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Reading Nation Waterfall

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About Author

Dr. Anthony Chow is a full professor and the Director of SJSU's School of Information. He holds a doctorate in instructional design and technology and a master's in educational psychology from Florida State University. He excels in the triple I's - information science, instructional technology, and information technology - and has taught for the past 23 years in three LIS programs specializing in web design and usability, information seeking, early children's literacy, leadership and management, and library technology integration. He is the son of immigrants from China and is married to his high school sweetheart, has three adult children, and three (one just passed away - RIP Max) dogs.

Reading Nation Waterfall (RNW) is a three year \$1.4 million dollar grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services focused on one goal: to increase access to reading and libraries for Native American children and families. Our name serves as a metaphor for the creation of book ecosystems where there is a "waterfall" of new and used books being added and circulated within our five tribal communities.

Our grant is seeking to implement a solution to the findings of a year-long pilot study with the Blackfoot Tribe where we found that many of their children were growing up with very few books or any books at all. Furthermore, despite living very close to a library, many parents reported they were not using their libraries either. Add in a high instance of poverty on the reservation, and a number of children were growing up in book deserts.

As a complex problem, we have come up with a multifaceted plan to try and address three different barriers to books and libraries we have identified - access, convenience, and relevance.

Figure 1

Dr. Chow sharing books with children participating in the RNW project



First is Access - books are expensive and so we are providing funding for books. Parents report lack of use of their libraries and so we have installed three little free libraries in strategic places where kids from 0-10 will be. We want children to have easy and browsable access to brand new books.

Second is Convenience - life is busy and single parents or those in poverty are often even busier trying to make ends meet. People in poverty often do not visit libraries due to a lack of time or transportation and so we have identified three locations where parents and children will be: Head Start Centers (children 3-5 years old living in poverty), elementary schools, and either a public or tribal library or other public places children and families are likely to be.

Third is Relevance - the tribes are helping us curate, select, and author original works to place in the little free libraries and their own school and public libraries. Furthermore, we are providing all public libraries with funding to study and provide new programs, services, and resources so that they are more relevant to the communities they are trying to serve.

Our five tribal partners represent four states - California, Montana, New Mexico, and North Carolina - and include the Yurok Tribe (CA), the Northern Cheyenne (MT), Santo Domingo Pueblo (NM), and the Lumbee and Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (NC). Each partnership includes "three legs of a stool" - Public/Tribal Library, School Library, and Head Start Center.

In order to measure the impact of our project we must have data. RNW is using what is called a logic model, which measures goals at three levels - inputs, outputs, and outcomes. How many books have we distributed? How many new resources, services, and programs have our libraries offered? How many books have been read at home? How much has library usage increased?

Our outcome measures are also important. What impact, if any, did we have on children's literacy and also the community's use of libraries? Our bodacious goal is to increase reading scores at kindergarten and 4th grade levels.

Right now, we are just getting started and have experienced a number of unexpected challenges in implementing the grant. First, given the complexity of grant requirements and the ensuing subcontracts that each tribe has to sign, we have had a lot of delays in getting the grant off the ground because we cannot start spending funds until all paperwork is signed. Second, the grant was awarded during the pandemic (Fall 2021 and again Fall 2023 after I left UNC Greensboro and came to San Jose State). This means that communication and general disruption in all of our lives was present which has further delayed getting the project started. Third, communication challenges with partners - at least three organizations at each tribe - has also been an issue. As we are spread out, lack of communication has led to misunderstandings and at times unfinished paperwork or lack of data. Finally, we lost the Crow Tribe because the principal changed and the new principal did not

want to continue with the grant. As a result we added the first tribe in California, which was the Yurok Tribe.

Despite these challenges, the project continues to gain momentum and has been supported by the iSchool both financially - the project manager and social media coordinator are funded student assistants - and, most importantly, by INFO 298 Special Topics students (11 students since Fall 2022). Two tribes have now finished their paperwork and the other three are close behind them.

We have a saying on our research team - "It is all about the children." I say that when things get particularly difficult and I get frustrated. I remember it is about the kids and our clear belief that the love of reading, and all of the well researched benefits that come with it, starts simply with access and providing children the opportunity to choose books that they want to read. All children deserve to have this opportunity and we all will succeed together because of it.