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Teaching Grantsmanship in a Nonprofit Leadership Class

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GPCI Competency 07: Knowledge of practices and services that raise the level of professionalism of grant developers

Abstract

Proposal-writing skills are critical for employees in a wide range of organizations, particularly in challenging economic times which demand diverse funding sources. This paper describes an innovative and multifaceted approach to teaching proposal writing to students enrolled in a nonprofit leadership course at a large, metropolitan university. The approach included a hands-on, field component in nonprofit organizations, in-depth organizational analyses involving interviews with nonprofit leaders, guest speakers including a grant professional and a foundation officer, grantsmanship textbooks loaned to all students for the semester, and review of students' completed proposals by a grant professional and the course instructor. Students presented their proposals to the class at the end of the semester and voted for the best presentations and proposal ideas. A celebration occurred at the end of the semester involving students and nonprofit partners. The service aspect of this course is part of the university's service learning faculty fellowship program. Additionally, in collaboration with students, during the semester the instructor modeled the application preparation process by writing and submitting a winning grant proposal to the university for funds to enhance the course. The paper adds to the existing literature on teaching grantsmanship to college students through experiential learning. It describes the various strategies used to introduce students to grant proposal writing and discusses challenges and lessons learned.

Introduction

Obtaining grant funding is critical for nonprofit organizations, and nonprofit leaders need more training in order to be successful proposal writers. In a survey of several hundred nonprofit administrators, fundraising and proposal preparation were identified most frequently as areas in which respondents believe they need additional training (Dolan, 2002). One option for providing this training is through university-based nonprofit leadership education programs.

While the nonprofit sector is large and growing (Cryer, 2008), nonprofit leadership education is a field relatively new to higher education (Garvey, 2009). The demand for such education continues to exceed supply (Garvey, 2009). Furthermore, nearly four out of five nonprofit leaders surveyed by the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance (2011) suggested that additional experience-based learning opportunities would enhance the professional development of future nonprofit leaders.

Limited scholarly literature exists on teaching real-world proposal writing skills in the context of nonprofit leadership education. This paper begins to fill that void by describing an innovative and multifaceted approach to teaching proposal preparation to students in a college course on nonprofit leadership.

Teaching grant proposal writing

Most of the literature on teaching grantsmanship to college students identified in this review focuses on service learning and other community-based learning activities. Several authors describe partnerships in which college students prepare grant proposals for nonprofit organizations as a way to develop proposal writing skills. Undergraduate and graduate students representing a wide range of disciplines take these courses.

For example, Griffith, Hart, and Goodling (2006) describe the use of service learning to teach proposal writing skills to master's level students enrolled in a course on program evaluation. Cook (2008) provides a description of a service learning partnership in which undergraduate human development and family studies students in the United States, participating in a senior capstone course, developed a grant proposal for a nonprofit organization in South Africa. Mennen (2006) writes about the use of proposal writing in a service learning initiative with undergraduate students in an advanced writing course. MacTavish *et al.* (2006) discuss application preparation as one of several experiential learning strategies for undergraduate students in human services. Finally, Addams, Woodbury, Allred, and Addams (2010) explain the use of persuasive solicitation letter writing assignments with students in business communication courses on behalf of nonprofit organizations.

Some of the literature on teaching grant proposal writing to college students focuses on courses that help students to prepare research-based grant proposals. Blair, Kline, and Bowen (2007) describe the use of a student peer-review process to help undergraduate biology majors develop the skills necessary to prepare grant proposals for biology research. Similarly, Eissenberg (2003) describes a proposal-writing seminar developed for graduate students in psychology to give them the tools to prepare grant proposals for potential submission to the National Institutes for Health.

Some papers focus specifically on partnerships with nonprofit organizations in the context of nonprofit leadership. For example, Katsioloudes and Arsenault (2001) explain their use of service learning in an undergraduate nonprofit leadership course for seniors to develop analyses of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of nonprofit organizations. Miller-Millesen and Mould (2004) describe a project-based learning initiative involving undergraduate and graduate students in the provision of technical assistance to nonprofit organizations in Kyrgyzstan. Bright, Bright, and Haley (2007) describe a technical assistance program for local nonprofit organizations implemented by faculty and graduate students. None of these articles focuses explicitly on grantsmanship skill development although Bright *et al.* (2007) note that their efforts to assist one organization with its strategic planning initiative resulted in the organization's receiving a \$50,000 grant.

Each of the works cited above is primarily descriptive in nature. Authors suggest that the chosen methodologies enhanced their courses; and student learning in proposal writing and related skills provided tangible benefits to partnering organizations. Some data support these claims; however, they warrant more formal research.

This literature review does not identify any articles specifically addressing teaching proposal writing skills in the context of nonprofit leadership education. This paper begins to fill an apparent gap in the existing scholarly literature by describing an innovative approach to teaching grant proposal writing in a nonprofit leadership course. The strategies used in this course build upon and extend those identified in this literature review.

