

## Transcript – Episode 57 – [Collaborative Grant- Seeking with Bess de Farber](#)

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Welcome to the Successful Nonprofits™ Podcast. I'm your host Dolph Goldenburg. And today we will be discussing collaborative grant seeking and growing a culture of grantsmanship. Now, before I get started, let me say that I am at the tail end of a strep throat infection, so my voice sounds a little a quickie today. But I'm still really looking forward to this conversation today in part because in my very, very early years in the nonprofit sector, as soon as I was done being a case manager and decided that I wanted to move into administration, the first job that I could get was as a grant writer. And as a grant writer, I grew an organization's grant portfolio from about a quarter-million-dollars to about \$5 million a year. And I did that over the course of five or six years. And it was an exciting time in my career, in part because as a grant writer, I got to be involved in every aspect of the organization.

So, suddenly, I was involved in budgeting conversations. I was involved in HR conversations and partnership conversations and facility. And it also meant that I got to know almost everything that was happening at the organization as part of my job. It was an amazing introduction to becoming a nonprofit manager and something that I always look back on and am excited about.

I'm very excited to talk to our featured conversation guests today who is Bess de Farber. And one of the reasons that I'm excited is that, you know, while I've maybe raised 20 or \$25 million in grant funds over the course of my career, our guest today has undoubtedly done many times more than that. Bess de Farber serves as the grant manager for the University of Florida libraries in beautiful, beautiful Gainesville, Florida. I've never been there, but I hear it's beautiful.

Before that, she served in the exact same position at the University of Arizona libraries. And she has also provided grantsmanship instruction over the past 29 years and has led efforts to secure millions of dollars in grant funding for nonprofits and academic libraries. Now, if this was the only credential on Bess' resume, it would still be impressive, but she is also the inventor of the Co-Lab planning series, and the Co-Lab is a large group process for groups and individuals that are seeking new collaborative partnerships. And through that process, I believe she has trained over 2,500 people. So, please join me today in welcoming Bess de Farber to the podcast.

Hey, Bess. Welcome to the podcast.

**Bess de Farber:** Thank you very much. I'm looking forward to talking with you about this really exciting subject,

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I am thrilled that you are joining us. You clearly are an expert. I know you have co-written this book as well as a workbook on helping organizations and individuals collaborate in grant writing.

**Bess de Farber:** Yes, I have this, uh, the title of the book is Collaborative Grant Seeking: A Practical Guide for Librarians, but I'm actually not a librarian. I'm a nonprofit management expert

and happened to fall into library and shipped and helping librarians be better grantwriters. This is kind of like my second career.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Oh, what was your first?

**Bess de Farber:** I was working as a consultant, um, in the nonprofit sector in South Florida for many years. And prior to that, I had been a program officer for arts and culture for human and race relations and for social services in Palm Beach County and serving Palm Beach County and Martin County.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Very cool. So, you've kind of seen both sides of the nonprofit sector.

**Bess de Farber:** Exactly. It's really easy for me to understand what it is that the library area, the library field doesn't understand about grantsmanship, but it also serves as a really good platform to communicate to nonprofits better ways of doing the work that is so crucial to their bread and butter.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Your book is specifically about collaborating and grant seeking. Why is it important for organizations to be trying to collaborate when they go out to get grants?

**Bess de Farber:** There are two aspects to it. You can't have individuals within an organization in charge to be the grants writer for that entire organization. It is not a solo sport. As you talked about in your introduction and the work that you had been doing and nonprofits, it's a team effort. And normally the person that serves as the grants writer or grants development expert is straddled between project development and program development and touches on every aspect of the organization. So, more of a generalist.

