

**Proposals, Grants and Projects:
A Strategic View for Collection Development
Andrew Herkovic
Fiesole, 18 March 2004**

Themes:

- Foundations and grant programs are not designed for our benefit; the challenge is to design our projects to their programs.
- “Free Money” turns out to be very expensive.
- Relationship management is key to success: many players, unintentional consequences.
- Leadership is vital to both proposal and project: the role of the champion.
- Well-managed proposals lead to successful projects.
- Proposal development is an acquired art that can only be learned on the job.
- Proposal work is a microcosm of active management; it provides a vehicle for staff growth and development

How to Assure a Successful Sponsored Project:

An idealized view not necessarily in real-world order.

- Start with a good idea.
- Find a champion.
- Obtain management commitment to the proposal effort as well as to the project.
- Involve internal stakeholders.
- Discuss the idea with funder’s program officer(s).
- Involve external stakeholders.
- Involve campus functions as appropriate (e.g., OSR)
- Design the project with as much specificity and as broad a perspective of impacts and adjacencies as possible. (Think globally, plan locally.)
- Write the proposal to the program interest. That is, redefine the good idea to get with the program.
- When possible or appropriate, forward a draft to the program officer.
- Budget realistically and compliantly, without padding.
- State budget assumptions fully and clearly.
- Submit proposal timely.
- On award, ramp up timely.
- Do what you proposed to do.
- Spend all the money; spend it appropriately; spend it on time.
- Report early and report often.

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Andrew Herkovic**

Thank you very much for allowing me to speak. This audience creates an opportunity for me to reflect on my own work and role, as well as to unburden myself of some concerns that have been growing for some years in working among fellow librarians. Assuming you all have at least occasional involvement in the proposal process in your work and that you have at least moral responsibilities for helping your staff develop, I believe these remarks bear directly on *your* work as senior managers.

My intention is to speak to the nature of U.S. foundations and grants, to issues of project design and proposal writing, and conclude with a modest proposal for you to consider in directing professional staff. I cannot and will not speak to philanthropic or funding practices outside the United States. While I will refer specifically to my experience at Stanford, I do not think my comments apply more particularly to that institution than to any other.

First, some observations on foundations and grants. I presume most of you have worked with donors – mostly perhaps alumni – who *genuinely* wish to help strengthen your institution and try to focus their giving to the *benefit* of the institution – whether or not you are comfortable with the way they manifest that noble intention. Foundations are *not like that* – or at least “*professional*” foundations, meaning those with staff and some separation from the founders, *do not act* in the interest of *your* institution.

Instead, foundations have programs. That is, each foundation goes through some sort of medium- to long-term planning process in which it decides what – among the vast range of possible directions for giving – it wishes to achieve. Generally, there is a clear intention to change the world for the better, in some ways derived from the founders’ original intent, informed by the concerns of the board, and crystallized by the foundation staff. Some foundations change their program focus frequently (say, a couple of times a

decade), some rarely, but in all cases, there is a clear sense that some worthy efforts are *in* scope and others – equally worthy – are *out* of scope.

Let me restate that. Foundations make grants to achieve some pre-determined social good. They do *not* make grants to reward or support *us*, or our good *ideas*, or our institution's *budget*. It is not ... about ... *us*. Let us consider for a moment the legendary philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie. He did not build hundreds of libraries because of a desire to dot the landscape with libraries or to create jobs for librarians. He built them because he believed in the importance of literacy and learning as social and economic forces. The Carnegie libraries were *means*, not ends, to his social vision. I can think of *no* foundation for which research libraries are an end in themselves; neither are we on *most* foundations' radar *even* as means.

What *are* professional foundations funding, and what are they *not* funding? Of course, specific answers for specific foundations vary and are, to a large extent, published on the web. Additional information is relatively easy to obtain either via your own reference staff or your campus foundation relations office. By and large, among the myriad foundations basking under the tax laws of the United States today, the vast majority of them are very narrow in their interests and very particular in how they support those interests.

