

FLAGLER HUMANITIES PROGRAMS: SUCCESS IN A TINY LIBRARY

Margaret A. Coval
Program Associate
Colorado Endowment for the Humanities
Boulder, Colorado

Paul G. McKenna
Center for Faculty Staff Development
University of Connecticut Library
Storrs, Connecticut

Flagler, Colorado, is a small, rural community with a population of less than 600, located on the high plains 120 miles east of Denver. Flagler boasts one of the smallest public libraries in the state of Colorado, the Flagler Community Library, which houses 5,300 volumes and operates on a yearly budget of less than \$2,000. The library is open only five hours a week. Yet when the Flagler community library presented its first public program, a humanities program, almost 300 people attended. Two months later when it presented a second program, the local movie theater had to be used to accommodate the attendance. Over 330 people came, and the main street was transformed into an open air museum of antique cars and farm machinery.

The library received funding to present the programs and technical assistance in program development from the Rural Libraries and the Humanities Project, a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grantee based at Kansas State University.¹ The programs, "A Potpourri of Early Years" and "Country School Legacy," were successful because Jean Strode, the librarian, maximized community interest by involving the

local people and organizations in the planning and implementation of the programs.

The Rural Libraries project assisted ten communities each in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Colorado in offering over sixty humanities programs through their public libraries during the past year. This project has ended, but a funding resource for public humanities programs exists in every state in the nation. Libraries and other non-profit organizations that would like to develop or present humanities programs for out-of-school adults can contact their state humanities committee for information. Although the names of these agencies vary slightly from state to state (Minnesota Humanities Commission, Delaware Humanities Forum, Colorado Endowment for the Humanities), all are supported by the Division of State Programs of NEH, and as such, are mandated to award grants to non-profit, non-political organizations for humanities projects benefiting the out-of-school adult public.

The primary criteria for funding is humanities content. The involvement of humanities scholars (usually PhD's in the disciplines listed by Congress)² in the planning and execution of the project helps to ensure the humanities content. Grant applications submitted to a state humanities council are reviewed by a volunteer committee made up of humanities scholars and other community leaders and individuals committed to education in the humanities.

Of vital importance in consideration of a grant application is a high level of community interest and involvement.

There should be a keen desire in the community for the program to take place, and enough community involvement before the program to guarantee a good audience turnout. Time, facilities, services, materials, and money donated by participants and non-participants should, at a minimum, be valued in equivalence to the requested grant amount.

In Flagler, librarian Strode had a local steering committee to assist her with the programs. From the onset the committee was a working, decision-making body. "I selected people that I knew would accept responsibility and were dependable. These were the visible, influential and busy people in the community," she said.

They were representative of the community: the chairperson was a machinist; other members were a gift shop owner, county commissioner, insurance salesman, two teachers, and the humanities scholar, who served as a consultant to the project.

The committee represented such groups as the Women's Club, Ladies Aid, Lions Club, Library Board, The County Commission and the school system. This breadth of representation was valuable because it led directly to involvement of diverse groups in the design and development of the programs, and heightened community awareness of the upcoming events. Additionally, the time spent by the steering committee on this project represented a significant in-kind contribution to the grant.

Because of Strode's enthusiasm for the project, the steering committee became strongly committed to the project.

The programs soon ceased being library programs and became Flagler community programs.

The programs were designed so that the residents were involved, supporting Peggy O'Donnell's contention that, "When you involve other people in the planning the more certain you can be that the programs will appeal to and interest your audience...when people have an active role in planning a program they are more likely to attend the program and bring their friends and families."³

Residents of the area were asked to display heirlooms and artifacts at the first program, and antique cars and farm machinery at the second program.

"We just asked, we kept asking everybody. Many people have items of historic value that they are pleased to display," said Strode. This approach very effectively involved the community in the programs.

The steering committee did not stop there. School children created posters to promote the programs and women from the local senior center were asked to judge the posters. Awards were given for the three best posters from each grade level, K-6. Music was provided before the programs by a RSVP Mountaineer Band, and several local residents were involved in the actual presentations. All this led to broad community interest and involvement in the programs, and (coupled with the publicity campaign) served to boost attendance.

