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Guardians at the Gate: Grant Writing, Access, Long Term Partnerships, and Social Justice

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Fighting for our deepest convictions requires relinquishing control and accepting messy uncertainties. It demands working as well as we can at efforts that feel morally right, and then having faith that our labors will bear fruit, perhaps in our time, perhaps down the line for somebody else. If you expect to see the final results of your work, you simply have not asked a big enough question.

Paul Loeb, *The Soul of a Citizen*

A Prologue of Sorts

The grantmaking system in the United States is like Cerberus, the three-headed hound guarding the gates of the Greek mythic underworld, keeping the living out and the dead in. However, in the grantmaking system, the “living” are people who lack access to vital resources such as income, food, shelter, or education because of societal structures that create inequality. The American Cerberus is not guarding the dead but rather tightly controls access to resources that could address or disrupt the systems of inequality that sustain social injustice. The hound’s three heads are the three major types of grants: governmental, private foundation, and corporate. Each “head” has a different temper and a different appetite, and that head must be satisfied if one is to enter the vault, access needed resources, and take them back to their community. In classical mythology, Cerberus was tamed by Hercules; in today’s system of restricted access to vital resources, the task of taming the three-headed hound falls to grant writers, who face a Herculean number of tasks: identifying if the vault has anything to help their community, satisfying the appetites of the hound so she can enter, and

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developing strategies to channel resources back to their community. Like Hercules, grant writers face a dizzying number of complex tasks, each of which must be performed correctly. And, like Hercules, the task of grant writing is only one of the labor necessary to address structural inequalities that cause social injustice.

The Herculean labor of addressing social injustice by increasing access to necessary resources requires long-term commitment. Universities, particularly technical communication programs, are in a position to provide long-term commitment by promoting more equal access to resources unequally distributed in our society. The approach taken at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi combines those taken at other universities. Like Rice at Western Kentucky University, we adopt a “comprehensive rhetorical and curricular approach” to grant writing, one emphasizing rhetorical situations and genres common in grant writing (2018, 186). Like Jones at University of Central Florida, we adopt a “hybrid service-learning” model that “emphasizes a social justice perspective for professional communication pedagogy” (2017, 7). And like Cella, Goldblatt, Johnson, Mathieu, Parks, and Restaino (2016), we depend upon “the power of relationships to sustain, invigorate, and guide us, despite the temptations to despair over lack of resources or the posers of capitalism that threat to overpower us” (41). This paper describes one model of how such work can be done by providing a brief overview of the grant making system in the US, acknowledging the limited but important role grant writing plays in increasing access, and describing how the technical communication program at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi has sought to address one particular access-related issue—access to food—over a partnership that has lasted nearly two decades.

The commitment to addressing hunger grew organically over the years, primarily because of the local Food Bank’s effective use of student volunteers (from multiple academic disciplines) and its staff’s ability to use student work in building programming and infrastructure. Examples chosen to illustrate points will mostly relate to food and food access; however, the ideas illustrated are relevant to other access-related issues. University programs or individual faculty with other interests should find that the ideas and concepts mentioned can be adapted to a variety of contexts.

The Complicated Positionality of the Grant Writer

To write grants is to live “intersectionally.” Grant writing acknowledges the “ways in which systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class and other forms of discrimination intersect to create unique dynamics and effects” (Center for Intersectional Justice). These systems of inequality create social injustice, characterized by lack of limited access—to food, housing, and other basic needs, education, jobs, or other basic rights. Working in or with partner organizations, usually nonprofit agencies, grant writers seek to address social injustices resulting from inequalities created by systemic issues—hunger, poverty, homelessness, lack of access to education, discrimination (the list of social injustices in the US is endless).

To succeed, grant writers must satisfy two different audiences. One audience is those who control the purse strings of grant dollars: government agencies, private foundations, and corporations—the very groups benefiting from systems of inequalities that unfairly restrict access in the first place. Governmental agencies control vast economic resources generated by a tax system that disadvantages people of color and anyone from a working-class background and preserves and increase the resources of the wealthy (Brown, 2021). Private foundations are structures that allow people of privilege to use personal wealth to influence society without paying taxes on this wealth. Known as the “Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” Smith defines these institutions as “a ‘shadow state’ constituted by a network of institutions that do much of what government agencies are supposed to do with tax money,” which in turn serves “as ‘an alibi’ that allows governments” to perpetuate injustices “under the veil of partnerships between the public and private sectors” (2007, 8-9). Although some corporations have philanthropic foundations, most corporate giving derives from advertising budgets, and philanthropy is generally limited to areas where the company does business—another form of advertising (Zhang et al., 2010). As part of advertising, corporate charitable giving seeks to benefit corporations’ bottom lines. The grant writer must appeal to those who control the purse strings—the three-headed hellhound, Cerberus. They must be insiders, able to function within the system.

