

FROM THE FOUNDATION FRONT: WHAT'S WORKING?

Lisa Arnold

The Paul G. Allen Family Foundation

April 2013

For more than twenty years the Allen Family Foundation has helped libraries build and sustain relationships with the communities they serve. We have provided twenty-seven million dollars to public libraries, primarily in the Pacific Northwest. Until recently, much of this funding (80%) supported capital projects to construct, renovate, and equip library buildings. We also have funded strategies to build library capacity by supporting automated inventory systems, volunteer programs, early literacy resources, and cultural programming.

In 2010 the Foundation decided to take the library program to the next level and launched *Making Connections*, an initiative with the goal of strengthening the role librarians play in connecting people to ideas. We pilot-tested the initiative in Washington, funding seven projects with a range of program designs. While all of them retained elements of traditional library services, many introduced technology resulting in program experimentation, professional development for librarians, and untested service delivery. At a foundation-grantee convening, library staff voiced their belief that private support was the critical difference between conventional library programming and ventures that break new ground and advance the field. The projects have the potential to change the way communities view librarians, but, just as importantly, how librarians view themselves.

In our second round of funding for this initiative, the Foundation tweaked the guidelines to offer risk capital to experiment with new delivery models. We recognized that fundamental shifts were transforming library services. In our review criteria we emphasized increasing library usage and patron satisfaction as desired outcomes. We had a particular interest in

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encouraging library use among teens, and funded teen projects in Burlington, Kitsap county, and Walla Walla, as well as a project to reach millennials in Seattle and one in Port Townsend to share public library and school catalogs. In this round of funding (approved in December 2012), we made nine grants to libraries and a grant to OCLC.

In our view, and I imagine most of you in the room share this, libraries are about more than media. They are about more than buildings. They are about building relationships. After all, that's what information science really is. Although we are putting money into projects like a smartphone app for Washington State Library, what we want is to cultivate the human element. Technology funding ensures that librarians continue to ride the cusp of communication. But studies show that patrons are more engaged with libraries when they have a relationship with their librarian. Our funding supports those kinds of projects that go beyond algorithms to include people and their sensibilities.

In January of this year we introduced a new name for our program and a new focus. The *Faye Allen Library Program* honors Paul and Jody Allen's mother, who spent her lifetime inspiring children to read. We invited proposals from public libraries and two nonprofits in Washington State and Multnomah County. We are positioning our funding to support:

- School-age children who know how to read, taking their interest and skill to the next level of self-directed readers, motivated by the excitement that pleasurable reading brings, leading to greater reading comprehension and a lifetime of reading.

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- Using multiple strategies, like reaching kids where they live, stimulating individual reading and group interaction, and promoting partnerships among public libraries and schools and nonprofits.
- We are targeting public libraries, either alone or in partnership with nonprofits to *lead* the creation of programs for this age group, including enriching school curricula.
- And we are interested in projects that provide outreach to rural areas in Washington to support communities in remote locations that are less likely to have robust library services and programs.

Examples of these types of projects include:

- **Summer reading** programs that encourage interaction among kids of similar ages and fill the learning gap between school years.
- **Book clubs**, both online and in-person, facilitated by librarians, that introduce kids to new subjects and increase their reading skills in a peer environment.
- **Innovative bookmobiles** staffed by librarians that visit popular venues, bringing books and other media to complement leisure activities.
- **"Battle of the Books,"** hosted by local librarians, in which teams of students read books and compete in Quiz Bowls to test reading skills.
- **Partnerships with Storytellers Guilds** that bring literature to life through local tellers at the library or in designated locations like children's museums.
- **STEM reading**, in which librarians teach basic electronics and engineering through the use of science kits, learning to read instructions, and reading fiction and non-fiction books that complement the material.

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The kids' program will alternate annually with *Making Connections*. For 2013 we already have received proposals. Our next cycle will be in 2014, when we will fund programs that experiment with delivery models.

Like other funders, the Allen Foundation seeks results. We evaluate all of our grants both individually and collectively. We look for ways to do a better job. What is our job? My first boss in philanthropy described it as "holding the jacket for the fighter in the ring."

Now, if we, as funders, are holding the jacket for public librarians, what does that mean? Who, or what, opposes you? Many librarians will tell me that their opponent is budget cuts. Universally, people want more money. But I can't approach my board and say, "Fund this project, librarians need more money." What I can say is that public librarians are resourceful and have come up with brilliant ideas that they'd like our help executing. We fund where librarians are experts about their community and their consumers. Librarians can tell me that books aren't going away any time soon, and I believe you. You can tell me that reallocating space will transform the way you provide services, that outreach to rural youth is key, that embedded public librarians in schools are absolutely necessary, and I will listen.

The fantastic creativity of librarians is brought home to me every day. I hear about burn out and librarians who lack excitement about their jobs. But I've discovered that librarians never stop churning out ideas. Ask a librarian for ten minutes of her time, and she'll express, often with pent up emotion, her deepest desires. Your opponent may be lack of bandwidth or a skillset you

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haven't mastered. You may be one step away from a partnership with schools, looking for that unique teacher-librarian who has vision. You may want your library to grow wheels. Ideas may incubate in library foundation board rooms for years before they see the light of day, and you may need just that much support to make it happen. These factors come into play when we consider what we will fund in the future. I need to know what you are thinking!

The time you spend dreaming, you are building sustainability into your model. How it will fly depends upon unknown factors of your world, a world you know well, much better than I. I am an outsider, an observer, a fly on the wall, a participant only to the extent that I spend hours in a chair or at a desk or computer or browsing the shelves of my local library, a wonderful work of architecture by Peter Bohlin, by the way, on Bainbridge Island.

The predictive value of a well built model will help you set goals, establish benchmarks, and craft reasonable, foreseeable outcomes that bring you closer to realizing your library of the future. To steal a line from William Shakespeare, "Things won are done; joy's soul lies in the doing." I have a feeling librarians have taken that page from Shakespeare's book [*Troilus and Cressida*].

Libraries are full of the stuff of romance and imagination for those of us whose lives are shaped by them. The Allen family certainly was shaped by them. The Foundation's parent company, Vulcan, employs a number of librarians who oversee the family's vast collection of books and media. Recently I took one of our newest librarians to lunch. He enthused about

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cataloging books, and expressed his admiration for a senior librarian's cataloging strategies. I know and appreciate how important that catalog number is to the orderliness of the universe, which orderliness would otherwise be random chaos, were it not for your expertise.