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## Grant Proposals for the Working Librarian: From Idea to Implementation

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# THE FRUGAL LIBRARIAN

Thriving in Tough Economic Times

Edited by Carol Smallwood

AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION  
CHICAGO 2011

GREENWOOD LIBRARY  
LONGWOOD UNIVERSITY  
REDFORD & RACE STREET  
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# GRANT PROPOSALS FOR THE WORKING LIBRARIAN

From Idea to Implementation

*Lois Stickell and Lisa Nickel*

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**T**HE RECENT ECONOMIC downturn has affected businesses and organizations in every sector of the economy. Libraries have been hit particularly hard, with budgets slashed, positions eliminated, and hours cut. Fortunately, all the news is not grim. Grants offer a way to help libraries get needed funds to enhance services or collections in a time when libraries are being asked to do more with less. In this chapter we discuss the grant-writing process, from identification of grants to the final reporting, and present our own successful grant proposal as a case study.

## IDENTIFYING GRANTS

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Patrons often ask librarians for help in identifying grants for funding. Although librarians regularly refer patrons to grant sources, few librarians have gone through the grant process themselves. This is unfortunate since grants specifically for libraries are available. There are two main ways to approach the process. One is to have a good idea what project you need funding to implement and then search for a grant that meets that need. The second is to find available grants and then determine whether your library meets any of their stated goals. Either one can be effective in getting you to a list of possible

grantors. "Getting grant money is a matter of matching library needs with the grant focus. The closer the match, the better the chance of receiving money. So the library must look at the library's users' needs relative to the potential funder's goals" (Farmer 1993, 110).

Although grant information is free and easily accessible, a few key strategies can help you organize your search. Be methodical. Pay attention

to grant announcements and deadlines. Make a list of potential grant ideas so you are ready if the opportunity presents itself. Use the resources available on the grant websites by creating an RSS feed of websites that announce grants so that you will be the first to know when they are available. If your institution subscribes to

## GRANT SOURCES

Grants.gov: [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov)

Institute of Museum and Library  
Services: [www.ims.gov](http://www.ims.gov)

Community of Science: [www.cos.com](http://www.cos.com)

grant sourcing databases (e.g., Community of Science), set up an alert so that you are notified when a grant that matches your search is posted.

In our particular case, we were already aware of the North Carolina State Library's grant cycles and announcements because we had looked at the list of available grants during the previous year. At that time we did not believe we had a strong enough argument for need. In addition, we could not meet the deadline. However, when the grant cycle was announced again, we were ready to apply with a clearly articulated argument and plenty of time to get our application together. *Hint:* If you are going to have to rush to apply for a grant, consider giving it a pass. The process is competitive enough that you don't want your application to appear to have been done in a last-minute rush.

## WRITING A SUCCESSFUL GRANT

Writing a successful grant is basically making a good argument for your need. Although there is quite a bit of grant money available to libraries, grant-funding agencies can be particular in deciding where to award money. Making a strong argument for why your library needs funding is important. Statistics are key because they back up your claims with numbers. The grant-awarding agency is more likely to be swayed by the specifics of statistics than by a vague "a lot of patrons would use this." In our case, we used university enrollment growth numbers as well as local and regional census data to strengthen our request for grant money. We also used facts about the number of students enrolled in the respiratory therapy program for which we were awarded the grant.

Funding agencies like to support “winners,” so it is to your advantage to showcase your library’s successes and plans, not simply point out your lack of money. Put your grant request in a positive light, explaining how the money would help your library be more successful in doing what it already does well. Be specific. How will your project help your library be more successful? How will it meet the goals of the grant agency?

## START SMALL

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Look for local grant opportunities in your town or on your campus. Many colleges and universities offer personal grants for research or travel, and municipalities often offer small local grants to agencies. Going through the grant-writing process the first time, even if it is for a relatively small grant, prepares you for the organizational steps you will need to follow to obtain larger grants in the future. “Getting one’s feet wet, with even a relatively small form of support, is a good way to get the experience needed to begin to hone your skills and develop a successful track record” (Herther 2009, 26). Funding agencies look for a successful track record, and having one grant under your belt can help you get larger grants in the future. “Receiving a grant opens doors. Receiving a grant implies confidence, a good track record, legitimacy—which leads to getting other grants. Successful grantees receive positive publicity for the library and are also more apt to get additional grants” (Farmer 1993, 109).

On a more personal note, receiving a grant feels a little like winning the lottery. It’s exciting and morale boosting to receive a letter or phone call announcing that your grant proposal was selected for funding. Your library administration will be pleased as well.

## ASK FOR HELP

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Some grant agencies make available copies of successful grant applications as guidelines for applicants. These can be helpful. In addition, ask colleagues to share their successful grant applications with you to gain insight into what grant agencies are looking for. We were lucky enough to have colleagues at a local community college who had won the same grant the previous year. They were eager to share their experience and offer suggestions. The final product of our applications was very different, but the opportunity to look over their application helped us tremendously.

We were fortunate enough to know someone who had applied for a grant similar to ours. If you are not in that position, still consider contacting

previous recipients of a grant and ask if they would be willing to give you some tips or answer specific questions.

