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Public Libraries in an Aging Society: Preparing MSLIS Students for our Shared Future

Introduction

In this three-year **Early Career Research Development** proposal, Dr. Joseph Winberry of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Information and Library Science (SILS) requests **$372,676.05** to study how to best prepare Master of Library and Information Science (MSLIS) students for public library careers at a time of profound societal aging. This study corresponds to **Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program goal/objective 2.3** as it supports the research of an untenured tenure-track library and information science faculty. The intended project results will be scholarly publications which provide theoretical and empirical insights to the academic literature, a white paper which outlines practical implications of the research, and a framework for a training series for librarians which will be created beyond the end date of this proposed project. Building on Dr. Winberry's earlier research, this study seeks to answer the following:

1. How can MSLIS education be improved to help librarians serving in an aging society?
   a. How are older adults represented on the websites of MSLIS programs and public libraries?
   b. What values do older adults expect from librarians?
   c. What skills do older adults appreciate in librarians?
   d. What services do older adults want from libraries?

Project Justification

The United Nations (2023) projects that by 2050, 1 in 6 people will be 65 years or older—up from an already historically high 1 in 10 in 2021. This demographic transformation requires the field of library and information science to wrestle with how to meet the needs of a burgeoning older adult population. While the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program has funded 2 projects which have addressed needs of older adults over the past decade (University at Buffalo, 2019; Califa Group, 2021), one topic essential to responding to this rapid shift has not been the focus of either funded project: MSLIS education. Many of today's MSLIS students will work in—and later lead—thousands of public libraries across the United States, whose value for older adults was reenforced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Lenstra et al., 2021). As such, the professional training of students towards older adults will be essential to meeting that population's needs. But data collected for Winberry (2021) found that among MSLIS student participants at American Library Association (ALA) accredited master programs:

- 96% shared that it was important that their programs offer classes on serving older adults
- 86% reported that their programs had classes on meeting needs of children or teenagers, but not older adults
- 80% felt that they could become more interested in serving older adults if their training exposed them more to the needs of this population.

These findings suggest that there are many opportunities for improving MSLIS student education around the needs of older adults. In response, this project would produce research whose theoretical and empirical findings would lay the foundation for practical guidance for MSLIS programs and public libraries as well as training for library professionals on meeting the needs of an aging society. This is accomplished through content analysis of select MSLIS program and public library websites as well as interviews with older adults. The content analysis is important because it provides both a baseline of how older adults are already represented and is useful context ahead of interviewing older adults. These interviews are essential because the education and work of public librarians in an aging society should be built on the perspectives of older adults. This project meets Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program goal/objective 2.3 as it supports the research of an untenured tenure-track library and information science faculty who in past, present, and planned future research applies his gerontology and LIS background to meeting the information needs of older adults.

Project Work Plan

Dr. Joseph Winberry—an untenured tenure-track library and information science faculty member at SILS—will plan, manage, and implement the project. In addition to having been an aging services practitioner who later developed a program to serve older adults based on his dissertation research, he has published extensively on public libraries and the needs of older adults. To answer the research questions, Winberry's team will start by sampling 10% (N=6) of the 56 ALA accredited MSLIS programs (as of September 2023) located in the United States. The 6 will be determined by purposive nonrandom sampling to include broad representation from 2 urban, 2 suburban, and 2 rural communities. Winberry's

team will then perform content analysis on the websites of the MSLIS programs and the primary public library in the program's municipality or county to identify examples of current older adult representation as well as areas for improvement. One resource useful for steering content analysis is the ALA guidelines on serving older adults.

Interview participants will be identified primarily by engaging with gatekeepers at aging services which exist in the same municipalities/counties as selected MSLIS programs such as offices on aging and senior centers. The expectation is to interview about 75-100 total participants over Zoom, about 15 in each of the 6 communities, which is a large enough sample to obtain saturation of responses in each community. Once the data is collected, it will be qualitatively analyzed using constructivist grounded theory. These analysis choices are important for two reasons. First, qualitative and open-ended approaches to this understudied topic is necessary because it allows for more exploration and follow ups than quantitative, close-ended research would. Second, constructivist grounded theory provides a good balance of allowing some theoretical structure without being prescriptive to the point of missing unexpected and important insights during data analysis. One structure which will guide interview question development is the Integrative Critical Gerontology Information Framework. Winberry and Mehra (2022) created this framework to take a holistic, anti-ageist view of the information needs of this population rather than reducing older adults to one dimension such as their health. Target venues for publication include conferences such as the American Library Association and the Association for Library and Information Science Education, and peer-reviewed journals such as *The Library Quarterly* and *Public Library Quarterly*.

The completion of this project will require two months' summer salary and two course releases for Dr. Winberry as well as the hiring of a masters or Ph.D. student who will assist with data collection and analysis. Other expenses will include conference participation, stipends for study participants, and interview transcription fees. Dr. Winberry will track grant progress against the following schedule, adjusting as necessary to ensure the project meets its expected results:

Year 1: 08/24 - 07/25	• Recruit grant-funded student assistant • Perform content analysis on select MSLIS program and public library websites • Begin interview data collection and analysis after IRB approval
Year 2: 08/25 - 07/26	• Continue interview data collection and analysis • Communicate early findings at conferences and possibly in peer-reviewed journals • Outline structures for white paper and training framework
Year 3: 08/26 - 07/27	• Complete interview data collection and analysis • Share late findings at conferences and in peer-reviewed journals • Finalize white paper and training framework

Diversity Plan

Winberry (2018) described how older adults are a diverse group, so it is fundamental that efforts to meet their information needs take these specific characteristics (race, level of ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, geographic location, etc.) into consideration. Therefore, the research will address diversity, equity, and inclusion topics where applicable. This representation will help interview participants consider how someone from their own background might be served by their public library.

Project Results

The results of this project will be scholarly publications which provide theoretical and empirical insights to the academic literature, a white paper which outlines practical implications of the research, and a framework for a training series for librarians which will be created beyond the end date of this proposed project. The results will help address deficits around serving older adults during this profound and ongoing demographic shift. The qualitative approach and geographic diversity of sampled municipalities will ensure there are transferable lessons which can be applied to other MSLIS programs and public libraries outside of the sampled communities' websites and older adult populations.

Budget Summary

The requested **$372,676.05** is distributed across the following categories: salaries and wages ($144,767.58), fringe benefits ($35,537.83), travel ($12,000), student support ($48,761.13), other costs ($16,000), and indirect costs ($115,609.50).