

Finding Money For Your Forensics Program

By Mark Feil, Ed.D.

Money. As the song says, it can't buy you love. But it can buy you lab supplies. It's a fact of education: classrooms need funds the way an SUV needs gas. And forensics classes need money in ways that scare many administrators. We need blood, chemicals, consumables, tools, supplies, and a thousand other things we usually pay for out of pocket if it's not too much. The Dollar Store people love teachers.

Schools usually give teachers a budget for supplies. But expenses come up that aren't in budgets. Things like equipment, last minute ideas, conferences, and things we need from the grocery store. Some schools will reimburse expenses; many don't. Teachers are usually experts in making things work on a shoestring. Budgets only go so far, and they rarely increase from year to year. However, there are other ways to get money or make it last longer.

One of the most obvious is to hunt for bargains. The Dollar Store, leftover bins, and warehouse clubs are some of the easiest ways to get classroom supplies for less. Louis Pasteur noted that "Chance favors a prepared mind," and this means knowing if you can use something free when you see it. A drugstore I frequent had a basket of 10ml syringes with a FREE sign. I took two dozen because we had a unit on blood spatter coming up. I also grabbed chicken parts when they went on sale and froze them because our forensic entomology unit needed fresh meat. If you have storage space and know what you will need it helps to get in the mindset of stocking up when you find a bargain. And if you can use someone else's money, all the better.

Grants are touted by administrators as the greatest thing since pencil sharpeners. What they neglect to mention, however, is 1) they take several weeks or months to hear about, 2) they're not guaranteed, 3) they're competitive, and 4) you'll be applying for it on your own. Most administrators are happy to mention grants, but few are willing to help you find them, or apply for them. But there is an upside.

While grants are rarely useful if you need money next month, they can do wonders if you don't need the funds until next year. A web search for teacher's grants will yield hundreds of possibilities. The only limit is how long you're willing to look online; there are literally thousands out there. And many more are available in your community. I once raised \$500 by asking two local insurance offices if they'd help purchase supplies that would have a direct impact on student driving habits. I mentioned we were reconstructing accidents, and promised to

state their names and the names of their companies when I concluded the activity. I also passed out brochures for their businesses while I talked about the role of the insurance industry in minimizing accidents, especially those that happen to young people.

Many teachers have an inborn fear of grants. We've heard they take dozens of pages of perfectly worded descriptions and justifications and a single error will doom the application after several months of intense labor. Not true. The folks who hand out the free money want to make sure their funds are used for what you say you're going to use them for. They'd also like to know that what you're suggesting is a good idea and will benefit the students. Remember, they're in the business of giving away money.

Many grant applications can be done in an hour or two. Some take much longer. Generally, the more money foundations give away the more time the application will take. I once received \$400 for an application that took 10 minutes. I worked four hours on another application that netted me \$5000, and much of that was online research. The key to getting a grant is telling the sponsors what you're going to do with the money, and why it's important that you do it. If you know the answers to these questions before you start writing, the process will be much, much shorter. Grants are useful, but not always the answer. However, if you need money for a unit coming up in a month there are other means.

For the short term, when you need money soon, you will have to raise funds on your own. This usually takes two forms. Both involve planning, accounting (keeping track of the money you raise), and work. The difference is how soon you want the cash.

The quickest way to raise funds is from the student body. Most schools prohibit the levying of lab fees so you have to get creative. Twice a year I take orders from my students for blue T-shirts that say FORENSICS across the back in white letters with the school logo and CSI above the breast pocket. The students pay \$10 in advance and the shirts arrive two weeks later. Since the shirts cost slightly less to produce, an order of 15 shirts nets enough for an order of fingerprint powder. Other ways of raising money include raffles, 50/50s, and the sale of items students want like snacks, supplies, or forensic goodies. After using magnetic brushes in our fingerprint unit, dozens of my students wanted one and it was a simple matter to take orders and payment for a magnetic brush and iron filings, both of which I bought in bulk.

