2025 Digital Justice Grant Webinar – Digital Capacity Building in the Age of Precarity

Welcome, welcome everyone. We are going to get started in just a moment just to let some more folks file in virtually. Please enjoy my DJ selection in the meantime. So, we'll get started in just a moment.

All right. Thank you all for listening to the music I like to play to energize myself in the middle of the day. Welcome. This is our fourth digital justice grants program webinar part of our fall webinar series. My name is Keyanah Nurse. I'm the senior program officer of IDEA programs and program lead of the digital justice grant program.

Today's session is digital capacity building in the age of precarity. Now, if you missed the first few webinars, one of which was a general information session about the program, another was a conversation with current and former digital justice grantees who have also served as reviewers in prior competitions, and then the last one was a conversation about data ethics. Those recordings are available on the ACLS digital justice supplementary materials web page. So I'm going to ask one of my ACLS colleagues to pop that into the chat for your reference. So, I highly recommend consulting those recordings if you are able to join us in real time.

So before I introduce our very esteemed interlocutors today, I want to open this session with some framing and some intention setting. Now for those of you who have been attending these webinars over the past couple of years at this point you're aware that their intention has always been to provide fora for prospective applicants to hear directly from prior reviewers about the kinds of considerations that inform their perspective as they evaluate applications both for this program, but also other similar programs as well. So these discussions aren't meant to be prescriptive and they can't be right because the reviewer pool for digital justice does change year to year but they are meant to put things on your radar that you may not have considered and open different ways of thinking about and orienting your project towards this grant opportunity.

So year after year we offer different discussion topics as a way of focusing that effort to make it responsive to the concerns that we hear from prospective applicants, from grantees, and from reviewers. Now in 2023 in our first webinar series, we offered two sessions on capacity building. One for startup projects applying for seed grants and then another for established projects applying for development grants. And we offered these

sessions specifically because capacity building and the myriad of activities that can constitute it within digital projects that was added as an explicit funding priority and also an evaluative measure to the program. So, if you've looked at any of the funded projects, you'll see that they have a significant capacity building element. Whether that's pedagogical projects that train students in digital humanities methods as a key feature of the project's content building practice. That has also looked like publicly engaged projects that develop new technological infrastructure with community partners. And that's also looked like trans institutional projects that connect scholars across academic and cultural heritage institutions.

But a lot has changed since 2023, which is probably the understatement of the century, and there aren't as many resources available specifically for justice oriented digital work. You know, at best and at worst there's an outright hostility that scholars are now encountering for pursuing such work. And so given that it seems like the deck is increasingly stacked against folks, I wanted this session to revisit what capacity building in this current moment might mean because I want to dispel the anxiety or the pressure that capacity building means. You must do more, with even less. I don't want that to be the message that you leave this session with today. We don't want people to think that they alone have to find a creative way to save digital humanities at your institution, even as you know entire departments are being shuttered, graduate students aren't being admitted, and it feels like everything is in flux. We're not thinking about capacity building in those terms. Instead, and I've tried to mention this in previous sessions, capacity building, as it exists in this program, is grounded in a redistributive and a reparative practice of equity. And we coach our reviewers to understand it that way as well. So that when you're responding to the prompts related specifically to capacity building, what you're actually doing is giving reviewers an assessment of your own local institutional and community contexts and making the case for why grant funds are needed in that context and what those funds will do to make this work more accessible and all the nuanced ways that that might entail. So, with that sort of general framing around you know what capacity building means as an ethos for this program, I want to introduce our interlocutors for today.

So, the first person I'd like to introduce is Maryemma Graham. Mary Emma Graham is Distinguished Professor Emerita at the University of Kansas and an American Book Award recipient. She founded the History of Black Writing in 1983. Known for high impact initiatives promoting research, teaching and public engagement in literary studies, she has published 12 books including The House Where My Soul Lives: The Life of Margaret Walker, which was published by Oxford in 2022. The History of Black Writings collaboration with the African American Studies Publishing Without Walls, also known as AFRO PWW, is now based at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. And it has also just announced a

new set of digital publications from participants in its innovative Blackbook Interactive Scholars Program. And I should note that HBW is now based at Indian University and currently directed by Ayesha Hardison.

