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You've Got to Be in it to Win It: Six Steps to Securing and Completing a Research Grant

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The first step of a successful grant application is to pick a topic and find out how much prior research has been done on that topic.

You've Got to Be in it to Win It

Six Steps to Securing and Completing a Research Grant

by Stephanie Burke, Kathryn Hensiak, and Donna Nixon

You've all thought about it before. One of your colleagues is announced as the recipient of a research grant, and you wonder how he or she received the grant. Or you encounter a work-related situation and think, "Someone should really research this area," or "I wonder if all law librarians encounter this?"

Applying for and working on a grant project is not nearly as complicated as you may think. In fact, with solid planning and some gusto, your first grant is mere steps away.

Why Apply for a Grant?

Preparing a grant proposal and receiving a grant award offer many career-enhancing rewards. To start with, working on a grant proposal provides innumerable opportunities for you to interact with colleagues. Instead of applying for a grant by yourself, you may choose to work with one or more colleagues. With today's communication technologies, the colleagues with whom you work can be scattered throughout the country or even across the globe.

In fact, working with colleagues from other types of institutions may be beneficial. For example, if you work in an academic law library, you might consider forging a partnership with a colleague from a private law library and vice versa. If you intend to extrapolate from your research data that a certain result holds true universally, collecting data from various institutions is vital.

Regardless of whether you apply for the grant individually or as part of a group, consult colleagues to lend insight into the area of your research. As a bonus, the professional contacts you make during your grant application process will increase your visibility within the profession and expand the circle of people you can call with questions, concerns, and ideas in the future.

If you are looking for a method to build professional knowledge, a grant application and project is the answer. As you move through the process, your expertise of the research topic will increase exponentially. While developing a research topic, you will review literature in that area and speak with experts in the field to build a solid foundation of background information. Your colleagues will view you as an expert on your research topic, and as a result, you may be asked to play a larger role in professional activities.

Working on a grant will give you great bang for your buck. You can use the knowledge you have acquired and the results from your grant-funded research to write articles; give presentations; and facilitate discussions at local, regional, national, and perhaps international professional events. Articles and presentations are powerful career boosters.

Step One: Find a Topic

Usually, when you decide to apply for a grant, you have a general topic in mind. Often, it is a vague idea that will need some refining. You should start by creating a hypothesis. Think of an important question in your field of interest. Make an educated guess of what the potential outcome or answer may be. Find out how much prior research has been done on the topic—read the literature in the field, attend presentations, ask questions, and contact experts in the field.

If your topic already seems to have been exhausted, consider expanding or narrowing the topic to focus on a related area that has not been examined extensively. Run your proposed topic by colleagues to see if it interests them. If others in your field of expertise agree that your topic is good, you are probably on the right track. Repeat the above process until you have a topic that seems ripe for exploration.

Step Two: Flush out the Details

Next, form an outline of what you would like to accomplish and ruminate on the steps needed to accomplish your goal. Include what method of research you plan to pursue: survey, direct observation, combing through data records, data analysis from other studies, etc. Consider whether you need additional help and what form you would like that to take—coauthor, outside consultant, assistance from your organization's grant support department, etc. Draw up an outline and a proposed budget. Some items to consider include:

- **Outside help.** If hiring a consultant, will you need to pay benefits, such as health insurance or workers compensation insurance, in addition to a fee for services? This is something you should discuss with your institution's grant support division (see "Ask for help" discussion in the next column).
- **Budgeting.** Will your institution be willing to assume costs for phone calls, photocopies, postage, and other miscellaneous items? If so, how much?
- **Work time.** Will your institution provide release time to allow you to work on the grant? Is your planned timeline reasonable? Have you taken into account other projects, holidays, and vacation schedules?

Step Three: Find a Grant to Sponsor Research

Now that you have a great topic and outline, the next step is to find a source for funding. To find out about available grants, use resources such as grant source libraries and organization Web sites. Often, grants go undistributed because of a lack of applicants.

