

“Heritage Is More than a Job”: Implications of Project 2025 on the Future of Libraries, Archives, and Museums

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ABSTRACT

For most of the 2024 presidential campaign, Donald Trump publicly claimed to be unfamiliar with or even to have never heard of the report, *Project 2025*, created by the Heritage Foundation, a far-right advocacy group. With the proposed budget cuts presented by this project, the future of LAMs remains a major concern for those who are in or are planning to go into these professions. With much in question about the future of LAMs, the rest of this article will describe the role of the government historically with these institutions, the implications of *Project 2025* for the LAM space (with some specific attention to museums and museum education), and what are the interventions we as scholars, practitioners, and students may engage with to continue to support these spaces.

Introduction

For most of the 2024 presidential campaign, Donald Trump publicly claimed to be unfamiliar with or even to have never heard of the report, *Project 2025*, created by the Heritage Foundation, a far-right advocacy group. As virtually everyone involved in assembling the report had worked in his first administration or were his current advisers, these denials were rather difficult to believe. The Heritage Foundation, the parent organization and creator of *Project 2025*, claims that its mission is to “formulate and promote public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense” (The Heritage Foundation, 2025).

The first Trump administration (2017–21) leaned heavily on the Heritage Foundation for ideas, including virtually copying their proposed federal budget and using it as the White House’s proposed federal budget each year. All the Heritage Foundation-derived proposed budgets from the White House in Trump’s first administration proposed eliminating all federal funding for libraries, literacy programs, and internet access funds, among others related to education and information (Douglass et al. 2017). These proposed budgets would have eliminated the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the one federal agency dedicated to libraries, archives, and museums (LAMs).

IMLS is one of the leading funding agencies for many libraries and museums across the US. Their stated mission “is to advance, support, and empower America’s museums, libraries, and related organizations through grantmaking, research, and policy development” (IMLS 2025c). The IMLS’s granting ability and other activities have been formalized into law through the Museum and Library Services Act of 1996, which is included within the US Code (Chapter 72 Title 20). As such, its budget and requests for funding are dictated by the federal government, particularly through the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act (IMLS, Legislation & Budget 2025).

For 2024, the IMLS requested a budget of \$294,800,000 to support their ongoing granting programs, administrative fees, and supporting funds for activities related to acts such as the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), the Museum Services Act (MSA), the National Museum of the American Latino Act (NMALA), and others (IMLS 2023). For 2025, the IMLS requested \$280,000,000 to operate their budgeting costs (IMLS 2024). As the Trump administration moves forward with the slashing of federal budgets, primarily related to libraries, museums, archives, and education, what will this mean for the future of the institutions the IMLS has supported? For many smaller institutions and community-based projects, the IMLS provides important grant funding that supports the ongoing efforts of these institutions.

While these are unsettled and unsettling times, with much in question about the future of LAMs, the rest of this article will describe the role of the government historically with these institutions, the implications of *Project 2025* for the LAM space (with some specific attention to museums and museum education), and what are the interventions we as scholars, practitioners, and students may engage with to subvert and continue to support these spaces.

Positionality

In writing this piece, it is important to explicitly state our positioning in the research and where our priorities lie regarding the issues at hand. All three authors are members of a College of Information, representing different constituencies that put them all at differing levels of risk. As the first author of this paper, my responsibility is to speak up for those who may feel unseen or unable to speak their truths, as has become an intended part of these policies and practices. In my research and work, my identity, specifically in this case as Indigenous and neurodivergent, and as a past and future scholar, researcher, and practitioner, impacts how I relate to and see the importance of the programs and funding that enables this type of work to continue. Among the authors in this group, as LAM professionals, we offer here our perspective on matters concerning the field in hopes that both our current colleagues and those around us can continue utilizing critical educational practices that represent a diverse group of stakeholders who are a key part of the future of these spaces and professions, all while being informed about the implications that actions being taken by the current government will have on said practices and how the effects of these programs will hit members of the LAM profession who belong to marginalized communities the most.

LAMs as Federal Institutions

The formation of LAMs has always been tied to the agendas of the state in terms of their official capacities and formation and institutionalization. The history of the institutionalization of cultural heritage memory institutions is explicitly tied to the formation, docu-

mentation, and memory of the state. Examples of these types of federal and government-related institutions include the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the Library of Congress (LOC), and the Smithsonian Institution (which accounts for many of the museums on the National Mall, the National Zoo, and the Smithsonian Gardens). In these ways, the creation of these early institutions, therefore, acted on behalf of the state to push narratives forward that aligned with the United States as a nationalistic project. These examples demonstrate that, in many ways, the ties between cultural heritage memory institutions (CHMIs) and government are strong and deeply entwined in these institutions' long histories and legacies.