Our next interlocutor is Jennifer Guiliano. Jennifer Guiliano is a white academic living and working on the lands of the Myaamia/Miami, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi, Wea, and Shawnee peoples. She currently holds a position as professor in the department of history and is affiliated faculty in both Native American and indigenous studies and American studies at Indiana University Indianapolis.

Welcome. So, our first question that I wanted to sort of get us started with today is that right now feels like an exceptionally taxing moment. Let me stop sharing my screen also. It feels like an exceptionally taxing moment and I think though when you look at things historically or have a longer sort of temporal scope, there have been moments of expansion and contraction that have defined the higher education ecosystem. you know, whether that be older examples of expansion, such as the institutional inclusion and recognition of different area studies in the 1960s or more recent examples of contraction, you know, such as the early 2000's push and an abrupt halt for mass digitization through the Google Books Project. So, as we navigate this current moment of contraction, with the cancellation of billions of dollars in federal research funding, hiring freezes, and the shuttering of departments, I want to start with thinking about any similarities or differences that the two of you see between now and any of these other moments, right? And I'm asking this because I want folks to start to think about the ways that a historical perspective can kind of aid us in thinking about, you know, what's possible to do or to create in this moment. And so I will start with you, Maryemma, if you could sort of walk us through if you see any similarities or differences between now and then in terms of what we're navigating with this sort of contraction in the higher ed ecosystem.

So, yeah, they are. I'd like to start with a story because I think sometimes people assume that when we come on, we know everything there is to know. And I'd like to tell people an origin story because when I got my first funding, it was the late Marianna White Davis, who had this long career at South Carolina State and who was very active in funding and everything else. She apparently was very influential excuse me in Jim Clyburn, the congressman from South Carolina's, career. So she called me up. It was ‘93, ‘94 maybe early and she said, "Do you know what you're doing? I heard you got an NEH grant." I mean, this woman did not know me from anybody, but she checked, you know, she reached out. And so my response was, you know, first of all, shocked. And I thought, well, I know you finished Boston University. I was in Boston at the time. And would you like to spend the summer at, you know, here and be co-director? So I immediately moved to that space and

for me, that was an significant sign that collaboration was really important and I had no clue what it meant or what I was doing. So I really want to put that out there because it seems to me that that is something that remains the same. We've learned that that's important. Collaboration is essential. And the other thing of course is community. That was also true. I'm born and raised in Georgia. Boston was new to me. I really did not have a community personally, you know, except where my kids went to school, and I was learning and this again as I said was the first grant for me that I had gotten for public educators. So it was one of the education grants but I valued that intervention that she made really and I think that, at this moment, we really do see the need for more collaboration rather than less. So, I think that is definitely something that's a carryover. You cannot do this work alone. You have to find out the ways to collaborate, and you have to have a community. You have to be bound by one. And a lot of people think that they can do that sort of after the fact. And I think it really precedes your intent with these projects. So, I think that that is certainly one thing. And what was important about that particular project is that we had two summers together. We had people who became a community, and they also did a product. Of all my projects, I've never had a group of people who actually wanted to publish a project, a book related project. So that was a really important you know part for me.

That's I think different today because people individually publish books learning from the institutes but they don't publish collectively. And I love that idea of a collective publication. And one of those publications was by the woman who had tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Did I know what I was doing?" Because she had started teaching in the 1940s. So we actually have an essay in her book that talks about teaching in a one room schoolhouse in the 1940s and how you adapt to different learning abilities and styles and ages. And so for me that again was an experience that I think you don't get unless you understand the importance of collaboration and community.

Now what's different I think that one of the unfortunate things about the digital environment is that we have more isolation. and I think that trying to find community in a situation where there is much more projected and expected isolation because you got to do your work, you got to learn the portals, you got to figure out what to do, does make it hard of obviously the money is an issue. The money has been has disappeared, but I think the isolation is perhaps more uh damaging because you don't recognize what other people can bring to the table, particularly if this is a if you're a first-time I'd say you know applicant for a proposal and many of you know that you have to do it multiple times. That's kind of the story of fundraising and now it's just more competitive. So what's also different I think is that there are more sort of private and startup and capacity building grants than used that there used to be and I think we don't always know who what they are and that is a problem we're going to have to address. I'm here at a meeting now on the east coast and I've learned

