Entrepreneurs in the Public Library: Reinventing an Institution

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ABSTRACT
IN THIS CASE STUDY, THE AUTHORS DESCRIBE a library system in northern Virginia which has reinvented itself as a public service corporation. The Fairfax County Public Library in Fairfax, Virginia, has successfully developed a public-private model for fund development using a top managerial committee, known as the Enterprise Group, to integrate fund-development activities into every aspect of the library's operation. Balancing the need for additional revenue with the traditional mission of meeting the informational demands of its users in a cost-effective fashion, the library has been able to avoid the public relations and legal pitfalls that are inherent when public or nonprofit organizations attempt to find private sources of income.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1993, fund-raising and development have become a mainstay in the budget mix of libraries. According to *Library Journal's* 1999 Budget Report, fund-raising activities for libraries have grown 228 percent in the past six years. In just the last year, the number of libraries reporting fund-raising operations such as foundations jumped 62 percent (Bogart, 1999, p. 6). Obviously, this growth represents the increased need—due in part to the high cost of technology—for alternative funding sources as well as the constrained circumstances of local library budgets.

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Public libraries have certainly contributed to this growth, evolving their fiscal development activities from simple used book sales to sophisticated corporate partnerships, grantsmanship, and direct marketing through foundations. As public libraries scurry to augment traditional sources of funding, they must face a number of difficulties, including the public relations consequences of embracing what is perceived as commercialization, threats to tax-exempt status, and the loss of control that can result when corporate funds are solicited.

J. Gregory Dees (1998), an associate professor at the Harvard Business School specializing in social entrepreneurship, suggested in a 1998 *Harvard Business Review* article that leaders of non-profits must carefully design their strategies on what he calls a "social enterprise spectrum" (p. 56). His definition of this term comprises a model that effectively mixes both the commercial and noncommercial aspects of a nonprofit organization, such as the public library. As he explains: "People want to make contributions to the common good, or to their vision of it. The challenge is to harness these social impulses and marry them to the best aspects of business practice in order to create a social sector that is as effective as it can be" (Dees, 1998, p. 67).

ADAPTING ENTREPRENEURSHIP TO THE PUBLIC LIBRARY: A CASE STUDY

The Fairfax County Public Library (FCPL), which serves nearly a million residents in northern Virginia, has adopted some of the concepts promulgated by Dees as it reinvents itself, not just as a library, but as a public service corporation.

While the Fairfax County Public Library is located in the affluent northern Virginia suburbs outside Washington, DC, like many library systems throughout the country in the past decade, it has faced shrinking funds. The library competes with seventy-one other county entities for limited tax funds. Its FY 1999 budget of $25,796,130 results in a per capita cost of $26.74. Compared to seven other major public library systems in the Washington, DC, area, FCPL's expenditures per capita rank near the bottom.

When county belt-tightening resulted in the loss to the library of about 100 positions in the early 1990s, culminating with the closing of four mini-branches three years ago, library management decided it needed to "go outside the box" to maintain and augment the quality service that Fairfax County residents had come to expect.

Innovative thinking has resulted in the establishment of a number of programs which provide fund-raising opportunities, including:

• the establishment of a Center for the Book, affiliated with the Library of Congress, which provides free programs for adults, as well as fund-raising programs;

- a volunteer program that promotes the idea that there is no job un-
  suitable for a volunteer, solicits volunteer help from corporations, and
  includes volunteer Web designers, Internet tutors for the public, and
  a volunteer-organized music recital program;
- a partnership between the library, its foundation, and two local utility
  companies which provided funding for a special environmental col-
  lection;
- staff training in managing patron problem behavior, which was recog-
  nized with a feature article in *Public Libraries* (Bangs, 1998) and a pre-
  sentation at the Public Library Association. The sale of the *Problem
  Behavior Manual* (Fairfax County Public Library, 1997) developed for
  the training module has become a source of extra income for the li-
  brary.

