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Why Should a Library Invest in You? or, How to Succeed with Short-Term Library and Archival Fellowship Grants

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Susanna Ashton

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SHORT-TERM library fellowships are quite likely the single most common kind of national research grant given out to scholars in the humanities. The Massachusetts Historical Society alone gives out twenty short-term library fellowships. Almost every major private university and scholarly library (including the Huntington, Newberry, Yale's Beinecke, Harvard's Houghton, and the New-York Historical Society), many public universities (such as the University of Texas, Austin), many major public libraries (such as the Boston Public Library and the New York Public Library), and many small specialized research libraries administrate these types of grants.

They are often modest in their monetary amounts (ranging from \$1,500 to \$4,000) and almost always distributed directly to the individual scholar. They rarely cause much of a blip on the radar of most college and university accounts that track billion-dollar National Science Foundation grants or large institution-sponsored foundation awards such as those from the National Endowment for the Humanities or from the United States Department of State's Fulbright program. Nonetheless, these modest library grants provide critical footholds for emerging careers. They provide money that isn't modest to an underpaid assistant professor or struggling graduate student, and they provide critical logistical, emotional, and scholarly support. They usually presume a scholar will be in residence at the institution for any period between two to eight weeks. Their applications tend to be fairly short, don't need extensive signatures or approvals from university officials, and usually require only two or three recommendations. Moreover, if you can win one, do good work, and produce a "deliverable" in the form of a peer-reviewed publication, you might well have launched yourself on a roll of scholarly awards. Money begets money.

The rise of these fellowships over the last few decades is truly one of the most exciting developments in scholarly culture in the United States. As Caroline Sloat of the American Antiquarian Society (AAS) observed, fellowships at institutions such as the AAS have existed since the 1970s, but their availability and growth have increased tremendously, as both donors and applicants have expressed more and more interest in them. The AAS, for example, currently offers over a dozen short-term library grants. Moreover, Sloat points out that the growth of Web sites, blogs, and electronic discussion lists in the past decade has allowed libraries to publicize their grants in new ways, and while they therefore are becoming more competitive, libraries are doing their best to keep up with the excitement by finding additional donors to fund such awards. Indeed, the growth in available fellowships is partly due to their popularity among donors, who can see immediate use, appreciation, and publicity for expensive and often painstakingly acquired library materials. Thus

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making one's own scholarly goals persuasively align with the goals of donors and award committees is really the key to success in library-fellowship applications.

James Grossman, vice president for research and education at the Newberry Library, points out that short-term fellowships allow libraries "considerable flexibility in locating, administering, and allocating funds," a flexibility that can be "particularly useful in times of financial stringency." Not only can a smaller donation go a longer way (a \$50,000 foundation donation, for example, can easily generate income for a \$2,500 summer research grant for many years), but because the donation is usually internal to the institution, issues common to long-term Mellon or National Endowment for the Humanities library grants concerning extensive external peer review and other more complicated regulations rarely come into play. Indeed, Grossman notes that many of the collaboratively funded short-term grants that can be found at institutions such as the Newberry (grants funded in part by organizations such as the Midwest Modern Language Association or the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies) exist precisely because such scholarly organizations could put up modest amounts of money in collaboration with the library for an immediate and lasting impact on the issues they mutually prioritize.

Some Considerations When Writing a Fellowship Application

The single biggest issue that arises in library-fellowship considerations is how well the applicant is likely to use the library resources, not necessarily or not solely how brilliant the argument or project is. After all, think of it from the libraries' point of view. Libraries want people who can make their collections famous, who can disseminate scholarship that will publicize the excellence of their collections, who will educate the curators themselves about the content of the collections, and who will provide significant foot traffic. They want people who will be professional and pleasant. They also want people who will help them justify the expensive purchases they have made over the years. They want people who will make them look good and help them garner enough goodwill to, in later years, provide letters of support to NEH grants to the libraries. Thus your job is to demonstrate that you are this type of person.

First of all, assume that the people judging these library fellowships, whether they are librarians or scholars (usually they will be a mix of both, although the ratio can vary by institution), have extensive knowledge of research methods and archival work. They might not know a tremendous amount about your particular topic, but they will know a great deal about *how* your work might get done. This is quite different from a book proposal or, say, a Guggenheim grant, in which you are making a case solely for the brilliance and scholarly significance of your work. Here you have to make a case that the library's *collection* is essential to the production of your indubitably brilliant and significant work.

The single biggest consideration, then, is how you argue for your use of library materials. As a result, you should *avoid* the following:

Favoring a location. If you mostly want an excuse to go to Boston, San Francisco, or New York, hide that fact. Or even better, please don't waste anyone's time by applying and possibly preventing a scholar who more genuinely

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needs the archival access from winning a fellowship. The award committees will be looking for people who just want a trip and ruling them out.

