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Exposing Real World Philanthropy to the Next Generation of Social Work Leaders

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Introduction

There is a mystique surrounding grant proposals, the people who write them, and those who review the proposals and make funding decisions. Many professionals in the fields of human services, health care, and mental health perceive grant-proposal writing as complex and challenging, requiring considerable skill and experience. Some may even consider grant writing as modern-day alchemy, turning ideas and aspirations into gold (i.e., funded projects).

A variation of this view is commonly expressed in a survey given at the beginning of each semester to students who take the Social Work in Administration course in the Joint Master of Social Work (JMSW) program, a unique social work degree curriculum offered jointly by North Carolina A&T State University, a historically black university, and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a former women's college. In this course, training in grant writing is offered as a part of overall social work career development. In responding to the course survey, most students indicate that they have had little exposure to grant-proposal writing, recognize grant writing as an important part of their professional development, and have strong anxiety about the prospects of becoming grant-proposal writers. This anxiety is largely based on their preconceived notions about the complexity of the task.

As the students correctly perceive, writing a grant proposal is an increasingly important task for

Key Points

- This article describes a method for instructing social work students in the art of enhanced collaboration with foundations, shifting the focus from “writing a winning proposal” and “finding alternative funding sources” to “developing collaborative partnerships for sustainable community development and social change.”
- The program consists of four major steps: charitable foundation review and case presentation, self-guided review of real-world proposals, mock grant proposal development, and side-by-side proposal review.
- Student proposals were rated similarly by the instructor and the foundation program officer, even though different criteria were used, suggesting that well-written proposals are also likely to clearly address foundation information needs.
- The instructional approach helped give students a real sense of what is going on in the human services, health care, and mental health care fields, as well as how to work effectively in partnership with foundations to address needs.

social workers in meeting the constantly shifting needs of vulnerable populations in the community. Particularly in today's austere budget environment, with looming projections of massive cuts in government programs and services (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2011 & 2010), aggressive searching for alternative funding sources has become an imperative in the social work profession.

Given today's economy, the important role that philanthropic foundations and their grant programs play is receiving renewed interest as a vital resource in meeting the needs of populations who are falling through the cracks of government programs. Nevertheless, many social work professionals are still unaware of the critical role of foundations, not only in funding social work-related programs but in reinventing the ways they provide services and foster community change and improvement. This is surprising, given the strong historic connection between philanthropy and social work (Axinn & Levin, 1992).

Many social work professionals are still unaware of the critical role of foundations, not only in funding social work-related programs but in reinventing the ways they provide services and foster community change and improvement. This is surprising, given the strong historic connection between philanthropy and social work.

This article discusses our method for instructing social work students in the art of enhanced collaboration with foundations, using philanthropic grant-proposal programs as an instructional vehicle. We believe that by shifting the focus from "writing a winning proposal" and "finding alternative funding sources" to "developing collaborative partnerships for sustainable community development and social change," we are making progress in sparking a genuine interest among our students who want to be a part of community improvement and change, helping them overcome their trepidation about grant writing and preparing them to be effective grant proposal writers. Foundation grant programs are ideally suited for this purpose.

Our approach also responds to the issues Michael Hooker (1978) raised more than 30 years ago in his call to action at the 1978 Conference on Private Philanthropy. In his speech, Hooker pointed out that exaggeration, hyperbole, lack of candor, myopic optimism, antagonism, and excessive competitiveness are commonplace in the world of grant programs, where the focus on winning the grant is undermining the foundation charge to be a genuine force for positive social change and improvement. His concerns, primarily addressed to foundations, are still relevant today, and social workers who write grant proposals also have a moral and ethical obligation to respond to his call: The Social Work Code of Ethics clearly requires the profession to be accurate in its representations of qualifications, competencies, and services and results to be achieved (National Association of Social Workers, 2008).

Our goal, in the classroom and beyond, is to foster a foundation-grant environment where grantmakers and grant seekers can interact constructively in the proposal process while forging effective partnerships for addressing community concerns. We believe that our approach to educating social work students about grant-proposal writing will ultimately help strengthen partnerships between foundations and the agencies for which the students will work, thereby enhancing the role of foundations in the community.

