

ADDING IT ALL UP

TEN IDEAS FOR FUNDING YOUR CIRCLE

by Jessa Barniol

FUNDING. You already know it's the difference between pizza and a nicely catered meal; between a quick, no-frills meeting and an overnight retreat; between happy teachers and ecstatic, enthusiastic teachers who feel they're being truly valued for their time. You know it's the biggest thing standing between you and everything your MTC could be. Now if you only knew where to start.



As three MTC leaders—two in Louisiana and one in Hawai'i—found out, getting funding is just finding the right mix of connections, perseverance and plain old luck. But the good news is that potential funding sources are everywhere; you just have to know where to look. Here are ten tips for maximizing your funding search.

1. Use AIM resources.

Judith Covington, a professor at Louisiana State University in Shreveport and a leader of the North Louisiana MTC, said her group's funding search really got off the ground after attending an AIM [workshop](#) on "How to Run a Math Teachers' Circle." AIM Director of Special Projects Brianna Donaldson helped Covington run an [online foundation directory search](#) that yielded a surprisingly long list of potential funding sources in Covington's area. "We were able to break the list down and send letters of inquiry to everything that remotely matched our goals," Covington said. "When we finally earned a grant [for \$25,000], it was from a foundation we had never heard of, and would not have heard of, without AIM's help." AIM also supplies a wealth of information and resources for groups looking for funding in the members-only section of the [MTC website](#). For more information, [email Donaldson](#).

2. Apply everywhere and often.

There are so many different types of funding available to Math Teachers' Circles that the best advice to follow, Covington said, is to apply to everything you see, on any level: local, regional, federal, private, public. "Don't cross someone off your list just because

you've never heard of them," Covington said. "In fact, if you've heard of them, so has everyone else and your chances are smaller." Christina Eubanks-Turner of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and her group, the Acadiana Math Teachers' Circle, had success earning a \$12,000 Pugh Grant for their summer workshop, a local grant that comes from a family that distributes private grants focusing on education, economic hardship and improving the community. Michelle Manes of the University of Hawai'i and MaTCH, the Math Teachers' Circle of Hawai'i, in contrast, has had success at the state and federal levels. Their group received \$72,550 in federal No Child Left Behind funds, which are disbursed through the College of Education at the University of Hawai'i. In addition, they garnered federal funding by piggybacking the project on Manes' NSF Individual Investigator grant as a part of her proposal for the broader impacts of her research. This funding has enabled MaTCH to cover their unique travel requirements; a number of their members must fly in from neighboring islands to attend the group's meetings. "Everything that we come across, we apply for," Manes said. "We've actually had quite a bit of success with this piecemeal approach." Other groups nationwide have had success with



NO FUNDING, NO FUN?

MAKING IT WORK WITH LIMITED RESOURCES



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If your search for funding is bearing little or no fruit, here is how to help your Circle thrive, not just survive, with fewer resources. As Manes said, "There's always a way to make it work with what is there."

1. Get creative.

Covington and her group brainstormed some ways to get food for meetings with limited funding. "Most group meals can be bought for less than \$500," Covington said. "Consider partnering with local restaurants or businesses to sponsor a meal for the Circle. Also talk directly with the food provider about possibilities for free or reduced prices on meals." She also knows of another MTC with a group leader that cooks for each meeting. Just be sure to check with your venue about their rules and requirements for bringing your own food to gatherings. Before their funding came through, Manes' group got creative with the meeting's venue by partnering with a local museum. They also capitalized on a partnership with the Hawai'i Department of Education to offer continuing education credits to teachers in lieu of a cash stipend. "We've found that continuing education credits are more than enough incentive for many teachers," Manes said. "Now that we have enough money to offer stipends, we offer teachers a choice, and more than half the teachers consistently choose credits over money."

2. Focus on the things money can't buy.

The teachers in your Circle are more interested in learning and socializing than they are in fancy food or cash stipends, Covington said. "The teachers really have just as much fun with pizza," she said. "In fact, I'm sure they would still come to the meetings even if we weren't feeding them. They're more interested in learning something new, broadening their horizons and making friends. Money is not a big decisive factor in any of those things." Try leading with a social icebreaker game, facilitating online discussions among the members of your group between in-person meetings, and making sure to offer interesting and in-demand session leaders and topics.

3. Try again soon.

In many regions, today's economic environment is not often a generous one for groups looking for money. "Some foundations simply aren't functioning in this economy," Covington said. "And even the ones that are still giving can't give money to everyone. But don't stop trying. Your group's lucky break could come at any time." □

institution-internal grants. These are often small grants that are intended to help a project get started and can go a long way toward funding meetings during the school year. Similar seed grant programs are sometimes offered by other organizations, such as MSRI or AIM. Many groups have also earned funding from both local and national private business ventures, such as banks, retailers and restaurants, looking for a way to reinvest in their communities.

3. Work with your university or school district. It is likely that your hosting institution has a non-profit 501(c)(3) status that will be invaluable when applying for funding, Eubanks-Turner said. “And don’t forget to check if they have any available funding as well,” Eubanks-Turner said. “That should be the first place you look.”

