Introduction to Grant Writing for Undergraduates and Community Professionals

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Abstract

A university course was developed for undergraduates to provide grant writing information and skills at an introductory level. The course was also open to community professionals for non-credit. This article outlines the course content, methods, and requirements and provides reflections on the course's evolution across five semesters.

Introduction

Undergraduates and grant writing are not two subjects that are often paired, but the author offerd a one-credit elective course on grant writing to undergraduates in the human services department and the university at large. The course was also open to professionals in the region who were interested in writing grants for nonprofit organizations. The goal of the course was to develop a basic understanding of: using grant-writing resources, the components of a grant proposal, the types of grants available to nonprofit organizations, and how to write certain sections of a proposal. The purpose of this article is to present the course content and methods. In addition, tips and lessons learned are offered.

The rationale for offering this course was based on several factors. First, no courses on grant-writing existed at the university, and no formal resources were available at the university to students who wished to write grants. Second, grant-writing is an essential activity in the human services profession. Nearly all social service organizations need grant writing for survival (Carlson, 2002), and human services students should be exposed to this aspect of nonprofit functioning. Third, grant writing is often learned by trial and error, and a formal education in grant writing can enhance the success rate in obtaining grants (Kraus, 2007). Finally, some jobs require the ability to get grants (Wooley, 2004). Most of the graduates of the author's program will primarily fill positions with bachelor's degrees in the region and will not seek graduate degrees. Most of the social services organizations in the community do not have specific positions for grant writers, and staff with other primary job responsibilities write the grants proposals.

Literature Review

Very little literature on the teaching of grant writing to students exists. Undergraduates as a focus of grant writing courses have been represented in one publication with graduate students predominating in three publications. In one example, biology undergraduate students were required to write a research grant proposal for a graded assignment. Prior to the final version for a grade their proposals were anonymously reviewed by peer review panels of four to six class

members. The conclusions of the faculty using this teaching method were that the students were better prepared for research, that communicative skills regarding science improved, that they no longer feared writing proposals for external funding, and that they had a competitive edge in job applications (Blair, Cline & Bowen, 2007), although a controlled study was not conducted on these conclusions.

In a second example, writing grant proposals was incorporated with a service learning assignment in a graduate level course on Program Evaluation (Griffith, Hart, & Goodling, 2006). In this three-credit course, the students, from a variety of majors, wrote drafts of grant proposals based on the needs of organizations in the community. Research was conducted by the instructors of the course, and they report that the sponsoring organizations were overwhelmingly supportive of the collaboration through the service learning project.

Third, grant writing was also taught to graduate students in psychology. Specific attention was given to NIH grants and the process of obtaining them. The students met in a weekly seminar for one semester. After learning about the components of a grant proposal and the review process and the practical aspects of selling a proposal the students delivered and received peer feedback on each component of their proposals. The instructor used NIH criteria to rate proposals. The students rated the course highly, and six students received external grant funding prior to completing their programs (Eissenberg, 2003).

Finally, peer review of grant proposals was also used with graduate students to give them real world skills (Wooley, 2004). Committees of students were formed to evaluate each proposal. A fishbowl arrangement was used wherein the committee discussed the proposal while the author of the proposal listened in. Scoring sheets were also used, and the students had opportunities to revise the proposal for the final grade.

Logistics of the Course
The course was offered for one credit for a grade or the pass/fail option.. It could also be taken for non-credit through the Department of Continuing Studies without a grade by both students and non-students. The course was not required, and it was explained to students in the author's department who were taking it for credit that the course was an "extra" course that would not fulfill any degree requirements. Students from other majors were encouraged to see their advisors if there was confusion about the use of the course in their degree programs. Nearly all of the university students took the course for a grade.

The course was managed through the Department of Continuing Studies because it was taught on the weekend. The course was advertised in the semi-annual bulletin of offerings by Continuing Studies. The author also mailed course fliers to nonprofits organizations in the community to further advertise the course to a specific population that could receive benefit from it.

The course ran on three Saturdays for five hours each time starting at 9:00 a.m. There was an hour for lunch from 12:00 to 1:00 p.m., and the class ended for the day at 3:00 p.m. The first Saturday was scheduled three to four weeks into the fifteen week semester, and the last Saturday was scheduled a couple of weeks prior to the end of the regular semester. As each student registered, a letter was mailed to prepare them for the first day of class. Due to the relatively few class meetings, a reading from the textbook was assigned prior to the first day of class, and the students were asked to come to the first class with ideas for which they might like to seek funding.

