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Organization for Transformative Works Strategic Planning Committee

Report on the Grants Committee

The Strategic Planning Committee surveyed and reviewed the Grants Committee as part of our larger goal to put together a reasonable and practical strategic plan for the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW).

The Grants Committee is on hiatus, but nevertheless this report should be read as a helpful document, meant to illuminate, reveal, and guide. It will be followed by similar reports for other committees and workgroups, and an overall report for the whole organization. These reports will then be synthesized into the strategic plan for the organization, which will be presented to the Board and shared publicly. The Board will decide how to act on the data offered by stakeholders, alongside the reports from the wider OTW Community Survey that has been analyzed by the Survey Workgroup.

Methodology

The information in this report was compiled by reviewing the committee's internal documentation on the organization's wiki and Basecamp, and a survey of the committee.

Distribution

This report was shared with the Board prior to being published publicly. The Board had the opportunity to correct factual errors in review, but not to remove or edit the summary of what was revealed by the information gathering process.

Participation

All 9 Grant Committee members (including the chairs) were invited to participate in a survey and follow up with us in August 2013. 1 member and 1 chair filled out at least one survey question, and 1 member filled out an email interview.

Nota Bene

This report is a living document and will remain that way until all OTW teams have been surveyed, at which point this report and all others will be locked for the writing of the strategic plan.

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Overview and History of the Grants Committee

The Grants Committee was formed by proposal thanks to a member of¹ the Development & Membership Committee (DevMem) with grant administration experience. Originally, DevMem applied for grants, applying for the first one in 2008, with plans to apply for more in 2009². They continued applying for more grants, but by 2011 came to realize that they could not apply for and administer grants on top of their other committee work. The Grants Committee was approved to separate from DevMem during the 2012 term.

Strengths and Challenges

At its inception, the Grants Committee had dedicated members, many of whom had experience with nonprofits. Some of them were professionals who worked with grants and grant writing daily in their professional lives. They were intensely excited about moving the OTW forward using grants to fund the servers and paid positions -- and intensely disappointed when it turned out that the OTW did not have sufficient infrastructure in place to make sure that the needs of the committee were met.

There were two main challenges that made the work of the Grants Committee impossible to continue: lack of sufficient staff training and time on the committee, and lack of support from the OTW.

¹ http://wiki.transformativeworks.org/mediawiki/File:Grants_Committee_Proposal.pdf (Accessed October 24, 2013)

² http://wiki.transformativeworks.org/mediawiki/OTW:Fundraising_plan_year_2 (Accessed October 24, 2013)

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While many of the staffers had skills that would contribute to grants work, most of them did not have any “real world” experience with writing grants, nor with the administrative work necessary. However, the people who *did* have the knowledge found it almost impossible to pass on to the rest of the Committee, as grants work is something that usually takes 40 - 60 hours per week, and the Grants Committee did not have anywhere near that time.

The Grants Committee did not have a staffer with grant writing experience until its last year, so the committee had a difficult time actually submitting grants. As one respondent told us, “the org information was tough to find, and we couldn't find people with the depth of knowledge about the org as well as the time and willingness to actually do the writing.”

However, once there was a grant writer on staff, “no one would talk to her so she could actually write the grants.” The Board did not participate sufficiently in the Grants Committee process, nor did the other committees who were needed to make sure the Grants Committee staff had the information necessary to complete and submit grants.

Another problem was that Grants felt very isolated from the rest of the OTW; one Grants staffer noted, “I think most committees barely knew we existed, let alone that we could -- theoretically -- get them money.” Another staffer noted, “No one knew what we were trying to do, or anything about grants, but they sure knew we weren't bringing in any money.”

Additionally, the OTW leadership did not have any plans in place for how to administer any received grants, nor any actual planning for what to do with the money. It seemed the OTW leadership did not, in fact, even have any realization of what the money could do for the organization -- one Grants Committee staffer said, “I was looking at grants that could bring in unbelievable amounts of money, fund to pay positions and our servers for years, but was told basically that I should scale it back, because what do we need that money for anyway?”

One former staffer noted that for them, the root of the problem was that the OTW was not cohesive, organized, or communicating enough as an organization to put together a successful grant application:

“You can't get a grant if your application is nonsense. Your grant application will be nonsense if you can't provide a detailed plan [...] The one time I got close enough to try to apply for a grant, three committees were unable to get us anything that would add up to a viable application.”

The Future of the Grants Committee

The OTW qualifies for and should apply for grants. Not only would these grants help the organization financially, but the grant writing process can potentially foster useful relationships

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with external grant-providing organizations that have similar interests. The fact that the OTW could not sustain a Grants Committee is a clear indictment of the lack of infrastructure and support throughout the organization. This is not a problem that reviving the Grants Committee could solve -- this is a problem that must be dealt with top-down.

The Grants Committee recognized the source of this problem; however, one respondent put it succinctly when they summarized: "Do I think the OTW needs grants to survive? Yes. Do I think the OTW is, presently, able to support a Grants Committee without driving everyone on it insane? No."