Well, you can't be an expert in each of those areas when you're in a nonprofit. You have to be able to work with each of the experts in those individual areas to seek the proper information that will make a fundable proposal. Within an organization, it should never be kind of delineated that one person is strictly responsible for this kind of work because the output and the outcome of those projects will be or those proposals may not be as successful if the organization as a whole were behind each project. There's the internal collaboration of a proposal, and then there's the external collaboration of seeking partners who have differentiating assets to contribute to a project that enhances either those people who might benefit from the project itself or the program or by adding assets that were not available through the applicant by themselves.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Let's talk for just a minute about the internal collaboration. What are some of the things that sometimes stand in the way of people or departments collaborating with each other and writing the grant proposal?

**Bess de Farber:** First of all, just not knowing the steps in which you should undertake a proposal development process. The first thing that I recommend that organizations do is really have a

thorough understanding of the guidelines of that specific project or that specific request for proposal or application guidelines. In order to do that, creating a checklist that is the organization's interpretation of those guidelines with embedded criteria within the checklist is one of the most successful things that an organization can do to prepare for actually doing the work of writing the proposal and then making sure that you start with your timeline and you start with your budget and work outward from that. I call that the spinal column of any proposal because that's where everything should emanate from, and, unfortunately, people create proposals in the order in which the sections are required, and that is really the kiss of death. It sucks the energy out of the organization, and it wastes too much time because you can't determine feasibility unless you have a budget and you have a timeline, and once you have determined with your team that this is a feasible project just by looking at the activities that are going to be executed and by looking at the budget then you have a green light to go forward, and you really haven't expended a lot of time to get to that place.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** When you say a timeline, you mean an implementation timeline for the project or the program.

**Bess de Farber:** Correct. And within that, you would have the timeframe for each activity to actualize the project. You would have the list of activities that would be needed during these time frames, and then you would also include the persons or person who would be responsible for leading that individual activity.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I would assume that to make a budget, you literally just start putting numbers on the timeline.

**Bess de Farber:** Exactly. And once you've done that, you have the backbone and the framework for a very solid proposal. You can also see very clearly whether it's feasible to do this and if it's a fundable project or if it's completely not feasible.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** What are some of the signs when you look at that timeline or that backbone of the project, what are some of the signs that it might not be feasible?

**Bess de Farber:** For instance, if the cost of the project serves too few audience members are too few beneficiaries, so let's say in a very simple example, you're creating a workshop series that's going to serve a hundred people, and the cost is going to be \$20,000. Well, no one is going to fund that. That's a completely obscene number, right? Unless it's a celebrity, and the people who are involved are very important people in your community, the leadership, but it's still not a very good return on investment.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Let's talk a little bit about collaborating externally. What are some of the factors that maybe impede external collaboration?

**Bess de Farber:** First of all, working with people that you don't know. Collaborating with strangers, which is something I'm very interested in. I think the biggest impediment to doing that

is not knowing the assets in one's own community. So, we are very good at doing these needs assessments. Everyone has to do a needs assessment. I think that's important, but I think it's more important to actually do an inventory of assets within your community. This is work that has been done through the asset-based community development institute, and there's lots of literature on this topic that's so important to nonprofits, and you can imagine if you have a list of organizations within your community that are all dealing with homeless issues, or all these organizations are involved in arts and culture. Well, the power is in the diversity of the assets that they bring to the table that are combined in a new way to create a new program or to solve a new issue. But if you don't have those relationships and if you're not aware of the diversity of assets that are just right next door to you, then you are at a loss because then you start with zero, and you start making cold calls, and there's just too much to learn about another organization and its mission and its assets in a short timeframe when you're trying to prepare a fundable proposal.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Are you saying that by creating this asset map, you're not really collaborating with strangers. You are just collaborating with people you may not know really well?

Because when you first said you're very intrigued and interested in collaborating with strangers, I thought most people are kind of scared of doing that.

**Bess de Farber:** Yes. But if you're collaborating with organizations that you're not aware of, those are strangers. And once you start to inquire about their assets and exchange information about your own organization's assets, that's where the magic starts to happen.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** And so, what are you do in the Co-Lab planning series?