At the same time, grant writers must be insiders, resisting the ideology that keeps systems of inequity in place. Grant writers must be aware of social injustice, seek to address its causes, and often resist injustice by accessing funds to bring about change, however small, to individual communities.

They must become what Meloncon & Schreiber describe as “critical pragmatic practitioners,” people with “a wide variety of practical and conceptual skills” who can

“make and produce...a wide variety of documents and texts” while at the same time critiquing “existing structures,” proposing “alternative solutions,” all while maintaining “a strong ethical grounding” (2018, 333). Thus, the work of grant writers is intersectional, working at the intersection of systemic injustices and existing powers to try and effect change.

The Work of Social Change and the Grant Writer’s Role

It’s important to acknowledge that grant writing is a small part of the more considerable work of increasing access. Three different kinds of work are needed to bring systemic change to the larger system that limits access to necessary resources. The first is “front line work”: agencies that seek food or housing for those who lack it, for example. Front-line work, or direct care, is usually the work of nonprofit agencies or, in some cases, governmental entities. The second kind of work is “awareness raising”: protests, media campaigns, academic articles—efforts to document the existing injustices and bring them to the attention of the larger population. The third kind of work is policy work: organizations that create or enact policy, usually governmental agencies, with the power to affect real change. Each kind of work is important, necessary, and vital. Academics interested in justice can contribute in any of these areas.

Grant writing usually falls into the first category. Front-line work—working to increase access to resources—is the “bread and butter” of grant writing. From a pedagogical perspective, front-line work has several advantages. It’s tangible in ways students can understand—they understand people in their community lack food or other resources. Rice notes that “narrowing grant proposal projects to local or regional opportunities provides students with a realistic and attainable goal” (2018, 189). Partnering with a nonprofit agency provides students with an entrée to do the kind of work Loeb talks about: “relinquishing control and accepting messy uncertainties” but knowing they are part of a sustained effort that will someday bear fruit (2010, 122). Students learn something about the causes of the problem—for example, senior citizens live on fixed incomes and find that grocery bills rise when incomes don’t. Student grant writers learn what is being done (the Food Bank has a program to deliver food to where senior citizens live) and what could be done differently or better (more people need the service than can be served, so another mobile pantry can help the agency serve more people). This work is the kind of work Mathieu calls “tactical”—what she defines as “street initiatives” that “operate situationally, grounded in time and place” (2005, xiv-xv). This tactical orientation requires “letting go of comfortable

claims of certainty and accepting the contingent and vexed nature of our actions” (2005, xv). University partnerships can provide support in other ways, such as how Towson University’s G.I.V.E. program provides infrastructure for nonprofits through building a digital repository and through providing grant management assistance, or the ways Texas A&M Corpus Christi’s Master of Public Administration program partners with various nonprofits to provide strategic planning support and program evaluation expertise. This approach “authorizes educators to work on vexing community problems by joining hands and minds across institutional boundaries” (Parks and Goldblatt, 2000, 587).

This tactical, front-line approach creates a space where university-based grant writing courses can provide value in addition to the deliverable of a submittable grant. Agency personnel are aware of what is happening “on the ground”—the grocery store in a rural community closed, so its place-bound and elderly residents can no longer easily access food. However, agency personnel’s efforts focus on meeting needs, leaving little time to address the “whys” of social problems affecting those their organizations exist to serve. The traditional role of the grant writer is to document the need—to show a problem exists in a community—to create a needs statement, an essential component of most grant applications. Often, needs statements written by nonprofit agencies rely on internal data—number of clients served, number services given, pounds of food delivered, and so forth. While this data is important, it is incomplete.

