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Entrepreneurial Skills in Academia: A Curriculum for Teaching Proposal Writing to Female Graduate Students

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Abstract

This article addresses the development of entrepreneurial skills in academic and human service settings by reporting on a curriculum for teaching proposal writing for funded research and program development grants. The article includes a review of current challenges in preparing primarily female graduate students with skills needed for grant seeking in their careers in human services. A description of the proposal writing curriculum, teaching methodologies used, and outcomes obtained during the past six offerings of the course are described. In addition, preliminary evaluation data from a survey of a nonrandom sample of participants in the course (N=30) about their perceptions of the course and its utility are included. Lessons learned and implications for using the curriculum with other populations, such as female faculty and agency-based human service professionals, are also explored.

Entrepreneurial Skills in Academia: A Curriculum for Teaching Proposal Writing to Female Graduate Students

A consensus in the literature reflects the continuing turbulent nature of the external environment of universities, human service organizations, and other public and civic organizations (Hopkins & Hyde, 2002; Martin, 2000; Patti, 2000). Increasingly, private, non-profit, and public sector organizations operate in a competitive funding environment with limited resources to meet a growing demand for services and enhanced calls for accountability (Austin, 2002; Brooks, 2004; Marx, 2000). For example, federal spending cuts to social services have resulted in non-profit organizations losing almost $46 billion in federal revenue between 1980 and 1996, pushing human service managers to rely on multiple streams of funding to meet the gap left between traditional federal sources of funding and rising demand for services (Brooks, 2004; Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004). In addition, rapid technological changes, the post September 11, 2001 reprioritization of the country's needs, and mounting state government deficits have all contributed to a growing urgency to develop and maintain a diverse base of funding for organizations (Farruggia, 2004; Hopkins & Hyde, 2002; Martin, 2000; Menefee & Thompson, 1994; Selber & Streeter, 2000). Indeed, the pressure on public sector managers for innovative and entrepreneurial responses to such financial challenges has never been greater (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Salamon, 1997; Tropman, 1989). This is especially true

in academic settings where state governments have increased fiscal scrutiny of university budgets, pushing the academy to rely more heavily on budget monies drawn down by faculty grants and contracts from outside funders (Boyer & Cockriel, 1999).

In this highly competitive marketplace for organizations, the challenge to enhance entrepreneurial skills, such as grant seeking, has increased in importance for top administrators. But how best to train these employees and professionals has been an ongoing debate in educational circles (Ezell, Chernesky, & Healy, 2004; Faherty, 1987; Gummer, 1997; Martin, Pine, & Healy, 1999; McNutt, 1995; Patti, 2000; Rimer, 1987; Wolk, 1994). Discussions over the past two decades regarding training in proposal writing, especially within graduate education in human services, have called into question even the necessity for, as well as the structure of such training. Other curriculum issues, such as the balance between technical and quantitative skills as opposed to theoretical and value-driven learning, have also been debated (Edwards, 1987; Hopkins & Hyde, 2002; Martin, et al., 1999; Menefee, 1998; Menefee & Thompson, 1994; Rimer, 1987; Wolk, 1994).

This article seeks to address one aspect of this debate by reporting on a training curriculum for teaching proposal writing skills to graduate students in human services and its adaptation for faculty and other health and human service professionals. The article includes a review of current challenges in training for proposal writing, a description of the curriculum, teaching methodologies used, and preliminary evaluation data about participants' perceptions of the course and its utility. Lessons learned and implications for female graduate students, faculty, and health and human service professionals are also covered.

The Challenges

Retrenchment of organizations during the 1980s and 1990s enhanced the interest in resource development within both public and private sector human service organizations, as well as other organizations such as universities. Today, it continues to be of primary interest, especially in organizations within the public and nonprofit sectors that often operate on a thin margin of funds. This happens at a time of increasing budget difficulties, enhanced performance expectations for organizations, as well as increased demand for government and civic services. All of these factors exacerbate limited resources and demand innovative, entrepreneurial responses to support even the core missions of these organizations (Brooks, 2004; Moxley & Bueche, 2002).

