

IMLS and NEH Grant Termination Impacts on Tribal Communities

This document provides two examples of how the terminations of IMLS and NEH grants are negatively impacting Tribal archivists and memory workers, alongside the Tribal communities they serve.

University of Maryland, College of Information - IMLS and NEH Grants Terminated

IMLS Grant Termination Effects:

Grant #PR-303758, *Connecting Indigenous Archives to Indigenous Communities: Advancing discoverability of Indigenous archival content through reparative aggregation and linked data*, awarded in **December 2024** was in its final and most critical year of work under the IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program (RE-252311-OLS-22). With \$167,011.92 remaining and a no-cost extension preliminarily approved through July 31, 2026, the project was actively building new pathways for Tribal nations' access and representation in SNAC (Social Networks and Archival Context), a national and international platform for searching primary sources.

Over two years, the UMD team successfully created new editorial standards, technical infrastructure, and Tribal Nation-centered protocols that improve the accuracy and searchability of records across archival collections involving Tribal nations and their citizens. This work was carried out in close collaboration with our Indigenous Description Group, an Indigenous Advisory Board, Tribal Archival Consultants, and organizational partners such as the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition.

The termination of our grant has caused serious and immediate harm across multiple dimensions:

Programmatic Impacts

Due to the rescinding of funds, UMD is no longer able to:

- Support and train graduate students, including a PhD student providing vital research leadership and analysis.
- Employ staff and students to produce outreach materials and asynchronous training modules for Tribal Nations.
- Support professional development and training for librarians and archivists of Tribal governments.
- Conduct planned training sessions in tribal nations, consultations, and edit-a-thons related to metadata and archival search relevant to that tribal nation.
- Provide sustained consultation to Tribal nations on previous collaborative commitments.

Damage to Collaborative and Technical Infrastructure

The third year of the project focused on implementing final platform changes based on extensive tribal nation user feedback. The termination interrupts this phase with the following consequences:

1. **Reduced Technical Capacity:** Development contractors were already engaged, and their termination halts implementation of interface improvements, feature upgrades, and critical search functionalities.
2. **Abandoned-Modifications to Tribal Representation:** Without funding, the integration of metadata reflecting Indigenous protocols, relationships, and sovereignty will remain incomplete.
3. **Halted Testing and Evaluation:** Upgrades—including thesauri, placenames, and language support—remain untested and underdeveloped due to the discontinuation of focus group discussions.
4. **Stalled Innovation:** The project was a national model for embedding relevant metadata into archival infrastructure. Innovation is now stalled.
5. **Disruption to Governance and Oversight:** Our Indigenous Advisory Board, crucial to strategic decision-making and dissemination, loses honoraria support.
6. **Loss of Tribal Archival Implementation Work:** Batch ingest of metadata for all federally-recognized Tribal Nations cannot proceed. This work was crucial to improving the presence of tribal nations in the SNAC platform.
7. **Limited Access to Heritage Materials:** Tribal nations who relied on this project to locate and reclaim heritage materials across dispersed collections will now face continued challenges in archival discovery.
8. **Long-Term Infrastructure Damage:** Years of infrastructure-building, including in past partnership with the National Archives and Records Administration, tribally specific metadata, and linked-data advancement are now in jeopardy—potentially setting back the field by years.

Damage to Training, Mentorship, and Research Infrastructure

The termination also halts vital workforce development and community capacity-building:

1. **Loss of Outreach and Training Tools:** The hourly student supporting audiovisual training and promotional materials is no longer funded, diminishing outreach to individuals and groups who rely on asynchronous educational resources.

2. **Disruption of Technical Infrastructure Research:** PhD student Ia Bull, an emerging information and archives scholar, can no longer complete final focus groups or lead user feedback analysis. This severs the feedback loop between users and platform design, critical for usable innovations to technical infrastructures.
 3. **Loss of Tribal Leadership:** The removal of a key researcher reduces mentorship in a space where it is critically needed.
 4. **Decreased Project Continuity:** These roles ensured continuity, reflection, and responsiveness. Their removal destabilizes the project's structure and weakens usability outcomes.
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Conclusion

The premature termination of this grant not only cuts short an innovative technical project—it fractures trust, silences voices, and halts progress toward accessible public archival systems. At a time when Tribal nations are seeking access to records for healing, justice, and reclamation, this loss is not merely administrative—it is deeply human.

This termination also alters the course of efforts to modernize archival learning for all users: researchers, educators, students, and the general public, who rely on trusted platforms to explore historical records. The loss of search enhancements, linked-data innovations, and updated content diminishes the quality, usability, and reach of archival systems that serve the broader public. This setback limits access to credible materials that support understanding, scholarly inquiry, and lifelong learning.

NEH Grant Termination Effects:

Grant #PR-303758, *Connecting Indigenous Archives to Indigenous Communities: Advancing discoverability of Indigenous archival content through reparative aggregation and linked data*, awarded in **December 2024**. PR-303758 is a research and development grant aimed to improve how Tribal and Indigenous nations locate their crucial documentary heritage in archives. The **termination of this grant** results in substantial losses to the field of archival research, access, and Tribal Nation representation in national data systems. Here's a summary of the impacts and losses due to the grant termination:

1. Halted Advancement in Tribal and Indigenous Information

The grant aimed to **develop and test scalable methods** for describing, indexing, and searching Tribal and Indigenous nations' archives. Its termination disrupts:

- Testing and implementation of **linked data standards**, controlled vocabularies, and infrastructure for Tribal and Indigenous primary source description.
- Development of Tribal and Indigenous-contributed **metadata and search vocabularies** that are essential for reclaiming Indigenous knowledge across archival institutions.

