

## Teaching Grant Writing with Service Learning

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Grant writing experience can be a valuable asset for students completing masters-level degree programs across a variety of disciplines. A service learning grant writing project was incorporated in a multidisciplinary program evaluation course as part of a writing requirement. Twelve students served as "ghost writers" and wrote grant proposals to foundations for community organizations. Projects were assessed by ratings provided by faculty across departments who served as judges. Qualitative data was collected from students and organizational sponsors that showed high levels of satisfaction from both groups and an awareness of reciprocity of benefit from service learning were observed in both groups. Benefits and limitations of the pedagogical technique are discussed.

Academic service learning has been implemented across the country in an effort to improve student learning and social behavior skills such as civic engagement and participation. The advantages of service learning have been pointed out since John Dewey (1938) recommended them. Although service learning has been endorsed at a national level, much debate exists concerning the meaning of this form of pedagogy (Mooney & Edwards, 2001). For example, Jacoby (1996) claimed that there were over 150 terms associated with service learning, the majority of which had different definitions. In an effort to use simplicity, this project regarded service learning as an integration of community service and academic coursework (Chapin, 1998). In other words, service learning projects expand teaching and learning beyond the classroom activities by relying on more practical applications (Berson, 1994; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Kinsley, 1993).

There is substantial evidence identifying the importance of grant writing skills across a variety of disciplines (Eissenberg, 2003; Kleinfelder, Price, & Dake, 2003; Medina-Walpole, Barker, & Katz, 2004; Wooley, 2004). The three primary venues for securing external funds include the federal government, state governments, and foundations. Among the various sources of where to apply for grants, foundations represent the largest number of sources. In 2004, more than 66,000 foundations provided an estimated \$32.4 billion in grants (Renz & Lawrence, 2005). The development of professional skills is often the focus of many masters-level graduate programs. Although some schools offer grant writing training within select departments (see Reynolds et al., 1998), the majority of training seems to occur by working with mentors or by attending workshops provided by institutional grants offices (Kleinfelder, Price, & Dake, 2003) and opportunities for formal coursework is often limited. A properly structured grant writing project was incorporated into a course in a community service

learning format to provide such training to graduate students.

The current project assessed an interdisciplinary graduate-level course in Program Evaluation at a master's granting state university. Students represented the fields of criminal justice, exercise science, psychology, social work, sociology, and general liberal arts. In addition to teaching the basics of program evaluation methodologies, there was an attempt to provide students with an "applied" writing project. In other words, a writing project was developed such that the labor of completing the project had both community and individual rewards. The community had the possibility of benefiting by having the possibility of receiving much needed monies and the students benefited by learning a new skill and gaining actual grant writing experience. Thus, an opportunity to partner with the community seemed possible. Putting all of these elements together, the goal was to provide students with a marketable writing skill that would be perceived as being useful and connect students with the community by providing a much needed service. The general structure of the service learning component of the class attempted to follow the recommendations of Tannenbaum and Berrett (2005) who conducted an extensive literature review and listed 11 "best practice" characteristics of effective service-learning projects (see Table 1).

Most of the collegiate level assessments of service learning have been quantitative, survey based, and comparative (Boyle-Baise, 2002). It is typical that a pre-post approach is used to assess the change in such variables as grasp of the subject matter, development of civic engagement and skills, and personal growth (see Eyler & Giles, 1999). There have been a limited number of qualitative studies that provided information regarding what actually happened within service-learning experiences. Within the qualitative studies that have been conducted, although students are assessed, the community is often overlooked (Cruz & Giles,

TABLE 1  
Tannenbaum and Berrett's (2005) Characteristics of  
Effective Service-Learning Projects

Best Practices
1. Service should be connected to the curriculum.
2. Service should involve a specific action.
3. There should be student reflection at the end of the service.
4. There should be ongoing reflection throughout the course.
5. Student's should have a choice in selecting the service.
6. Students should receive training in the service area.
7. Students should be involved for a minimum of 10 hours.
8. Faculty should be trained in the use of service-learning.
9. There should be ongoing communication between the faculty member and community service-learning partner throughout the project.
10. Assessment should be conducted to determine if program outcomes were achieved.
11. There should be recognition of student contributions.

2000) and examination of the issue of collaboration between the two constituent groups has been largely neglected. The present study attempted to address these shortcomings by using qualitative methodology to assess the service-learning experience from the perspectives of the students and community.

