

“The Mountains Seemed Empty, but I Knew They Weren’t”<sup>1</sup>: Elevating Appalachian Voices in Library Collections

**Introduction:** The University of Kentucky and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville request a National Leadership Grant for Libraries – Forum Project, which will be expended over 2 years (2024-2026) to develop and convene a series of forums designed to: 1) develop a consortium of research libraries committed to implementing a strategy that will create a comprehensive, distributed, prospective shared Central and Southern Appalachian monograph collection; 2) identify challenges and barriers facing libraries, publishers, and vendors as research libraries seek to develop monograph collections that elevate traditionally marginalized voices and then develop strategies, approaches, and solutions to overcome these challenges; and, 3) develop an approach to develop a distributed, prospective shared monograph collections that could be implemented by other libraries and consortia. This project will support IMLS Goal 5 and objective 5.1 by bringing together libraries and other stakeholders to develop solutions and approaches that will allow libraries to collaborate on a prospective shared print project to create a comprehensive Appalachian monograph collection. By fostering collaboration, promoting diversity, and providing a platform for knowledge sharing, this project will contribute to the advancement of scholarship and the enrichment of library collections nationally. The approach taken by the libraries in this project will be able to be replicated by other groups of libraries looking to advance other shared print projects, including, but not limited to, those that aim to elevate and enhance access to works by and about other marginalized communities.

**Project Justification:** In popular culture and the media, the people of Appalachia are too often [stereotyped](#) as poor, backward, and white. Appalachian dialects are [often associated with negative connotations](#) related to intelligence, ambition, wealth, and education, rather than the reality of historic geographic isolation and limited regional economic development opportunities. These stereotypes and generalizations speak to the discrimination and marginalization that the region faces, and they belie the rich culture and diversity of a region that stretches from New York to Mississippi.

Appalachia has a rich literary tradition. Noted contemporary writers include the likes of Wendell Berry, Silas House, and recent Pulitzer Prize winner, Barbara Kingsolver. Appalachian poets and authors, including Nikki Finney, Frank X. Walker, and Crystal Wilkinson, and writers like bell hooks and Neema Avashia, have served to highlight and elevate the stories and voices of people of color who live in Appalachia yet are often overlooked because they do not align with tropes and stereotypes of the region. While well-known authors are often published by national publishers, many others are published by university presses and smaller regional presses, such as Mountain State Press and Appalachia Book Company.

In Ithaca S+R’s whitepaper, “[Leading by Diversifying Collections: A Guide for Academic Library Leadership](#),” Kara Bledsoe, Roger Schonfeld, and Oya Rieger argue “(r)ather than seeking perfection in terms of comprehensiveness, many library leaders and their partners on this work may instead wish to find a tangible place to begin to address and improve the diversity of their collections by focusing on a specific group(s) that has been historically marginalized and is a priority for their institution.” Despite having a number of major research libraries located in or adjacent to Appalachia, there is little focus on comprehensively collecting monographs about Appalachia or works by Appalachian authors. Appalachian collecting efforts are [often centered within libraries’ special collections](#), often focusing on rare books and manuscript collections and generally limiting access via resource sharing networks. [An analysis](#) done at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville detailed the layout of their collection, of which Appalachian titles are a priority, and highlighted the difficulty of regional collecting in a vacuum. Analyses of other regional research libraries’ holdings based on the work done at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville suggested similar gaps in collections. While this project team is comprised of academic librarians, the issues faced by these institutions are not solely found in academic or research libraries. Solutions developed by these forums can serve to advance the work of other cultural heritage institutions.

While these gaps will assuredly vary from institution to institution, a significant barrier to building Appalachian collections is incomplete or missing metadata that limits libraries’ ability to identify these works. Nonfiction works about Appalachia or issues occurring there are often not identified as such by book vendors even when they are part of a publisher’s series focused on the region. GOBI Library Solutions has added “Appalachian Mountains” as a geographic

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<sup>1</sup> Gipe, Robert (2015). *Trampoline: An Illustrated Novel*, Ohio University Press.

descriptor and “Appalachian Studies” as an interdisciplinary subject descriptor, which should streamline the identification of interdisciplinary works about the region, but it often does not label books with these tags. These challenges are even greater when it comes to identifying literary works by authors from Appalachia and biographies or memoirs about individuals from Appalachia. On top of that is the reality that works from small, regional publishers may not be profiled by vendors like GOBI or Ex Libris. Yet, it is possible that changes in workflows by vendors and enhanced metadata from publishers could ameliorate many of these challenges. For example, a value added layer of metadata, allowing authors, presses, or organizations to self-identify as belonging to a region, group or identity could increase findability and better describe the richness and diversity of the publishing industry. With better metadata, libraries would be able to identify more works of interest and could make better-informed local and collective collection development decisions. We intend to explore solutions to these gaps with stakeholders during the course of this project.

