

Florida State University School of Information

Introduction- Florida State University seeks \$590,000 in funding from the National Leadership for Libraries Program in the form of an Applied Research grant, for a three-year project beginning August 1st, 2024. This project will explore the hiring practices and evaluative measures of social workers (SWs) hired in public libraries in the Southeast. This proposal aligns with **Goal 2: build the capacity of libraries and archives to improve community well-being and strengthen civic engagement**, and **Objective 2.1: develop or enhance replicable programming, models, and tools that engage communities and individuals of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds**. In phase one, this project will evaluate the hiring ads and position descriptions in the Southeastern United States (SEUS) and interview library directors about their hiring and evaluative practices and metrics. By doing so, we will be able to answer the following research question, (RQ1) *What are the primary skills sought in hiring social workers Southeastern libraries, and how are these skills then evaluated in practice?* In phase two, we will drill down to 32 libraries and conduct semi-structured interviews of SWs and library staff. By doing this, we hope to further inform RQ1 and also address our next questions, (RQ2) *What are the social needs being addressed by SWs in libraries?* and (RQ3) *What are the perceptions of library staff about the efficacy of SWs in libraries?* We have chosen to focus on the SEUS because of our current strong relationships in the region, and to specifically identify regional social needs. By understanding the skills that library administrators are seeking- and by what metrics evaluating- SWs, we will better understand these practices and the social needs that libraries are addressing in the SEUS, as well as provide data that can inform library hiring practices.

Project Justification- Because of catastrophes such as COVID-19 and the opioid epidemic, the needs of some library patrons have grown critical and require careful, specialized professional intervention beyond the scope of traditional librarianship. In response, libraries have hired SWs who are trained to respond to people in crisis. These SWs are hired to attend to vital community needs, such as helping with housing, providing services and resources related to the opioid crisis and other specialized needs, to assist with navigating systems, assistance with domestic violence, and to provide interpersonal services beyond the scope and expertise of traditional librarianship (Kosmicki, 2019). However, as this is a newer practice in public libraries, there have not been large-scale studies conducted on either the scope of the skills sought by libraries when hiring SWs, or which metrics are being used to evaluate their performance (Baum, Gross, Latham, Crabtree, & Randolph, 2023). This project is distinct from others in that it is concerned with the hiring and evaluation of SWs and library staff perspectives on such. In understanding these processes we may better differentiate the services, and potentially impact, that SWs provide in public libraries from the social needs already met by library staff. Knowing this will better illustrate the unmet social needs in the SEUS and can inform LIS educators so that future librarians can be better prepared (Soska & Navarro, 2020). Understanding perceptions of librarians and staff on the effectiveness of SWs in meeting these needs will help to paint a larger picture of how these positions are impacting librarianship and affords the chance to positively impact many of the social determinants of health: health care and access, economic stability, neighborhoods, and social factors. These directly relate to the National Leadership for Libraries Program Goal/Objective 2.1: *develop or enhance replicable programming, models, and tools that engage communities and individuals of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, as it relates to workforce development and efforts that increase equity*.

Project Work Plan- To address the aforementioned gaps, the proposed three-year project will have a multi-phase, mixed methods design (Hanson et al., 2005). Using Qualtrics, the PI will create a mixed methods survey, assisted by Carli Lucius, MSW of FSU's College of Social Work, to generate data on libraries with existing social workers in their library system. This survey will go through an exploratory pilot phase, overseen by the PI and by an advisory board of social work and LIS faculty and stakeholders, then disseminated to library directors across the Southeast Region of the United States (Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Florida), where the PI and Ms. Lucius already have connections with libraries through a current SAMHSA-funded grant. This survey will aid the PI, a Graduate Assistant (GA), and Ms. Lucius in identifying libraries with and SWs develop the implementation plan.

Having conducted this initial outreach and analysis, the PI will select 32 library systems, 4 per state (two rural and two urban), with varying amounts and duration of library social work roles to reach out to for virtual semi-structured interviews (compensated \$50 per person). Interviews will be conducted with the system's social worker(s), on-sight librarians, and the library director to gather individualized, job-specific data to analyze the social worker's role and efficacy. We are interested in many aspects of the SW's hiring and evaluation, including the perceptions of their colleague librarians regarding their effectiveness in their roles. The semi-structured interviews will be transcribed through the Otter system and edited, as needed, by the GA. Additional data analysis will be conducted via machine analysis of library social workers' position descriptions, evaluation measures, and any other evaluative documents provided by the library system to find similarities and differences in their roles and outcomes.

