

# Skill and Efficacy Development in a Human Services Grant Writing Course

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## Abstract

In the field of Human Services, taking grant writing courses and developing related research and critical thinking skills are essential to successful service-related careers. This study examines how specific instructional strategies utilized in a Human Services grant writing course serve as meaningful and effective learning experiences that enhance core competencies as well as intrapersonal development. Four semester-long grant writing class sections during one academic year participated in the process. One hundred and eighty-nine, upper-division human services students participated in the study. Specific grant writing competencies increased and student intrapersonal growth was reported utilizing both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

## Keywords

Grant Writing, Efficacy, Instructional Strategies, Skills

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We gain strength, and courage, and confidence by each experience in which we really stop to look fear in the face... we must do that which we think we cannot.

~ Eleanor Roosevelt

## 1. Introduction

There exists substantial evidence identifying the importance of grant writing skills across a variety of disciplines (Eissenberg, 2003; Kleinfelder, Price, & Dake, 2003; Medina-Walpole, Barker, & Katz, 2004; Wooley, 2004). In the field of Human Services, taking grant writing courses and developing related research and critical thinking skills (including logic models, budgeting, problem and evaluation statements) are essential to successful service-related careers (Puig & Downey, 2001). Grant writing skills can serve as an important asset in a job search as well as an enhancement to overall job performance.

Given the current economic climate, having grant writing skills are essential, especially for students whose

employment will require them to obtain external funding (e.g., Wooley, 2004). Interestingly, the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) reports that there are currently over 1.5 million nonprofit organizations in the United States whose livelihood depends on securing funds via grants. The nonprofit sector has in fact expanded in terms of number of organizations and number of paid employees. In 1994, nonprofit organizations in the United States employed about 5.4 million people, or 4.4 percent of all workers. By 2007, nonprofits employed 8.7 million workers, or 5.9 percent of all workers (Internal Revenue Service Data Book, 1997; Current Population Survey (CPS), 1994 and 2007). Health professionals, educators, health technicians, administrative support workers, and other service occupations account for the majority of paid workers in the nonprofit sector (Ruhm & Borkoski, 2003). It is likely then that many Human Services students will go on to careers in non-profit settings and grant writing experiences will be a valuable asset to their professional success.

Raines and Alvarez (2006) suggest that the grant writing process is essentially a collaborative one that involves

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building a meaningful relationship with the potential funding entity. Since funding streams have diminished for the foreseeable future, human service professionals need to learn the principles of grant writing, including building effective relationships with funders, using a team approach, capitalizing on one's strengths, and moving the project forward in a systemized manner (Raines & Alvarez, 2006).

Unfortunately, many undergraduate students struggle with research-based courses, and upon graduation, give little significance to utilizing research procedures in practices like grant writing (Rubin, 1992). This is in part due to the fact that students oftentimes approach such courses with fear, phobia, and disinterest (Rubin, 1992; Ziefert, Brown, Krajewski, 1995). Often, however, it appears that training in statistics, measurement, and research methods are seen as *necessary evils* for the student preparing themselves for work in the human services field rather than true necessities that might benefit one in their practice (Ruby, 2005). Indeed, in our department, human service students anticipate that the grant writing class is going to be the *most dreaded* and *worst* class ever because of the research related tasks required.

Several solutions have been presented by both researchers and grant writers themselves to offset students' anxiety and to increase proficiency among students, with the focus typically on changing student attitudes towards research itself or on developing classroom strategies that meet the learning needs of students. This oftentimes includes techniques for the integration of active, anchored, generative teaching strategies and the development of effective learning environments. For example, Puig & Downey (2001) discuss how they developed positive student experiences with grant writing by integrating group collaboration into the classroom and by connecting research knowledge with real world problems via the utilization of actual Request for Proposals (RFP's) from real agencies. Similarly, Griffith, Hart, & Goodling (2006) incorporated grant writing into a community-based service learning experience whereby students understood that writing grants -"mattered"- and "instead of just writing some type of research paper, this one [the grant] actually helps people" (p. 225). In addition, Eissenberg (2003) suggests using student peers who are outside the proposal's immediate subject area to review grants as well as to increase input from faculty who are experienced in the grant review process. It is also recommended that social learning experiences, such as peer teaching and group projects, be utilized to increase positive classroom experiences.

The above findings considered student achievement in grant writing courses by assessing academic outcomes, including knowledge of grant related content, success in the field, and ability to secure funds via a real grant submission. Such outcomes fit nicely with the larger body of literature on the

study of academic success in post-secondary education (for a detailed review of the early literature, see Tinto, 1993), which typically emphasizes student GPA, retention, and knowledge of course content. However, more current directions in research on academic success take into account the relationship between various emotional abilities and academic achievement, including intrapersonal skills. This includes the recognition and understanding of one's own feelings, the ability to regulate emotions, and the skills to manage change and stress (Parker, Taylor, & Bagby, 2001; Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997; Zins, Payton, Weissberg, & O'Brien, 2007). Previous studies have shown that students high in intrapersonal skills (sometimes referred to as emotional intelligence) will be more successful at transitioning to new college-based challenges, including becoming independent and handling college-related stressors.

