The Challenges and Opportunities of Community Engagement

Introduction

In spring 2013, our technical communication program began a grant-writing partnership with a small homeless day shelter in our surrounding, rural New Mexico community that has resulted at the time of writing this chapter in nearly $43,000 in grant funding. In many ways, the partnership has been extremely successful. Writing grants for a nonprofit organization has provided technical communication majors with real-world writing opportunities that has assisted with their transition to non-classroom settings, which is the stated goal of many client projects and service-learning pedagogies (Huckin, 1997; Kramer-Simpson, et al., 2015; Matthews & Zimmerman, 1999; Weber & Spartz, 2014). Further, the grant money has not only helped with shelter upkeep and operations but, in the early stages of this partnership, kept the shelter from being shut down completely by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA).

Beyond these pragmatic points, our program strives for deeper goals. We aim, first of all, to instill in students a sense of civic responsibility and to expose them to career opportunities in the nonprofit sector. More importantly, we aim for this project to have long-term benefits for the organization and to build a sustainable infrastructure for future organizational growth. These objectives raise numerous challenges and ethical concerns in our ongoing community work. For example, we must ask to what degree students understand the civic impact of their work? Do they see value in this community collaboration, or is it just another line to add to their résumés? To what degree are we considering the needs of varying community stakeholders such as shelter clients or staff? Are we truly helping the organization grow, or are we just providing temporary financial relief? In building this long-term partnership with one community organization, are we overlooking other needs in the community?
In this chapter, we explore these questions using data drawn from interviews with ten students who have participated in this project over the past three years, a focus group session with the shelter’s staff and board members, and observations from class interactions with students. Our immediate goal in this paper is to provide technical communication programs and instructors with strategies for developing more effective, sustainable, and community-focused service-learning partnerships. However, a broader goal is to challenge programs to take a leading role in their institutions in connecting with key stakeholders in town and on campus.

Service-Learning in Technical Communication

Service-learning pedagogies have a long history not just in technical communication but also in the sister field of composition and rhetoric, and more broadly in higher education research (Bowden & Scott, 2002; Cushman 2002; Deans, 2000; Dubinsky, 2002; Kimme Hea & Shah, 2016; Jacoby and Associates, 1996; Mathieu, 2005; Stoecker, 2016). While service-learning plays a laudable goal of providing students with real-world applications for community work, we would echo Sapp & Crabtree’s (2002) argument that these pedagogies are particularly important for showing technical communication majors that fulfilling employment can be found in the nonprofit sector and not just in for-profit industry. Further, such pedagogies, in theory, can provide students with a deeper sense of the civic responsibilities that accompany professional work (Cushman, 1999; Eble & Gaillet 2004).

Our own community work is situated within two ongoing discussions in the service-learning literature. The first discussion involves the structure of the service-learning relationship, namely the distinction that Cushman (2002) draws between long-term partnerships and “hit-it-and-quit-it relation[s] with communities” (p. 41). The “hit-it-and-quit-it” model might be all too familiar to technical communication practitioners; students are sent into their communities to “find a client” and perform some sort of service, whether it be creating publicity materials, documenting workplace practices, or so on. Generally, students complete this work in a semester’s time and release this work to the “client” before heading off for winter or summer break.

This model certainly has its place in the curriculum in that it provides students with a better sense of audience than a strictly classroom-based project would. However, this model has been critiqued extensively. Cushman (2002) has expressed concerns with the sustainability of a model that relies on students to “create their own liaisons” with community partners with very little faculty involvement, as over time bad service-learning experiences can hurt the program’s credibility. In our own case, living in a very small town, we could very quickly run through our list of community partners if we were to develop a reputation for substandard or unreliable student work. More importantly, however, many scholars have rightly indicated that this approach places too much emphasis on
what the student receives from the experience, rather than what the organization receives. As Mathieu (2005) aptly argues, nonprofit organizations’ needs extend beyond the confines of the semester and often require more follow-up than students can provide. Further, she recounts numerous anecdotes of nonprofits either not receiving the promised deliverables, receiving deliverables that were not useful, or taking more time than they have to give mentoring student workers. More recently, Kimme Hea & Shah (2016) noted the complexity of community partners’ motivations for participating in service-learning assignments and emphasized the importance community partners placed on having a clear plan or agenda for a service-learning assignment, which can be difficult without adequate teacher involvement. Thus, while it is important to consider the educational benefits for students, reciprocity is critical to a successful service-learning partnership; the activity needs to benefit the organization and must account for the nonprofit’s needs, constraints, and timetables.