These competitive social markets require higher levels of performance, especially in the area of resource development. The challenge is how to prepare future professionals, such as human service managers, to navigate the complexities of the external environment and address the increasingly intractable budget problems that are part of these organizational environments. Studies of nonprofit managers reveal that obtaining and managing resources were considered core requirements for their career preparation (Mirabella & Wish, 2000; Moxley & Bueche, 2002). Furthermore, a fundamental expectation in the nonprofit community is that graduate students in feeder management programs, such as social work, public administration, and business administration, finish with knowledge about these outside functions and not just acquire the skills on the job. Fundraising is considered among the most crucial categories relating to the management of the outside environment of nonprofits, a skill typically addressed through activities such as proposal writing (Hopkins & Hyde, 2002; Mirabella & Wish, 2000). Within universities, for example, studies suggest that female faculty, in particular, feel unprepared to tackle one of the key aspects of their performance evaluation--that of research and associated grant seeking and proposal writing (Boyer & Cockriel, 1999; Daniel & Gallaher, 1990). In one study, female faculty reported lacking the training to pursue grants which became a reason not to pursue external funding. In most cases, women faculty reported that they were not knowledgeable about how to initiate the process of proposal writing which was cited as a reason for fewer proposals being submitted (Boyer & Cockriel, 1999).

Furthermore, overall proposal writing and other forms of resource development have not been given the prominence in university mentoring programs or in graduate education in human services. For example, social work graduate students commonly report feeling unprepared to face these tasks upon graduation and employment, primarily due to the lack of graduate training (Haslett, 1997). This identified need for training can initially be offered through course content and experientially based activities in proposal writing.

The Proposal Writing Curriculum

The following curriculum highlights the efforts primarily developed as part of a graduate program in social work management. In addition, much of the content is also beginning to be adapted for faculty in university settings as part of a book development process. In addition, the curriculum has been used in consultation with a variety of organizations, including public sector and nonprofit organizations in health and human services. All of these settings are characterized as placing a high premium on entrepreneurial activities, and thus keenly interested in this training.

Course Theoretical Frameworks

The instructor blended three main theoretical perspectives to frame the course content. First, a systems perspective helped underscore the importance of the grant seeker within an organizational context. The instructor covered divergent perspectives--the grant seeker as a professional within an organization, the grant seeking organization, and the funder--across the various topics of the course. This systems perspective assisted in preparing participants in understanding both the dynamics of the program development, proposal planning, and evaluation processes from a more holistic framework.

In addition, a capacity-building framework supported the understanding of developing fiscal, human, and informational resources to address needs at the organization and community levels. Proposal writing was portrayed as part of a larger effort of building resources within organizations and connecting organizations to the community by addressing community needs.

Finally, a consumer-oriented framework provided a focus that supported topics, such as the choice of consumer methodologies for program evaluation of proposed grant activities. These theoretical frameworks were an important aspect of the course, embedding the overall technical skill of grant seeking and proposal writing within professional purposes, values, and ethics. Without this type of theoretical framework, the course provides only a one-dimensional, technical perspective and limits the importance of seeing this as an issue of building social capital in organizations.

Course Domains

The course began by focusing on the new organizational models in the public and nonprofit sectors, such as quality management and consumer-oriented management theories. Also, trends in funding across the United States were covered, including areas of funding priority and donor profiles. The importance of grants to the development and extension of resources in organizations and communities, especially to disadvantaged populations, were examined. Next, the course addressed the process of funding and streams of funding within different areas of research and program development. Diverse types of funders, including private foundations; corporations; and federal, state, and local government entities, were also examined and techniques for searching and matching these funders to organizations were covered. The basic parts of proposals were also explored using in-class exercises, critiques of requests-for-proposals (RFPs), and sample proposals. Cover letters, abstracts, literature reviews, methodologies, program evaluations, budgets, and organizational capacity statements were among the main proposal elements reviewed.

The curriculum also emphasized the understanding of the proposal writing process within organizations and

promoted the process as a teamwork effort. Participants also learned about the ethics of proposal writing, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and protection of human subjects process within organizational and university settings. In addition, a variety of research topics were covered, including such issues as survey development and methodologies for promoting consumer input, such as focus groups and consumer satisfaction surveys.

Several books were chosen for the course to give a balance of practice-oriented and theoretical information. A workbook that provided exercises on how to complete the proposal elements was also used (Carlson, 2002; Coley & Scheinberg, 2000; Lauffer, 1997). Readings from the World-Wide-Web on funders and research articles on the needs of diverse populations were included in the reading requirements. A review of such important websites as The Foundation Center provided an impressive array of materials for training (Foundation Center , 2004). Another important source of readings was the articles that participants identified for the literature reviews for substantiation of the needs statements in their proposals.