Some grant sources include universities and departments; professional organizations (e.g., ALA, AALL, ASIST, SLA); learned societies; and foundations (e.g., Gates Foundation, Ford Foundation). Ask colleagues about other potential sources. (See the list on page 16 for more sources.)

Step Four: Write the Grant

Once you select a grant, it is time to prepare the application. Keep in mind several key considerations.

Observe all deadlines. If the guidelines say to submit "Form X" by December 2, submit the form before close of business on that day—not at the stroke of midnight or the next day. To avoid missing deadlines, make a chart of deadlines and a timeline that provides plenty of leeway.

Take it step by step. The whole process can seem quite overwhelming if you begin to fret about all the things that need to get done. Remember, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Break the process down into steps and it will be surprisingly manageable.

Ask for help. Universities, for one, usually have support organizations to help you through the grant-writing process. In fact, many universities require that you get approval before you apply for outside grants. Other organizations may have similar constraints. Investigate who in your organization may have to give consent for your grant application and contact them

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as soon as possible—well in advance of the grant submission deadline. Find out what your organization and the grant sponsor organization require to write and authorize the grant. You will learn a lot about your organization's red tape.

Whenever something in the application seems ambiguous, do not hesitate to make a call to the grant organization and your grant support division to clarify. It is far better to clarify in advance than to miss an opportunity because you sent the wrong or incomplete information.

Obtain specific approvals, if you are dealing with human subjects (administering a survey, holding focus groups, etc.). Federal law, university guidelines, and other employer policy may impose additional strict guidelines on the use of human subjects.

Follow up to make sure the granting organization received your application, and verify the timeline for the response. While you wait for a response, do not sit idly by! Investigate other sources for sponsorship. Some grants have too many worthy applicants, while others do not receive any applications. Don't get discouraged if this

Lessons Learned During the Grant-Writing Process

An amazing array of resources exists to assist people through the grant process—usually free of charge. Universities usually have an office of sponsored programs, or something similarly named, whose sole purpose is to assist university members through the grant process. In addition, universities often have departments that will assist you with statistical programs and other research tools. Grant applicants in other types of institutions should talk to the heads of their departments or institutions about available assistance.

Humans are complicated. Any and all research that involves humans, even if it is a simple survey, is considered human subject research and must go through close scrutiny, often from some formal institutional review board.

Help is easy to find. There are many great people within the profession of law librarianship and general librarianship who are willing to share the benefit of their expertise and time with little or no monetary reward.

Conference calls are key. Learn how to use your institution's conference calling facilities to facilitate your research. If you work with colleagues outside your area, determine how to equitably work as a group to meet deadlines, despite living in different states and time zones.

Survey the survey options. Evaluate different Internet survey tools for quality, support, cost, and flexibility. Be sure to pre-test a survey on a sample group to make sure the tools and questions work as anticipated.

Set realistic deadlines. Research almost always takes longer than originally thought,

so set structured deadlines, even if they are fake. Otherwise the research project will take a back seat on your to-do list.

Red tape is imminent. Know that you will deal with administrative requirements, such as accounting for expenditures, issuing checks, and complying with the grant requirements. At times, this is more difficult than conducting the actual research.

Cultivate a team mentality. We all bring more skills and expertise to the table than we give ourselves credit for. Working together can be much more rewarding than working individually, because you each have unique skills and insights that enhance the project. Also, working with colleagues on the grant project can prevent you from feeling overwhelmed.

one doesn't come through—work toward getting the next one. Look for alternate grants before you receive news about the first grant application to keep you motivated and minimize discouragement if you later find out you were not chosen for the first grant.

Step Five: You Have the Grant … Now What?

Ah, joyous news, you received the grant! But now what? After weeks, possibly months, of planning, it is time to put the pedal to the metal and actually do the research project. First and foremost, do not panic. Feeling overwhelmed is a very normal reaction. To alleviate the feelings of sheer dread, here are a few simple steps to help you get started.

