

More Than a Number: Measuring Value and ROI for Library Microgrant Programs

Introduction

The University of Houston Libraries first implemented the internal microgrant program in 2007 as a tool to highlight the libraries strategic directions. Since that time the program has grown and changed: requirements and guidelines have shifted as budgets and expectations changed. So, too, has the library administration changed; a new Dean of Libraries took her position in August 2015. As the needs, leadership, and strategic plans for the libraries shift it became important to identify whether the microgrant program should continue to receive support, both in terms of staffing resources and financing. Several questions emerge from reviewing this line or reasoning: does the microgrant program still encourage new endeavors that fulfill the libraries' goals and plans? Is the funding adequate, sub-par, or excessive based on the need? Can the impact of microgrant programs be quantified and, if so, how?

Method

This study identified three primary criteria for assessing return on investment from library microgrants: engagement, continuation, and professional impact. Engagement was considered at four levels: planning team, collaborator, volunteer, and participant. Continuation was assessed by identifying ongoing impact, including whether an event was repeated or if a microgrant resulted in a permanent or semi-permanent change in library workflow. Professional impact identified the presentations, articles, and awards generated by UH library microgrants. Criteria from each year of the microgrant program was reconciled with annual funding to identify trends in spending versus impact.

Results

Total Engagement

- Average 520 participants per microgrant year
- Average 134 participants per project
- Total participation from 2007-2015 was 4,161

Continuation

- 13 projects (42%) continued in some way past the initial microgrant year--a positive sign, as some projects were not suited to be assessed in this way.

Professional Impact

- Microgrant projects resulted in 16 presentations and articles and 3 awards.

Cost budgeted for the microgrant program was \$43,011 in total for the years 2007-2015, with an average budget of \$5,376 a year. Compared to costs for programming, outreach, and materials at many libraries this amount is not excessive, and yet resulted in significant participation and impact, with many continuing positive outcomes. As such, internal microgrant programs appear to offer a positive return on investment for academic libraries, and possibly others with the budget to offer them.

Limitations

- Assessment not built-in from implementation
- Managing missing data
- No existing assessment guidelines
- One outlier weighted statistics
- Mainly quantitative data

Recommendations

- Establish a tracking and assessment system when creating a microgrant program.
- Set clear guidelines, expectations, and priorities for microgrant funding based on goals for the program.
- Encourage professional engagement based on projects if that is a priority.
- Compare suggested microgrant budget with other programming and project budgets in the library.
- Better define impact/value or outcome. Besides our criteria, are there any other outcome that will show the success of a program?

About the Authors



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