Two versions of syllabi were used, one for the for-credit students and one for the non-credit students. However, the expectations for assignments were very similar. For-credit students received feedback and a score on all assignments. Non-credit students worked toward a certificate of completion, and assignments had to be completed and judged as achieving "C" or better work by the instructor in order to receive this certificate. The primary difference between the two groups of students was related to the needs of non-credit students who might be working on actual grant submissions or planned to work on them. These students, and any others, could complete the minimum work assigned or do more than the assignment required, and the instructor would also provide feedback. Success in the course did not include securing funding or writing a grant proposal for a nonprofit organization.

Quality expectations included: high expectations in writing, work done on-time, using the APA style, and citing and referencing in accordance with ethical standards at the university. Late assignments were docked 5% off for each day late.

Description of the Students

The students were from both the university and the community. Each time the course was taught, the students were split almost in half between the community professionals and degree-seeking students. The total number of community professionals across the five times the course was taught was 47. The total number of degree-seeking students across the five semesters was 54. 33 % of these were from the author's home department, Human Services. Students from a variety of academic disciplines such as psychology, sociology, art, music, and education, sought the course. The community professionals also came from a wide range of nonprofits A sample of the missions of these nonprofits were environmental, medical, youth development, religious, outreach to impoverished citizens, and affordable housing. Some of the students traveled from small cities outside of the larger metropolitan area. The vast majority of the students had lived in the region and would remain in the area whether they were seeking a degree or not.

Course Methods

Students' understanding of the grant process is very limited even at the graduate level (Griffith, Hart, & Goodling, 2006), and learning to write grants is a process that is not conquered in one course. In this introductory and short course, the goal was exposure to and practice in some basic aspects of grant writing. There was also an emphasis on knowledge of resources.

The course description was stated as: "This course covers the basics of writing grant proposals for nonprofit organizations. It is designed to meet the needs of professionals who will use the information at their work as well as current degree-seeking students who will use the information in future professional settings. Students should expect to obtain helpful information and strategies for writing and submitting proposals and be exposed to resources for grant funding. The primary practical outcome of the course is a partial draft of a grant proposal." The stated course objectives were: "1) To understand the components of a grant proposal; 2) To learn the resources for locating grants; 3) To grasp the grant review and evaluation process; and 4) To write a partial or full draft of a grant proposal. There were three ways to earn a grade: 20% was for attendance and class participation; 25% for the first written assignment; and 55% for the second written assignment.

The teaching methods used were assigned readings, mini-lectures with breakout discussion groups, two writing assignments, guest speakers, attending an off-campus orientation at the local

library's nonprofit resource center, and a critical peer review of the needs statement and the second written assignment. Each is covered in the following sub-sections.

Assigned Readings

The text book, *Winning Grants Step by Step* (Carlson, 2002) structured much of the course topics, and all chapters of the text were assigned. The topics in the text are comprehensive with regard to writing all sections of a proposal as well as developing and maintaining relationships with funders. There are useful exercises, worksheets and examples, and the reader is referred to this book for other details. This book was considered useful by the author and students and was re-selected each time the course was taught.

Orientation at the Public Library's Nonprofit Resource Center.

The author's community is fortunate to have an excellent resource for the public that is housed at the main location of the public library. Orientations to grant writing resources were offered by the library at a variety of days and times. Students had to attend a ninety minute orientation provide by the staff who discussed local and national grant resources and how to access a variety of grant information from their database. Students were asked to complete this orientation before the second class meeting as it was intended to help them complete their first written assignment that included creating a list of possible funding sources for the proposal. The Nonprofit Resource Center reported attendance at the orientations to the author. If the orientation was not completed by the end of the course, the for-credit student would receive a grade of "Incomplete" and the non-credit students would not receive the certificate.

Mini-Lectures

A review of essential concepts in grant writing from both the text and supplemental information was provided and applications to one's own goals or current employment were made in the larger class group and in smaller breakout groups. Supplemental information included, but was not limited to: a definition of a nonprofit organizations, the nature of nonprofits and why they seek funding, a brief overview of how nonprofit organizations are developed, the difference between types of funding sources such as private foundations, corporate foundations, and government grants, how to examine the Form 990 of a nonprofit organization, the difference between fundraising and grants, the difference between solicited proposals (RFPs) and non-solicited proposals, the control of the funder over what will be funded, where to locate information on available grants, and the seriousness of following the instructions of the funder. Students' questions always directed some of the discussion in each class meeting.

