

Letter of Transmittal

May 5, 2024

Caitlin Patton Stanley, Director of Grants and Compliance
NC Humanities
320 E 9th St. #414
Charlotte, NC 28202

Dear Mrs. Patton Stanley,

Teens in Buncombe County are severely limited by the number of safe, inclusive spaces for them to gather and engage in open dialogue about issues impacting them such as identity, mental health, personal finances, drug use, cultural traditions, and more. Buncombe County Public Library (BCPL) is committed to providing valuable resources, including accessible programming, welcoming spaces, and diverse literature, to all county residents, but struggles to adequately connect with teens.

In September 2025, BCPL would like to host 12 local authors at its first biannual Teen Book Festival at Pack Memorial Library. Through author panels and Q&A sessions, teens will be encouraged to engage in discussions that foster critical thinking about pertinent issues through the lens of diverse young adult fiction. The goal of the Festival is twofold: to establish BCPL as an inclusive destination for teens, particularly Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) teens, by holding a monthly social justice book club that encourages discussion around social issues and to help teens discover diverse books that reflect themselves and expose them to new perspectives.

BCPL is requesting a \$15,000 Large Project Grant to pay a stipend to each of the local authors. If successful, the Trust Fund for BCPL as well as the Friends of the Library are committed supporting future biannual Teen Book Festivals by making a significant contribution toward author stipends.

I would appreciate the opportunity to talk with you further about the local authors who are already committed to making this Festival successful for the teens in our community. Feel free to reach out to me directly at megan.northcote@buncombecounty.org or by calling my office at 828-250-4721 to arrange a time to visit Pack Memorial Library.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Megan Northcote
Youth Services Manager, BCPL

**Buncombe County Public Library Teen Book Festival:
A NC Humanities' Large Projects Grant Proposal**

RFP: <https://www.grantinterface.com/Form/Preview?form=1118600&urlkey=nchumanities>

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May 1, 2024

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Executive Summary

For over 100 years, Buncombe County Public Library (BCPL) has provided exceptional customer service, equitable access to resources, and over 45,000 annual innovative and collaborative programs to its 275,000 residents. While teens (ages 12-18) comprise 10 percent of county residents, this demographic is grossly underserved by the Library. Few spaces exist in Buncombe County where teens, particularly BIPOC teens, feel safe, welcome, and supported to engage in open dialogue about issues that impact their lives. Given that nearly 90 percent of county residents identify as white, teens need inclusive spaces like the Library more than ever to dismantle oppressive systems of racism and combat notions of white privilege one conversation at a time.

In alignment with NC Humanities' mission, the BCPL Teen Book Festival is designed to facilitate dialogue around difficult topics affecting teens through the lens of diverse young adult literature. Twelve local authors are committed to showcasing their work and speaking on panels together at this September 2025 Festival at Pack Memorial Library. The Festival aims to kickstart a 25 percent increase of both the circulation of diverse young adult fiction titles as well as the number of year-round young adult programs attended. Youth services librarians will perform diversity audits to critically assess and then showcase the diversity within their collections through booklists, library displays and heightened social media promotion. Likewise, as a continuation of the Festival discussions, Librarians will solidify the libraries as welcoming, inclusive spaces through the launch of a monthly social justice book club for teens. BCPL is seeking an initial \$15,000 Large Project Grant to pay a stipend to each of the 12 local authors. If the initial Festival is successful, the Trust Fund for BCPL is a possible funding source for some author stipends on a biannual basis and the Friends of the Library has agreed to set aside 10 percent of its annual sales to fill in additional funding gaps.

Introduction to Proposal

BCPL is seeking a \$15,000 Large Project Grant through NC Humanities to host local authors at a biannual Teen Book Festival at Pack Memorial Library in September 2025. With minimal inclusive spaces in the community for teens to engage in open dialogue, the Festival discussion panels are a welcomed opportunity for teens to hear and see themselves and the issues that matter to them reflected in the authors' experiences and stories they share in their books.

