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You Ought to Write a Book!

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You Ought to Write a Book!

Cover Page Footnote

Crystal Renfro is the Graduate Engineering Librarian at Kennesaw State University. She, along with Cheryl Stiles, co-edited the 2018 ACRL publication: Transforming Libraries to Serve Graduate Students.

You Ought to Write a Book!

By Crystal Renfro

You've just finished an innovative project, given a popular presentation, or successfully juggled the diverse responsibilities of librarianship in a particularly effective and successful way. Then something totally unexpected happens. Someone declares, "You ought to write a book!" You've never considered such an endeavor, or, if you did, it might have involved some random scribbles of poetry or a fanciful scene recorded in a secret notebook somewhere, never intended to be brought to light. But colleagues, your boss, or maybe even your boss's boss have jumped on the enthusiastic publishing bandwagon, and you find yourself facing a challenge you had never imagined without a clear roadmap for your way. Like me, your managers might also encourage you to consider how advantageous it would be to have a published book listed as part of your tenure and promotion portfolio. I hear you. I was you just a few years ago. Settle back and let me share with you some of what I learned from getting a 430 plus page, 34 chapter edited book published, which I co-edited with Cheryl Stiles, and which was the number three ranked bestselling ACRL book for 2018–2019.

Laying the Groundwork

When first considering the idea of writing a book, it is important for you to do a preliminary search of library literature to determine the originality of your topic. Has your topic already been published? How is your experience, program, or slant different than current literature? Is there a market-sized audience for which you can target your book? We targeted our book, *Transforming Libraries to Serve Graduate Students*, specifically to academic libraries with graduate student populations. This was a niche market, but one that had proved to be a very interested segment based on our two national biennial conferences:

Transforming Libraries for Graduate Students. During your library literature search, pay attention to the publishers of books similar in nature to yours. They can form the basis of your targeted publisher list when you are determining where to send your book proposal. This type of target market information is also often a part of the information your publishers will request in a book proposal and will prove useful to them as they attempt to determine market size and opportunities.

Next, outline the possible content for your book. Is there really enough material to fill an entire book? For example, if you are describing a program or initiative within your library, the text could be expanded to discuss similar programs in other libraries. There are many ways to incorporate this, from citing other literature to guest authors who write sections about their programs, or to even using a written "interview" format with other program designers.

Third, consider whether you are the best person to write all aspects of the book. Do you want to consider finding co-authors or becoming the editor of the book and putting out a chapter call for authors? If you decide on a chapter call format, do you want a co-editor to help? For my book, I felt comfortable with organization, strategic planning, and maintaining a cohesive, overall tone for the text, but knew I needed a co-editor who was good at editing details and bibliographic consistency.

The Chapter Call

In our case, we wanted to provide a detailed, cross-section overview of library services to graduate students from many different perspectives. This premise lent itself naturally to a multi-author, edited collection format.

Utilizing the chapter call model also offered us the ability to reach out to specific experts as invited contributors to add the value of recognized authors in the field to our book.

One surprise to us was that publishers differ widely in the requirements of their book proposals. One publisher that had expressed early interest in our idea wanted to have a fairly firm outline of the book prior to making any decision regarding their intention to offer a contract. Under this scenario, we needed to complete our chapter call and choose our authors from their submitted abstracts prior to completing any book proposal. This course of action requires a certain leap of faith both on the part of the book editors and on the part of the proposal chapter authors since no book contract has yet been established. It also requires excellent communication between editors and authors for both to understand the time frame (which could and often does shift!) and to maintain interest in the project at each step of the publication process. While we initially worked with this publisher, completing our full chapter call and determining the proposed chapters for our book proposal, they did not choose to move forward with our book proposal as they were not convinced the market size was sufficient.

As a point of clarification, our eventual publisher, ACRL Publishing, does not require an author call prior to proposal. Most of their book proposals include a detailed outline of projected topics that the book editors create, and after they accept the proposal, the editors can do a full chapter call with adjustments to the outline as needed and approved by both editors and publisher based on the chapter proposals you receive. ACRL Publishing was happy to consider our proposal, fully outlined with prospective chapter authors and topics, since we had already reached that point when we approached them with a proposal. We greatly appreciated their enthusiasm, flexibility, patience, and professionalism throughout the

publishing process. They were such a help to first-time book editors like us.

There are many ways editors can implement a chapter call for a book. Many calls list the general focus of a book requesting chapter abstracts in any of several areas from which the editors then compile a book outline. My co-editor and I chose a different route. We brainstormed all the most interesting (in our opinion) aspects of graduate librarianship. As we listed possibilities, we began to form an outline grouping similar ideas into overarching sections, such as services by delivery method and discipline, physical space design, workshops and specialty tools, and finally a section on partnerships with other university units. We decided to send out a very specific chapter call to various library listservs. In it, we listed our actual potential book outline and called for authors interested in writing those specific chapters. We also allowed submissions on additional chapter topics if they could be incorporated into our outline. Our very specific call yielded over 50 responses within a one-month time frame and amazingly fulfilled almost every suggested chapter within our outline as well as yielding several wonderful topics we had not previously considered.

