

## Public and Academic Libraries as Community Hubs to Promote Mental Health Help-seeking for Young Adults

**Introduction:** The University of Texas (UT) at Austin School of Information seeks \$148,080 for an 18-month National Leadership **Planning Grant** to investigate young adults' needs for seeking help with mental health concerns; identify public and academic librarians' perceived community needs for mental health support; and develop a handbook for librarians to use in planning mental health programs and services to promote and support young adults' mental health help-seeking. The project aligns with Program Objective 1.1: Develop or enhance replicable library and archive programs, models, and tools to support learning, and Objective 2.3: Establish or refine approaches that equip libraries and archives to contribute to the well-being of communities.

**Project Justification:** The mental health crisis is growing at an alarming rate nationwide. Young adults ages 18-25 have the fastest growing and the greatest prevalence of mental health concerns but the lowest rates of receiving outpatient mental health treatments (National Survey on Drug Use and Health 2019). Without timely treatment, mental illness can be undiagnosed and worsen over time, further debilitating individuals, hindering learning and development, and increasing societal losses (Brent 2015; Richards 2011). Treatment and prevention are the most effective ways to alleviate individual and social burdens associated with mental illness (Office of the Surgeon General 2021). Seeking help is a critical step for both prevention and treatment. In the mental health context, help-seeking is an active and adaptive coping process of attempting to obtain external assistance to deal with a mental health concern (Rickwood 2012). External assistance may come from formal healthcare and community services or informal sources such as family and friends.

Existing efforts to enhance help-seeking for mental health concerns mainly adopt cognitive behavioral approaches, emphasizing addressing individual barriers including knowledge, stigma, and perceived need for help through different forms of psychoeducation of individuals (Eisenberg 2012; Xu 2018). However, given the prevalence of mental health challenges and the shortage of clinical resources for care, improving young adults' mental health requires an "all-of-society effort," including policy, institutional, community, and individual involvement (Office of the Surgeon General 2021; WHO 2022). A limited number of interventions involved or targeted interpersonal, institutional, or community players, such as significant others, peers, gatekeepers (e.g., teachers), and primary care facilities, to promote help-seeking (Velasco 2020; Xu 2018), but few involved libraries. Libraries are trusted community partners with a mission to enhance community health and health equity and have been supporting community health information needs (Luo 2013; Hammock 2023). They are naturally positioned to be a strong community-level resource to promote and provide help-seeking for public health issues such as mental health concerns (Philbin 2019). Many libraries, including public and academic libraries, have started to explore means to provide mental health support. For example, some libraries provide education programs or workshops to enhance patrons' mental health literacy, and some incorporate or collaborate with public health and social workers to connect patrons with mental health resources (ALA 2018; NPR 2022). More recently, the Seattle Public Library (SPL) initiated a VR-based co-design intervention to reinforce positive teen mental health with support from IMLS (SPL, 2023). However, limited knowledge exists on what programs and services are most needed by and useful for *young adults* with mental health concerns, and what programs and services are most efficient in enhancing their help-seeking behavior.

Our primary goal of this project is to fill this gap by investigating how public and academic libraries, as information and community hubs, can contribute to addressing the escalating mental health crisis among young adults by promoting and supporting help-seeking. Our work will help develop a handbook for librarians to create user-centered and evidence-based library programs, services, or tools that promote young adults' mental health literacy and help-seeking behavior. Broadly, the effort will help build or strengthen the capacity of libraries to improve community well-being and reduce health disparity.

**Project Work Plan:** The project team will use mixed methods, including surveys, interviews, and participatory design, and draw on samples from nationwide. Prior to the beginning of the project, we will collect and analyze documents, including journal articles, white papers, library newsletters, and news articles, about library services and programs related to mental health. This analysis will provide a comprehensive view of academic and public libraries' existing efforts to address community mental health challenges and inform the design of interview questions and participatory design workshops. The proposed project includes the following phases.