As Stoecker (2016) has aptly pointed out, even the long-term partnership model has pitfalls to consider. Presumably, this approach builds better relationships between higher education and a nonprofit organization. However, he writes, “as agency staff come and go and students come and go, the bureaucratic long-term partnership is not between individuals but between organizations, neither of which may actually be controlled by the people most affected by it” (p. 71). Thus, we would stress that the concept of a “long-term partnership” does not imply an indefinite relationship. That is, the partnership needs to have sustainability in mind so that if the project runs its course for any number of reasons, the organization has the infrastructure in place to continue whatever service had been rendered by students. Further, Stoecker raises the ethical concern of whether a higher education institution or program, by entering a long-term relationship with one organization, might be taking opportunities away from other nonprofits, or might be giving this one organization an advantage over other nonprofits. We would agree that educators need to have a holistic understanding of community needs. Later in this chapter, we will discuss how we have used this one partnership as a way to bridge to other community opportunities.

The second essential discussion pertinent to our work is the definition of “community” itself, and the way students learn via the client project to position themselves in relation to it. Most important to this question, of course, is which community one decides to focus on. The university community is certainly the safest and easiest community to engage but arguably not the community with the greatest need. Cushman (1999) argues for academia to think beyond these comfortable communities “to address social issues important to community members in under-served neighborhoods.” Cushman goes on to describe these often overlooked local communities: “You know these neighborhoods: They’re the ones often located close by universities, just beyond the walls and gates, or down the hill, or over the bridge, or past the tracks. The public in these communities isn’t usually the one scholars have in mind when they try to define the roles of “public” intellectuals” (p. 329).
We agree with this charge, though we would like to overlay a concern raised by both Stoecker (2016) and Ornatowski & Bekins (2004) concerning the murkiness of our assumptions about “community.” Stoecker (2016) cautions us that, as members of the university, we often place ourselves in the position of identifying what this “community” needs or lacks. Further, Ornatowski & Bekins (2004) have argued that many of our uses of community in educational contexts communicate an implicit duality between “inside” and “outside” the university. That is, in the very act of sending students out into the community, we are defining community as “something ‘outside’ of whatever it is that is designated as not the community” (p. 256). In other words, while ostensibly trying to better “university-community” relations, we are reinforcing a separation between the two. Further, Ornatowski & Bekins (2004) draw attention to our assumptions that sending students into the community for “real life” experience automatically “translates into civic and, perhaps more importantly, rhetorical awareness” (p. 255).

We have wrestled with these questions with our program’s community partnerships. In our situation, since very few of our students are from the small New Mexico town in which our university is situated, this divide between ‘university’ and ‘community’ can be very pronounced, and it may be very difficult for students to identify themselves as members of the surrounding community (though we do, of course, welcome when students are able to do so). In our case, we hope that through this pedagogy students are reflective of what a civic stance might mean and to differentiate it from the hyperpragmatic approach that Scott (2004) identifies. One obstacle to teaching civic engagement in the class is that students’ lens for viewing learning is very often shaped by the industry-university relationship. Technical communication students express their learning in utilitarian terms, often in terms of what can be added to a résumé or TC portfolio. The struggle is helping students adjust their discourse and expand their frame of learning to account for lessons they can learn from a community-based project and possibly to expand their understanding of future career trajectories to include consideration of nonprofit sector jobs. From a programmatic perspective, our goal is to think more critically of how our relationship with a nonprofit is benefiting the organization and how the bridges that we build with the community partners enables students and community members to work together on solving community problems.

Project Description and Methodology

Client Background

Puerto Seguro (PSI) is a homeless day shelter in Socorro, a small city of about 9,000 residents in south-central New Mexico situated 70 miles south of Albuquerque and close to 150 miles from Las Cruces. It is seemingly a town in the middle of nowhere, and many New Mexicans have trouble placing it on their
mental maps of the state; Albuquerque residents tend to place it much closer to Las Cruces, and Las Cruces residents place it up closer to Albuquerque. The Spanish word *socorro* comes from the same root as the English word *succor* and means “help in distress.”