As a result of these and other efforts, in FY 1999, nearly 77 percent of
Fairfax County residents owned FCPL library cards. There were nearly 5
million library visits and a record 10 million loans. An average of 5,465
new users registered each month. Circulation, which had dropped slightly
in the early 1990s when funding was drastically cut, has increased by more
than 1.5 million since 1993. More than 135,000 users attended more than
3,000 library programs, and the library earned a 94 percent approval rat-
ing in a community survey conducted by Goldhaber Research Associates.

The library must steer safely through the sometimes-difficult relation-
ships that develop when nonprofit organizations seek outside funding. A
recent series by Herbert Snyder (1998), "When Fund-Raising is Too Inno-
vative" in *Library Administration and Management,* addresses two tax areas
that must be considered when developing fund-raising programs: unre-
lated business income and tax-exempt status.

According to the Internal Revenue Service, business income must be
earned in a way that advances the purposes for which the nonprofit orga-
nization was established. If the IRS determines income is unrelated, then
a non-profit will either have to pay taxes on the income, sometimes at
corporate rates, or risk the nonprofit status of the organization. As Snyder
points out, these issues must be addressed *before* activities begin rather
than discovering problems after bad publicity or an IRS audit.

Snyder suggests that libraries must develop a mission statement that
clearly reflects their tax-exempt purposes. This allows every new project
to be developed in relation to that statement (Snyder, 1998, p. 31). He
also suggests that, as organizations grow and evolve, fund-raising must be
evaluated in light of these changes. Snyder's (1998) guidelines for avoid-
ing tax-related problems include:

- developing specific policies and procedures for evaluating income- gen-
  erating projects;

- closely examining sources of income and spending policies to avoid becoming a victim of innovative fund-raising success;
- keeping good records, not just financial, but of the decision-making process; and
- consulting with a professional since tax law is so complex (p. 31).

FCPL considers fund-raising proposals in light of possible tax conse-quences to its nonprofit foundation. It has sought legal counsel and re-jected fund-raising ideas that might jeopardize tax-exempt status. One such idea was the possibility of advertising an online bookseller on the library's Web site to gain a percentage of revenue from books sold. Legal advice determined that such a plan fell outside the library's fund-raising mission.

The library has also grappled with the complications of accepting corporate gifts that require matching or additional funding from the li-brary. Because corporate and government deadlines can vary consider-ably, problems sometimes arise. For example, a developer offered to set aside space in a shopping mall for a library branch in an underserved area of Fairfax County. The library would provide all the interior furnishings. When the shopping center project was delayed, library funds had already been approved for the interior shelving, collection, and so on, creating problems that required some budget adjustment. While everything is now on schedule, the library will look carefully at any similar offers in the fu-ture.

The public relations consequences of accepting outside funding have caused problems for some nonprofits. Dees (1998) cites the recent expe-rience of the American Medical Association, which had to cancel an ex-clusive arrangement with the Sunbeam Corporation. AMA members and others objected that the partnership with the manufacturer of health-re-lated products such as thermometers and blood pressure monitors would jeopardize the organization's integrity (p. 55).

A sale of rare mathematics books by a university library in Great Brit-ain caused a different sort of outcry from academics. When Keele Univer-sity in Stoke-on-Trent, England, sold off 1,400 books in a rare collection to invest in library materials, computers, and Internet access, protestors called for an audit and tried to hold up export licenses for books sold to U.S. buyers (Swanton, 1999, p. 2).

FCPL staff voiced reservations when the library first began seeking corporate sponsors. Some felt corporations might wish to dictate the con-tent of library collections. Successful partnerships have put many of those fears to rest. The library evaluates each potential corporate partnership in order to ensure that the library's mission and policies will not be com-promised.

The library's foundation, its Center for the Book, Grants Office,

volunteer program, award-winning Web site, evaluation techniques, and staff training programs all benefit from an integrated creative approach to maximizing resources. Such activities often involve partnerships with corporations and other entrepreneurial activities. By redefining traditional limits, the library gives the citizens of Fairfax County the quality service they deserve in an era of scarce tax dollars.

