

INNOVATION Fund Application Round 2

Submission Date	2014-08-28 13:42:21
Organization Name	High Country News
Tax-exempt status	501(c)(3) organization
EIN of organization (or of fiscal sponsor's organization)	
Website address	www.hcn.org
Phone Number	
Applicant's name	Paul Larmer
Title:	Executive Director/Publisher
Contact email	
Proposed Start Date	10-01-2014
Proposed End Date	06-30-2015
Total estimated budget for the proposed project	53,546
What is the total annual budget for your organization or, if you are a project of another organization, the total annual budget for your overall project.	2,590,155
Request amount:	30,000
In two or three sentences, describe your organization's purpose and audience.	High Country News' (HCN) mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. Through the production of an every-other-week magazine, High Country News, and a website, www.HCN.org , we aim to foster an informed citizenry that will be able to better manage the West in terms of its ecological, economic, and social health. HCN's audience is everyone who cares about the American West with over 26,000 paid subscribers; a core readership that is a veritable "who's who" of conservation-minded leaders in politics, government, non-profits, and academia; and another three million folks who are exposed to HCN's stories and opinion in print and online.
Describe in detail the project for which you are requesting funds. How does it fit with your sustainability plans? Explain the need for this project, and how you expect it to increase revenue and/or audience	The vision of HCN University is to reach the leaders of the future—and High Country News' future reader base—through college and university classrooms. Like many journalistic and non-profit endeavors, we face an aging readership and a younger generation that has been steadily pulled away from in-depth news about critical issues through a cacophonous and often shallow digital world.

engagement.

While HCN has long given a nod to this trend, it's only been in the past year that we have seen the potential power in providing a substantive, subsidized classroom program to the many tens of thousands of students across the country who are focused on the environmental issues that have been HCNs bread and butter for the past four decades. Last year, we provided 50 professors and their 1,800 students with free, semester-long subscriptions to HCN, and the response was fantastic. Professors used our stories for in-depth discussions, research projects, and even final exams. In addition, we saw a noticeable surge in online readership during the academic year, driven by students reading stories and researching topics from our 44 years' worth of archives. Here are a few of the comments from professors:

-- "The students in my Land Use in the American West class have to write-up three current event assignments as part of their final grade. They found the free HCNs extremely helpful and relevant. I heard from several of them that they also valued reading them purely for their own enjoyment and interest as well. Thank you!!" -- Hannah Gosnell, Oregon State University

-- "Thanks for keeping these coming. I've been using the issues this spring primarily for a course titled, "Restoration Geographies," but for the Travel issue I distributed it instead to my class on "Recreation, Tourism, and Environment." (We used the entire issue as one of our required readings that week.) Several students in the restoration class then approached me that week to ask why they hadn't received an issue of HCN. They had come to look forward to getting it every other week! (I've encouraged them to subscribe...)" -- David Havlick, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs

-- "All of my students (except for a few international ones) are from the eastern U.S., and it is a lot of fun to watch them grapple with western issues. They have no idea about water law, and when I show them a map of federal land holdings, they are amazed." -- Susan Buck, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

-- "Having access to High Country News was an invaluable resource for my freshman students in our introductory Environment and Natural Resource Problems & Policies course here at the University of Wyoming. It allowed the students to have a consistent and reliable source of current ENR issues in the West, and also helped them discern different kinds of academic and popular sources, and examine issues from multiple perspectives. Using HCN allowed them to see that the approach we take in class--to use critical lenses and ask data-driven questions--is one that helps us all understand and consider solutions to complex issues in our homes, region, and world." -- Melanie Murphey, University of Wyoming

We now see that the HCN University program is critical for HCN to achieve its mission, as well as to secure its long-term economic viability. We are requesting funding from the INNOvation Fund to quickly bring the project to scale and test its efficacy.

The program's core is a free one-semester subscription program for college and university professors, both in the

West and around the country. HCN will provide free copies of the print magazine and free digital access to students in programs focused on environment, science, social science, law, and journalism.

