

# **Collaborations to Support the SJ4A Curriculum in Archival Studies and Social Justice Intersections: Training of Community-Embedded Paraprofessional Archivists Who Are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Institute of Museum and Library Services' *Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program* recently awarded a \$463,238 grant titled "Training of Community-Embedded Social Justice Archivists" (SJ4A) to the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alabama. The grant's goal is to recruit/train 17 community-embedded paraprofessional archivists who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color to complete their master's degree part-time from January 2023 – December 2024 in the SLIS' synchronous distance education program. SJ4A meets an urgent need to diversify the professions and for archivists to apply social justice competencies in work experience and community-embedded practice with graduate instruction and curriculum support. This paper identifies ongoing collaborations to support curriculum development in the SJ4A phases, including recruitment of students, needs assessment of archives-related professionals about social justice services, implementation of educational activities, mentoring, evaluation of program outcomes, dissemination of results, and post-graduation career tracking.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

archives; education programs; social justice.

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC); collaborations; community-embedded; paraprofessionals.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights ongoing collaborations to support archival studies and social justice intersections in the curriculum for a three-year grant entitled “Training of Community-Embedded Social Justice Archivists” (SJ4A)<sup>1</sup> recently awarded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), *Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program – FY 2022 Guidelines*, to the School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS) at the University of Alabama (UA) [RE-252356-OLS-22] (SJ4A, n.d.). The UA SLIS partners with multiple state archives-related agencies<sup>2</sup> to achieve the SJ4A goal of recruiting/training 17 community-embedded paraprofessional archivists who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) to complete their master’s degree part-time from January 2023 – December 2024 in the SLIS’ synchronous distance education program. The SJ4A addresses current gaps in diversifying the workforce and operationalizing how-to’s of social justice practice within galleries, libraries, archives, and museums while proposing systematic, intentional, action-oriented, community-engaged, and impact-driven education (Mehra, 2021; Mehra and Rioux, 2016). BIPOC archivist paraprofessionals living in their communities are in strong positions to integrate social justice principles of fairness, justice, equity, inclusiveness, empathy, and empowerment in developing information-based solutions that address their communities’ injustices while engaging with underserved populations and others (Poole, 2020; Wakimoto et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2014). SJ4A students are receiving a structured, individually tailored cohesive curriculum drawing upon intersections in archival studies and social justice, receiving formal/informal professional mentoring by educators/practitioners, applying acquired skills through an integrated practicum course with community-based agencies external to their workplace (during summer 2024). Students are operationalizing archives management and social justice skillsets incorporated into the curriculum to develop work applications, practices, and interventions that create tangible deliverables, especially tailored towards meeting underrepresented needs in their embedded communities (Mehra et al., 2024). The SJ4A is currently underway in its third and final year. This paper identifies ongoing collaborations to support curriculum development in the SJ4A phases, including student recruitment, needs assessment of archives-related professionals, educational activities, mentoring, program evaluation and dissemination, and post-graduation career-tracking.

## 2. CONTEXT OF NEED

Both the Core Values and Core Ethics of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) identify the need for diversity in archival collections and “acknowledge that, both historically and currently, not all members of the profession abide by these beliefs or guidelines” within a reality of work that has historically stayed privileged/biased while representing a semblance of neutrality (SAA, 2020). As a result, today’s archives-related agencies increasingly recognize the

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<sup>1</sup> See SJ4A website at: <http://socialjusticearchivists-sj4a.ua.edu/>.

<sup>2</sup> SJ4A partners include Alabama Department of Archives and History, Alabama Public Library Service, Multnomah County and the Oregon Country Fair, New Mexico State Library, Society of American Archivists, and Special Collections and Archives at the California State University. See SJ4A people listed at: <http://socialjusticearchivists-sj4a.ua.edu/people.html>.

past's lapses and a need to center social justice in their special collections, evidenced by recent emergence of community archives, preservation literacy programs, and community archives consulting programs (Liew et al., 2020; Caswell et al., 2017). While these developments are encouraging, the question remains as to if the profession possesses the necessary capacity to support such initiatives outside of larger well-resourced, institutions (Engseth, 2018).