Applicant Organization

Since 1919 with the opening of Asheville's first free public library, Buncombe County Public Library has been fulfilling its mission of "connecting and empowering the community" for over 100 years (Buncombe County Special Collections, 2021). Serving nearly 275,000 predominantly white, middle-class constituents (US Census Bureau 2022), Buncombe County consists of vibrant rural and urban communities, including Asheville, the 11th largest city in the state fueled by a rapidly expanding tourism industry (World Population Review 2024). In 2007, with the addition of several branches outside the city limits, Asheville city libraries merged with the county branches. Funded by county government and guided by a board of 9 advisors appointed by the County Commissioners, today BCPL strives to serve its patrons in accordance with the five county values of respect, integrity, collaboration, honesty and equity (Mission & Goals, 2024).

With a small, but mighty staff of 120 employees spread across 12 locations, BCPL excels at providing exceptional customer service, equitable access to resources, and innovative programming to patrons throughout the county. All of these programs, services, and resources are free to Buncombe County taxpaying residents. To provide all patrons with the highest level of service, staff are encouraged to participate in county-led professional development trainings such as LGBTQIA+ awareness, mental health first aid, and patron de-escalation training. As an active member of NC Cardinal, a resource sharing consortium, BCPL provides patrons access to physical materials from 64 counties as well as access to NC Digital Library, boasting thousands of virtual titles, and NC LIVE, a collection of 87 robust databases. BCPL staff pride themselves on curating diverse physical and digital collections reflective of each community branch. In addition to a slate of regular programming offered at all locations, including weekly story times and monthly book clubs, librarians collaborate with community partners to host impactful monthly programs. Some of the collaborative programs of which BCPL is most proud include: Spanish language classes, STEM programs with community partners, and even the Zoom Pass program, which gives Library card holders free admission to local attractions.

Much like NC Humanities, BCPL is continually searching for opportunities to collaborate with organizations that support diversity and give voice to marginalized community groups. East Asheville Library partners with Noir Collective Asheville to host The Black Experience Book Club, which meets monthly for adults to discuss fiction and nonfiction by Black authors. “It’s one thing to know something intellectually or to see some statistics,” says East Asheville Library branch manager Alexandra Duncan. “And it’s another thing to have a personal conversation with somebody and hear about their reflections on the books and how those same issues may or may not impact their lives. It’s a really wonderful experience” (Dallara, 2024).

While BCPL staff excel at offering exemplary programming that reaches a wide range of community members, teens have historically been the trickiest demographic to attract. In 2023, BCPL’s programming reached 18,201 early literacy youth (ages 0-5), 12,457 children (age 6-11), and 14,220 adults, but only 1,017 teens (ages 12-18).

Problem Statement

In Buncombe County, teens (ages 12-18) comprise roughly 10 percent of county residents (US Census Bureau, 2022). However, despite this sizable demographic, very few spaces exist in Buncombe County where teens feel safe, welcome and supported, and even fewer where they can engage in open dialogue regarding issues in society that affect them and shape their identities. More specifically, even fewer inclusive spaces exist for BIPOC youth in a community where they are the overwhelming minority group.

Countywide, 89.4 percent of Buncombe County residents identify as white (US Census Report, 2020). Redlining in the 1930s combined with the city's urban renewal efforts from the 1970s to the early 2000s resulted in hundreds of Blacks being evicted and uprooted, creating a predominantly white populace (Urban Renewal Impact, 2021). This lack of diversity is reflected today in the eight high schools and nine middle schools across the city and county where minority enrollment ranges from 20-45 percent, significantly less than the state average of 53-55 percent minority enrollment in middle and high schools (Public School Review, 2024).

At Asheville High School, where minority enrollment is a mere 32.8 percent, Black students came together to form the Black Student Union (US News Report, 2019-2022). “We thought there should be a space for Black students to be able to find community within a predominantly white school,” BSU co-founder Tia Irvy said. “It’s really hard to see yourself, and it’s hard to see yourself in teachers or other students” (Aguirre, 2022). BSU actively holds gatherings for its members featuring influential community leaders of color, a program known as Hood Talks. Outside of school, almost no organizations exist to provide a safe, inclusive space for the majority of BIPOC teens in Buncombe County. So why is this a problem?