Teaching Methodologies and how the Seminar Operated

A variety of teaching methodologies were used, including lectures, web-based activities, in-class exercises, and guest lectures with grant experts and former course participants who had successfully integrated proposal writing skills into their careers. Classrooms with Internet connections were vital to the course to facilitate learning about funding streams and proposal guidelines. As well, a classroom that accommodated small group exercises was equally important so that students could participate in activities, such as critiquing proposals and team reviews of RFPs.

However, the most important methodology used was the practice experience of teaming up with an organization in the community to provide the scenario for the proposal writing and program development activities. The emphasis throughout the course was on this experiential element. The instructor emphasized that the proposal was not a lab exercise but rather a real proposal developed within the constraints and opportunities found within a community and organizational context. Thus, class discussions centered on the use of examples from the participants' projects.

Between 11 and 18 participants took the 45-hour classroom course during each offering. Students were required, with instructor input, to negotiate with the selected organization the opportunity to work on a proposal and were responsible for consultations in the organization to complete the project. Organizations readily participated and provided excellent resources to assist the participants with their work including access to staff, program material, information about budgets, and the technology to get the job done. The literature indicates that budgetary and evaluation information is seen as a proprietary element within organizations (Kettner, 2002). However, participants reported no problems gaining data to complete drafts of budgets and suggest outcomes of proposed activities.

Assignments for the course focused only on the actual proposal and required that participants complete the proposal in stages and receive feedback, both written and verbal, during class and scheduled conferences. Participants then used the feedback to rework further drafts of the proposal. During the last several course offerings, the instructor changed from requiring one proposal to two proposals; one proposal was to a private foundation or corporation, the other for a government entity such as a city, county, state, or federal unit. The two proposals were directed toward the same overall program so that participants mastered only one area of the literature. For example, a participant preparing a proposal to a foundation for a child advocacy center might prepare the second proposal for different budget items or different program components to a state crime victims program.

Organizational Settings

Participants were free to choose agency settings that reflected their interests. The instructor encouraged, but did not require, participants to choose agencies with which they had some prior affiliation or knowledge, such as a volunteer, a student intern, or as an employee. Having some familiarity with the agency was a key to both managing the up-front time commitment needed for engaging the agency and producing a richly valuable product that the agencies could utilize. A variety of agency settings were used, including public and private, non-profit settings in practice areas such as mental health, disabilities, child welfare, juvenile justice, school-based, and medical, just to name a few.

Course Limitations

Although participants were enthusiastic about the course, they also routinely commented on the time consuming nature of the work outside of class. Participants reported spending between 5 to 8 hours per week on meetings in the agencies, literature reviews, and reviewing RFPs.

This level of commitment was also true for the instructor's time. Reading and editing drafts of proposals and heavy amounts of consultation with participants were needed. Because of this, having a class size between 12 to 15 participants was essential.

An additional challenge was the lack of a uniform guide for writing the proposal. Most RFPs for grants vary and this created the situation of not having a common framework for the proposals across participant projects. This was a trade-off with having a "real world" request-for-proposal versus one that the instructor prepared for all students. However, most proposals have similar, yet not identical, elements and this was deemed more important in order to keep the assignment from becoming "just another academic paper."

Evaluation Methodology

A web-based survey was distributed to a group of course participants of graduate students in a medium size school of social work in a southwestern state. Of the 78 participants who had taken the course over the six course offerings, a total of 43 (55%) had email addresses on file. Thus, the nonrandom sample included 43 participants, all former graduate students in social work. Of these 43, a total of thirty (N=30) surveys were returned for a return rate of 69%. This represented an acceptable rate of return for surveys (Rubin & Babbie, 2001).

The survey asked participants to respond to their perceptions of the course. The web-based survey included twelve categorical, Likert, and open-ended questions that requested information about their backgrounds, current jobs, prior grant-writing experience, and current work experiences. As well, the survey asked the graduates to rate their perceptions of the utility of various aspects of the proposal writing course.

Findings

Regarding ethnicity, respondents were White (86%, N= 26), Hispanic (10%, N=3), and African-American (3%, N=1). The total group of course participants had a similar make-up; the total course group was White (85%), Hispanic (13%), and African-American (2%) (N=78). In terms of gender, the groups were also comparable. All survey respondents were female (100%, N=30) and between 30-37 years of age, with a mean age of 36 years (N=30). In comparison, the total course group was 73% female and 27% male. Although the respondents were similar to the overall cohort in terms of demographics, the relatively small, nonrandom sample limits the generalizations of the findings.