With [declining budgets](#) and the [proliferation](#) of published content, it is challenging for most libraries - [even the most well-resourced ones](#) - to collect comprehensively. At the same time, it is not necessary for any one library to collect comprehensively (see articles by [Way](#), [Dempsey, Malpas and Lavoie](#), and [Levine-Clark](#)). Libraries have made significant progress cooperatively managing legacy print collections through shared print projects, yet in spite of the numerous calls to do so, there has been relatively little progress in cooperatively developing prospective shared print collections with only a limited number of bespoke projects across the country.

- Colby College, Bates College, Bowdoin College have had a [shared approval plan since 2008](#), where the three institutions have a shared profile with GOBI Library Services that evenly distributes print monographs across the three institutions and that is designed to limit duplication across the three institutions rather than ensuring access. This program is unique in that the three elite private institutions also have a single shared library management system and single shared catalog.
- The Orbis Cascade Alliance has taken a different approach to limiting unnecessary duplication, with its [threshold program](#). This program, which was put in place around 2011 seeks advance bibliodiversity across the consortium, by placing a voluntary limit of three copies of any monograph across its 38 member institutions.
- The University of California system has a robust shared print program, but it is primarily focused on retrospective collections. Its only prospective shared monograph program is focused on [monographic series](#) rather than stand-alone monographic titles.
- The Big Ten Academic Alliance is working toward creating what they have branded “The BIG Collection,” which aims to create a single shared collection across the consortium of research libraries. Operationalizing this goal for monographs has been slow to date, with the only prospective shared print monograph project under way is a [pre-existing project with Oxford University Press](#), where all members acquire access to OUP ebooks and a single corresponding print version is centrally acquired by the BTAA.
- The VIVA consortium has implemented a unique [prospective shared monograph program](#) designed to ensure access to content from small publishers that focus their publishing on traditionally marginalized voices. The program uses central consortium funds to comprehensively collect the output from these publishers, distributing the content to different libraries in the consortium.

Each of the above programs is unique in its own way. They all utilize existing consortia and the barrier to participation is relatively low. VIVA and the BTAA projects began with “coalitions of the willing” and expanded from there. Most of the projects were also quite narrow in scope, perhaps with the exception the Colby-Bates-Bowdoin partnership. The commonality among these projects is that they have not been replicated by any other consortia at scale. Of the above projects, the most similar to what is looking to be accomplished with this grant is the VIVA project, but it has significant differences. It utilizes a pre-existing consortium, a central funding model where the consortium handles payment, and is focused on collecting at the publisher-level rather than the title-level. This last element is important, as collecting all of a publisher’s output simplifies the task of identifying content, but requires that a publisher have a narrow focus. While there are some publishers that focus on Appalachia, in the vast majority of cases, this is a subset of their larger list.

What this project seeks to do is to create a more universal, replicable model for prospective shared monograph collecting that can be implemented by existing consortia or through the creation of new partnerships between institutions. We seek to explore how to overcome barriers to participation and to structure a program in a way that makes participation easy and beneficial to all engaged.

Project Work Plan: This project will run for two years and will consist of two in-person forums and a series of virtual forums. Planning and facilitation of the forums and deliverables will be carried out by the project team: [Doug Way](#), [Erin Whitaker](#) and [Kat Brooks](#). The team has published and presented widely and has significant expertise in the areas of collection development, collection analysis, shared print, and the use of library collections. The project team will invite additional subject matter experts to the forums to supplement their expertise. The project team will also identify groups for involvement via an open call and targeted outreach to groups such as the [Appalachian College Association](#), [ASERL](#), [Stay Project](#), [Highlander](#), [Black in Appalachia](#), and [Invisible Histories](#).

The first in-person forum would be a two day meeting in Lexington, Kentucky in Spring 2025, which would bring together approximately 30-35 stakeholders to engage in information sharing and discussion. The project team will form a 3-5 member program planning team with experts from these different stakeholder groups, drawn from the project team's professional network. That program planning team will develop criteria for selection for participation in the forum.