Within the last few years, there has been a major *retreat* from higher education on the part of major foundations. Despite incredible support in the past on the part of such foundations as Hewlett and Atlantic Philanthropic, many, including those just named, have announced program shifts away from Higher Education. This has mainly benefited K through 12 education. We can hope this reflects concern that basic education is in crisis, rather than disappointment with our own institutions. There seems to be a degree of herd mentality among the major foundations, some of which cooperate and collaborate on major initiatives, and the herd is not heading our way right now. (A similar direction, by the way, is discernable among US federal grants, albeit in a more explicitly political

context. Though I will not speak about government grants, some dynamics apply equally to writing proposals for government support as for foundation grants.)

This is *not* to say, however, that there is *no* foundation support for higher education, merely that there is a very noticeable and frightening negative trend. For example, the Indianapolis-based Lilly Endowment announced last month a \$100 million initiative to attract top scholars and students to Indiana's seven public universities and thirty of its private colleges. These institutions will be invited to propose ways to invest in faculty, researchers, visiting fellows, graduate and undergraduate students, and administrators, as well as to renovate and equip teaching and research facilities in order to make them more attractive to top scholars and students nationwide. Well, *we* know that libraries are teaching and research facilities *par excellence*, but I did not see the L-word in the AP coverage, which described the initiative as “investing in brains rather than bricks and mortar.” I am curious whether books would be construed more like bricks or like brains – “books,” of course, being a metaphor for all those things you provide to the community.

My local National Public Radio station went to great lengths during their last winter pledge drive to inform listeners the \$200 million bequeathed to NPR by Joan Kroc, the widow of hamburger baron Ray Kroc, will not trickle down to the station level. The basic infrastructure – the local station – still relies on the local listener base for support. Despite that distinction, the pledge drive ended up about \$100,000 below expectation. We in libraries are in something of a similar position, in that large gifts or grants to the institution as a whole rarely trickle down to the library, and we are left to seek what we can and may – as long as we don't interfere with the next Big Ask.

However reduced, foundation support does continue to flow to higher education. Targeted scholarships, for example, remains an important area. Most grant funding favors researchers and more-or-less-applied research. Little goes to basic resources. The foundations want results, in measurable ways, and in finite periods of time. Do they fund the ordinary business of teaching and learning? Not ordinarily. Do they fund extraordinary efforts to achieve extraordinary results? Sometimes – but only when those

results correspond to the programmatic ends of the funder. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, for example, has funded Stanford and others to develop open-source course management systems, but has no appetite for underwriting the local support of such systems on our own campus. Rightly, too: they are supporting academia broadly and seeking broadly distributed benefit for their grant investment.

Toward support of that broader benefit, foundations, Mellon included, tend to favor collaborative proposals. In a recent summary of current and pending grants at the Stanford Libraries, I discovered that 83% of grant funds were in support of projects in collaboration with other institutions. The remaining 17% of grant funds went to three projects: one of the three involved public access to documents via web publishing, another enabled broader access to Chinese and Japanese catalog records, and the third sponsored an international scholarly symposium. So, clearly, distributed benefit is an important trend, and collaboration is a favored strategy, among foundation grants. Government grant programs are very similar in this regard.

As the Lilly/Indiana example demonstrates, the local angle is often very strong in foundation giving priorities. Our cousins in museums have exploited this fact far better than libraries have, and while our respective needs and means are different in important ways, it may be profitable for us to study and mimic their funding strategies.

Even among foundations that continue to support academia, few of their programs explicitly direct or enable support to research libraries. The challenge is to identify program goals that are *sympathetic* to library interests, though not dedicated to them. This can be very frustrating: while it is *easy* to find the right key words in a program statement, libraries and information resources usually slip through the cracks due to one or another technicality. Most often, one needs to focus very specifically in a topical area while seeking potential funders and *then* apply both diligence and creativity to approaching them. Your campus foundation relations office may be of help. My experience is that the campus foundation relations office is *active* in protecting the

university and the familiar foundations and *passive* in finding and exploiting opportunities for the libraries.