In the event that the OTW is able to solve its infrastructure issues, respondents did have some ideas for what might be necessary to make a hypothetical Grants Committee successful.

Recruitment

Although many people on the Grants Committee did have relevant experience and knowledge, the lack of structural support was not counterbalanced by staff members who had intimate knowledge of the organization.

In order to be successful, a new Grants Committee would need targeted recruitment of people with specialized skills -- both within grants and within the OTW.

One staffer was very clear that the Grants Committee needed "[s]everal people who a) have intimate knowledge of the org - structure, goals, financials, everything, b) can write and c) are willing to put in the time to help the grant writer put together the application. It is a collaborative process, and takes a LOT of time for the application to get built."

Another was very clear that even if those people were highly experienced, some level of training was also necessary: "[there] needs to be a formal training program, even if it's simply a document outlining steps that each new member receives."

Without those vital pieces, a Grants Committee cannot function because grants cannot be written.

Board Participation

One of the largest problems the Grants Committee ran into was that the Board of the OTW was not interacting with them the way that Boards of Directors of grant-receiving institutions need to. Grant applications require a significant commitment on the part of the Board to help provide necessary background information, outline current structure and functioning, plan and

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communicate how the grant will be used, etc³. Staff and chair comments indicated that the Board did not understand their role in the process, and Grants Committee members were unable to complete even their information-gathering stages without Board support:

“We had two board liaisons. We tried to work with other Board members on applications and just couldn't get what we needed.”

“We'd meet and basically, the grant writer would say 'I reached out to X, Y, and Z for information about the org, the narrative, and financials and haven't heard back.' So therefore she couldn't do anything, and therefore I couldn't do anything.”

“So far as I could tell, [the grant writer] was unable to get [the Board] to communicate meaningfully about anything. I was never in a position to do so myself.”

If the Grants Committee were to be revived, the Board would need to understand and commit to a close working relationship with them. It would be essential for all members of the Board to understand that writing a grant is a process that requires Board participation and availability. We also recommend, in the event that Grants Committee is recreated, a training session for all Board members on grant application best practices be conducted by an appropriate expert in the field.

Inter-committee Communication

The Grants Committee was also unable to get the information they needed to write grants from any of the other committees in the OTW. Equally unfortunately, other OTW committees seemed unaware that Grants was available to help acquire funding for them to support their staff and projects.

One respondent noted that among the things the rest of the OTW would need to understand about a Grants Committee were:

“That it exists; what it is for [...]; how Grants could help your committee or you as a user, staff member, etc. of the OTW get money to do a project, obtain training, or any of a large number of carefully articulated possibilities.”

³ Adams, C. and Peters, A (2011). “The Role of the Board of Directors in Grantseeking: A Conversation Between Peers.” *Grant Station*. Retrieved 2013 11 09 from www.GrantStation.com.

“WE COULD PAY PEOPLE TO TRAIN AS CODERS. Seriously, people should be jumping up and down about this,” another respondent commented, highlighting the discrepancy between a committee’s stated needs and their knowledge that Grants might have been able to help with those needs.”

Other comments agreed:

“[Grants lacked] any kind of ability to communicate with other committees and be heard.”

“Most of the org did not seem to be aware of the existence of the committee, or perhaps were not in a place where they had anything to ask for.”

Without other committees understanding vital information about Grants, no one ever reached out to Grants for help or information, and when Grants tried to reach out themselves their efforts were fruitless.

Clarity of Purpose and Procedures

Several respondents identified the major problem at the root of Grants Committees’ struggles as a lack of understanding from Grants, the Board, and the rest of the OTW about what Grant’s purpose was, what their priorities should be, and how they fit into the organization as a whole. One respondent noted, “I often felt like the Board had all these ideas about what Grants was supposed to be and be doing, but I never knew what they were, just that we weren't doing them effectively.”

Another respondent added that Grants didn’t have clear enough procedures to follow a purpose, even if what its priorities were had been clear: “the discussions and enthusiasm were great, but there weren't procedures in place to produce follow-through.”

Grants was founded with clear responsibilities, but without a clear purview or clear procedures, we received no further clarification about the OTW’s most pressing needs, initiatives, and goals that could benefit from grant funding. There was a clear sense from the survey answers that most committees that had tried to reach out had not bought into the very concept of grant funding and why it might be important or useful.

Before Grants could be revived, respondents agreed the organization would need to “identify, as an org, how we'd like to move forward and how grants money could fit into that...We need to think bigger, and then once the org has decided which way to go, put all their resources behind the applications, and apply until we get it.”

Appendix A: Quantitative Data

Due to the small number of responses, the Strategic Planning Committee decided not to release the quantitative data to protect the confidentiality of the respondents. The raw data is stored in the OTW's Vault if there is a need to reference it in the future.

Appendix B: Textual Data from Surveys Used to Create Aggregate Numbers

Due to the small number of responses, the Strategic Planning Committee decided not to release the textual data for the aggregate numbers to protect the confidentiality of the respondents. The raw data is stored in the OTW's Vault if there is a need to reference it in the future.