Fundraising 101 for Art Librarians: The Inferno Example

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In Spring 2003 the Massachusetts College of Art (MassArt) Library tried its hand at fundraising by presenting a reading by former poet laureate Robert Pinsky. The event was a success, and now MassArt is beginning to piece together strategies for annual fundraising initiatives, in light of the recent following announcement.

On Wednesday February 11, 2004 the Chicago Tribune reported that Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan predicted a positive turn in the U.S. economy, suggesting:

...prospects are good for a sustained expansion with "significant job growth" in the near future...he told members of the House Financial Services Committee that he expected a strong growth in productivity—that is, the economic efficiency that has spurred layoffs—could be tapering off. When that happens, he said, employment could increase rapidly.1

We all have reason to rejoice over such good news. The turnaround in the United States economy is an opportune time for art librarians to begin fundraising initiatives. Libraries, especially those affiliated with arts organizations, are vulnerable when it comes to the cruel fluctuations of the national and local economy. Over the past couple of years, many libraries have had to cut journal subscriptions, databases, hours of service, and staff. When Alan Greenspan is upbeat, libraries also have reason to be optimistic. But does the economic optimism really mean libraries should expect funding to immediately revert back to what it was in the late nineties? The reality is that economic growth trickles down slowly to those organizations that bear the brunt of the cuts. Libraries, arts organizations, and social services may not feel the positive effects of the economic turnaround for years. Rather than waiting for funding to return to a comfortable level, libraries should use this economic optimism to their advantage by fundraising.

There are many books published about capital campaigns, grant writing, and long-term annual funds. Establishing a systematic and predictable mode of fundraising, especially if the parent organization is supportive, is certainly the preferred way to address the cyclical nature of funding for libraries. Unfortunately, such undertakings are so daunting that they may scare away those new to the world of fundraising. Rather than try to duplicate the comprehensive information available in already published sources, this article will briefly describe MassArt library's debut fundraising in Spring of 2003 and then suggest a few strategies for novice fundraisers.

For libraries like MassArt that are just beginning to explore the possibilities of fundraising, a single event or initiative can help determine the skills and personnel required to be successful in a long-term development effort. Some libraries will find it is not worth the time and effort to raise funds, since an unsuccessful event is worse than no event at all. However, good publicity in the community, good will among the board, parent institution, or constituents, plus the camaraderie and excitement produced in the library staff could all be invaluable effects of a successful, if not profitable, fundraising initiative. Fundraising can be a useful tool not only to raise money, but also to build relationships inside and outside an institution. If the attempt was worthwhile, the initial work will serve as the basis for future fundraising endeavors. The effort of fundraising is largely an investment in the future. Diligent relationship building and regular promotion of the library will ensure future support from donors and parent institutions.

Figure 1. From left to right: Ryan Folan, MassArt student and fundraising instigator; Katherine Sloan, president, MassArt; Paul Dobbs, library director; Bernice Godine, library donor; and poet Robert Pinsky.

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MassArt Visits Hell

In fiscal year 2001 MassArt was still basking in the economic boom of the 1990s. As a state-funded college, it received a percentage of the “Educational Reference Materials” line item (7077-0010) from the statewide budget. That year its portion was a staggering $196,277. Of course, at the time it did not seem staggering at all. It was simply the money used to purchase databases, journals, books, etc., to meet the needs of our patrons. Last winter when we heard rumors that the Educational Reference Materials budget for fiscal year 2003 had been cut completely, we were distraught. It was not, however, the worst rumor we heard. There was also talk of closing MassArt entirely. Thankfully, the latter rumor did not prove true. And at the risk of sounding too Pollyannish, that rumor may have worked to the library’s advantage by mobilizing both the library staff and the greater MassArt community.