the names of two or three other grants that I never heard of before and I try to stay current but there are smaller foundations I think, I mean not giving millions of dollars, but they are giving funding for specific kinds of things. So I think we do have a landscape that has opened up some even though other things have shut down and have been very different. I think that the last thing I would say about that is that we probably have to now, I think, pay more attention to sort of predecessors in terms of who have done who are the people who have done things before. I learned for instance there were things I started early in the 80s I was using language that I didn't even understand. That was my the reason my first grants were denied: Nobody knew what I was doing. They, you know people would call me up, NEH even like “what are you trying to do?” because I really didn't have a clear idea. I didn't have, there was no word called digital humanities at the time this was of course was in the early 80s, but it does seem to me that early models give us something to learn from and I'm happy to share with people some of the reports from those early models because earlier office of education was funding some of the work that we do now and it's interesting to look at what those people did and how they got their work accomplished and how uh it was it sort of fed into the universities where they worked or the communities where they lived. But it was not the funding that we have really lost. It was really funding from other sources or it was a way in which the office of education itself and other entities that treat education were doing. So, I think we've lost some things, but we've gained some things that I don't think we want to, you know, paint a blank canvas there when we think about it. So, I'll stop there, and let Jennifer take it over.

Thanks. So, I think to build on what, you know, Maryemma's I think really good answer about what's there in the past is, you know, when I look at the similarities between previous instances of what's going on and today, I think value driven work is really one of the shared similarities. a clarity about what value we have of a project, the value we have of a community, the value we have as a humanities discipline. I really do think that sort of a shared ethos and a collective sense of value and an agreement about what our values are within the communities we work in is really sort of a shared similarity that still exists.

I think, you know, the other thing that's a similarity that still exists is the pressure to adopt technology for the sake of the technology. You know, there's a lot of conversation today about, you know, why aren't you using AI? Why aren't you using this? Why aren't you using that? I think back, you know, like Maryemma, I'm old enough to live through the Second Life era. I've lived through, you know, multiple online player gaming that we were all supposed to be doing. I've lived through, you know, as Keyanah pointed out, the mass digitization era where everything had to be digitized. I think, you know, one of the things that's interesting about thinking about those similar pushes is that the projects and the people that have did the best work in those areas were the ones who were actually really truly committed to

those technologies enabling their community. And I think that's the biggest thing that that I see as a similarity is that, you know, doing something just because others are doing it doesn't bear out in the scholarship. It doesn't bear out in the community, It doesn't bear out in the project. But those who actually are utilizing the technology to carry forward the goals, the collective goals, of a community are the ones that are most successful and bear the most fruit across the board across time. You know, I do think one of the biggest differences right now though is, you know, this is, I think the first real time we've seen the full devaluing of higher education as a whole and the notion that knowledge is somehow a bad thing. I think that that's one of my biggest concerns right now when we think about digital capacity building, you know, new projects, new people coming into the community wanting to build and do this type of digital justice work is that, you know, they're not starting from a place where we all agree that knowledge is a good thing anymore. I think that makes it a particularly hostile environment for folks to learn in. It makes it hard to propose projects. It makes it hard to find buy in from institutions, and it also makes it hard to find buy in from legislators and others who can limit, or allow, certain types of work. And so I think, you know, I do feel a sense of sadness for those who are just getting started now that they're not sort of working in the heyday that I did in the early 90s and early 2000s where knowledge was really seen as a value in and of itself and an intrinsic part of what we were doing as a whole.

Yeah. Can I tack on to that a little bit, Jennifer? because you reminded me that one of the things that is so interesting is that we have, you know, a digital born consumers and producers now who are outside of their community, who are outside of education and who are hostile towards it. And so it is much more difficult now to think about that because those users and consumers and producers are actively doing what they do and here we are on the inside trying to get work started. So, I think that that division of the house is pretty powerful because even if you want to work together, there is a perceived distinction and difference and disrespect that you have to overcome to get there. So, and that's very problematic.