A grant writer trained to be a critical pragmatic practitioner can do more. Grant writers in university-based courses occupy an advantageous position, with access to resources many nonprofit agencies do not have—particularly expertise and information. To continue the previous example about food insecurity in rural areas, universities have experts in economics, sociology, public health, government agencies, and many other fields who can help contextualize problems at the local level. A student in a university-based grant writing course might not be an expert in these fields, but they are trained in research techniques. They know they can ask professors questions. They know their academic libraries have resources, particularly databases, that can provide additional information. A professor of business might note that grocery suppliers have consolidated into four major corporations, all of which prioritize urban areas and have deemphasized or abandoned rural areas because they are less profitable than urban markets. A sociologist who studies older people might note that, because of fixed incomes, rising prices, and failing health, older adults are place-bound and have difficulty getting access to most things they need, particularly food. A nursing faculty member might note that most low-income elderly people suffer from

micronutrient undernutrition caused by the inability to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables, which can have catastrophic consequences for older people. A college-based grant writing course can train students to correlate governmental databases maintained by the US Census Bureau, the Center for Disease Control, and the United States Department of Agriculture (to name a few) to understand better the issues a nonprofit's clients are facing and can provide this information to agency professionals. As a result, agency professionals will have access to information they might not have had otherwise, enabling them to serve their clients better. By studying societal structures, a grant writer trained to be a critical pragmatic practitioner can be a more effective grant writer.

As mentioned above, the grant writer must play the dual roles of “insider” and “outsider” at the same time. The grant writer must be familiar with the work of the agency, must listen to its staff (and its clients), must work with agency to articulate the community's needs in language that will appeal to funding agencies, and must accurately describe the agency's programs in terms that correspond to funding guidelines. Perhaps the most difficult task the grant writer will do is to match the agency's programs and needs with funding sources. Their labor is complex; it is Herculean. Long-term partnerships between universities and nonprofit agencies can make this labor more manageable.

Local Situation

Part One: The Coastal Bend area of South Texas

Part of being a critical pragmatic practitioner of grant writing is understanding local conditions—what they are and how they came about. Corpus Christi, Texas and the surrounding region provide a snapshot of unequal destruction of resources in the nation or even in Texas.

Local conditions: A city of 317,773 located on the Texas Gulf Coast, its population is 63.8% Hispanic or Latino,¹ meaning its largest ethnic group represents a traditionally under-resourced population. The city lags behind the nation in nearly every major economic indicator. The table below illustrates the consequences of lack of access to needed resources in Corpus Christi:

¹ These are the terms the US Census Bureau and other government agencies use to describe Latinx people. Latinx will be used as a keyword to speak to current scholarship in technical communication. Gonzales et al. provide an insightful discussion of the semantic and cultural distance between Latinx and Hispanic (2020).

Economic Indicator	Corpus Christi	Texas	United States
Median Income	\$57,387	63,826	64,994
Persons in poverty	16%	14.2%	11.6%
Persons without Health insurance	20.7%	20.4%	9.8%
Value, owner-occupied housing	\$150,100	\$187,200	\$229,800
High School Graduate	84.1	84.4	88.5
Bachelor's degree or Higher	22.0	30.7	32.9
Foreign born persons	9.1%	16.8%	13.5%

Figure 1: Economic Indicators illustrating lack of access to resources in Corpus Christi, Texas (Source: United States Census Bureau)

The most telling statistics are income levels, the percentage of people in poverty, and the lack of access to health insurance. Reasons for the systemic inequality in South Texas are numerous, but most are traceable back to people with wealth and power trying to preserve their capital and influence.

How local conditions came about.

A brief discussion of the region’s history demonstrates how systemic equality developed over time in South Texas. Like most of the American Southwest, early sixteenth-century Spanish explorers encountered Native American, leaving settlements such as Corpus Christi in their wake. Descendants of unions between Spaniards and Native Americans have occupied the region ever since, living under a successive string of governments—Spanish, French, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the United States, the Confederacy, and the United States again—all of which marginalized denied them rights to lands they have inhabited for centuries. Although these descendants have lived here since 1519, official histories trace the “founding” of Corpus Christi to 1838, when a Pennsylvanian calling himself “Colonel Kinney” came to the Republic of Texas, decided land was “available” (meaning unclaimed by English-speaking Europeans), and began trading it. South Texas soon was the site of large private land holdings, including the King Ranch (825,000 acres), the Briscoe Ranch (640,000 acres), and the O’Conner Ranches, (500,000 acres). Larger ranches dominated the cattle industry, greatly enriching their owners and increasing their

influence in Austin, the state capital. Large ranches required large numbers of low-paid workers, which were mostly the Latinx people who already lived there. Although ranch workers were poorly paid, the ranches represented the only economic opportunities available to non-whites in the region.

Large landholders initially resisted changes brought by oil and natural gas industries; however, when they realized the petrochemical industry was more profitable than cattle, they came to dominate that industry as well. The descendants of unions between Spanish explorers and Native Americans were also excluded in this system. For decades, the oil industry was “white only” industry; people of Latinx descent were not hired in the oilfields, nor could they find work in the lucrative jobs in the refineries that grew up near Corpus Christi to process the petroleum.