**Bess de Farber:** Well, that is a completely separate book from this one where we've just published.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** So, can you tell us maybe a story about two organizations, a library and some other organization that had an external collaboration that worked really well?

**Bess de Farber:** Oh sure. This actually started with the mini-grant within the libraries, and it was called Gator Scholar, and it was an attempt to create profiles of all of the professors and their publications in the College of Agriculture here. That was a successful project, and then there was an RFP that came out that was through the National Institutes of Health that was interested in creating a national network. Very similar to what we had done with this very small \$5,000 project. One of the other professors on campus was really interested in actualizing a project that would involve not only the University of Florida and the libraries and the faculty here, but also at six other institutions because we needed to have other large universities, private universities and universities in rural and remote areas and also with diverse populations serving diverse populations. That application, there was only one award nationally, and it was made to the University of Florida with our six partners. It was over \$12 million. So, initially it was a \$5,000 project in collaboration with Cornell, and then it grew to this very large \$12-million project

because so many of the other libraries in these other institutions, were interested in creating this directory of faculty and to expose the assets of those broadly in an international way. There are over 125 universities that use that system called Vivo.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Wow. That is definitely a successful partnership to go from a handful to 125.

**Bess de Farber:** It's truly an amazing project that came out of a very small project.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Do you ever find that two organizations have some distrust just because they've not worked together before? Even if they know each other, you know, so maybe they see each other at meetings and that kind of thing. But this would be the first time that the two organizations have really closely partnered, not just signed, you know, letters of support for each other but actually partnered on a project.

**Bess de Farber:** If you look at the wilder definition of collaborations, what is a collaboration? That is based on two entities bringing their assets together in ways that they have never worked before. So, it is a very high-risk behavior, I would say. And there are situations because you never know what the actual agenda of the other organization is or the motivation for that organization to participate with you. And there's always the money issue that comes up in these collaborative projects. There are also the personality issues that come up with the people who either self-select to be part of the project or are appointed through their own organizational leadership to be part of the project. You have all of these challenging dynamics going on that could explode into a very unsuccessful endeavor, especially if these challenges are not exposed. Meaning in the first meeting, I recommend that everyone in the room state and share what's in it for them.

And that's when you start to talk about money right from the beginning. I've also seen organizations make the big mistake of going through the planning process, developing the proposal, submitting the proposal, and never talking about how the funds will be distributed among the partner. Sometimes, that's not a requirement of the actual grant maker. I would say that money and funding is a touchy subject mostly with Americans. It's a charged subject, and I have found that staff members are mostly uncomfortable about bringing up the topic, and this is something that I completely disagree with and encourage folks to bring it up, especially in a facilitated meeting where you're first introducing yourselves, talking about the assets that your organization could contribute to the project and then you need to get to, "What's in it For me.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I have seen two organizations that will partner, and they come to some kind of agreement, hopefully early on about how they're going to split the revenue and what each entity is going to do as part of the partnership. But then by the end of it, it's almost like a really bad couple because both partners feel like they've done most of the work and not gotten enough of the money.

**Bess de Farber:** That could be the case, but I would say that it takes practice. This is not just one of behavior that you want to engage in. You want to over time practice with new partners, practice with partners that you've had successful agreements with and successful project

outcomes with and then maybe adding one new partner to another project and do it slowly. You also have the issue of *saboteurs* that I talk about in the book. There are different types of people in organizations that are in it for different reasons and have different behaviors that are either supportive of a group and team environment or that are not supportive of that type of environment. It does take practice, and I think it takes a neutral facilitator in some of these planning sessions that represents the best interests of the project rather than the best interests of any one organization. And the facilitator, because I have this role so often in developing these projects, is so important because even though I work for the libraries, I have extensive training in facilitation and can see where the group is going or where different individuals may be headed, and I can help them see that their opinions or thoughts are not for the benefit of the whole and just for the benefit of their own represented organization.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I think the real takeaway, Bess is that partnership is a muscle. And so, like all muscles you've got to work at, and you've got to build it up, and you know, if you try once and you're sore afterward, well that just means you got to keep trying.