Yeah, if I can kind of synthesize some of those threads because one of we will talk about AI for better or for worse. Well, we'll save that for a few minutes. But one of the things that I think sort of digital justice projects navigate particularly and you were both sort of hinting at this in different ways is the sort of way that it exists in the university but also exists outside of it exists in that liminal space in between it and I think that's just by virtue of the work right like the types of communities that are centered in these projects we have had a really great session, I think last year we talked about community sort of partnerships and you know forming those community partnerships through digital projects so also recommend that recording on the site as well. But I guess from both of your perspectives and, again keeping

in mind this kind of larger sort of historical perspective, you know, how do you sort of think about digital projects as existing in that liminal space between the academy and the communities, you know, outside of it? What can we learn, you know, from that liminal space? What have those third spaces, if we're going to call that, what have they looked like? I think particularly since we're approaching this from the perspective of like applying for the grant, you know, getting your materials ready, if we're thinking about this from a design perspective, are the things that you take into account, when thinking about how to design and then articulate these projects as they exist in that that liminal space, the things that it affords you or the things that you lose by doing that.

So I mean I think one of the biggest things for me is that when you are working in this space, you are not your own audience as a scholar, and you are not the one who should be necessarily determining the end goal of a project. I think that that sort of consultative process that happens in the third space between a scholar or a project team and the community has to happen in an honest and open way where the community's goals and the community's needs actually supersede that of the scholar and the academy. And I think that's a very uncomfortable place to be in when many of us are operating in institutions that are pushing for academic deliverables, like peer-reviewed articles and presentations and books, and things that the university can own, whether that's websites or digital projects. I think that's one of the hardest things because if you're truly coming at digital justice work from a reparative, in a rematriative sense, then your needs, particularly my needs as a white woman, but your needs as a scholar should be subsumed underneath the needs of the community. And I think that that's very different from how many of us are trained. It's very different from how the institution rewards work. And so there's a beauty in that third space where you can confidently sort of say like no, we've got to do these things first because the community needs those things and those things are important and we do those things first and we prioritize funding for those things first and then we'll worry about whether we're doing A, B, and C over here that the academy cares about. And I think navigating that tension between your needs as a scholar to be able to deliver certain things that are understood in the academic publisher parish context and a community's needs to ensure its survival and its prosperity and its growth and structure and stability. You know, I think that that's a very long-term commitment. And I think that's the biggest thing I would say about that third space is that the best projects for me are the ones who look at community projects and digital justice projects as a careerlong career wide commitment. They're not one offs. They're not something we do for three years because we have money. They're true commitments for the life of the scholar. And I think that's one of the things that, for me, resonates very strongly across the digital justice projects is that you're committing to relationships. You're not just committing to outputs.

So, an example I guess and thank you because this this picks up right where you leave off, Jennifer. example of an experiment that we conducted. My last, before I retired, and of course halfway through my retirement I um we partnered with the AFRO PWW project at University of Illinois [Urbana-Champaign]. And I mean I want to thank you know and give a shout out for Marilyn Thomas-Houston because she had the vision to create a curriculum that had the most popular portals teaching curriculum but it also went from teaching to learning to production and in fact we were learning as we were doing this. So, we had cohorts, she had the training the models but she also partnered with Illinois IOPN, which is a publishing network and what we found is that and we invited people to apply and they got stipends and those stipends were very often driven by work they were doing outside of the university but had impact or in doing in the community but had impact on the university. And so, we extended the projects, but we had this incredible team of people working from several places, but it was through that partnership with AFRO PWW. So, you know, I'll send you the website that you can look at some of the projects because you'll see that those projects are not specifically academically driven, but they're all working in the digital spaces. There are people doing very different kinds of things, and I think that that kind of, I would say cross institutional, not just inter institutional but cross generational partnerships really encouraged that and people, of course, become communities through those networks so this was a training program basically and some people extended it for eight for two years some people could do the work in eight months but I think there's some new options and I call this a sort of teaching learning production model that we need to rethink think, I mean how do people get from the teaching spaces, the learning spaces meaning we had students graduate students as well as faculty sort of working together when those boundaries had been reduced, but I do think I call that a third space because it's not traditionally how we operate you know people join a network when they are in school or thinking about changing careers even, but they want to think about what that career means so I think the third space have to have to be seen in some different kinds of ways.

Yeah, that's a really great point and I think that you know the third space can also as you say like exist within the university. it can exist in this liminal space that we've been talking about. And I do want to sort of circle back on you know what it means to position your project kind of within that in between space both in a, you know, we've talked about the relationships and the maintenance and care for those relationships that are you know at the center of that. But if we're thinking also about again design and some of the more technical aspects of like concretely, what does that entail and what does that look like? I'm wondering if both of you could sort of speak to right now what's happening in terms of how to navigate any potential or even actual institutional rollbacks of some of the resources that actually go to support these projects even if they still exist within that liminal space

between, you know, the university and communities outside of it. Like, you know, what kinds of contingency plans have you developed for your own work or what kinds of considerations would you encourage people to think again as they are crafting applications and thinking about how to talk about their projects?