The Written Assignments

There were two written assignments, and both are described here. Written Assignment #1 was worth 25% of the total grade and had two parts. The requirements of Part One were to write a needs statement. The directions were to address the following questions: 1) the reason for requesting funding; 2) the significant need for the grant with existing literature and research to support the assertion; 3) the goals or expected results; and 4) who will be served by the grant. To assist with developing this part, the students were also given questions to ask each other in class. The questions were: 1) Who will be helped?; 2) How great is the need?; 3) How will your program make a difference?; 4) Is the need really solvable through grant funding or are other efforts indicated? 5) Is your effort to have this program unique or is it being duplicated elsewhere?; and 6) Is there any research that points to the benefits of having such a program?

The students evaluated each other using comments. An example of a needs statement was also provided in the textbook.

Part Two of the first written assignment was focused on locating funding sources. The students were directed to identify the type of funding source that might be most relevant for the proposed grant. Choices were private foundations, corporate foundations, and government grants. The students were then directed to conduct an internet search and list a minimum of ten possible funding sources. Each grant had to be viable for their proposal and not just remotely related to the focus of the proposal. The list was to include the name of the grants, the funding source and the website address.   In addition, a printout of the information was to be attached.

The Written Assignment #2 was worth 55% of the total grade and had five sections, described below. This assignment focused the student on: describing the qualifications of the organization, refining the needs statement, describing a plan of action to execute the program, and describing a budget. Students were to re-submit Written Assignment #1 with this assignment during the third class meeting. The first section was the title page. Students were to include the name of the organization that would be funded; the name of the primary contact person and contact information; the title of the project; a 25-word summary of the project; and the amount requested. The second section addressed the purpose of the project. Students were to make improvements on the needs statement written previously.

The third section was to outline the plan of action to implement the grant, describing the activities and a sequence of events. The description also included who on the staff of the organization would be involved; what kind of training, if necessary, would be for the staff; how the clients will be elected; the anticipated outcomes; and the method of evaluating the success of the project. The fourth section answered questions about the qualifications of the organization including, Why should your organization receive the grant? What resources and competencies does it have to successfully use the grant? Will you be working with other organizations on this grant? What qualifications do individuals in the organization have to contribute? The fifth and final section required the student to describe their budget. All of these sections were related to information provided in the classroom and in the textbook.

On the third and last Saturday, students provided a second peer review to each other's Written Assignment #2, and comments and questions were shared with the larger class. Students who were satisfied with what they had written could submit that version for grading. Students who wanted to work further on the assignment were given one additional week to submit without grade penalty. The draft brought to class had to accompany the final paper.

Guest Speakers
While the author had experience in writing and receiving funding for grants, it was important that the students become acquainted with local talent and with grant writers whose specific areas of expertise were more concentrated than the author's. In addition, the textbook is more oriented to obtaining private foundation grants, and exposure to government grants is essential for nonprofit employees. After teaching the five semesters, the author concluded that her best choices for speakers were: a speaker from a community foundation who could address foundation-based grants; a speaker with many years of securing government grants; and a very successful grant writer, a director of a local social service organization, who shared wisdom from her experiences in grant writing and fundraising.

Overview of Course Schedule
The course schedule is presented in Appendix A with regard to activities and topics covered so that the reader may view the schedule at a glance. Logistical tasks and announcements such as completing a contact information form or restaurants for lunch options are omitted.

Reflections and Conclusions
Teaching Grant Writing to Undergraduates
Undergraduates bring academic deficits to the grant writing course that can hamper them in a grant writing course. Most do not have an appreciation for research, many do not seek further education after the bachelor's degree, their writing skills are not good enough to submit a grant, and they are not aware that some of their faculty engage in research and grant writing (Blair, Cline & Bowen, 2007). It seemed difficult for the some of the students to accept that despite their inspiring ideas for projects and their efforts to complete the requirements of the assignments poor writing would lower their grades. In addition, if students did not come to the course with an understanding of how to use research findings to support new ideas an additional barrier to comfort was created. Nonetheless, the author proposes continued strengthening of the general curriculum and standards in writing and research comprehension rather than omitting this course. In addition, a full three-credit course may permit time to build research and writing skills that would benefit the student in broad ways.

Teaching Grant Writing to Community Professionals
Most of the community professionals who took the course had skills at the level of the course with a handful who were more advanced than the course. The professionals in the community generally had better writing skills than the undergraduates. They also seemed more motivated to learn new skills, perhaps propelled by necessity and impetus to succeed at their current places of employment. However, non-credit students were more likely to not complete assignments than the degree-seeking undergraduates. This became a significant problem during classes where students were to exchange assignments for peer reviews. Thus, turning in assignments became a requirement for receiving the certificate of completion.

