Overview and Background
The Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University received an award of $205,000 for a twelve-month project involving the demolition and removal of an existing mezzanine and staircase on the north side of the Center’s archival storage room, the installation of custom-sized compact shelving units, and the installation of new linear lighting. The renovation project was successfully completed within the established timeline, with all goals met and only minor project adjustments required. The project finished significantly under the proposed budget, the surplus largely attributable to over-estimates by outside vendors. The project also involved reorganization of the CPM’s archival collection, which has been largely accomplished with some portions of this work ongoing.

Established in 1985 as a state Center of Excellence, the Center for Popular Music (CPM) at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) is one of the nation’s premier research archives devoted to the full breadth of American vernacular music-making, from the eighteenth century to the present. The collections comprise manuscripts, sound recordings, video recordings, sheet music, songbooks and other rare books, instructional materials, photographs, performance documents, serials, catalogs, and various ephemera, totaling more than one million individual items and valued at more than three million dollars. Its scope includes every genre of folk and popular music active in United States for the past three hundred years, along with a sampling of musics from around the globe that relate to America’s musical heritage. The collections are used by students, scholars, musicians, documentarians, and other patrons from around the country and the globe, some 2,500 patrons during the 2016–2017 fiscal year.

The robust recent growth rate of the collections has quickly outpaced the Center’s available storage space, thus restricting access to these valuable materials and threatening their long-term preservation. The Center has been experiencing numerous challenges with the sustainable preservation of various unusual formats because existing shelving was not designed for materials of these shapes and sizes. Moreover, items from the collections are at greater risk of fire, tornado, earthquake, flooding, and other disasters because the old shelving and mezzanine were not designed to withstand such perils. Of particular importance, removal of the mezzanine allows the fire suppression system to protect all of the archival materials as it was designed to do.

In addition to facilitating sustainable preservation of the materials, the project also improved access for staff and, by extension, patrons. The improvements provide better air circulation for increased control of environmental conditions, improved lighting and visibility, better organization, faster access to stored materials in response to reference requests, and more processing space in which to prepare new collections for long-term storage and patron use.
The project unfolded in four stages from October 1, 2018 to September 30, 2019.

Stage 1
Preparations for Stage 1 began approximately two months before the grant period commenced. These preparations involved developing a detailed timeline for the packing, moving, and temporary storage of affected parts of the Center for Popular Music (CPM) collection. Project staff consulted with the Dean and Associate Dean of the College of Media and Entertainment, along with staff from the university’s Office of Campus Planning, to ensure that off site storage facilities in Ezell Hall would be cleared and out and ready for CPM materials in October. Project staff also identified dates when CPM staff and student workers would be available to move supplies and to begin boxing affected parts of the CPM collection. Orders for boxing and packing supplies included in the grant budget were placed shortly after the commencement of the official grant period.

In October 2018 project staff and support workers moved CPM archival supplies such as extra record sleeves, boxes of folders, and other non-collection items out of the CPM archive and into three different rooms in Ezell Hall. The decision was also made to move CD stock, t-shirts, and other materials from the Center’s in-house record label Spring Fed Records, to Ezell Hall since these items are not part of the Center’s archival collection. Roughly twenty-five boxes of unprocessed sheet music from a recent donation were moved into a corner of the CPM reading room. It is important to note here that, as outlined in the original project narrative, none of the Center’s archival materials, including unprocessed items, were moved outside of the Center itself. This was to ensure their safety and security during the renovation. Only supplies and the aforementioned Spring Fed Records materials were moved to another location on campus.

From late October through the first half of December, 2018, project staff worked on moving those parts of the CPM archival collection stored on shelving slated for removal. Some of these materials, such as individual pieces of sheet music and 45-rpm records, were already boxed in acid-free archival boxes for their permanent storage and did not require any new or additional boxing. Other items, however, required careful boxing. We began with the Center’s rare book collection, which was packed into acid-free banker’s boxes in their catalog order. Each box’s range of contents was marked on its exterior and entered into a spreadsheet, with box numbers assigned. Most of these boxes were stored in staff offices, with a smaller number of less valuable items placed on top of file cabinets in the CPM reading room.

Sheet music boxes were moved to opposite side of the archive, placed in available spaces atop manuscript boxes and other archival materials on the compact shelving units that were not being replaced. 45-rpm sound recordings, which were already stored in boxes, were moved to empty shelving spaces on the opposite side of the room where the Center’s LP collection is housed. Compact discs had not been stored in boxes, but the decision was made to place them into appropriately sized archival long boxes not only for moving and temporary storage during the renovation, but to remain there in their new home after completion of the project. Project staff also worked to clear out a large area in the back corner of the archive that had accumulated thousands of unprocessed sound recordings in various formats (78s, LPs, and various tape formats) along with an array of sound playback equipment kept for parts or eventual repair. Some of this equipment was dispensed with permanently, while whatever was deemed
potentially useful was moved into corners of the reading room or into CPM staff offices. The unprocessed sound recordings were moved to available shelf space on the opposite side of the archive.