Jennifer, you want to kick us off?

Sure. So, I mean, I think one of the biggest contingencies that we've built into projects recently is actually a technical contingency. The institution that I work in, IU Indianapolis, has decided to enforce not only universal brand guidelines, but wants the ability to have a say in content that's available on URLs on servers that come from the university. So, I run a project called Discover Indiana, which is hundreds of mobile tours basically throughout the state of Indiana that we've built with partners from throughout the state, libraries, archives, museums, historical societies. And much of the content, unsurprisingly, is not the type of content you get in a textbook. It is content on labor disputes. It's context on content on LGBTQIA life. its content on indigenous peoples. It's very much to supplement a lot of the historical narratives that are given throughout the state about who Indiana is, and who lives in Indiana and what's happening. The university sent us through an email the other day that basically said, you know, if you have a URL that ends with our suffix, you know, we expect that it will align to all of these new guidelines. Here are all the new guidelines according to the state of Indiana, which includes something called intellectual diversity, which is what they're calling I guess a conservative supportive viewpoint. Unsurprisingly, a lot of our content violates that because we're not talking about the upside of white supremacy or things like that. So we actually have moved our entire site, our entire project off of campus servers, off of institutional servers. We have it hosted separately with a third party. We still direct the URL to our content offsite, but as of right now, there is no longer a link between our servers and the content because of this. And I think that that's one of the biggest concerns or one of the biggest sort of strategies that I think projects need to be thinking through, which is institutional priorities change, whether they're political changes, whether they're economic changes, and knowing what you're going to do if they start wanting to charge you for things they haven't in the past or they start wanting to have a say in your content or they're concerned about X, Y, and Z. Having a fallback position, you know, where do you move your project next or what outputs can you make that don't rely on the university, I think is a really smart strategy when you're designing your project now is to have those fallbacks already in mind so that you're not surprised later on when you get an email that says we want to charge you $1,000 an hour for something or whatever.

So, we had I guess a fortunate experience in working with the University of Illinois because the Illinois open publishing network is has a relationship with the university but it's really part of the University of Illinois Press and so it is experimental and so what we did was we, I guess we a combination of what people ,that is there were the major platforms people were learning in you whether it was Omega or Scala or Pressbooks or OJS, we had we're learning those conventional forms through a training program. But then we also added and this was something that came late, and it was very fortunate, what we call developmental editors because our goal was to give people opportunities to actually publish through this process. So it was independent on the one hand and the members of our of the various teams that you know were again getting stipends to do this had the had the training they had products but they were vastly different but we did not have as many of the constraints because we did operate within those portals or people brought ones they wanted to use. We would find experts who could assist them in you know getting their projects ready for production. The biggest problem I will say is that the critique, that was where we ran into some snaps. People who were submitting projects for publication but did not feel that the feedback that they got was sufficient or was I should say appropriate is probably the better word. But because we were operating again with a publisher itself which didn't have the same constraints that the university imposes and these cohorts were independent people who came and applied for the stipend and therefore were not under the constraints of the university so I think we were just lucky in that regard I don't know there is an effort to make some adjustments to this project to this collaborative project between Illinois and HBW, but I don't know where that funding will come from, but apparently new foundations are coming above board and I ones that I just never heard of but I think that these are two different situations but interesting models to think about.

Yeah, thank you both for sharing those because I think you know part of the capacity building sort of thread of this is obviously technical in as much as also, you know relational, and we'll talk a little bit more about the intellectual as well. But as promised, we have to talk about the elephant in the room, which in this case is AI, and you know I'm not quite sure you know what kind of narratives people have you know absorbed about this tool, but the way that I have seen it sold is usually a tool that you know it says we can produce you can increase productivity and efficiency because it's able to do seemingly tedious tasks at scale right and you know as much as that's sort of one of the positives, it's also deeply criticized and so there's kind of emerged this binary way that we understand this tool, what it can do, what it can't do. But even amongst, you know, there are some digital justice grantees that have appropriately and effectively incorporated things like machine learning into their projects to generate new insights into their work.

