Building the Foundation for a National Finding Aid Network
The California Digital Library (CDL), LYRASIS (ArchivesSpace), OCLC (ArchiveGrid), and University of Virginia Library (Information Technology and Social Networks and Archival Context) request $994,764 in IMLS NLG-L funding ("Research in Service to Practice Grants") to conduct a 2-year research and demonstration project to establish the foundations for a national-level archival finding aid network.

Statement of National Need
After two decades of operation, finding aid aggregations across the U.S., such as the CDL's Online Archive of California (OAC), are now struggling to find sufficient resources to update aging infrastructure, meet evolving user needs, and engage with some of the most promising advances in the field. In 2018-2019, the CDL organized a LSTA-funded planning initiative, "Toward a National Archival Finding Aid Network," convening a symposium of U.S. finding aid aggregators and expert advisors with deep knowledge of organizational development, community engagement, and sustainability. Preparatory research and symposium outcomes clearly signal that aggregations are at-risk in their current siloed contexts. Participants broadly affirmed that it is time to rethink aggregation at scale, calling for a substantially more inclusive framework that enables participation by a wider range of cultural heritage institutional contributors, supports a greater variety of collection description levels and formats, and meets the needs and interests of a more diverse set of end users, while simultaneously transitioning away from outmoded technologies and directly addressing foundational issues of sustainability.

Relevance to IMLS Project Category
Our proposed NLG-L project aligns with the IMLS project category "National Digital Infrastructures and Initiatives," which includes "exploring, piloting, scaling, or enhancing open source digital library infrastructures, efforts to engage communities with digital library content and collections, and other activities related to leveraging shared tools and services."

Project Design and Outcomes
Building on the 2018-2019 initiative, this project will leverage community engagement in the problem of siloed, under-resourced, and languishing finding aid aggregators to move toward the pilot development of a unified, national aggregation solution. This will situate the project within an exploratory and pilot phase of maturity. This effort will be focused on three different areas of work, conducted in parallel:

1) Research: Implement a strategically prioritized research agenda to investigate the following:

- **Scholar and other end-user stakeholder needs:** Who are our current users? Why and how do they access our collections? Which users are not accessing existing collections and why? We need to better understand how users interact with, navigate between, interpret, and utilize an expanding universe of archival descriptions within an aggregation.
- **Contributor participation and needs:** What is the nature of the current contributor base? How do we engage the greatest number of contributing institutions efficiently, while still providing a worthwhile end user experience? What are the technical and non-technical barriers to participation (e.g. generating

structured data, financial limitations, cultural sensitivity requirements)? We must identify barriers to participation in order to expand the range of contributors and collections.

- **Sustainability at scale:** What is the value proposition for national-level aggregation vis-a-vis resource capacities among aggregators and individual contributing institutions? What are the viable business and governance models for this community? Given the current funding challenges, aggregators need to find a sustainable path forward that allows for the necessary growth and evolution of the services over time.

Our methods will include literature reviews, interviews, focus groups, and surveys with researchers and other key stakeholders. Findings will be widely shared with the broader library, archive, and museum community in the form of persistently-hosted reports and/or peer-reviewed articles, conference presentations, and mailing list announcements.

2) Proof-of-concept system: Using finding aid and repository data from the OAC and other sources, and informed by the ongoing research activities, we will build a prototype that concretely illustrates the viability and promise of a national alternative to current regional approaches. We will broadly engage the community by demonstrating the ability to include high-value connectors (e.g., related context from SNAC, seamless data sharing from ArchivesSpace), surfacing the tremendous potential of a richly integrated approach. This will lay the groundwork for iterative development toward a full-production system (to be developed in subsequent phases).

3) Community building: Leveraging the aggregator partnership developed in the 2018-2019 planning initiative, incorporating the findings from the research agenda, and establishing a diverse set of institutions and users, we will formalize and promote new communication mechanisms, establish requirements for governance models, identify potential organizational homes for the national network, test business/sustainability models, and establish advisory structures to ensure relevance and stakeholder engagement.

National Impact
Our national scholarly communications infrastructure suffers from a critical gap: comprehensive, persistent access to finding aids and holding repositories, integrated with related content and context. A national-level finding aid network could both transform the archival description landscape and ensure its viability and relevance moving forward.

Budget Summary
CDL is requesting $994,764 in IMLS funds for a 2-year project. This funds: 1) $50,239 for CDL personnel (15% FTE, Project Administrator); 2) $654,800 in subawards to partner organizations, to conduct research and analysis (end-user and stakeholder needs, finding aid data analysis), prototype development, and user experience/design activities; 3) $200,000 for consultants to conduct business/market research and analysis, and support community engagement and project management activities; 4) $30,000 for travel to support community engagement meetings (2 in-person meetings) and dissemination of research findings at key conferences (4 conferences); and 5) $800 for incentives to support end-user research. Indirect costs are included ($58,925 at our Federally negotiated rate of 17.8% of MTDC). CDL would provide a total of $80,052 in in-kind personnel contributions, including salaries and fringe benefits ($7,691 at 1% FTE for the Principal Investigator, $60,265 at 15% for the Technical Lead, and $12,096 indirect cost at our federally negotiated rate 17.8% of MTDC).