Moreover, archival-related disciplines have struggled with diversifying their ranks/membership throughout their whitewashed histories and contemporary practice. They have resisted discarding dated notions, including neutrality, passive community bystanders, solely internalized foci, and limited input-output planning in service design to generate external impacts of change in harsh sociocultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic realities (Tai, 2020). Further, graduating archivists, and those in the workforce, continue to remain predominantly white and few racial/ethnic minorities have gravitated towards the archives-related professions (Meissner, 2016; Poole, 2017). Dr. M. H. Ramirez<sup>3</sup> (2015), Associate Dean and Chief Librarian at The City College of New York, critically ascribes an intellectual, methodological, and racial homogeneity to the archival professions for its resistance to engage with intersections between race, power, and whiteness (Greene, 2013). Archivist-historians also note that a lack of racial/ethnic minority representation is directly related to poor recruitment/retention support provided to BIPOC members (e.g., white supremacy and linguistic vagueness of “diversity”-related meanings as an “empty signifier” in archival education) (Sheffield et al., 2021, p. 2). The critical role of mentorship/networking in supporting the professional development of minority archivists is also a major barrier to recruiting/retaining archival professionals from underrepresented backgrounds (Fritz, 2019). More BIPOC archives-related professionals with MLIS degrees are urgently needed to serve their increasingly diverse populations around the country. SJ4A graduates will be the first of many BIPOC archives leaders who can act as change agents to effectively mitigate the forces contributing to the limited impact the professions in making a difference external to their work environments.

### 3. CONTEXT OF RESEARCH

The SLIS supports a comprehensive archival studies program which adheres to the SAA's (2016) recommended educational guidelines on graduate education, is listed in the SAA educational directory, and is also an invited consortium member of the Archival Education and Research Initiative (AERI, n.d.). The SLIS' programmatic offerings include MLIS-Archival concentration (36 Credit Hours), in which all students in the SJ4A program are enrolled, and that has been evaluated and approved by the UA Board of Trustees and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE). SJ4A students are completing a social justice emphasis within an already emerging archival studies program in an ALA-accredited school, capable of supporting their academic and professional goals. Approximately forty-five percent of incoming 2021 MLIS students (of a total of 128)<sup>4</sup> self-declared as archival studies concentrators. These students (and SJ4A enrollees) also benefit from participation in extracurricular professional development

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<sup>3</sup>[https://www.ccny.cuny.edu/news/ccny-names-mario-h-ramirez-new-associate-dean-and-chief-librarian?srsId=AfmBOooiYNWWYLNq\\_pYTUsINqSYmpWzs8k\\_eM1FO0H7vDxBewPctNYiY](https://www.ccny.cuny.edu/news/ccny-names-mario-h-ramirez-new-associate-dean-and-chief-librarian?srsId=AfmBOooiYNWWYLNq_pYTUsINqSYmpWzs8k_eM1FO0H7vDxBewPctNYiY).

<sup>4</sup> <https://cis.ua.edu/accreditation/#slis>.

activities, including an active SAA student chapter and mentorship opportunities provided by the local, regional, and national community partners.

#### 4. SJ4A CURRICULUM DESIGN

The SJ4A curriculum is semi-structured in that students are expected to take the three SLIS required courses (providing core knowledge functionalities in the profession), four courses focusing on archival studies, four courses on social justice, including one elective course of student choice, and one practicum/internship (see Table 1). The SJ4A program is individually tailored with flexibility based on students integrating context-related realities in their course deliverables while drawing connections between archival studies and social justice intersections as they respond to their community-embedded experiences in their unique settings around the country. These course deliverables/products that students individually develop in their course assignments are expected to be useful/applied to their local contexts of their archives/libraries and communities. Explore SJ4A students' select course work via their websites at URL: <https://socialjusticearchivists-sj4a.ua.edu/people.html>.

**Table 1**

*Course requirements/tentative schedule for SJ4A students' plan of study (January 2023 – December 2024).*

Competencies/Outcome Expectations	Req. Hrs.	Examples of Courses (3 credit-hours each)
1. <i>Knowledge of core functionalities in the profession</i> (required courses that all students currently take).	9	LS 500 (Information and Media); LS 501 (Information in Communities); LS 513 (Professional Paths).
2. <i>Archival studies skills</i>	12	LS 555 (Introduction to Archival Studies); LS 556 (Intellectual Foundations of Archival Theory and Practice); LS 557 (Archival Appraisal); LS 558 (Archival Representation, Access, and Use).
3. <i>Social justice skills</i>	12	CIS 650 (Applying Diversity Leadership Theories and Praxis in Information Organizations); CIS 650 (Community-Engaged Scholarship); CIS 668 Social Justice and Inclusion Advocacy; LS 621 (Intercultural Perspectives in Youth Literature); LS 544 Cultural Diversity Programming; LS 580 (Outreach to Diverse Populations); LS 581 (Universal Design for Information Technologies); LS 583 (Social Aspects of Information); LS 582 (Race, Gender, and Sexuality in LIS).
4. <i>Social justice archivist practicum</i>	3	Practicum experience in a community-based environment external to their regular work setting.
<i>Comprehensive ePortfolio</i> [required]	0	Student homepage will be tailored to represent SJ4A grant experiences during the MLIS program. Components include: Philosophy of LIS Practice + Two course/work samples that support each of the four Program Learning Outcomes at UA SLIS.
<i>TOTAL</i>	36	