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The PI's data analysis will be based upon Creswell's (2007) process of analyzing qualitative data by fragmenting and grouping like-responses into thematic codes and exploring the data for general topics that give explanation to the research questions- along with generating descriptive quantitative statistics to support the qualitative data. Throughout the project, a GA will assist with data collection and processing, scheduling interviews with library staff, obtaining informed consent, and data analysis. Guided by the data provided in the study, the PI and Ms. Lucius will develop a series of practical recommendations for libraries, publish them in a practitioner's journal, and present the information at two library-based conferences. In addition, the project will disseminate information to participants in real-time through bi-annual virtual meetings via Zoom to provide library social workers and directors with updates on the information collected in the study and how it informs the RQs. The project will also host one final "report out" session and invite all participants and any other individuals in the library community to a virtual meeting via Zoom to report all preliminary findings, share the next steps in publishing, and how the information can inform library social work roles across the region and greater library community. Using the information created in this project, the PI will create a website that details this project and provides free, usable classroom modules for LIS programs around the country. This site will be created with help from this grant but will be linked on the PI's institutional website and maintained by the PI.

The PI has experience that is significant to this work. Her research area is in exploring the health and mental health information needs of marginalized and often stigmatized groups and providing answers through public libraries. She has been awarded several previous grants to create public library programming to assist librarians in helping the homeless and the opioid-use populations in their communities in the southeastern US. She also is a co-PI of a grant with FSU's College of Social Work in which she trains rural librarians around an eight-state region on implementing the OCLC's Call to Action Toolkit. This project has assisted her and Ms. Lucius in forming partnerships that will be crucial to the success of this project. The proposed project will further her long-term research agenda and her personal goal to conduct research that benefits underserved, stigmatized, small-world communities that use public libraries. She has published a dozen or more journal articles on this topic.

Timeline: Prior to the grant- Assemble advisory board and library systems to be initially surveyed. *Year 1-* Hire GA, create first survey, send out to advisory board, submit IRB, send out to library systems, receive, and process data, determine 32 library systems for further analysis. Write up the first report to respond to RQ1 and disseminate to the advisory board. Set up project website. Create semi-structured interview protocol. *Year 2-* Conduct semi-structured interviews over zoom. Present year one findings at a conference. Develop project website. Analyze and process data from interviews. Report our initial findings on the website and to the advisory board. *Year 3-* Conduct any remaining interviews and data analysis. Development of the learning modules for LIS schools and write up and disseminate all findings through one peer-reviewed LIS publication such as Public Library Quarterly, one peer-reviewed social work publication, and one practitioner journal, and at a conference including the Public Library Association. Put all products on project website.

Diversity Plan: The driving motivation behind this project is to understand library SWs hiring and evaluation processes and how SWs can best assist librarians in meeting the unique social needs of their patrons. Libraries serve as community anchors for many diverse, at-risk, and vulnerable populations, including people who are unemployed, immigrating or seeking refuge, homeless, or in re-entry from incarceration (Moxley, et al., 2016) and more. By better preparing libraries to meet these challenges, we are responding to diverse groups, providing increased opportunity for equity and inclusion.

Project Results- This research will aid public libraries in several ways. First, it will provide data that can be used for informing hiring practices of SWs. In addition to informing hiring and evaluation processes, this project also will provide an overview of the non-traditional skills that are needed in libraries. While this will be very useful for libraries and librarians, it also provide valuable information about the social needs of patrons in the SEUS that are not met by current librarianship practices. By finding out this information, we can better inform LIS faculty around the country about potential skills that may be needed in LIS programs, and how to collaborate with outside fields to have those needs met. The deliverables of this project will be a minimum of two peer-reviewed journal articles and a practitioner article, two national conference presentations, bi-annual virtual meetings with participants to disseminate findings, a final "report out" with all participants and the greater library community to present findings, and a website that provides the developed LIS learning module and the other deliverables from this project.

Budget Summary- Years 1-3 Total funds requested: \$590,000. This includes faculty salary & fringe (\$137,905); Other Personnel salary & fringe (\$89,561); One GA salary & fringe (\$96,381); One GA student tuition (\$33,052); materials and supplies (\$5,667); travel for dissemination (conference trips = \$12,140); Consultant (\$6,400); Participant Incentives (200 people x \$62 Gift Cards = \$11,200); Final Incentive (\$1,200); Advisory Board (\$1,200) and indirect costs (\$195,294). No cost share is required for an applied research grant.