

## Sometimes the News is Good

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Even in difficult economic times, an institution as complex as a university sometimes approaches the end of the fiscal year with funds that must be expended. The sources of these funds are varied, as are the requirements for their use. For a public university supported by state funds, there are deadlines by which the funds must be used if they are not to be returned to the state. Federally funded research grants have specific guidelines for permissible uses of funds. Income streams such as tuition differentials and fees are often earmarked for particular purposes, but the existence of these funds may free up other budgeted monies for unrestricted uses. These unallocated funds provide opportunities to enhance library services, facilities and collections. If the library has a prominent role in the university's ability to meet its strategic goals, the university administration is more likely to think of the library when looking for effective means of using the funds. From the library's point of view, the sudden infusion of funds at the end of the fiscal year should be seen as a cause for celebration, even when these funds have strings attached. By planning ahead for potential year-end surprises of this kind, the library can respond quickly to use these funds wisely and in accordance with the requirements for any funding source or type. This kind of planning is often part of the job of the AUL, even if the library dean is the person who actually takes forward the proposals at the appropriate time.

Universities use a variety of budget systems for allocating funds to campus units. Mott Linn has provided a concise and approachable overview of some of the budgeting models that one might encounter depending on where one is employed.<sup>1</sup> Any library administrator who wants to take maximum advantage of opportunities that might come to the library should make it his or

her priority to discover how the budget process works in their particular university environment. If there is a formal procedure for adding proposals to a campus-wide list, the library's needs must be on that list and kept up-to-date. In addition, the AUL can provide the dean with a list with talking points that can be used whenever the subject comes up in a meeting with his/her provost or in discussions where the various deans are involved in dividing funds among worthy projects.

Many books have been written about the role of the university president in guiding the strategic direction of the institution. William Bowen's reflections on his years in this role are of particular interest in understanding how the upper administration's perception of the library may help or hinder efforts to become a conduit for funding that needs to be expended.<sup>2</sup> Another piece of advice for the library administrator is to take heed of the climate of the university and its leadership in developing plans for expending funding. Although enhancing the library's materials collections is a popular target for infusions of year-end money, other uses may be possible and may be more worthy of consideration, if only because it may be difficult to justify ongoing funding for some of these purposes.

In the following paragraphs, there are suggestions for using end of year money to achieve a variety of goals. The potential uses include library services, facilities-related projects, and collection enhancements. These ideas are not intended to be comprehensive, but are a springboard for more detailed discussion and planning activities. The unifying principle behind these suggestions is that advance planning is essential for using unexpected funds thoughtfully and in a timely manner. The decision to use funds for particular projects and services depends on the strings attached to a particular funding source, as well as the priority of each potential use as related to the strategic goals of the library and the university. Even taking into account these

considerations, the ability to implement particular ideas depends on how much money is available and how quickly it must be spent. The most desirable uses of funds may not necessarily mesh with the funds provided at a particular time. Developing a matrix that lists each potential use with the estimated costs, resources needed, time involved, and possible sources for obtaining the materials required to implement each project makes it easier to determine which uses to pursue when the library is presented with an infusion of funds.

Library services that might be funded with one-time money include pilot projects; hiring students for short-term projects; outsourcing; cross-campus collaborative activities; startup purchases to support new courses or programs; marketing; and continuing education. Pilot projects can be broadly defined as any experiment the library is interested in pursuing, based on following trends in the profession and the research focus of the librarians. One example involves purchasing e-book readers, loading some of the library's electronic content on the readers, loaning them to students, and soliciting feedback. Since the e-book reader market changes so rapidly, the details would need to be specified at the last minute. Finding sources for popular e-readers could be taken care of ahead of time, even going so far as to prequalify the vendors to make it easy to place orders and receive the hardware quickly.

Hiring students for short-term projects such as catching up with shelving all the materials that were returned at the end of the semester may be feasible if the funds can be used for personnel expenses, and if there are well-trained student workers who would like to keep working after the end of the semester, or who are willing and able to work extra hours. Other possible projects include cleaning the computer keyboards, screens and mice; vacuuming the books in the stacks; and shelf-reading to get the stacks in order before the next semester.

Outsourcing some aspects of library work is sometimes a viable option. If the library lacks expertise and time for cataloging some types of materials, there are companies that will take on the library's collection of music CDs or the large stack of Russian books left by a retiring faculty member. Setting up contracts with these companies takes quite a bit of time, so it is a good idea to plan ahead by tracking down the companies and arranging for small batches of the materials to be cataloged, assuring that the quality of the work is satisfactory. Then, when there are more funds available, the library has already established a relationship with the company and can easily ship off the materials.