Grant Writing in Social Work Education

An increasing number of master's degree programs in social work incorporate grant writing in their curricula. The popularity of grant-proposal writing in social work degree programs will only increase in the coming years as the profession anticipates increasing needs for services while grappling with the diminishing availability of financial resources for human services, health care, and mental health (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2010 & 2011).

In spite of the growing popularity of grant-proposal writing in M.S.W. education, information is limited on how grant writing is actually being taught. Armand Lauffer (1977) sparked an early interest in grant-proposal writing in social work education in his groundbreaking book,

Grantsmanship and Fund Raising, which stressed the importance of grant-proposal writing skills to enhancing the social worker's capacity as an effective agent for social change and community improvement. Later, J. L. Wolk (1994) discussed how a grant-proposal writing project in his community foundation course served as a vehicle to integrate social work theories and practice. Typically, textbooks on social work administration and management have a chapter on grant-proposal writing and fundraising (Patti, 2009). However, these chapters tend to be generic and not very informative about how the topic should be taught in the classroom. It is especially difficult to find information focusing on foundation grant programs.

Social workers should be especially interested in the critical role foundations have played in advancing service innovations and addressing service gaps for vulnerable populations in the U.S. (Brown, Colombo, & Hughes, 2009). The track record of foundations as the power behind some of the most versatile and creative innovations in human services, health care, and mental health care make them ideal partners in the classroom. For example, the highly successful Community Alternatives Program for Disabled Adults, under the North Carolina Medicaid program, began as a demonstration grant from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust (Duke University, n.d.) and serves as a national model. This and other foundation-funded innovations demonstrate how grant programs can spark creativity, an essential lesson for social work students.

A New Perspective Is Needed

There are various options for developing grant-proposal writing skills, with a number of how-to books, articles, and workshops providing good information on preparing well-written proposals, often with many examples and skill-development exercises (Devine, 2009; Griffith, Hart, & Goodling, 2006; Kraus, n.d.). Since motivated students and professionals can easily seek out these options to guide their own proposal efforts, a grant seeker might ask why we need to teach the subject as a part of a graduate-degree program in social work and what the benefits to exposing students to grant-proposal programs might be.

Similarly, foundations might ask why they need to get involved in teaching social work students.

The study of foundation grant programs provides an excellent vehicle for students to learn useful techniques for preparing effective grant proposals and to gain a perspective on grant-proposal writing as a powerful tool for forging collaborative networks for community change.

Merits for Students

Generally speaking, foundation grant programs:

- are more flexible and versatile than government grant programs, often encouraging creativity and ingenuity;
- have a strong focus on the unmet needs of vulnerable populations that fall through the cracks, a perspective resonating strongly with the central values of the social work profession (National Association of Social Workers, 2008);
- often have a strong local and community focus; and
- offer a less cumbersome proposal submission process than required for government grants.

Furthermore, many foundations, especially those with years of operational experience, are a respected presence locally, regionally, and, in some cases, nationally. Combining these factors, the study of foundation grant programs provides an excellent vehicle for students to learn useful techniques for preparing effective grant proposals and to gain a perspective on grant-proposal writing as a powerful tool for forging collaborative networks for community change.

Another important reason for exposing students to grant writing is to expand career opportuni-

ties for social workers in philanthropy. Dynamic economic development over the last decade (just prior to the current economic downturn) led to an exponential increase in the number of new foundations. There were more than 75,000 grant-making philanthropic foundations in 2007 and the rise of foundation assets, from \$385.1 billion in 1998 to \$682.2 billion in 2007, was unprecedented – although assets fell to \$533.1 billion in 2008 due to the faltering economy (Foundation Center, 2009). Furthermore, several studies indicate that within the next five years a significant number of nonprofit executive directors plan to step down or retire. The expected leadership vacuum in the nonprofit sector, including foundations, will increase the demand for highly trained professionals (Halpern, 2006). With this shift in leadership over such a short time, we see increased opportunities for social work students interested in careers in philanthropy.

