School of Information Science, University of Kentucky – Shannon Crawford Barniskis, PhD

Public Library Trustees: Selection, Training and Collaboration for Equity, Access, and Civic Engagement

Introduction: The School of Information Science at the University of Kentucky, along with tenure-track Assistant Professor Dr. Shannon Crawford Barniskis, respectfully requests $442,586 for a three year Laura Bush 21st Century (LB21) Early Career Development Research Grant to: (1) investigate current public library trustee demographics, selection, training, and work practices; (2) understand which practices support beneficial and inclusive governance; and (3) extend and develop an early-career scholar's research portfolio on public libraries, governance, and community capabilities.

Project Justification: The proposed project will contribute to the capacity of public library administration and boards of trustees in supporting shared governance processes that benefit communities, while supporting equity, access and civic engagement. Public libraries depend on community-based governance decisions about funding, policy development, and access to materials. These decisions often rest in the hands of volunteer boards of trustees. We do not know how trustees are trained, if at all, how they represent the diversity of their communities, or how they are otherwise prepared for the important work they do (Gibbs et al., 2007; Joeckel, 1935; Garceau, 1949; Prentice, 1973). Little research has explored trustees or their practices, and the most recent research on trustees in the United States is more than a decade old (e.g., Ames & Heid, 2009; Arns, 2007; Gibbs et al., 2007). Substantive research is older still (Belanger, 1995; Lynch, 1998; Prentice, 1973). This sparse body of research finds that trustees may have no connection to, or training in, library values of access, equity, and intellectual freedom (Gibbs et al., 2007). Yet trustees are often tasked with intellectual freedom and access decisions, such as whether challenged materials remain on library shelves (Preer, 2014). While untrained trustees can do well working with the library administration in times of relative calm, in times of tension a board of trustees can struggle (Arns, 2007). As trustees are asked to do more, due to recent increases in book challenges (ALA, 2023), they may need more tools to reconcile disparate perceptions of informational access. The proposed project will begin to address many of the research gaps and open questions about trustees. This study asks: Who are the nation's public library trustees, how are they are selected and trained, how do they work with libraries, what is their understanding of their role and its civic value, and how they might be better prepared for the many duties required of them?

This project extends the PI's pilot research in Kentucky, investigating trustee practices and the perceived impact of Senate Bill 167, a law that shifted responsibility for selecting trustees from the state library and local library boards to county judge executives. The initial findings of the pilot study highlight the urgent needs of small and rural libraries, and the judge executives working with them, to find, select, and train qualified trustees. In expanding and deepening this pilot study, this proposal addresses **Objective 2.3** of the IMLS LB21 program, by supporting untenured tenure-track faculty research. The PI's research has already encompassed public library mission statements, makerspace policy and practice, access, and the impacts of library programs, all aiming to understand how public libraries impact their communities. This project widens this research stream, by exploring the interconnected nature of trustee governance and the communities that libraries serve. In addition, the project will support graduate student researchers who are evolving their research careers, by embedding their early research experiences in practice. One graduate student will be part of the research team from the first year and another will join for the final year. They will learn by assisting with qualitative and quantitative data analysis, survey design, participant recruitment, interviews, design of materials and processes, and scholarly writing.

Project Work Plan: Research Questions (RQs) 1 and 2 are exploratory, examining existing practice and processes involving trustees. RQ3 will leverage the expertise of practitioners, scholars, and trustees to amplify the most promising practices to support community needs.

(RQ1): *Who are today's public library trustees, demographically? 1a: What are the current practices pertaining to the selection, training, collaboration, and advocacy efforts of public library trustees? 1b: How do trustees understand their roles? 1c: How, and to what extent, do differences in selecting or working with trustees impact library services?* The data for these questions will be gathered in a nationwide, largely quantitative survey sent to all state library listservs, with a goal of ensuring a representative sample of public library administrators and trustees. To ensure that diverse voices are heard, participants will be actively recruited from organizations such as Black Caucus American Library Association (BCALA), Reforma, the Association of Small & Rural Libraries, and the Social Responsibilities Roundtable. Data will be analyzed with ANOVA and descriptive statistics. The team will also identify and solicit participants for further interview and focus groups through snowball sampling and self-identified participant selection from the survey.