Remember the outline and timeline you created while planning to apply for the grant? Now is the time to revisit them—both will provide guidance about what you intend to accomplish. Be flexible. Don't make the timeline too rigid,

> **"Don't get discouraged if this [grant] doesn't come through—work toward getting the next one."**

particularly when one step depends on the completion of another. If you are working with colleagues, carefully review your individual schedules and set your own internal timelines. Post reminders to yourself to avoid scrambling at the last minute.

Review your budget and get the financial aspect of the grant in shape. Find out the accounting requirements at your organization and with whom the funds should be deposited. In most cases, you will be working with your organization's accounts payable department. Each department will have its own requirements (and accompanying red tape). Determine any requirements as early in the process as possible, so payments are made in a timely manner.

If you work with a group, determine who will hold the grant funds. Although it might seem equitable to divide up the funds equally among the group and have

each member be responsible for certain expenditures, this probably will be more bothersome than it is worth. A better option is to appoint one person to be responsible for receiving funds and paying expenditures.

Go over the requirements of the granting organization. Typically, granting organizations have committees that administer grants. Make sure you know the names of the committee members and if the members are likely to change during your grant period. If you have not had any communication with the committee chair yet, it is a good idea to contact that person as soon as you receive the grant. Also, if the composition of the committee will change during the term of your grant— particularly the chair—contact the new chair as soon as possible.

It is the responsibility of the committee chair to make sure that you adhere to the grant requirements. As a result, establishing communication with the committee chair is a must.

Most granting organizations require periodic reports. Verify reporting requirements with the chair. Also, some grants require the recipients to publish

Select Resources for Grant Funding for Libraries

Online Resources
AALL Online Bibliographic Services SIS and the Technical Services SIS Joint Research Grant General Information (www.aallnet.org/sis/obssis/research/researchinfo.htm)

AALL Research Committee: Oversees AALL research grants from Aspen and LexisNexis (www.aallnet.org/committee/research/)

American Library Association: Awards and Scholarships: Grants and Fellowships (www.ALA.org)

Finding Funding for Your Project: Grants & Financial Support for your Digitization Project: Some Suggested Resources (www.normicro.com/grantinfo.htm)

Funding and Grant Sources for Libraries (www.libraryhq.com/funding.html)

Gates Foundation (www.gatesfoundation.org/Libraries/)

Grants.gov: Federal government gateway for searching all federal grant opportunities (http://grants.gov/)

Institute for Museum and Library Services (www.imls.gov/grants/library/index.htm)

Internet Library for Librarians: Library Grants (www.itcompany.com/inforetriever/grant.htm)

Library Grant Money on the Web: A Resource Primer, Bill Becker, *Searcher,* Vol. 11 No. 10, Nov/Dec 2003 (www.infotoday.com/searcher/nov03/becker.shtml)

Library and Museum Grants (www.technologygrantnews.com/grant-index-by-type/library-grants-funding.html)

SLA Goldspiel Memorial Research Fund (www.sla.org/content/learn/scholarship/goldspiel/index.cfm)

Print Resources
Annual Register of Grant Support: A Directory of Funding Sources, R.R. Bowker (annual).

The Big Book of Library Grant Money, 2002-03. Prepared by the Taft Group for the American Library Association, American Library Association, 2002.

Federal Grants and Services for Libraries: A Guide to Selected Programs. Mary R. Costabile and Frederick D. King, American Library Association, 1993.

Foundation Grants Guide For Schools, Museums, And Libraries. International Communications Industries Association, 1984.

Funding For Museums, Archives, and Special Collections. Denise Wallen and Karen Cantrell, eds. Oryx Press, 1988.

Getting Your Grant: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians, Peggy Barber, Linda D. Crowe, Neal-Schuman, 1992.

Grants for Libraries: A Guide to Public and Private Funding Programs and Proposal Writing Techniques. Emmett Corry, Libraries Unlimited, 1986.

Grants for Libraries and Information Services. Foundation Center (annual).

