

# Public Library-University Partnerships in Library and Information Science: Approaches, Challenges, Implications for Translating Research into Practice

<b>Kim, Soo Hyeon</b>	Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, USA   skim541@iu.edu
<b>Choi, Gi Woong</b>	University of Cincinnati, USA   giwoong.choi@uc.edu
<b>Choi, Kahyun</b>	Indiana University, USA   choika@iu.edu
<b>Copeland, Andrea</b>	Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, USA   ajapzon@iupui.edu
<b>D'Arpa, Christine</b>	Wayne State University, USA   CL0091@wayne.edu
<b>Evans, Sarah</b>	University of North Texas, USA   Sarah.Evans@unt.edu
<b>Lance, Simpson</b>	University of Alabama, USA   lsimpson@ua.edu
<b>Lee, Hee Rin</b>	Michigan State University, USA   heerin@msu.edu
<b>Yoon, Ayoung</b>	Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, USA   ayyoon@iupui.edu

## ABSTRACT

While the potential and benefits of research-practice partnerships are well documented, there is limited discussion around approaches and challenges of establishing and sustaining public library-university partnerships in LIS research to bridge the gap between research and practice. This panel brings together five groups of panelists to highlight a diversity of public library-university partnerships within LIS and their approaches, models, practices, and implications toward consequential pedagogies and programming at public libraries. Through a collaborative panel discussion, this 90-minute panel will convene scholars and members of the ASIS&T community to improve concrete approaches and practices involved in public library-university partnerships to develop pedagogies and programming that are informed by the voices, needs, and interests across various communities.

## KEYWORDS

Research-practice partnership; Public libraries; LIS research; Research into practice

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Research-practice divide is a known concern in various disciplines, including the field of Library and Information Science (LIS). Obstacles include difficulty in establishing and maintaining relationships with practitioners (Ponti, 2013), different research goals and expectations (Booth, 2003), and lack of successful application of research into practice (Powell et al., 2002). One effective approach to bridge this gap between research and practice is through research-practice partnership (RPP). RPP provides the opportunity to identify research and design needs that are grounded in practice, develop innovations that integrate diverse expertise, support recruitment of participants from more diverse contexts and inclusion of practitioners in research projects, and scale up solutions through expansive professional networks (Coburn & Penuel, 2013).

While the potential and benefits of RPP are well documented to bridge the research-practice divide, there is limited discussion around approaches and challenges of establishing and sustaining public library-university partnerships in LIS research (Adkins, 2019; Latham & Lenstra, 2021; Wynia Baluk et al., 2023). Adkins (2019) highlighted that there is little documentation of public library-university partnership based on an analysis of journal articles relating to public librarianship. Furthermore, although several panel discussions have been formed in LIS to discuss ways to support applied research in the field, the nature of discussion was related to LIS research-practice divide broadly (Abbas et al., 2016) or specific to a single country (Partridge et al., 2019).

This 90-minute panel brings together five groups of panelists who are engaged in successful implementation of RPP with public libraries at different sizes and settings (i.e., rural, urban, suburban) on multiple topics (i.e., STEM, engineering, data literacy, AI, health) to highlight a diversity of public library-university partnerships within LIS. In alignment with the 2023 ASIST theme of translating research to practice, this panel seeks to improve approaches and practices involved in public library-university partnerships to bridge the LIS research-practice divide.

## PANEL STRUCTURE

### Introduction (5 minutes)

The moderator, Soo Hyeon, will introduce the panel topic and the goals of this panel. This panel aims to:

1. introduce a diversity of public library-university partnerships toward consequential pedagogies and programming at public libraries;

2. identify strategies that supported mutually beneficial RPP relationship with public libraries;
3. discuss different theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches that are used to translate their research into practice;
4. expand our understanding on the role of public libraries in applied LIS research

### **Panel discussion (30 minutes)**

Each panelist will have 5-6 minutes to share a brief overview of their projects and discuss their RPP experiences with public libraries, with particular focus on approaches for building and sustaining RPP, challenges and opportunities working with public libraries. The moderator will introduce each panelist.

#### ***Raise up radio: Family and youth engagement in library supported learning via radio – Sarah Evans and Lance Simpson***

This two-year project is inspired by radio broadcasting as a stable source of information in rural America and by the university-based researchers' experience working in public libraries. Using a design-based research methodology, rural library staff partner with local youth and families to investigate a STEM topic relevant to community needs and interests. As a team, library staff and families gather information from community experts and identify local resources to create four episodes of an audio program that can be broadcast on a local radio station and shared in podcast format for maximum community access. Each episode features STEM content, including an at-home science activity, with materials provided in library take-home kits.

During the program implementation stage, researchers quickly realized how different rural-serving libraries can be from each other. Staffing structure, open hours, and individual staff members' prior knowledge dictated the level of the researcher's direct involvement with families. Each library did meet the goals of the project, including increased connections to local STEM resources yet in diverse ways. An important finding for researchers is the need to assess library staff members' strengths and struggles at the beginning of the partnership more effectively. This includes assessing the practical constraints of the library setting (i.e., number of staff, hours open, size of storage space), as well as the knowledge and skills of each staff member. Such an assessment will allow the research team to estimate the support needed to create a fully realized partnership that puts research into practice successfully.