**Bess de Farber:** And I think all of this requires practice asset mapping. Talking to people that you don't know about their assets and learning about others is a practice. Creating checklists that help you interpret guidelines and criteria for evaluating these proposals is a practice. Working with others and facilitating meetings with others that may be uncomfortable or that are challenging where there's not enough funding to actually fund the entire project as it's foreseen by the participants. These all things that require practice because this is all I do day in and day out. I have a lot of practice doing it, and I can see that, unfortunately, others don't.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Bess, thank you so much. We're going to take a short break, and when we come back, we are going to talk about growing a culture of grantsmanship and your organization.

The Successful Nonprofits™ Podcast is produced by the Goldenburg Group as part of our mission to provide board development, strategic planning and interim leadership to help nonprofits thrive in a competitive environment.

As I think I may have mentioned a few episodes ago at this point, we have absolutely no bandwidth at the Goldenburg Group to take on new clients this year. It is a great place to be, but it also means that we're now in a place where we are starting conversations with organizations who may be want to be doing strategic planning or board development or anticipating a transition in 2018 so if that's you, if that's your organization, please reach out at [www.goldenburggroup.com](http://www.goldenburggroup.com).

We are back with Bess De Farber, and we're talking about her book *Collaborative Grant Seeking*. Bess, I'm hoping in the second half we're going to be able to have a little bit of a conversation about how to grow and build a culture of grantsmanship in your organization. What's the first step, you know, in an organization just hired their first grant writer. What's that first step and trying to build a culture of grantsmanship?

**Bess de Farber:** Well, I had that opportunity here when I came to the University of Florida and, fortunately, there was some funding available to create a mini-grant program. I would recommend this methodology for any large organization that has a consistent budget that could be designated for internal mini-grant funds. And what does this do for an organization? If the goal is that these mini-grant funds be distributed to project teams within an organization that have innovative ideas to execute something that without the funds it would be impossible to do, then this is the opportunity where the organization could sponsor these projects. But the goal should be to develop strong grantsmanship knowledge and expertise within the project teams of those who apply for these funds, not simply to execute this project, but to create grant writers within the organization. And we've done exactly that here at the University of Florida.

And it has become a model among libraries, both public and academic across the country. So, it's very easy, I think, to go find a donor and to ask the donor if they would be willing to sponsor an annual grant-making program within the organization that wants to develop a strong grantsmanship program. And that's where I would start. And it's amazing that in terms of evaluating these proposals, the awards are made by representatives from all the different departments within that organization, and over time, those folks that are on the grants management committee that makes those decisions about yes, we funded this project and the quality of the proposal was the driver, not necessarily the fact that we wanted to see this innovation happen within our organization.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** One of the other really cool things about that I think is those people that are serving on the internal grants decision committee now are starting to learn what external grant decision committees are looking at and thinking about and talking about when they're reviewing their grant proposals.

**Bess de Farber:** Exactly. That could be the case, but what they're doing is learning to be grant writers themselves. They may bring to the table the expertise of that particular department as a critical eye to seeing, "Oh well they miss this, and they missed this." And rather than penalize that project team, go ahead and provide a list of questions that would steer them in the direction of finding more information to strengthen their proposal. And that's essentially how we've been doing it here. We've been using this local system of inquiring about the gaps of these specific proposals to make them stronger and then once those are answered, evaluating the quality of the proposals that are apples to apples rather than meaning that the applications are all complete, and they have sufficient information that the committee can decide based on that quality that's more equal and more equitable.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** As you're building these internal grant writers, how quickly do you see them then writing successful grant proposals to external funders?