The committee established dates for the programs (both were conducted on Sunday afternoons), arranged for facilities

(another in-kind contribution towards the grant), developed the publicity campaigns, helped the librarian in writing the grant application (the humanities scholar was helpful in ensuring the humanities content of the application), and in general worked with the librarian to ensure program success.

Many state humanities councils offer mini-grants or planning grants which are large enough to bring a humanities scholar into the community to assist in the design of the program and the actual writing of the grant application. Librarians considering applying for state funds should contact their state humanities council and request guidelines, deadline schedules and application forms. They should be sure to ask about special programs for libraries and/or rural audiences. Some states offer small planning grants, speakers' grants, media resources, packaged programs, and traveling exhibits. Often these are less complicated to apply for and to arrange. The programs in Flagler cost \$500 and \$300 in grant funds. The considerable local contribution and donated time by the scholars made these programs inexpensive. Costs of rural programs are often higher because of travel costs for scholars and other participants, especially if the project requires the scholar to do research in more than one location before the program.

Packaged programs have an appeal to rural and small libraries. These programs can take a variety of formats. For example, an exhibit and scholar/speaker, a film and scholar/discussion leader, or a panel reproducing a previous program but drawing on local participants and issues. The

packaged program is usually less expensive to present than a program created at the local level and may better utilize the community's limited resources. The uniqueness of each community comes through during discussion segments even when a packaged program is used.

Discussion and dialogue is an important part of a humanities program. It gives the audience an opportunity to participate in a humanities process--analysis, questioning, critical thinking, hearing and responding to others' views. In the best cases, the dialogue serves to augment the base of existing information on a topic.

The project planner/grant writer has an important role in communicating to the scholar the kind of program anticipated by the planners, the role the scholar is being asked to play (especially as discussion leader), the expectations of the funding organization, and the effect of successful education-
al programs on the library and the community.

From the scholar's perspective, good local preparation, feedback on his or her contribution to the project, and beforehand knowledge of local controversial issues are appreciated.

What appeal does this kind of program have for the scholar? Why would a scholar drive to Flagler, Colorado or any other rural community to participate in a humanities program? Primarily these programs offer an opportunity to meet and talk with a uniquely different audience. The participants have unique experiences from their distinct lifestyles to draw upon during discussions. Their views are

often not represented on the typical college campus, or in the audiences who attend programs in urban settings. A scholar, while presenting new information and offering perspectives, can enrich his or her work significantly. Libraries benefit from the programs because the programs offer an opportunity for the library to serve the adult population in the community. Library usage may even increase.

When considering applying for a state humanities grant, project directors should contact their state humanities commission. The commission can, at any stage in the planning, advise on the humanities content of the program, suggest various kinds of applications, assist in locating the best scholar, supply examples of applications of funded projects, answer questions on the application process and review and comment on drafts of the application. The final grant application will be considered by the state committee, the governing and grant awarding body of state humanities programs.

Successful public humanities programs are vastly rewarding, but they are not easy to do. Flagler's warmly-received presentations were the result of substantial time and energy well spent--and not all of it by the librarian. Strode's careful groundwork brought wide-spread community interest and involvement. Then her role became two-fold. While she was the catalyst who kept the pot boiling, she was also responsible for keeping the program within the parameters of the grant criteria, all the while being careful not to douse

the committee's enthusiasm.

The tiny Flagler Community Library, open just five hours a week, serving a population under 600, nevertheless presented two humanities programs that attracted nearly 1,000 people. If a small rural library, with an inspired librarian, can develop and present this kind of programming, think what is possible in your community.

NOTES

1. Grant number GL-20176-82, awarded to the Division of Continuing Education, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.

2. The humanities include, but are not limited to "history, philosophy, languages, linguistics, archeology, jurisprudence, art history and criticism, ethics, comparative religion, and those aspects of the social sciences employing historical or philosophical approaches."

3. Peggy O'Donnell and Patsy Reed, Planning Library Programs, American Library Association.