The question remains then as to how grant writing can increase the intrapersonal development of students and how classroom techniques can assist in this process. Interestingly, no study to date has yet examined how a grant writing course relates to students' development of intrapersonal skills. Given that many of the Human Service students in our department report they are apprehensive of the writing process, feel intimidated about the research process, question their competencies in research-based writing, and lack understanding of the relevance and benefit of grant writing/research courses, we endeavored to examine how a Human Services grant writing course can operate as a meaningful and effective learning experience that enhances both core competencies as well as intrapersonal development.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Procedure and Participants

We utilized and developed several techniques to enhance grant writing skills. In particular, we integrated varying instructional models that deviate from the lecture format, such as visual presentations, site visits, interviews, and use of emerging instructional technology. We also varied our options for students' performance from individual written formats to group work including small writing assignments, and critical review of scholarly work and oral presentations. Students were encouraged to develop programs that capitalized on their personal strengths, interests, and internship experiences in order to foster motivation and engagement.

These techniques were implemented into four grant writing, semester-long sections during the 2009-2010 academic year. One hundred and eighty-nine, upper-division human services students participated. The mean age of the participants was

25.27 years old with a standard deviation of 6.61. Eighty-eight percent of the sample was female which matches the proportion seen in the department overall. Seventy-five percent of the students were enrolled in the mental health track for the major. Participants completed surveys at the beginning and end of the semester in which they were enrolled in the course. In addition, upon completion of the course, an hour long, intensive focus group with a sub-sample of ten student participants was conducted.

## 2.2. Measures

A 38-item questionnaire was designed by the authors to assess students' core competencies, including knowledge and ability related to grant writing course content. The survey included several likert scale questions about students' level of knowledge and ability (e.g., of "the development of comprehensive problem statements for human services issues" and "knowledge of budgeting of human service programs"). In addition, to assess intrapersonal development, 10 open-ended questions were developed and implemented during the focus group session. In order not to prime or lead students, questions were broad, and related to overall experiences in the class and to personal effectiveness of specific assignments and activities. Questions included: "What are your reflections on the class now that you have completed it?", "What was the most useful part of the class for your future career in human services?", and "What were the weaknesses and strengths of the class design (structure, implementation, etc)?"

Qualitative themes were identified as two group facilitators reviewed their notes and the audio recording of the interview. While the scientific method and thus a positivist, quantitative approach to research is well suited for measuring concrete, factual phenomena that would be independently verifiable, the social sciences often focus on human perception, where people can have differing accounts of the same experience. As a result of this assumption, there is no one objectively verifiable truth when it comes to lived experiences; rather, there are as many individual truths regarding one specific experience as there are people experiencing it (Creswell, 2007).

The research design utilized in this study is firmly rooted in Moustakas' (1994) application of transcendental phenomenology to social science research. Phenomenology originated as a philosophical concept as early as in the 18th century, but Edmund Husserl is credited with developing it into a philosophical system that evolved into a research paradigm in the first half of the 20th century (Moustakas, 1994). When conducting phenomenological research, the goal is to develop a composite description of the phenomenon researched. The individual descriptions are considered and delimited to meaningful units, which in turn are clustered into themes, which enables the researcher to

develop the composite description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

## 3. Results

*Quantitative results.* Results from a series of one-way within-subjects ANOVA's using the pre-post surveys indicated significant increases in level of knowledge and ability to write grants ( $F = 4.16, df = 1, p = .043$ ), in ability to use library databases ( $F = 7.22, df = 1, p = .006$ ), and in ability to comprehend scholarly journal articles ( $F = 3.56, df = 1, p = .037$ ). Of particular importance were the significant increases in the rating of the importance of grant writing in the professional development of a human service worker ( $F = 10.81, df = 1, p = .001$ ) and the level of interest in the course topic of grant writing ( $F = 12.59, df = 1, p = .001$ ). Overall, quantitative findings suggest that there was an increase in core competencies related to grant writing.

*Qualitative results.* For the present study, qualitative data was also obtained via the intensive focus group. Each participant's response was recorded, transcribed, and examined in an effort to identify particular themes. Such themes emerged only after reading student comments several times and taking note of particular issues of importance within each comment. Similar topics and responses were revealed and natural groupings emerged. Two coders were utilized and themes were finalized based upon synchrony of identified groupings. It is important to note while there are a number of natural internal biases and assumptions inherent in conducting qualitative research, such as cultural orientations and historical experiences, a key concept to highlight here, however, is that according to qualitative research protocols, these are not problems to solve, but simply truths to point out to the reader. As Coffey and Atkinson (1996) point out, coding comments adds nothing initially to an understanding of the data. It is essentially a reductionistic task. The data only begin to become valuable when similar appeals to indeterminate knowledge have been identified. Significant themes emerge from survey participants' comments because such themes are actually embedded in them.