It would seem sensible that in response to our severe budget cuts the college president, the library director, or a development officer would decide that the library should hold a fundraising event. Instead, it was a student in the art education program who suggested the idea. He had just become acquainted with a line from a John F. Kennedy speech: “Dante once said that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a period of moral crisis maintain their neutrality.”1 He was struck by the message, which for him meant he could not sit by idly while his school’s library was in danger. He tracked down a copy of Robert Pinsky’s translation of Dante’s Inferno and learned that Pinsky, the former poet laureate, taught locally. The student realized that Pinsky would be the perfect person to ask for help. While a calculated, professional approach to fundraising is ideal, one reason our event was so successful was that it was born from the creativity of an impassioned patron and not the less personal perspective of a development officer.

On May 7, 2003, Robert Pinsky came to MassArt and read from his translation of the Inferno. We charged a modest $15 for the reading ($5 for students), but a larger donation also purchased admission to a cocktail party in the library following the reading. The main attraction of the party was Pinsky, but we also featured the prints of Michael Mazur, who had illustrated Pinsky’s Inferno. Mazur was unable to attend the reception, but donated one of his prints to be offered to the most generous donor of the evening. We provided plenty of wine and beer (all donated) and hors d’oeuvres (mostly made by the library staff, but we also had cheese platters donated by our school’s catering facility and desserts from a local restaurant). A few library staff brought in armfuls of forsythia and blooming quince branches from their gardens, while others brought in vases, serving dishes, silver, and votive candles. A friend of the library director designed the invitations free of charge, and one of our library assistants, who majored in illustration at MassArt, designed the posters. The college’s development office picked up the cost of printing. MassArt staff and students donated their time and expertise to selling tickets, providing sound, lighting, and videotaping during the reading, and helping prepare and serve food and drinks during the reception. It may sound a bit chaotic having so many volunteers—and it was—but having lots of enthusiastic people around also contributed to the festive atmosphere. Our college president, the vice presidents, and the staff from the development office played a less conspicuous, but extremely important role. They networked with potential donors on behalf of the library and secured the largest donations. The development office was crucial in making this event a financial success. The library staff drummed up enthusiasm, organized details, and planned a nice party, but in the end did very little to solicit money from potential donors.

Not by accident, our reading and reception coincided with an extravaganza organized by the student body, which was free and open to the public. The students held an elaborate barbecue in the courtyard with barbeque pits fashioned by the sculpture students in the shape of cows and pigs, a spectacular outdoor iron-pour, and other live entertainment. Our library director dubbed this event “Inferno in the Courtyard.” The students adopted this name and as a result the two events were linked by the inferno theme. As our reception was ending, we shuttled our guests down to the courtyard to see the raucous side of MassArt. Our donors appreciated Pinsky’s powerful reading and our attempt at an elegant reception, but their understanding and appreciation of MassArt were enhanced by seeing our exuberant students at work and play. Although the library did not orchestrate this portion of the evening, it affirmed for our guests why they should donate. We had shown them what is unique and special about our institution. In the case of MassArt, our best asset is our student body.

The library spent only $300 and made $30,000—an impressive net gain, especially when considered separately from the time and effort expended. Staff spent over four hundred hours

Figure 2. Iron pour at MassArt, the “Inferno in the Courtyard.” Photograph courtesy of MassArt Iron Guild.
on preparation, which was far more time than anticipated when the idea of the reading was proposed. Our reception on a $300 budget, like everything at MassArt, did not feel sleek or professional, but its quirkiness was charming and illustrated the allure of a poor art school. One donor, upon hearing that the librarians had prepared the food, donated an additional $5,000.

**Other Fundraising Initiatives**

Because of our success, we intend to incorporate annual fundraising into our long-term plans. To this end, we are systematically looking for new ideas to exploit at MassArt. As we gather examples of fundraising initiatives and general strategies, we are attempting to focus on the most promising ideas. Below are some fundraising ventures and suggested methods that may have potential for any art library.