Stage 2
This phase of the project, slated to begin on January 1, 2019 and involving demolition and removal of the old, stationary shelving, mezzanine, and staircase, was delayed slightly because of work crew availability. There was, therefore, a period of waiting and inactivity during January and early February, 2019. The demolition and removal of the old fixture commenced in mid-February, with MTSU crews responsible for the work and cleanup. Most of this was accomplished quickly, within about two weeks time, although there was need for some repair to the floors and walls that spilled over into early March. During this time electrical crews (contracted through MTSU Construction and Renovation) performed their work to remove fluorescent light fixtures and install the new LED lighting in five continuous rows running the length of the archival storage room, perpendicular to the shelving to avoid any dark or “dead” spots. Although this electrical work had originally been proposed for Stage 3, the decision was made that crews’ scaffolding would be easier to erect before the new shelving was installed.

Stage 3
With the space cleared out, newly lit, and ready for the new shelving, a crew from Patterson-Pope began its installation work in mid-March, 2019. The bulk of the work took place quickly, starting with installation of wall-attached shelving in the northwest and northeast corners of the room. The next step was to install tracks in floor platforms for the compact shelves, followed by shelf frames going up, shelving mounted, and end panels secured. Minor adjustments to the original floor plan were made because of slight mismeasurements, to allow access to electrical wall plugs, and other unanticipated factors. On the whole, the final shelving installation was very close to what was included in the design. This work was completed by early April. There were various missing pieces to the shelves, shelf supports, shelf dividers, and end panels that had to be ordered and that experienced some delay in delivery, but these were relatively minor and necessitated about six follow-up visits by Patterson-Pope crews over the next few months. In the meantime, a carpet crew came to install low-pile carpet around the floor tracks, a step we had initially thought would happen before the shelves went up, but learned is in fact better to do afterward.

Step 4
With the renovation work completed, this final stage of the project involved CPM staff replacing, reorganizing, and rehousing affected parts of the collection. Supplies were moved back first from their temporary off-site storage, and onto the first unit of shelving whose spacing and depth had been designed specifically to hold archival supplies. The first part of the research collection to be replaced was the rare books. Care was taken by CPM staff not only to place these books in their proper catalog order on the new shelves, but to evaluate every item for accurate cataloging, and for whether items needed new housing. The banker’s boxes that had been used to store the rare book collection during the renovation were carefully broken down and stored for future use. With the rare book collection newly organized and thoroughly checked, CPM staff began to replace sheet music, photographs, performance documents, and other parts of the archival research collection.
Reorganization of the CPM’s large and varied sound recording collection continues now in the last few months of 2019, which extends beyond the official grant period. Because continuation of this work has no grant-related budgetary implications, the decision was made to slow this process to ensure it is done thoroughly and with maximum long-term benefit. As of the date of this paper, all of the Center’s unprocessed sound recordings have been moved together (for the first time in decades) onto the newly installed wall shelving in the back corner of the archive, an area that was specifically designed for this purpose and that will facilitate more efficient processing of these materials. CD boxed sets have been moved on the new compact shelves in a manner that makes them easier to access, and we have begun moving other CDs (in long boxes) and the 45-rpm collection (also in long boxes) onto the new compact shelving.

It should also be noted here that the CPM staff has already benefitted from the generally easier access that the new shelving units and configuration offers, both for patron research requests and for continuing our work of evaluation and reorganization. Floor plans, collection maps, and the CPM disaster plan have all been updated, and will continue to be refined as the collection reorganization finishes. The new lighting has also been transformative, making access and processing work (much of which takes place in the archive room rather than in staff offices) much easier and more efficient.

Budget
The surprisingly large project surplus of $74,715 on the NEH funding side (out of an award of $205,000) requires some comment. With the exception of packing supplies, which we somewhat underestimated, every other facet of the project renovation budget was originally overestimated. The PI and project staff from the Center for Popular Music relied on estimates from Patterson-Pope and from contractors working with MTSU Construction and Renovation. These estimates all proved to be higher than the final costs, with the gap widened further by the inclusion of contingency funds in the original grant budget. Of course, finishing a project far under budget is an inherently good thing. Our biggest regret, however, is that we would have liked to include updates to our HVAC system as part of the project, had we known that there might have been budgetary room to do so.