#### Method

Twelve students were enrolled in a graduate level class in Program Evaluation at a master's granting institution in Texas. The class met for 75 minutes twice a week during a 15-week semester. Of the students enrolled, six were pursuing a graduate degree in psychology, two in general liberal arts, and one each in criminal justice, sociology, social work, and exercise science. The course used a textbook (i.e., Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999), had several outside readings, and required students to take a mid-term and final exam. Of relevance to this paper is the grant proposal which comprised 40% of the final grade.

#### *Grant Proposal Structure*

On the first day of class, students were provided with a 20-item multiple-choice knowledge test regarding the preparation of grant proposals for foundations. After completing the pre-test, they were given a 16-page document on preparing grants for foundations. The foundation and grants-related document is something that was developed by the instructor and included the following sections:

- what is a grant
- different sources of funding
- what is a foundation

- before you begin to write
- how to begin
- assessing need
- finding funders
- general guidelines in seeking foundation funds
- elements of a proposal
- how proposals are assessed.

In addition, students were provided with copies of two successful grant proposals that were awarded monies by foundations in order for them to have models. Students were required to read the document for the following class meeting at which time a representative from the university grants office provided a presentation on basic grant writing and finding foundation funders. Throughout the semester, topics related to the grant writing process were covered while discussing relevant issues in program evaluation. Seven deadlines were provided and enforced in order to ensure progress of the writing project. The deadlines across the 15-week semester were as follows:

- **Deadline 1:** During week 2, students identified an organization in the community that allowed them to serve as a "ghost writer" in writing a grant. An organizational contact including the name, title, phone number, and e-mail address of that individual had to be turned in.
- **Deadline 2:** During week 3, students provided an overview of the group that agreed to work with them. The overview included an organizational flow chart, mission and history of the organization, description of services, description of clients, a brief summary of that which was in most need of funding, and a list of three potential funders.
- **Deadline 3:** During week 6, students provided a problem statement, an implementation plan, an evaluation plan, and selected one funder.
- **Deadline 4:** During week 9, students provided a budget and budget narrative.
- **Deadline 5:** During week 11, students provided a rough draft with the following sections: cover letter, title page, one-page summary, overview of the organization, problem statement, goal, major objectives, sub-objectives, evaluation, future funding, budget, references, and appendices.
- **Deadline 6:** During week 13, students provided the completed proposals. The proposal followed the standard format detailed in the Deadline 5 section and students were required to attach the rough draft in order to provide the instructor with an opportunity to assess recommended changes.

- **Deadline 7:** During week 14, students gave a 10-minute oral presentation. The nature of the presentation required students to (a) discuss the organization with which they partnered, (b) summarize the services the organization provides and which groups are primarily served, (c) detail the amount of monies requested and the purpose for the monies requested, (d) discuss the source from which the monies will be requested, (e) provide a statement of the need, and (f) give details of the implementation and evaluation plans.

Four faculty members from different disciplines (i.e., criminal justice, exercise science, psychology, and social work), all of whom had successful grant writing experiences, were recruited to serve as reviewers. Faculty members were given instructions and a scoring sheet similar to that used by Wooley (2004). The instructions were provided in a one-page summary format. Reviewers understood that a structured format was followed and the relevant and expected information under each section of the grants was listed and detailed. Reviewers were also given a scoring sheet and were asked to rate each proposal according to 10 criteria (see Table 2), based on a 0-10 scale. Each of the four

reviewers worked independently and did not discuss scores until all scoring sheets were completed.

The overall assigned score was an average of the four independent reviews. During week 14, students were provided with the scored grant proposals and asked to make necessary modifications to the proposals prior to turning them in to their respective sponsor organization. During week 15, students provided the instructor with a letter from their contact at their respective organization indicating that the completed grant proposal was provided to the sponsor. On the last day of class, students took the 20-item knowledge test that was given to them on the first day of class. It should be noted that students were not informed that they would be given the knowledge test after the first administration.

With regards to qualitative data, all students completed a questionnaire at the end of the semester; the instruments were completed in 10-15 minutes. The questionnaire asked three open-ended questions in an attempt to assess what actually happened during the service-learning experiences. These questions included: (a) What did you gain from the grant writing project?; (b) What were advantages/disadvantages of the grant writing project compared to more traditional writing assignments?; and (c) What did you learn from working with your organization?