In addition, with INN funding, HCN will be able to provide professors with three special services to enhance the classroom experience for their students.

1. A regular e-newsletter that will give professors a heads up on the coming issue's content.
2. A digital librarian service, in which an HCN staffer, at professors' requests, will pull together special collections of articles from 44 years of archived stories for specific classes. For example, a professor wants a reading list on drought along the Colorado River; the evolving science of climate change; or the oil and gas boom. We can quickly get them the stories that not only will bring their students up to speed on the latest developments, but also provide them with historic context.
3. One or two interactive webinars per semester for teachers and students in the program to discuss a particularly hot topic in depth with the writer and an expert. We would work closely with the schools using HCN to do these events and hone them based on feedback from all participants. One of our goals would be to get professors and students to interact with their peers at other colleges and universities around the country, fostering collaborative academic projects across geography and disciplines.

HCN would also sponsor a student essay contest on a particular hot topic, promoting it through the professors using HCN in the classroom. HCN will publish the winning essay in the magazine and on the web site.

All of this will cost money, from marketing and extra printing/ mailing costs to staff time dedicated to serving professors and students once they are on board. So how will we pay for it and make money, especially knowing how tight students are with cash?

We know anecdotally that some of our most stalwart readers and donors were initially exposed to HCN in the classroom. This is why we see an expanded HCN University program as a long-term investment that will help sustain HCN far into the future. Though we do not anticipate that the students themselves will spend a lot of money buying subscriptions or making donations, we believe that early exposure to HCN will increase the likelihood that they eventually will when they become established in their careers. In the short-term, though, we believe that the program can yield substantial immediate financial benefits that will cover the costs of the program going forward.

1. Increased donations from our readers: As we have learned from our long-running editorial internship program, our readers love to contribute to programs that deeply educate young people and give them a strong start in life. We will launch specific fundraising campaigns in support of the new program, using some of the grant money as a matching challenge grant. In particular, we will focus on online campaigns. Our goal would be to develop a solid base of core supporters willing to invest in the program

every year.

2. Increased advertising revenue: With an increased magazine print run and rising levels of student-generated traffic on our web site, we believe companies and organizations wanting to reach our young, educated audience – especially those focused on outdoor recreation, education, and publishing -- will buy more advertising. We have already seen this dynamic at work with our annual Future Issue, published in January for the past two years. This issue has attracted twice the number of ads as normal issues, largely from academic institutions with natural resource and environmental programs.

3. Increased subscription revenue: During and after each semester, HCN will follow up with students to keep them engaged with HCN through our free e-newsletter, free digital subscription (while they remain students), and cheap print and digital subscription offers. We will also promote gift subscriptions for students to our existing readership.

With our average print reader in his or her 50's, and our average online reader only slightly younger, HCN's long-term sustainability rests on our ability to attract a new generation of readers and supporters. Our current strategic plan calls for investments in technology to attract new readers and expand HCN's reach. This program dovetails with that, using both print and digital to reach out to a new generation.

Is this a new project?

Extension of an existing project. We are doing this now or have done it in the past year.

Who will help carry out the project? Describe the key staff and capabilities. If you plan to use outside partners, consultants, or vendors, tell us why you chose them (or how you will select them). Will you need to hire additional fulltime or part-time help to complete your proposed project?

HCN's Engagement Marketer, Gretchen King, will spearhead this project. She will focus on signing up professors and classes, sending the professors a regular e-mail highlighting upcoming content, managing the HCN Librarian for this project, Marshall Swearingen, who will provide specific content collections for professors, and coordinating the activities of the rest of the team. Subscription Marketer JoAnn Kalenak will develop and execute follow-up campaigns targeting students to keep them engaged with HCN as subscribers. Online Editor Tay Wiles will oversee the topical webinars each semester. Development Manager Alyssa Pinkerton will oversee the creation and execution of online fundraising campaigns surrounding the Adopt-A-Classroom program. Executive Director Paul Larmer, with the help of grant writer consultant Janet Reasoner, will pitch the program to various high donors and foundations during the course of his regular fundraising activities.