This economic structure, which restricted benefits offered by access to land, cattle, and the petroleum industries, was perpetuated by a political system that severely limited Latinx people’s right to vote. Even though Latinx people were considered “technically white” by US census rules (a convenient way to create a system of segregation that persisted nearly two decades after *Brown vs the Board of Education* ended legal segregation of African Americans), they were denied a place at the political table. One strategy was the poll tax, passed in 1902 to limit Latinx participation in voting. Another strategy was gerrymandering, creating oddly shaped political districts to dilute the power of Latinx citizens and give the advantage to white candidates. At the local level, the city council was elected using an “at large” system so that candidates represented the city “as a whole” rather than specific districts where people lived, so that people in minority-majority parts of a city were not allowed to represent themselves.

The aftermath of the systemic denial of access can be seen throughout South Texas today. It is reflected in lower income levels, higher poverty rates, and lower levels of educational achievement. Denial of access is evident in the fact that, despite its \$1.83 trillion dollar economy, Texas is the 6th most food insecure state in the nation (Friends Committee on National Legislation, 2022). This aftermath is evident in higher infant mortality rates (Well Being in the Nation Network, 2022) and death rates from diabetes and other endocrine diseases— 33% higher than national rates—that have increased by 37% since 1980 (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 2016). The most telling statistic in Figure 1 is the percentage of people without health insurance— more than double the national rate. This is a direct result of governmental policy—the State of Texas has declined to pass any expansion of Medicaid (which funds health care for the poor) despite the availability of federal funds to pay for it (Harper, 2021), nor will it use state funds to extend participation in the Children’s Health Insurance

Program (ChIP). To sum up this discussion about systemic inequality in South Texas, the final row of Figure 1 is important: percentage of “Foreign born persons.” Because of its proximity to the US/Mexico border, those unfamiliar with the region assume that poverty is linked to immigration, attributing low income and educational levels and high poverty in Corpus Christi to an immigrant population, who, by their nature, are assumed to be “lacking.” However, as Figure 1 demonstrates, the percentage of foreign-born persons in Corpus Christi is far lower than state or national rates. People who live here have been subject to systemic injustices that date back, literally, for centuries.

For the strictly pragmatic work of grant writing, only the first part of this discussion (a description of the current situation) is necessary to complete a grant application—the data provided in Figure 1 could plug nicely into a needs statement for many grants. For grant writers to fully engage in the community they write for, understanding how the situation came to be is critical, even if the information never makes it into the pages of a grant application.

Local Situation

Part Two: The Coastal Bend Food Bank

The Coastal Bend Food Bank has been an effective long-term partner with TAMUCC’s grant writing program because it is an excellent site for service-learning in a variety of disciplines; in addition to working with its Executive Director (ED) and development staff on grant writing, nursing students work with Food Bank staff to assess health needs and assist with diabetes education initiatives. Students in the Master of Public Administration program have partnered with the agency on various initiatives, including program assessment. Another reason the Food Bank makes an excellent partner for addressing issues of access is because of the credibility it has earned in the Corpus Christi area (it serves an eleven-county region in the Coastal Bend area of the Texas Gulf Coast).

Initially begun in 1982 with the stated mission “to feed the hungry,” Food Bank staff quickly identified the difference between providing food and providing healthy food in an area where diabetes, malnutrition, undernutrition, and other food-related illness run rampant. Corpus Christi has long been known for the highest diabetes amputation rate (Gibson, 2020) in the country. Food Bank staff soon focused on providing healthy food alternatives, only to discover that clients would not use healthier foods because they were unfamiliar. This disconnect led to nutrition

education and cooking classes, which introduced new foods (often fresh produce), encouraged people to taste them, and taught healthy ways to prepare them. Other programs developed included a successful diabetes management program (the Coastal Bend Food Bank was the first food bank in the nation to have a registered nurse and a registered dietician on staff), nutrition education explicitly targeted to children (which became Kids Cafes, which also offered after-school tutoring and recreation), and backpack programs, which provide school-lunch eligible children with food to tide them over through nights and weekends. Additionally, the Food Bank now provides a social services program, assisting clients to complete applications for government programs including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), CHIP, Medicaid, and Long Care for Seniors).