The Grants Register: The Complete Guide to Postgraduate Funding Worldwide, Palgrave Macmillan (annual).

National Guide to Funding for Libraries and Information Services, Foundation Center (annual).

an article. Make sure you understand these requirements well in advance of any deadlines. Finally and most importantly, file all reports required by your employing organization on time.

Consider whether you need additional expertise to complete your grant project. Very often, grants include funding for a consultant, someone who can add expertise and assist with the research project. If you plan to hire a consultant, now is the time to start your search.

Factors to consider when selecting a consultant include expertise, salary expectations, work style, goals, and expectations. Salary is often the biggest sticking point. In general, private consultants who depend on consulting work as their primary means of income will charge much higher rates than other types of consultants. If funds are limited, you might want to consider a colleague or someone in an academic setting who will do the work based upon their interest in the topic—usually for less money.

Make sure you outline expectations with your consultant early and that the consultant understands his or her role. For example, if you do not want the consultant to use the information gathered throughout the research project for his or her own research, make that clear to the consultant before hiring him or her. Finally, make sure your consultant understands the timeline for the project. It is imperative that your consultant be able to meet deadlines.

Evaluate research tools you need to complete the project. Consider whether you need an online survey tool or some other form of data collection and assessment or whether you may need software to analyze your data, such as SPSS®. Although you may have done some preliminary investigation on the cost of these tools when preparing your budget, now is the time to confirm prices and then purchase the tools. Be certain to verify that you have the necessary computer or other technical requirements to support the software. (For more information about conducting surveys, see related article on this page.)

Step Six: Wrap Up

Once you complete your research project and fulfill the requirements of the grant, it is time to wrap things up. Analyze your findings and determine how you will share those findings. Decide whether you will write an article, present a program at a conference, or possibly both.

Building a Successful Survey

If you are working with a survey tool, you will face special challenges. First, you must decide whether the survey will be conducted in person using traditional paper or using an online survey tool.

In-person surveys are the most time consuming. If you have a small, easily identifiable sample of research subjects (i.e., a class you are teaching), a traditional paper survey may be appropriate. For large sample groups, an online survey is most likely the best option. Online surveys allow you to easily reach a large audience and, most importantly, analyze the survey data using computer software.

While you can utilize computer software, such as Excel or SPSS®, with in-person or paper surveys, you will need to go through the additional step of inputting the survey data. In comparison, an online survey will already have the data available in electronic format for analysis.

There are many excellent and inexpensive online survey tools. Selecting the type of survey tool to use is the easy part. The more difficult task is drafting the survey questions that will ensure reliable and informative responses. A consultant may be able to offer some valuable expertise at this point. Consider how many questions will be appropriate for your research project, keeping in mind that most research subjects will grow impatient with a survey after about 10 to 15 minutes.

The best way to ensure your survey will get reliable results is to pre-test the survey with a small sample group. To the extent possible, the sample group should possess similar characteristics to your research subjects. Ask your sample group for honest and direct feedback about the survey. Use this feedback to revise your survey instrument.

Administering the survey provides another set of challenges. First, consider whether you will offer incentives to your research subjects to encourage participation. Incentives might include cash prizes or gift certificates. You will have to include the cost of any incentives in the budget of your initial grant application. Determine whether each participant will receive an incentive or whether participants will be chosen at random to receive the incentive.

Next, consider how you will publicize and market the survey to your potential research subjects. Reassure the participants that their survey responses will not be connected with their identity in any way (indeed, this may be required by the grant maker or by your employing organization). Continue publicizing the survey throughout the survey period.

Finally, and most importantly, get to work. Getting started is sometimes the most difficult step of all, but the sooner you start, the sooner you will see the fruits of your labor.

If you have funds left over, find out how and where to return the funds. If you hold the funds at a university, most universities will not allow you to continue past the term of the grant without approval.

The grant application process, and the completion of grant-funded research, teaches some valuable lessons. From working with this grant process, you will likely learn a number of things that will help you in your career and with future grant projects.

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