Emphasis is placed on ensuring, before the proposal writing begins, that a grant program is compatible with the grant-seeking agency's mission and capacity. The importance of finding the right foundation partner cannot be overemphasized.

Merits for Foundations

The merits of a course such as ours for foundations include:

- increasing awareness among future professionals in the fields of human services, health care, and mental health care about the unique role foundation grant programs play in improving the quality of life in American communities;
- improving the quality of proposals, reflecting a better understanding of the specific goals of foundation grant programs; and
- helping to change the grant writing culture from a focus on winning to the creation of long-term partnerships designed to meet the shared goals of making a difference in the community we serve, as Hooker envisioned more than 30 years ago.

Also, it is vitally important for any organization wanting to be a viable force for social change to attract and engage younger talent. Today this need is particularly urgent, not only because of the proliferation of philanthropic organizations in recent years but because philanthropies have been losing a generation of leaders to retirement. Yet, there is no systematic way for the younger generation to enter the field of philanthropy (Matthews, 2005). In an effort to engage younger talent, some foundations have looked toward universities to recruit interns, fellows, and even staff members. We believe that exposing students to the field of philanthropy through a partnership in the classroom is an effective method for increasing awareness about foundations and providing a possible career path for motivated students. Ensuring that the next generation of nonprofit leaders is represented by well-informed and capable professionals should be of interest to any grantmaking organization (Cryer, 2004).