Food Banks work through partner agencies—the Coastal Bend Food Bank recovers food donated by grocery stores and through FDA government surplus programs and then distributes it to agencies that hold “pantry days” in various communities. Food Bank staff deliver to more than 100 partner agencies in eleven counties, so people needing assistance do not have to travel to Corpus Christi to get the food needed. Even with this wide distribution system in place, Food Bank staff noticed that gaps in coverage still existed, and that older people are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. As a result, Food Bank staff developed a “mobile pantry” system and, using geolocation software identified underserved places and arranged to have pantry days in those locations. In addition, staff from the Social Services Program come regularly to help identify client needs, to identify services they might be eligible for, and to assist in registration.

The above overview demonstrates how effective the Food Bank of the Coastal Bend is in identifying and meeting needs in the Coastal Bend. This center occupies a unique place of trust in the area, respected by the donor community, people of all political stripes, and, most important, it is trusted by people who are facing the effects of lack of access to needed resources and services. As a result, the Food Bank has become a major player in the region’s disaster planning, recovery, and resilience efforts. In the past five years, the Coastal Bend has been struck by two major disasters, Hurricane Harvey in 2017 and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-2022. In both instances, the Food Bank was the first agency many turned to—not only for relief but with offers of help. In terms of assisting people with gaining access to needed goods and services, it is a vital player in the region.

Local Situation

Part Three: Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC)

Located on the Texas Gulf Coast, TAMUCC has an enrollment of approximately 11,000 students. A federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), 49% of its student body is Hispanic or Latino, the largest demographic group on campus.² Furthermore, 42% are first-generation college students, 59% are from under-represented populations, and 38% are Pell eligible (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2021, 21). South Texas has long been a diverse region with a strong and proud history rooted in Mexican American culture and tradition.

Grant writing at the university began in the early 2000s by Susan Garza in the English department. Grant writing was initially offered within the umbrella course “Professional Writing Workshop”; the initial grant application was a project for the Boys and Girls Club of the Coastal Bend to fund an additional site in Robstown, a low-income community near Corpus Christi. A strong proponent of the value of service-learning in technical writing courses, Garza’s grant writing work later took on the project of addressing conditions in colonias, “predominantly low-income, Mexican-American rural and periurban subdivisions characterized by irregular housing and poor water and sanitation infrastructure” (Jepson 2012, 615). Both projects were directly concerned with access—to resources for youth and affordable housing. Garza notes that neither project was funded but demonstrates that these projects were perceived positively by the client agencies involved in the grant application process. Furthermore, grant writing helped achieve course objectives and helped students move beyond their own perspectives, which she equates with the cultural value of individualism and toward a deeper understanding of the communities in which they will live and work (Garza, 2012). Her contribution “Why Are You Making Me Do This? An Examination of Student Attitudes Toward Writing with the Community Service Learning Projects” provides a useful case study describing how to work with a community partner and the challenges that can arise for students who initially may not understand the value of service-learning projects in a community different from their own.

The collaboration with the Food Bank began in 2005, in my first year at the university. A colleague knew its executive director (ED), noting that the Food Bank did a good job of providing students with meaningful learning experiences. Although

² Terms for Latinx people used by the US Census Bureau are used in this section.

I had written a number of grants at my previous institution, all had been university-based, seeking funding for programs at my institution or for my own research. This opportunity would be my first foray into writing for a nonprofit. From the start, it was a true collaboration between the Food Bank, me, and my students. The ED and I agreed that a capacity building grant would be the best approach to take with the class, one that would benefit the Food Bank if funded but that was not critical for its operations. The ED noted she had never had the time to apply for a Kraft Grant and asked that our class focus on seeking funding to build a new room-sized refrigeration unit suitable for storing produce. The Food Bank received more produce than it could distribute before it spoiled—another refrigeration unit would increase the organization's capacity to store and distribute produce.

This initial project established a pattern that has benefited both the Food Bank and TAMUCC for years. Food Bank staff would identify unmet needs in the community (such as limited access to fresh food), develop a solution, and present this as a project for the grant writing class. Because most of these grants involved capital expenses—new equipment or facility expansion—they were specific programs with tangible benefits that appealed to private foundations. Such grants, while not simple to write, are relatively straightforward projects, ones that beginning grant writers can work on with a reasonable likelihood of success. That initial project was funded for \$47,000: the refrigeration unit was built and continues to be in operation today. It also established a model that mirrors good grant writing practices.

Since then, student projects have provided grant writing assistance that has supported the creation of several new initiatives. Funded student-written grant projects include youth initiatives, programs for children such as nutrition education (Kitchen Kaptains) and diabetes prevention (Get Fit!), the first van for the mobile pantry (supporting rural food delivery), a new refrigerated truck to increase food delivery (twice), a kitchen to serve as the site for nutrition education, a backpack program for homeless youth, an initiative targeting malnutrition and undernutrition among adults, a program to fund additional rural delivery to senior citizens, and funds to support the construction of a new building.

