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Connecting Researchers with Funding Opportunities: a Joint Effort of the Libraries and the University Research Office

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Abstract

In early 2007, staff from the University of Minnesota Libraries and the Office of the Vice President for Research began a collaboration to present a workshop covering grant resources. The session introduced faculty, staff, and graduate students to four key databases of external granting opportunities as well as intramural funding sources. We explain the context, development, and implementation of this ongoing, popular workshop; mention extensions of the workshop effort; and hope to inspire fellow librarians to identify and explore routes to broad institutional engagement.

Introduction

Academic liaison librarians recognize the need for active engagement with their campuses. Many librarians now see their turf as the entire campus, both physical and virtual, with potential users of library resources and services in every corner. Partnerships extend beyond those with academic departments and colleges, to include continuing and extension education and the upper administrative offices of the institution.

In the LIS literature, there are numerous examples of joint efforts formed between librarians and faculty members, particularly in the areas of bibliographic instruction/information literacy to support specific coursework. By way of illustration, McInnis Bowers, Chew, et al (2009) described one such association in teaching an entry-level, undergraduate business course at Birmingham-Southern, a liberal arts college. Mazak and Manista (2001) discussed the incorporation of resources available in the Michigan State University Archives and Historical Collections into a course offered by the Department of American Thought and Language. In support of students' research experience, Stamatoplos (2009) presented the expansion of librarians' roles into undergraduate research at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, which includes not only meeting the information needs of student-researchers but a role in program development.

As many institutions of higher education undergo reorganization and strategic planning processes, it is crucial that libraries align themselves with the institution's plan, and find opportunities for contribution. Little and Tuten (2006) explained the design of the information-literacy efforts of the library at the University of South Carolina Aiken to explicitly support an information-seeking goal in the university's strategic plan. Further, at Eastern Washington University, the Libraries took a unique twist on strategic planning - faculty joined with the staff to develop the Libraries' five-year strategic plan (Miller 2009). In the discussion below, the work of the University of Minnesota Libraries with the Office of the Vice President for Research (OVPR) similarly stemmed from a timely recognition that the Libraries could support, in a very concrete way, a specific element of the University's strategic plan.

External funding is a more dominant element than ever before in supporting the research, instruction, and outreach work of academic and research institutions, whether public or private. Blobaum (2007) discussed the development of the Grants Information Service at Governors State University Library (IL), and the efforts of the Grants Information Librarian to support the hospital's quest for external funding. In this case, the librarian instructed a workshop that served as a resource for identification of and access to funding sources and taught the ele-

ments of grant proposal preparation. Kraus (2007) described a similar evolution for a "Grant Writing and Research" class available to faculty, staff, and graduate students through libraries at the University of Utah.

This paper describes a different type of library involvement than those described by Blobaum or Kraus. Unlike Blobaum, the University of Minnesota Libraries' efforts go beyond a single disciplinary area; instead, a group of librarians serving a range of disciplinary areas, from the life and physical sciences to the arts, humanities, and social sciences, offer workshops addressing the search for funding opportunities. Unlike Kraus, the Libraries offer multiple sessions during a semester, but our workshop does not prepare attendees to write a proposal. The Minnesota story most closely resembles that of Holmes and Hawson (2000), in which the library reference staff at the University of North Carolina (UNC) Greensboro and staff from that university's Office of Research Services collaborated to offer workshops that teach about web-based grants databases.

The UNC-Greensboro story started with a fortuitous accidental meeting, whereas the relationship between the University of Minnesota's OVPR and Libraries developed from deliberate outreach by the Libraries to meet researchers' need for better discovery of grant opportunities. This discussion explains the development of the relationship between the Libraries and the OVPR; the content and implementation of the successful workshops on grants resources; and mentions additional opportunities that have resulted from the partnership.

History and Context

The Libraries offered sessions on grant resources beginning in the late 1990s. These first workshops responded to needs expressed at the reference desk of the Bio-Medical Library. At that time, the workshop emphasized print resources held by the Libraries and introduced SPIN (Sponsored Programs Information Network), the first database of funding opportunities to which the University subscribed. Workshops continued periodically during the next several years.