THE ENTERPRISE GROUP

The FCPL library's Enterprise Group is the creative impetus for many of the programs that seek non-tax support to maintain quality service. The library director and several program managers meet bi-monthly for brainstorming sessions. The management style of the library has been likened to that of a corporation by a member of its Board of Trustees. Believing that FCPL has to make its own future, the library's approach is to break boundaries and to transform the library into a public service corporation where anything is possible.

Through the Enterprise Group, the library administration hopes to address attitudes and approaches that are key to successful nonprofit development programs, including:

*   understanding that fund development is an institutional, not just an individual or departmental, commitment, and making sure fund-raising is not concentrated in one methodology, whether it is direct mail, special events, or a foundation;
*   understanding that public relations and fund development go hand-in-hand; and
*   knowing that fund development and fund raising are different (fund development relies on long-term relationships) (Lamkins, 1995, pp. 36-39).

Members of the library's Enterprise Group include the library director, the executive director of the library's foundation, the volunteer coordinator, the associate library director, the coordinator of the Center for the Book, and the public information officer. The group's goal is to create an integrated approach to exploring and developing creative sources of non-tax support for library services as well as to introduce new services to the community. Some of these sources might provide private funds, in-kind gifts for the collection, in-kind contributions of equipment and other nonbook resources, or volunteer programs that extend the library's ability to reach its community without a concomitant increase in the budget. A number of innovative initiatives have evolved from Enterprise Group discussions, one of which was the library's Center for the Book (CFB).

THE CENTER FOR THE BOOK

The Center for the Book uniquely addresses the combined needs of

programming and fund-raising. Created in 1997, the center is affiliated with the Virginia Center for the Book and seeks support through grants, donations, and gifts from individuals. It is the only Center for the Book in the Library of Congress program affiliated with a local library system; the typical CFB is associated with a state library. The CFB allows the library to support adult programming that had to be curtailed during an earlier budget crunch. The CFB's goal is to offer eight programs a year, most of them free.

Its inaugural program was a Potomac riverboat cruise and fund-raiser with John Berendt, author of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil.* Other programs have included a visit from bestselling novelist Sharyn McCrumb; a series co-sponsored by the Peace Institute on Global Conflict; and a program by Samuel Papert, a noted expert on children and computers. Most recently, the center sponsored a fund-raising literary cruise in the Bahamas with poet laureate Rita Dove, crime-thriller author John Gilstrap, and Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey, author of *A Woman of Independent Means.* In May 1999, the center honored local authors with a special reception.

These events have become extremely popular. In all, since its founding two years ago, more than 1,500 individuals have attended adult Center for the Book programs. Prior to its inauguration, adult programming was scarce and erratically funded by local branch Friends groups. The CFB's for-fee programs help to support its free programming, and the CFB's affiliation with a national network of similar organizations allows it to share programming from other jurisdictions at little or no cost to the library.

SUMMER READING PROGRAMMING

The number of children attending the library's summer reading program jumped 20 percent when the library initiated an incentive program with local companies such as Domino's Pizza and Blockbuster Video, offering coupons to those who complete the program. More than fifteen businesses and other agencies sponsored the 1999 summer reading program and donated more than $1 million worth of free and discounted products and services to children who completed their reading requirements.

The library thanks these corporate sponsors with an innovative marketing tool that gives them additional publicity: screensavers on branch public computer terminals. Screensavers are words or graphics that display on a computer terminal when it is idle. The library's graphic artists create colorful screensavers thanking the sponsors, which library staff then program to run whenever patrons are not using those terminals. Since FCPL has more than 700,000 registered users and almost 5 million visits to our branches each year, these screensavers give sponsors additional

visibility. Many sponsors have indicated that the screensavers were one of the most attractive aspects of our partnerships.

GRANTS OFFICE

A major contributor to the Enterprise Group is the library's Grants Office. The office was established two years ago with the goal of developing volunteer talent to research and apply for grants and partnerships for which FCPL or its foundation might be eligible. The office has already yielded rich results:

- a $7,500 grant from America Online to help start a Computer Clubhouse for disadvantaged youth;
- a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to host a "National Connections" book discussion series for adults learning to read;
- a partnership with the Inova Health System for the Office's Health Information Project to increase the depth of the library's medical resources; and
- a partnership with a local theater to host the library's classical music recital series.