Some non-degree students wanted the author to provide them with help toward writing a grant after the course ended. After the first semester of hearing this request, the author began noting at the beginning of the course that her role was to teach the class and give worthwhile feedback on the work done by students during the semester of the course. After grades were submitted, and reports on completion of requirements were provided to Continuing Studies for non-degree students, the author would not be available for consulting. If individual students persisted with this request, the author would further explain that if every student asked for help writing a grant proposal, the author would have little time left for the work required of her faculty position.

General Questions from Students
The author noted several themes in questions asked by students each time the course was taught that were not related to the assigned readings or supplemental material. They appear in Appendix B. Some of the questions were probably asked because the nature of nonprofits and their mission is not understood and/or the nature of funding from private or corporate foundations or the government is not understood. Thus, a presentation at the beginning of the course about what gives an organization nonprofit status, an overview of the process of becoming a nonprofit and grant-makers is useful.

Conclusions

The reader should keep in mind that this article reflects an evolution of development wherein each semester built on the last. The material presented here reflects this evolution. Based on the five-semester experience, the author made three conclusions. First, it is challenging to teach both undergraduates and professionals in the same class. While not possible at the university due to the need for enrollment numbers to allow the course to be taught, separating the two groups might have provided a more satisfactory experience for each group and made it easier on the instructor. An example of a different approach for each group might have been to offer quizzes on terms and concepts for the undergraduates and to focus on a full grant proposal, instead of a few key parts for the professionals. On the other hand, the professionals provided valuable perspectives, questions, and experiences for the undergraduates.

Second, there were always students (including undergraduates) who liked having the course offered for one credit and those, primarily undergraduates, who thought that the course should be offered for three credits during a regular semester. Similarly, some students appreciated the five hour stretch on three Saturdays while others wanted to meet one hour per week for fifteen weeks.

Third, despite the stress of dealing with unfamiliar course material, the course was widely received as a positive experience. The instructor's very good course evaluations, unsolicited email comments and continued contact from some of the community professionals seemed to reflect the need for the course and suggested satisfaction with the course.

Finally, some students suggested advanced courses in grant writing and the availability of a certificate in grant writing built on several courses and competencies. Research examining the application of learning from the course in the long-term including application of course concepts, grant proposal submissions, and success in grant funding could be helpful.

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Appendix A

Course Schedule At-A-Glance

First Class
Assigned reading from Carlson text: Introduction and Steps 1-3 (pages 1-25)

Submission deadline: Bring ideas to class for a program that you would like to have funded (instructions provided prior to first class meeting).

Topics covered: How to develop an idea for funding; how to put the idea into the form of a need statement; do's and don'ts of approaching funders; common mistakes in grant writing; building collaborative community relationships for grant funding; differences between types of funding sources; differences between solicited and non-solicited proposals; developing a nonprofit organization; the types of funding available and where to locate it.

Activities: Large group discussion of ideas for proposals with introductions of students; practice writing a letter of intent.

Guest Speaker: Speaker on personal experience in grant writing and fundraising.

Second Class
Assigned reading from Carlson text: Steps 4 – 6 (p.26-46) and Steps 8 (pages 53-61) and Appendices A and B.

Submission deadline: Written Assignment I (both parts) due in class

Topics covered: Components of a grant proposal; understanding the role of research in obtaining funding and sustaining funding; understanding the Form 990; budgets for the proposal.

Activities: Develop a sample budget; peer review of needs statements; discussion of orientation at Nonprofit Resource Center with reinforcement of concepts and facts learned.

Guest Speaker: Speaker on private foundation grants

Third Class
Assigned reading from Carlson text: Step 7 (p.47-52) and Steps 9-12 (p.62-82) and Appendix C (p.96-103)

Submission deadline: Written Assignment II due in class with copy for instructor and one classmate.

Topics covered: Do's and don'ts of proposal submission; how to lose your funding; what to do if your proposal is rejected; seeking repeated funding.

Activities: Peer review of completed project; present conclusions and lessons learned about proposals to large group.

Guest Speaker: Speaker on government grants

Appendix B

Common Questions from Students

1. What career choices and appropriate opportunities are available for talented grant-writers?

2. How is someone funded while setting up a nonprofit organization.

3. If I have an idea for a program or project, where should I go with it?

4. How do I use research findings in my grant proposal?

5. What ideas are the most fundable?

6. How can I fund myself (or my children's college education) through grant-writing?

7. How can I get funding for the organization's operational expenses?

8. How can I locate a mentor to help me write grants?

9. How can I obtain grants to live on while I'm developing a nonprofit organization?

10. What grants are available to for-profit ventures?

11. Where can I find models of funded grant proposals?

12. How can I raise money for my organization besides grant writing?