During 2005-2006, the University's campus-wide "strategic positioning" effort identified a number of unmet needs of researchers. Researchers especially noted the lack of support for identifying funding opportunities or writing grant proposals, but reported significant University support once a proposal was successful. To directly address the concern, the OVPR hired an experienced grants administrator into an expanded position with responsibility to develop new initiatives in collaborative research services (CRS; see http://www.collaborate.umn.edu/explore/explore_index.html). A librarian-colleague, previously employed by the OVPR, suggested that the supervisor of CRS might be interested in the grants class and willing to help with its promotion. In retrospect, the OVPR and Libraries should have communicated from the initiation of the earlier workshops. The CRS staff was very interested and we met with the new CRS person during his first week on the job.

Development and Implementation of the Workshop

Initially, the CRS colleague did not know much about the capabilities of the library staff, and in turn, we did not know much about the operations of the OVPR. During the early meetings, we discovered many common goals and found that the strengths of the organizations dovetailed well. Our shared goals were 1) to assist researchers in finding and effectively using resources; 2) to connect users with tools that help them organize their work, and; 3) to help researchers identify potential collaborators on campus and provide space or resources for their work.

Strengths that the Libraries brought to the table include:

- Searching and database navigation skills, whether of bibliographic information, nucleic acid sequences, or grant opportunities
- Strong connections to each department on campus and to individuals in each of those departments, through our liaison program
- An infrastructure for conducting workshops, including dedicated computer labs for hands-on instruction, a workshop regis-

tration system, and numerous experienced instructors. The OVPR had neither the personnel nor the infrastructure to conduct such training sessions for a campus community of over 50,000 people.

The OVPR enriched the effort in many ways, such as:

- Prestige: The OVPR is a significant force on campus
- Money: The OVPR funds most of the grants databases, at a significant cost
- Experience: Our lead CRS person has extensive experience in the development of training programs, both in person and online
- Communication networks: The OVPR regularly communicates with many groups potentially interested in identifying funding opportunities
- Existing relationships: The strong link between the OVPR and the University's Graduate School is especially helpful in reaching the potential audiences of graduate students, Directors of Graduate Studies, and postdocs.

Our first joint task was to evaluate the existing workshop's ability to meet the needs of the OVPR's initiative. The initial workshop was developed without the input of anyone with true training expertise in grant research, so it was decided that a re-design of the workshop was in order. Beginning in early 2007 and continuing to the present, the University Libraries and the OVPR jointly re-designed, delivered, and promoted a hands-on workshop entitled "Grant Funding - Search Tools and Resources." Workshop content included best practices in searching and implementing e-mail alerts for the following subscription databases:

- Community of Science
- Foundation Directory Online
- IRIS (Illinois Researcher Information Service)
- SPIN

In addition, instructors identified resources for intramural funding opportunities and for information about recent awards from U. S. federal agencies. Although grant proposal preparation was not a topic, we highlighted a collection of web-based resources, selected by the OVPR, that support the grant writing process.

Since January 2007, we conducted almost 50 sessions and reached more than 350 people in the University community, including several from the other campuses in the University system. In response to demand, some of the workshops were specifically for graduate students ("Grant Funding for Graduate Students"), and we led invited workshops for individual departments and research groups.

During the initial offerings of the workshop, a representative from the OVPR attended each session in order to field questions and fill in information, but as the sessions became more popular and workshop frequency increased, his regular attendance was no longer possible. In order to encourage continual assessment, we co-designed, with the CRS staff person, a paper evaluation form for completion by workshop attendees before their departure. During the years 2007-2009, we distributed during 31 sessions, 350 evaluations with 279 returns, for an average return rate of almost 80%; the return rate on an individual session basis ranges from 60% to 100 %. We requested feedback on whether the content level was appropriate, and asked each attendee to rank on a four-point scale: the information's usefulness; her/his increased awareness and ability to search for funding opportunities; and the workshop's organization. Participants may share what new information from the workshop they will use, and may suggest changes to the workshop. We made numerous alterations based on attendees' comments, both written evaluations as well as informal oral remarks. Key changes included:

- creating more practical handouts and posting these on the OVPR's Web site (see http://www.collaborate.umn.edu/explore/searching.html);
- lengthening the session from an hour to 75 minutes;
- demonstrating how to register with the relevant databases and how to set up an e-mail alert during the session;

- encouraging people to use their own search terms during the demonstrations; and
- offering highly specific, subject-oriented sessions for departments ranging from art to oral biology, and adolescent health to neuroscience.

