

ArtCenter College of Design proposes **Reimagining Access: Inclusive Technology Design for Archives and Special Collections**—an NLG National Digital Infrastructures and Initiatives Project Grant. The goals are to scale and expand national guidelines for archives and special collections in fostering access for people with disabilities—adding new guidelines that address technology design. It is a collaboration with the Society of American Archivists (SAA) and the Braille Institute. The grant request is for \$200,750.

STATEMENT OF NATIONAL NEED

According to the [CDC](#), 1 in 4 U.S. adults—61 million Americans—have a disability that impacts major life activities. Improving access to libraries and archives for people with disabilities is a core goal in the IMLS Strategic Plan. Disabilities are rising as an urgent topic in the field; in SAA's most recent national conference, six separate sessions addressed disabilities. Recognizing the widespread need, SAA initiated a Task Force that updated and published their newly revised [Guidelines for Accessible Archives for People with Disabilities](#) in February 2019—the first major update in a decade. One important area not fully addressed in the new guidelines is technology. The year 2020 will be the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act—an ideal time to expand practices for designing technologies to improve access.

PROJECT DESIGN

This project will scale SAA's existing Guidelines by expanding on a critical area: designing digital technologies that can improve access and user experiences. In 2019, ArtCenter released its IMLS-funded publication, [Future Pasts: Reimagining the User Experience in Archives](#), which documented emerging best practices for library and archive professionals working with technology designers. These design practices—and the project structure that led to their development—will be adapted for this new project.

A core team of archive/library professionals, designers and design educators, disability experts, and technologists—about 10 people in total—will oversee the project. Robert Dirig, College Archivist, will serve as PI, with Maggie Hendrie, Chair of Interaction Design, serving as Co-PI. The participants from SAA's Accessibility and Disability Section include archivists with disabilities. The Braille Institute has also offered to be a collaborator, and their experts have already advised on prior student and faculty research. We anticipate adding experts in other types of disabilities, such as physical, cognitive and hearing disabilities.

The key overarching question to be explored will be, “How can we improve digital technologies to better serve people with disabilities?” An exciting related question is, “What can we learn from people with disabilities to improve access for all people?”

We will concentrate on two main areas: (1) online access to finding aids and digital collections; and (2) reference and outreach. Even though current general website accessibility standards exist, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 (WCAG), we aspire to help archives go beyond merely being compliant, as there is much room for improvement. Archives websites and apps need more attention and solutions specific to the types of content. For example, how can screen readers be improved to help read the hierarchical content of online finding aids? How can archives improve website accessibility of digital collections? What are additional guidelines that collection management software vendors could follow?

The work plan organizes the project into 5 stages over a 2-year period:

1. Mini-symposium: Convening a wider initial group of 20-25 carefully selected experts to focus and scope the project

2. Core Development Period: Conducting structured, replicable working sessions that simulate designers/firms being hired by an archive/library for a discrete assignment: to design and prototype new digital tools to improve access for people with disabilities
3. Synthesis & Assessment: Distilling lessons learned into recommended guidelines and practices; a Ph.D. specialist in educational evaluation will serve as a key advisor
4. Creation of final deliverables: Producing written contributions to existing SAA guidelines, with accompanying visual and/or technological assets
5. Dissemination: Sharing guidelines in practical, user-friendly formats with the archival, disability and design communities through ways such as social media, a publication and website

The Core Development Period will be organized as follows:

- *Weeks 1-3*: Immersion: Designers and archivists study the needs of people with disabilities and surveying existing tools/technologies;
- *Weeks 4-6*: Generative concept development including personas (archetypical profiles of users), key use cases and iterative user-experience prototyping and evaluation;
- *Week 7*: Midpoint critique of concepts with key advisors/experts to identify the strongest concepts;
- *Weeks 8-11*: Refine mid- to high-fidelity prototypes, conduct user testing;
- *Weeks 12-14*: User Experience Prototypes (in the form of relevant user interfaces, apps or online services, as relevant) presented for evaluation/assessment by advisors/experts; the top 1-3 prototypes selected for more advanced development;
- *Weeks 15-28*: Advanced development of prototypes with more in-depth testing and refinement.

An industry-focused school, ArtCenter excels at creating studio settings that mimic real-world situations, led by instructors who are working designers. While the primary outcome we aim to achieve is to develop guidelines, a secondary outcome will be the development and early prototyping of new digital tools and methods that will also be documented and shared.

DIVERSITY PLAN & NATIONAL IMPACT

The whole project focuses on people with disabilities as an underserved constituency. ArtCenter has a long programmatic history of design for social impact; a revamped Diversity, Equity and Inclusion practice, and faculty specialists in designing accessible services, products and spaces. However, the voices of people with disabilities will be central throughout the project.

SAA has been devoted to this subject area for more than a decade and has an ongoing Access and Disability Section committed to advancing improvements and awareness for the long term. By expanding SAA's national guidelines, and through federal support and promotion from IMLS, we are confident that the generated knowledge will benefit a substantial audience across America and beyond.

BUDGET SUMMARY

The \$200,750 grant will support Personnel (\$81,500 for faculty, advisors, technology developer, coordinator); Travel (\$33,000 for advisors' participation and team members to attend conferences); Supplies/Materials/Equipment (\$27,000 for digital storage, technology supplies, printing/office supplies); Student Support (\$21,000 for teaching assistants, student documentarians, material stipends); Other Costs (\$20,000 for photography/videography, printing, producing documentation and adapting into accessible formats); and Indirect Costs (\$18,250 as de minimis 10% of direct costs).