Needing few documents. If you just need to look at a few documents, you don't need to be there. Be simultaneously extensive, creative, and specific in your interests (discussed further below). After all, if you only need to see a couple of letters, you could probably pay the library to make you a handful of photocopies and mail them to your house.

Looking ignorant of the archives. If you indicate only a cursory knowledge of the archives, you won't make a good case for your work there. Fifteen minutes looking at their Collection Highlights Web page won't cut it.

Emphasizing time and quiet. If you overemphasize just needing the time and quiet to write, you also won't make a compelling case. It may be true, for who doesn't need more quiet and time? But it isn't likely to be well received by a committee.

Using jargon. Since your award committee is likely to consist of at least some people who are not trained in your specific discipline, be mindful of what might be construed as jargon or what might be common assumptions in your field that demand more interdisciplinary sensitivity if not more explicit explanation.

The following items *should* be emphasized in your application:

Knowledge of the culture of the library. This is a graceful way to direct you first and foremost to the institution's Frequently Asked Questions Web page. One application to one institution will not fit all, and the experts I have consulted all agree that a tremendous number of applications are set aside because they simply indicate the applicant has not bothered to read the relevant regulations and guidelines or to query any gray areas. If an institution requires a terminal degree from all applicants, for example, and you're not certain if they consider an MFA, a master's of library science, or a master's of architecture a terminal degree, get in touch with the staff before you apply.

Knowledge of the archives. To begin with, make sure you are absolutely clear about why you wish to see documents that might otherwise be available online or in published form. What is it about the physical manuscript that you simply cannot know without inspecting it personally? There are many ways to make this case; for example, documents are not all scanned and published, marginalia might not be visible in reproductions, or you may need to understand the physical presence (size, color, binding, jackets, wear and tear, bookplates, inscriptions, etc.) in order to make your arguments about marketing or audience. No matter what your reasoning is, be sure to demonstrate an informed and compelling argument about the reason you need physical proximity.

One way to do this is to consult with the curators and library staff members as much as you, courteously, can over e-mail or by the phone or by letter in order to learn about how collections might shape your work. Don't just tell them what you need; ask them what materials *they think* might inform your work.

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Often the greatest materials at rare book libraries, particularly historical societies, are not the manuscripts themselves but the relevant account books, inscribed hymnals, tax records, receipt books, schoolbooks, carbon copies, Sunday school curriculum materials, recipe books, handbills, party invitations, odd little city directories by trade, maps of proposed buildings that never happened, lists of cemetery occupants, christening records, mailing lists of charitable groups, yearly lists of public library purchases for a community, board of director handbooks, instruction manuals, office memos, and court records. These are the kinds of materials that are unsung, unsexy, and yet collected by libraries, and they can provide deep and rich context to seemingly discrete “literary” manuscript research. If you can detail how and why these materials could inform your work, you will be a long way ahead of the applicants who simply glean a couple of bibliography entries from the online book catalog. Indeed, if you possibly can manage it, try to do a scouting site visit for a day or two to speak with the librarians and pore over the catalogs and file books, planning how your application can best highlight your knowledge of their collections.

Finding aids are not always available online. Be sure to ask about them when you do your scouting visit. If you have the time during your scouting session to use them, do so. But even if you can only refer to the desire to use them more fully in your application, that will at least indicate you are knowledgeable about the opportunities the library may offer you.

Knowledge of how those materials have been used by other scholars and an explanation of how your work differs. Do indicate knowledge of the field that differentiates your work from other people’s. For example, Author A’s influential book on this topic drew extensively on this archive’s eighteenth-century children’s literature collection; while your topic will similarly examine materials from this collection, you nonetheless plan to emphasize textbooks and orphanage documentation in order to construct a competing argument from a different perspective.

Periodicals and newspaper use. Consider emphasizing any genuine needs you have to access periodical and newspaper collections, which are almost always inadequately microfilmed and incompletely collected. Libraries agonize about the accumulation of periodicals on overcrowded shelves, so you are in a position to justify all the battles they’ve fought. Regional and obscure periodicals, for example, are often only accessible by what one of my mentors from the University of Iowa, Kathleen Diffley, taught me to describe as “dirty searching”—meaning that someone needs to simply get in there and work with the materials directly. After all, pages often were folded over and not filmed; classified advertisements were skipped; whole issues were ignored. The only way to check up on these variables is to get your hands on the pages and (delicately) turn them yourselves. Thus you might emphasize how such periodical collections held by the library can inform your work.