Being a predominantly white community, white Buncombe County teens are at a higher risk of lacking awareness of their white privilege, that is, unearned advantages, such as greater access to power and resources than people of color, which is rooted in systemic racism (Collins, 2018). This white privilege advantage, in turn, negatively marginalizes BIPOC, perpetuating racism among other forms of societal oppression (Feris & Cheung-Miaw, 2017). By not giving BIPOC and other minority teen groups the voice and agency to share and hear their counter stories alongside the dominant narrative of their white peers, Buncombe County is doing a disservice to its future leaders by allowing them to perpetuate oppressive viewpoints that are directly reflected back into their community.

Finding ways to address this problem by connecting teens to community spaces that allow for reflective and restorative dialogue aligns well with the mission of BCPL and NC Humanities. Three BCPL locations already host Dungeons & Dragons, a highly popular role-playing game that draws together teens of diverse backgrounds. Providing a collaborative space for teens to discuss real-world issues affecting their daily lives seems like a natural extension for BCPL programming that closely mirrors NC Humanities mission to “deepen human connections by broadening perspectives” through dialogue.

Program Description

Buncombe County Public Library wants to host a day-long Teen Book Festival at Pack Memorial Library’s Lord Auditorium in September 2025 featuring local authors that showcase diversity and highlight contemporary social issues through the lens of young adult fiction. These 12 local authors will include Cinda Chima, Hafsa Faizal, Tracy Deonn, Scott Reintgen, Adrienne Young, Kristin Dwyer, Alechia Dow, Isabel Ibanez, Rocky Callen, Maia Toll, Erin Entrada Kelly and Nora Carpenter. Authors will receive a modest grant-funded stipend (see Appendix A). Author panels will be held throughout the day and each panel will have a different focus, including mental health, diverse representation in fiction, and authentic character identity in fantasy (see Appendix B). After each panel, BCPL Youth Services (YS) Librarians will facilitate a guided, open-ended discussion for attendees, posing questions that encourage the audience to reflect on their own experiences with and reactions to the topic of each panel. Book signings will immediately follow each panel discussion; Malaprops Bookstore will partner with the Library to provide copies of the authors’ titles to attendees at a discounted rate. A projector and screen will be made available by the Library for panelists’ presentations. The Library staff will form a planning committee with the local authors that consists of a partnership coordinator, a volunteer coordinator, a videographer, a photographer, and a graphic designer. While the Festival is open to anyone, it will be heavily marketed toward teens.

Goal 1

To expose teens to stories and authors that reflect diversity in terms of ethnicity, race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and other social issues pertinent to teens.

Objective

Within one year of the Festival, the circulation rates of diverse titles in the young adult fiction collection will increase by 25 percent.

Methods

The guided discussions after each panel will give teen attendees the opportunity to explore the diversity found within the authors' work. Authors will be invited to promote their work on the Library's social media channels, primarily Instagram reels, to generate interest both leading up to and after the Festival. Instagram posts in which an author is tagged generates significantly more traffic to the Library's page. Additionally, YS librarians will create diverse booklists with suggested readalikes for each author, which will be available during the Festival and which will reside in the teen section year round. For example, booklists might highlight titles featuring LGBTQIA+ characters, neurodivergent characters, Asian American titles, and more. Librarian curated displays will feature some of these titles throughout the year. Sticking these titles on the spine with a label that reflects its category can feel "othering" and limiting for patrons browsing for their next good read; booklists are a much more accessible way of pointing patrons in the direction of books that fit their interest without permanently labeling a book with a sticker.

Goal 2

To establish Buncombe County Public Library as a safe, welcoming, and inclusive place for teens to visit, interact with resources and engage in dialogue.

Objective

Year-round program attendance for young adult programs (ages 12-18) will increase by 25 percent within one year of the Festival.