Participants in the forum would include:

- 10-15 librarians from potential partner institutions located in Central and Southern Appalachia;
- 3-5 representatives from consortia such as VIVA or the BTAA that have worked on similar collaborative collection development projects;
- 5-10 representatives from regional university presses and literary presses;
- 3-5 representatives from vendors that supply books to academic libraries, such as GOBI Library Solutions, Baker and Taylor, or Ex Libris;
- 3-5 Appalachian scholars and authors.

These numbers are subject to change as we further gauge interest from potential participants. We will make efforts to include as many various perspectives as possible. This grant would reduce financial barriers to participation for attendees by covering the cost of traveling to and attending this forum.

The program planning team will also determine specific topics for presentations, identify and recruit speakers and workshop facilitators, and determine the specific topics and format of workshops. Presentation topics could include overviews of similar projects, opportunities for collaboration from publisher or vendor perspectives, and overviews from author and researcher perspectives. We suspect that these topics will also arise from conversations among the planning team and experts.

Day one of the forum would explore the challenges facing each stakeholder group through presentations and a workshop format to facilitate small-group discussions, while day two would examine possible solutions through presentations and start to chart paths forward through the continuation of workshops. Workshop topics and format will be determined by the program planning team, but it is anticipated there would be 3-5 workshops. Workshop topics could include: improving metadata for discovery, researcher and author needs, developing prospective shared print programs, collection development needs, or resource sharing opportunities. Workshop formats would likely utilize liberating structures or other similar approaches to actively engage all participants in exploring a challenge and developing possible solutions. By holding this meeting in person, a more fluid approach to identifying possible solutions and collaborations can be taken. Individuals will be able to opt in and out of workshop conversations exploring paths that could be taken. Holding these discussions in person also provides participants with opportunities to build relationships and networks that will extend beyond the forum. By the end of day two, the forum participants will identify paths forward for advancing solutions identified in the forum.

The in-person forum would be followed up by a series of 3 to 5 synchronous, half-day online forums with different stakeholder groups. The exact make-up of these forums, the number of times the stakeholder groups would meet, and their work would be dictated by the issues surfaced and outcomes of the first in-person forum, but these could include publishers and book vendors working on solutions to metadata issues, libraries working with vendors to improve the description and discoverability of relevant works, and libraries working together to establish a coordinated collection development approach for Appalachian monograph collections. The project team will convene and facilitate these forums, but it is possible that they would be led by other stakeholders with interest in the work being conducted. These

forums would utilize Zoom as an online platform and would be limited in size to ensure active engagement from all participants. It is anticipated that additional asynchronous efforts would be necessary to maximize the impact of these online meetings. These online forums' discussions, findings, and outcomes would contribute to the whitepaper's findings.

A final in-person forum would take place in concert with a relevant national or regional meeting, such as the annual [Charleston Conference](#), which brings together librarians, publishers, and vendors in conversations around common issues and concerns. At this forum, the project team will provide an overview of the project and its goals, the project team will identify participants from the first in-person forum and the subsequent online forums to share their findings and next steps with core stakeholders and other interested parties. The forum would also serve to convene the participants of the shared print Appalachian collections consortium, allowing these libraries to meet in person to work through challenges and advance this goal of this grant. The intent of the in-person forum will be to advance this work, but to also expand the impact of this grant by engaging interested parties in a dialogue and exchange of ideas and approaches rather than simply the one-way dissemination of information that only a whitepaper would provide. The participants of this forum would include librarians, consortia leaders, publishers, and book vendors. They would come away from this event with an understanding of what the grant accomplished, but also with the knowledge of how they could apply the findings and replicate this project in their local context.

Diversity Plan: While Appalachia as a whole is underrepresented (or misrepresented) in library collections and in popular and scholarly discourse, we recognize that our community is not alone in that and that others are impacted even moreso. Upon first conception, this project is an opportunity to celebrate and highlight the intersectionality of Appalachian identities and experience. It is an attempt to remedy an issue that the project team has encountered in their work as Appalachian librarians. However, the barriers we face in developing an Appalachian collection are not isolated or unique to Appalachia, but are formed by limitations of current publishing pipelines. The same issues would be seen if developing a collection on nearly any other regional community and infinitely more complex when developing collections based on marginalized identities that span geographic location. It is well documented that the Library of Congress classification systems are largely too rigid and slow moving to accurately describe modern discourse. The work of Homosuarus and the Trans Metadata Collective are excellent representations of advocacy in this area in action.

