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Oregon's LTSA State Grant Program: Excavating Best Practice, Reaching Toward Transparency

Ann Reed
Oregon State Library

Jane Scheppke
Oregon State Library

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by Ann Reed
Federal Programs Coordinator,
Oregon State Library

and

by Jane Scheppke
Volunteer,
Oregon State Library

As one compares the library service landscape today versus a decade ago, much of what were then wishes are now realities. For example, Plinkit Web sites for small libraries, subsidies for statewide database licensing, and OSLIS, a thriving Web portal for the K–12 community. How did these come to pass? A dig through the records shows the critical involvement of Oregon's library community, made possible by increasing transparency in allocating LSTA funding.

When Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) became the major federal grant program for libraries in 1996, it broke new ground. LSTA was designed as a block grant program, with many kinds of libraries and projects emphasizing innovation and partnerships now being eligible for funding. LSTA funds provide leverage to experiment and learn best practices. LSTA is more flexible than its predecessor, the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA), which limited funds to public libraries, building projects, and projects with public library partners. With the LSTA state program, Oregon's library community has much more input and information on how the state uses the funds.

Oregon's LSTA program strives for transparency mainly through the Library Development Services section of the Oregon State Library (OSL) Web site, http://www.oregon.gov/OSL/LD/grantmainalt.shtml. The Web site includes information about the LSTA Advisory Council and links to current core documents from the Federal government, Oregon Library Association, and State government. To help potential grant-writers, several years of past grant applications, accompanying materials, and key information, such as funding averages, are available online. Staff also works with grantees to ensure that all forms and information needed are available. Consultants Himmel and Wilson (2007), looking at Oregon's LSTA program, have stated:

> One can learn from Oregon that] transparency in regard to the LSTA program can result in a library community that is highly engaged and one that views the state library agency as a partner in pursuit of excellence in library service. The Oregon State Library provides a tremendous amount of detail regarding the LSTA program and the competitive grants that are awarded on its Web site. The consultants believe that Oregon is exemplary in this regard. (p. 31)

LSTA Five-Year Plan

The five-year plan is the bedrock of Oregon's effort to keep the LSTA program responsive. Oregon is required by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), which administers LSTA funds, to develop a five-year plan that guides how the state spends its annual grant of around two million dollars. Oregon's current plan is on the Web at http://www.oregon.gov/OSL/LD/lsta.shtml. The process of building a new plan starts with the evaluation of the old one. This is important because if a project does not fit into the boundaries of the five-year plan, LSTA funds cannot be used for it.

In 2001 and 2007, the State hired consultants Himmel and Wilson to evaluate the last two plans by conducting surveys, focus groups, and interviews with leaders of public, academic, school, and special libraries. The consultants noted themes arising from the 2001 evaluation, "… Participants felt that much remained to be done … [including funding] licens[ed] databases at the state level" (Appendix B, p. 8).

Ideas gathered from evaluations serve to bridge the old plan and the new. The last two plans started with intensive retreats, including representatives from all types of libraries, library

38

associations, the OSL Board of Trustees, and the Board's LSTA Advisory Council. Input is integrated into a new draft plan. The State Library posts it on the Web and invites comments. Following that, the plan is discussed by the LSTA Advisory Council, then the Board.

Input Changes the Plan

The 1998–2001 plan did not indicate that shared online information resources was appropriate use of LSTA funds. A failed initiative to get state general fund support for database licensing led to the 2002 Senate Interim Task Force on Library Cooperation. They produced HB12, passed in July 2003, which authorized using LSTA to subsidize statewide database

Does people's input make a difference in the way LSTA funds are spent? Absolutely.

licensing. Given the feedback in the 2001 evaluation and elsewhere, the 2002–2008 plan was written to allow for LSTA funds to be used for online database licensing, L-net online reference, and digitization projects.

To be funded, items must be allowable under the five-year plan, developed with extensive community input. The comments in the evaluation of 2003–2008 impact the current five-year plan. Comments from focus groups included "More library services should be digitized—downloadable books, for example" (Appendix A, p. 7) and "OverDrive [is] the kind of project that the State Library should be involved in" (Appendix A, p. 8). In response, since 2009, three grants totaling $250,000 were approved to add downloadable audio, video, and e-books to the state's OverDrive (Library2Go) project.

LSTA Advisory Council

If the five-year state plan is the bedrock of Oregon's LSTA program, then the LSTA Advisory Council is the capstone. The Council oversees the LSTA program, including developing grant guidelines, identifying priorities, and regularly considering the balance of expenditures in all areas of the program. Elected by the OSL Board of Trustees, the thirteen councilors represent library users, public, academic, special, and school libraries, and disadvantaged persons from across Oregon. Since they are drawn from the larger community, it is easy to find and talk to them at conferences, trainings, and in the course of normal business. The State also includes their contact information on its Web site to encourage communication.

Over time, the Council has refined its procedures to create as fair a process as possible. For example, the Council modified the way grants are discussed at their meetings. Currently, the Council discusses a proposal first, with State Library staff adding comments at the end of discussion if requested. All appropriations that are not made in the usual cycle are considered by the Council to recommend to the final authority, the Board of Trustees.

Excavating Best Practice

One area of the LSTA program remains uncovered: gathering and sharing the lessons learned through grant-funded projects. Oregon's LSTA program encourages risk-taking and innova-

tion (Oregon State Library, 2010, p. 2) to learn best practices and try new technologies. One tool that could help is the peer evaluations undergone by competitive grants. Among the evaluation criteria is, "What can be learned from the results of this project?"