In addition to materially benefiting the Food Bank and its programs, this long-term collaboration has yielded other benefits. Projects begin with community needs identified by Food Bank staff; however, they remain open to student perspectives. Although the collaboration between the university and nonprofit staff has built up a shared history of collaboration and expertise—in working with students in service-learning projects on behalf of the Food Bank and in the operations and needs on behalf of university faculty—students are new each time and bring a fresh perspective;

they are willing to ask questions precisely because they don't know how things have been done. As a result, Food Bank staff has been willing to rethink operations based on student input. Two significant examples illustrate the benefits of students' fresh perspectives. During a conference call between the grant manager, students, and the ED of the Food Bank while working on the Kraft Grant, the grant manager noted that to be funded, grant awardees had to demonstrate that, for each dollar spent, ten additional pounds of food would need to be distributed. This criterion was not mentioned anywhere in the RFP (Request for Proposals) or in any other published document, and the Food Bank staff would not have known about it if it hadn't been for the conference call students had arranged. The ED took this information back to her staff and they were able to demonstrate that, with a new refrigeration unit, the Food Bank would be able to distribute at least eleven additional pounds of produce for each grant dollar spent (and exceeded that estimate actually). Another example of the positive benefits resulting from the Food Bank's receptiveness to student input came when a student who was a retired Coast Guard storekeeper suggested adopting a new hardware-based inventory system he had used while in the military. For his individual project, he priced the hardware and software, suggested an implementation strategy, and wrote a successful grant application on behalf of the Food Bank, which now uses the inventory system suggested by the student, significantly increasing efficiency.

Partially because of the success of the collaboration with the Food Bank, the grant writing program has expanded significantly at TAMUCC. Initially begun as a special topics course, offered once every two years, it has developed into its own course with multiple sections offered every spring. The university could offer more sections if it had the faculty to teach it; three faculty members (Susan Garza, Catherine Schumann (this volume's co-editor), and myself) have taken turns teaching the course. The undergraduate version has been offered both online and face-to-face. Additionally, the English department has offered grant writing at the graduate level numerous times and, in 2015, TAMUCC's Master of Public Education (MPA) requested that English faculty begin teaching a graduate grant writing course as part of their program, which has been offered every spring for the past seven years. At times, this course has been cross listed between English and MPA, which has presented a unique opportunity for collaborations between English students, who bring expertise in using writing to address community needs, and MPA students, who bring specific expertise in identifying, documenting, and describing community needs. Over the years, TAMUCC students and faculty have collaborated to write more than

\$969,000 in successful grant applications on behalf of various Coastal Bend area nonprofits.

The collaboration between the university and nonprofit agencies grew beyond grant writing. In 2012, Diana Cardenas and I interviewed a few effective nonprofit professionals in the Coastal Bend about the kinds of writing they do and about the communication skills an effective nonprofit professional should have. This project grew into a fully online Writing for Nonprofits (WNPR) certificate program in which students learn nonprofit writing genres (internal communication, media relations, publication, fund raising, and board relations), writing for the web, document design, grant writing, and a capstone course in which students create a nonprofit project benefitting a nonprofit.

Part Four: An Approach to Teaching Grant Writing

What follows is an overview of what we have learned at TAMUCC over nearly two decades of partnering with community agencies and writing grants on their behalf. We have been successful because we have had good partners—not only the Food Bank but other organizations willing to work with us.

We need to begin with some caveats. Because we are a Hispanic Serving Institution, we feel a responsibility to help train students to be successful, working professionals. We do not uncritically accept corporate ideologies sometimes implicit in workplace writing programs, nor do we think of the nonprofit system as inherently good. We want our students to be critical pragmatic practitioners, aware of the problems inherent in the nonprofit industrial complex, engaged with the communities their work will serve, and cognizant of structural injustices that create the inequalities that restrict access to goods and services people need. We also want them to learn how to write grants, because grant writing is a marketable skill that will help students find employment and because we want to do as good a job as possible for our community partners.

Here is an overview of how we ran our course:

1. Students write two grants; during the first half of the semester, they collaborate on a single, larger grant on behalf of a nonprofit agency (usually the Food Bank).
2. During the second half of the semester, students write a grant by themselves on behalf of a local nonprofit of their choosing. We maintain a regularly updated list of community partners. Many students choose a

partner from this list, but many are already involved with a community agency. In these cases, we encourage students to work with agencies they know and engage in causes they believe in.

