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Grant Writing, Access, and Empowerment: Introduction

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The grant writing course is an increasingly common fixture in English departments, taking myriad forms. For some, grant writing is an anchor for a writing for non-profits program. For others, it's focused on science and technical communication. In others, it's a popular advanced writing elective. Often, grant writing courses employ service-learning methodology, giving students real-world experience in writing grants on behalf of university or community organizations.

Overview

Whatever the form, grant writing courses provide an interesting perspective on the complexities of *access*. The act of grant writing, at its most basic form, seeks access--to funding, to networks, to opportunities for creating or enhancing solutions to problems, whether scientific or societal. Teaching grant writing provides access for students to the language of proposal, empowering them to learn and use skill sets involved in asking for and receiving resources. Grant writing courses teach students to analyze communities critically, using data (Census reports, CDC statistics, FDA bulletins, etc.) that many English majors otherwise have little exposure to. Students often work with community partners to develop solutions to meet the needs their research has identified, and they learn to write for a very specific audience (funding agencies) that have specific needs and requirements. When successful, grant writing

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draws much-needed resources to communities. Grant writing is often a bridge (a metaphor of access) between those with resources and those who need resources. Students in grant writing courses are builders of those bridges, and the process of writing a grant helps students to see themselves in the role of advocates and potential change agents (Jones 2017).

However, the nature of the grant funding world complicates this picture of access. Instructors of grant writing ostensibly train students to work effectively in the non-profit world. However, that world is rife with inequities and may even actively deny access to the organizations that need funding the most. Power and money are in the hands of foundations, corporations, and government agencies who decide what organizations and causes get resources (Incite 2007). Smaller, grassroots organizations, including many social justice-focused organizations best positioned to address local community problems, may not have the resources, skills, or personnel to do the work necessary to navigate the complex, labyrinthian structures of grant funding. While universities, through partnership with local non-profits, may be in a position to provide some of those resources via service learning and outreach programs, such efforts do not disrupt the fundamental inequities in the non-profit funding world. Teaching grant writing is thus an ironic act, necessitating teaching students how to work within this unjust framework in order to seek resources to aid social justice causes.

The essays included in this volume explore multiple facets of access in the context of grant writing instruction. How do instructors of grant writing provide access for students—to knowledge and resources that will help them succeed, reach their goals, obtain economic benefits, or achieve other ends? This question of access, of course, is a fundamental (if problematic) question of higher education. However, grant writing instructors have a larger responsibility—to help students understand the complexities of access in grant writing. While writing grants may create access to resources for non-profit organizations, the funding system of non-profits is inherently inaccessible to many individuals and organizations who might enact social change. We must teach students not only how to write grants, but how one might disrupt the problematic system that requires grant writing in the first place.

The articles here explore both the practical and theoretical conundrums in understanding grant writing and access. We begin with Zosha Stuckey and Carrie Grant's article, "Localize, Prioritize, Decolonize: A Guide for Consciously Supporting POC-led Organizations," which is both theoretical and pedagogical, exploring the key questions of social injustice and access that are central to this journal issue. Stuckey and Grant detail what an anti-racist, decolonized concept of access in grant writing

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should be. Based on their experiences as white women working for a predominantly white institution in a majority POC neighborhood, they offer advice for how university/community grant writing partnerships can center POC-led community organizations. They first apply Audre Lorde’s three tendencies of response to difference—ignore, copy, destroy—to question the status quo in the grant writing, non-profit context, which tends to perpetuate inequities in access to funding resources. Then they discuss how to work against these tendencies by “localizing, prioritizing, and decolonizing” grant writing and community partnerships. Heuristic questions for each of these anti-racist modes of thinking/acting help instructors and institutions consider how to better support local communities in grant writing and non-profit outreach work.