**Bess de Farber:** The grant period for those projects is a year, so not only do they plan the project internally. If they're successful, they get the funding, but then they learn how to manage the funds and manage a project from inception to completion and with the reporting requirements and managing their budgets. So, when the faculty members and the staff members of the

libraries have completed one grant project, then a mini-grant project, then they're ready to do almost any other project that they're interested in applying for as long as it's a feasible project. I find that once I've worked with and mentored this one project team, it's very easy for them to move into external grant seeking in a very positive and very successful manner.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Bess, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today. Our loyal listeners know that we always ask an Off-the-Map question and I actually have two questions in my back pocket in case you don't love the first one. Now, keeping in mind that you are not a librarian, but I'm still gonna ask you two library-related questions. My first Off-the-Map question is, what happened to all of those old-fashioned card catalogs? Back when I was a kid, and I think actually even when I was in undergraduate school, there were like these wooden boxes, little tiny drawers. You'd pull them out and go through actual cards in them where you could look up topics and go find the book. What happened to the physical card catalog?

**Bess de Farber:** Well, I would suggest that everyone who's listening to the podcast, Google [www.worldcat.org](http://www.worldcat.org). There's a giant catalog in the sky. It's managed by what's called WorldCat. That's where all the catalog records went. There's a universal cataloging system that's electronic, and you can search any title imaginable by keywords, and that's where you will find all of the publications available to the world today.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** So that's what happened to the information that was inside the card catalogs. But I'm actually asking what happened to those wooden card catalogs themselves.

**Bess de Farber:** Those are in individual curators' offices. They are confident. They're beautifully made of beautiful oak. And the cards are still there. There are libraries that still have their card catalog so you can have that experience, you know, obviously not going to be complete, but it gives you a chance to browse in a way that people used to browse. Browsing now I think is, is more challenging without the card catalogs and without, you know, having access to all the books because the volume of books prevents all of those books held by a library to be available at an instant. They're stored in offsite storage and need to be requested. You can still find those card catalogs. We do have some of those. We have cards here at the University of Florida, and we have the actual furniture where the cards were stored. A few of those are still around.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I think about those. You're right. They were beautiful and I'm always like, what happened to them? Do people did choose them for sock storage? What do they use them for?

**Bess de Farber:** It could be anything. There are libraries that have none of those left. That was an interesting question.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** It's an Off-the-Map question, and the purpose of that question is to ask you something that really has nothing at all to do with our conversation, but it's interesting for listeners to hear about. Bess, thank you again for joining us on the podcast today. I want to make sure that all of our listeners know how they can get ahold of you. In addition to working for the

University of Florida Library, you also have your own website, and that is [www.bessdefarber.com](http://www.bessdefarber.com), and we will put a link to that in our show notes. From there, people can read about you. They can read book reviews of books that you have written and also get your contact information. So, thank you so much for joining us today.

**Bess de Farber:** It's been a real pleasure talking with you, Dolph.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Once again, be certain to visit [www.successfulnonprofits.com](http://www.successfulnonprofits.com) to get all of Bess' contact information from our show notes. Now, I think the takeaway from today's show is that partnerships are important, and there's a partnership muscle. And we got to really work it, and we've got to do multiple partnerships and keep improving every time we do partnerships. So, for me, that's my takeaway from the show. Now, have I mentioned that the Successful Nonprofits™ Podcast is the podcast media sponsor of board sources by annual board leadership forum in Seattle this month, this October 18-20. Make sure that you download our daily episodes from board leadership forum and also know that while we are there, we're going to be talking and doing interviews with many of the thought leaders that are presenting at this conference. Now, nothing beats attending in person, but I think it is probably sold out by the time this podcast is produced. You can always go to [www.boardsource.org](http://www.boardsource.org) to find out more about what they do, but you may not be able to register at this point in time. But while you're online, subscribe to the Successful Nonprofits™ Podcast on your podcast streamer of choice. That's our show for this week. I hope that you have gained some insight that will help your nonprofit thrive in a competitive environment.

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