3. We teach a specific process, one that is a hybrid of that found in many grant writing textbooks:
 - Document the need in the community the agency is addressing.
 - Describe the program the agency is proposing to meet the need.
 - Identify potential funding sources for the proposed program. Once a funding source is identified, students, with permission of their partner agencies, contact the funding sources themselves to determine whether a project is a match for that funding source. Note that finding a funding source can take time, and that other steps can be worked on as a funding source is identified.
 - Demonstrate how this program will meet the need (grant writing terminology for this is Goals, Objectives, and Strategies)
 - Be prepared to demonstrate whether the grant is achieving the results it's supposed to (Evaluation)
 - If required, have a plan for showing how the project will continue after the grant period is over.
 - Create a Budget and explain where the money is going (a Budget Justification).
 - Meeting the funding source's requirements for putting the grant together (which can include an organizational history or background and a summary, as well as a cover letter or abstract).

Students go through this process twice. The first time, they worked in teams, on separate parts of the grant. As the semester proceeds, readings and discussions introduce students to various aspects of the grant writing process. Each team has responsibility for a few parts of the process, and their contributions will be shared with the class when it is relevant. When the class is learning about Goals, Objectives, and Activities, the group preparing that section of the grant will present its work to the class, for example. In the end, the whole class assembles the grant, reads it through, and edits and evaluates it for consistency, clarity, and completeness. During the second half of the semester, each student will go through this process again.

1. We emphasize to the students the need for a clear line of thinking from the community need the grant is addressing to the budget:

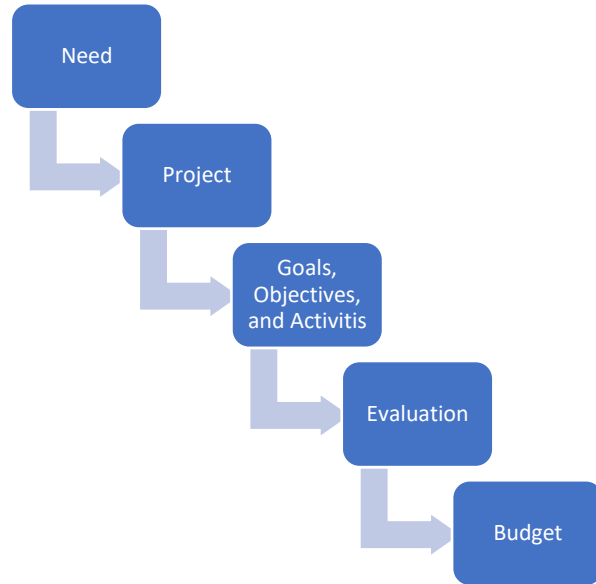


Figure 2: The Logic of Grant writing

2. We emphasize that a budget is a moral document—that where an organization spends its money reveals what its true values are. In addition to this being good grant writing, this approach to budgeting offers another opportunity to address issues of access and how financial structures can help or impede communities.
3. The partner agency is contacted during the semester and asked to:
 - Identify a Specific Need that Needs to be Addressed—It is important to be clear that the partner agency is in charge: the agency contact is the “supervisor” for this grant.
 - Have a Specific, Defined Project—It is more helpful for student learning if grant agencies have a specific, defined project to meet the need. If an agency has several ideas, students are given a simple strategic planning exercise to help smaller agencies choose which projects are most likely to be funded.

- **Maintain Regular Contact with the Student Grant Writer**—We let partner agencies know up front that students may have lots of questions, and we let students know that people in nonprofits are busy and can't drop what they are doing to answer questions. We recommend that agency personnel and students communicate with one another once a week regularly. We also let students know that part of learning professional behavior is to identify which method of communication is the best way to contact their agency partner—phone, email, messenger, GroupMe, etc.
- **Have Realistic Expectations about Student Work**—We let students know we expect them to do their best, and that we will support them to the best of our abilities. However, students are students, and the work they produce will not always be “submission worthy.” Agencies usually understand this. Most student-written grants are submitted by the agencies, others are revised by agency personnel and then submitted, and a few are not submitted.
- **Provide Feedback on Student Work**—Agency personnel are asked to provide a written assessment of the students' work—how well they understood the agencies work and its mission, things the students did well, areas in which the student can improve, and an overall evaluation of the quality of the grant produced. This is shared with both the student and the instructor.

To recap, we teach grant writing as a standalone course in which students write two grants on behalf of area nonprofit agencies. Students go through the process twice, once in teams and once individually. The first group-written grant is usually in conjunction with the Food Bank of the Coastal Bend, a long-term partnership that has fostered trust, history, and a shared body of knowledge about strategies to address problems stemming from lack of access to a basic need—food—in the Coastal Bend. The second grant, which students write independently, is done in conjunction with a nonprofit agency of the student's choice.