## 5. SJ4A COLLABORATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS

The SJ4A planning/development was informed by ongoing feedback provided by paraprofessional students in the UA SLIS' online program and regional archivists/librarians in the UA SLIS's advisory board and alumni networks that contributed a fuller picture about the context of study. Participation in local, regional and state-level archive/library networks established ties with the professional community over several years and gained their support and involvement in the grant proposal. Contributions by public archivists/librarians in the pilot study provided formal need assessment evidence to inform grant development. Further, project partners involvement throughout the grant is providing validity, leadership, knowledge, networks, experience, and drive to further its agenda. The following is a brief summary.

**5.1 SJ4A Phase 1 Collaborations: Recruitment (August – December 2022):** The *SJ4A Recruitment Board* consisted of 10 members (mix of BIPOC and white archives-related professionals) identified from the team's professional networks; they helped create a plan and materials for competitive recruitment of diverse underrepresented students to the program. Prospective SJ4A applicants were reached through the UA SLIS's existing recruitment mechanisms, including outreach to professional organizations, and advertising on the UA SLIS website. Individual applicants working with members from the *SJ4A Recruitment Board* and others in consultation with the SJ4A faculty were encouraged to apply. Subsequently, we recruited more than 70 potential applicants who initially established contact, of whom 29 submitted their application materials, and eighteen were selected (one withdrew after the first semester). The grant required admission of 12 SJ4A Fellows. Thanks to strong recruitment and an exceptional applicant pool, we were able to secure College/School resources to additionally admit 6 SJ4A Scholars fully funded by the UA. An extensive list of email contacts in archives-related agencies (including public libraries) from most states, in addition to professional electronic lists, were used for marketing and promotion, identifying potential candidates from diverse community populations, and helping them complete admission procedures and application materials in a timely manner. Applications were reviewed in October 2022 and a decision about the final pool was made by mid-November 2022 based on submitted application materials tailored to the SJ4A's expectations. Plus, the SJ4A faculty had ensuing conversations with strong applicants and communicated with select employers (with the applicant's permission) to determine suitability into the program, potential social justice initiatives in the work setting, employer support/resources for the applicants while they were to be enrolled in the SJ4A, and other aspects to ensure student success. These communications have been sustained (as needed based on student feedback) with few employers of SJ4A students (once admitted) throughout the SJ4A time-period to meet SJ4A objectives and support enriching experiences for all concerned.

**5.2 SJ4A Phase 2 Collaborations: Needs Assessment/Recruitment (August – December 2022):** *SJ4A Needs Assessment Interviews* (formal, informal) were conducted with fifty archives-related professionals (BIPOC and white, diverse professional backgrounds) who provided feedback regarding challenges in developing and integrating social justice applications in their regions. They addressed topics related to local information needs, use of information resources and services, challenges and barriers, areas of improvement, and the use of computers and information technologies to further social justice and impact-driven offerings in archives-related

settings. Notes were taken during these conversations and select interviews were recorded to permit additional content analysis. Findings informed the development of mentoring materials, course content, practicum projects, advising protocols, and the annual *SJ4A summits*. This is allowing SJ4A to develop as an evidenced-based program while responding to current concerns and needs of archives-related professionals and their institutions.

**5.3 SJ4A Phase 3 Collaborations: Educational/Training (Ongoing January 2023 - December 2024):** Beginning in spring 2023, SJ4A students enrolled in two courses per semester including the summer session. Archival studies' deliverables applied toward community-embedded settings in the SJ4A courses include: introduction to archival studies and social justice intersections; intellectual foundations of archival theory and practice; archival appraisal; archival representation, access, and use. Social justice-related content in the SJ4A courses include: social justice and inclusion advocacy; applying diversity leadership praxis; community-engaged scholarship; outreach to diverse populations (or other). Both the archival studies and social justice courses integrate intersections across these areas of impact, allowing students to respond to community-based realities in the workplace, and address issues of privilege/bias in archival practices (e.g., sole reliance on Western imperialist axiology). Admitted SJ4A students participated in an online *SJ4A New Student Orientation* during January 2023 where they were introduced to both the SLIS MLIS and SJ4A requirements/procedures.