The cognizant faculty may be of more assistance: in *identifying* sources of funding, in *approaching* funders, in *endorsing* proposals, in *helping* to design or justify projects. The door-opening role is particularly important for approaching foundations that do not accept unsolicited proposals; sometimes senior faculty are the only means we will have of entrée. They know their fields, some of them are old masters of the grant game, and, after all, *your* success creates resources for *their* use.

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One of my most important points today is that grants are never “free money.” A grant is a contract - a contract to perform a *certain* set of tasks, with a *certain* set of tangible deliverables, on a *certain* schedule, using *certain* means, in exchange for which the funder provides an agreed upon sum of money. In short, they *hire* your organization to do a job *they* want done. The essence is no different from hiring a contractor to build an addition to your home, except that on completion the contractor walks away from your home, leaving you to enjoy the addition, while usually in the case of grants, some specific constituency – such as palaeographers, or cancer patients, or impoverished children, or the like – get to enjoy the outcome, and the funder walks away, leaving you, the grant recipient, to deal with any loose connections, increased work load, and administrative cost. In short: *somebody’s* money creates benefit for somebody *other than us*, and we are left holding the bag. While this is in essence what libraries always do, the third-party benefit is perhaps a little more explicit in the case of grants.

Another way that grants are not “free money” is that staff and administrative investment is *rarely* fully tabulated or compensated, and *always* greater than anticipated. There are opportunity costs from the moment the thought emerges to seek funding for some project until long after the grant money is spent. Every time I obtain some expert input from a colleague, say on digitization specifications, or an estimate of the size of some collection,

or a projection of programming requirements to convert format X to format Y, that colleague is diverted from the primary mission of serving students and faculty.

Whenever I call a meeting to make sure parties agree on how to handle some process, I take time away from other things. There is almost no project worth undertaking in our organizations that can be executed without reference to multiple experts in several departments. Lots of us have a mental image of ourselves much like that of the medieval scholar working alone in a garret or carrel, books and quill pen to hand – your basic Saint Jerome model. This is no longer, if it ever was, a useful model for how libraries get things done, and that applies to proposals and projects as well as to our basic working lives.

Thus, teamwork is essential to the undertaking. Having worked on about a hundred proposals – commercial, governmental, or academic – I have a good idea of the mechanics; that is, I ought to know how to forge a proposal – in several senses of that verb – and build a formally appropriate document. *However*, if I go about it without recourse to genuine, hands-on, topical expertise, my solo proposal will be junk. It will be critically defective: deficient in *design*, in allocation of *resources*, in consideration of *dependencies*, in coordination with other *efforts*, and so on. By the same token, a concerned curator or other expert staff member may be able to develop a thoughtful proposal in isolation, but the probability that it will be compelling to the intended reader is low, and the likelihood that it will be fully integrative, without collegial consultation, approaches nil.

In other words, teamwork is critical to the success of both proposal and project from the very beginning, and that means, among other things, that every proposal is disruptive and expensive to the organization. Certain key people are tapped over and over to help. At Stanford, for example, I rely continuously on several people for help, such as our budget officer. I badger various experts. A good example is our digitization project manager, in part because digitization is a frequent component of our proposal efforts, but equally because he has developed a keen sense of how to organize complex processes and how to manage outsourcing relationships. As a result, though I know he is extremely busy and

needs to be extremely productive vis à vis his primary responsibilities, I often have to distract him, perhaps several times a week. He is not the only expert whose ongoing work I routinely hamper, and of course, once we get a grant, the same experts are tapped to launch or implement the project – whether or not their time is supported by the grant.

The writing of proposals and executing of grants thus have measurable secondary impacts on the library. As you can imagine, the project manager I just described tends to avoid eye contact with me in the halls for fear I will spring something new on him. We all have many roles in our work lives, and others view my role in various ways. Some see me as a distraction or as just another taskmaster, dispensing work to be done, always on deadline. I prefer to think of myself – and I believe a few people also think of me – as coach or advisor or interpreter or reviewer, occasionally as referee or intermediary. I find that my job satisfaction lies much more in assisting colleagues in framing their proposals than in winning grants, which, after all, creates further work. Sometimes I privately hope that proposals not result in awards.