As an instructor in the program, I should note that teaching grant writing requires a great deal of effort. The semester before, the instructor must work with agency personnel to identify a larger project for the group grant and must communicate with other community partners to arrange potential projects for students when they write individual grants. During the semester grant writing is taught, a series of specific tasks must be completed so the grant can be ready for submission. Although

students must assume leadership roles and work together to ensure the grant is written, they require a great deal of coaching and support. When the course is taught online and grant writing students don't interact in a classroom, a system of regular check-ins with each other, with other teams, and the instructor is needed. Through trial and error, we've developed a system that works, but it, too, is time consuming. Later, when students are working individually, the instructor must keep track of what project each student is doing, which funding sources are being approached (to avoid project overlap), and how students are doing. When different instructors teach different sections, coordination is needed so that no single agency is flooded with requests for student projects and no single granting agency receives multiple grant applications for the same funding source (so students don't compete with one another for the same grant). We have developed a database of grant projects that each instructor has access to, so we can coordinate with each other and avoid project and funder overlap.

As with the long-term partnership with the Food Bank, our institution's long-term commitment to teaching grant writing has created a fund of knowledge and institutional memory for how it can be taught effectively. This has changed over time, however. Since the partnership began, grant writing has changed from paper-based submissions to electronic. Four different presidential administrations have come, and three have gone, significant because each new president makes policy changes that alter the funding landscape. Course delivery has continued in face-to-face courses and has also developed in an asynchronous, fully online modality. The program continued through a pandemic. We have also worked with different partners for the group-written grant, always returning to the Food Bank because working with them as a partner provides our students with an excellent learning experience. Students in the program know they are part of a tradition, and the \$969,000 they have raised to date on behalf of various nonprofit agencies in the Coastal Bend demonstrates that student work can be of great value.

A Conclusion of Sorts

Hercules was able to tame Cerberus, the three-headed guardian of Hades, just as generations of TAMUCC students have been able to tame the three-headed monster that is the grant making system, satisfying it sufficiently that it has allowed resources to flow from the vaults it guards and into the communities of the Coastal Bend. However, taming Cerberus was not Hercules' final labor, and our program leaves much of the work of access undone.

Although the programs funded by successful student-written grants have helped many people via the nonprofit agencies that serve them, the structural inequalities in South Texas persist. The number of people served by the Food Bank increases every year. Income inequality has increased, and high rate of food insecurity, poverty rates, and uninsured children persist. Students rarely see the outcomes of their work—they take the course and, even if both of the grants they helped to write are funded, the semester ends, and they move on to other courses or jobs. Some stay involved with the nonprofit they wrote for. Many mean to stay involved but don't because of other commitments.

There are also real limits to the way we teach grant writing. Because we prioritize student learning, we seek to ensure that the partner agencies we work with are sufficiently stable that they can support a student through the process. Although we do work with smaller nonprofits that are volunteer-driven or that are just starting up, our students' efforts on behalf of these agencies are less successful. If we were fully signed off on the ideology of the Nonprofit Industrial Complex, we could claim that these agencies "aren't ready to get a grant yet" because certain structures have to be in place for an agency to receive grant funding. We don't because it's not helpful. However, we don't have the personnel or expertise to help startup and volunteer agencies get to the point where they can "check enough boxes" that they can receive grant funding. We study our community, identifying the historical and societal structures that limit access to needed resources for people of underrepresented backgrounds, but we haven't done much of the "higher level" work of social justice identified in the "social change" section of this article—we haven't raised awareness at a large enough level to produce the kind of changes necessary to correct structural inequalities that continue to limit access to those who need and deserve it. Much is left undone.

However, we keep in mind the quote from Loeb that begins this article: "If you expect to see the final results of your work, you simply have not asked a big enough question" (2010, 123). We continue in the faith that our work and the work of our students is of value, that it makes a difference, no matter how small, in the lives of others. We encourage others who are contemplating teaching a grant writing course to do so because grant writing isn't hard—it's just a hell of a lot of work. If you're willing to do the work, your students will gain a valuable skill that will benefit them in nearly any career they choose; having had a grant writing course will increase their chances of accessing better employment and, therefore, more resources for themselves and their families. The work these students do in grant writing courses will become a small part of the larger work of making our communities just a little bit better places to live.

Teaching grant writing won't change the world, but it could make it just a little bit nicer place.

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