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**Growing Grant Professionals:  
A Snapshot of Two Community-Focused Education  
Programs**

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**Abstract**

Professional training in grant development is readily available. From in-person, week-long immersion classes with hefty price tags, to free hour-long webinars and self-paced online courses, there are many opportunities for professional development in this arena. However, what opportunities exist to grow the grants profession at the local level? This strategy paper describes two ongoing educational efforts in Syracuse, New York: 1) A grant writing and professional development workshop series hosted by a community foundation that aims to enhance nonprofit capacity and sustainability; and 2) An undergraduate service-learning class which pairs students with community-based nonprofits to teach grant skills while contributing to community development through the production of actual grant proposals.

**Introduction**

It is not unusual for nonprofit staff to have both fundraising and grant development as a part of their job responsibilities. Many have little or no formal education in these skills. Even for organizations that do not normally rely on grant funding, administrative staff may feel compelled to focus on grant applications because grants sometimes appear to yield large rewards for less effort than other fundraising strategies (O'Neal-McElrath, 2013). As a result, many nonprofit staff members find themselves overwhelmed by the necessity to maintain best practices in grant writing techniques or to seek training for the first time.

Fortunately, there are many training opportunities available to grant novices. Common types of instructor-led options include: comprehensive, in-person, week-long immersion classes; two-day, single-topic, in-depth classes; and half-day or one-hour introductory sessions or single-topic overviews. These "in-house" trainings take place at organizational headquarters or in traveling workshops. For those who prefer self-directed training, both free and fee-based self-paced online courses are available. There are also many books on the subject. However, each of these training opportunities represents training for an individual. What happens when the focus is on improving the needs of the individual *and of the community?*

The authors of this paper are colleagues at the same university involved in separate, but similar community-based and community-focused grant development training efforts. One is sponsored by the local community foundation with the goal of improving the quality of grant proposals received from area nonprofits. The second is an undergraduate college course offered through a long-standing, award-winning program known for community involvement. The following is a snapshot of each of these unique programs.

### **Community Foundation-Sponsored Grant Writing Workshops**

The Central New York Community Foundation (CNYCF), established in 1927 and based in Syracuse, New York, is the largest charitable foundation in the region with assets of nearly \$190 million. In 2015, CNYCF awarded almost \$10 million in grants, primarily through its Community Grant Program, which supports nonprofit programs benefiting Onondaga and Cayuga County, New York. The Community Foundation works closely with local nonprofits and serves as a civic leader, convener, and sponsor of special initiatives designed to strengthen local nonprofits and to address the region's most pressing challenges.

Toward this end, CNYCF started its Nonprofit Essentials Workshop Series (NEWS), a series of professional development courses for the nonprofit community. NEWS topics include: Board Development, Financial Management, Understanding Financial Statements, and Grant Writing. The Community Foundation partners with experts in the community to deliver these three-hour workshops at its facility and charges a nominal fee of \$25 to cover food and to encourage attendance. Presenters are not paid. CNYCF donates the speaker fee to a local nonprofit chosen by the presenter.

In 2011 the CNYCF, in partnership with Syracuse University, designed a Grant Writing Workshop for their NEWS series. These courses have been offered at least once every year since that time, have sold out at 35 participants each time offered, and have received "strongly favorable" participant evaluations.

The Introduction to Grant Writing Workshop covers a broad range of topics essential to any nonprofit professional involved in raising funds through grants. Many local nonprofits are too small to have dedicated fundraising positions, so attendees' roles vary—communications, marketing, event coordinators, education specialists and board members. Fundraising and grant development are job expectations, but frequently formal training or experience is lacking. These nonprofit professionals express that they feel overwhelmed and unprepared when trying to accomplish their own jobs and also asked to keep their organization financially viable. While this cannot be fully remedied in three hours, this workshop provides a solid introduction to the field and an overview of techniques, tips, and pitfalls of grant writing.

Following the first introductory workshop, CNYCF conducted a survey to determine which grant topics participants and other nonprofit professionals would be most interested in exploring in more depth. The overwhelming response was for budgets and evaluation metrics. As a result, these topics became the focus of the three-hour Advanced Grant Writing Workshop. The Advanced Workshop follows a much more interactive format. Participants bring a current project that they are developing. In the session, they work through their theory of change, draft a logic model, define program outcomes and metrics, develop a budget, and brainstorm sustainability. Workshop evaluations indicate that participants appreciate the hands-on portions of the session, would like more, and would even appreciate more time for this advanced workshop.