The next three contributions continue Stuckey and Grant’s focus on deepening community engagement through a productive partnership between grant writing courses and local non-profit organizations. In “Guardians at the Gate: Grant Writing, Access, Long Term Partnerships, and Social Justice,” Charles Etheridge describes the long-term, productive partnership between his grant writing courses and the Food Bank of Corpus Christi, Tx. This collaboration has benefited students and the Food Bank, with over \$900,000 in successful student-written grants distributed so far. These grants have significantly increased access to needed resources for the Food Bank, addressing poverty, food insecurity, and health issues in the local area. However, the article also highlights the problematic elements of access in teaching grant writing—success at obtaining funds does not address the structural inequities inherent in the grant writing system. It’s important that instructors, while teaching students the skills of grant writing, also help them understand the non-profit world’s fundamental problems that sustain social injustice.

The next two contributions detail the writers’ experiences beginning new partnerships with community agencies. In “Writing the Watershed’: The Place of Bioregional Pedagogy and Student Grant Writing in a Community-Based Professional Writing Course,” Alex Ozbolt, Andy Ross, and James Wolf address the question, “what unique contributions does a grant writing project make for facilitating connections to place?” The article takes the unique approach of exploring the question from three perspectives: the grant writing course instructor (Ross), the community partner (Wolf), and the student (Ozbolt). With the trail at Baltimore’s Stony Run Park serving as a metaphor of writing’s winding through and making connections, the authors detail an ecocomposition-influenced grant writing course that shifts student perspective on place as something to write *about* to something to write *for*. The article

concludes with a useful bulleted list of recommendations for instructors who might wish to develop a similar approach at their institutions.

Ian Weaver initially found that students pushed back against the community partner chosen for his course's service-learning project ("Popwalk"—a place-based immersive art experience accessed by smartphone app). In "Access as a Participatory Design Principle: Grant Writers Moving from Securing Resources to Codesigning with Communities," Weaver describes how his students criticized the project based on issues of access and elitism, given that the project requires a smartphone and focused on a "niche" art project. However, by using participatory design as the theoretical basis for the course, the instructor was able to help students complicate notions of access, moving from a resource-based assumption to one that centers community in the design and implementation of projects. Students moved from understanding grant writing as a genre skill to a deeper sense of the grant writer's potential role in facilitating participatory community work.

The final two contributions explore specific concerns for student access within the grant writing course itself. In "Online Access: Grant writing as Reciprocal Service Learning at a Hispanic Serving Institution" Rachel Jordan details her experiences teaching grant writing with a service-learning component online, demonstrating how online learning can increase access to traditionally underserved student populations. She explores the reciprocity element that students and community partners perceive benefit from the service-learning partnership. Students expressed benefits not so much in terms of skills or the production of a document but how the project gave them access to a professional context, providing valuable experience navigating professional relationships. Interestingly, community partners also perceived their benefits less from a product perspective (free grant writing services), and more as access to "fresh voices," needed perspectives on their organization within the grant writing context. Both of these expressed benefits highlight the fact that students and community partners were able to develop and maintain social connections throughout the course in an online context, and Jordan demonstrates how online access even enhanced these possibilities. Jordan's article is a solid answer for those who question online learning on the basis that it lacks a social element.

Finally, Kavita Surya discusses an access problem typical for grant writing courses—do students themselves have access to the resources they need to succeed in the course? In "Signaling Access in Grant Writing Pedagogy and Practice," Kavita Surya notes that access is a prevalent logistical problem for students enrolled in grant writing course for the simple reason that viable funding resources (such as RFPs) are often locked behind paywalls. She uses institutional logics and signal theory

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frameworks in an exploratory analysis of this problem in the context of teaching an undergraduate writing course at an MSI (Minority Serving Institution). She offers four pedagogical strategies to mitigate constraints on access to funding resources. These strategies provide students opportunities to not only produce work that supports funding of community-based projects, even without access to RFPs, but also to explore inequities in access to resources inherent in the grant writing context.

This collection of articles demonstrates that, whatever the context in which they are taught, grant writing courses are valuable, offering students the opportunity to gain not only marketable skills but the tools to question the unjust system of social inequalities that create issues of access in the first place. We, the editors, encourage readers of *Open Words* to explore the possibilities grant writing courses offer students, faculty, and programs for personal and professional growth, for deepening ties to the communities, for addressing the issue of social justice, and for promoting more equitable access.

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Etheridge and Schumann

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