And indeed, there have been grants I came to regret were funded – we have one or two like that now. That is, all things considered, hindsight showed the organization would have been better off *not* having its attention and energy diverted by the project in the form it was granted, whether due to staffing issues, project design, funder expectations or random external factors. One of the key questions to ask, then, is whether a particular grant opportunity is really worth the effort and distraction it would involve.

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An important part of my job is as an intermediary to the campus bureaucracy. It is my job to make sure the Libraries play well with the Office of Sponsored Research, the Office of the Dean of Research Administration, the Office of Technology Licensing, and the like. Whenever possible, I walk proposals over to OSR for approval, rather than rely on impersonal campus mail. I try always to let them know a week or so ahead when a major proposal is headed their way. I even return their calls and emails! The result is

cooperation, timeliness, and the benefit of the doubt - the difference between “We rejected the proposal because you miscalculated the Indirect Costs” and “Would you please explain how you came up with the Modified Total Direct Cost?” In terms of the board game Monopoly, good working relationships with OSR is the difference between “Do not pass Go; Do not collect \$200” and “Get out of Jail Free.”

Certainly, some proposal submission and grant requirements seem more worthy and important than others. Nobody likes arbitrary and ambiguous rules and meaningless processes. However, one of the most important ways I understand my role is as steward of relationships: relationships among campus organizations, relationships with program officers and other funders, relationships with project partners. (I will not address here the messy pleasures of joint proposals, but obviously funding partnerships invokes a whole series of relationship issues.) The direct project staff may care simply to get the task done, to get the project completed, but someone has to be concerned with how our institutional conduct on *this* project will influence our prospects for the *next* grant. At Stanford, and undoubtedly elsewhere, much of the effort to maintain good relations with foundations, as with donors, lodges with the University Librarian. But the Librarian needs support to be successful in this regard. We can understand this as a microcosm of the university, where the President is essentially the Chief Public Relations Officer, supported (or controlled) by the Office of Development, among others.

We all know that, left to their own devices, most of our colleagues will make reasonable efforts to do right. They never intentionally do substandard or incomplete work, though of course, they rarely have the luxury of truly adequate time for all their many responsibilities, which may include work on proposals.. However, it is apparent that hastily conceived and poorly prepared proposals rarely result in well-managed, productive, efficient, and gratifying projects. Indeed, good proposals make good projects possible. In the US military, there is an applicable initialism, the Seven Ps, representing several variants, all vulgar, of a maxim relating planning to performance. In lab research, it is a commonplace notion that one should get far enough along on an experiment to know it will work before proposing it – thus assuring success – and using the left-over

resources of the grant to start work on the next experiment to be proposed. Technically, this borders (at least) on fraud, but in practice, it has the effect of keeping all parties in relative harmony. This is not a useful model for library projects, for lots of reasons, but it is instructive at least in that the proposal wants to be informed by careful preparation and active methodological research.

Ideally, such careful preparation and methodological research is performed by the individuals who will be responsible for executing the eventual project. I discuss, edit, critique, evaluate, structure, recalculate, and package the proposed endeavor, but I cannot be relied on to construct a sound project design. That is, some directly interested and involved expert needs to be at the center of the proposal. And that expert - or in my preferred language, that *champion* – must assume *personal* responsibility for the fate of the proposal and the outcome of the eventual project. I've worked on lots of proposals without champions and lots with, and invariably, the latter are superior, in terms of prospects both for funding and, more importantly, for successful execution. Even when the eventual champion is to be hired through the grant, you need an interim champion to see the process through the point of hiring the main player.

I need hardly remind you that these champions ideally emerge from Collections and Public Services staffs. Technologists and Technical Services staff can inform and assist, but I think it is fair to say that the core ideas and commitments originate predominantly with those who work most directly with the users of resources. At Stanford, lots of ideas blossom at the top of the organization, at the level of Mike Keller and Assunta Pisani, which helps make it a great place to work. I note, however, that executive interest translates into tangible, workable, successful projects only if and when someone else in the organization understands, accepts responsibility for, and identifies with the undertaking. Assignment of a project is not enough. Essentially, championship cannot be assigned; it has to be embraced, and without the champion the prospects are dim.