TABLE 2  
Reviewer Scoring Sheet

Grant Scoring Summary	
Name of Applicant	Name of Reviewer
<u>Scoring</u>	
One-page Summary	_____(10 points max)
Statement of Problem	_____(10 points max)
Project Impact on Problem	_____(10 points max)
Implementation Plan	_____(10 points max)
Staffing	_____(10 points max)
Feasibility	_____(10 points max)
Evaluation	_____(10 points max)
Staffing	_____(10 points max)
Budget	_____(10 points max)
Overall Neatness and Organization	_____(10 points max)
<b>TOTAL POINTS</b>	_____(100 points max)
Overall Strengths	
Overall Weaknesses	
Recommendations	

The instructor met with the contact person from each organization with whom a grant was submitted on behalf of the students to collect feedback from their perspectives. In addition to asking informally about the positive and negative aspects of the project, each sponsor was provided with a questionnaire to answer the following items provided in an open-ended format: (a) How did your organization benefit from this project?; (b) How did the student benefit from participation in this project?; and (c) What did you learn from working with the student?

The qualitative data from both students and organizational sponsors were analyzed by use of a "framework" approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). This involved the intentional collation of raw data under pre-identified themes in a systematic manner, from which key concepts were subsequently refined. There are five key stages to the framework method which include familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping. In stage one, responses to the questionnaires were reviewed and recurrent themes were listed in the participants' own words. In stage two, the recurrent themes listed during stage one (i.e., familiarization) were used to label the data into distinct units. The purpose of this stage was to identify major themes. In stage three, the thematic framework was systematically applied to the data in order to detect patterns of information. In stage four, each a priori question and any emergent themes were used to categorize the data. In stage five, the thematic framework was used to detect patterns among themes and rate importance of themes. Two judges independently applied the thematic framework to the data. The few discrepancies that did exist (i.e., five) were discussed and consensus was reached resulting in 100% agreement.

### Results

The organizations that were represented in the project were quite varied and included a boys and girls club, preschool, faith-based outreach center, high school, juvenile detention center, homeless shelter, daycare center, community mental health center, group home for the developmentally disabled, geriatric care center, museum, and drug rehabilitation center. The primary need of each organization also varied widely and was determined by needs assessments conducted in collaboration between the students and organizational sponsors. Budgets ranged from \$5,000 to \$52,000 with the average request at \$17,500. The grant writing project was assessed by four methods.

The first assessment method involved knowledge of grant writing and foundations. The 20-item knowledge test was given during the first and last day of class. There was a significant increase in

knowledge,  $t(11) = 25.71, p < .001$ , with the posttest scores ( $M = 16.83, SD = 1.96$ ) higher than the pretest scores ( $M = 7.17, SD = 1.89$ ). The second assessment method examined the scores assigned by the four independent raters who judged the quality of the proposals. Scores were collapsed across raters to yield an average score which ranged from 74 to 93, with a maximum score of 100. It was of interest to conduct an analysis in order to assess the degree of consistency among raters. In situations where multiple judges are used, it is recommended to use Cronbach's alpha coefficient as an appropriate consistency estimate of interrater reliability (Crocker & Algina, 1986). Cronbach's alpha coefficient is a measure of internal consistency reliability and can be useful for interpreting the degree to which the ratings from a group of independent judges hold together to measure a common dimension. Low Cronbach's alpha estimates among the judges suggest that the majority of the variance in the total composite score is accounted for by error variance rather than true score variance (Crocker & Algina, 1986). The calculated Chronbach's alpha value was .90 indicating a high level of agreement across the four independent raters.

The third and fourth assessments involved feedback from the students and organizational sponsors regarding satisfaction with the grant writing proposal project. Four themes emerged for the student group which included marketable skills, knowledge, community service, and workload. All 12 students reported that grant writing was a skill that would increase their marketability in the job market. One student stated, "I remember my internship advisor told me that I had to learn to write grants to get a job. Well, now I know how and I really think it will help me." Another stated, "Everybody I talk to tells me that I need to know how to get grants so I think this course helped me and I actually have experience doing a real grant." There was a general consensus (75%) among students that very little was known about grant writing coming in to the course and that knowledge regarding grant writing was gained throughout the semester. One student explained,

I knew that grants are important in my field [human services] but I had no idea where to even start. I knew that you could get money from places, that's about it. Now, I think that I could show someone else how to do it.

Nine students indicated that they thought their work benefited the community. One student wrote,

It was cool that I did a project that actually mattered. Instead of just writing some type of research paper, this one can actually help people. I

hope they get the money because they do great work there [homeless shelter].

Similarly, one of the general liberal arts students stated, "I had no idea how hard they work [boys and girls club]. In fact, I started volunteering after meetings because they didn't have enough staff and their work can really help kids."