#### ***Community health and wellness: Small and rural library practices, perspectives, and programs – Christine D'Arpa***

This study, which ends June 2024, aimed to understand current programming, services, and partnerships at small and rural libraries. The research team, Ellen Rubenstein and Susan Burke (University of Oklahoma), Noah Lenstra (University of North Carolina Greensboro), and Christine examined publicly available information and gathered data in the form of interviews from library workers, patrons, and outside partners with whom libraries develop and implement these programs. The research documented and analyzed current practices in small and rural libraries to help them become more robust catalysts of community health. The project focused on 16 small and rural libraries representing different regions of four U.S. states (Michigan, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Vermont). The research team is completing its analysis of a rich dataset that will result in locally adaptable, evidence-based educational projects that can be freely shared and used in libraries across the nation. In addition, the research data will be used to develop and disseminate a model that will inform both library practices and library science pedagogies. The model will be grounded in the voices of the practitioners, patrons, and partners we interviewed and address successful strategies and common obstacles associated with developing health and wellness programs in small and rural public libraries, as well as how to assess, sustain, and extend existing programs.

#### ***Family makers: Online engineering program at rural libraries – Soo Hyeon Kim (Organizer & Moderator) and Gi Woong Choi***

This project responds to educational inequities of underserved rural children by developing a new outreach approach at rural libraries through online space and supporting rural library staff to become learning facilitators. By adopting culturally-relevant pedagogy and constructionism, the research team aims to engage elementary-aged children and caregivers in rural communities in engineering learning using familiar making practices. The research team is currently conducting research-practice partnership (RPP) and co-design with eight small rural libraries from eight states to develop usable solutions informed by professional practices, and aligned with the resources, practices, and constraints of rural libraries. As a result of our implementation research through two iterations across eight rural library settings, the primary outcome will be a culturally-relevant online engineering program and webinars to support rural libraries across the nation to implement online engineering programs.

As the team completes Year 1 of a three-year study, several areas of RPP challenges and opportunities have emerged. One immediate challenge was forming the partnership with eight rural libraries as the project did not have any prior networks or relationships with public libraries. The project team also experienced challenges related to building shared understanding among eight different partners and relying on rural libraries to recruit family

participants. However, regular meetings and open communication provide a way to generate creative ideas that the project team implements to address these challenges, which will be shared more fully during the panel discussion.

### *AI and co-design in public libraries – Hee Rin Lee and Kahyun Choi*

In this project, the research team examines the role of the library as a community catalyst to enable economically underserved youth to 1) have access to core knowledge about AI, and 2) play an active role in designing AI technologies for their communities. This project follows a pedagogy built upon a critical race theory that views students from socially underserved communities not as people with deficits but as people with community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). By using participatory design methodology, 10- to 14-year-old students will utilize their assets to co-design AI technologies for their community. The project will generate publicly available open-source AI education modules and webinars to support public libraries to run their own AI literacy programs. In collaboration with YALSA, project materials will be disseminated to many youth librarians across the country.

The research team established partnerships with three large public libraries in MI, CA, and MD that contribute significantly by assisting in participant recruitment, providing resources, offering feedback on materials and sessions, and sharing their expertise to help us incorporate best practices. In this project, the research team encountered challenges such as staff turnover and pandemic-induced work overloads, however, also found ways to adapt and address these issues effectively. In contrast, numerous opportunities arise from local connections and the valuable facilities and resources our partner libraries provide, significantly enhancing educational programs.

### *Building public libraries' capacity for open data services – Andrea Copeland and Ayoung Yoon*

This project is a validation and an implementation of a theoretical model for developing public library services relevant to open data. A model for Community Open Data Engagement (mCODE) was developed from our previous project employing multi-step evidence-based research studies. mCODE addresses four areas in libraries' support of open data: 1) promoting open data access, 2) providing instructions to promote data literacy among the public, 3) developing library programming from open data, and 4) developing internal data capacities for future service creation. The project team partnered with four different types of public libraries from various geographic locations (mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas in MI, IN, and WA) to implement one area of the model each. Library partners were selected based on the alignment of the library's strategic plan with the aspect of the model to be evaluated. Each partner library was matched with an advisory board member from a public library who was considered at the leading edge of providing data services.

As the research team approaches the midpoint of a 2.5-year project, they have encountered two significant challenges, especially concerning the scalability of our model. The first challenge relates to the scarcity of staff members with expertise in data services and the high rate of staff turnover. The second challenge involves the complexity of integrating a community engagement dimension into our model due to variations in the operations of public libraries, the characteristics of local communities, and the nature of the relationship between libraries and their communities. These challenges demand our attention as we strive to develop effective strategies to enhance the role of public libraries in promoting community data and engagement within their communities.

