BOOKS-TO-PRISONERS NON-PROFITS: 6/6/19
Common Challenges, Concerns, and Opportunities

introduction

Over the two months since the national btp conference, Joan Ross (BTP Seattle) and I have had follow-up conversations and email exchanges with more than a dozen books-to-prisoners groups, to help determine how best to support the efforts of books-to-prisoners non-profits around the country.

Our discussions focused on identifying both short-term and longer-term needs and challenges for each group. Many of these one-on-one conversations were wide-ranging, and lasted an hour or more; taken together, they allowed us to identify a number of shared needs and concerns.

What follows is a summary of our findings, followed by some recommendations. This document doesn't pretend to be complete or exhaustive. With this brief report, we only hope to facilitate and inform:

- programming for the upcoming virtual summit and future btp group conferences;
- practical, short-term initiatives that would benefit btp groups;
- further collaboration and cooperation among BTP groups and like-minded organizations

-- Peter Esmonde June 6, 2019

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I. lack of a national btp coalition/alliance to fight DOCs strategically
II. no definitive national information on prisoners' access to books, information, or educational resources
III. absence of detailed (e.g., state-by-state) info about prisoners' information access
IV. limited knowledge of each btp group's expertise, resources, & challenges
V. lack of organized outreach to programs/groups with similar missions
VI. low visibility to potential allies (grantors, educators, librarians, publishers) & the general public
VII. no insight into BOP/DOC strategies and future plans for prisoner access to education, books, tablets, etc.

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I. coordinating to fight book restrictions and censorship
II. sharing more knowledge and resources around prisons, DOCs, etc.
III. providing experts to teach groups about managing/leading non-hierarchical non-profits like theirs
IV. providing (better) access to legal & financial assistance

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I. create greater opportunities for peer-to-peer information-sharing and education, and improve existing communication channels
II. provide education/training opportunities around best practices for non-profits
III. organize a national btp coalition
IV. develop proactive strategies for dealing with upcoming challenges
V. reach out to prisoners and formerly imprisoned people
VI. foster information exchange with best non-profits working for prisoner education and prisoner rights

A. *Common organizational challenges (within btp groups)*

I. ensuring leadership development & succession

Some smaller groups – led by one or two individuals, in university towns – seek best practices around recruiting and training long-term members to take on leadership roles. Student volunteers come and go; many groups are concerned about how to build continuity, and train others to help with day-to-day tasks.

For some more established groups, the challenge is 'founderitis'*: How to respect the work done by the group's initial organizers, while ceding greater responsibility and leadership to an upcoming generation of btp activists?*

In both contexts, some groups have expressed concerns about organizer burnout.

II. managing the group effectively

Across the board, groups are experiencing growing pains: As grassroots btp groups attract more volunteers and deal with more book requests, they need to grow capacity, but want to manage/govern in ways that remain inclusive and respectful of everyone.

They want to make intelligent, informed choices (usually based on their grassroots/ collectivist roots) about ways to consciously build and manage their non-profit organization. (At the same time, some may be mistrustful or suspicious of someone claiming to be an 'authority' in this field.)

Some of the younger organizations may also elect to not consolidate as a non-profit, usually for ideological reasons. This presents a host of obvious difficulties for the organization in question; other groups may want to consider ways to offer them material support and solidarity.

Some common questions:
- How do we continue to grow, but maintain our collectivist, inclusive culture?
- What are the pros/cons of the various approaches (collective, board, consensus, etc.)?
- How can we investigate/explore best practices for a flat, non-hierarchical organization?
- Is a limited hierarchy -- with a single, small leadership group – a viable option for us?
- As we grow: which approaches/models will scale up? which are not sustainable?
- How do we determine who gets to vote (by attendance? seniority? tasks performed?)?
- Who determines when a volunteer is ready for a larger role/responsibility or leadership?
- What are best practices for keeping volunteers collaborative and actively engaged?

III. **fostering group diversity**

Almost everyone feels that their btp group is too homogeneous. They lack – and want -- the perspectives of prisoners, former prisoners, prisoners' families. And they hope to attract volunteers from other racial, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Some common questions (re group diversity):
- How can our group be more inclusive?
- How can we attract, retain, and accommodate incarcerated and formerly imprisoned people in our group? What can we do to gain the full benefit of their knowledge, experience, and wisdom?
- How can we attract and keep volunteers from other racial, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds? How can we become more accommodating?
- What are the best ways to reach out to other local groups with similar missions (e.g., prisoner education, prisoner rights) to widen our own perspectives and knowledge?
- How can we better educate ourselves – and new volunteers – about critical issues in prison education, prisoner rights, the prison-industrial complex, and social justice?

IV. **gaining inexpensive/*pro bono* access to legal & financial expertise**

Irrespective of group size, a number of organized cited lack of easy access to legal and/or financial help/expertise as an issue.

re **legal:** Given DOCs' apparent clampdown on book restrictions across the country, many groups are wondering how they could (or would) challenge and combat book bans in their state. A few want information on best practices for challenging existing bans (e.g., when a particular state prison has returned all books).

re **financial:** Fundraising remains a concern for almost all groups. Most groups are working with minimal budgets, and face challenges meeting rent and/or postage fees month-by-month. More established groups are looking for ways to develop financial security through longer-term donor development.

Some younger groups need reliable information on the pros and cons of registering as a 501c3 non-profit. A couple of growing groups face questions as their budgets top $50k/year.

If our state DOC imposes a ban on all used books, how do we combat it?
What are the best ways for us to fight one of our state prisons banning books? *(con't)*

How can we overturn a longstanding ban/restriction?
What strategies have worked well in the past?
What are the best places to find allies, resources, and support?
What do we need to mount an effective media campaign? a strong legal challenge?
How do we find out what our state's current rules & regs are?