In terms of their current positions, 30% (N=9) of course respondents stated that their positions were primarily administrative, 37% (N= 11) said that their positions had both clinical and administrative duties, while 3% (N=1) said their positions were all clinical. About 30% (N=9) of respondents said that their positions were "Other," such as dealing with policy and human resources. This data may suggest the variety

of tasks that graduates are expected to perform and the generalist nature of many jobs within the human service profession.

Among the survey respondents, 47% (N=14) stated that prior to the proposal writing course they had no exposure to this task, while 33% (N=10) stated they had some exposure to the topic, and 20% (N=6) stated they had a limited role in writing proposals prior to the class. Such a high level (53%) of students reporting some exposure to the content prior to class may reflect the pervasiveness of proposal writing in the world of agency-based human services and the fact that students have had some level of volunteer, field, or paid work experience in agencies prior to taking the course. Most students reporting prior exposure to the topic stated that they had read or seen proposals in agencies prior to taking the course.

In addition, about 63% (N= 19) of respondents reported that they had further proposal writing experience since graduation, while 37% (N=11) reported that they had not yet had more experience. This reflects a high percentage of students who have had experience since graduation, supporting the idea that graduates need this skill in a variety of jobs in human services.

In terms of student perceptions of the course, respondents reported the usefulness of learning about streams of funding with 96% (N=28) reporting that gathering information about funders and funding agencies was helpful. Only 4% (N=1) reported that they learned only some information on this topic. This was equally true regarding program development where 100% (N=30) of the respondents reported that learning about how to develop programs was very useful. Such high positive responses to learning in these areas may further underscore the importance of using the proposal writing class as a vehicle for teaching policy issues, such as patterns of funding and funding agencies, and for teaching management skills like program development.

Another area the respondents reported as useful was the actual writing skills developed in the course. Of those responding, 96% (N=28) reported that writing skills were very useful, and only one respondent reporting that this was not at all useful. This suggests that graduates recognize the importance of developing writing skills for external audiences, especially after being in the practice world where communication skills, such as writing, are crucial.

In terms of research content, 88% of respondents (N=26) reported that the learning in this area was also very helpful, and only 13% (N= 4) reported that it was only somewhat helpful. This may reflect the importance of giving students opportunities for real practice situations for applying other areas of the curriculum, such as research content.

In addition, 58% (N=17) of respondents reported that agencies appreciated their work, about one-third (31%, N=9) reported only some appreciation, 7% (N=2) reported little to no appreciation, while 3% (N=1) reported no appreciation shown by the agency for the work. Although the study did not examine this question further, such high numbers of participants who did not feel that their work was adequately acknowledged may reflect that participants did not have time to properly terminate with the agencies after the proposals were completed and the course had ended. This is a topic for further exploration and may suggest that a mechanism be built into the course to accomplish this formal acknowledgement. In the future, it might be beneficial to ask agency staff to write letters to participants documenting their work as a way of recognizing these contributions.

In addition, 44% (N= 13) of respondents reported that the experience was very helpful in finding a job after graduation, 38% (N= 11) reported it provided some help, and 17% (N=5) reported that the class did not help them find a job after graduation. With a total of 82% of graduates responding that the course was at least helpful in job acquisition, this may indicate that having a beginning level skill in this area is indeed marketable for human service job seekers. With job markets highly competitive in human services, this may

be a strong selling point for graduates.

Finally, in terms of overall helpfulness of the course, 93% (N=27) found the course to be very or somewhat helpful, and only 3% (N=2) found the course to not be helpful. This indicates a high level of satisfaction with the course's utility.

In addition, the course generated important agency-related and community outcomes. Analyzing data from all participants during the six offerings of the course, a total of 69 proposals were completed for agencies. This represented approximately 11,770 hours of technical assistance provided to agencies in the local community by social work students enrolled in the course. The estimated value of such volunteer assistance was around $93,600, reflecting that the course provided substantial support to the agencies in their service-giving capacities. Based on feedback, at least 7 proposals were known to have been funded, or about one each time the course was offered, and represented approximately $420,000 in added funding for human service organizations and the community. Such outcomes suggest added advantages in terms of connecting the university to the community in a tangible way.