Several attendees suggested that the workshop should be required training for all new graduate students and staff.

The popularity of the grants sessions was due in large part to promotion by the OVPR, through a prominent advertisement on their Web site, and in orientation sessions for new faculty. The CRS person contacted the Directors of Graduate Studies in each department, and strongly recommended that graduate students attend, prompting us to develop the aforementioned workshop for graduate students.

Faculty members, research staff, and even highly motivated undergraduates attended the workshop. Surprisingly, so did quite a few grants administrators who are regular users of the grants databases, but attended the training in order to learn more about the idiosyncrasies of effectively searching the resources. Other participants included a college associate dean for research, and staff from the campus-wide grants administration office.

Workshop attendees are now predominantly graduate students, and their needs and questions present areas of further work for the workshop instructors and the OVPR. For example, some international students wish to limit their searches to those opportunities available to non-U.S. citizens, which is not a simple search refinement in the products to which the University currently subscribes. Another student asked about grants given by European foundations for work in Africa – again, not well addressed in our resources. We plan to research additional resources, both free and subscription-based, that may help these researchers with their funding needs.

Extensions of the Collaboration

The librarians involved in the initial work with the OVPR staffed the three large science libraries on campus: the Bio-Medical Library, the Magrath Library (with a focus on agriculture, ecology and life sciences), and the Physical Sciences and Engineering Library. As the sessions grew in popularity, and as more attendees came from the arts, humanities, and social sciences, we recruited librarians serving those disciplines to teach workshops.

All University of Minnesota librarians and other interested library staff attended a hands-on session that closely resembled that offered to the faculty, staff, and graduate students. This internal training grew out of an effort to raise awareness about grant opportunities for which the University Libraries might apply, as well as to provide an opportunity to expand the suite of skills that liaison librarians offered to their departments. Although committed to assisting users with grant-related resources, the Libraries had no full-time librarian to work solely on outreach about grants resources, as found at George Washington University, the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin, and some large public libraries. Often, these positions are part of an arrangement with the Foundation Center, which sponsors Cooperating Collections in all 50 states as well as several international locations (http://foundationcenter.org/collections/).

In addition to conducting training sessions, the authors helped the OVPR staff to evaluate additional databases to add to the pool of resources, an outgrowth of our collaborations on the training sessions, and provided extensive input to the OVPR about the organization and description of features of its CRS Website (http://www.collaborate.umn.edu/index.html).

The authors suggested to the Libraries' Scholarly Communications Collaborative that there was a need for more local, on-campus opportunities to fulfill the continuing education component, part of the Responsible Conduct of Research program, required of all principal investigators. With the help of the OVPR, these librarians presented a well-received workshop on academic publishing issues, including copyright and author's rights. Similarly, connections with the Graduate School provided us with the opportunity to use their mailing lists for promotion of all

library workshops, substantially increasing attendance.

In response to users' suggestions - and hoping to reach a broader audience - we are in the process of creating an online version of the workshop. The online version will make available the same content found in the in-person workshop, but its 24/7 availability at the OVPR's Website will allow users at their convenience to review selected information, or new users to choose tutorials for specific databases. Enhanced information includes a segment from the perspective of an agency's program officer, contributed by a current faculty member previously employed in that role at the National Science Foundation. Another extension of the grant resources workshops, now in the planning stage, is either a hands-on workshop or an online resource explaining how to search the various funded-research databases maintained by many U.S. federal agencies. Some agencies (e.g., the US Department of Agriculture and its Current Research Information Service, or CRIS, database), either require grant applicants to document such searches in their proposal, or at least assume such searches will be done to eliminate the submission of redundant proposals.

Final Thoughts

Our work with the OVPR's staff is one of many opportunities the University Libraries has discovered on campus. The Libraries are in a unique position with 1) ties to academic departments; 2) a place for students and faculty to gather; and 3) librarians who are skilled at collecting, organizing, and presenting information. Connecting with other units that also serve the university community to provide instruction, programming, and services is a natural extension of the Libraries' mission and strengths.

Moving beyond the walls of the library is essential in these changing times. We strongly recommend working with other units to design, promote, and fund mutually valuable events. Take advantage of the opportunities offered by your institution's strategic plan to apply librarians' skills in new ways.

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