

Towards Assessing Black History Month Programming

Summary

The Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA) will explore the feasibility of conducting a national research project to assess Black History Month (BHM) programming offered at public libraries. This project will bring together partners from key American Library Association Divisions and Offices, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), the University of Michigan's Program for Research on Black Americans (PRBA), and other experts in the field. The activities conducted under this planning grant will include holding two planning meetings with all the partners, gathering preliminary data via a pilot study on how BHM programming is developed, and the characteristics of that programming (target age group, content, scope, and focus of the programs) at 2021 ALA Mid-Winter Conference and online via various ALA listservs, analyzing the results of that data, and determining the feasibility of a more comprehensive research initiative to systematically assess current BHM programming at public libraries. Project outcomes will include a report based on results from the preliminary pilot data, a draft Assessment Tool of BHM programming, a panel presentation at the 2021 ALA Conference, and if deemed appropriate, the broad strokes of a national research study to comprehensively assess BHM programming that could be submitted to the IMLS Research in Service to Practice funding category.

Statement of National Need

Virtually every public library across the U.S. conducts some programming during BHM. The content, scope, and quality of that programming vary, and little is known on how BHM programming is developed, from where they get their ideas, the extent to which they utilize the themes identified each year by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), or the extent to which they recycle the same programs year after year. Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the founder of what became BHM, told an audience of Hampton Institute students in 1924, "We are going back to that beautiful history, and it is going to inspire us to greater achievements." The study and celebration of African American contributions to this country and the world are critically important for all Americans, but especially racially marginalized groups. Programming for this important month is a challenge for public libraries across the nation. Further, BHM public programming aligns with one of the IMLS's agency-level goals and the National Leadership Grants for Libraries project category of promoting lifelong learning for families and individuals of all ages and from diverse backgrounds.

Given the expertise in the organization, BCALA is uniquely positioned and could play a leadership role in advising the ALA on BHM library programming and providing models of effective programs that can be shared with librarians across the country. Given the current political and racial climate in this country and the ALA's Strategic Direction on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, it would be very timely to be able to offer innovative programming ideas that celebrate the contributions of African Americans. But first, one must assess the kinds of programming that are currently taking place. Although the recently released report, *National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment* (2019) provides very useful standardized characteristics of public programming as a whole, additional work needs to be done to assess the nature, character, scope, content, and diversity of specific BHM programming.

Assessing the state of BHM public library programming is the first step of a multi-stage process that will lead to increasing the quality of inclusive programming and fostering support for lifelong learners across diverse geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The current project being proposed requires exploratory work to define the problem and refine the methods to assess the variety of BHM programming being conducted. Therefore, this project fits into the Exploratory Phase.

Project Design

This one-year project will commence on August 1, 2020, and include the following activities:

1. A preliminary meeting of the Project Director, the Executive of BCALA, and the PRBA researcher at the National Conference of African American Librarians (NCAAL) August 5-9, 2020 to discuss the agenda and details of the first 1.5-day Planning Meeting.
2. Planning Meeting in Fall with the full 15-member planning team to review what has previously been done on this issue, understand the roles and expertise of each partner organization, and develop a draft of the pilot questionnaire to gather preliminary data on BHM programming.
3. The questionnaire will be finalized and submitted to the University of Michigan's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval in November 2020. This is a necessary step for all research to ensure the rights of human subjects are protected.
4. The link to the pilot survey will be disseminated at the 2021 ALA Mid-Winter Conference, discussed during a panel presentation at the Mid-Winter conference, and distributed online through various ALA and BCALA lists. The pilot survey will gather preliminary data on how BHM programming is developed, and the characteristics of that programming; target age group, content, scope, and focus of the programs. We will also assess the perceived need for additional resources and BHM programming models.
5. A second 1.5-day Planning Meeting of all partners will be held in approximately May 2021 to discuss the findings of the survey, discuss the draft BHM Assessment Tool, outline the main sections of the report, and finalize preparations for the panel we will propose for the June 2021 ALA Annual Conference.
6. The final report and draft BHM Assessment Tool will be disseminated online and via the various ALA and Affiliate Group listservs.

The 15-member Planning Team includes **four** representatives from the BCALA, **two** people from the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, **six** people representing different ALA Divisions and Offices (Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services, Young Adult Library Services Association, Public Library Association, Association for Library Service to Children, Project Outcome, and the National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment), **two** people from the Program for Research on Black Americans, and **one** other subject matter expert to be identified. Since ALA offices are located in Chicago, the two full Planning Team meetings will be held there.

Goals, Outcomes and Impact

This planning grant would provide some initial data on the content, focus, and variety of BHM programming at public libraries. The outcomes include a report based on pilot data, a draft BHM Assessment Tool, a panel at the June 2021 ALA Annual conference to discuss findings, and general dissemination of the report online through various sites and listservs. The findings from the pilot will provide important initial information that will have national impact and assist programming librarians as they face creating BHM programs. In addition, this project also has implications for other ethnic/gender heritage months such as Hispanic History Month, Women's History Month, Asian Pacific American Heritage, Native American Indian Heritage Month, etc. Depending on what is discovered in this process, the draft BHM Assessment Tool can be revised and this model could be replicated to assess those programming efforts. As this project is a planning grant, we also anticipate developing the broad strokes of a comprehensive national research project assessing BHM public library programming that would be submitted under the Research in Service to Practice funding category.

Budget

BCALA is requesting \$90,000 to cover two 1.5-day Planning Meetings of the full 15-member planning team, and travel to two conferences for the Project Director, Research Consultant, and a designated BCALA Executive Committee member. This grant would also fund a Project Director at 20% time, a Research Consultant for 40 days throughout the project, an Administrative Assistant to handle the Planning Meeting logistics, supplies, and a web designer to incorporate the work on this project on the BCALA website.