Just as the barriers of Appalachian collection development are replicable, the priority of this forum is to document methods and outcomes of the forum in a way that is replicable to others. The development and process of conducting the forum, the outreach efforts utilized, the suggestions made by attendees, any outcomes, recommendations, best practices, successes and pain points, etc. will all be documented with respect to anonymity of attendees. They will be packaged into a blueprint for others to use as a resource or starting place for further discussion, research, and advocacy. While it is difficult to anticipate what solutions the forum may uncover, the interconnectedness of the publishing landscape ensures that any solutions highlighted in this forum could be of use to someone elsewhere as well. Perhaps even demonstrating to presses, publishers and vendors that if we could *find* more Appalachian literature we would *purchase* more Appalachian literature can convince them to commit effort and support in this and other diversity initiatives.

Cognizant that three academic librarians cannot be representative of all aspects of Appalachian identity nor of every section of the literary and publishing landscape, we are actively seeking partners and attendees through contact points at the Highlander Center, Black in Appalachia, The Appalachian Consortium, Queer History South, and others that decentralize our own voices. To accomplish this, the program planning team will develop a vetting process for participants that will ensure broad representation from across the region that represents a diverse array of work, identity, and perspective. We will also implement a [code of conduct](#) in both the in-person and online forums to ensure that all participants feel comfortable and confident sharing their perspectives. We recognize that travel costs and attendance time investment can present a hardship for many. To that end, we have budgeted for participant support that would facilitate this opportunity for our participants by covering their travel, food, and lodging.

All documents, web pages, communications, and advertising created in relation to this forum will follow ADA Standards for Accessible Design and WC3 Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. Project outcomes and deliverables will be archived and disseminated openly and in accessible formats, increasing access outside the forum directly.

Project Results: The findings of this forum grant will be disseminated through a whitepaper that will be hosted on one or more institutional repositories and through an in-person forum held in concert with another conference. In the whitepaper and the in-person forum findings, specific to the development of a comprehensive Appalachian monograph collection will be shared.

This project will also result in a consortium of academic libraries from across middle and southern Appalachia that will commit to building a comprehensive collection of monographs from and about the region. The results of this project seek to provide libraries a roadmap for a universal approach to constructing shared monograph collections that amplify traditionally marginalized voices. This roadmap will communicate a replicable framework capable of advancing coordinated collection development efforts across libraries and consortia. Additionally, it will provide a pathway for libraries, whether individually or as part of a consortia, to diversify their collections. Library users all benefit when libraries elevate historically overlooked perspectives in their collections. If this project can inspire other regional projects to leverage the power of collaboration and coordination to address concerns around representation and access to these works, all users will benefit. In today's networked environment, which makes it simple to identify, request, and acquire materials from other libraries around the country, the development of subsequent regional projects has the ability to benefit the American people by ensuring they can discover and access materials that in the past were locked away in special collections or, worse, not available at all.

Additionally, this project will have a positive impact on the discoverability of materials from and about marginalized communities. Libraries around the country are interested in developing such collections, but are unable to easily identify this content due to publisher and vendor metadata shortcomings. By bringing these groups together with librarians who are struggling to identify these works, we will provide transferable solutions that will benefit all parties by increasing sales and enriching collections.

In addition to the whitepaper, the conveners will also disseminate the findings of this project in appropriate conferences or venues, such as the Charleston Conference, the Timberline Acquisitions Institute, Print Archiving Network fora, the annual ALA conference, or the biannual ACRL conference. They may also look to share findings through further publication in relevant journals, such as *College & Research Libraries*, *The International Journal of Library and Information Science*, *Collaborative Librarianship*, etc.

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\*ACRL Conference - April 2025  
 Charleston Conference - November 2025  
 Timberline Acquisitions Institute - May 2026  
 ALA Annual Conference - June 2026



## Digital Products Plan

This project will lead to the creation of a whitepaper written by the project team. This document will outline the project, its key findings and results, including plans for a coordinated collection development project focused on Appalachian collections and a replicable plan for other libraries seeking to advance similar efforts. This document will be disseminated in one or more formats that comply with standards outlined in section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The whitepaper will be available under a CC-BY Creative Commons license. It will be hosted in one or more institutional repositories. The University of Kentucky's institutional repository, UKnowledge, and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's institutional repository, TRACE, are hosted on the Digital Commons platform, which is owned and supported by Elsevier. Both institutions are committed to the preservation, migration, and accessibility of documents hosted in their repositories. The University of Kentucky Libraries outlines its commitment and approach to long-term access through an articulated digital preservation plan. UT Libraries also has a [digital preservation plan](#) that aligns with their [collection development guidelines and philosophy](#).