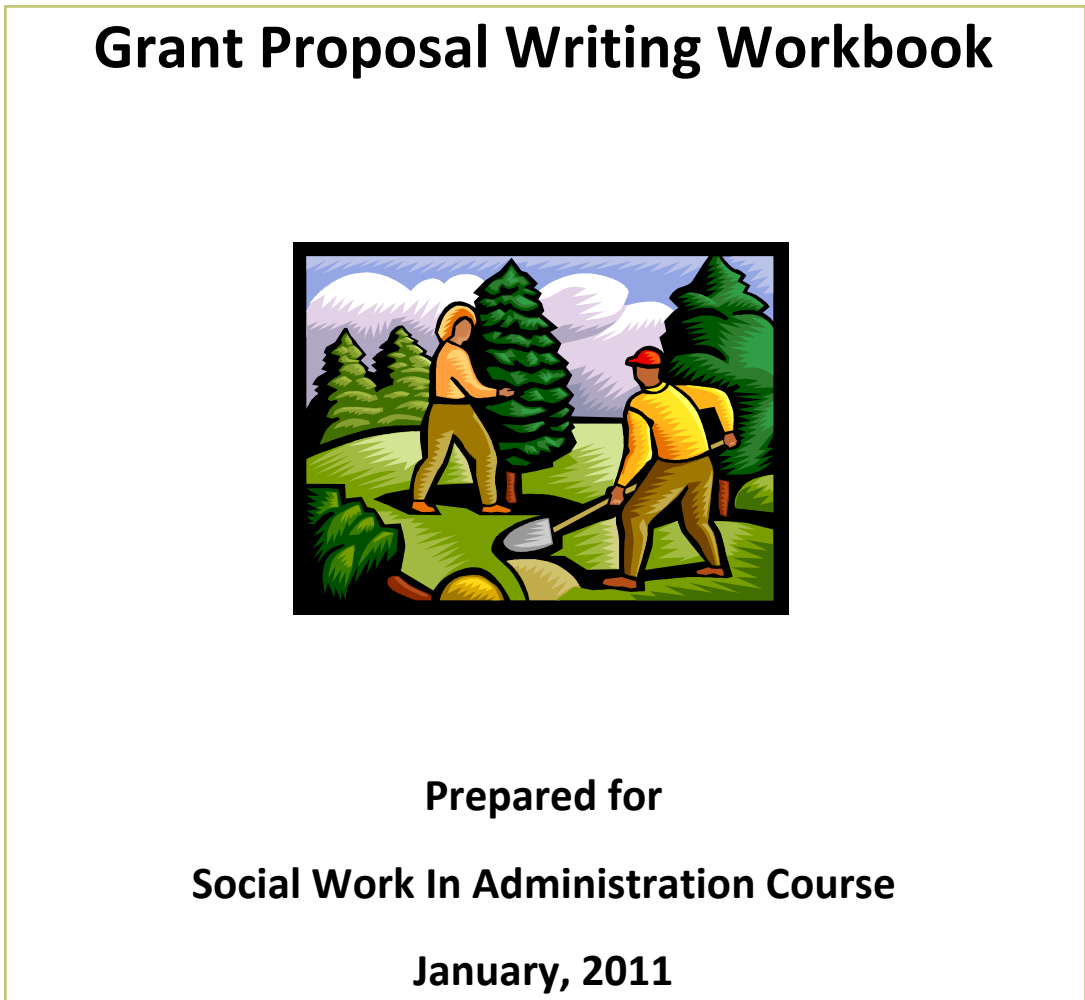
Our Instructional Method

Among many highly effective and visible foundations, a partnership between the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust (KBR) and the Joint Master of Social Work program made sense because of shared interest in the fields of health care and mental health care¹ and geographic proximity² to each other. Additionally, KBR's strong local ties help students perceive the foundation as a force for good in the community and a potential partner for future collaboration after graduation. This sense of familiarity is critical in motivating students who view grant-proposal writing as an anxiety-provoking exercise. For KBR, this was an opportunity to discuss with students how grant writing might contribute to community develop-

¹ The area of health and mental health is one of the two tracks the JMSW program offers to students.

² KBR is located in Winston-Salem, N.C., just 20 miles from the JMSW program.

FIGURE 1 Grant Proposal Writing Workbook Cover



ment and social change in North Carolina communities.

Our classroom program consists of four major steps:

1. charitable foundation review and case presentation,
2. self-guided review of real-world proposals,
3. mock grant proposal development, and
4. side-by-side proposal review.

Step 1: Charitable Foundation Review and Case Presentation

Our training starts with an overview of grant programs in human services, health care, and mental health care in the U.S. This provides the context in which foundations administer their grant programs. Next, the students review the KBR grants program online to see how one foundation structures information and instructions for grant seekers.

The focal point of this initial instruction step is a two-hour presentation by the KBR program officer, who clarifies the roles foundations and their grant programs play in society, highlight-

TABLE 1 10 Grant-proposal Questions Posed by KBR

10 grant-proposal questions posed by KBR
What is your organization's mission?
What have you achieved in the past three years to advance your mission?
What issue are you addressing? How many individuals or groups within your focus area are affected by it?
Describe the participants who will be included in your program. How many are financially needy? Are the participants different in any way from the full population you described in question three?
What impact are you committed to achieving? How many of the participants will achieve that impact?
How many of the participants would be likely to achieve the anticipated impact if your program did not exist?
Describe the work for which you seek funds. What approach will you use to achieve the anticipated impact?
Is your approach backed by evidence of success? If so what is it?
How will you know when your impact has been achieved? What information or evidence will you use to verify success and/or make course corrections in your program?
What do you most want to learn from this program?

ing several transformative movements within the world of philanthropy and their community partners. This presentation is always powerful, giving students their first close look at philanthropy and at foundations such as KBR in the context of a partnership rather than a mere funding source. This instruction stresses how KBR, as a grant-maker, works closely with grant seekers sharing common interests.

Emphasis is placed on ensuring, before the proposal writing begins, that a grant program is compatible with the grant-seeking agency's mission and capacity. The importance of finding the right foundation partner cannot be overemphasized. Specifically, students are instructed to:

- Identify grant programs that are a good fit for your agency's interests and capabilities.
- Pay attention to the grantmaker's approach to working with grant seekers; give priority to opportunities where interactive partnerships and collaboration are feasible and valued.
- Submit a proposal only when it makes sense to you and your agency, laying the groundwork for future collaboration.
- Follow up with the grantmaker, even when your proposal is rejected. Doing so will provide valuable feedback and an opportunity to demonstrate your interest in the foundation and begin building a relationship for future grant proposals. Where permitted, submit a revised proposal based on lessons learned from your

rejected proposal and from follow-up.