(RQ2): *Which current practices related to public library trustees are promising in supporting equitable, inclusive, and beneficial governance, as well as community members' civic engagement?* The team will gather data for these questions through interviews and focus groups and analyze it through iterative thematic analysis (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). From the interview and focus group participants, the team will use snowball and purposive methods to identify potential trustees, librarians, or other trustee decision-makers who are innovating and/or seeing beneficial results to their practices, to participate in a 20-person Participatory Action Research (PAR) Council. PAR is a form of collaborative inquiry that invites participants to engage deeply as co-researchers, and weaves diverse voices into the research process to

ensure inclusion, ideas more grounded in lived experiences, and to develop support **with**, rather than just **for** people (McIntyre, 2008). The team will also invite 1-2 additional scholars interested in library trustee governance to join the Council.

(RQ3): *What materials or processes would advance beneficial and inclusive trustee governance?* The data for this question will be gathered through convening the PAR Council in a two-day symposium. The Council will collaborate in determining promising practices from the previously-gathered data, add their own insights, and help to generate early draft materials supporting trustees and libraries. The team will gather data via participatory and universal design methods, including graffiti wall, KJ Technique, and design charette (Hanington & Martin, 2019). In PAR, collaborative analysis occurs in tandem with data collection, using iterative pattern-seeking analysis methods.

At least three scholarly articles, two trade publications, and six conference presentations will share and elicit feedback on the project's emerging analysis. Publications will be distributed as open access articles or through trade journals, to ensure practitioners and communities can benefit from them. Presentations will target local and national practitioner conferences, as well as scholarly conferences. In addition, the team will cultivate social media channels to keep practitioners informed about the questions and insights of each stage. The findings of the study will be generalizable due to the recruitment of a wide array of participants, triangulation of the data through mixed research methods, and PAR methods. The resulting information will be usable and adaptable for public libraries and communities across the United States. All anonymized and aggregated data will be released in Dataverse, or a similar open data repository, upon completion of the project.

Year	Data Gathering	Data Analysis	Output
One/RQ1	Develop, test (fall), distribute national survey (winter)	Analyze with ANOVA and descriptive statistics, identify potential focus group and interview participants (spring)	Survey, 1 publication (summer), 1 conference, questions for Focus Groups & Interviews (summer)
Two/RQ2	Focus Groups & Interviews (fall)	Iterative thematic analysis, identify potential PAR Council members (winter/spring)	2 publications (spring/summer), 3 conferences
Three/RQ3	PAR Council symposium (fall)	PAR collaborative analysis (fall), ongoing iterative thematic analysis (winter/spring)	1 publication (summer), 2 conferences, collaboratively designed early draft materials for a trustee toolkit (summer)

Diversity Plan. This project centers diversity in its methods, participants, and in its aim. It seeks to assist inclusive library boards of trustees, and to address the needs of diverse communities, particularly small, rural, or socioeconomically marginalized communities. Participants will be recruited from across the country, and through organizations that emphasize diverse perspectives. An honorarium will be offered to PAR Council participants to ensure that losing days of income to participate is not a financial barrier.

Results. Public libraries support people's freedom to engage with a wide range of ideas, as active members of a self-governing society (ALA, 2023; Preer, 2014). As key decision-makers in libraries, trustees impact the public sphere and this free exchange of ideas necessary to a thriving participatory democracy (Post, 2011). The results of this study will support that public sphere, by assisting communities of all sizes and configurations in cultivating their public library boards of trustees in ways that best reflect community needs, as well as equitable access. The project does so by first understanding trustees and their roles, then by crafting, with the PAR Council, materials to activate and sustain promising practices in inclusive, diverse, community-centered library governance. The findings from this project will support the well-being of communities across the United States, by supporting this community governance of libraries.

The impact on the early career of the PI will also be significant. Though they have already published and presented on impacts of public libraries on their community-members' capabilities, and how libraries reflect their own values as they serve communities, this project grounds this research portfolio in the scholarly conversation about how libraries work **with** their communities through sharing governance for the benefit of all. After this project is complete, the PI aims to further develop a comprehensive trustee toolkit, based on this study's findings, and perform follow-up studies on the impacts of the toolkit. The toolkit will be aimed at libraries of different sizes, locations, and community makeup and needs, with an emphasis on supporting small, rural, and socio-economically challenged communities.

Budget Summary. The estimated total request from IMLS for this 3-year project is $442,586 with no cost share. This includes $109,805 for PI salary with a 10-20-20% distribution of effort over three years and 11.11% summer effort and fringe; Salaries for 1 PhD Research Assistant for three years and 1 part-time graduate assistant for one year, $137,172 (including $44,293 tuition remission for the 3-year PhD RA); Conference travel and PAR travel $21,568; Participant incentives and speaker fees, $16,240; Supplies $8,300; Publication costs $8,600; Other direct costs, including PAR Council Symposium $8,556; Indirect Costs $132,345 based on UKY's negotiated rate of 53%.