We don't have money to hire an accountant or bookkeeper. What are best financial practices for a small non-profit like us? What skills do we need to learn?
What's the best financial software for our small organization?
What are the most efficient and sustainable fundraising tactics for groups working at different scales? For each level of fundraising, how can technology work best?
Conversely, when resources are limited, what kind of technological/financial resources can be jettisoned in favor of more economical practices?

V. other common organizational concerns

a. loss of space

Only a couple of btp groups own their working space; most rent space in community centers or churches. Sooner or later, most groups face the necessity of moving.
How can we anticipate – and deal with – a potential loss of our working space?
Faced by our landlord limiting our space or access hours, how can we negotiate?
How can we maintain good relations with other organizations in our space, or with our landlords, what with the high foot-traffic and odd hours?
For larger groups: What are effective strategies for purchasing a space outright?

b. increasing numbers of book requests

As a btp group becomes more well-known, the number of book requests it receives increases dramatically. Burdened by the flood of book requests and a growing backlog, a new btp group may go into 'crisis mode'; some never emerge.
As we get more requests in, what will be our strategies for dealing with: lack of postage funds; inadequate working space/hours; increasing workflow; book shortages?
How do we keep our heads above water, to manage our group effectively?
How have other groups dealt with this challenge?

c. organizer burnout

This may well be the most common problem in volunteer non-profits.
What can we do to ensure that our group moves beyond its dependence on one or two key individuals?
How can we help key organizers identify opportunities to delegate & step back?
How to distribute tasks and responsibilities, to create redundancy within our group?

B. ***Organizational Concerns (across btp groups)***

To date, btp group efforts have been reactive (responding to DOC bans and restrictions) and largely *ad hoc*. The problem of prisoner info access is huge, but we don't yet have a measure of its full scope. The desire to engage in proactive organizing is also tempered by the increasing frequency of, to be frank, DOC/BOP bullshit; this keeps us on our toes and distracted from longer-term projects.

I. ***lack of a national btp coalition/alliance to fight DOCs strategically***

II. ***no definitive information on prisoners' access to books, information, or educational resources***

III. ***absence of detailed knowledge about prisoner information access*** *(i.e., no aggregated data on specific prison populations' book access by state/ prison /sex/ gender/ age/ ability/ etc.)*

IV. ***limited shared knowledge about each btp group's expertise, resources, & challenges***

V. ***lack of organized outreach to programs/groups with similar missions (i.e., prisoners' education, prisoners' rights)***

VI. ***low visibility to potential allies (grantors, educators, librarians, publishers) & the general public***

VII. ***inconsistency of some btp strategies with prison abolition objectives*** *(i.e., inadvertently supporting or replicating frameworks of punishment, or validating state control)*

VIII. ***no insight into BOP/DOC strategies and future plans for prisoner access to education, books, tablets, etc.***

C. ***Common Causes***

Asked to name issues on which they could envision working together with other books-to-prisoners groups right now, groups identify the following opportunities.

In the short term, these will be the easiest ways to bring btp groups together and allow them to see the benefit of working together

I. ***coordinating to fight book restrictions and censorship***

II. ***sharing more knowledge and resources around prisons, DOCs, etc.***

III. ***providing experts to teach groups about managing/leading non-hierarchical non-profits like theirs***

IV. ***providing (better) access to legal & financial assistance***

(Almost all groups state that **obtaining books** and **finding volunteers** are ***not*** problems right now -- even if volunteer retention and development can prove difficult.)

D. **Recommendations (short-term)**

Despite the lack of definitive data, significant progress has been made in getting books to prisoners: Nationally, the public's awareness of lack of educational opportunities in prisons and jails has rarely been higher. Over the past 18 months, BTP groups have gained national media attention, further increased public awareness, and successfully fought prison book restrictions.

I.create greater opportunities for peer-to-peer information-sharing and education, and improve existing communication channels:

Create a national btp website; improve btp listserv; use google docs, surveys, virtual summit, and conferences to share:

- lessons learned around fighting prison book bans (WA, PA, MS)
- useful information: resources, searchable directories, restrictions lists, zines
- best practices for managing workflow, using databases, etc.
- fundraising and community partnership advice

(con't)

II. provide education/training opportunities around best practices for non-profits:
Create and use webinars, online courses, and conference speakers/workshops around:
- group leadership & succession;
- models for non-hierarchical non-profits (management, governance, boards)
- building community partnerships;
- finding (pro bono or cheap) legal & financial expertise in your community

III. organize a national btp coalition
- use connections made at the national conference and on the btp listserv to create a national coalition of books-to-prisoners groups. Provide btp groups with opportunities to opt-in/opt-out of specific initiatives, programs, statements of support, etc.
- rather than a stand-alone, monolithic organization, the coalition should act to enable and facilitate organizing between and among btp groups. This decentralization allows groups to remain autonomous, agile, and responsive to state and regional challenges and opportunities.

IV. develop proactive strategies for dealing with upcoming challenges, including:
- more state-by-state attempts to restrict/ban books in prisons (used books, 'third-party vendors', all books excepting amazon/b&n, etc. etc.)
- increasing push from telecoms & DOCs for tablets with limited educational info access

V.reach out to prisoners and formerly imprisoned people

VI. foster information exchange with non-profits engaged in prisoner education and prisoner rights: (e.g., HRDC, PPI, ACLU, CCR, NLG, etc.)
- how many books shipped yearly? to where? Which particular states/ regions/ populations are especially underserved?

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