PARTNERING FOR DOLLARS

Using Grant Opportunities to Build Community and Provide Programming

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"I'M OFF" to the Arts Council." "I will be at the public radio station." These are the excited statements from a busy librarian working to develop arts and lecture programs at an academic library. Academic libraries have a rich history of providing programs to enrich the lives of their students and faculty. For an academic library without an active Friends group, allocating librarian time to partner with the community is one way to ensure lively arts and lecture programs. By partnering for national grants, we have been able to expand the breadth of our offerings while maintaining energetic partnerships with the surrounding community. Such partnerships ensure meaningful and timely programs for the students, faculty, and people living within the Sonoma State University (SSU) area, which is located in Rohnert Park, California. This chapter will discuss the partnerships on two grants—the National Endowment for the Arts' Big Read project and the American Library Association's Let's Talk about It project.

WHERE DOES IT FIT? THE LIBRARY, THE COMMUNITY, AND THE GRANTS

One of the most important things a library must decide before beginning to work with the community, especially in applying for grants, is determining if the grant project and the community partnership align with the mission of the library.

SSU Library has several strategic initiatives, of which one is to provide a venue for the enrichment of student life and campus culture. One of the means for achieving this goal is providing dynamic art exhibits and lecture programs. We knew that participating with the community would expand our networks and, ultimately, add a unique element to our programs by drawing on a wider range of expertise.

Obviously, it is important to understand the needs of the community and be aware of projects in which collaboration makes good sense. In our community, there is a growing and committed arts and literary "scene," which made for perfect collaboration on numerous occasions and helped fulfill our mission. And while Sonoma County is a large area geographically, its small but growing population strongly participates in cultural activities.
The Big Read project was one example where the expectations of the funding opportunity matched the needs of the community and supported the mission of the library. The Big Read, a program sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts in cooperation with Arts Midwest, brings together partners across a community to encourage citizens to read for pleasure and enlightenment. Our county had been working on something called “Sonoma County Reads” for several years with great success. The Big Read seemed a natural extension. Our community applied for Big Read grants for two consecutive years. The first Big Read grant encouraged all residents of Sonoma County to read Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 and participate in a wide variety of activities. For the second Big Read grant, activities focused on Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird.

The ALA’s Let’s Talk about It program is another national funding opportunity our library received. The Let’s Talk about It program provides funding to present lecture and discussion groups on different topics surrounding Jewish literature. This particular project requires that libraries partner with a local scholar to lead discussions with community members on preselected books. It was another natural fit for both the library and the community’s interests.

HOW TO PARTICIPATE

Community partnerships seem to work best when each group plays to its own strengths. For example, the Big Read project was administered overall through the local public radio and television station, which had the capacity to handle the administrative execution of the project. Our library hosted and coordinated an art exhibition titled “Those Who Don’t Build Must Burn: An Installation in Response to Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451” by local artist Brooke Holve, whose interpretation of the book challenged college students and local high school students whose classes read the book. The public library coordinated book readings in each community, and the local independent film house sponsored showings of the film version of the book. The unique perspectives each organization brought to the discussions helped ensure that the programs created reflected the diverse interests of the community. On a side note, it was fascinating to work with school, public, and academic libraries.

The Let’s Talk about It project didn’t have the community involved in developing a wide variety of programs but rather in helping to ensure the series attracted a wide audience. The community partners in this case who helped in the promotion of the series included local synagogues, senior centers, student groups, and the networks established from our participation in programs such as the Big Read.

EVALUATION

For both grants, the visions and insights shared by a wide range of participants helped ensure that the goals of each program were met. For each project, specific evaluation outcomes were provided as required by the funder. Assessment on the local level included quantitative data such as numbers of participants, media queries,
and hits to websites and qualitative data such as survey responses from students and teachers and at events, which were used to evaluate the success of the overall program. Each participating group also had individual evaluation tools. We evaluated such things as the number of people attending events in our building, comments from program participants, and the number of new community borrowers.

CONCLUSION

For our library, where community means supporting our users through engaging services and collections, bringing people into our facility, friend building, and being a good member of the larger community, local participation helps us meet our library's mission in ways we could not have done alone—perhaps the ultimate meaning of community.