The course

Fundamentals of Leadership in the Nonprofit Sector is a course offered through Towson University's Department of Family Studies and Community Development. It is a core course for students engaged in the Leadership in the Nonprofit Sector track, one of four track options for students majoring in family studies. It is a combined undergraduate and graduate course with additional requirements for graduate students.

The goals of the course are for students to understand the size, scope, history and diversity of the nonprofit sector; to appreciate the functions and operations of nonprofit organizations; and to learn about the roles and responsibilities of nonprofit leaders. The course surveys a wide range of issues pertinent to nonprofit leadership such as development and management of financial resources, human resources, and programs; planning and evaluation; and branding, marketing, community outreach, and public relations.

Proposal writing is a major assignment for this course, because it is an important skill for nonprofit leaders, and because writing a grant proposal requires understanding multiple aspects of nonprofit leadership. The instructor used the course as the focus of a service learning faculty fellowship in the 2008-2009 academic year. With the support of this fellowship, she used several strategies in spring 2009 to teach application preparation skills to students and to strengthen their knowledge of nonprofit organizations through hands-on experiences with nonprofit organizations. Nineteen students completed the course, including one graduate student.

Students chose nonprofit organizations as the focus of their service learning and proposal writing for this course. They reviewed several resources to identify nonprofit organizations. Online resources included the membership directory of the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations, and the university's and the department's lists of community partners. Students selected and worked with a wide range of nonprofit organizations with interests as diverse as pregnancy, domestic violence, disabilities, seniors, arts and sports.

Students spent a minimum of eight hours onsite volunteering for the selected organization and/or shadowing a leader. Students' service hours included doing work that helped them gain an understanding and appreciation of the mission and activities of the organization. For example, one student helped out at a Goodwill store and another helped with set-up and clean-up before and after services at her church. A third student spent a full day shadowing the director of a small youth leadership organization. Students wrote service plans and reflection reports to document and reflect upon their overall experiences with the agencies.

Students held one face-to-face interview with the executive director or another person in a leadership capacity to gather information for preparing an extensive organizational analysis. They used interviews, observations, and information gleaned from the organizations' websites and publications to prepare their organizational analyses, due approximately mid-semester. Students reviewed other materials as well, such as the organizations' annual reports, budgets, organizational charts, and program brochures. Their analyses included information on the history, mission, vision and values of the organization, its organizational structure, staffing and leadership; its financial management and

resource development; and its programs, governance and community participation. Papers included an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the organization (SWOT analysis) as in Katsiolouides and Arsenault (2001). Based upon the SWOT analysis, students included in their papers a series of recommendations for strengthening the organization.

During the second half of the semester, students developed grant proposals based upon their organizational analyses. Specifically, students selected one of their recommendations and used it as the basis of their grant proposal. Students were creative in their ideas for what was needed and their proposals reflected their imaginative thinking and unique perspectives. For example, one student wrote a proposal to build a playground on the site of a shelter for victims of domestic violence. She viewed the playground as a needed resource for children living at the shelter. Another student developed a grant proposal to provide mental health services for residents of a nursing home.

For the assignment, students used a modified version of the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers' (2011) Common Grant Application format. Students identified and used scholarly literature to support their proposals. The deadline for the proposals was toward the end of the semester. The instructor and the grant development professional reviewed them.

At the end of the semester, students gave oral presentations to the class that included a brief summary of the organizational analysis and of the project proposal. Students' presentations included use of PowerPoint and handouts. Students then nominated one another for four winning categories: best overall presentation, best visuals, best speaker and best proposal idea.

To lay the groundwork for this assignment, the instructor provided the students with explicit guidelines for how to identify nonprofit organizations, approach nonprofit leaders, conduct interviews of them and appropriately follow up with and thank them, gather data from nonprofit organizations, and develop organizational analyses and grant proposals. Several guest speakers spoke to the class over the course of the semester. The executive director of a small nonprofit organization and a program director within a larger nonprofit organization gave broad overviews of their organizations. A foundation program officer gave a talk specifically about how foundations function and make funding decisions. Students had time in class to ask questions and problem-solve together about any challenges they faced in identifying or working with nonprofit organizations.

Serendipitous enhancements to course

During the semester, an internal funding opportunity became available to support existing service learning courses. The instructor informed the

class about this opportunity, and together they generated ideas about ways that the course could be enhanced. The instructor developed a grant proposal based upon student input and received funds for three purposes: to engage the assistance of a grant professional in the course, to provide additional training on the application preparation process and offer students supplementary feedback on their grant proposals; to purchase a class set of books on grant development for student use; and to enhance the end-of-semester reflection and celebration event.

The grant professional gave two guest lectures on grant preparation, read all students' grant proposals, and gave students individualized feedback. The two presentations were videotaped for use in future classes. The first lecture gave a general overview of sources of funds, types of grants, what information to include in grant proposals, and some of the reasons that grant proposals fail. When judging the proposals, the grant professional used a rubric he developed for providing feedback to students on their proposals. He evaluated each section of the proposal (organizational background, project description, description of need, evaluation process and budget). Then he assessed the overall format, gave an evaluation of the quality of the proposal and gave his perspective on the fundability of the proposal. He agreed to make himself available to students as they were preparing their grant proposals. Several students emailed him with questions, and he provided valuable and timely feedback. For example, one student, whose proposal focused on extracurricular sports for high school students, requested feedback from the grant professional on whether it made more sense to request funds to purchase a bus or to simply rent a bus when needed, given the frequency with which the bus would be used and the expense of maintenance. Other students requested feedback on early drafts of their proposals.