To date, the State Library staff has not had time to mine the records for developing best practices. In Fall 2009, volunteer Jane Scheppke started reviewing LSTA files, interviewing project participants, and gathering best practices by topic, beginning with outreach to immigrant and non-English speaking populations. These lists of best practices are sent to past grantees, the Board of Trustees, and library listservs for further comment before the final draft is posted online.

Visible Patterns of Success

While some best practices only apply to specific types of projects, there are patterns of success and failure that become apparent as one reads through past LSTA grants. Libraries may use LSTA money to fund a variety of projects, but the basic formula for success stays remarkably constant. With thorough outreach, smart staffing, and strong community support, libraries across the state have achieved great things with the help of Oregon's LSTA grant program. Lists of best practices organized by topic would provide prospective grantees with places to start.

The OSL's LSTA Web site allows potential grant applicants to look over most of the grant applications, progress reports, and peer evaluations submitted in the past ten years (currently, letters of recommendation are not digitized). Here are a few examples of successful grants exemplifying common best practice that every prospective grantee should read.

Cornelius Public Library's (2008) "Promoting Targeted Library Services to Latinos" took an exemplary approach to outreach and partnerships. After hiring an outreach coordinator who spent lots of time speaking to people throughout the community, the Cornelius Public Library used its new partnerships to build an ambitious outreach program for the city's large Latino population. While large organizations and civic leaders provided critical support, the success of the program was largely due to many well-documented partnerships with local businesses, media outlets, and influential community members. Smaller libraries that want to "go big" with their outreach may look to this grant as a model.

Portland State University and Oregon Literacy (2004 and 2005) collaborated on "Learner Web," a portal for adult literacy learners available online, by phone, and in person. The grant provides a good example of how an innovative and somewhat risky program can overcome considerable obstacles and still be successful in the long run thanks to good outreach and solid planning.

The Multnomah County Library (2006) performed an in-depth needs analysis of Vietnamese, Chinese, and Slavic-language speakers in the Portland area, titled "Planning Culturally Appropriate Library Services." This project is a good example of a planning grant. The results of their research were put into action in 2008 with "This Is How I Use My Library," an outreach

Libraries with successful projects understand that outreach is ongoing, not just a formality when the library wants to do something new.

project resulting in library "how to" DVDs for groups targeted by the earlier study. Depending on the size of a project and expertise of the library, a planning grant is worth considering.

What We Mean by Best Practice: Outreach

Successful LSTA grant projects are based on a thorough understanding of local needs and positive relationships built between the library and its community. These libraries also understand that strong community relationships may take a long time to cultivate, and that they must only embark on ambitious projects when the public support is there. They build their projects to address documented needs. There is no substitute for comprehensive, face-to-face communication.

To develop relationships, successful libraries allow their staff paid time to leave the library, go into the community, and ask people what they need. By going to community gatherings and clubs, staff spread awareness of the library and build goodwill while gathering information about target populations.

Libraries that wait until after their grants have been approved before doing outreach inevitably spend unanticipated time and money scrambling for answers to why people are unaware of or uninterested in programs. However, libraries that start outreach early have a good chance at achieving long-term success.

Staffing: Paid vs. Volunteers

Volunteers are invaluable to a library. They bring important skills and provide support that few projects could do without. With that in mind, there are pitfalls in using volunteers. Projects may attempt to trim budgets by finding volunteers to fill positions that would otherwise be held by staff. This approach rarely succeeds. Volunteer bases vary from place to place, and there are limits to what volunteers are willing to do without pay. Every time a volunteer leaves, the library must train a replacement. In addition, services offered by volunteers may be inadequate or unequal across populations; for example, an English language storytime could be run on curriculum developed by the children's librarian, while Vietnamese language storytime is run informally by a volunteer.

While it is possible to run programs entirely on volunteers, the handful of libraries that have succeeded at this have had unusually deep relationships with their volunteer base. More often, libraries with successful programs have cultivated their volunteers through outreach and then assigned volunteers to support tasks based on their strengths while leaving planning and administration to library staff.

Partnerships

The strength of a library's current relationships can be judged by the letters of recommendation included with the LSTA grant application. These letters can predict the future success of the program. Successful libraries include letters from local organizations who may have a stake in the grant. For example, a project aiming to bring teens and seniors together should include letters from the director of the local senior center, a school principal, a student council president, etc. Each writer will make their own unique case for the program.

Attitudes: or, "We're the library; what do you need?" vs. "We're the library! We know what you need!"

Successful libraries approach outreach, staff development, and partnerships ready to listen. They are willing to look critically at the image they project to the community and to revisit

basic policies to better meet the needs of their target population. If the program brings underrepresented populations through library doors, all frontline staff are trained to communicate with these new patrons with respect and sensitivity.

Most of all, generalizations about entire populations are avoided. Successful libraries know that there is no such thing as a "typical member" of any group or an organization that can speak for all of its beneficiaries, and they do not base programs on assumptions that cannot easily be taken back.

Conclusion

The LSTA grant program gives Oregon libraries the chance to experiment and innovate. It has funded many successful projects, including statewide database licensing, Plinkit, and a number of outreach projects. The OSL attempts to make the program as transparent and involve as many people as possible. The difficulty has been in making the lessons learned from grant projects available to the library community. By looking at past grant projects, we have identified best practices common to successful projects. As we look to the future, we continue to depend on wide community involvement in sharing information on LSTA projects.

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