The NEWS series developed by the Central New York Community Foundation is an excellent model for community foundations and other organizations interested in building local nonprofit capacity. CNYCF is a trusted entity in the region and, as such, nonprofits know they will receive high-quality information from CNYCF-sponsored training. The workshop series also benefits the Foundation, as the workshops have resulted in stronger proposals from better prepared nonprofit organizations, allowing more effective work to be done in the community.

There are a few key factors leading to the success of this format. Because the Community Foundation owns its own space and attracts speakers for minimal or no fees, costs to the participants are affordable, even for the smallest nonprofits. Other advantages are that the workshops are local (most participants drive fewer than 30 minutes to attend), in-person, and focused, and they require only a half-day time commitment. Reviews of the introductory course are overwhelmingly favorable and indicate that participants feel that it is the right amount of material at the right pace. Attendees of the advanced workshop note that they appreciate the time allocated to work on current projects and that they would like even more time to brainstorm ideas with the interactive group with the goal of improving on current proposals in progress.

## **Undergraduate Grant Writing Education**

The Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs Program at Syracuse University is home to the Public Policy Major, known for graduating students with the skills and intent to make the world a better place (Levy, 2007, p. 11). Courses emphasize the development of skills including technical writing, public presentations, systematic evaluation, proficiency in Excel, and teamwork. The program itself emphasizes community service. A significant portion of the curriculum consists of hands-on field work—accomplished in partnership with community agencies—through internships, research projects, and service-learning courses. Over the past 40 years, the Public Affairs Program has helped hundreds of nonprofits and government organizations in Onondaga County and throughout the world with research and service projects.

Since 2003, a consistently popular offering has been Introduction to Grant Writing—a 15-week service-learning course, which places equal emphasis on the learning in the classroom and the service provided to the community (Furco, 1996). The course pairs students with community-based nonprofit organizations to learn about grant development by identifying appropriate funding opportunities for the organization, and creating a full grant proposal for submission. Class size is small (10–12 students) to facilitate ample feedback among the instructor, the students, and the partner organizations. Class time is divided equally between instruction, question and answer periods, and lab work, during which students either research relevant funder information and data for use in their proposals, or write proposal content and provide real-time peer reviews.

Course content focuses on basic elements of grant development. Two requirements the students meet are to research the community to validate the needs identified by their organizations and to manage and document their communications, including site visits, conference calls, and email exchanges.

Besides the final course product—a fully packaged proposal delivered to the organization for submission—a unique feature of the semester is an evening with local foundations. Students deliver three-minute “elevator speeches” about a community need and how their organizations propose to address that need. Executive Directors and Program Officers from local foundations provide insight on their foundation missions and methods of grant making to the students and invited organizational representatives. The evening ends with a lively question and answer period, which provides more useful, and often candid, information. Foundation personnel respond to these events enthusiastically, calling them an enjoyable way to learn about new needs and organizations in their community, while fostering learning for the students and organizations. Students and organizational representatives consistently report that this Panel of Local Foundations event facilitates a greater understanding about philanthropic operations of the individual funders but also of the importance of relationships among funders in a single community.

Students gain skills, experience, and knowledge necessary to draft successful grant applications, with the intent of improving the quality of life in their community. Each graduate brings to a prospective employer applied experience in identifying funding targets, and technical grant development. Course reviews consistently point to the “real world” design of the course as the most valuable aspect: pairing with a community organization to produce a tangible product for potential local impact. Alumni of the Policy Studies program have gone on to be employed as nonprofit administrators, case workers, and researchers.

The impact of this course extends beyond the individual students. Each partner community organization receives a new, eager volunteer; one specifically tasked to identify, apply for, and hopefully secure a new funding stream for their programs. Organizational representatives are exposed to new materials on grant writing, feedback from the instructor and local funders on their project ideas, and the potential for securing new funding for their organization. Local foundation representatives learn of community needs, and of organizations and projects responding to those needs. The instructor benefits each year from relationships with new and existing community-based nonprofits and learns about and draws attention to community needs. From this annual array of partnerships, the university-community relationship itself is strengthened through small but impactful collaborations.

## Conclusion

While in-person and online grant development training opportunities exist in many forms, most focus on filling an information void for an individual. In contrast, the two educational offerings described in this paper developed to address individual skill-building while providing a positive community impact. The potential benefits realized through both forms of instruction, a community-based grant workshop and an undergraduate service learning course, are shown below:

		Benefits					
		Grant writing skills	Nonprofit Management skills	Collaboration skills	Funding generated	Community awareness	Goodwill investment
Beneficiaries	Student	X	X	X		X	X
	Nonprofit rep	X	X	X	X		X
	Nonprofit org			X	X		X
	Instructor			X		X	X
	Foundation rep					X	X
	Community				X		X
	University					X	X

### Benefits of Community-Based Grant Writing Instruction

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