How will you measure progress? Please be specific and concrete about the metrics you will use?

We have identified several metrics (listed below) to measure the progress of this program and would provide a report to INN at the end of each semester.

Below is a list of the metrics for the grant period:

Number of classrooms participating in the program: We've set a goal of providing HCN content to an average of at least 100 classrooms for the Fall 2014 semester and the Spring 2015 semester, serving approximately 3,000 students each semester.

Number and amount of donations: We've set a goal of

raising \$15,500 in donations from at least 200 current subscribers of High Country News and 50 non-subscribers (those who read us on the web for free), using the INNovate grant as a matching challenge grant.

New advertising revenue: Secure \$5,000 in new advertising revenue, for print and web.

New student subscribers: Secure 100 new paid student subscriptions and 500 new free digital subscriptions.

Growth in HCN's web traffic and social media engagement: We anticipate growth in the number of unique visits and pageviews on HCN.org at a rate five percent higher than 2013's growth rate (30 percent versus 25 percent) due to student activity on the site; we anticipate the same five percent bump over 2013 on our Facebook and Twitter followers.

Number of students participating in the webinars. We will track these numbers over each semester to determine if we need to make changes in th

Using those metrics, what is the threshold of success for this project?

As described above, the threshold of success will be:

1. Serving 100 classrooms and 3,000 students each semester;
2. Using the INN grant as a challenge grant, raising \$15,500 in donations from at least 200 current subscribers and 50 non-subscribers;
3. Securing \$5,000 in new advertising revenue;
4. Acquiring 100 new paid student subscriptions and 500 free digital subscriptions;
5. Seeing a five percent rise in web traffic and social media engagement.

We will also use feedback from professors as a subjective guide to the project's success, making adjustments as needed based on that feedback.

How will INN be able to validate the metrics and how the project did using those metrics?

The data for the metrics will come from our circulation department, professors (using information on class size they provide), and financial information for subscription, donations, and advertising revenue. We will also provide anecdotal information from surveys of professors and students.

What do you hope to learn from this project, and how do you hope to apply what you've learned over the long term?

We hope to come out of this project with a set of best practices for approaching professors and for meeting the needs of professors and students. Much of this will come from direct feedback from both groups, as well as looking at the metrics over time. We also hope to learn what will motivate current donors to support the project into the future, to find out what advertisers want to see in terms of audience growth to increase our ad revenue, and to find "hooks" that will get young adults to subscribe to HCN.

We will apply all of these to our ongoing development and advertising efforts and to recruiting additional professors to participate.

Why are you the right organization and team to do this project?

HCN has a superior editorial product that fits well into academia, where students need to understand the complex dimensions - scientific, political, cultural, and economic -

shaping the issues in our region. As one of our professors using HCN this semester wrote: "I've used the printed copies in my intro to natural resource management to discuss the inter-relatedness of resource issues - that something isn't just a recreation/tourism issue, or a grazing issue, or an access issue, etc. but that stories often have many connections. It's been phenomenally useful to have the printed copies for class sessions before offering them up to students to take home. Thanks, again." Dave Rolloff, Dept. of Recreation, Parks & Tourism Administration, California State University, Sacramento.

Why is this project timely? Why is now a good time to undertake this project?

This is the right time to involve students and young people because they will ultimately resolve the environmental challenges of our time – whether climate change, energy development, water, wildlife, or recreation—and because their engagement in supporting and consuming in-depth reporting is critical to the future of journalism and, ultimately, our democracy.

Additionally, our organization needs to figure out now, while the print magazine is still chugging along as the main economic engine, how to attract and retain its future customer base. This program, which existing staff can carry out, is a very timely experiment that will help us figure out our long-term strategies for survival and growth.

As noted above, this project fits with HCN's current strategic plan, which calls for exploring new marketing channels to expand our audience and ultimately exert more influence on critical issues in the region.

Upload your project budget

[HCN Budget -- INN Application 9.2.14 -- final.xlsx](#)