Museums represent a wide range of organizations created as spaces of public education and cultural heritage preservation, designed toward different ends and to showcase a wide range of material culture, art, and science. Particularly focused on institutions of cultural heritage, CHMIs represent a wide range of institutions that, in their formation and institutionalization, have become key players in the preservation of the culture or histories of humankind. As defined by the United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), cultural heritage includes artifacts, monuments, sites, and museums with symbolic, historical, artistic, aesthetic, anthropological, scientific, and/or social value as tangible or intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2009). Included within this definition of CHMIs are institutions such as museums, libraries, and archives responsible for holding these objects and educating the public on these histories (Stainforth 2017). In the last several decades, pushes to increase visibility of underrepresented groups with new museums on the mall has been an ongoing effort, with the creation of the National Museum of the American Indian (created via the NMAI Act of 1989), the National Museum of African American History and Culture (which opened to the public in 2016), and more recently with a campaign to formally create the National Museum of the American Latino (NMAI Act 1989; Towle 2017; National Museums of the American Indian 2025).

For many communities represented by these newer institutions, the silencing of diverse perspectives, challenges to intellectual freedom, and the ability to tell our own stories is not new, nor is it surprising. In recent history, education, art, and humanities, as well as efforts for equity and diversity, have been seen as less important than the military-industrial complex, often emphasized by the ways in which governmental resources are allocated. In practice, this was demonstrated immediately by an executive order signed on day one of this new presidency titled “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing” (Executive Order #14151, 2025). Only days after the release of this EO, the results are already beginning to be felt across CHMIs, with the Smithsonian Institution only days later announcing that it will be closing its DEI office (Small 2025; Ulaby 2025). As one of the more well-known and often thought of examples of cultural heritage institutions, the Smithsonian's moves indicate far more problematic moves and indications of what is coming for the field at large.

IMLS Funding and LAMs

Many smaller institutions, including those that support community LAMs, Tribal LAMs, and projects, can provide key services due to their ability to receive funding from federal sources. IMLS's stated mission is to “advance, support, and empower America's museums, libraries, and related organizations through grantmaking, research, and policy development. The agency carries out its charge as it adapts to meet the changing needs of our nation's

museums and libraries and their communities. IMLS's mission is essential to helping these institutions navigate change and continue to improve their services" (IMLS 2025d). Their strategic goals include "Lifelong Learning," "Strengthen Community Engagement," "Advance Collections Stewardship and Access," and "Demonstrate Excellence in Public Services" (IMLS 2025f). Compared to Project 2025, these goals demonstrate how even though the IMLS supports the future of learning and education through LAMs, they stand in direct contrast to the propaganda pushed forward by conservative organizations.

Additionally, while many of these institutions are inherently tied to promoting DEI either through intentional programming or development or in their nature, IMLS's strategic areas include a wide range of areas central to supporting institutional goals and the communities they serve. Included in their priority areas are things such as "Civic Engagement," "STEM," "Accessibility," "Broadband," "Professional Development," "Veterans," "Early Learning," and many others (IMLS 2025e). For example, for their "Civic Engagement" priority area, the IMLS has worked toward, partnered, and funded some of the following: (1) Partnering with the US Citizenship and Immigration Services to help libraries and museums support information seeking on immigration and citizenship; (2) Funded the Edward M. Kennedy Center in Boston to support the expansion of civics education; (3) Supported seventeen libraries in Oklahoma as polling places for the election (IMLS 2025b). In another example, "Broadband" remains an essential output of IMLS support in providing internet access through libraries for communities that may lack access to these types of services in their homes (IMLS 2025a).

While the IMLS remains at risk under the objectives of *Project 2025*, so do all of the programs and goals it supports toward providing communities with essential services. As previously mentioned, many of these services work toward equity and access in these institutions while supporting their role as knowledge institutions for their communities. Without these federal funding sources, however, many of these programs cannot continue or would not exist in the first place. This is why we must consider how we, as practitioners, educators, and professionals, can continue to think about and consider our responsibilities to these institutions and maintain how they continue to work.

Future of LAMs and Project 2025

The ideas in *Project 2025* comprised roughly seven hundred policy proposals to deport all undocumented immigrants and revoke the citizenship of many immigrants who have legally been admitted to live in the US, defund much of the federal government that is not related to the military, outlaw birth control, revoke rights to many marginalized populations, end environmental regulations, shut down the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), weaken the Department of Education (DOE), and greatly enhance the power of the presidency and weaken the rest of the government that had not already been eliminated.

For education and information professionals working in schools, libraries, and museums, the report recommends not just sending them to jail but also forcing them to be registered as sex offenders if banned books or other banned content is found in their collections or displays. Such titles that would lead to imprisonment and registration as a sex offender under *Project 2025* would include works by such terrifying authors as Maurice Sendak and Judy

* It's worth mentioning here that many of these areas represent things and categories that fall into DEI or work that supports increasing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Unfortunately the agendas of the current administration have made it so that DEI equals race and gender and have mobilized the hate and fear associated with these aspects to get rid of important programs and funding that provide information equity and access.

Blume. While some of the other proposals in this report would be very hard to achieve, the notion of librarians and teachers being jailed as sex offenders for having a copy of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* or *Where the Wild Things Are* is alarmingly realistic. In 2024, seventeen state legislatures seriously considered laws that would imprison education and information professionals for banned content in their institutions.