### *Narrative Response Themes*

Thematic analysis from focus group interviews indicated that the different learning techniques implemented increased several student competencies, internal resources, and learning strategies. Themes that emerged and selected student comments follow.

*Confidence* – "It made me feel like I can do it. I can go further and be productive in the future."; "I can write a research paper like that (snaps)!"; "I felt prepared." This theme speaks to the notion of a students' sense of self-

efficacy and ability to successfully complete the tasks required in the class. As instructors, we interpreted these thematic comments to be indicators that the instructional strategies used were effective in bringing about this growth. *Meaning* – “*I got to create something. That is neat!*”; “*The skills we had to use in this class are always good to know.*” As mentioned earlier, students often had a sense of dread prior to taking the class and previous research has indicated that research oriented content is often seen as meaningless, or lacking relevance (Ruby, 2005). These comments indicate that the instructional strategies enabled the students to find an avenue for personal meaning construction as they designed a program to address a need for which they felt concern. Thus, the skills acquired became salient to students for their potential work beyond the classroom. *Critical thinking* – “*Allowed me to approach [demographic] statistics in a different way.*” “*It made my brain go to a different place.*” As instructors, we were concerned with helping our students develop critical thinking skills related to data analysis and building a rationale for a given program design. These types of thematic comments indicated that students were challenged to approach data in a new and different way and that they perceived that the instructional strategies utilized helped them do so. *Usefulness*- “*Now I know where to find resources to actually help.*” “*I liked how the class explained why we do what we do.*” If, as mentioned earlier, students do seek relevance for the material they are being required to learn in class, these comments indicate that the instructional requirements and pedagogical approaches we used enabled students to perceive that the material was useful to them – both as an academic discipline and as an emerging human services professional. *Feedback about Process*- “*Having things due in draft form along the way really helped me know how I was doing and what I needed to add or change.*”; “*The regular feedback was really valuable.*”; “*The process was like using building blocks.*” This theme provides affirmation that the step-by-step feedback process utilized for the program design and grant proposal project was appreciated by students and assisted them in their learning. We see these comments as an affirmation that students benefit from a guided learning process that incorporated opportunities for periodic evaluation and feedback.

Overall, the qualitative themes indicate that the strategies we used in the course were effective and useful for student learning. These themes, when combined with the more quantitative measures of student success, indicate that the methods utilized in the classroom were successful.

## 4. Discussion

*“Tell me and I’ll forget; show me and I may remember;*

*involve me and I’ll understand.”*

~ Chinese Proverb

In the present study, we sought to gain a deeper understanding of whether or not a grant writing course would serve to increase students’ internal resources and competencies, as well as personal mastery and confidence. While there has been a growing push to integrate grant writing skills into human services curriculum (e.g., Puig & Downey, 2001), less is known about students’ feelings and experiences related to taking and completing a grant writing course. As such, this became a prime opportunity to not only improve the delivery of grant writing/research courses, but also a chance to reflect on best practices and outcomes related to students’ classroom experiences. Specifically, we were interested in not only examining the extent to which student knowledge and understanding of course material improved over the semester, but also how student’s intrapersonal skills evolved.

Results, overall, indicated that student ability and interest in grant writing both increased upon completion of the course despite how negatively the student’s perceive the topic when they begin the class. These latter outcomes are especially critical for human services students who will continue to work in the field and whereby personal stamina and discipline are oftentimes necessary. Having self-knowledge (i.e., that one is capable of solving problems, of working under stress, of completing challenging assignments, and of being resourceful) are key factors when working with vulnerable and challenging clients/populations. These skills are also critical in that they provide the foundation from which people learn to cope with stress, manage emotions, as well as interact with others and resolve conflict. Our findings shed light on the fact that completing a grant writing course is more than learning core research skills, but can serve as a necessary foundation from which life-long intrapersonal abilities develop.

As such, faculty who teach grant writing and research-based courses can enhance students’ personal sense of self. As shown, this can be achieved by guiding students through the process of grant writing and by providing opportunities for students to reflect on their progress, as well as connecting this to the larger field of human services. It is through the grant writing process that students can begin to not only understand the larger challenge and solutions to improving the lives of those we serve, but also to gain personal insight into ones’ capability for overcoming fear. Furthermore, when we include students in the process of creating their own journey, and provide to them the opportunity to gain meta-awareness of their achievements in the classroom, students will truly begin to understand the salient role they can play as leaders in the field of Human Services.

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