Cross-campus collaborative activities are likely to be unique to a particular university, but one common feature of universities is that colleges, schools, and departments all tend to advertise their more unusual and interesting programs, using a variety of approaches including newsletters and web pages. Taking the time to read these offerings whenever they are available will reveal patterns, enabling the AUL to discover which units on campus would make good partners for various projects. For example, if the English Department has an annual conference and brings in well-known authors, the library might volunteer to host an author reading with a reception and book signing.

If the one-time funds are received at the right time of the academic year, it may be possible to use them in support of new faculty members' research interests, emerging courses of study which are being offered on campus, or other academic programs. Some projects of this type involve setting aside an amount of money per faculty member, with the library purchasing items requested by the faculty member and adding them to the library's collections. New faculty are particularly impressed when the subject bibliographer from the university contacts them for book suggestions even before they have arrived on campus prior to the start of the new academic

year. Although there is risk involved with this project idea, because some faculty will request journal subscriptions which are more difficult to support with one-time money, the goodwill generated by making the offer and being able to fill some of the requests is considerable.

There are many ways to market the library, of which one of the most fun is to hand out “stuff” such as pencils, erasers, notepads, tote bags, fanny packs, tee shirts, flash drives, stress balls, and other inexpensive items imprinted with the library’s name, phone number, hours, or other information. There are quite a few national companies that sell these types of promotional materials, and in many towns there is a local screen printer that can produce such items, but the library’s budget for purchasing items to give away is often pretty limited. Having an idea of what sorts of handouts are most popular with the students, and knowing where to get those items, may make it possible to have a supply produced quickly when there are funds to pay for them, particularly if the company or companies already have the library’s imprint information on file.

Continuing education, particularly for library staff, is rarely funded at a level sufficient to provide opportunities for all who would benefit from them. Unrestricted one-time funding can be used to bring in a trainer to present a workshop on a topic of interest to the staff. For this strategy to be effective, the advance work to gather information about the types of training desired, along with contact information for trainers who offer such training, may be useful. At some institutions, a consulting contract must be signed before the trainer can be brought in, and this process might take too long. However, if there are nearby training opportunities such as management workshops, to which staff can be sent, the library may be able to use these one-time funds to pay for registration fees and transportation costs.

Another category of uses for end-of-year funds is facilities-related projects. Even if the library building is fairly new, there are always ways to improve the physical surroundings.

Remodeling projects are major undertakings, and it may take a long time to obtain the specifications and cost estimates needed before the project can begin, so having a bid in hand is the best way to use funds quickly, assuming the library is able to encumber the funds without having to disburse them by the end of the fiscal year. A less complicated means of spending funds quickly on the physical facility is to buy furnishings and fixtures. Before committing to particular purchases, the AUL responsible for facilities should be aware of which types of purchases are more likely to fall into the “general maintenance” category. It is likely that if the items are moveable, such as tables, chairs, lamps, soft seating, lounge furniture, file cabinets, and shelving they can be purchased more readily than items such as carpeting or a new circulation desk. Keeping an updated list of the library’s facility-related needs, with prices and vendor information readily available, makes it possible for the AUL to implement purchase decisions quickly if money is available.

Collection enhancements are the most obvious use for funds, particularly if the library enjoys a central role in the life of the university. Unfortunately, many people who do not understand the inner workings of the library may think that collections are the only possible use for funds, and many times when the library receives end-of-year funding, it is with the expectation or restriction that the funds will be used only for collections. Accepting that fact as a condition for receiving funding, the “wish list” is a valuable tool for being able to commit funds quickly and wisely. The management of the list is likely to be the responsibility of the collection development department or a similar entity, but suggestions for the list can come from a variety of sources. The easiest way to deal with a list of this type of information is to build a spreadsheet for tracking the titles, vendors, prices, and other pertinent information. Some of the categories that may find their way onto the list are expensive monographs, journal back runs,

electronic book packages, databases, and proposals to convert microprint and other archaic formats to more user-friendly formats. In addition, it may be possible to use the end-of-year funds to cover budget shortfalls, make one-time payments for subscriptions to temporarily avert cancellations, prepay invoices for materials, or add funds to deposit accounts for approval plans.

Planning in advance for various scenarios is always worthwhile, if only to provide peace of mind when times are bad. Knowing that one has thought of as many contingencies as possible makes it easier to accept what happens. In the best case, if one is prepared for monetary windfalls and is able to deal with them efficiently, effectively, and ethically, more such windfalls may come to the library as a result of the organization's having demonstrated fiscal responsibility in the past.

#### **NOTES**

1. Mott Linn, "Budget systems used in allocating resources to libraries," *The Bottom Line: Managing Library Finances*, v. 20, no. 1, (2007): 20-29.
2. William G. Bowen, *Lessons learned: reflections of a university president*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

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