University of Tennessee

Assessment of Rural Librarians' Role in Community Engagement in the Southern & Central Appalachian Region: Mobilization from Change Agents to Community Anchors (CA2CA@SCA-RL)[1]

Project: "Assessment of Rural Library Professionals' Role in Community Engagement in the Southern and Central Appalachian Region: Mobilization from Change Agents to Community Anchors" (CA2CA@SCA-RL) at the University of Tennessee's (UT) School of Information Sciences (SIS) is a one-year planning proposal (Continuing Education Project Type) that meets the requirements specified in the IMLS' Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program (Community Anchors category). The project goal is to research community engagement efforts and create a strategic action plan for rural libraries to further community building and community development processes in the nine states of the Southern and Central Appalachian (SCA) region. CA2CA@SCA-RL will involve collecting quantitative and qualitative assessment datasets from rural librarians about their perspectives and experiences in community engagement, and the challenges, opportunities, outcomes, and impact they can potentially make as community anchors in the SCA rural communities. A *Community Engagement Framework & Strategic Action Plan* will also be developed in collaboration with SCA rural and state librarians. Proposal activities build on insights developed during two recently-funded IMLS grants[2] to the UT SIS that involved training of 29 rural library paraprofessionals in the SCA region to become change agents while completing an online master's degree with a specially-tailored curriculum focusing on information technology (IT) and rural management (Mehra et. al, 2014; Mehra et. al, 2011a).

Key Personnel--PIs: Bharat Mehra, Vandana Singh (Associate Professors, UT); Advisory Board: Rural and state librarians from the SCA region will provide feedback in project planning, design, and implementation.

Why is it important? Historically, the Appalachian region has experienced debilitating economic, social, and cultural circumstances that have adversely affected the people living in these areas (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2013; Bishop, Mehra, & Partee II, 2016). SCA rural residents additionally encounter limited financial opportunities, significant information poverty/unemployment, low information literacy and educational attainment, lack of access to IT resources, and other unique environmental challenges (Mehra, Bishop, and Partee II, 2016). Rural libraries are emerging as strong potential community anchors to further community development and achieve sustainable community growth in the region (Mehra et. al, 2011b).

Research Goals: The project goal is to research the role SCA rural libraries play in community development processes in the region and potentially mobilize rural librarians as community anchors by proposing a community engagement framework prototype and action plan based on stakeholder perspectives and experiences. The overall project includes the following phases over the one-year period: *Phase 1*: Collecting quantitative and qualitative feedback about the perspectives and experiences of librarian staff stakeholders about the role rural libraries play in the SCA regions in community development processes. *Phase 2*: Developing a *Community Engagement Framework & Strategic Action Plan* for rural libraries in its conceptualization and operationalization based on feedback from key stakeholders. This will serve as a pilot case experience and assessment test-bed for implementation at a national level in all rural communities.

Research Objective and Outcomes: The following objectives will help achieve the project goal. *Objective 1*: To implement a quantitative online survey (print and online) and collect feedback from SCA rural and state librarian staff stakeholders about their experiences in community building processes and what past and current role have rural libraries played in community development activities. *Objective 2*: To conduct qualitative interviews/focus groups-with SCA rural state librarian staff stakeholders about their role as community

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anchors in order to conceptualize and draft a community engagement framework prototype identifying particular community domains of potential actions, resources, and best practices. *Objective 3:* To develop a *Community Engagement Framework & Strategic Action Plan* for rural libraries and finalize its design in conceptualization and operationalization based on feedback from key stakeholders and partners.

The grant outcomes will be used to develop a full project that will implement the tested *Community Engagement Framework & Strategic Action Plan* for rural librarians to serve as community anchors in the SCA and other regions. Grant experiences involve preliminary planning activities; analyzing existing perspectives, experiences, needs and feasibility; solidifying community partnerships; and developing initial work plans of a community engagement framework and strategic action plan prototype. It will serve as a pilot experience to expand using similar strategies for the entire Appalachian region and other rural environments based on availability of additional funding in the future.

Impact: The intended project audience includes the SCA communities, rural and state library staff, library and information science (LIS) educators/students, rural community development activists, public officials in government, and other concerned stakeholders. The benefits of the grant help translate collected data from rural librarians towards development of a framework and strategic action plan to consolidate their role as community anchors in community engagement. It will consist of valuable information, strategies, and best practices that provide a mechanism to enhance their roles in community building and community development.

Research Plan: Primary participants will be SCA rural/state librarians. Table 1 outlines methods description of activities to achieve objectives, expected results in each phase, and time period for proposed activities.

Method Description and Activities	Expected Results and Time Period
Phase 1a: Utilizing state library networks a survey will collect quantitative feedback from 50-100 SCA rural librarians about their experiences in community building and what past/current role have rural libraries played in community development [Objective 1].	Provides an initial assessment of the role of SCA rural librarians in community building processes and community development activities and needed mobilization efforts identifying key challenges, opportunities, outcomes, and impact. [Month 1 – 4].
Phase 1b: Qualitative interviews/focus groups (face-to-face, phone, or virtual meetings) will be conducted with 30 SCA rural librarian staff stakeholders about details regarding their existing and potential roles. [Objective 2].	Develop a *Community Engagement Framework* with particular community domains of potential actions, resources, and best practices. Draft a *Community Engagement Strategic Action Plan* based on feedback collected so far. [Month 5 – 8].
Phase 2: Community agency feedback on the draft of the *Community Engagement Framework & Strategic Action Plan* will be collected during a CA2CA@SCA-RL Summit with at least 20 SCA rural librarians and key partners. [Objective 3].	Refine and finalize design of a *Community Engagement Framework & Strategic Action Plan* based on feedback collected about its conceptualization and operationalization, and associated details. [Month 9 – 12].
Phase 1 & 2: Ongoing analysis throughout the grant period in terms of a domino affect where analysis of feedback during Phase 1 will inform developments in Phase 2 and subsequent analysis will inform the developments of the *Community Engagement Framework & Strategic Action Plan.*	

Table 1: Outline of the CA2CA@SCA-RL Research Plan.

Budget: TOTAL = $49,848. Graduate Research Assistant for data collection/data analysis/web dev. = $20,042 (incl. 2-sem. tuition, 10hr/week for 12 month stipend, & insurance) [CA2CA@SCA-RL work will further student's career in comm. engagement/outreach librarianship]; Summer salary for PI and Co-PI: $5,950; Honorarium for FIVE library partners: $5000; Honorarium for 30 participants during interviews/focus groups = $1,500; Honorarium for 20 participants during the Summit = $2,000 (Boxed lunches during Summit = $400); Indirect Costs = $12,938.