The staff of the office has also been instrumental in establishing partnerships for the library with other County agencies. One such exciting effort includes the partnership with the Department of Information Technology in the development and deployment of multimedia electronic kiosks that are housed in nine library branches. The kiosks have over 7,000 pages of information about county programs and services, and they permit citizens to transact business with the county, such as paying taxes, from library branches. Since the kiosk program was established three years ago, the interest in kiosks from other jurisdictions—both in Virginia and in other states—has exploded, and the county now serves as consultant on kiosk development to other organizations.

One of the office's recent accomplishments is the $25,000 matching grant obtained for the library to digitize the contents of its Virginia Room, which houses historical records, documents, and memorabilia. Scanning of the items began in mid-1999 along with the development of full MARC records.

VOLUNTEER SERVICES

The library's volunteer program has tripled in the past ten years, first under the leadership of the personnel director when tax funding first began to diminish and then under the stewardship of a paid volunteer coordinator hired in 1993. In all, more than 3,000 volunteers donated more than 142,000 hours last year.

Implementing the library's philosophy that any task is possible for a volunteer, the volunteer coordinator offers an array of nontraditional vol-

unteer job opportunities, including those of Web and database designer, grant proposal researcher or writer, and recital manager and landscaper. Also, the library solicits corporate assistance in its volunteer efforts. For example, FCPL's Volunteer Tech Force includes a corps of fifty-five technically knowledgeable volunteers, some representing technology firms in the region such as America Online, IBM, and EDS. Volunteers provide one-on-one tutoring as well as group workshops for individuals learning to navigate the Internet and use other library electronic resources. In FY 1999, forty-five Tech Force volunteers contributed more than 4,855 hours in tutorial activities as well as Web and database design. The contribution of these volunteers allows paid library staff to devote more time to public reference questions or other essential tasks rather than the technology instruction and troubleshooting that can sometimes take up valuable staff time.

Another unique volunteer project is the "Rising Star" concert recital series, headed by a retired music librarian who donates fourteen hours a week, and sponsored by the library's Friends of Music. Through this concert series, the library supports one of its goals of meeting the recreational needs of its users.

The Friends of Music was established in the early 1970s to support the library's music collection housed in one of its regional branches. The group bought a Steinway piano in 1974 (later replaced with a new seven-foot Steinway in 1987). The live recital series began as a simple Sunday concert in a branch meeting room but has evolved into a regionally-recognized series, reviewed by music critics for the *Washington Post* and other area newspapers.

The Friends of Music provide volunteer staffing for the eight-month series, which consists of sixteen recitals by professional classical musicians and a "Young Soloists" recital in which serious students of music compete to participate. In fall 1998, the library set up a partnership with the Alden Theatre, located in a local community center, and the recital series was moved from a library meeting room to a more acoustically accommodating and commercial location.

Between September 1998 and early summer 1999, more than 990 people attended the concert series. Music lovers in the community help support the series through membership in the Friends of Music, and the group is exploring a partnership with a local classical music radio station to assist in fund-raising.

THE LIBRARY FOUNDATION

While library foundations are often formed during capital improvement drives, the Fairfax County Public Library Foundation, Inc. has been instrumental in developing the library's collection in areas where tax dollars fell short. Prior to the establishment of the foundation, individual

Friends of the Library groups, affiliated with most branches, were the non-profit arms that provided much of the non-tax funding. Raising money primarily through used book sales (one Friends group raises more than $60,000 a year with a biannual sale), Friends were instrumental in providing early technology when county funds were unavailable. The foundation has helped to focus Friends' activities beyond the needs of individual branches to encompass system needs as well.