Methods

Following the Festival, the YS Librarian at Pack Memorial Library will create and lead a monthly social justice book club for teens to continue the conversations encouraged by the Festival; each month a different diverse title from the collection will be selected by the teens to read and discuss the following month. Public libraries across the country utilize this method of empowering teens to have open, guided conversations in a safe space by creating teen advisory boards and groups such as Reel Time: Community Discussions about Difficult Topics where teens talk about current events and Teen Reading Lounges (Hassell, 2018). We Need Diverse Books, a nonprofit, advocates for the creation of social justice book clubs as a way of recognizing and celebrating the diversity inherent in all communities, which may otherwise go unnoticed (Ruiz, 2020). Over 30 years ago, Rudine Sims Bishop, a forerunner in recognizing the need for multicultural children's literature, authored a short essay in which she acknowledged the

importance of having books that can serve as “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors;” in this way, young readers can see themselves reflected in the literature (mirrors), be exposed to other worlds different than their own (windows), and be invited to enter these worlds to gain perspective (sliding glass doors) (Bishop, 1990).

In order to attract more teens to the Library, marketing efforts must be amplified to reach teens. In the weeks leading up to the Festival, social justice book club, and any other teen event, Library assistants will post these events directly to the Library’s Instagram channels twice each week, ideally in the evenings during the hours when teens are most active online. Particular priority will be given to posting Instagram stories, which Social Media Manager for Buncombe County Kirby Rucker states is the most effective way of attracting the attention of the younger generation on Instagram. Social media posts will be reposted through the Buncombe County government social media pages to attract new followers to the Library pages.

Library staff will table at the local high school and middle school cafeterias during lunchtime or at the media centers during open circulation periods to talk about these upcoming teen opportunities; event flyers as well as bookmarks with QR codes to the Library’s social media channels will be distributed and also posted in the teen section of the Library. The YS Manager will promote events to staff who work with teens in the community at the monthly Youth Advocacy Council, which includes community partners such as the YWCA, Asheville City Schools, and AB among others. Speaking directly with teens and those adults who support them is the most effective way to grow program participation through word of mouth.

Evaluation

Immediately following the Festival, a survey will be distributed to Festival attendees via email and made available through a QR code linked to the Library’s social media accounts. Paper copies will also be available at the conclusion of the Festival. The purpose of the survey is to qualitatively measure the Festival’s success in increasing awareness of diverse young adult authors and assessing the effectiveness of the Library as a welcoming, inclusive place for teens to gather and engage in dialogue around tough topics. (See Appendix C for sample survey questions).

While anecdotal feedback from the Festival is important, the YS Manager will carry out an evaluation of the young adult (YA) collection once every quarter for one year following the Festival to quantify an increase in diverse young adult titles being checked out and read by teens. A few months before the Festival, the YS Manager will use Evergreen, a Library software system, to run a report establishing the baseline circulation rates for young adult fiction over the last year. A Library teen volunteer or intern will then conduct a modified diversity audit of the YA collection. Diversity audits are an essential way to ensure that the Library’s collection is reflective of its community and readership (Diversity Considerations, n.d.). A checklist will be created in Excel to inventory the diversity of the authors by category (ethnicity and gender

identity) and to categorize the books' main characters in terms of gender identity and ethnicity. The volunteer or intern would use credible book review sites, such as School Library Journal or Booklist, along with readers' advisory tools like Novelist to make their category determinations. Divide the total number of books in each category by the total number of books in the collection to calculate the percentage of representation in each category, noting the circulation rates for each title (Diversity Considerations, n.d.). Each quarter, the YS Manager will run the same Evergreen report and calculate the percentage of circulation change in each category based on the previous quarters' statistics. Using this data to see which categories circulated most will inform the YS Manager's future purchasing decisions in a way that directly responds to the diversity needs of the teen community being served.

In regards to measuring an increase in teen program attendance, attendance numbers will be gathered at the end of each month following the Festival for a period of one year. One month prior to the Festival, the YS Manager will run a report to establish a baseline statistic for attendance at young adult library programs. One year after the Festival, a program attendance report will be run again to gauge how effective the social justice book club and marketing efforts were in increasing the teen presence in the Library by 25 percent.