Step 2: Self-Guided Review of Real-World Proposals

Although the goal of our program is broader than simply learning how to write a grant proposal, understanding the nuts and bolts of the process is an important component of the students' education. For many students, this is their first formal professional writing experience and they may be intimidated by the prospect. We developed a workbook containing four "real world" proposals supplied by KBR, representing successful and unsuccessful examples. (See Figure 1.) All identifying information was removed from the proposals to protect the confidentiality of applicants.

The narrative section of the KBR proposal format contains 10 questions (see Table 1), to which applicants are requested to respond directly and concisely. KBR provides online tips on and examples of how it would like to see responses prepared. Our workbook groups the tip and example for each question with the corresponding response from an actual proposal. (See Figure 2.) Student teams are asked to compare the responses with the tips and examples, and then analyze whether the questions were answered directly, concisely, candidly, and informatively. The teams are given class time to work on this assignment and the salient points from the assignment are reviewed with the entire class.

FIGURE 2 Example Assignment from Grant-proposal Writing Workbook

KBR guidance	Question	1. What is your organization's mission?
	Tip	We see "mission" as what you are trying to accomplish. It describes the overall purpose of your organization. Your mission answers the question, "Why does the organization exist?" The best mission statements are short and clear. We are especially interested in how your mission gives you concentration and focus – discouraging you from taking on programs that are not related to your mission. If your organization is very large, for example a university, please provide the mission for the overall organization as well as the mission for the most relevant subgroup – that is, the department, division, or school.
	Example	The Neighborhood Health Center of the East (NHCE) was founded in 1988 to provide health care services to low-income persons in Davis County. Our mission is to respond to the health care needs of all with quality and respect – regardless of the ability to pay.
Proposal response to question	The Children's Health Association (alias) is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of children through the collective efforts of our membership. The Children's Health Association was created to support the charitable, educational, and scientific purpose of the Society and to provide funding and infrastructure to achieve the mission of improving the health of children and youth in North Carolina.	
Assignment	<p>Instructor's notes: It is always important to give a good and strong first impression. Here, you may be inclined to cut and paste your organization's mission. Don't do this unless it contains the precise information the funder is looking for: agencies with interest in improving the health and mental health of North Carolinians with special focus on the poor and needy. Here, if your agency's interest does not include addressing these issues, you are not a good candidate for this program. If, on the other hand, your agency's interests are a good match, it is important to highlight them concisely here.</p> <p>Please analyze the proposed response to the question:</p>	

By having the opportunity to examine both successful and unsuccessful proposals, the students learn not only how to write a technically acceptable proposal, but also how not to write a poorly conceived and organized proposal. Bad examples can show students the types of mistakes they might make and should avoid.

This classroom exercise helps the students gain insight into grant-proposal writing in the real world and what grant seekers go through to put together a compelling proposal. The use of actual proposals is especially helpful because students can identify the general context under which the proposals were developed, even if the applicants' identities are not disclosed. This contextual familiarity allows the students to put themselves in the applicants' shoes and begin to understand the challenges involved in compiling information and ideas to create an innovative proposal that has a reasonable chance of being funded.

Step 3: Mock Grant-Proposal Development

We use a team approach to proposal writing. Small teams are formed by drawing names from a basket. After a brief discussion of what constitutes a good proposal team, the students are asked to identify the different talents, skills, and interests of the team members and discuss how those can contribute to effective working relationships. This is an important lesson. Close collaboration with fellow workers is usually necessary to grant-proposal writing today as emphasis is increasingly placed on the sustainability of projects through partnerships and collaboration.

The small-team approach – about four students on each team – seems to provide the best opportunity for the students to take on individual responsibility while experiencing authentic organizational interactions such as dividing and sharing responsibilities, establishing reasonable timelines, solving problems as a team, and improving the quality of the final product. In reality, we find that sometimes the student teams divide up the tasks

based on what they are good at or interested in without assuming joint responsibility for the final proposal, and thus they miss out on opportunities to comprehend the entire proposal process. The key to a successful small-team approach is how well the students understand and accept their dual roles: assuming primary responsibility for their assigned area and taking ownership of the proposal as a whole.