**Auction**

Since our college already holds a very successful annual auction, our library cannot duplicate that event, but this form of fundraising is well suited to an art library. With institutional permission, ask for goods from all of the library’s best-connected sources. Artists (including art faculty) who have a relationship with your institution, successful alumni, book vendors, and the board of trustees could all provide items to auction. Local businesses such as restaurants, hotels, and spas may be willing to donate merchandise in exchange for the good publicity and a tax benefit. Some local auction houses will donate time to conduct auctions for fundraising events. A local printer may print the catalog in exchange for being listed as a sponsor of the event. If feasible, hold the auction in the library to give potential donors a connection to the space and the people that their money will help. A festive atmosphere, enhanced by food and drink, promotes generosity. An auction should feel like a party where the guests feel welcome and are comfortable.

If your institution, like ours, holds its own auction, ask your development office or administration to include the library among the departments that benefit from it. Perhaps the library could negotiate a set percentage of the profits, or the profits from specific lots from each institutional fundraising auction.

**Book Sale**

Many art libraries offer duplicate or unneeded books to a book vendor in exchange for credit. This can be mutually beneficial, but conducting a book sale can also be profitable. Holding a sale requires the enlistment of volunteers, but minimal monetary expenditure or risk on the library’s part. Limit the sale to perhaps just a week during the library’s peak hours and hold it when there will be other institutional or community events that draw additional people into the library. If items for sale are few, solicit donations from faculty, curators, or beloved library patrons. Advertising for the sale will be the key to its success. In addition to posters, consider a mailing. Be sure to communicate the goals of the book sale to the volunteers, make them feel a part of a team, and most importantly, thank them for their work. These are the people who will be the charter members of your library friends group, if you do not already have one. Friends groups, most common in public libraries, can be wonderful benefactors. In addition to helping run special events and promoting library services, they can be very persuasive advocates in local politics. Besides making money, an event like a book sale can be a great way to get people invested in the library.

**Direct Mail Solicitation**

Although mailings are not usually great moneymakers, they can be useful tools in identifying a donor base. For example, if one hundred solicitation letters get five responses with $10 donations and one response with a $100 donation, retain the contact information for all six responses in your database with a special designation next to the name of the most generous donor. The first step is to develop a mailing list. Your parent institution may already have one that could serve as the foundation for the library’s own list. If not, consult your board of trustees or other powerful constituents for names. Then compile lists of people who have given books or money in the past, affluent library patrons, names from the library’s guest book, alumni of the institution, faculty or curators (current and/or retired), vendors and businesses that deal with your institution, and local community groups. Mailing lists can also be purchased, and this may well be the most cost-effective way to acquire one. However, such a list should be supplemented with names of people who have an existing relationship to the library. Most importantly, keep good records of the returns so that you will be able to more accurately target your audience for subsequent campaigns.

**Exhibition Opening**

Exhibiting your library’s rarely seen gems is a great promotional tool, whether or not it is used in conjunction with a fundraiser. To celebrate the 175th anniversary of the founding of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the library organized an exhibition and fundraiser at Henri Bendel of early Bendel fashion sketches from the library’s collection. Partnering with a retail store diversified the audience of potential donors. Even within an institution, affiliating a library-sponsored exhibition with another event can lure in new library visitors. And for regular library users it can serve as yet another reason to appreciate the library. If your library already curates exhibitions, adding an opening reception could be a relatively effortless way to make some money and further promote the library. A substantial portion of the effort should go to advertising, whether through direct mailings, press releases, posters, or preferably a combination of all of these. Drawing people to the event will be the key to its success. The opening party need not be elaborate, but it should highlight the best qualities of the library, whether that is the collection and/or a gracious and enthusiastic staff. Involve your staff in the preparations so that they feel part of the event and will represent the library well.