- 1) Survey of young adults (08/01/2024-12/31/2024): We have conducted an interview study with young adults about their information practices related to mental health help-seeking and found that community-level resources are unavailable or underused by the group, revealing a gap in society's effort to address mental health crises (Liu, submitted). We will design the questionnaire based on the interview study results and established help-seeking measures (e.g., General Help-seeking

Questionnaire) and conduct a broad survey of young adults about their needs for mental health support, current use of resources for help-seeking, challenges encountered, and perceptions of libraries as information and community hubs for mental health support. The participants ( $n = 300-400$ ) will be recruited through venues including university listservs and social media platforms. Our advisory board members, representing libraries in urban, rural, and suburban settings and different geographic regions, will also be our key data-gathering partners to broaden the call for participation.

- 2) In-person and virtual interviews or focus groups with librarians (01/01/2025-07/31/2025): We will recruit and interview 50-60 librarians in different roles (e.g., reference services, information literacy instructions) in public and academic libraries of different sizes across the US to investigate their perceived community needs for mental health support. The participants will be solicited via email messages to various listservs, such as the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL)'s Community and the American Library Association (ALA)'s Discussion Lists, and through our advisory board members.
- 3) Design workshops with young adults and librarians (08/01/2025-01/31/2026): Building on the results in Phases 1 and 2, we will conduct 2-3 design workshops with young adults and librarians following participatory design methodologies, with at least one workshop being in-person. Each workshop will involve 4-5 young adults and 1-2 librarians and be facilitated by researchers with design and user experience research expertise. We will use materials such as post-it cards, sketch boards, or digital tools such as Figma or Miro to facilitate the co-construction of library programs, services, or tools that can promote and enhance young adults' mental health help-seeking. At the same time, we will refer to the Community Forums in Public Libraries Toolkit that Dr. Vanessa Kitzie, our advisory board member, developed based on her IMLS-supported work on the health of LGBTQ+ people. The participants will be solicited from the Phase 1 and 2 participants. We will then create a mental health handbook for librarians to use in planning mental health services by integrating results from all three phases. We will elicit feedback from our advisory board members and refine the handbook iteratively to make it more practical and usable.

*Project Team and Partners:* Our project team includes faculty (PI: Dr. Yan Zhang, Associate Professor; Co-PI: Dr. David Lankes, Professor) and graduate student researchers from UT iSchool. Our advisory board includes representatives from urban, rural, and suburban libraries across the nation: Nate Hill, Executive Director, Metropolitan New York Library Council (NY); Dianne Connery, Director, Pottsboro Library (TX); and Angela Craig, Executive Director, Charleston County Public Library (SC). The board also includes Takisha Moore, Certified Mental Health Specialist and the L4H (Libraries for Health) Coordinator at Via Hope and St. David's Foundation (TX), who has extensive experience mediating health care and communities; and Dr. Vanessa Kitzie, Associate Professor at the University of South Carolina iSchool, who will provide advice on working with communities for health and using the participatory design methodology in library contexts.

**Diversity Plan:** The project team will recruit young adults from various communities, including college and non-college and rural and urban settings. Special efforts, including working closely with our advisory board members who regularly work with underserved groups, will be exerted on recruiting participants from marginalized and underrepresented groups who are more likely to lack mental health support when needed. We will also recruit librarians with diverse demographic backgrounds (e.g., gender and race) and work roles from public and academic libraries of all sizes and locations.

**Project Results:** Based on the project findings, we will create a Mental Health Handbook for librarians to use in planning and preparing their virtual and physical programs and services. We will gather feedback from our partners to refine the handbook to be more practical. The final handbook will be publicized through the Community Institute for Rural Communities and Librarianship (<http://circl.community>), with its membership including state libraries, associations, scholars, and libraries. We will publish at least two peer-reviewed papers in journals (e.g., Journal of Librarianship and Information Science) and present results at conferences (e.g., ALA annual meetings). Building on this planning grant, we will continue to work with our partners to derive and evaluate practicable methods for getting a library more ready to support young adult mental health.

**Budget Summary:** We request a total of \$148,080 in IMLS funds. This budget estimate includes (1) Salaries and Wages \$27,384; (2) Fringe Benefits \$6,848; (3) Travel \$4,000; (4) Supplies, Materials, and Equipment \$1,200; (5) Student Support \$51,650; (6) Other Costs \$7,240, including honoraria for advisory board and incentives for study participants; (7) Indirect Costs \$49,758.