## CASE STUDY

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In 2008 the University of North Carolina, Charlotte campus, was preparing to offer a new program within the College of Health and Human Services in respiratory therapy. The problem was that the university library, Atkins Library, had very few books to support this program, and the economy made it impossible to purchase the necessary books. Lisa Nickel, the library liaison to the College of Health and Human Services, and Lois Stickell, chair of the liaison advisory team, decided to seek a grant for books in respiratory therapy. The funds purchased much-needed research materials for the new program, getting it off to a strong start. It also allowed us to collaborate with another department on campus, thus strengthening our relationships with that department.

### CHECKLIST

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- Is there a strong need for something—a program, service, or collection—that your library cannot provide without help?
- Can you quickly identify a grant that will help pay for this program, service, or collection?
- Do you have support from your library administration?
- Do you have the time to devote to writing a grant proposal and to tracking the grant's progress if you receive it? (*Hint: Budget 10 percent of your work time for the grant at the beginning and end of the grant.*)
- Can you partner with someone in your library who can help share the responsibility and time needed for the grant?
- Are you enthusiastic about this project? If the answer is no, don't do it.
- If you decide to submit a proposal, fill out the forms honestly and completely.
- If you are awarded the grant, congratulations! If you are not awarded the grant, remember—they can be competitive, so try again.

## Our Grant

The grant we applied for and received was from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a federal grant-making agency that supports museums and libraries of all types. The agency maintains a search feature on its website that allows libraries to search for grants suitable to their particular institution and situation. Our grant, the “EZ Strengthening Public and Academic Library Collections” grant, was administered through the North Carolina State Library. The award amount for this grant was \$10,000 and required a \$2,500 match from our library. Guidelines for the grant stated that the money could be used only for the purchase of books—no serials or electronic resources, and no salaries. We could, however, pay for shipping, taxes, and processing with the funds.

## Strategy

Once we determined that the respiratory therapy collection was seriously deficient, we did a quick scan of books in WorldCat and consulted several book vendors on prices. This allowed us to estimate how many books we could reasonably hope to purchase with the funding offered. Our major concern was about the matching funds. Because of the poor economy, library funds were already stretched thin, and we did not know whether the university librarian would be willing or able to provide the matching funds. However, we believed strongly that the library needed the books, so we met with the library director and requested the matching funds. Fortunately, she agreed with us about the necessity for these books and made the match available. If she had not been willing to do so, we could not have proceeded further with the application.

## Staying on Track

The EZ Strengthening Public and Academic Library Collections had a definite time line for ordering, submitting receipts and invoices, writing a brief report, and explaining how and when the grant was publicized. Each grant comes with its own set of deadlines. For example, our grant was announced in December, had an application deadline in February with winners announced in June, and final reporting was due the following June. One important lesson we learned was that, although our grants office on campus assisted us with reporting, we were responsible for making certain all deadlines were followed. We recommend going through the time line and putting every event of significance into an online calendar (such as Outlook) or starting a paper



calendar with key dates highlighted so that you don't miss any submission or reporting deadline.

## Documentation

Applying for and receiving grants is a way to add books, bring in programs and speakers, and improve your library creatively. However, all grants come with stipulations. The money *must* be used as directed by the grant. That means that documentation is critical. Not only must the grant writer keep a careful accounting of funds, he or she must also be able to articulate concisely how the money was spent, if it accomplished the purpose for which it was intended, and if the results merited the expenditure. This statement is not meant to discourage grant seeking but to make potential grant applicants aware of the expectations of the grant provider. In our case, the State Library of North Carolina wanted to know the money it provided was used judiciously and resulted in an improvement in library materials for our patrons. They requested a simple review of the project and provided a form for this review. This made their expectations, our obligation, and the end result clear. Had the goal of providing relevant books for the new degree program been accomplished?

## Lessons Learned

One of the lessons we learned is that overseeing a grant can be time consuming. Tracking the money can be particularly challenging if this is not part of your ordinary responsibilities. Frankly, we sometimes struggled to balance the accounts. Setting up a spreadsheet and keeping it updated can make tracking easier. In addition, because there were two of us, we were able to divide the work. If you are considering applying for a grant, you may want to find a coworker who is also interested in working with you on the grant.

## GRANTS ARE COMPETITIVE

Because grants are essentially free money, there can be a lot of competition for them. That means that some applications will be rejected. If your grant application is rejected, don't be discouraged. Consider improving your application and trying again. Ways to improve include looking at the winning grants to try to determine what gave them an edge over you. Review your own application or ask a colleague to review it, looking for weaknesses that may have derailed you. Reread the guidelines. Did you meet all of them? If not, how can you improve and retry next year. You may conclude that your

particular project was not grant worthy, but you may have another idea that would make a successful grant project.

## CONCLUSION

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In this chapter we describe our experience with one type of grant, but there are many different types out there that focus on a wide variety of areas in libraries: career enhancement, travel, training, research, technology, digitization, book purchasing—the list goes on and on. We had both been awarded grants for professional travel, again from our state library. Our library had won grants for other projects—for purchasing laptops to outfit the library's instruction classroom, purchasing laptops to circulate for student use, developing and teaching a course on digitization for local teachers, and several more. These examples illustrate the wide variety of opportunities available to libraries and awarded to librarians willing to attempt writing a grant proposal. We encourage you to try.

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