And so, you know, not in the spirit of reifying that binary, but in the spirit of sort of laying out different types of considerations that you would urge folks to think about if they are considering using AI in their projects. What should some of those things be from your perspective? And I would also add that this is a question that we actually asked the interlocutors who appeared on our session on data ethics. So, for those in the audience, if you're curious about other perspectives on this or additional perspectives on this, you should check out the recording from that session as well. But yes, considerations that you would urge people to think about if they're thinking about incorporating AI into their projects.

Well, I'll be brief in there because we have AI training. We have opened at the University of Kansas which is where I retired from. We've opened spaces in the English department for instance to give people ways of rethinking the courses that they are producing and that's where much of this discussion that I have been listening to and that I have been interested in hearing I think I'm too old school to go whole hog on that. I'll be honest. And because I did not want to be too to appear to be too interested because I'm retired and I didn't want to be asked to do anything especially to you know to join somebody in a grant to do that. But we are incorporating I think that into the model. I can't say much more because as I said I've kept a little bit of distance from it, but I do think it's worth the investigation that that is going into it as I see, the university also seems to be opening up some space for that and that's another what I call strategic move you sometimes have to make you know what you have to get give something to get something and so if they're going to give you something, you know some funding at the university level to do a study on that to get some projects undergoing, it sometimes I think can work but my experience as I said is more I is to look before you leap. People who are taking this into consideration and I think that there are some questions and there has to be space for those questions to be answered honestly and openly.

So as Dr. Nurse knows I am an AI refuser, for a variety of reasons and I'll give you a couple of considerations that I think about. One is an ethical consideration. Most commercially available large language models like Claude and ChatGPT and Anthropic the things like that, utilize copyrighted material as their base for the learning algorithm, including my own. I've had four books and numerous articles taken, and I say taken because they were never released officially, and utilized as core material to train the large language models. And I have real ethical questions if another person had read those materials, it would be one thing, but when we're talking about a computer ingesting millions of books and millions of things and then using that content to answer questions, you know, is that an ethical form of plagiarism or not? because I really do feel like it is plagiarism. I think the other thing too is that what part of what concerns me about the utilization of AI particularly in the humanities

side is that there are humanities methods that are based on mathematics and AI does great with mathematical models. It does great with what we would call the hard sciences, right? Like you need help with chemistry, it can help you with chemistry. You need help writing code, it's a very formulaic thing. It can help you do that. AI doesn't think on its own though and I really feel like one of the questions a digital justice project has to ask is does the tool that we are using match the values of our community and AI not only because it is taken particularly from underrepresented folks without financial recourse but also because it overwhelmingly impacts underrepresented communities when it comes to things like climate and energy usage. I don't think it aligns to the values of most of the communities that I work with and I've had conversations about things like rising energy costs, about data centers going in here in our city and about the fact that they're overwhelmingly being built in Black communities and that they're buying and forcing out people. And the ethics of that for me are particularly problematic in a digital justice space.

So, I think you have to have a conversation with your project team first about you know what is it that we're trying to replace? What is it that we're trying to make more efficient? And is that a matter of making things easier or is that a matter of subverting the values of a project in order to get someplace just because we think we need to get there. One of the things I say to people a lot is that I teach and I research because I want to learn. And part of learning is struggling. Part of learning is trying to understand. Part of learning is trying to problem solve. And if I'm dependent on an AI to summarize my thoughts or to generate my prompts or to provide overviews or to analyze hundreds of pages of writing from 19th century explorers, I'm not the one learning. I'm not the one becoming familiar. I'm not the one that's grappling with those materials. And so, I think when we think about digital projects, particularly in the digital justice space, it really is a question of what are you trying to learn? And I think the key knowledge production for me is that the projects that are most successful using AI in the digital humanities are projects that are using it for things like computer vision where the scale and the scope is enabled by the AI, but the actual knowledge production is not necessarily right. like it's the ability to process millions of images or to subdivide millions of images or to place millions of images on a map, but a human being still has to go through and do all of that data work and do all of that verification. So, you know, I embrace the fact that we want to try new technologies, but I think for me, I always start from a place of does this technology actually fit with the values of our project and the goals that we have. And nine times out of 10, it's somebody saying, well, I just wanted to experiment with it because everybody keeps telling me it's easier. Well, what is it making easier? So, I'll end with this because I enjoy studies. There's a recent study that just came out of Switzerland saying it actually makes people less intelligent that utilizing AI encourages them to stop thinking and they found people who use AI on a regular

basis actually stop thinking in their day-to-day life and come out less cognitively flexible than they were when they began the day. And I think a lot about that that, cognitively flexible is how we still stay healthy as human beings, and what does it mean that we're outsourcing that to something else?

