

Editorial essay: Thoughts on a stalled grant bid

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Abstract: As a small academic library, technology has always been a challenge. Recent IT department personnel changes have yielded robust technologies on campus at long last. This meant that it was finally worth pursuing grant opportunities to create digital collections from our Archives holdings. Our 10,000 piece Historical Costume Collection and Fashion program history seemed a good place to start. But the path to applying for a large-scale grant at our institution was not as straightforward as it we had hoped.

Keywords: digital collections; academic libraries; grant writing



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It's an exciting moment when, as librarians, you realize you can contribute something truly unique to larger scholarship. Our school is a small, Catholic (chiefly) women's university in Milwaukee. Among notable programs in Art Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Counseling, and Dietetics is Fashion. The program was started in the mid-1960s by, yes, nuns interested in fashion design and the growing careers available to young women. It has grown and thrived over the years. Students go to New York and Paris annually, and design for and participate in an annual fashion show. It is quite the destination every May.

Against this backdrop: a digital collection waiting to be found. With fifty years of program history and increasing numbers of exciting digital images and videos from fashion shows sitting in various desktop file folders, it seemed like a great time to embark on a digital repository. Looking around the Web, we found no institutions had public collections covering the history of fashion education, or student fashion shows. Not to mention the school's 10,000-piece Historic Costume Collection (HCC). We knew we had an interesting and unique collection brewing. What follows is a cautionary tale of how to avoid major setbacks in creating such a repository.

Early in the year, our Grants Manager caught that the deadline for the [Council on Library and Information Resources' Hidden Collections](#) grant was fast approaching. She spoke with our Library Director, and he assembled a team with

him and me and the University Archivist. Our IT department had already downloaded [Omeka](#), an open source digital collection platform. The labyrinthine application's sections were divvied up, and we set to work crafting language about the collection, while the Grants Manager worked on the more "institutional" sections.

Meanwhile, our Director also researched the technical side of photographing the HCC and the various components needed including time and the need for preservation, which was required for the grant. We also tried to keep the Dean of the School of Arts and Design apprised of our progress, since she oversaw the Fashion program, as well as one of the department co-chairs, who happily sent along many image files for the Omeka test site. It was a tremendously busy five weeks, but we got it done!

Our grants approval process can be laborious, as it often includes Vice President(s), the President, and the Board of Trustees. Despite the conversations among all these individuals, the Grants Manager, and our library team, and despite that few if any grant proposals had ever been turned away here, our grant bid was in fact denied in the proverbial eleventh hour. I won't go into the precise reasoning. What it boils down to is this: make sure all stakeholders know as much as possible about the purpose and design of your project. And make sure you do the communicating, whenever possible. Provide details, no matter how mundane.

Exude know-how and passion, no matter how often. A particular detail came to light in the “tenth” hour, which ultimately sank the project. For now. Details matter.

Keeping communication flowing means you need to understand the inner workings of the process for grants at your institution. Learn as much as you can, no matter how mundane. Details matter. Even if your institution’s process seems transparent, make sure. In the end, we will amend our proposal and try again this fall. No harm done, really. But it’s doubtful that we will ever shake the sour feeling that things should be much farther along by next January.