

Developing Training for Rural Library Workers to Build Inclusive Archives

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ABSTRACT

Nearly four in ten public libraries in the US are located in rural communities and serve more than 30 million Americans, and one-third of public library buildings serve populations of 2,500 people or fewer (Swan, Grimes, & Owens, 2013 <https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/brief201305.pdf>). Yet, training for practitioners across LIS and best practices often do not scale to these smaller memory institutions. This project advocates for a reorientation of curricula that centers community memory and recognizes small and rural libraries. Co-PI's Bateman and Mattock observed these challenges during partnerships with rural public libraries in Iowa: untouched boxes of photographs, cabinets brimming with yellowing newspapers, whole basements of genealogical documents and burial records in storage. Stewarding these untouched collections are overworked library directors, rightly more concerned with immediate patron needs such as computer access. Being the only memory institutions within large radii, rural libraries become presumed repositories for community memory records, donated by well-meaning citizens cleaning out the family attic or by the local organizations producing such documents. Describing this phenomenon to librarians doesn't take many words; to them, it's self-evident. "I know exactly the problem you're talking about," a rural librarian from Vermont responded to us. But getting to the root of the problem is harder, and finding solutions is harder still.

The IMLS-sponsored project "Activating Archives in Remote Communities" evolved in response to the challenges that we have observed. Over the past year, the project has convened a diverse group of community-engaged practitioners with the aim of understanding how MLIS programs can respond to the needs of these rural archival spaces through curricular interventions and open educational resources that can help prepare rural public librarians to engage with archival materials and become aware of the cultural pluralities that constitute the vast service areas of small libraries. Representing practitioners from across the United States, "Activating Archives" includes the perspectives of the LIS professionals who are tasked with preserving community memory as collaborators in the development of a curriculum that serves their needs

and increases their capacity. Together we aim to provide an adaptable model for community memory and engagement that is directly applicable to the most remote communities. The “Activating Archives” advisory panel includes community-based and rural practitioners from across the United States: Joshua Burford, Director of Outreach and Lead Archivist for the Invisible Histories Project; Jerald Crook, Founder and Executive Director of Alabama’s Higher Ground Society; Jessica Ieremia, director of Alaska’s Sitka Public Library; Doris Malkmus, archivist and oral historian; Allie Parrsmith, director of the Iowa’s West Liberty Public Library; Verónica Reyes-Escudero, University of Arizona’s Katherine B. Willcock Head of Special Collections; Monique Tyndall an independent expert with experience in tribal archives and cultural affairs; and, Jessamyn West, librarian and community technologist in rural Vermont. The panel addressed many of the known challenges in small and rural collections, the lack of resources (time, funding, staff), and the reliance on volunteers. The group also stressed the necessity of collaboration, the politics of building and navigating partnerships, the challenges to building trust across heterogeneous communities, and the ethics of reparative archival work. As we concluded our conversations, the panel offered their perspectives on pedagogical interventions within LIS curricula and provided insight into how open educational resources can support training within MLIS programs and support the work of practitioners already in place in rural institutions.

During this session, project PIs, MLIS student collaborators, and community-engaged archivist Aiden Bettine will present the initial findings from the advisory panel and invite the session attendees to add their perspectives to the already rich conversation, further informing the resulting training modules and educational resources produced by the grant. The presenters will ask the audience to work together to share their perspectives and invite feedback from our initial findings, further informing the project deliverables that include training modules and open education resources to support LIS training at all levels.

Overall, this project aims to strengthen rural-community resilience, belonging, and well-being by encouraging collaborations that will help communities maintain their own cultural heritage sustainably. Our research reflects memory practices that de-center white, Western archival methods and instead reflect the numerous and mixed methods by which diverse community constituencies self-represent. The project has recruited an advisory panel that represents region-specific and culturally situated memory practices. We also hope that our research and curriculum will be used widely to help include non-dominant populations in library engagement as well as to include their voices in community histories. Finally, we view small and rural libraries as underrepresented organizations in LIS training and literature that nevertheless serve millions of diverse US patrons. Our focus on small and rural libraries includes particular attention to the populations who are likewise discounted in LIS discourse, such as rural Black library users.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

curriculum; pedagogy; archives; public libraries; community-led services

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

community-engagement; archival praxis; small and rural libraries; community partnerships

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2023.1265>