4. Broaden your network and make existing partnerships work for you. The Hawaii group has developed a great partnership with their state’s Department of Education, who provides the food for their



meetings and, even more importantly, provides the continuing education credits they offer to the Circle’s participating teachers. “When you first look at the hoops that have to be jumped through for official CE credits, it looks nearly impossible,” Manes said. “But it’s a question of finding the right person; someone who truly believes in the program and is willing to help you. We really lucked out in that regard.” Manes also said that the partnerships that may already exist in your Circle’s leadership are invaluable. “My partner is in the education department and I’m in the math department,” Manes said. “Together we have access to a broader spectrum of potential funding and we’re able to put something together that works.”

5. Take the time to explain your Circle well to a prospective supporter. If appropriate, include photos of meetings, proposed topics and testimonials from teachers in your group. Don’t forget to include a link to the [MTC network website](#). “A lot of places you write proposals to will have no idea what a Math Teachers’ Circle is,” Eubanks-Turner said. “Be sure to do it justice.” The members-only section of the MTC website includes many helpful resources to familiarize prospective donors with the MTC concept. For more information, [email Brianna Donaldson](#).

6. Remember that, in some cases, you have not because you ask not. “Think about what would make you truly happy, and ask for that in your proposal,” said Covington, who originally had some reservations about including salaries for the Circle’s leaders in the proposed budget. She decided to try it, and then was thrilled when it was granted. “Don’t undersell yourself or your group,” Covington said. “Don’t pad your proposed budget, but write for a best-case scenario. Then, if you don’t get what you ask for, adjust from there.”

7. Apply as a group.

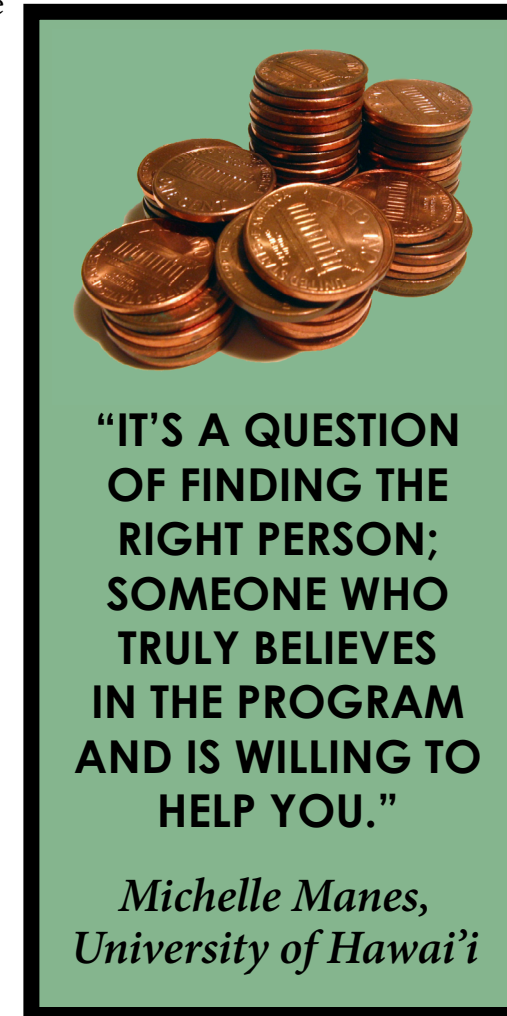
When you send your letters of inquiry and proposals, have your whole leadership group sign the letters, not just one member. This approach worked well for Covington’s group, which is partnered with more than one school district in adjoining parishes. “We had made a conscious effort to have a diverse founding group,” Covington said. “I’m in the math department, but we’ve also got a founder from the university’s education department and other founders from middle schools in different districts. We wanted to show what a wide impact this Circle would have if given the chance, and it truly made an impression on our potential funding sources.”

8. Don’t lose hope.

It was nearly a year after she applied that Manes finally got the good news that she had been awarded the NSF Individual Investigator grant. “I had all but given up on the hope of ever receiving that money,” Manes said. “Sometimes, patience does pay off.” Covington agrees: “You have to be willing to reach out to 20 groups or more and only hear back from one,” she said. “But in the end, when you get the funding, all that work and waiting is worth it.” In the meantime, try getting creative with ways to keep your Circle thriving, even with limited resources. (See sidebar, “No funding, no fun?” on page 7 for ideas.)

9. Make lasting choices with the money.

Congratulations! You’ve earned some funding for your Circle. Now what should you do with it? In addition to food and workshop costs, Eubanks-Turner invested some of the money from the Acadiana group’s Pugh Grant into buying an ELMO document camera, which will continue to be useful to the group for years to come. “There are usually many different ways to approaching a problem that’s presented in one of our meetings,” Eubanks-Turner said. “This way each group can show their approach to the Circle without having to redo their work on the board.” The Acadiana group also invested some of their funding into buying gift cards for each of the teachers to purchase ETA/Cuisenaire manipulative tools for each of their classrooms, which will also last for years.



10. Say thank you.

Especially with funding from smaller or family-based foundations, a follow-up letter or thank-you note is an extremely important step that could lead to future funding from the same source. When Eubanks-Turner’s group took surveys of the teachers that attended the Acadiana workshop, the reviews were so positive that they decided to send copies of the surveys to their sponsoring foundation, along with a note of thanks. “It shows that you really are making an impact and doing great things with their money,” Eubanks-Turner said. “The foundation enjoyed that very much, and I think that follow-up is going to help us continue our relationship with them in the future.”