Socorro, NM, was slammed by the last economic downturn, and many businesses—often renting space from out-of-town landlords—recently shuttered their windows, causing many residents to lose their jobs. Many of the evaporating towns in the vicinity have been drying up for years, and these residents also rely on Socorro for services. The health of our community has become very important to our university and has been recently written into our school’s strategic plan. In addition to encouraging faculty and administration to live and shop in Socorro rather than Albuquerque, our school has looked for ways to engage the community and help build better infrastructure for education and economic growth. Our technical communication program has found opportunities to lead this charge through proposal-writing initiatives such as the one we have developed with PSI.

PSI, while a small facility, serves all of Socorro, Catron, and Valencia Counties, an area roughly the size of Maryland, and also draws many clients from the nearby Navajo reservation. The day shelter offers meals, shower and laundry facilities, and emergency shelter and support paying utilities, gas and/or rent. PSI is also committed to helping clients find employment and provides clients with a mailing address when searching for jobs. The shelter operates with just two paid employees and a large volunteer base; many volunteers are previous or current shelter clients.

The uniqueness of this shelter makes it difficult to anonymize completely. We have worked with our Institutional Review Board (IRB) administrator and the shelter staff and executive board on methods of protecting participants’ identities. Further, we have made sure to keep participants apprised of our progress on this study. By and large, our community partners are excited about our opportunity to share the story of our partnership.

**Client Project Description**

We started our project with PSI with a grant-writing unit in a required senior-level class in our Bachelor of Science in Technical Communication program in spring 2013 (TC 421: Professional Writing Workshop). Elisabeth taught this first iteration. After a successful pilot, we decided to continue the grant-writing partnership, though the project was moved to our senior-level Persuasive Communication class, which Steve taught in spring 2014. We continued from that point working on these grants in Persuasive Communication, taught by Elisabeth again in fall 2015, in addition to working smaller grant-writing and publicity tasks for PSI into other classes in the major (e.g., our 1-credit introduction to the major, TC 101). Thus, many students who partook in the third iteration of the class had already been introduced to the organization.
Service-learning client projects always involve some amount of chaos; simply bringing in stakeholders outside of the university complicates the audiences with whom students are communicating and for whom they are writing. However, it is this complexity that can lead to rich learning opportunities for students. Elisabeth had initially decided to forge a relationship with a nonprofit in the interest of streamlining the process of collecting organizational data and creating a deeper and more meaningful grant-writing experience. In preparation for the spring 2013 class, Elisabeth contacted an acquaintance at the local Episcopal church who chaired the board of the local shelter. Elisabeth had not been to the homeless shelter at that time nor did she know what services it provided. However, she believed in supporting the community and had positive experiences working with homeless shelters in other communities, and so she thought that PSI may be a good candidate for the focus of grant-writing efforts.

Initially, Elisabeth planned to work with the shelter for only part of a semester. After working with the director and board for three months, she found the work engaging, became a member of the board, and planned to engage more classes and students in writing grants for the shelter. The willingness of the board and paid staff to work with the students was a key factor in building this relationship. The staff successfully fielded many emails from students during the spring 2013 class. The accessibility and flexibility of the staff helped mitigate other complications with the partnership such as ideas posed by staff that seemed impractical or not fundable, or discrepancies with record keeping and shelter statistics. The other most central force driving this partnership was the mutual need: our students needed grant-writing experience, and the homeless shelter had a seemingly endless list of needs for funding projects. Students wrote grants for a variety of projects at the shelter in spring 2013—from winter clothes to a kitchen upgrade. We submitted three grants from the groups the semester after the class ended (for food, kitchen upgrade and utilities support) and were awarded two of the grants in spring 2014 (kitchen upgrade and utilities support).

Involvement on the shelter board gave Elisabeth access to the organization’s financial records and more details about client success stories. In the second iteration of the class (which Steve taught in spring 2014), Elisabeth, as a member of the board, served as the main point of contact for Steve’s students. We had very pragmatic reasons at the time for reducing students’ contact with shelter staff; the board was undergoing some personnel changes, and there was tension between the staff and the board. We thought that we had the best interests of students in mind by sheltering them from this disorganization, but in retrospect, we feel that this was the wrong decision. The communication was quick and timely, but as a professor, Elisabeth missed some of the authentic stories and experiences of working at the shelter day-to-day. Students also never visited the shelter and were distanced from the experience. However, the partnership continued to be useful to the students as they found and wrote grants. Students were able to use the extensive database of information gathered over the course of the past year and a half. Also, it was very beneficial to the organization, as the second part of the
grant for kitchen upgrades started in spring 2013 had to be written by students in the spring 2014 class. This grant alone secured $10,000 and allowed PSI to upgrade its kitchen with commercial-grade equipment as required by a recent FDA inspection.

