

Artifact: Federal Grants Strategy

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One of the last projects I completed before I left Roberts Wesleyan College was to propose a federal grants strategy to set the college up for success as they pursue federal funding. This project included assessing the infrastructure of the college and making recommendations for the realignment of assets and illustrates DEL Outcomes 1 and 3.

Sensing and Seizing Opportunities to Break Path Dependence

One of the issues facing the college was organizational mindset leading to path dependency. Path dependency has its roots in evolutionary biology (Boulton, et al., 2015) and has itself evolved as a concept with influences from economics, sociology, political science, and business domains (R. G. Wylie, personal conversation, August 5, 2020). In essence, path dependency refers to how specific events and choices in the past affect and limit choices in the future (Fortwengel & Keller, 2020, theoretical background section). It's important to understand that companies often create this dependency through their culture and values and, in a way, can become prisoners of deeply ingrained ideas, assumptions, or worldviews (Teece, 2007, p. 1322). Dorst (2015) called this becoming "trapped by their habits" (p. 15) and warned that trying to solve a problem by ways that always worked in the past could lead to an inability to go beyond earlier ways of thinking (pp. 15-16).

For Roberts Wesleyan, this culture of path dependence can be seen in the thinking and practices surrounding grants. Despite the fact that grants play a significant role in providing

funds for capital projects, scholarships, and programs or projects, the college has only had one full-time grant writer on staff in its entire 154-year history. Prior to my arrival, we had two short-lived, part-time writers, and before them, grants were one-off projects written and won by enterprising faculty members or Advancement staff. Additionally, as a teaching college, federal grants were not often pursued. In fact, the last federal grants the college held were a result of one professor's efforts in the sciences over 40 years ago. Side note – that professor was teaching when I was a student at the college and still works for Roberts today! It seems the college never really thought of itself as eligible for the research grants available through the federal government or as capable of winning and managing funding from this source.

DEL Outcome 1 encourages us to, “Sense and shape opportunities for, and threats to, future growth and development through embedding scanning, creative, and learning processes into organizations, communities, or institutions” (DEL Learning Guide, 2020, p. 32). By understanding the lock-in that was occurring in the realm of federal grants, I was able to sense a threat to the future growth of the college and had the opportunity to shape our pursuit of federal grants as a vehicle for future growth.

Often it takes a triggering event of some nature to break path dependence, and this was no different for the college. Sigl & Leisyte (2018) talked about “critical junctures” to break a path and create new paths (p. 360), and van Buuren, et al. (2012) referred to the process as a “change event” or a “great energy” that triggers minor events and lead to system change (p. 120). Fortwengel & Keller more forcefully argued “destabilizing a path requires an external shock” (introduction section) and advocated for the need to interrupt any self-reinforcing mechanisms in play (Tiffin, 2020, p. 11).

For Roberts, there were two events that prompted a return to the federal grants conversation. But before we talk about them, it is important to know that I had started the conversation a year earlier and was in the process of laying out a five- to seven-year federal grants strategy for the college based on the needs people were bringing to me, the opportunities federal grants presented, and the need for a strategy rather than a disorganized approach as single opportunities presented. While I was able to progress the plan, I had put it on hold due to key personnel changes in Finance and the timing of two surgeries I experienced.

As I recovered from surgery two, the COVID-19 shutdown hit. And while this might have pushed us further into a pattern of lock-in regarding federal grants, it actually became a triggering event in that the federal government provided funding to institutions of higher education and ran all the funding through the federal grants system. This not only provided me and the Finance department with more experience in proposing and managing federal grants, but it opened up the idea of federal funding streams.

The second event was the authorization of CARES Act funding for humanities programs through NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities). Because we were trying to introduce our first Associate degree in Arts & Humanities, the program and its director were at risk of being cut because of COVID-related budget cuts, and the program aligned perfectly with NEH's intent, we submitted a proposal. Turns out NEH agreed with us, and we won just under \$75K in funding to bring the program online. This win changed perceptions on campus in terms of federal grants and gave us some impetus to pursue other federal funding, as winning a federal grant with one agency enhances your chances of winning with others as you can show proof of the organization's capabilities in managing federal funds.

