WiLS Ideas to Action Fund Grant Summary

In 2018 Schreiner Memorial Library, in cooperation with the Lancaster School District, was awarded an Ideas to Action grant for our Lancaster Small Business Center Project. Our goal was to create a small-scale business center to support small businesses and entrepreneurs in the Lancaster area, both in the schools and throughout the community. Our original proposal assumed that the cooperation between the school and public libraries would be the main collaboration in the project. It also focused on the technology component of the project; bringing on new state-of-the-art technology to support small businesses.

Once we started planning for the business center and word got out that we were working on it, several other entities became interested in cooperating on this project. The City of Lancaster common council and City Administrator were especially interested in the project, as they'd been considering how to support an incubator-style program. Some local businesses invested in small businesses and startups (like local banks) wanted to be part of the conversation as well. Our planning team expanded significantly, and our planning process was therefore slowed down. Ultimately, this project made something of a turn from school-public collaboration to a full community cooperative program. While the school is still involved to some degree, the wider community has become the focus because of the interest from business partners.

After creating a website to gather and promote our digital and physical resources, we started marketing the Lancaster Business Center to local students, small business startups, and other potential entrepreneurs. Two of the local patrons who already used the library to help in the running of their businesses worked with us to describe why we are so useful and what we could do to help even more. We discovered that rather than large investments in technology first, it was more necessary to build the user base and then respond to their needs. So we invested in our print collection, marketed the services we already had, and started planning, funding, and implementing programs aimed at educating and encouraging entrepreneurs. We have also moved forward with the process of getting screen sharing technology in the study room which we've dedicated to the business center. We have reached out beyond our regular patron base through an email list, newspaper and radio spots, and via the word of mouth from our partners and supporters.

Our community has benefitted from our project and will for years into the future. While the library has always served small businesses and startups in some ways, our targeted and intentional approach to this service brings more people in and encourages users to see the library in a different way. Our community now has a one-stop-shop for

small business reference questions and a network of supporters which they can access right from the library or the website. And when the library is no longer able to help it can lead them to the right support, whether that be the Wisconsin Small Business Development Center, the Department of Workforce Development, or private assistance like attorneys or banks.

Libraries interested in starting this type of program should reach out to their municipalities and local business community before starting the planning process- odds are there's interest or even the start of a plan out there somewhere. Using all of those connections will build your audience faster, take some of the work off your shoulders, and help create avenues for future funding to sustain the program. Relying on resources that already exist like databases and print materials in your system will also reduce the cost of the program. Keeping an open mind about what it might look like (rather than deciding what's needed before reaching out to those who might use the business center) seems like it will slow down the process but it also reduces wasted time, energy, and funding.

See the site at schreinermemorialsbc.org

See the WI Libraries for Everyone blog post about the project here.