2024 IMLS LB21 Proposal - Library Makers: Growing a Community for Lifelong Learners and Leaders

Introduction

Our proposed project, *Library Makers: Growing A Community for Lifelong Learners and Leaders,* is designed to support the strategic expansion of a national community of practitioners through the professional development of its leaders and members. Califa is requesting $249,353.32 for a 2-year Implementation grant from the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program (LB21) to help achieve Goal 3, Objectives 3.3 in partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Champaign-Urbana (C-U) Community Fab Lab at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The *Library Makers* community was created to address the need of library professionals developing and delivering maker programs in diverse settings and locations across the country to have a place to share resources and learnings about how maker programming can be both sustainable and responsive to the 21st-century informational and learning needs of their local communities. We're entering a new phase of growth for this community and wish to: (1) Identify and vet the current problems of practice that library maker staff face and, with community members, co-create a suite of professional development resources to build staff self-efficacy; (2) Expand access and exposure for libraries and communities that are traditionally underrepresented in collaborative and online forums, particularly those related to making; and (3) Develop a sustainable distributed leadership structure that focuses on professional growth for community members.

Project Justification

The current IMLS-funded initiative (2021-2024) is built on the learnings from the Makers in the Library project (2018-2020), funded by a Library Services and Technology Act grant through the CA State Library. In Feb. 2021, project staff held focus groups to better understand the needs of library makerspaces as they began to emerge from the pandemic. Participants expressed a desire for support, guidelines, and resources that would help them strengthen and expand access to their maker programs. These conversations served as the catalyst for creating a national, practitioner-led community, now known as *Library Makers*, to support libraries recovering from the pandemic, promote DEAI practices for staff and the communities they serve, and build library professionals' capacity, knowledge, practice, and skill sets. A set of 7 diverse (rural, suburban, urban), geographically dispersed public libraries were chosen from a national pool of applicants as Charter Members to provide initial leadership to this community. This year, an additional 14 individual library maker staff were brought on as Ambassadors. The rapid growth of this community is a strong testament to the need for its expansion. At the time this proposal was submitted, there were 345 LibraryMakers.org community members,1600 Library Makers Facebook group members, and a newsletter mailing list of 725 individuals.

The library field is recognizing the growing need for library makerspace professionals to connect and share resources, evidenced by the upcoming petition from the Univ. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to start an ALA Round Table focused on library makerspaces. However, there is also a need for more affordable and accessible professional learning opportunities and leadership development, especially for those working in more isolated settings (rural, academic, tribal). The study by Knox, et. al. revealed that "well-trained staff are key to a makerspace that provides value and impact for the community" (pg. 28). It also highlighted that maker staff must be constantly learning and adapting, pointing to a need for a dynamic professional development platform that is more participatory and sensitive to changing issues than one-off workshops, conference presentations, or college courses. The LibraryMakers.org community will help fill this gap by providing free access to professional learning opportunities driven by an individuals' needs and interests through live online events and more informal conversations on our site. In our first 6 months of community activity, we have drawn library staff from 27 states across the U.S. to our live events. This has become one of the main ways we attract new members to engage in our community.

Project Work Plan

To ensure that our growth plan is aligned with the needs and issues of a fluid and diverse library maker audience, our first priority will be to conduct listening sessions with both current community members and other groups and individuals that are not adequately represented in *Library Makers* (e.g., tribal, school, and academic libraries). We expect that a more formal study will not only help shape the direction of our community in meeting challenges in a variety of library types, but also provide creative and resourceful solutions that can be shared more broadly. During the study, we will test and refine our currently identified problems of practice (marketing and attracting new audiences, advocating for makerspaces as a core library service, overcoming

cultural and socio-economic barriers, ensuring sustainability, addressing operational challenges, building self-efficacy through staff training).

With data in hand, we will determine what types of additional content (e.g., a webinar series on a particular topic), features (e.g., a dedicated area of the website where members can tackle sensitive issues), services (e.g. formal mentorship programs), and outreach efforts (e.g., local events) would engage more library audiences in a professional learning community of their peers. Growth of this online community will be promoted through our membership, leaders and Ambassadors as well as with the help from our partners at the Univ. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who are working to create a new ALA Makerspace Round Table set to launch in Fall of 2024. In addition to monitoring growth in general membership, we will study a variety of analytics to help assess the health of our community through the Mighty Networks platform on which LibraryMakers.org is hosted. Metrics will include engagement rates and tracking levels of individual activity to follow the development of new leaders and the number of conversations that address our newly refined problems of practice.

Key to the growth of our community is the expansion of our leadership team through the Ambassador program, which leverages the skills, experience, and network of diverse and emergent library leaders. Each year, we will bring on a new Ambassador cohort to create a continuous cycle of leadership. The trajectory of a *Library Makers* member may start by hearing about our community at a local conference or by answering a few questions when creating a free account on LibraryMakers.org. From there, new members can gain valuable insights from questions posed by their peers, through participation in monthly virtual Happy Hours, or by messaging others based on shared interests. Members may be asked to participate on a panel in an upcoming learning event, contribute content to a blog post, or apply to be an Ambassador. Ambassadors receive additional professional growth opportunities to help them feel confident to present at regional or national conferences, gain insights into equitable community management strategies, or transition to one of our *Library Makers* leadership committees. Clearly defining the various roles and responsibilities needed to sustain a practitioner-led community of practice will be the focus of the first ever in-person meeting of our leadership team taking place in conjunction with the 2025 Play Make Learn Conference. Our partners at Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison have agreed to provide the use of their space and a spot in the pre-conference program.

Project Results
This project aims to deliver a model for how to sustain and grow a practitioner-led community for library professionals built on a collaborative and inclusionary process of distributed leadership, decision-making, and communication that fosters trust, accountability, and shared learning. We believe that if leadership and responsibility are equitable and meaningful, the knowledge and experience that result are likely to lead to both individual and collective learning opportunities as well as increased motivation. Promoting equal access to opportunities for leadership is consistent with and contributes to the community's norms, beliefs, and principles from which our members develop a shared purpose.

All data collected during the initial listening sessions, the ongoing assessment and evaluation measures including annual surveys of community members and interviews with leadership team members, as well the analytics available through the Mighty Networks platform, will be made publicly available and used to create strategic content and outreach plans that can inform others working in the fields of maker programming or library staff training. In addition, we will apply key takeaways from the listening sessions to create two shareable resources to build the capacity of our current and future *Library Makers* leaders and others who run professional learning communities. The first will be a guide on how to implement smaller needs assessments of members of an online community to ensure that we are constantly responding to their professional interests and needs. The second will be a white paper on the problems of practice for library maker programming, co-written by some community members, that can be distributed online and at various regional and national conferences.

Budget
We request a no cost share amount of $249,353.32 to support the following: 1) salary and wages: $49,920.00; 2) fringe: $0.00; 3) travel: $35,886.00; 4) supplies, materials, equipment: $5789.75; 5) subawards and contract: $90,180.00; 6) student support: $40,600.00; 7) other costs: $8,000.00; and 8) indirect costs: $18,977.57.

References
Knox, E., Koh, K., & Zalot, A. (2022). *Measuring the Impact and Value of Makerspaces in Public Libraries*. https://www.measuringmakerspaces.com/white-paper