**5.4 SJ4A Phase 4 Collaborations: Professional Mentoring (Ongoing January 2023 - December 2024):** Seventeen archivists/librarians with MLIS (or associated) degrees formed the *SJ4A Practitioner-Mentoring Board* that is working with SJ4A educators beginning January 2023 to tailor individual students' academic programs in integrating archival studies and social justice competencies in response to their community-embedded settings. *SJ4A Practitioner-Mentoring Board* members were selected from our professional networks based on their inclination, expertise, alignment of interests with individual student's focus, geography, work place type, student suggestions, etc. These mentors are assisting the SJ4A students (as needed by the student) in developing/implementing community information initiatives, providing professional development advice, and guidance regarding the political realities of social justice driven information work. The students participate in the mentoring experience to serve as a structured element and they individualize (as needed) to ensure that the mentoring aligns with their contexts of practice and professional goals. Synchronous online conversations have involved faculty, practitioner-mentors, and students to identify learning objectives and course recommendations (as needed) in an educational strategic plan based on the students individual learning objectives and professional goals. This provides an alignment between the program curriculum, course outputs, practicum component, research projects, and allowed for early identification and remediation of academic deficiencies.

**5.5 SJ4A Phase 5 Collaborations: Evaluation + Dissemination (Continuously):** Feedback from SJ4A students, mentors, and others is being regularly collected (as needed). Project researchers are continuously analyzing the effectiveness of students' experiences in developing archival studies and social justice course applications for their embedded communities. Quantitative survey-based online student evaluations at the beginning and end of semesters and qualitative interviews (as needed) during alternate semesters are providing students opportunities to share feedback on career choice, academic success, professional association participation, and the graduates' evaluation of the program throughout their period of study. The key to the ongoing evaluation is careful documentation of the several aspects of the project, with particular emphasis on which aspects were most successful and which need to be refined.

In addition, providing students an opportunity to share feedback during interviews each semester ensures tracking issues and concerns as they emerge. In order to consider the possibility of student intimidation owing to perceived authority hierarchies (e.g., faculty vs. student) during online interviews, these meetings are conducted by graduate student assistants and the SJ4A students are given the choice to maintain anonymity. This is to ensure that the students provide authentic responses instead of sharing what they think their educators want to hear rather than what truly represents their feelings/opinions. The project team is using pre-and-post-course evaluation instruments to be completed by each SJ4A student every semester; their supervisors, practitioner-mentors, and project staff of practicum institutions will share feedback at the end of the program. At the SJ4A conclusion, the project team will conduct exit interviews. Summary information will be incorporated into the final report to IMLS and shared with the archives-related work communities. A follow-up survey of participants and employers following completion of the program will establish overall program effectiveness. Formal and informal evaluations, application materials, new student orientation, the *SJ4A Annual Summits*, and the semester-meetings between practitioners and educators (s needed), are providing insights into how to enrich the archival studies and social justice curriculum. Similarly, dissemination of ongoing findings is ongoing (see <http://socialjusticearchivists-sj4a.ua.edu/news.html>).

**5.6 SJ4A Phase 6 Collaborations: Post-Graduation Tracking of Career Development (January - July 2025):** Once SJ4A students graduate, monthly online meetings with the SJ4A faculty will help tracking of career development at their place of work. Collective online meetings are planned with the 17 BIPOC graduates to support their post-graduation professional growth, continue mentoring, discuss ways to overcome challenges, and identify opportunities through collaborations and participation at professional conferences. The cohort will form the *SJ4A Alumni Committee* to ensure the project's sustainability (once funding is over) in integrating its goals/objectives/activities with future students recruited into the program (e.g., the SJ4A graduates will serve as practitioner-mentors to future students). This time will play an important role as the cohort bridges and negotiates transitions and new roles based on their individual circumstances.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

SJ4A outcomes are observable/measurable, and include: (1) SJ4A students will gain specific intersecting archival studies and social justice skills and develop information-related products/experiences contextualized in their work settings/communities; (2) More than 75 % of the SJ4A student's learning objectives/goals will be met; (3) SJ4A students will display a high level of competency in archives management and social justice advocacy pertinent to their work settings as judged by professionals in the field; (4) SJ4A practitioner-faculty collaborations will result in curricular changes; (5) Student involvement in archival studies and social justice applications in specific work environments will increase, making the value of these skills more visible, and contributing to the creation of additional career opportunities; (6) Each SJ4A student will develop a valuable network of mentors (i.e., practitioner and educator) upon which they may draw upon in the future; (7) SJ4A practitioner-faculty collaborations will lead to greater cooperation in preparing social justice archives-related professionals. Future findings via multiple dissemination strategies (e.g., diverse conference presentations and publications) will ensure follow-up on many aspects documented in this paper.



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