The Fairfax County Public Library Foundation, Inc., was established in 1994 to develop private funds to enable the library to achieve a margin of excellence—to provide materials, programming, and technological enhancements beyond the scope of public budgets. The Library Board of Trustees was concerned that establishing the foundation might result in the county allocating less tax dollars to the library. In fact, the reverse seems to be true. It was difficult to find county funds for the library's first automated catalog more than fifteen years ago until $90,000 had been collected from Friends groups. This principle has worked just as well with the new foundation. When private funds begin to come in, the county feels a responsibility to contribute its fair share.

Other library systems have discovered similar reactions. In a September 1998 article in *American Libraries*, Deborah Jacobs, director of the Seattle Public Library, describes a conversation with then-mayor-elect Paul School as she opened a letter from a foundation that had just given the Seattle Public Library $2.5 million. The mayor-elect, Jacobs (1998) explained, "suddenly realized the strength behind the library's commitment to fulfilling its vision for a first-class system" (p. 42). FCPL has had similar experiences. The County Board of Supervisors recently restored funds for the full development of a collection at a regional library that had opened many years earlier with a much smaller collection than required. The board is also considering providing funds to restore hours of operation to community libraries cut in the early 1990s. Both actions are, on the part of local officials, the result of increased awareness of community support for the library.

In 1999, the foundation presented the library with a check for more than $65,000 for the purchase of audio books. This amount represented the 1998 income from the Orrin W. Macleod Endowment, established in 1997 with a $1 million gift to the foundation from the estate of a library patron who used recorded books as his vision failed. Prior to his death, Macleod learned through newspaper accounts that the foundation was being established. He approached the library and foundation directors indicating his interest in setting up a bequest to a nonprofit organization rather than a government entity supported by tax dollars. To date, this gift has generated more than $207,000 for the purchase of audio books.

Other corporate and private donors have also expressed a preference

to donate to a nonprofit organization rather than a government entity. Without the foundation in place, the library might not have received the generous gift from Macleod and others.

In 1999, a $60,000 gift from two energy providers created the Columbia Energy Group/Washington Gas Energy & Environment Collection, which is housed at a regional branch. The collection includes 1,100 volumes, an online sciences database, and a computer station. Adult and children's material in the collection covers topics such as ecology; energy conservation, production, and distribution; and environmental law and policy. Print and video materials range from children's stories to policy treatises. The computer station provides access to a science database of complete articles from 150 popular and professional science periodicals, biographical data, and more. The database is accessible from all nineteen library branches and from patrons' home computers through the library's Web site.

In spring 1999, the foundation received a $25,000 Library Improvement Award from the *Washington Post*. In FY1999, total money and in-kind donations to the foundation exceeded $360,000 and supported the purchase of technology, programming, and many other needed items and services. Since its establishment five years ago, the foundation has raised approximately $2 million for the Fairfax County Public Library.

AWARD-WINNING WEB SITE ATTRACTS POTENTIAL PARTNERS

The library's nationally recognized Web site (www.co.fairfax.va.us/library) is a business, reference, and public relations tool that communicates the library's fund-raising and development needs to a wider universe of users than just those who visit FCPL's branches. FCPL's Web site was launched in 1996 and now has 1,800 pages of information and links to over 1,000 Web sites carefully selected by librarians to meet the needs of the general public. The Internet Services Department staff, which now has 3.5 full-time equivalent positions, could not have established this Web site without partnerships with nearby universities, which have provided interns and volunteers as well as time offered by corporate volunteers. To date, volunteers have contributed more than 2,000 hours in Web development.

In 1998, the coordinator of the Library's Internet Services Department was named "Cybrarian of the Year" by MCI. In making this award, MCI contributed $1,000 to the library's foundation, which was used to purchase books, materials for Web development, and a year of MCI Internet access.

The library's Web site brings library services to individuals in unique and ever-expanding ways. Through the Web site, individuals can reserve and renew materials, register for certain programs, ask reference questions, and find volunteer and Friends of the Library applications. FCPL

made its catalog available through its Web site in October 1998, and during the online catalog's first nine months of operation, it was accessed more than 107,000 times and used to reserve more than 50,000 items, representing 11 percent of the more than 433,000 total FCPL reserves for FY1999.