2. Disruption of Indigenous Collaboration and Leadership

- Loss of support for Indigenous Advisory Board (AB) and Indigenous Description Group (IDG), and therefore loss of core cultural-technical consultations.
- Loss of **Tribal and Indigenous-centered design**, evaluation, and authority over the representation of Indigenous knowledge.
- Interruption of relationships with **American cultural institutions, Tribal Nation partners, and GLAM networks**, undermining long-term trust.

3. Termination of Workforce Development and Mentorship

- Elimination of paid roles for:
 - A **Graduate Assistant** (Ia Bull) focused on metadata and Indigenous standards.
 - **Undergraduate Fellows** training in Indigenous Research Methodologies.
 - A **Project Manager** coordinating logistics, IRB protocols, subject recruitment, and data management.
 - **Student developers** performing cultural-technical upgrades.
- Lost opportunity to train, mentor, and launch **emerging Tribal and Indigenous scholars** into the library, archives, and digital humanities professions.

4. Technical and Educational Product Loss

Cancellation of planned outputs including:

- A **controlled vocabularies module** with SNAC to improve description and search of Tribal and Indigenous content.
- **Archives 101 training modules** and virtual workshops for Indigenous researchers and archivists, as well as the lay public.
- **Instructor training program for SNACSchool**, tailored to Tribal archives and Indigenous archival contexts.
- Technical **workflows and tools for Tribal Nation archives** to build their own thesauri.

5. Damage to SNAC's Platform Infrastructure

The project was set to guide SNAC in:

- **Expanding its language picklists** to better reflect Indigenous languages.

- Better representation of **Boarding School records and Tribal nations**.
- Revising relationship types and **ontology models** to be more accurate. Losing this funding halts these critical cultural-technical upgrades.

6. Setback in Tribal Nation Access and Visibility

- Tribal and Indigenous users continue to face **poor findability of their own records** in SNAC and broader archival systems.
- Tribal Nations lose access to **dispersed and hidden records** necessary for legal, linguistic, educational, and reclamation.

7. Loss of Dissemination and Field-Wide Impact

The project included plans to:

- Present at key conference venues such as the **SAA**.
- Disseminate tools and best practices via the **Sustainable Heritage Network**, project websites, and DRUM. Termination prevents these materials from reaching the broader archival and humanities fields and from being integrated into practice.

8. Broken Continuity and Momentum

- This work was set to build **nearly a decade of SNAC-Indigenous research**, including prior IMLS-funded initiatives and multiple public events.
- The abrupt ending risks not only halting progress but **eroding trust** with Tribal nations who invested time and expertise.

Conclusion

This grant termination is not just a financial or technical setback—it represents a profound interruption in national efforts to **center Tribal nations’ authority in the archival record**, improve data access, and support Tribally-led knowledge infrastructures. The loss of this funding damages relationships, disrupts workforce development, and delays crucial structural changes to archival platforms at a time when they are urgently needed.

National Native American Boarding School Coalition (NABS) - NEH Grant Terminated

This \$283,000 award supported multiple organizations across the continent to engage in an ongoing effort to digitize over 120,000 pages of Native American boarding school records in the National Archives. The loss of funding directly threatens these groups' capacity to document, safeguard, and share the lived experiences of boarding school survivors.

The stories conveyed by these documents are fundamental to documenting the truth and impact of the boarding school system in order to work toward understanding and healing the trauma it caused.

Grant Termination Announcement

- As of April 2, 2025, a federal award (Application No. PB29604323) that NABS received from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has been officially terminated.
- This decision stems from an executive order issued by the President on February 19, 2025, directing the elimination of all non-statutorily required activities. In response, NEH has revised its funding priorities and withdrawn support from several initiatives, including ours.
- NEH stated the grant is no longer aligned with its current “needs and priorities,” and is reallocating funds to support the President’s agenda.

Impact on NABS

- NEH pulled nearly \$283,000 in funding from NABS overnight.
- Staff whose positions were supported by the grant were devastated. Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways for the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe of Michigan and The Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center by Dickinson College have also been severely affected.
- The terminated NEH grant was a vital source of support for digitizing over 120,000 pages of Indian boarding school records from the National Archives. It funded the team working to preserve the histories of Native children and families impacted by these institutions.
- In addition to the barriers created to curate boarding school records, important events geared toward engagement with tribal leadership and communities has also been affected. These partnerships and conversations inform a community based archival practice and ensure the digital archives program at NABS is in alignment with the needs of boarding school survivors and descendants.
- The loss of funding directly threatens our capacity to document, safeguard, and share the lived experiences of Indian boarding school survivors. Without sustained support, this critical archival work may be delayed or halted—jeopardizing the preservation of these records that are vital for future generations to truly understand their history, identity, and the resilience of their ancestors.
- These stories are fundamental to a more honest understanding of American history and a powerful testament to the strength of Native communities. They are not simply records of the past—they are living knowledge that carry our culture, language, and spirit forward. When we lose the means to preserve these narratives, we risk losing sacred wisdom that future generations need to heal, grow, and carry on our legacy.

- If this work cannot continue, future generations—both Native and non-Native—will have limited access to the truth about the boarding school era. This loss not only hinders education, but also deepens the gap in our national understanding, allowing cycles of erasure, misunderstanding, and invisibility to persist.

Next Steps

- Though this presents a serious challenge, our dedication to this work remains steadfast.
- We are actively pursuing alternative avenues of support to carry this mission forward and ensure these records are never lost.
- It is essential that we shine a light on the consequences of this decision—not only to advocate for renewed backing, but to rally our communities, allies, and institutions into meaningful action.
- Preserving these truths is not just an act of remembrance—it's a commitment to future generations, and a necessary step toward truth, justice, and healing for our country.