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## Thinking Out of the Box: Receiving a Grant to Fund Our Discovery Tool

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# Thinking Out of the Box: Receiving a Grant to Fund Our Discovery Tool

## **Cover Page Footnote**

We would like to express our thanks to Dr. Keith Hopper for his valuable advice and comments on this paper

## Thinking Out of the Box: Receiving a Grant to Fund Our Discovery Tool

By Li Chen

The recent economic downturn has affected both businesses and educational organizations. Funding for higher education institutions from federal, state, and private sectors is shrinking and even disappearing altogether. Higher education institutions have faced unprecedented budget cuts, with more expected. Libraries need to think of alternative methods for acquiring the funds needed to enhance library services. Fortunately, grants offer a way to help libraries accomplish this goal. In this article, I will share our success story concerning how the Lawrence V. Johnson Library at Southern Polytechnic State University received a grant to fund our web-scale discovery service.

Southern Polytechnic State University is located in Marietta, Georgia and has an enrollment of more than 5,500 students. The library uses Voyager, an ILS online catalog, to search books, journals, and other electronic resources. The librarians observed students struggling with different research tools and spending too much time learning how to use the library's search engines. Also, students turned to Google for research papers, not because of quality content, but because they were often confused and disappointed by their library

search experiences. Our valuable resources were often overlooked and underutilized.

We were concerned about streamlining the search process for library resources. We wanted to provide a search engine for students to allow quick, easy access to quality information, so that they could spend their time learning rather than dealing with the mechanics of locating resources. We conducted thorough research on discovery tools and found that the web-scale service enabled library patrons to locate relevant, scholarly materials without the need to search in multiple places. It broke a fundamental barrier between the library and its users. Research indicated that with this new technology, library resource usage greatly increased.

In early 2011, we invited discovery tool vendors to our library. After comparing functions and prices, we chose EBSCO Discovery Service. EBSCO Discovery Service is a library version of Google. It provides an integrated index for library resources, including both EBSCO and non-EBSCO resources, so that students can search library resources using a single search box instead of going through individual databases for articles and the

library catalog for books and serials. EBSCO Discovery results consolidate library materials in various formats into one list.

But where does the money come from for such a service? Without adequate funding, how can we maximize our organizational budget and achieve our goals? We started identifying and evaluating potential funding sources and decided to tap the University Tech Fee. The Tech Fee funds long-term, large-scale projects that directly support student learning and have a broad impact on campus academics.

Due to the budget shortage, more and more departments, professors, and staff have turned to Tech Fee grants to fund projects. As a result, the Tech Fee fund was overextended. To get funding for our project, we needed a strategic plan to map out such an initiative in order to develop a successful grant proposal. The following steps led to our success in receiving funding.

### Planning and conducting a survey

We conducted a campus survey to address the following objectives:

- To find out students' research patterns

- To collect data to support our proposal

And to answer the following questions:

- How do students feel about our current search tools?
- Why do students choose certain search engines to do their research?
- Do students like a search engine similar to Google to do research?

Our hypothesis was that students would like to use a search engine similar to Google for library research. Results validated what we suspected. The survey showed that among 255 responding students, 79 percent did their assignments starting with Google, and 64 percent would prefer a Google-like library search engine for the future. Students indicated that they liked Google because it was simple and straightforward.

### **Engaging and educating our students**

After data collection, we collaborated with EBSCO to set up a trial account. We contacted the president of the campus Student Government Association (SGA), went to an SGA meeting, presented the trial version of the discovery tool, and demonstrated the differences between the discovery tool and existing searching engines. We emphasized the advantages of

EBSCO Discovery Service and answered questions. We received unanimous endorsement from the SGA. The idea to move forward to request funding for EBSCO Discovery Service via the Tech Fee Proposal was overwhelmingly accepted by the SGA.

### **Writing the proposal**

In our basic proposal, we emphasized that the project was tied to both university and library goals. One of the library's goals is to facilitate high quality search experiences and build better research skills. The provision of a discovery tool would meet our library goal to provide easy access to research resources for the successful pursuit of academic programs, and would support the goals of the university, which are to "increase the System's participation in research and economic development to the benefit of a global Georgia, and to build online and on-campus learning environments that enable collaborative, student-centered learning." We believed this pleasant and improved research experience would develop a more supportive campus environment, thus supporting the mission of the university.

In the project description statement, we provided details about the new product, the expected improvement for access to library resources in the future, and our objectives.

We answered the question, "How would this project benefit our students and faculty?" We emphasized that by providing a simple, rapid search tool that exposes all library content and helps locate relevant scholarly materials, the library would not only provide a high-quality online research experience, but would also increase the information literacy of students. It is less about students using the library, but more about what resources they find, and how they learn to use them effectively. Students will come with their problems, knowing where to start. They can focus on evaluating search results, and this facilitates student research, learning, and growth.

Justifying need is important when writing a grant because grant agencies focus on what is needed as opposed to what is wanted. It is essential to explain in detail why you need funding, and this requires a detailed budget statement. The budget statement must be realistic and persuasive, explaining why funds are needed. It should not only state that the project is beyond ordinary budget spending, but should demonstrate the value resulting from the money. Our proposal emphasized that this was not a simple equipment purchase request because this web-scale discovery tool would solve a significant problem in campus research. The capability of "one search" simultaneously across the library's entire collection was not a mere convenience,

but a necessity if the academic library was to enhance its role as an information gateway for current and future academic researchers.

The process of obtaining the grant to fund our discovery tool

was time consuming and required energy and effort, but it was also very rewarding. With the desire to innovate, enthusiasm, a sound project proposal, and good writing, we obtained our desired result. On April 26, 2012, we learned that

our Tech Fee proposal would be funded at \$63,000 for 3 years. Our discovery tool was fully implemented in summer 2012.

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