Proposal Submission

Most publishers have very detailed inquiry forms with specific deliverables, which take some time and effort to complete. Items such as synopsis of book, estimated length of manuscript, plans for illustrations, manuscript outline, estimated completion date, target audience, author/editor biographies, marketing and promotion plans, and an overview of the competitive landscape for the book are often part of any formal book proposal. Be sure to check with each publisher as the details vary. When working on large projects, bumps inevitably happen, which can either spell failure or require on-the-spot strategic adjustments that often result in even greater success for the project. Our bump occurred when our initial

publisher decided to go in a different direction and not proceed with our book proposal. This caused us to invoke one of the cardinal rules for writers: when rejected, evaluate any comments from your publisher, revise if necessary, and then resubmit to another venue. Following this time-honored advice, on the very same day we were rejected by one publisher, we submitted our proposal to ACRL Publishing, who as mentioned previously subsequently offered us a book contract.

Communication is Key

This brings us to a second critical responsibility that applies to co-authors and especially to book editors. Frequent and timely communication to all stakeholders is critical, and not a trivial task. My co-editor and I decided early on that while contact information for both of us would be on all chapter author and publisher communications, it would provide the most cohesive edit trail to have only one of us send out the majority of the e-mails and conduct individual follow-up when necessary.

Because of the month-long delays while seeking book contracts with first one publisher and then ACRL Publishing, our potential chapter authors were kept waiting in limbo on the acceptance of their proposals. What we had initially proposed to be a summer writing project for our authors turned into fall semester deadlines during one of the busiest times for most academic librarians. We maintained continual communication with our authors, updating them as the timeline shifted, and keeping them always in the loop regarding the book's progress. Due to this communication channel and, due in large part to their collective professionalism, we were able to successfully receive all chapters within the stated deadlines.

The Importance of Organization

Good organization skills are critical when you are dealing with multiple chapter authors (34

chapters, many with multiple authors each, in our case). Sometimes mass recipient e-mails can be sent with general update information, but it behooves the book editors to complete much of the correspondence on an individual basis. Maintaining author lists with contact e-mails and place of employment is also an essential task to include in your planning. Consider that over the life of your project, some authors may change employment or even go on sabbatical, so maintaining contact is critical. To aid us in this, the library's Digital Commons manager created a submission system for proposals that captured author names, university, e-mails, tentative titles, and proposals. This eliminated the need for proposal receipt e-mails. Some of the other e-mails that editors may anticipate sending out to chapter authors include acceptance/rejection of proposal, timeline updates, reminders of chapter due dates, revision requests for each edited chapter, reminders on revised chapter submission deadlines, as needed correspondence for image/figure adjustments, and general announcements on book release dates, cover reveals, and more. There are also a number of correspondence topics between you and your publisher that will need to be considered when planning your project including such items as: submissions of initial manuscript and subsequent redline edits, collection of chapter author biographic blurb, and discussions regarding book cover, layout, and marketing plans, to name only a few.

It Takes a Village

Depending on the size of the book you're writing, you might require the assistance of other co-workers once the book chapter editing stage is reached. Consider gathering individuals with different expertise: an excellent grammar editor, someone detail oriented to help with organization of chapter copies and spreadsheets, and someone with content rich knowledge. In our case, my co-editor and I enlisted the help of a talented graduate student worker and our equally talented library

assistant to join us in several weeks' worth of work in editing 34 chapters. As co-editors, we each read and edited all 34 chapters, with our two co-workers each editing 17 chapters. We then came together for several all-day edit-a-thons where we all analyzed each chapter together. Some of us were best at identifying flow issues and sentence structure, while others excelled at formatting endnotes and bibliographies according to our chosen style guide. The editing process was monumental. It took a village.

The Book Project Afterlife

While delivering a completed manuscript to your book publisher is a pinnacle moment, the work surrounding your project is far from complete. Your publisher may have significant re-edits or even restructuring requests for the manuscript. Some you may be able to handle yourself, but others may require going back yet again to certain chapter authors. The publisher will conduct a professional copy edit for clarity, grammar, and style following the manual of style designated by the publisher. The resulting redlined copyedit will then be returned to the book editors for review and possibly chapter authors will see these versions if needed.

Once you have resolved all the major editing elements, the next stage to publication is the actual layout of the book; here the publisher will generally return a new copy back to you for final review and approval. At this stage you will see what your final book will look like. Publishers have great graphic artists who create layout graphics and book covers, but don't be shy in making suggestions when it comes to

your final book's appearance. In our case, a talented graphic designer in the library suggested a more colorful book cover design that echoed the graphic design we had previously used for our popular graduate librarian's conference. We loved the cohesive tie-in to our conference, and our publisher was very gracious in working with us to use that cover and provide attribution to our graphic designer. The bottom line is that you never know what is possible if you don't ask. Our experience is that most publishers are terrific to work with and have a shared interest in making the book a success.

After your book is finally published, marketing and promotion is likely to continue for a number of months. This might include such opportunities as announcements to listservs, stints in author booths and author/editor panels at national conventions, or possible invitations for topical webinars or podcasts. The possibilities are only limited by your willingness to participate and the creativity of you and your publisher for marketing opportunities.

Are you eager to pick up your pen and put on your author's or editor's cap? If you don't tell your story, who will? Whether you choose to be a solo author or take the path of an edited collection like my co-editor and I did, your story needs to be told. The library profession grows and innovates based on the combined contributions of its members. Your book is an important part in that process. The sense of accomplishment and pride you will feel when viewing the final product will be well worth the effort. Happy writing!