Our third iteration of this class was held in fall 2015 (taught by Elisabeth), and in order to engage students better, we scheduled a field trip to visit the shelter and talk with staff. Students became more interested in the shelter (some donated food or clothes), and Elisabeth by this time had a well-established database of information about the shelter, spanning three years. Elisabeth used samples of previous grants to help students write for the shelter. Also, a student from the spring 2013 class, who had graduated and had accepted a position as a professional grant-writer for a large nonprofit, shared samples of her own grant-writing with the class. Despite this preparation, Elisabeth still phoned the staff regularly to ask student questions and clarify stories of success at the shelter. Five grants from this class were submitted between fall 2015 and summer 2016, and four were funded (for plumbing, shelving, chairs/tables, and gas for clients). The class was also featured in news articles in the local paper and on the school website.

Since piloting the grant-writing partnership, we have worked shelter work into multiple courses in the TC program. More recently, we have also run an Advanced Grant Writing course that works more in depth with the shelter (including more work on follow-up grant reporting and grant administration) and pursues a number of grant opportunities benefitting other organizations and small businesses in town. This course has been popular among community members, as well. We are constantly looking for ways to grow the impact of this partnership and other partnerships in the community and so we collected data from the stakeholders, both students and community members, to evaluate the effectiveness of the partnership with Puerto Seguro and systematically observe ways this partnership could be extended.

**Data Collection**

We identify strongly with Grabill’s (2012) description of Community-Based Research (CBR) as “the practice of working with people to answer questions and solve problems—as opposed to researching ‘on’ people and their problems” (p. 212). That is, much like action research, CBR is participatory in that the researchers work directly with members of the community on tasks being studied. This research approach necessarily means that we are not as clinically removed from our subject of study as other qualitative researchers might be, and we are, in fact, directly impacting study results. However, through this approach, we have gained a much greater level of insider access to the community, and we believe that this approach allows for greater reciprocity and benefits to the community. The other side of this reciprocity is that we discuss our research with members of the community organization and account for their insight in our findings. This community participation is particularly critical in our case, since
the remoteness and uniqueness of the organization with which we are working make it nearly impossible to disguise the organization’s identity, though steps were taken to protect identities of the shelter’s staff and volunteers.

We employ a purely qualitative approach to the study. This IRB-approved study draws from interviews with student participants, and staff and board members from the shelter, in addition to our own observations of class and shelter interactions. Students were recruited by email and participated in 30-minute, semi-structured follow-up interviews on their experiences writing for the shelter. We were careful to ensure that we had representation from all three iterations of our pilot work with our project. Because the first iteration occurred in a different class than the one that became the primary home for this project, some students participated in both the first and second iterations. Overall, ten students were interviewed. In Table 5.1, we have included their pseudonyms and an indication of which versions of the project they participated in.

In the interest of protecting the identities of shelter staff, volunteers, and board members, we conducted a one-hour focus group interview with seven participants who fill a variety of roles at the shelter. Participant responses from the focus group will be referred to only as “focus group responses”; the roles of responders will not be indicated.

Interviews were transcribed and coded for emerging themes separately by each researcher. After initial coding, the researchers shared emergent themes with each other, identified overlapping themes, and discussed passages that they coded similarly and differently and abstracted these themes to categories. We followed Hughes & Hayhoe’s (2008) advice to follow the data in our qualitative examination of the transcripts, and also sought to increase reliability through collecting multiple perspectives in interviews and multiple forms of data (observation, interview and text). We triangulated these in establishing our categories.

**TABLE 5.1** Community grant-writing partnership student participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student pseudonym</th>
<th>Class (Iteration / Semester)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>First Iteration / Spring 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>First and Second Iteration / Spring 2013 and Spring 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Second Iteration / Spring 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jared</td>
<td>Second Iteration / Spring 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Third Iteration / Fall 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>Third Iteration / Fall 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabella</td>
<td>Third Iteration / Fall 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maddie</td>
<td>Third Iteration / Fall 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Third Iteration / Fall 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timothy</td>
<td>Third Iteration / Fall 2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Project Outcomes

Students’ Perceived Personal Benefits

In a student interview, Michael, who participated in the third iteration of the class, summarized nicely the top motivations students had for participating in this project and what students saw as the benefits of writing grants for the day shelter: “There’s the one voice in the back of my head, it’s like, ‘This is a good thing to do.’ Then there’s the other one, ‘This is going to look really good on your LinkedIn profile.’” Students saw both benefits to their professional development and benefits to the shelter, though the variation in how the students saw the grant-writing benefitting the shelter indicates that some students were motivated by the civic elements of writing these grants more than others.