**Film Series**

Having a fundraising event that reflects the need for additional funds can be quite effective. If you are raising money to preserve a film collection, why not have a film series? Because copyright restrictions don’t allow charging admission, the fundraising aspect of the event must be more creative. Whether charging $15 for a bag of popcorn or simply asking for donations, yielding a profit should be relatively easy. For example, showing a film like *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or some other not-often-seen treasure on the big screen may appeal to a large number of people and should draw a crowd.
Gifts

The World Wildlife Fund gives away baseball caps to people who donate $15; our local PBS affiliate gives member cards and t-shirts or mugs to donors who give $40 or more. This model of reward is difficult, because you need to have a fairly accurate estimate of how many donations you are likely to receive. Ordering too many or too few gifts could make the venture unprofitable. However, if you are not inclined to hold an event, membership and a gift can be an enticing perk. As a smaller enticement, bookplates might be an option. MassArt is considering bookplates for perhaps $25. Donors will be allowed to pick out a book and we will insert a customized bookplate. MassArt is also intrigued by the idea of producing an artist's book for larger donations. Although inspired by May Castleberry's Artists and Writers Series from the Whitney Museum of American Art, we envision doing this project on a much more modest scale. By engaging local book artists and perhaps pairing them with MassArt students we could produce two levels of books—one created by local book artists and another created primarily by students. This project would not only benefit the library, but would also create works of enduring value and be educational for our students.

Online Giving

Consider using the Internet when planning any fundraiser. The easier it is to donate, the more donations may be realized. Making it possible to donate online may be worth an investment in an e-commerce account to accept credit card information and encrypting software to ensure that donors' personal information is protected. Because this can cost between $1,500 and $2,000, some commitment to this means of fundraising is necessary. See the Web sites of Northwestern University Library http://www.library.northwestern.edu/giving/index.html and the University of Cincinnati http://www.giveto.uc.edu/giving/university-libraries.asp for examples. Even if you don't make credit card payments available online, having a Web page for donors is still a good idea. In addition to instructions on how to donate, include information that would be interesting to donors, like news of library initiatives or recent acquisitions.

General Fundraising Guidelines

No matter what event or project is chosen to initiate a library's fundraising program, there are guidelines that will help make it a success. Most of these are common sense, but in the heat of planning it can be easy to overlook the obvious:

- Have a specific reason for fundraising and be able to clearly articulate that reason; e.g., to preserve resources and services in spite of budget cuts, or to offer a new resource or service
- Set a goal for the fundraiser
- Provide your administration with justification for supporting the needs of the library
- Get approval for your fundraising program at the appropriate level to ensure your event/s won't interfere with other initiatives in your organization
- Communicate the library's needs to those in your institution who are responsible for distributing the proceeds of institution-wide fundraising programs
- Tap into the support, expertise, and resources of your institution's development office, e.g., for mailing lists, media contacts, etc.
- Link your fundraising event with another special event at your institution, e.g., a popular exhibition, homecoming weekend, etc., to increase the size of the audience to whom you are appealing, and to save on advertising expenses

Unless you come from a background of development or sales, you probably feel uncomfortable asking people for their time, money, or goods. As librarians we are inclined to offer resources and services, and it is especially difficult for many of us to ask for things. However, if you are going to undertake fundraising, you must bite the bullet and ask for everything. People will be surprisingly receptive, especially if you ask nicely and explain why you need help. Before you even start asking people for money, try asking for products and services, free or at a discount, that you will need to hold a fundraising event. When a business is willing to donate a substantial amount of money or goods, accord it sponsor status for the event. If you need volunteers, ask loyal patrons, alumni, or others with a connection to your library, like current students or staff, to help.

Fundraising is very much about building relationships. Be sure to thank everybody who helped you during the course of fundraising with public acknowledgment as well as by letter. List sponsors in a program or a prominent display in the library. If you have a principal sponsor for the entire event, give it top billing and include the company's logo on printed materials. If you have a newsletter, include a list of donors and put their names on its mailing list. Accurate record-keeping about donors and donations is essential. Software, such as DonorPerfect, is available for organizing donor information, or you can develop an in-house database. The records will remind you whom you need to thank and also whom to ask for assistance when the next fundraiser rolls around.