Another significant and growing use of the Web site is of FCPL databases. FCPL recently began to offer patrons, through its Web site, access to the following subscription databases which have complete articles and, in some cases, indexes and abstracts: INFOTRAC, EBSCOhost, GaleNet, SIRS, and PROQUEST Direct. Although all of these were not available during the full fiscal year, there were more than 343,000 searches and more than 650,000 "views" in FY1999. "Views" comprise articles and other discrete pieces of data such as maps or a biography. For comparative purposes, if a "view" is like checking out a book, the subscription databases are generating the volume of business of another regional library branch.

In FY1999 the library added a boon to genealogists and historians to its Web site: the Historical Newspaper Index. This gives users access to more than 1 million records indexing 200 years of articles from eight local newspapers. Thanks to a gargantuan volunteer effort that spanned ten years, users can search the historical newspaper index online by name, subject, or keyword and produce a list of publications, issues, page numbers, and brief content blurbs. The newspapers on which the indexes are based are located in the Virginia Room of the Fairfax County Public Library and can be viewed on microfilm. Individuals at remote distances can order articles from the library's Virginia Room for a nominal fee. The online Historical Newspaper Index was featured in a *Washington Post* article and in a telecast meeting of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors.

The fact that the Web site is so dynamic and heavily used makes partnering with the library more attractive to corporations because we feature information about our corporate sponsors and donors on our Web site. For example, the Inova Health System, a local hospital corporation, cited the FCPL Web site's excellent gateway to medical information as one reason for entering into a partnership with the library. Inova has committed $40,000 to the partnership, which will include jointly distributing health information via each organization's Web sites, the library's kiosks, and other media.

TRAINING AND EVALUATION

Even staff training modules are evaluated as possible resources for outside income. One in particular has resulted in augmenting the library's funds. A May 1998 feature in *Public Libraries* entitled "When Bad Things Happen in Good Libraries: Staff Tools for the '90s and Beyond" (Bangs, 1988, pp. 196-99) summarized the efforts of a Problem Behavior Task Force, formed in 1995 to revisit the issue of training staff to deal with disruptive

patron behavior. *The Problem Behavior Manual* (Fairfax County Public Library, 1997) developed for this training is now sold through the Public Library Association and has raised $15,000 for the library.

The Library's Office of Planning and Evaluation (OPE) serves as a major source of support when seeking outside funds. Unlike many public library systems that combine statistic-gathering activities with other management functions, FCPL's OPE is devoted exclusively to compiling information about FCPL.

The library's administration recognizes that information is key to making sound decisions about delivering good service to county residents and essential in convincing outside funders that their assistance is necessary and will be used appropriately.

Having a dedicated department for planning and evaluation makes FCPL unique among public libraries. The associate director who heads the department believes OPE provides a consistency in evaluation services and reporting usage that results in useful information. Using a variety of data-gathering tools, OPE monitors changes in community demographics and use patterns to ensure that resources are allocated most efficiently to meet community needs. These statistics are also essential when approaching grantors and other funding sources.

OPE shepherded a community survey conducted by George D'Elia for Goldhaber and Associates which indicated that FCPL is doing things right. The 1998 report stated that 81.7 percent of the respondents had personally used a Fairfax County Public Library in the last year, and 93.7 percent reported that they were satisfied with library services.

CONCLUSION

As Dees (1998) notes: "Strategic and structural innovation should focus on improving mission-related performance" (p. 67). The results of the above mentioned survey indicate FCPL is definitely maintaining its quality service while tapping outside sources for funding and support. But it is maintaining a mix on the social enterprise spectrum, ensuring that its public service goals and fund development objectives blend together. Fundraising activities, such as those sponsored by The Center for the Book, for example, are always balanced with free programming that the community of library users has come to expect. Through this integrated creative approach that pushes the envelope in types of programs, training, and sources of funding, FCPL has been able to evaluate fund-raising and entrepreneurial efforts and provide superior and cost-effective services to its community of users.

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