If you have the time, a more efficient way to raise money is to have a fundraiser. Hundreds of examples abound in your church, school, and community. Many you're probably familiar with include pizza kits, putting on a show, bake sales, rummage sales, partnering with local businesses, cookbooks, flower and plant sales, hat day, family Monte Carlo night, silent auction, magazine subscriptions, gift wrap sales, faculty/student games, concession stand, caroling, duck race, T-shirt sponsorship, cookie dough, and candy sales. And the list goes on and on. The profits are potentially larger, but so is the to-do list.

Nearly all of the above mentioned fundraisers require some capital to get started. You'll have to put up money to make money. And you'll need organizational skills. You'll also have to be cognizant of whether or not a permit is required, and what to do about sales tax if your state has

it. Volunteers will also be crucial, and parents should be involved. Publicity is another concern, and while much of it is free, you'll have to work to get on the community's radar. You're absolutely going to need administrative support at your school, and they may be able to smooth out the fundraising road since they've seen a lot of it in the course of their duties. I don't want to scare anyone away from trying a fundraiser with a mountain of concerns; once you've done one the rest will be easier. You should know what you're getting into, that's all. There's a lot to do to make a fundraiser work, but you're crazy if you think people won't want to help, or that it all has to be done ASAP. The beautiful thing about taking time to plan a fundraiser is you have the luxury of planning with people who have done it before, of making sure all your ducks are in a row before anything happens. Remember, people *want* you to succeed.

Lois Kahalelio, a teacher in Hawaii, found this out when she took matters into her own hands six years ago. She raised money in pledges, then kicked off her program one June morning. At 6am she launched her paddleboard into the Pacific Ocean and paddled halfway around the island of Oahu in horrible weather. Then she climbed onto a bike, and later ran the remaining distance to her starting point. Total time: 22 hours. She noted how sad it was for a teacher to have to go to extremes like this. The upside was the \$5,000 she collected, and the contacts she made. Those contacts would eventually lead to deals with Bio-Rad for lesson plans in exchange for equipment. Other contacts heard of her and donated equipment. While such drastic measures aren't for everyone, they demonstrate people are sympathetic to teachers' budget woes. Often a phone call to a biotechnology firm will yield surplus or outdated equipment for free.

If the idea of a fundraiser still seems overwhelming, get a copy of "How to Get Money for Your Classroom & School" by Karnes and Stephens (\$10.36 from Amazon.com). It covers every aspect of raising money from A to Z. The authors break down the process into easy to digest bites and give literally hundreds of ideas. They're careful to cover every aspect of the process, and they write in a conversational tone. But raising money won't be the end of your troubles.

Another concern is what to do with the money. To avoid taxes you need to set up an internal account at your school and find a way to channel funds into it. You're also going to need a way to get money out for purchases and reimbursements in a timely manner. I had thousands in an account at our school at the beginning of the school year, but due to administrative changes and new district regulations I haven't been able to touch a cent of it. Many of the tips I've related in this article describe some of the ways I've tried to keep our program and my sanity intact.

When you get the money you've got decisions to make before you pat yourself on the back. Much of the money will go for exactly what you planned, but keep in mind you'll need to reinvest some of it to continue the fundraising process. A don't forget thank you notes to your volunteers.

Raising money for your classroom can seem like an overwhelming affair, but it doesn't have to be. There are different ways to go about it, and different ways to make it a success. The key is planning, whether for a grant, a fundraiser, or a sale in your classroom. Most people make the

mistake of thinking it's not possible, and that's often their biggest hurdle. No matter what you have in mind there's someone else at your school or in your community you know who's already done it, and is just waiting for you to ask their advice. Look around, ask around, and you'll soon be spreading it around. Believe in yourself and the money will come.

Sidebar: Great sites to start with

Community Foundation Locator: www.communityfoundationlocator.org/search/index.cfm

Findit: www.findit.org/fund_online_foundations.html

Grandmakers for Education: <http://edfunders.com>

SchoolGrants: www.schoolgrants.org

Campbell's Labels for Education: www.labelsforeducation.com

American Association of Fund Raising Counsel, Inc.: www.aafc.org

General Mills Boxtops for Education: www.boxtops4education.com