Next, the students write their own mock proposals. Providing the right framework for this assignment has been a challenge. In the first year of using the foundation grant proposal approach, we asked students to identify a potential grant-proposal idea for the agency where they serve as social work interns and to prepare a mock proposal for the agency. Students did this work individually, which was effective for some but not all. Most, as novice grant-proposal writers, found it difficult to obtain sufficient support from their agency's key staff, who were preoccupied with the daily demands of their jobs. In the following year, formed small teams of students and asked each team to select a local agency and interview its staff to gather information for their mock proposals. Again, this approach worked well for some students but not for others. We learned that creating a framework where all student teams have similar access to the information needed to write a grant is essential to having a more even outcome.

In the third year, we formed a mock project-management team consisting of the course instructor, two other faculty members, and two local agency managers. Initially, the management team provided each student team with the framework for the mock project to be developed on behalf of the JMSW's Congregational Social Work Education Internship (CSWEI) program. The CSWEI program provides visits to homebound older adults by social work interns who team with a congregational nurse. We asked the student teams to use the CSWEI framework and develop proposals to specifically address mental health or substance abuse needs among older immigrants and refugee populations in our area. The management team provided continued guidance to the student

teams on proposal options.

While the framework is common for all proposals, student teams are encouraged to make decisions regarding a number of proposal elements based on the CSWEI program's strengths and interests as described by the management team, compatibility with the KBR proposal guidelines, local conditions and needs, and the students' professional interests. The keys to this process are for the students to clearly understand the management team's goal for the assignment, develop a proposal strategy that best satisfies the interests of both the CSWEI program and the funding agency, diligently follow the proposal instructions in gathering meaningful information and identifying useful resources, and organize their thoughts into a workable proposal.

Following the sessions with the management team, the student teams were given several weeks to research and develop their mock proposals, during which time the management team members were available for consultation. The student teams could also submit questions through the course instructor, who coordinated with the management team members and the KBR program officer and who posted answers to questions on the course's electronic blackboard. Answers to questions were prepared from internal files and real data, and the entire exercise was made as realistic as possible. Because of this, some teams' work ultimately may turn into real proposals as suitable opportunities materialize. Student responses were quite favorable to this approach.

Step 4: Side-by-Side Proposal Review

Finally, the students' proposals are evaluated by the course instructor and the foundation program officer. The course instructor reviews the students' proposals from a technical perspective using three primary criteria: each component of the proposal must be relevant and substantive, all components of the proposal must be logically connected, and the overall proposal must be well-organized, concise, and professional. The KBR program officer rates the proposals from more of a real-world perspective, including whether there is a clear focus on addressing critical needs with-

TABLE 2 Paired *t*-Test Comparisons of Proposal Grades between Two Raters

Paired <i>t</i> -test comparisons of proposal grades between two raters				
Rater 1 mean (SD)	Rater 2 mean (SD)	<i>t</i>	d.f.	P
2.85 (1.58)	2.74 (1.79)	0.59	26	0.56

Notes: 27 students participated in this proposal-writing exercise. The course instructor and the program officer were Rater 1 and Rater 2, respectively.

in the scope established by the grants program, a balance between innovation and practicality, and a collaborative approach aimed at community impact.

Evolving Approach

In the first year before the team approach was used, 27 students wrote individual proposals. The instructor and KBR program officer rated the proposals separately on a scale of 1 to 6. We examined our ratings by running a paired *t*-test to determine whether there was a significant difference between the scores of the two raters. The results are shown in Table 2.

The paired *t*-test analysis indicates that, in spite of using the two different review criteria, both raters came to close agreement on the quality of each proposal. This may be interpreted as (1) good proposals reflect a good fit between the interests of the grants program and the agency represented in the proposals and (2) the proposal framework used is structured closely to what the grants program expects from good proposals. In other words, if the student proposal writers adhere closely to the proposal instructions, address each item directly and substantively, and pay special attention to the needs of the foundation in formulating their proposed course of action, the instructor and program officer are likely to agree on the rating.