Many students mentioned in interviews that the professional experience and the résumé line were two of the most important personal benefits that they received from this project. Jared reported that other students in the class were excited to be able to add grant-writing to their résumés, and he also mentioned that it was one benefit of working for a real organization. Anthony said, “I got a great line on my résumé that says, ‘Contributed to . . .’” when discussing the grant. Alicia mentioned that it increased her “marketability,” and Arabella reported that it was a skill that could help all sorts of students when entering the workforce, not just Technical Communication students. Though not mentioning the résumé in particular, Alex discussed how writing grants for the shelter was “a great opportunity to add to my repertoire of writing skills,” and Alice reported that grant-writing is a possible TC career trajectory. Most students acknowledged that developing grant-writing skills would potentially benefit them as they entered the workplace. Two of the students interviewed actively sought careers in grant-writing. Andrea, a student in the first iteration of the class who became a professional grant-writer for a large nonprofit, stated that for this career:

“[Y]ou just kind of have to start like we did, hope that somebody will give you a chance and the numbers that you need to be a grant-writer so you can build up some success so you can actually call yourself a grant-writer and then you kick off a career in grant-writing.”

That is, many nonprofit grant-writing jobs require applicants to have prior grant-writing experience. Thus, even though most jobs required several years of experience, this grant-writing assignment did make Andrea marketable. For her, not only was grant-writing a résumé line but real experience for her future career. Arabella also mentioned how it was helpful to start her training for this career in the class, as it confirmed that she wanted to follow this career path in grant-writing for nonprofits.
Students’ Perceptions of Civic Benefits

In addition to seeing the benefits to their professional technical communication work, many students reported in their interviews that they liked the opportunity to help people and saw their grant-writing as an opportunity to improve lives. Alex reported that “the most unique part of this class was that we got to actually engage with the community and write things that mattered.” He later clarified this statement:

“I don’t like spending hours on a paper that I know somebody’s going to read for five minutes and then throw out and neither of us will ever think about again. It’s nice when you actually do something that makes a lasting impact.”

Alex felt that the grant-writing would make a difference in people’s lives as opposed to a class assignment, which might be quickly forgotten. Alicia was more specific about how this impact fit within her goals, as she said, “helping people is important to me, so I was very, very invested” in writing grants for the shelter. Arabella went a step further and described how all of the writing classes she took were helpful in preparing her to help others. In her interview, Arabella seemed to empathize with the shelter clients more than other students interviewed:

“I don’t believe it’s always the person’s fault as to why they can’t afford things, why they’re out on the streets. Situations happen and things happen and you can’t really control everything. I think the more we can do to help people the better.”

She approaches all of her life with this civic mindset and reported in her interview that she sees all of her TC program classes equipping her with skills to help people. Michael, on the other hand, described how grant-writing for the shelter gave him a feel-good experience that he could share with his family:

“For this, in particular, there was some satisfaction to it. There was the nice perk of going home for Thanksgiving and talking with my nice, Christian grandmother and telling her that, ‘Yes, I’m doing well. I’m writing for a homeless shelter and we’re doing a lot of good for the community, and my writing is directly contributing to that.’ That’s a good feeling.”

He appreciated the opportunity to share with his family how what he was learning would benefit the community.

Two students, Michael and Maddie, mentioned that it was nice to see the university reach out to the community. Often, the students referred to the university as its own world, and they felt good about moving out of the “ivory tower” to join in efforts to support the larger community. This stated desire to bridge the campus and community was, in our minds, a step beyond simply acknowledging
the “feel-good” benefits of helping other people, and it fell in line with the university’s strategic priority to “broaden the circle of community” with community initiatives (New Mexico Tech Strategic Plan).

