

INNOVATION Fund Application Round 4 - Dec. 8, 2015

Submission Date	2015-12-08 21:53:42
Organization Name	The Marshall Project
Tax-exempt status	501(c)(3) organization
EIN of organization (or of fiscal sponsor's organization)	46-4353634
Website address	www.themarshallproject.org
Phone Number	(212) 8035200
Applicant's name	Kelli Payne
Title:	Director of Development
Contact email	kpayne@themarshallproject.org
Proposed Project Start Date	03-02-2016
Anticipated Project End Date	09-06-2016
Total estimated budget for the proposed project	30,000
Request amount from the INNOVATION Fund:	25,000
What is the total annual budget for your organization or, if you are a fiscally-sponsored project of another organization, the total annual budget for your fiscally-sponsored project.	\$4.6m
In two or three sentences, describe your organization's purpose and audience.	The Marshall Project is a single-subject, nonprofit news organization that covers the U.S. criminal justice system. Our mission is to create and sustain a sense of urgency about criminal justice in America. We aim to reach a broad audience through partnerships, while simultaneously creating a loyal community of individuals with direct experience of the system.

Describe in detail the business experiment 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 engagement.

We seek funds to test whether building niche communities help with grow our overall audience. The pilot for this innovative process, the Justice Education Network (JEN), will serve as a content and community hub that will enable high school teachers to integrate criminal justice news into the classroom. We believe that making these issues accessible will build, engage and retain an audience that extends the reach of our journalism to both a younger and atypical audience.

What's unique about this project is the process. Traditionally, news organizations develop communities and content based on what they deem newsworthy. In contrast, this strategy starts with the reader. We identify a target audience, ask them questions about how they consume and use the news, and then build tools to make that process easier. As we've seen with projects like ProPublica's 'Patient Harm Community', these user-centered products cultivate a loyal and engaged audience, creating brand ambassador who become helpful in marketing our product at a grassroots level.

Why this community? We chose this group to test our theory because we had many teachers approached us for help on translating our stories for the classroom. They expressed a desire to teach the subject, but very clear hurdles emerged: lack of knowledge about the subject, the need for tips on how to talk about this sensitive issue with their students and the desire for a go-to resource that lets them quickly integrate an article with existing curricula. We will build tools that help high school teachers overcome these obstacles.

As a single-issue news site, we are positioned to provide teachers with the most nuanced resources on criminal justice – a critical issue that touches a range of topics.

While this particular project is targeted to growing an audience, it opens the possibility for revenue opportunities. We plan to make our subject guides available for purchase, develop a training workshop for teachers that schools can hire as professional service and, seek out sponsorship opportunities in Phase 2.

We have designed a two-phase project to help educators overcome obstacles to teaching criminal justice news. Our request from INN will fund phase one.

Phase I:

Create a toolkit of lesson plans and background guides to criminal justice, as well as tips on discussing sensitive criminal justice issues with students. We will launch a community for teachers on Facebook. And we'll blog about what we learn as the project unfolds, so other nonprofit newsrooms can glean lessons on this engagement strategy.

Foundational elements include: Facebook group, Teacher's guide, lesson plans to name a few. We plan to host these materials on our site, and also upload our lesson plans to Share My Lesson, a resource from the American Federation of Teachers that lets teachers discuss and download lesson plans. We also plan to translate articles associated with these lesson plans to different reading levels, in partnership with Newsela. Finally, Katherine Schulten of the NYT Learning Network has agreed to take a look at our content and work it into an activity for the New York Times' Learning Network, a major resource for teachers.

Which of the following statements best describes your proposed business experiment?

Principally an audience-driven project that will generate leads to convert and monetize in the future

Is this a new project?

New project. We have not done this before.

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?

Blair Hickman, Audience Editor, will lead program implementation and measurement. She is experienced in launching audience engagement projects. At ProPublica, Hickman developed community reporting projects on patient harm and unpaid internships. She also has experience with quantitative analytics measurement and social impact projects, having studied media innovation at NYU and worked on impact strategy at Solutions Journalism Network. She will also maintain the blog on this project.

Newsela, an organization that specializes in translating news articles to different reading levels.

They'll help us translate articles for our site, and send our work to their existing network of teachers.

Consultant and freelance lesson plan writer, to craft the background guides and lesson plans. This will be a working or retired educator.

Potential partner: Facing History and Ourselves, a global organization that helps teachers discuss sensitive history and current events with their students to create a "humane, well-educated citizenry."

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

Suggestion: Keep the number of suggested metrics limited and make sure that they are actually measuring the results of the proposed business experiment.

Growth and Reach

total facebook group members (+ week over week growth rate) / facebook total JEN network subscribers (+ week over week growth rate) / mailchimp count of students reached / survey

Retention

How many people became regular readers via JEN / Google analytics and surveys

Engagement

of FB members vs. # of people who commented

Using those metrics, how will you know you have succeeded in meeting the objectives for the business experiment. Please be as specific as possible.

This project's primary objective is to grow an engaged audience. We've broken this into three buckets for the purposes of measure the project's success: 1) growth, 2) retention and 3) engagement.

Whenever possible, we will compare the growth, retention and engagement rates for the Justice Education Network (JEN) with overall audience metrics. Due to the short time frame we have for collecting data about JEN, the comparison won't be perfect. However, we hope to have a clear enough understanding by the end of the project to judge whether it's worth devoting more resources to this audience development strategy.

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

We'll give INN access to the same data we use to measure success and our collection processes. We will work with INN throughout to ensure this information is clear.

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 plan to use a Facebook group to bring teachers into the content development process. Will this create a more valuable product and encourage participants to share? Would it be worth developing processes to involve our readers in the overall content and product development process?

*Will teachers return to the site outside of their dedicated content and spaces? In other words, will providing a user-centered entry point turn people into regular readers of our work?

*Can we turn youth into engaged, regular readers by introducing our content into the classroom?

*How does engaging teachers affect audience growth and retention, compared to our existing strategies for diversifying audience reach (partnerships, social media)? Is continuing this project a viable growth strategy for a small nonprofit newsroom?

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

The Marshall Project's single-issue focus on criminal justice is the key reason we are a good fit to test our audience growth and engagement strategy with this particular project.

How is this project similar/different than other projects you've researched ahead of this proposal? What can you learn that is different from what others have already tried?

This project is similar to the targeted audience development ProPublica executes around their investigations. Those projects led to increased pageviews and an introduction to a new (and larger) community. Other newsrooms, most notably the New York Times and PBS, have developed education portals that make it easier for teachers to integrate their work into the classroom.

Our project is unique because of the specificity of the subject area. It puts us in a better position to learn about how best to attract readers of a single-subject news site.

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

Events of the last year have brought criminal justice into the national spotlight. The increased interest from teachers and the general public leads us to believe that now is an appropriate time to launch this particular type of product as we seek new and innovative ways to grow our audience.

This is also an ideal time for our organization to undertake this kind of audience project. In the year since we've been publishing, we've attracted a core audience of people who work in criminal justice or have experience with the system. This will be an important first project for us as we work to both expand our audience and better engage (and retain) our current audience, and extend the offline reach of our work.

Upload your project budget

[INNovation-Fund-Project-Budget-Template.xlsx](#)