

When One Funding Source is Not Enough | Elise May

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As an independent teaching artist, every year I have to ask the same question: Will I have paid work next year? My possible paycheck always has an enemy: someone's budget. I never second guess my choice to bring vocal empowerment through theatre arts to classrooms and libraries when I am teaching. It is when I have to pay my bills that my choice comes into doubt. I want to focus my energies creatively on my programs. Instead, more and more I find my time being consumed by seeking additional funding sources, sometimes beyond that of the original employer, so that my programs can realize their full potential.

I do this because sometimes an employer will say, "What can you do for \$xxx?" Other times they will ask for a proposal and, after seeing it, counter with, "We don't have that in our budget. How can you bring the costs down?" Instead of shaving costs, I prefer to try to go to additional funding sources so the vision for the full program may be realized.

When putting a proposal together, I always try to think of the bottom line; the tenuous number which will be low enough for a prospective employer, while not leaving me or others in the project working for below minimum wage. Quantifying hours and costs can be extremely difficult for me. How many hours does it take to create? So often people outside the arts do not realize the amount of time it takes to produce 'work.' The planning, meeting and preparation time, material acquisition, all the work that happens before the 'work' starts or in between sessions, is rarely something valued by an employer who often only sees the end product as what their dollars are paying for. I find administrators, while used to high costs in other areas of their budget, do not expect the arts to cost money. They do, however, expect a product. I have adapted my process to receive funds and get a resulting product everyone can be happy with.

For example, when asked to create an anniversary production for a library, their budget cap left me without the scenery I felt was paramount to the production. By tweaking my idea and including an aspect of the scenery the cast could create, I was able to find a community grant which enabled my full vision to be realized.



One night, 30 children slept over at the library and painted over 30 canvases to be used in the production. Each canvass was a stack of books which would be brought on stage as the library grew through its 120 year history. The grant allowed all the supplies for

scenery to be purchased enabling me to produce a final production in line with my original vision. I now had creatively painted canvasses by children mixed with a professionally painted triptych and set. I actually liked the final product more than my original concept. The resulting process had participants take more ownership of the final product because they were no longer just actors; they were scenic designers as well. It was a great lesson for me in flexibility, creativity and never giving up when faced with ever tightening budgets.