The relatively low mean scores, generally in the B to B+ range, indicate that the students made some inroads into comprehending the grant-proposal writing process and in acquiring necessary skills, but that the individualized instructional approach may not have been the most productive way to conduct this exercise. As Wolk (1997) discusses, a complex assignment such as grant-proposal writing may be too overwhelming for all

but highly motivated and interested students. In our case, each rater identified only one proposal as good enough for funding (receiving the highest score, equivalent to an A+ rating). Overall, we were dissatisfied with the quality of the mock proposals and recognized the need to modify the learning approach.

The small-team approach taken in subsequent classes yielded more satisfactory proposals among those teams that worked well together. In the first year of taking the team approach we formed four four-member teams. Of those teams, two produced substantive proposals, rated “fundable (A+)” or “near fundable (A).” The other two teams were less successful, in part because they found it difficult to obtain adequate collaboration from the agencies they selected.

In an education setting when the task is as complicated and unfamiliar as grant-proposal writing, the differences between high-functioning and low-functioning teams becomes more pronounced. This, of course, is the challenge of many real-world proposal-writing efforts and the reason some agencies continue assigning proposals to individuals rather than developing them as teams. Predictably, student satisfaction levels were high among those who were able to learn as teams and effectively use the lessons learned from reviewing the proposal examples. For these students, the team process of writing a proposal was invigorating and stimulating. The teams that failed to develop good cohesion ended up with disappointing proposals, even though the students’ writing and planning abilities were fairly evenly distributed among the four teams.

Discussion

We help students understand and gain experience with grant-proposal writing by focusing on

an actual philanthropic grant program in a real-world context. By having a hands-on, in-depth experience with one grant program, the students build the confidence needed to tackle proposal writing in the future, even if the framework and premises of their future efforts are different from the examples used in class.

At its core, grant-proposal writing is a creative and relationship-building process involving social workers and others who are committed to addressing the community's needs effectively and sustainably. Collaboration with foundations is vital since they have been, and continue to be, the power behind some of the most innovative programs and services in the fields of human services, health care, and mental health care.

We also emphasize in class that, at its core, grant-proposal writing is a creative and relationship-building process involving social workers and others who are committed to addressing the community's needs effectively and sustainably. Collaboration with foundations is vital since they have been, and continue to be, the power behind some of the most innovative programs and services in the fields of human services, health care, and mental health care.

In the past, this collaborative relationship was based more on a "division of labor" paradigm, with foundations providing funding and grant seekers proposing and implementing interventions. Although this approach to writing grant proposals persists today, the line between funder

and grant seeker is often blurred. Increasingly, foundations are taking proactive steps, seeking out promising service providers and innovators in the community and working with them to develop programs that benefit people and communities. Equally, more foundations see a more assertive involvement in the process as a necessary investment that will lead to better grant proposals, thereby enhancing the likelihood of achieving their own organizational goals.

For these reasons, we focused our grant-proposal writing course not just on the mechanics of writing a good proposal, but on developing collaborative partnerships with foundations. This long-term view helps to frame grant-proposal writing as an essential activity of professionals seeking change and innovation in human services, health care, and mental health care. One student noted in class that she no longer views a philanthropic foundation as a mysterious, rich uncle from another state we have to visit every so often.

Conclusion

We found our instructional approach of focusing on one foundation's grant program helped give students a real sense of what is going on in the human services, health care, and mental health care fields, and how to take advantage of often-underutilized resources in developing effective grant proposals and in integrating grant programs into the long-term goals and objectives of the agencies they will work for.

As we face severe budget cuts at the federal and state levels, philanthropies will play an increasingly important role in reinvigorating a vibrant, healthy community life in America. The task is daunting, but we can view this as an opportunity to address the issue Hooker (1978) raised decades ago – making foundation grant programs a catalyst for new approaches and innovations in community service and in meeting the needs of our most vulnerable populations. Both the philanthropic and social work professions have a vital stake in this process.

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