I can't say any more behind that.

Yeah. I just I want to sort of echo the idea that you presented of sort of making sure that the tool that you use sort of falls in line with the values of the project because that is something that's at the heart of this program of what makes projects you know successful in the application cycle you know versus not of that sort of degree of intentionality and care in terms of the kinds of tools and platforms that folks are choosing to use. And you know, I also really appreciate your comments about sort of, you know, thinking critically about what AI and I think also too, it would behoove folks to be precise about what it is you're talking about when you incorporate those elements into your project. So, if you're talking about machine learning and machine learning is going to help you accomplish X, Y, and Z relative to as you highlighted sort of thinking through scale and it's impossible to do this work without that tool. That makes a lot of sense. But usually right now when people are talking about AI, it's generative AI, right? And so, what does that, what do you sacrifice when you lose that tool outside of it not necessarily being aligned with the values?

I was having a conversation with someone about how, you know, if you're trying to, for example, clean up transcripts of oral histories, there are some platforms that are actually really terrible at picking up different accents, particularly of Black people. And so those kinds of intentional choices, which we welcome you to reflect on pretty explicitly in the application because I think reviewers appreciate that it, you know, they have that question anyway, so might as well explicitly answer it in the in the materials that you present. Those are all sorts of considerations that I think, you know, folks, you know, it would be great for them to be thinking about.

So, can I just say that at the end of the day though, what you're saying, Jennifer, if it doesn't fit because I'm looking at the last cohort of projects we did with our partners with AFRO PWW and these projects would not fit and so it never came up. I mean, people worked on these projects, some of them, you know, go back two years, but they are very original, the researches, you know, people struggle to get their cohorts to because most of these projects are collaborative. But the struggles that people went through, I don't think people were willing to let go of them in a way that just erased the need for close careful consideration and connecting the dots. So in that last cohort, I mean other people were I think early on a little curious and wanted to see how it might work. But I think after this is again the sixth cohort, after the fourth and fifth cohorts learned that it, they did not see

much value in it. I think we got more people who really enjoyed digging deep into the research. And so, if you got research you know supportive people and you've got a network who's helping you move the work along I think that the need for AI does not seem as urgent. So I think that's where the teaching learning production, you know, developmental editor model seems to be useful because people are forming learning community, new kinds of learning communities, is when they're doing that and I'm a big fan of the learning community.

So the last sort of set of questions that I'll ask before we open it up for folks in the audience to ask questions is around academic freedom which, at this moment I see as part of the work of capacity building, because by and large the sort of cancellation of grants is really as you said Jennifer like this sort of attack on higher education attack on sort of the intrinsic value of critical sustained knowledge. Um, and so when we're talking about the absence of these federal funds or about, you know, funding for different types of work, we're also talking about, you know, the quiet part, which we'll say out loud is an attack on academic freedom. And so, particularly for digital justice work or, you know, justice oriented digital projects that are facing different kinds of hostility, how do you engage with that? How do you sustain that work? And more importantly, I think how do you create a project that enables structures of protection for the most vulnerable within your team or collaborators so that you're not also kind of inadvertently doing harm by trying to pursue this work.

I was going to let you take it, I was volleying here back and forth. But I think that one of the things that seems to be a really big concern is how we I guess adjust and adapt what I call the teaching learning model. That is necessary to do this kind of work, and that was something I was interested in doing at toward the end of my career is that how does teaching and learning change and again AI accepted from this discussion but there are other kinds of models when we were working with the communities of people who have various disabilities. We had to make adaptations to hearing impaired community, other kinds of communities and those require a different level of engagement and very few people in that in those communities are interested in the quick and dirty versions of anything because that there's already a you know for the lack of a better term a sort of disabling features and then these other things just make those disabilities increase the level and intensity. So I can I'll start there and you know and you can pick it up and I'll think about some other examples that I've had because this is something that has come up a fair amount. But as I said people are building things and seeing things and I think they're bringing more to the table, and because we are working again with producers outside of the

academy, that is something that we had to talk about but I think it is working. People get over their sort of differences when they learn to work together and I think that that working together has been somewhat valuable.

