

## BUILDING CAPACITY AND RESILIENCE FOR DIGITAL STEWARDSHIP THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

### Introduction:

The School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-SILS) requests \$343,066 from the Laura Bush 21<sup>st</sup> Century Library Program for a three-year Early Career Research Development project to study, evaluate and model how professional communities of practice working in digital stewardship<sup>1</sup> address field-wide challenges through collective action. Project Director (PD) Dr. Alexandra Chassanoff will use a multi-method approach to investigate, understand and articulate the shared characteristics, functional activities, and attribution of value that can sustain participatory, collaborative work. The following research questions guide the project:

- *How do professional CoPs support collective learning and knowledge sharing across domains?*
- *What gaps exist between best-in-practice approaches and the needs of digital stewards?*
- *What motivates digital stewards to participate, engage, and collaborate in CoPs?*

### Project Justification:

A decade after the foundational “AIMS Project” (2012), digital stewardship continues to be a significant challenge for libraries and archives. A recent assessment by Ithaka S&R notes that “very little digital preservation activity is actually taking place” (Rieger, 2022). Practitioners report ongoing difficulties adapting and implementing best-in-practice theoretical models such as the OAIS and Digital Curation Centre Lifecycle model (Wilson, 2017; Keitel & Mitcham, 2023). Digital stewardship activities at institutions are sites of complex and evolving practices (Post et al., 2019), often composed of ad-hoc workflows and emergent sociotechnical tensions that make it difficult to model integrated approaches (Chassanoff & Post, 2020; Chassanoff & Wang, 2021). These evolving and persistent challenges underscore the need to explore new approaches for digital stewardship (Lavoie & Malpas, 2015) and to develop capacity-building efforts for field-wide knowledge exchange, collaboration, and shared learning (NDSA, 2020).

At the same time, practitioners frequently work together across domains to develop impactful, innovative solutions to shared challenges.<sup>2</sup> Despite these accomplishments, the field has not yet formally adopted or developed an incentivized model for participating in professional CoPs. The concept was originally introduced by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) in their groundbreaking study on apprenticeships, where they concluded that learning is a fundamentally social activity. Wenger-Trayner has continued to develop useful CoP models and frameworks for studying social learning capabilities. Most library and information science (LIS) scholarship uses CoP concepts in description rather than analysis of professional communities, though the application of a CoP lens in emerging areas of practice can be useful for developing shared vocabularies and transferring cross-domain knowledge (Rios et al., 2020). CoP models also are frequently adapted for use by librarians in support of understanding researcher needs (Green, 2014; Freeman et al., 2022).

Participatory approaches to shared problems in digital stewardship offer actionable pathways forward (Chassanoff et al., 2023). In alignment with LB21 Program’s goals and objectives, the proposed project will advance the PD’s long term research agenda, career trajectory, and professional development (objective 2.3) by building on a decade of applied research studying community-driven approaches to digital stewardship. Additionally, the project will support training of the library and archival workforce in digital collection management (objective 3.5). As an LIS educator teaching applied practice courses such as digital preservation and records management, the PD plans to use findings to tailor curriculum design as needed, and to explore the feasibility of a digital stewardship “collaboratory” for learning, sharing, and practicing new technical skills.

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<sup>1</sup> This proposal uses the following definitions: communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner, 2015) and digital stewardship is “all activities related to the care and management of digital objects over time” (McCurry, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Examples of collaborative implementation projects include: [National Digital Stewardship Alliance’s Levels of Preservation](#), the Data Curation Network’s [Data Curation Primers](#), and the [UC Guidelines for Born-Digital Archival Description](#).

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### Project Work Plan:

To understand the factors that motivate and sustain collaborative, participatory work, the proposed project combines virtual ethnographic methods with a community of practice analytical framework. In **Y1**, the PD will recruit and hire a doctoral student to assist with project management, including data collection, analysis, outreach, and communication. The PD will also solicit and confirm participation from identified coordinators at four professional CoPs<sup>3</sup> and a five-person advisory board with expertise in practice-driven approaches to community cultivation, and submit relevant IRBs for data collection and analysis. The project team (PD and doctoral student) will design and distribute a field-wide survey for digital stewards designed to: a) identify shared obstacles and pressing challenges in current practice; and b) understand motivations and potential incentives for participation in professional activities. Descriptive analysis of survey data will be augmented by thematic analysis ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)) and culminate in the publication of a **Summative Report on Digital Stewardship Practices** outlining current challenges and opportunities. In **Y2**, the project team will conduct a **multi-case virtual ethnography** of four CoPs ([Hine, 2008](#)), including: **site observations** of online CoP meetings and community forums and **document analysis** of community-created documentation (e.g., governance, membership and outreach strategies, research outputs). Additionally, the team will conduct in-depth, focused interviews with twenty CoP cohort members to elaborate on emergent themes. In **Y3**, the project team will triangulate data collection and analysis ([Baxter and Jack, 2008](#)) to create thick description cases ([Geertz, 1973](#)) for each CoP. The extended team, including cohort participants and advisory board members, will host a two-hour **Community Webinar** to highlight and share successful strategies in generative CoPs. Cumulative project findings will inform the development of a **Guide to Cultivating Professional Communities of Practice**.

### Diversity Plan:

The stewardship of digital cultural heritage is inherently about inclusivity, because it determines “who has access, to what heritage, and which new narratives and knowledge can be generated about it” ([Wallace, 2019](#)). In recent literature, digital stewards report feeling dissatisfied and disempowered in the workplace due to organizational misalignment, noting chronic under-resourcing and the absence of administrative buy-in and support ([Blumenthal et al., 2020](#); [NDSA, 2021](#)). The proposed research focuses attention on practitioner efforts and needs, in service toward retaining them as vital stakeholders with invaluable tacit knowledge. The PD also intentionally selected CoPs and advisory board members who represent diverse perspectives across multiple domains, institutional types, roles, and organizational structures.

### Project Results:

The outcomes of this research will yield key insights into the support mechanisms that help sustain and grow professional CoPs in libraries and archives practice settings. This project has three key deliverables: 1) a **Summative Report on Digital Stewardship Practices**; 2) a two-hour **Community Webinar**; and 3) A **Guide to Cultivating Professional Communities of Practice**. All project findings will be disseminated widely to cross-domain, professional associations and conferences, affiliated working groups, and in peer-reviewed scholarship (journal articles, conference proceedings).

### Budget Summary:

The project requests \$343,066 to provide funding for the following: \$135,292 for student support (1 doctoral students' tuition support, stipends, and benefits, Y1-Y3); \$73,456 for PD (summer salary, fringe benefits, and course releases); \$2,500 for advisory board stipends; \$6,300 for PD and GRA conference travel support; \$7,500 for SILS ITS fees; \$5,000 (\$250 x 20 participants) for Cohort interview participation; \$4000 (\$20 x 200 participants) for field-wide survey participation; and \$109,018 in indirect costs at the negotiated on-campus rate of 55%.

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<sup>3</sup> The PD has confirmed preliminary interest from four professional CoPs: [The National Digital Stewardship Alliance](#), [The BitCurator Consortium](#), [The Data Curation Network](#), and [DLF's Born-Digital Access Working Group](#).