Lessons Learned

In the dynamic environment of organizational practice, human service professionals must understand the importance of entrepreneurial skills, such as proposal writing, since their roles as future managers are now more consumed with maintaining adequate financial support for services. Most graduate students in human services are not regularly exposed to fundraising techniques, such as proposal writing, despite the fact that many of them will face fundraising issues in their employing agencies, even in the short term in their careers. Graduate programs in human services, such as schools of social work, can best help students prepare for this eventuality by requiring all students to take a course in which proposal writing is at least a major domain of the course.

Teaching the course is time consuming for the instructor and requires a substantial commitment to interfacing with the community as well. Instructor knowledge of the community is important and the course works best when the instructor knows the community agencies well. In addition, participants must be able to quickly move into an agency setting due to the fast pace of the course. This was challenging, even under circumstances of a prior relationship with the agency.

The explosion in knowledge and the access to a wide variety of information on funders, RFPs, and the electronic submission of proposals over the World-Wide-Web makes the topic of proposal writing even more compelling as a topic of graduate study. The course is best taught with a high degree of technology support in order to better examine topics, such as websites of funders, streams of funding, and guidelines for proposal submittal. The instructor can also provide cutting edge instruction in the use of software programs, such as web-based survey technology for implementing surveys on the web, spreadsheet software for creating grant budgets, and research analysis software, such as qualitative programs for analyzing narrative focus group data. This is possible if the instructor can dedicate the majority of the course to proposal writing and resource development.

It is an important source of learning that participants are from different interest areas and this proves useful for the class as participants are exposed to needs of diverse populations as well as diverse agency settings and communities. The course also exposes students to the possibility of collaborations across disciplines as participants work on program development projects with agency staff that are often from a variety of disciplines. In addition, the course is important in requiring students to struggle with the real world of agency-based research in terms of program development activities. Many participants have had little or no previous experience with research except within an academic classroom. Preparing program evaluation plans for the grant proposals pushes participants to connect research knowledge with practice. Finally,

participants are also required to work on budget items in their grants and to collect budget data from agencies. Although this is a sensitive issue for some agencies, most participants manage to negotiate this data without concerns. In the process, students report that budgets and budget justifications become easier to discuss.

Overall, anecdotal feedback from agencies throughout the six offerings of the course has been very positive. One indication of this has been the number of agencies that regularly call inquiring about the possibility of receiving students from the proposal writing course for their agencies. In addition, agencies that provide the final internships for many of the course participants often assigned proposal writing tasks after learning that the students had taken the course. This further enhances the students' skills and the value of their work for agencies.

In addition, the course has been used to provide consultation with numerous human service agencies to assist in training of their staff in program development activities. As well, the course is currently being developed for use with female faculty who identify the need for further skill development in this area. Since female faculty often feel at a disadvantage in this area and universities often lack formal mentoring programs, the adaptability of the course for this purpose is being examined.

Conclusion

Human service organizations, especially nonprofits, face many obstacles within the social marketplace, especially in terms of resource development. Educators must respond to these challenges by preparing graduate students with the knowledge and skills both in the classroom and in internships to meet these challenges early in their careers. Indeed, in recent years a new type of resource development specialist has emerged in human service administration, primarily outside of social work, to fill the need in developing and managing resources (Moxley & Bueche, 2002). Social work and other health and human service professions must provide students with these skills in order to continue to be relevant to nonprofit organizations, a traditional employment setting for many human service graduates.

Professionals in human services often view entrepreneurial activities as controversial due to a strong identification with mission-based perspectives. However, an array of resource development activities, such as proposal writing, fund development, and special event development can be seen as a form of advocacy in terms of better addressing goals and causes, thus, part of pursuit of a mission-based identity (Brinckerhoff, 2002; Wolk, 1994). If social work, for example, is to continue to contribute in the human services management arena, especially in leadership for advocating change, such skill sets must be covered in the graduate curriculum. Although human service management is in many ways in its infancy in terms of empirical development, increased competition from fields, such as business management and public administration, argues for the need to enhance the tools and techniques at the disposal of graduates entering the work-force (Menefee, 1998; Packard, 2004; Patti, 2000). With increased pressures to provide leadership in an external environment full of challenges for accountability and innovation, educators must arm graduates with tools and techniques to manage effectively in what has been called the "permanent whitewater" of human service management (Martin, et al., 1999). If human service professions support the idea that its managers do indeed offer a unique perspective for managing human services, then efforts for inclusion of such entrepreneurial skills as proposal writing must be viewed as a critical core component of the curriculum that helps keep our graduates competitive.

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