There was common project criticism that was identified by seven of the students that can be summarized by the criminal justice student who explained, "It was a good project, but it took too much time. That's a lot of work to do for one person." Similarly, half of the students recommended that the project might be better if completed in a partner or group format rather than individually.

Organizational sponsors were overwhelmingly supportive of the project and each one supported the possibility of future projects with students working with them in the same capacity. Three themes emerged for the organizational sponsors group which included organizational resources, real world experience, and support. None of the organizations employed a professional grant writer although grant seeking activities were vital in the sustainability of the majority of organizations so these activities were most welcomed. Eleven of the organizational sponsors indicated that the students were very helpful in writing the grant because of organizational resource shortcomings. One representative said, "There is no way we would have got that grant submitted if [Karen] would not have helped us; she was a godsend." Similarly, the representative from the mental health center agreed, "We are so busy around here, I can't tell you how glad we were to have [Jonathon] work with us. He did a great job." Eight of the sponsors felt that students benefited by experiencing the real world. The homeless shelter sponsor stated,

I noticed a change in [Adelle] during the semester. At first she was almost scared to come through the door and didn't even look at anyone. By the time she left, some of our clients knew her by her first name and she spent time talking with them every time she came in.

In a similar vein, the daycare sponsor said,

I think [Angela] has a greater understanding of what goes on at a daycare center and realizes that we do more than play games. We all laughed when she told us that she would retire after one year of this kind of work.

Eight of the sponsors had no recommendations to improve the project. The recommendations that were

provided included doing the project more often and assigning several students to one organization to work on multiple grants. In summary, the organizational sponsors were overwhelmingly supportive of the project and encouraged future collaborations between the university and their respective organizations.

#### Discussion

This project served several purposes. First, it taught a marketable skill to students and provided them with "real world" experience in grant writing. Depending on the field students enter, even a basic understanding of the grant writing process could be an asset during a job search and perhaps even tied to later promotions. And, rather than just having a working knowledge of grant writing, participation in the project ensured that each student had actual grant writing experience including first hand knowledge of each step during the process from beginning through the actual grant submission. Many jobs require the ability to get grant funding (e.g., Wooley, 2004) and grant writing experience would most likely be an asset on student resumes. Another benefit of the acquisition of grant writing skills is that it can be transferred across fields. Grant writing is a process rather than being a discipline specific activity, thus has applications across a wide variety of fields. Second, the project provided a valuable community service. All 12 of the organizational sponsors indicated that the proposals provided by the students offered a much needed service. The organizations served vital health, educational, artistic, social, and economic roles in the community. Many of these organizations claimed to be short-handed with the majority of services they provided so free assistance in an attempt to solicit much needed monies for their programs was most appreciated from their behalf. Students provided an opportunity for organizations to conduct their administrative and service roles within the organization with minimal distractions from the student grant ghost writers with the potential for financial benefits. Third, it was a good way for students to become knowledgeable about various organizations and activities in the immediate community. Students were required to provide an oral presentation at the end of the semester discussing the organization they worked with, the services provided by the organization, and a summary of the grant proposal. The presentation was open to other students and faculty in order to provide students with the opportunity to make professional presentations and to disseminate information regarding community organizations and services across the campus.

The majority of best practices recommended by Tannenbaum and Berrett (2005) were followed. Of the 11 best practices that were listed, the following nine

characteristics were met: (a) the grant writing project was connected to the curriculum, (b) the service did involve a specific action (i.e., grant writing), (c) students were provided with an opportunity to reflect at the end of the project, (d) although students had to write a grant and had no control on the actual service component, they were provided with the opportunity to select which organization they wanted to work with, (e) students did receive training in grant writing, (f) all students were involved for substantially more than 10 hours, (g) the instructor attended workshops in the use of service learning prior to the course, (h) there were multiple assessments to determine if project outcomes were achieved, and (i) students were recognized for their contributions by organizational sponsors, faculty, and other students.

There were shortcomings on two of the characteristics. That is, there was limited emphasis on providing students with adequate opportunities for ongoing reflection throughout the course and limited contact between the instructor and community organizations. Perhaps one alternative to address better that characteristic in the future would be to require the students to maintain a weekly journal that details what they experienced that week with regards to the project, and their reactions to those experiences. In addition, the instructor did not have ongoing communication with the organizational sponsor. Specifically, there were two times throughout the project when the instructor was in contact with the organization contact. After students identified an organization they wanted to work with, the instructor contacted the sponsor via telephone in order to provide details of the project. The next meeting was in person and occurred at the conclusion of the project. Perhaps efforts could be made to have more contact with the sponsors that could take the form of phone calls, e-mails, or brief meetings.