Single-project focus. A number of veteran members of library-fellowship committees caution that your application should emphasize one particular project instead of suggesting that you will use your grant to revise one project and perhaps launch another two. While ambitious, this kind of agenda is

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hard to judge and measure and can risk looking scattered and inefficient beside an application with a single focus.

Your productivity. Demonstrate your track record in productivity. Libraries want people who will publish. If you have published any scholarship before, emphasize clearly how you did research and then professionally disseminated it, demonstrating unequivocally that there is every reason to think the library's investment in you will pay off for them.

Professional contacts. Your outside letters should be, ideally, from scholars important in their own fields and from scholars who are familiar with the institution you are looking at. If this isn't possible, do be sure that your letters are directed as specifically as possible to your work generally and why your work needs to be done at that specific site.

Potential venues for your work. Instead of simply suggesting you will submit your summer research as an article to an unnamed journal, consider naming the journal or press or publication venue. Librarians and scholars who are on fellowship committees are aware of the competitive and mercurial justice of the publishing gatekeepers, so no one will misunderstand "I plan to complete and submit this essay to *English Literary History* or *American Studies* by next spring" as a *fait accompli*. However, this is an opportunity for you to signal, yet again, your professional knowledge of the field and your ability to set realistic and appropriately ambitious goals for dissemination of scholarship.

Matching funds or other previous investments. If anyone has already invested in you and this project, make sure the libraries know. Are you already on a dissertation fellowship? Did you receive a library grant the previous year when you wrote your first chapters? Show that this project has already excited "investors."

Flexibility. Libraries are often eager to have scholars work in their collections throughout the year and not simply be in residence for July or August. (Some libraries do prefer their scholarly traffic to occur during the summer months, though, so be sure to read all grant guidelines with care.) Nonetheless, if you can possibly make a case for being in residence for four weeks in November or March, it couldn't hurt and might help your case. Similarly, if it is a longer-term fellowship for, say, six months or a year, you could indicate flexibility about start and end dates that might be well received.

Database access. Don't make it a huge point, but as a small side point you can mention that your current institution may not subscribe to all sorts of expensive and specialized databases that this site library may allow you access to. While it isn't as powerful an argument as asking for access to physical materials, it nonetheless lets libraries justify insanely expensive expenditures they've made to buy access to databases like *Harpweek*, *Early English Books Online*, or *Early American Newspapers*.

Previous Fellows. Research previous lists of fellows or award winners. What projects and, even more tellingly, what publications resulted from their archival work? Often, libraries will proudly list previous award winners on their Web sites, but if they haven't done so, consider contacting the libraries and asking for names. Understanding what kinds of projects have attracted

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library money in the past can clue you in about how to frame your project in similar terms.

Once You Are Awarded a Fellowship

Show up. Show up every day; libraries like to see their money at work. Even if you do spend some of that time daydreaming, they want to see you as a regular patron of their space and their materials. For your award period, your job is to be, quite simply, a scholar in residence.

Don't be a diva. Follow the institutional rules for lockers and pencils. Speak quietly. Turn off the sound on your laptop and make it a habit, not an afterthought, to mute your cell phone as you enter the building. Ask the staff for appointments when you have extensive questions instead of just assuming that they are endlessly free for consultation. Use the foam book wedges when instructed and turn your pages with gloves, as necessary. Be sensitive to the particular security concerns they might have, and don't perform a dramatic sigh when the security guard asks you to open your coat or bag. Be patient if you have to request an off-site manuscript box a day or two ahead of time. Never assume a particular file is yours and yours alone to work with. Be the colleague you'd like to have. You've joined a new community, and it would behoove you to embrace its institutional culture and practices with the respect it deserves.

Ask for advice on housing, parking, and local resources. It doesn't hurt to ask the librarians if they have any advice for guesthouses or inexpensive temporary quarters for the fellows. Can they advise you about where to park or if there is a private commuter bus? The research staff members have seen a lot of fellows come and go, so they might have some tips for you.

Meet fellow fellows. Ask the research librarians who the other fellows are, and try to introduce yourself or have the staff introduce you and get a coffee or lunch. When people are just sitting silently in a cubicle or at a desk, it's hard to know if they are fellow fellows or not, so take advantage of the social advantages the library staff can offer and try to meet some of the other scholars likely working around you. You never know what they may have unearthed in the archives that might be helpful to you, and that shaggy person at the next table may be a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer or an endowed chair on a huge NEH grant. It might be a family genealogist whose nonacademic status may belie exhaustive knowledge of the local archives. Never underestimate the surprising ways in which people can be helpful, inspiring, and kind. You're in the archival trenches with these people, get to know them!