### **Group activity (40 minutes)**

After the presentations from five groups of panelists, the moderator will share one slide on the virtual brainstorming tool (i.e., Miro) with key themes that were presented in the panel discussion. The moderator will engage the whole group to add more themes and/or questions to the slide to identify 3-5 topics that will be discussed in the group activity. One of the panelists will be the notetaker.

The moderator will invite the attendees to share their partnership experiences to brainstorm concrete approaches and practices involved in public library-university partnerships around 3-5 topics that were previously decided. If the audience size permits, small groups will be formed to share ideas and solutions for addressing the challenges and opportunities in public library-university partnership. Each group will create a mind map that illustrates key themes discussed during the discussion. Panelists will be the facilitators to lead small group discussions and take notes.

### **Each group share out (10 minutes)**

One member from each small group will volunteer to share key findings with the larger group. Mind maps created during the group activity will be made available in a google drive.

### **Wrap-up (5 minutes)**

The moderator will summarize key themes and outcomes of the panel discussion.

### **PANEL MEMBERS**

**Kahyun Choi** is an Assistant Professor in the Luddy School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering at Indiana University Bloomington. Her research explores public library-based AI education programs, ethical AI for Libraries,

Archives, and Museums (LAMs), music information retrieval, and computational analysis of lyrics and poetry. She has received the 2023 IU Trustees Teaching Award, the 2022 IMLS Early Career Research Development Project Grant, the 2021 IMLS National Leadership Grant, and the 2021 Luddy Faculty Fellowship.

**Gi Woong Choi** is an Assistant Professor of Instructional Design and Technology at the University of Cincinnati. He has received the 2022 IMLS grant as a Co-PI, received Best Awards from AERA SIG Instructional Technology, and Korean Conference on Management Information Systems and received Ralph T. Heimer Award at Penn State University. He is an educational researcher with a prior background in HCI and UX. His current research interests include AI in education, mobile learning, informal learning, and HCI in education.

**Christine D'Arpa** is an assistant professor in the School of Information Sciences at Wayne State University. Her research focuses on the history of libraries; the role of the federal government in information provision; and public libraries and community engagement and has been published PLQ, *The Library Quarterly*, *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion (IJIDI)*, *Library Trends*, *Journal of Agricultural & Food Information*, and *IFLA Journal*. D'Arpa is co-investigator on a National Leadership Grant from the IMLS.

**Andrea Copeland** is an Associate Professor and chair of the Department of Library and Information Science in Luddy School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering at IUPUI. Her past research focused on the role of public libraries in personal and community digital collection preservation, which led to a multi-year collaboration with the Bethel AME Church of Indianapolis. Her current research examines community data and public library services that encourage equitable access and use of data to promote more socially just communities.

**Sarah A. Evans** is the Presidential Early Career Professor in the College of Information at the University of North Texas. She serves as the Director for the Children's and Young Adult Librarianship program and as Co-Director of the Multiple Literacies Lab. Her research examines the literacies and identities taken up in informal learning experiences and environments.

**Soo Hyeon Kim** is an Assistant Professor at Luddy School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering (IUPUI). Her scholarly goal is to transform public libraries to facilitate STEM learning for children and families through making. She has received the 2022 National Leadership Grant from IMLS as a PI, New Frontiers in the Arts and Humanities Research Grant from Indiana University, and 2022-2023 IU Trustees' Teaching Award. She has numerous experiences facilitating idea generation while working in industrial design engineering and IT industry.

**Hee Rin Lee** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Media and Information at Michigan State University. Her research focuses on Human-Robot Interaction (HRI) and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) to design and evaluate robots for social good. Her work has been recognized with a Best Paper Award and four Best Paper Nominations at respected HCI conferences, including CSCW, HRI, UbiComp, and CHI. Additionally, she has received funding from prestigious institutions such as the IMLS, NIH, and NSF to further her important work.

**Lance Simpson** is an Assistant Professor and serves as the Assessment Librarian in the University Libraries at The University of Alabama. Lance earned his Master of Library and Information Studies from The University of Alabama, and worked in public libraries where he developed STEM- and arts-focused learning labs for teens and facilitated training for national cohorts of youth-serving librarians. His research interests include community learning ecosystems, connected learning in rural communities, and assessing learning in informal learning settings.

**Ayoung Yoon** is an Associate Professor at Luddy School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering (IUPUI). She is interested in building community capacity for constructing an equitable data ecosystem and infrastructure to promote data sharing and reuse. She is currently the Co-PI of two IMLS grants and was the PI of two IMLS grants. She was an RDA/US data share fellow at Research Data Alliance (RDA) supported by Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

## CONCLUSION

RPP can develop applied research that can create direct impact to the everyday life of citizens. Understanding approaches, challenges, and implications for translating research into practice through public library-university partnerships will stimulate mutual beneficial partnerships between public libraries and higher education.

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