After one year, the YS Manager will then present the results of the post-Festival survey and circulation and programming attendance statistics to the Library Director for further review to assess the need for a biannual Teen Book Festival.

Sustainability Plan

If the evaluation results confirm that the Festival satisfactorily achieved its goals and objectives, Buncombe County Public Library will commit to hosting the Teen Book Festival on a biannual basis. The Trust Fund for Buncombe County Public Libraries offers a Service Enhancement Grant for the purposes of funding a public service or program that would otherwise not be funded within a 12-month window. If the first Teen Book Festival is successful, the Library will apply for this grant, which could fund some of the author stipends. As a supplemental source of funding, the Friends of the Library Board is committed to setting aside 10 percent of their annual sales to go toward the Teen Book Festival expenses so long as the Festival continues to grow and be supported by teens and community members. The largest expense for the Festival is the cost of providing a workshop stipend to the local authors.

If the Festival ever grew to include young adult authors outside of Western North Carolina requiring lodging and transportation expenses, the Library would consider turning the Festival over to the Buncombe County Tourism and Development Authority. Through their Festivals and Cultural Event Fund, the TDA is better positioned to provide additional tax dollars toward large-scale festivals designed to generate statewide attendance.

Conclusion

The Teen Book Festival has the potential of exposing Buncombe County teens to authors, books, and most importantly, fresh perspectives that reflect the diversity of our community and that empower teens to connect with the Library in meaningful ways. Marginalized youth have the opportunity to interact a safe space while engaging in eye-opening conversations about social issues that shape their identity and the ways in which they prepare to navigate the world beyond high school. If funded, the Library would be honored for the Teen Book Festival to be the vehicle through which our teens discover the “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” that shape them for the rest of their lives.

Appendix A

Budget

\$1,500 stipend per author for 45-minute panel session plus author signing:

- Maia Toll
- Alechia Dow
- Nora Carpenter
- Alechia Dow
- Isabel Ibanez
- Rocky Callen
- Hafsah Faizal
- Tracy Deonn
- Scott Reintgen
- Kristin Dwyer
- Adrienne Young
- Cinda Chima

Publicity materials and lunch paid for by Friends of the Library. Friends will also pay for any additional author stipend requests.

Malaprops staff will sell author books and donate items for raffle.

Appendix B

Agenda

10 AM: keynote and welcome by Isable Ibanez

10:30-11:15: Author panel 1 and Q&A - mental health (Rocky Callan, Nora Carpenter, Kristin Swyer, and Maia Toll)

11:15-11:45: Panel 1 author signing

11:30-12:15 Author panel 2 and Q&A – authentic character identity in fantasy (Cinda Chima, Hafsa Faizal, Scott Reintgen, and Adrienne Young)

12:15-12:45: Panel 2 author signing

12:30-1:30 lunch break (provided by Friends of the Library)

1:30 – 2:15: author panel 3 and Q&A - diverse representation in fiction (Isabel Ibanez, Erin Entrada Kelly, Alechia Dow, Tracy Deonn)

2:15-2:45: Panel 3 signings

2:45- 3 : Raffle drawings (Library shirts, swag donated by Malaprops) and closing words from Festival Committee, surveys

Appendix C

Sample Festival Survey Questions

Age (optional)

1. What panel discussion had the most impact on you and why?
2. Are there any young adult authors whose work you will now be more likely to seek out in the Library as a result of attending this Festival?
3. Before attending the Festival, on a scale of one to ten, how much did you view the Library as a welcoming, inclusive place for teens to gather, interact with resources, and engage in dialogue? After attending the Festival, on a scale of one to ten how did this rating change, if at all?
4. Were there any local authors you'd like to see represented at next year's Festival? Any other changes you'd like to see at next Year's Festival?
5. Would you be interested in attending a monthly teen social justice book club at the Library to extend conversations around race, identity and social issues that impact teens in your community? If so, please provide your contact information (optional).

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