Those states considering creating such laws in 2024 were in addition to those that already had such laws (EveryLibrary has resources that allow you to track all of this legislation of concern at <https://www.everylibrary.org/billtracking>). States like Florida, Indiana, Missouri, Tennessee, and Texas already have laws that ban books and other materials, creating legal jeopardies for violating those laws for librarians, teachers, museum professionals, and other educators. Depending on the state, these legal threats can be up to five years in prison and \$10,000 in fines for each offense (Jaeger et al. 2022; Jennings-Roche 2023).

It is imperative to note that such legal jeopardies are not normal in terms of US history. The United States has previously gone through prolonged periods of intense censorship. However, the greatest threat to information professionals for defending banned materials or ideas was that they would potentially lose their jobs (Jaeger et al. 2023). Thus far, public and school librarians have received the most attention from the threats created by these new laws, as they work with the most significant portion of the public. However, these laws create the same potential legal liabilities for information professionals in other kinds of institutions as well, even if they have not been pursued yet.

The current censorship movement is targeting an extensive range of marginalized populations—most especially Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and beyond (LGBTQIA+) communities, but also women, Jewish, and disabled populations in various locations—in a similarly wide variety of venues, indicating that it will continue to grow in scope and ambition (Jaeger 2025). The expansiveness of the current censorship movement makes an extension of the active application of these laws into museums and archives quite realistic. One recent example of this occurred at New College of Florida, where large-scale book removals not only discarded collections featuring LGBTQIA+ topics and many books from the religious studies section but also resulted in the elimination of former student theses and the dismantling of the student-run Gender and Diversity Center’s (GDC) book collection due to topics related to DEI. The gutting happened during a period when many students were not on campus to bring the books into their collections, resulting in the loss of so much academic history and resources for future student research.

It took only a few months for the second Trump administration to begin shuttering IMLS; the agency received \$295 million in funding in fiscal year 2024. Of those funds, roughly \$65 million were distributed in grants to museums for programming, research, collections, and professional education programs. The loss of such funding for museums, libraries, and archives would significantly negatively impact information institutions and professionals. For Indigenous institutions in particular, the closure of IMLS would mean the loss of financial support to Indigenous libraries, archives, and museums through the Native American Library Services grant programs.

Beyond the shutting down of particular institutions that rely on federal funding, there is also growing concern about the impacts of decreased funding for universities, particularly state and other public institutions whose budgets rely not only on federal granting agencies (such as IMLS, NSF, NEH) but also on what will be allowed to be taught and what will be allowed in curriculum. For example, the Museum Scholarship and Material Culture (MSMC)

graduate certificate program at the University of Maryland, of which all three authors are a part, focuses on building engagement with critical museum studies and social justice (MSMC 2025). Such a pedagogical commitment may cause problems with funding and even existence in the face of potential threats of withholding federal funds to university programs that continue to focus on issues of justice. However, as a program, holding steadfast and teaching these skills and ideas will be particularly crucial in the subsequent phases of *Project 2025* and training for current and future graduate students interested in becoming library and museum professionals.

Conclusion: Looking Toward the Future

The lack of specifics and ambiguity regarding the ways in which this administration is moving creates an ongoing struggle in writing about issues plaguing the LAM sector. In moving toward the future of these institutions, trying to account for the variety in access and equity to resources, whether fiscally or labor-wise, will remain a key concern, especially in regard to potential federal budget cuts and campaigns against the types of work these institutions are tasked with taking on. While many administrations make it clear that programs that help develop equitable programs are frequently listed as cuts, there should be a level of personal onus to continue being critical of hegemonic narratives in your institutions and continue including the perspectives that show the dynamic ways people live.

Institutions making community-oriented efforts for inclusion despite systemic withholding of financial support for such programs is something that can be combated by the types of people brought into the museum space professionally. A collective understanding of the issues that impact marginalized people both in the professional and visitor aspects of libraries and museums is not nearly enough. There needs to be joint action toward retaining diverse perspectives in the decision-making process, from creating programming to collections development, especially now and going forward. Without that, we will only see resistance through a narrow lens. As future practitioners and educators within museums and libraries, there is a lot of possibility amidst what may feel like unending doom in this current moment. As we move forward, we have the opportunity to ask ourselves what we want museums to be and what they should be. How do we build communities to make sure we continue toward equity and inclusion in these spaces? Moreover, we can channel our frustration and anger into work and scholarship, which helps us sustain these spaces.

As stakeholders in the preservation of historical memory, it is paramount now more than ever to find ways to continue to do and support the work of these institutions. Notably, as we consider the possibilities of what DEI work will look like in these institutions, we must consider how to prepare ourselves and future generations of leaders and practitioners in the field. At the same time, we must hold space for the ongoing trauma and confusion purposefully being imposed by this administration. As is and has always been the case, if we continue to work together, we will be stronger and, therefore, more able to continue to engage and fight against threats to our field.

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