Yeah. So I mean I think one of the first steps is acknowledging the hostility that exists and that a lot of projects that work in the digital justice space face. not just hostility externally to your institution but potentially hostility internal to the institution whether that's administrators or colleagues or staff or students or whomever. I think one of the initial steps is to have a really open conversation among the project team about where everyone sits in terms of their ability and or willingness to be associated with the project publicly. And by that, I mean not just your name on the project, but easily contactable, the person who stands up to present, the person who, you know, is the one out shilling for the project, requesting funds, meeting with the community. One of the things that that I do that that we do on a project that we've just finished up with funding from Melon, we have a process for publication where we go in reverse seniority. So the most junior person always appears first on that because they're building their CV, it's more prestigious, etc. Except that all of the publicly available contact information is the contact information that comes to the two of us that are most senior on the project. We filter out the complaints, we filter out the concerns, we ensure that the time that our more junior, underrepresented colleagues spend on the project is a space that is safe for them. And that can be everything from, you know, we're the ones standing up taking the Q&A at a conference to, you know, if an administrator wants to argue about something, we're the ones doing the arguing, it's never our junior colleague being the one who has to sort of put their political and cultural capital on display.

So I think that's an important first step in a project is to be very honest. You know, do you have visa holders? Do you have people who are untenured? Do you have community members who are potentially risking their own safety by being named on a project? And so we're very careful about what is public and what is private to ensure that safety for people. I think helping people as well when they're working on projects that are particular lightning rods to ensure that they have things like liability insurance. It's one of the things I talk to everybody about. You know, making sure that you have backup with a lawyer if needed if something happens, but also technical backup. You know, making sure that that we have resources if somebody's being targeted online, making sure we have a process of what happens if, you know, they're getting social media spam, if they're getting hit with various things. I mean, I think unfortunately this is the environment that the internet encourages and that hostile climate encourages. And so, thinking about these things from the outset where the hope is we never need them. The hope is that we never have to use them, but we have those processes and we have those procedures in place so that if they have to be

triggered, it's not a “hey we've got to figure it out right now” kind of situation. It's a “let's pull out this document, we're ready to go” kind of situation. I think the other thing too is that, you know, in a lot of projects, particularly with community partners, it means being amendable to potentially different languages than you might want to use. So, for example, I use the word genocide a lot in the work that I do here in Indiana. Our community partners are not necessarily comfortable having the word genocide in their entries. it makes their funding boards and their community boards really nervous when you talk about the fact that the founders of their county committed a genocide. So, you know, it's having those conversations and saying, "Okay, I I understand I want to call it a genocide. You do not. What's a term we can come up with that's not citizen? You know, let's come up with some other terms that that can be utilized." So, it's also being a little bit flexible and understanding that your community members may have particular priorities or areas that they're not comfortable going and how do you still accomplish the core of what you want to accomplish without necessarily giving up what you feel are the valuable portions of the project.

I just want to backtrack a little bit because Jennifer reminded me of an experience that we had when I talked about working in collaboration with communities is cross institutional and community collaborations that one of the things that we discovered is that because the grants often come through the university, that people were not sharing the proposal drafts appropriately with partners, particularly community-based partners, and that became a big issue. And I had to actually negotiate a situation where people were threatening to report that this was going on. And I don't know how we get how we got there and I wasn't sure and I didn't do that investigation myself, but I did say that that was an ethically --- just absolutely wrong. But apparently it had been going on for quite some time. That is people had been partnering within communities. Some communities were comfortable with that. Programs were comfortable with that, but most were not because they were being used and exploited in ways that they began to recognize over time. And this is maybe after being refunded a couple of times. Now, if right now, of course, with the with the slowdown, I think it's even more crucial that people are doing that. But that is something that I do, you know, if you're writing grant proposals again with community partners, there has to be a practice of sharing openly and consistently so that there is no exploitation going on or being unprincipled in ways because that was something that we found to be the case. It's unfortunate and it probably happens more often than not, and that it doesn't get openly discussed, but I thought that that really needs to be something to remind people of. I'm not saying anybody here does that, if you're from an institution, but I want to just put it on your radar.

Thank you for sharing that. And at this point, we are going to open the floor up to questions.