Foundations, development, and accounting people – people like me – serve useful roles in the process, but we support, we do not lead. Let me give you an example. Some years

ago, I prepared, at Mike Keller's direction, a proposal for a pilot program of digital scanning of books in fulfillment of interlibrary loan requests, called dd-ILL. The California State Library awarded LSTA funds to the project. And then time passed. A committee was formed, and there followed some civil, but indecisive, meetings. Anxiety about this orphan project grew. Gradually, one member of the committee started to initiate documents and processes, and eventually emerged as the leader of the whole project. Once that fact was clear, progress was extraordinary; the program took off, a second year of funding was awarded, and the program continues today as a valuable part of our ILL function. All because one individual, more or less unbidden, seized on the idea and made it work. Had that champion been involved at the proposal stage, we would have had four extra months of development time and a better, more efficient, process all along.

Note I have said, at length, three things:

- Proposals require effort.
- Proposals require teamwork.
- Proposals require champions.

It follows from these three points that proposals also require support of leadership. It is difficult to assemble the team and to allow the champion to succeed without the acknowledgement of management that this is an important and valid professional activity. If the cost of supporting the effort properly is too high from the managerial point of view, it is better to kill it cleanly than to half-starve it.

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Let me pause here to ask, how do we define a good proposal? The immediate and obvious answer – that a good proposal is one that results in funding – is a partial one at best. I suggest, a good proposal is one that results in a successful project. In turn, I would define a successful project in two ways. First, a successful project is one that achieves something useful, as proposed and in the manner proposed. Second, a successful project

is one that enhances the reputation of the institution at least in the eyes of the funder. (In this regard, library projects are a bit different from those of individual researchers or research teams, where the individuals' reputations takes on more immediate importance than the institution's.)

A good proposal presents a vision, a need, and a feasible solution, informed by research (whether bibliographic or consultative), and described with sufficient specificity to be plausible, but sufficient flexibility to accommodate experience. That balance, between the vague and the specific, can be elusive, particularly if the wishes, prejudices, and knowledge base of the funder are poorly understood or inadequately discussed.

Parenthetically, I would extrapolate that it is almost impossible to write a good proposal for a government grant. The laudable mandate to avoid partiality, to keep relationships at arm's length, to avoid the appearance of corruption or cronyism leads to making the granting or procurement process essentially agonistic, if not quite adversarial. I express no blame here or generalized distrust of government, just a sadness that bad faith necessarily prevails in *res publica*. It is often true as well that the effort of applying for government grants is greater, with the result less certain, than with foundation grants, and the difference has to do with the relative place of relationships in the two processes. Certainly, however, various federal programs are significant sources for library grants.

What government granting frowns upon, and foundation funding relies upon, is dialogue within existing relationships. It is about fulfilling the desires and needs of both grantor and grantee in partnership. It is about the long term. It is about assuring there are no surprises. Discussion precedes suggestion of an idea for funding. Informal correspondence precedes draft proposals. Final proposals reflect several iterations of input. Proposals developed in this manner tend to be approved and those approved tend to succeed in execution. The mantra is simple: No surprises.

This same approach applies throughout the grant period. The watchword here is: Report early and report often. Even for grants that require annual reporting, I insist that we report

quarterly. (You can imagine how popular this makes me.) Project staff may chafe at this, but I have yet to hear a complaint from funders about our providing too much information. On the other hand, I *have* had some very uncomfortable conversations with funders who had *not* received enough or timely-enough information. Should a project not go quite as planned and require schedule changes or reallocation of funds, the program officer *should* have had some prior notice of the way things are going. Thus, again: No surprises.

Let me recapitulate the whole process in rapid-fire bullet form:

- Find a champion who *believes* in the project.
- *Discuss* what you want to propose.
- Propose what the funder said *it* wants.
- Propose what you *really* intend to do.
- *Do* what you proposed to do.
- Spend the money *as proposed*.
- Report early and report often, that is,
- Tell ‘em what you are doing, and finally,
- Tell ‘em again what you did.