In the final presentation to the class, the grant professional gave general feedback and talked about the grant management process as well as how to research and identify foundations.

The text purchased with grant funds is *The Foundation Center's Guide to Proposal Writing, 5th Edition* (Geever, 2007). Purchasing a class set allowed students enrolled in the course to borrow copies for the duration of the semester.

A culminating reflection event occurred at the end of the semester to honor nonprofit partners. This special session of class was open to department faculty, the university's service learning fellows and the service learning subcommittee, and to the community partners that worked with the class over the semester. The class, three department faculty, four faculty and staff from the service learning subcommittee and five community partners attended the event. Two students gave grant proposal presentations. Students who earned the most votes from their peers in each of the award category areas received certificates as did all nonprofit representatives in attendance.

Benefits, challenges and lessons learned

When students submitted their grant proposals, they also provided feedback on what they learned through the proposal writing experience. In one student's words, "[I've learned] a new way of thinking and writing." Students identified specific aspects of grantwriting they mastered, such as identifying the need and preparing an evaluation. Some students noted that it is difficult to write a grant proposal and that it takes a lot of time.

When asked what they liked most about their grant proposals, students noted that they liked their grant ideas and the creative aspects of the grant proposal. Some noted that they liked learning about the organizations or the population served. Some students mentioned that they enjoyed doing the background research required for the proposal. Students also noted that it felt real to them; they wrote that they liked "having the opportunity to do something [they] may do in the future" and "the thought that the program could actually happen."

This was a demanding course for students. The course required them to exercise professional behavior, written and oral communication skills and critical thinking skills, all important skills in nonprofit leadership (Katioloude & Arsenault, 2001). Students experienced the level of workload as high compared with other courses, as did the Master's level students in Griffith *et al.* (2006).

Students identified many challenges they experienced in writing their grant proposals. Some mentioned that it was difficult for them to prepare the budget section of the proposal. For example, one student wrote that it was challenging, "simply finding data to estimate cost" and another struggled with "knowing the budget [of the organization] since it was unavailable to me." Students also noted that "making [the] budget work and seem realistic" was difficult, as was "not knowing what's too much or expensive." Some students wrote that they did not know how to begin or what to write or they did not think they had enough to say and thought their proposals were not long enough.

Given its demands, a course such as this might be better experienced as a senior capstone course, as described in some of the scholarly literature (Cook, 2008; MacTavish *et al.*, 2006) or as an honors course. Alternatively, there may be ways to reduce the workload by dividing the course into two, with the organizational analysis occurring in a prerequisite course. A benefit of this approach would be the possibility to provide multiple complete drafts of the proposal over the course of the semester so that the final piece would be more polished. Another possibility is for students to develop their analyses and proposals in teams rather than individually. Griffith *et al.* (2006) suggest that group projects might be particularly appropriate in rural areas where fewer nonprofit organizations may be available; however, group projects may also be useful for allowing students to share the workload and to learn from and support one another.

Ideas for the future

For this course, students had the choice to share their final grant proposals with their partnering organizations. In the future one option is to make that a requirement of the course. Another appropriate next step would be for student grantwriters to shadow or to develop proposals in direct partnership with grant professionals within nonprofit organizations. Another model is for nonprofit organizations in need of proposal-writing assistance to request the support of students in a service-learning capacity through the course. Possible benefits of this model are that students would not need to identify partnering organizations on their own, and they would be able to respond to real needs. On the other hand, students might have less choice in selecting their organizations, and they would have to follow the organizations' directives for the grant proposal rather than pursuing their own ideas from their organizational analyses.

It is important to note that this paper does not focus on the differentiation between service learning and other types of experiential learning. There is vast literature on service learning and other experiential learning approaches available for additional information. While the course described here benefitted from service-learning resources, some may argue that it lacked enough actual service to qualify as a service learning course. In "The Service Matrix," de Montmollin and Hendricks (2006) propose a matrix of service alternatives which vary in value to the community and degree of formal learning. Based on their model, this course might be more appropriately described as community-based learning, because there is a high level of formal learning for students with relatively low value to the community. Some of the ideas described above would help to move the course toward a higher level of service.

Conclusion

Grantsmanship skills are critical for nonprofit leaders and should be an integral component of nonprofit leadership education. A promising method for teaching proposal writing is through real-world experiential learning opportunities with nonprofit community partners. The approach described in this paper includes multiple strategies. Further assessment could be done to determine which components are essential versus which strategies may be desirable but not essential. Each element of proposal writing instruction and support was valuable for student learning and instructors are encouraged to consider adoption of these strategies, in full or in part.

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