Most of this information was gleaned from library literature, which is fairly comprehensive in the area of fundraising. However, it is useful to see how other non-profit organizations approach fundraising differently and what lessons we can learn from them. Research for this article has relied heavily on information from Google searches and visits to the business section of the local Barnes and Noble. For a more professional perspective, a business school text on fundraising obtained via interlibrary loan proved useful. In general, the information available from the broader non-profit sector is comparable to that from the library world. In fact, libraries are just as innovative as other nonprofits in their approach to securing funding sources and building relationships with potential donors. Specifically, libraries have been very creative and tasteful when it comes to planning fundraisers. While the idea of a celebrity carwash is intriguing, it may not be the best fundraising tool for a library. This does not mean there is no useful information outside of the world of library literature. Web sites such as http://www.fundraising-ideas.org/ and http://www.grassrootsfundraising.org/ offer interesting information that affirms the lessons taught by librarians writing on fundraising. Strategic Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations, the textbook used in Marketing and Fundraising for Nonprofit Organizations at Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, offers a analytic view of fundraising, which is more involved than most beginning fundraisers need. However, it does
offer a few insights that are not often mentioned elsewhere. One compelling piece of advice is to beware of “mission creep.” In other words, however you approach fundraising, do not let it set the agenda for your institution. If fundraising changes your mission, rather than supports it, the fundraising is no longer beneficial to your institution. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of developing a customer-centered mindset, which, although mentioned elsewhere, is a primary theme of *Strategic Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations*. For fundraising, this model means that priority should be placed in what the donor gains from fundraising. If the donor is profiting from fundraising, then the organization will also profit. This model is important, especially for beginning fundraisers, as it serves as a reminder that the goal of fundraising is not simply to raise money, but to build relationships.

**Conclusion**

The question remains, is all this effort really worth it? MassArt would not be pursuing additional fundraising ideas if the benefits did not surpass the cost. Every library must judge for itself whether it can afford such an endeavor. If the answer is a resounding yes, one might question whether fundraising is really needed, although even well funded libraries can use extra funds for special projects. It is ironic that fundraising can be the most difficult to undertake when it can do the most good. For short-staffed and cash-poor libraries, fundraising does not feel like a core activity and seems difficult to justify. Although MassArt invested very little money in the *Inferno* reading, staff had reservations about the amount of time spent in planning and preparation. Until the day of the event, its financial success was in question. In retrospect, neglecting the backlog of cataloging work on arrangements for the reception was not all that catastrophic. Our $29,600 yield far exceeded our expectations. However, even if we had not achieved financial success, the enthusiasm generated by our event was well worth all the hours of hard work. Ultimately our staff was re-energized by the process (and the outcome) and our school’s administration, faculty, and student body were delighted.

Because their collections tend to be interesting and visually appealing, art librarians are in an excellent position to raise funds. Whether it is artists’ books, fashion magazines from the 1920s, or Howardena Pindell videotapes, they can use their collections as a compelling marketing tool. They can and should also be using their contacts for marketing purposes, even though doing so might feel opportunistic. In fact, many artists and art historian feel honored to be invited to a fundraising event. Other types of libraries may take advantage of interesting connections too, but as a group, art libraries have a higher concentration of noteworthy individuals affiliated with their institutions. Another resource is a proximity to creative, artistic people. Because an important component of fundraising is marketing, well-designed promotional materials should be considered a top priority. Finding a designer or artist for printed materials should be relatively easy since many student workers, staff, and patrons of art libraries are artists. Finally, art libraries have a je ne sais quoi universal appeal. Even without marketing, people are drawn to art libraries. While some potential donors may be regular visitors in pursuit of inspiration or research materials, others who stop into the library for the first time for a fundraising event are easily won over for their own personal reasons. Selling the art library is easy, but it requires a willingness and commitment on the part of the librarian to reach beyond the regular duties of library work. And while this may still be a choice for most librarians, it seems likely that fundraising activities will become more and more a part of an art librarian’s expected job responsibilities.

**Notes**


5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.


**Bibliography**


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