Reconfiguring Resources

DEL Outcome 3 establishes the ability to, “Assemble, align, and reconfigure tangible and intangible assets to sustain organizations, communities, and institutions” (DEL Learning Guide, 2020, p. 34). Teece (2007) stated, “A key to sustained profitable growth is the ability to recombine and to reconfigure assets and organizational structures as the enterprise grows, and as markets and technologies change, as they surely will” (p. 1335). In breaking free from path dependency, organizations often need to clear the hurdle of how they allocate their resources, and as Teece (2007) has pointed out, success follows those organizations who can figure this out.

Previously, evidence of path dependence can be seen in the college’s reluctance to allocate budget for grant-related activities, both in the grants positions and in the necessary support staff such as in Finance, HR, and faculty administrative support necessary to manage large, detailed grants. As Randy Bell once mentioned in class, leadership is partly a matter of resource allocation (R. Bell, personal communication, March 12, 2020). How budget is and is not spent can be a clear indication of culture, lock-in, and path dependence.

COVID-19 hit Roberts significantly, and decisions were made to tighten budgets to the point of eliminating programs and positions in order to ensure resilience in the face of another possible shut down – a very real possibility in New York State given the considerable restrictions faced in order to control the spread of the virus. One of the cuts we made was to eliminate the unfilled Assistant Director position in Grants because though it is a vital position, it was easier to eliminate an unfilled position than to consider letting a current employee go.

However, once the College rethought the idea of federal grants and the opportunities they present for us, we began to revisit the Grants position conversation. Only a month after cuts were announced, I was asked for options that could support the pursuit of federal grants. I offered four

options, each with varying price tags, and we decided to pursue two of the options – freelance and contract grant support.

Both options require creativity, but reconfiguring assets is part of leadership. As soon as I was given a green light, I resumed my study of our infrastructure to see if we could handle further federal grant awards while still pursuing all of the private foundation and state grants we were already working on. As I learned, “Ambidextrous organizations are ones that can combine both exploration and exploitation within their own organizations” (Tiffin, 2020, p. 9). In fact, Nooteboom (2010) noted exploitation, or the efficient use of existing resources, is necessary for companies to survive in the short term while exploration, or searching out the unknown and changing existing patterns, is necessary for long-term survival (p. 3). For the College, ambidexterity can be seen in continuing the strong pattern of applying for private foundation funding while exploring and expanding into the realm of applying for federal funding.

In order to pursue both paths, I had to ensure a strategic path forward. I quickly gathered a team of key stakeholders from IT, Finance, HR, Faculty, IRB, Risk Management, and Institutional Research and held a series of meetings in which I presented the case for federal research, explained the potential pitfalls and strain on their teams, and administered a survey to gather their thoughts. Once I received answers back, I analyzed the results and compiled a presentation for Cabinet to review. This presentation included the opportunities we had through pursuing federal grants, the infrastructure pressures we might face, and ways to solve these issues, including financing through indirect costs we could recover in awarded grants as well as the proposal to utilize a contract service that could not only help us propose projects but could also provide ongoing learning and perform our first indirect cost rate agreement.

By hiring a consultant, not only did I help send them in a direction that would create a culture of continuous opportunity, but I also enabled them to learn from experts as they pursue federal opportunities, deepening institutional knowledge and setting the college up for future success. This means that even though I left the college, I put in place a mechanism that is not dependent on the person in the role but is applicable to college processes independent of the individual in charge.

It turns out this decision held a measure of strategic foresight. Right before I left the college for a new position, I submitted my federal grants strategy proposal for consideration. The college ended up replacing with a less-experienced individual and has not filled the assistant position, so not only it is possible they could utilize those resources to hire a consultant for a couple of years to get them off the ground but that consultant could play a key role in guiding them through the processes of proposal, performance, and management of federal grants and help them win the resources necessary to implement significant projects within the college.

It is my hope the college will follow through on this opportunity in order to reap the benefits of the research and practical work I did to lead them to the position to be able to win further federal grants to support their work. Additionally, I am finding my work may be applicable in some parts to my new context as I continually scan and sense opportunities for Champlain and see opportunity to implement a similar strategy tailored to the culture and structure I am in now.

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