1. Abstract

Savannah State University (SSU), Georgia’s oldest public Historically-Black College and University (HBCU), will engage an interdisciplinary group of scholars in a collaboration involving seven museums of African American history and culture in a 12-month project to strengthen the knowledge and skills of current staff. $149,884 are requested for a 12 month period beginning August 2008, matched 1:1 for a total project cost of $300,447.

This project is a first step in a long-term effort to add to the capacity of these museums to increase their programmatic impact on local, regional, and national constituencies. Five museums that have agreed to participate in the collaboration are in Savannah and two serve largely rural communities. They include the SSU Archives; the Beach Institute African American Culture Center; the King-Tisdell Cottage; the Ralph Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum; the First African Baptist Church Museum; the Dorchester Academy Museum in Midway, Georgia and the Willow Hill Heritage and Renaissance Center in Portal, Georgia, a museum-in-formation. These institutions include the archive of an HBCU founded in 1890, a museum/culture center housed in the first school for African Americans in Savannah just after the Civil War, and a museum housed in one of the oldest Black churches in the United States.

Based on several planning discussions, the project will be based on three broad principles: building skills and knowledge, supporting partnerships and linkages, and developing elements that promote the continuity and sustainability of capacity building. Our goals are fourfold: 1) enhance interpretive skills; 2) increase access of museum staff to professional development opportunities; 3) institutionalize a sustainable regional network; and 4) engage and encourage students and others to pursue education and volunteer opportunities in support of museums. Activities to achieve these goals include using an overview of each museum’s history and regional history to prepare and present two exhibits; initiating an Afro-American Museum Roundtable for ongoing professional development; attending professional conferences; conducting tours and assessments of other museums; attending workshops, lectures, and classes; developing a K-12 curriculum resource; piloting a student intern program and developing a museum education option, and developing a resource brochure and website.

Dr. Ronald W. Bailey, Visiting Distinguished Professor of Afro-American Studies and History at SSU, will serve as project director. Bailey holds an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Black Studies from Stanford University, and has extensive experience working with museums and public history. A project coordinator will be named. Consultants who are specialists in African American History and museum educators include Stanford’s Dr. Clayborne Carson, editor of the Rev. Martin Luther King Papers and Dr. Brent Tharp, Director of the Georgia Southern University Museum and President-elect of the Georgia Association of Museums and Galleries. Dr. Saundra Murray Nettles, former Principal Research Scientist at Johns Hopkins’ Center for the Social Organization of Schools and Professor at Georgia Southern, will serve as evaluator. She collaborated in creating an organizational development program called program development evaluation (PDE) and has used this evaluation tool in projects funded by NSF, NASA, and other agencies. Dr. Nettles will develop indicators of success for each of the capacity building principles that guide the project’s implementation.

Participants are committed to sustaining their collaboration and future proposals will submitted to IMLS, the Georgia Humanities Council, NEH, National Science Foundation, local corporations, and agencies that are involved with heritage tourism and with HBCUs. Some will focus on developing projects that contribute to closing the achievement gap and expanding cultural diversity. Project outcomes will be widely disseminated so that they can serve the African American and general museum community. The main vehicles for dissemination will include an annual conference; presentations and exhibits for interested constituencies in the communities of collaborating museums; a widely disseminated brochure that will present the work of each museum and the efforts to building this collaboration of seven museums; a project website; and presentation of the project’s work and a completed case study at professional conferences of museums, scholars in history and African American Studies, and specialists in heritage tourism.