

You Belong in Libraries: Recruiting & Retaining a Diverse Library Workforce

Introduction

The Missouri Library Association (MLA), with guidance from a state library association advisory council including Michigan, Oregon & Kentucky, will plan & implement the You Belong program to retain & develop existing library workers from historically underrepresented groups, in order to address the persistent lack of diversity in library & information science professions (Goal 1, Objective 1.1 of the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program). They request \$249,308 from IMLS. This program will create a model for other state library associations, filling the gap between national diversity initiatives & ground-level needs for diverse practitioners. Each year's cohort of You Belong scholars will include diverse library workers who are pursuing an undergraduate degree or Master's in Library & Information Science (MLIS). They will receive holistic support & participate in cohort activities to develop their interest in & readiness for long-term library & information careers, including: a leadership academy at the MLA annual conference; mentorship from diverse library professionals; a laptop; a scholarship; a professional development stipend; & a paid internship. Results will include a scalable project plan for other library associations to adopt to develop diverse library employees (developed with the guidance of an advisory council of other state library associations) & increased interest in & preparation for library & information careers among diverse library workers.

Project Justification

2022 data show that 86% of American librarians & 74% of other library workers are white, with no significant change in the past 15 years [1,2]. As the communities they serve grow more diverse, & library employee diversity remains low, the disparity grows [3,4,5]. Libraries serve a unique role as institutions of knowledge, education, reflection, aspiration that champion equity & inclusion--institutions where everyone should belong. Increasing diversity in the library workforce to reflect the community is imperative. While several national library association diversity programs exist, such as ALA Spectrum, ARL Kaleidoscope, SAA Mosaic, APALA, AILA, & REFORMA, there is a lack of state-level library association scholarship & career development programs to advance diversity in the library workforce [6,7,8]. This project will fill that gap by implementing the You Belong project in Missouri with input from an advisory council of representatives from other library associations, with the goal of producing an adaptable, scalable model for a program that library associations can deploy to retain & develop the existing library workforce.

Project Work Plan

The MLA Recruitment & Retention Task Force (RRTF) will 1) implement the You Belong program to address the persistent lack of diversity in the library profession by providing a suite of supports for an annual cohort of five diverse library employees & 2) with the guidance of an advisory council of other state library associations, develop an adaptable model & program curriculum that other associations can adopt to advance diversity in library workforces across the nation. RRTF members include Jennifer Gibson (Chair & Project Director), Cindy Thompson (Vice-Chair), Jason Alston, Jennifer Beckley, Nick Genthon, MaShonda Harris, Erin Magner, Casey Phillips, April Roy & Brandy Sanchez. The RRTF team is informed by the vast professional & lived experiences of the diverse group, which includes academic & public librarians, MLIS & non-MLIS holders, management & non-management employees & administrators as well as front-line employees. The RRTF is proud to also have the perspectives of two ALA Spectrum scholars & two ARL Kaleidoscope scholars on the team. The RRTF will plan & implement the You Belong program, with seven primary roles being: coordinating internships; coordinating mentors; executing the leadership academy; measuring outcomes & impact; overseeing project communications; advisory council liaison & model dissemination; & grant administration. Three remaining RRTF members will provide support to varying projects as needed. In 2024 & 2025, all RRTF members will engage in a variety of promotional activities to build awareness of the program & recruit applicants, mentors, internship host sites & donors. Conversations have already begun with representatives from Michigan, Oregon, & Kentucky Library Associations; RRTF members will recruit up to 2 more associations to form the advisory council which will meet remotely 3-5 times per year.

Eligible applicants for the You Belong program include any current library worker in Missouri from a historically underrepresented or minoritized group who is earning their undergraduate or MLIS degree. The application process will be as unburdensome as possible to present a low barrier for any interested applicant. RRTF will also hold info sessions & post FAQs about the application. In Summer 2025, RRTF will select five individuals (2

undergraduate, 3 MLIS) to form the inaugural annual You Belong cohort using a blind review process. Each cohort member will receive a one-time scholarship to support tuition costs & a laptop. MLIS students will also receive a one-time professional development stipend to pursue a career interest of their choice. The cohort will attend a leadership academy together in person at the MLA Annual Conference to participate in programming developed by RRTF to build networks, gain insight into library & information careers & build leadership skills. Cohort members will also have the opportunity to work at a host library as a paid intern for up to 320 hours. During their cohort experience, You Belong scholars will share their experiences & learn with each other, building a collegial support system. Throughout the first cohort year (Fall 2025-Summer 2026), RRTF will assess the program's outputs & outcomes, which will inform the simultaneous planning for the second You Belong cohort (Fall 2026-Summer 2027). RRTF will repeat this work in 2026, implementing the 2026-2027 You Belong cohort activities, planning for the next year, & staying engaged with the growing network of You Belong alumni. While development of the scalable model for dissemination to other library associations will take place throughout the project, concerted efforts to publish & disseminate the program mode will take place during 2026, with guidance from the association advisory council. This will allow for RRTF to submit detailed proposals for presentations at 2027 conferences.

Diversity Plan

The You Belong project design & implementation is informed by the diverse lived experiences & professional expertise of RRTF, which includes two ALA Spectrum Scholars & two ARL Kaleidoscope Scholars. The project plan includes administering a statewide survey of diverse library workers to establish baseline data as well as understand their actual challenges and needs in order to provide the most helpful support we can. The survey will be repeated throughout the project to track progress. Diversity is a key criterion for program eligibility & application requirements are designed to be as inclusive and unburdensome as possible. The program itself is designed to advance equitable access to the education & experiences needed to build a library career to create a more inclusive & diverse library workforce. Input & feedback from diverse library workers will inform not only the final design elements of the You Belong project but also the iteration of each cohort. Diverse mentors & speakers at the leadership academy will not only be sharing their time & expertise but also their emotional labor & will be compensated accordingly.

Project Results

The You Belong program design, leadership curricula & assessment instruments will be disseminated to other library associations as a scalable model they can adopt to develop diversity in the libraries they represent, thus increasing supports for a diverse library workforce across the nation & filling the gap between national diversity initiatives and state-level needs for diverse practitioners. The You Belong program will result in increased interest in and preparation for long-term library careers by increasing equitable access to education & professional development experiences for existing diverse library workers. You Belong scholars will develop their career plans, gain insight from library professionals & experience in the possibilities of a library career. They will receive financial support in the form of a scholarship, a laptop, and a professional development stipend for MLIS students. They will receive career & development support through mentorships, the leadership academy, participation at the MLA conference & a paid internship--while also developing a collegial, professional network. The You Belong program will encourage libraries of all types to create paid summer internship programs to recruit diverse individuals to careers in libraries, leading to increased opportunities to gain paid experience at a variety of library types.

Budget Summary

To support the MLA You Belong scholarship and internship program for a three-year period, the Missouri Library Association requests \$249,308 in funds from the IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian program. Since the total budget request for this implementation grant does not exceed \$249,999, no cost share is required. These \$249,308 in funds will be broken down as follows: \$21,960 for travel; \$115,188 for student support (providing a variety of supports for an annual cohort of five recipients, including a scholarship, laptop, travel expenses for the leadership academy, professional development costs & internship wages); \$45,100 in other costs (including stipends for mentors, RRTF members, library association advisory council members, and presenter fees for speakers at the leadership academy); & \$67,060 in indirect costs at a rate of 10% of modified total direct costs.