preserved and made accessible by community-based archives mostly fall outside the scope and collecting interests of traditional archival repositories and would likely be erased from public consciousness if not for their work.

This glaring shadow over the voices, perspectives, memories, and experiences of historically marginalized communities in dominant historical narratives is exacerbated when materials from community archives are left out of classrooms, teaching guides, curricula, exhibits, and other educational materials. In addition to expanding educational opportunities, widespread access to educational archival materials created by and with marginalized communities are essential for advocates, organizers, policymakers, health practitioners, and community members interested in cultivating deeper, nuanced, and more complete understandings of pressing social and moral issues that impact our communities. However, because many community archives are under-resourced and struggle to secure sustainable funding, there are often no resources to expand dissemination efforts by creating educational materials based on community archival collections. In addition to a lack of time and funding to create educational materials, additional challenges faced by under-resourced community archives are navigating technical barriers to creating autonomous (independent of institutions) e-learning platforms to host the materials. This is especially true for community archives, like TAVP, that are dependent on partnerships with institutions for access to digital infrastructure but otherwise receive little or no financial resources to support collection development, maintenance, or dissemination.

Partnership & Project Design

Since its founding in 2008, SAADA has enabled academics, artists, journalists, students, and community members to write books, create new content, and shape public understanding about the South Asian American community. Founded in 2007, TAVP documents, archives, and shares stories and other materials related to the impacts of violence on individuals, families, and communities, and works to promote restorative nonviolent responses when violence occurs. After meeting last year at the Architecting Sustainable Futures gathering of community archives practitioners, the executive directors of SAADA and TAVP, Samip Mallick and Gabriel Solis respectively, have built a strong professional relationship and continue to offer each other mutual support

on nonprofit management, fundraising and development strategies, sustainability, and other issues related to successfully managing community archives. We will continue this professional support this fall at a gathering of the Community Archives Collaborative, organized by SAADA and supported by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). In addition to regularly presenting and writing about the importance of community archives, Mallick and Solis also share a strong interest in activating archival collections by developing accessible educational materials for a wide range of public audiences.

During the first half of the grant period, the project team will assess the specific needs of SAADA and TAVP related to the development of educational materials and the use of e-learning platforms. We will also survey the needs of other community archives across the US, including those that are part of the growing network that emerged from the Architecting Sustainable Futures gathering. During this period, we will also conduct research on processes of developing various educational materials based on archival collections, including surveying institutional and community archives across the US that may be able to share models. Because SAADA and TAVP take a participatory approach to our work, we are particularly interested in processes that directly involve community members in the creation of educational materials and other decisions regarding purpose and pedagogy. Finally, we will research existing e-learning platforms and evaluate their efficacy for the needs of SAADA and TAVP, as well as the needs of community archives more broadly.

During the second half of the grant period, the project team will build on our findings by consulting with archival professionals who have substantial experience with creating archival educational materials. Through these consultations, SAADA and TAVP will develop prototypes of educational materials based on their collections that we can share as models with other community archives. A goal for SAADA is to develop a multi-part online course about South Asian American history and culture that can be publicly launched by the end of the grant period. A goal for TAVP is to develop digital exhibits with accompanying curricula and course guides that weave together oral history and infographics about violence in our communities. A shared goal is to begin to create or adapt an existing e-learning platform that SAADA and TAVP can implement on their websites that can serve as a model to be shared with other community archives. Finally, we will document and evaluate our work during the entire planning period so that we can build on our momentum toward a broader collaborative project on the development of e-learning materials and platforms, as well as develop models that can be replicated or modified by community archives across the US.

National Impact

One major outcome of this project will be a roadmap for community archives to develop e-learning resources that highlight stories and materials from the marginalized communities reflected in their collections. The prototypes of e-learning resources created through this project will begin to address the critical gap in pedagogical and informational resources available about these communities. As a result, another outcome of our project will be a continuation of the trailblazing path of community archives to de-center educational and archival institutions as primary sites of public access to vital information, ideas, and knowledge. Through this process, SAADA and TAVP will also develop and share strategies by which community archives can address challenges and other key needs in successfully integrating e-learning into their collection dissemination efforts. By widely publicizing the process and results of this planning project, SAADA and TAVP contribute to an ongoing national dialogue about how community archives can serve a crucial role in documenting, preserving, and sharing stories from our country's most marginalized and vulnerable communities.

Budget Summary

The total anticipated cost of the proposed project is \$100,000 over a twelve-month period. This includes \$90,910 for direct costs and \$9,090 for indirect costs. Expenses include \$57,100 for SAADA and TAVP staff salaries, \$5,710 in fringe benefits, \$8,700 for contractual and consulting costs, \$9,000 for project team planning meetings (including travel expenses), and \$10,400 to facilitate a workshop for community archives practitioners (including travel expenses) at the 2021 Society of American Archivists (SAA) annual conference in Anaheim.