Successful completion of this course required a writing assignment consisting of a completed grant targeting a foundation. Students were required to partner with an organization in the immediate community and serve as a “ghost grant writer” such that they were responsible for working with the organization to identify needs, find a potential funder, and complete a formal proposal. It can be argued that this project met the criteria established by Chapin (1998) regarding a service-learning project. In addition to the grant writing skills gained by students in this endeavor, prior work has reported that participation in community service projects lead to increased levels of civic professionalism, personal growth, community involvement, interpersonal skills, and self-confidence (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Hardy & Schaen, 2000; McGovern et al., 1991; Piliavin, 2003; Sherman, 1982; Waldstein & Reiher, 2001).

Although this project had positive outcomes, all components of courses should be monitored and adapted in order to improve the effectiveness of the instruction. This project is no exception, and there were issues that developed during the course of the semester that can be improved upon. It is necessary for the instructor to be very clear about the role of a “grant ghost writer” from the beginning of the semester. There were two main problems that emerged when the assignment was initially provided to the students. First, there was a lack of understanding of the final product of the project. In other words, the term “ghost writer” was not readily understood such that some students were under the impression that they were going to submit a grant for themselves and work for the organization. This may have been the case because of their unfamiliarity with the grant writing process. Examination of the pre-test knowledge scores indicated that students responded at the chance level so their understanding of the grant processes was very limited. Perhaps more time should be spent during the first class clearly articulating not only what their role is, but also what their role is not. After the instructor received feedback which suggested some role confusion associated with the project, an attempt was made to detail what the project did not involve. A second issue that emerged throughout the semester involved complaints of time requirements. In other words, students complained that the project was taking substantially more time compared to other courses. The instructor attempted to convey that in addition to being a content course, it was also a skills-based course. It was further emphasized that the ideal way to develop a skill is via practice in a real world setting. There was also an attempt to realize the importance of civic engagement and that volunteerism is a just cause requires sacrifice which is often in the form of time. This is an area that will certainly require modifications by the instructor. That is, it is of great importance to convince students that although extensive time is required (i.e., relative to other more traditional classes), the benefits are substantial to both the student and the community. In this vein, it may not be appropriate to consider the actual success of a grant (i.e., if it was funded or not) as an outcome measure. Students served the role as a ghost writer for organizations and it is up to the discretion of the organization what they did with the proposal. The organizations may elect to submit it, modify it and submit, or not submit. These options are out of control of the student and should not be used as a grading factor within this context.

Another consideration should be the number of projects that an instructor has within a class. This is largely determined by geographic location. Urban areas may offer more opportunities for such partnerships with

organizations. Thus, in more rural areas with fewer possible partners, one might consider group projects depending on the size of the class. The majority of students had a very limited knowledge of the organizations within the community that were eligible and in need of funding. Instructions were provided to identify non-profit organizations in the community that may be of a topical interest to individuals students, then contact the organization to determine if there might be a need that a grant could be used to address. They were motivated to do so because 40% of their grade was determined by the project, but because this was the first service-learning project for each student, there was probably some degree of anxiety associated with this task. One approach could be to provide a list of eligible organizations within the community. The instructor, however, believed that it was of value to put that responsibility on the student in order to gain a better understanding of what organizations actually exist in the community. This grant writing project was conducted with students pursuing master's degrees across a variety of disciplines and it may be applicable to advanced undergraduate populations. It would certainly seem to fit within an internship model, but incorporating it into an upper-level undergraduate course may require some modifications. Notably, an instructor may abridge the evaluation component of the proposal and focus more on simple outcome measures rather than more sophisticated designs and analytical plans. A final recommendation would be to make an effort to bring in the organizational sponsors to class at some point during the course of the semester so that they may discuss their organization. This may provide a stronger tie between the university and community organizations and assist in the development of stronger long-term relationships and may create possible internship and job opportunities for students or research collaborations with faculty members.

In summary, this community service-learning project was a success and has great potential. This grant writing project can be applied in a variety of courses across a wide range of disciplines. There was ample evidence that students knew very little about grant writing prior to the course and gained a significant amount of knowledge within this skill set. All 12 students completed actual grant proposals for an organization within the community. Future studies might use this method in other courses, with other students, and try different approaches to determine its relative effectiveness and alternative applications. It would be of particular interest to assess long-term effects regarding the potential impact this project had on finding a job and subsequent employment activities.

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