The end game is simple: the fewer surprises, the likelier future proposals will be entertained and accepted. If you have ever been harangued by university development officers about stewardship, much of this will be familiar, and with good reason. What I am talking about is nothing other than stewardship. We achieve our ends by motivating funders to long-term support, with foundations as with donor-alumni. If you win the grant award, but lose the relationship with the funder, the institution takes a hit that may take a generation to heal.

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Proposal writing is not often an inborn or natural facility. Rather, it is an acquired skill and discipline that does not seem particularly common in our profession. I assume with

no evidence that most of you as senior managers have, indeed, worked on or reviewed numerous proposals. But I ask: what fraction of your *staff* have any substantial experience in proposal development? For some of us, the closest thing was applying to graduate school, and, frankly, that's not close enough. According to the 1988 *Nonsexist Word Finder* entry on grantsmanship, "[t]here is no one-word for this handy, but sexist, term." Whatever you want to call it, it was certainly not taught or even mentioned in library school when I attended, and exposure to grantsmanship seems very hit or miss thereafter for most of us. There are lots of highly experienced professionals around who have never sought grant funding or even put together a project budget. Should I find this surprising or disappointing? Perhaps I should not, but I do.

Proposal development, I submit, is a broadly useful competency. The discipline of proposing something, of course, is as applicable to internal programmatic requests as for external funding requests. It demands a level of clarity in thinking, in planning, in managing resources, as well as in written communication. I suggest it is a way of building general professional competence on the job, whether or not it results immediately in funding.

A few years ago, I helped to compile an omnibus prospectus for innovation in the libraries – intended for a Campus-Needs type exercise, and I was equally struck by the wealth of creative ambitions of our staff as by the variation of expertise in presenting those ambitions. In some cases, the issues were quantitative – budgets ran somewhere between incomplete and incomprehensible. In other cases, the specialists neglected to build a case for their ideas – mainly by assuming, rather than stating, the value and effect of the intended innovation. I know from experience that it can be difficult sometimes to strike a balance between self-presentation and boastful posturing. In squirming to avoid the appearance of vainglory, we can fail to present persuasive cases of the value of what we do. I think this has cost librarians and librarianship dearly. Proposal work is an arena where it is critical to make a persuasive case. I think many of our colleagues are reluctant to accept that ours is a competitive environment – indeed, it is distressingly like the rest of the world. *Even* in our genuine desires to cooperate and collaborate with each other,

we have to be *competitive* about presenting *cooperative* efforts. Let me warn you that thinking too much along these lines can lead to headache.

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In closing, I would like to make a modest propose to you that you embed proposal work in your expectations for the professional growth of your people. Make it clear that you consider it part of the job for curatorial and like staff to *seek* grant opportunities, to *lead* proposal development, and to *manage* grants. Indicate it is not enough to take what is given, but that each subject specialist has at least a moral responsibility to seek additional fiscal resources. Obviously, it is easier to find support in some fields than others, but I think there should be some opportunity at least to try for all professional staff.

Recall that I cautioned earlier about the effort, distraction, and uncertainty of proposal preparation. I acknowledge that my suggestion is therefore *expensive* to your departments. However, I submit, there will be real benefits to your organization if you try such a policy. In the first place, your library will produce better proposals, in the sense that skill sets will grow, that the notion of championship will have an opportunity to flourish, and that internal competition will produce Darwinian benefits. In the second place, the institution will enjoy better collections and services, whether because of increased external funding or simply due to clearer priorities and expressions of direction for internal consumption and understanding. Further, there are opportunities for staff to engage with the faculty as partners or advisors to proposed projects and thus to foster closer working relationships with the faculty and to help them understand the needs and strengths of the library organization. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, working on proposals and projects is a way for your people to broaden their horizons and work lives, to grow in their careers. There has been much discussion in recent years about professional development for librarians – or more precisely, the *lack* of opportunity for same – and encouraging your staff to plan projects and secure funding for them creates a serious vehicle for them to develop professionally.

I hope you come away from this with two thoughts: first, that relationships are paramount at *every* level of funding efforts and, if handled properly, can only strengthen your institution; and second, that engagement with the grant funding process is, or could become, a valuable aspect of librarians' careers.

Thank you.