Tell the librarians about remarkable finds. Offer to do more for the library than just someday publish a book, a dissertation, or an article. If you find something remarkable, particularly if you think it is a bit obscure or unnoticed or could be better cross-referenced or differently cataloged, be sure to call it to the attention of the staff. Often you will be in a position to recognize an important signature on an otherwise insignificant looking thank-you note that

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will suddenly connect two different collections the library holds. Perhaps you'll notice that an otherwise mundane account book holds a small entry on page 378 indicating a million-dollar donation to an obscure abolitionist splinter group, thus requiring that a different subversive history of political engagement be written. Don't just save up these details for your research (particularly since it may end up buried in a footnote in an obscure journal five years later, let's be honest . . .); tell the librarians and staff members so that you can help educate and excite them about their collections.

Write for their newsletters. Similarly, libraries often have small "friends of the rare book collection"—type newsletters and other in-house journals or publications that they use for publicity and fund-raising purposes. Increasingly these institutions have Web sites and blogs, which might also welcome contributors and research updates. Please consider offering to write a few paragraphs about something remarkable in their collections that you've noticed or simply outlining your work and your experiences there or otherwise contributing something a library audience might appreciate. It might not be a career-making publication, but it would only take a modest expenditure of energy and would garner a lot of goodwill from the people who have now invested in your work. Again, the librarians might not think to ask you, but it couldn't hurt to volunteer.

Alert your home institution. You're certainly planning on sharing your good news with your department chair and your tenure or promotions committee. In addition, please also take a moment to notify your university's PR and media-relations office. They're used to bragging about huge donor grants and technical awards but are often less familiar with these kinds of modest but prestigious awards in humanities research, especially since they don't have "overhead" and go directly to the scholar and not through a university's sponsored programs office. Your award is a happy opportunity to educate your home institution about how recognition in your field works and let them broadcast their pride and support in you. I've seen university alumni magazines feature photos of faculty and graduate student library fellows waving their institutional banner in front of august library facades. Don't be shy about sharing your good news and your good work.

Offer to give a talk. Some libraries have organized talks, seminars, and lecture series that they invite fellows to participate in or deliver. Be proactive and offer to discuss your research at a brown-bag lunch, short talk, *PowerPoint* lecture, or whatever the librarians might appreciate. Nice vita line for you, nice gesture to the library, and it might even give them a small event to invite library donors to. Recognize that there might well be some institutional or schedule constraints that could make your proposal unworkable, but it would nonetheless be kind and professional to modestly offer.

Offer to share any reference materials you create. If you are transcribing letters or creating your own indexes to a file, please offer to share your tools with the staff. Many scholars create their own private digitization projects, for example. Although not all such projects are useful or appropriate, consider

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sharing your materials with the staff and with future scholars, who might be very grateful that you got there first to do the dirty work!

Write an article profiling the collection itself. Scholarly and popular journals occasionally welcome profile pieces and articles that are heftier than mere newsletter blurbs and yet serve to publicize, analyze, weigh, and present to the public a particular library's acquisition. As Grossman explains, this sometimes overlooked but useful and often compelling genre of publication can represent meaningful scholarship for many colleges and universities and can thus mutually benefit the scholar's career and the library's interests.

Offer to participate in their special programs. Some institutions have programs designed for K–12 teachers that could possibly use a friendly hand lent, in some informal fashion, by the scholar in residence who might have some appropriate expertise to share. Grossman cautions that, as with some of the other offers you might make, you should consider mentioning things like this or your willingness to give a talk well before you arrive, since planning even the most casual drop-by involvement in such programs might need more than a few weeks' lead time.

Let them know that you will remain an involved alum. Before you leave, consider giving your updated contact information to staff members just in case anything has changed since you submitted your award-winning application months before. Let them know that you'd be happy to consult about any acquisition issues or archival questions or, indeed, about any area in which your expertise might be of help. Offer to write letters of support to their institution if they ever plan to apply for a grant to process or digitize the collection you just spent weeks toiling in. Let them know that your relationship with their institution isn't at an end.

Use your acknowledgments page well. Obviously, thank the library or foundation that funded your fellowship in your acknowledgments. If appropriate and possible, it would also be a kind gesture to cite some of the individuals who went above and beyond the call of duty in facilitating your research experience. Librarians get professionally evaluated, too, and noting their contributions is an act of professional kindness that will be appreciated.

Encourage and mentor others to apply. Many junior scholars, in particular, would appreciate advice and explicit encouragement to apply for a fellowship such as you have won. Take a leadership or mentoring role and direct talented researchers to these institutions.

Send them your publications. Finally, be sure to send the libraries or the fellowship committee chair any copies of accepted articles or book chapters or finished publications that were written using materials held in their collections. It will mean a lot to them, and since libraries often need to "justify" their investments in you, even an unpublished deliverable is better than nothing.

Works Cited

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