**Challenges to Community Engagement**

Not all students interviewed identified with the civic goals of the assignment. Two students (Anthony and Jared) from the second class reported feeling disconnected from the organization. Anthony candidly stated that, “Even though I was persuading, I didn’t necessarily feel motivated by Puerto Seguro’s plight, I suppose.” He further explained that he didn’t go to the shelter or have contact with those he was writing for. Though Jared found that “it’s always a good thing to help out people that are just helping out for the sake of it, for the sake of better living conditions and life,” he also felt disconnect with the shelter and said, “to me, the organization now is still just a name.” As students in the second class, neither Anthony nor Jared had direct contact with shelter staff.

Two students reported that the field trip in the third iteration of the class increased their motivation. Alex found the face-to-face field trip crucial to his investment:

> “We took a look at the facilities they were currently using and we looked at their kitchen, and we looked through their meeting areas, their shower, which was . . . I think the first grant we wrote was for the shower and their showers were definitely in need of repair and so I did like how we got to see all of that.”

Alex liked seeing the issues at the shelter firsthand. Michael, also in the third iteration, remembered the visit to the shelter, and commented, “You still have that understanding of what the organization does, what kind of atmosphere it has, and what they are concerned with from the mouths of the representatives that gave us the tour.” Hearing from the staff and volunteers directly was an essential part of the experience that we plan to continue in future iterations of this grant-writing client project.

**Students Reported Benefits to the Client**

Some students interview comments did focus more on benefits to the shelter than on benefits to themselves or their classmates. Alice specifically discussed ways that the grants helped the shelter:

> “I felt that if Puerto Seguro got the grant that they would use the money well to help people, and that would of course help people who would either get food, get winter clothing, specifically on these grants.”
Because the grants had a direct tie to client services, she felt the shelter and clients would benefit. Andrea, in her interview, tended to mention almost nothing about herself but focused exclusively on the client and the organization. She had gained a significant amount of experience with the client, as she went on after the first iteration of the class to be a volunteer intern for the organization and to continue writing grants. Her responses about the effect of the project on clients were also more detailed than other students’ responses. In her interview, for example, Andrea focused on the role that grants play for the organization:

“Every nonprofit needs money and grant-writing—I’ve yet to come across a grant that’s for overhead funds—but for projects and for updates and things that you just don’t have the budget, like the $10,000 kitchen update, that you just don’t have the budget to do that whenever you feel like it, you really need some kind of outside source to come in and provide you with that money all of a sudden in one lump sum to get you that project finished.”

Andrea knew that the shelter had limited funds and often relied upon grants to make much-needed improvements or repairs. She was able to see how the money was used from the successful grant to make vital kitchen upgrades to remain compliant with FDA regulations. Michael identified benefits to the shelter as a key part of this grant-writing experience: “I also think that another major motivating factor should be, ‘Are we actually getting something done for the client?’” Michael explained that he wanted to actually submit the grants, as he felt it was not enough to just generate text for the organization. He wanted to make sure that the project was finished and that the client actually benefitted. Alicia seconded the need to submit the grants and impact the client. It was impressive to see many of the students look beyond the benefits to themselves and appreciate that the client project was in fact benefitting the shelter.

**Financial Benefits to the Shelter**

Over the course of the three years we taught students to write grants in groups, we submitted some but not all of the grant requests they created, as some needs were more pressing and some students’ writing was better than others’. We submitted a total of 17 grant requests. The shelter was awarded 12 grants over the last three years for a variety of upgrade projects totaling around $43,000. The projects were as follows: kitchen upgrade, plumbing upgrade, utilities support for clients, gas money for clients, temporary lodging for clients, shelving and lighting, chairs and tables, and opening the shelter an extra day during the week. All of the grants came from local foundations, and all had grant reporting expectations. Some of the students, particularly those who were interested in making grant-writing for nonprofits a career, helped Elisabeth complete the grant reporting.
Four grants that were submitted were not awarded, giving us a 70 percent success rate. Some of these grants came at critical times; the kitchen upgrade money came the week the stove quit working. One staff member mentioned that the grants kept the shelter open.

**Morale-Boosting at the Shelter**

The shelter received considerable publicity from these grants, and the community named the shelter best local organization of the year for 2014. Andrea, who had also interned for the shelter, indicated in her interview how the kitchen upgrade improved the morale of the volunteers and led to less bickering. The staff noticed how each of these projects lifted clients’ morale and made the shelter experience better: in particular how tables and chairs gave more room and made the meal times more social events (and they were easier to clean). In our focus group session with shelter staff and board members, a participant reported that the grants “help us to treat them with dignity, and help them [clients] know that they are worth something instead of being beat down like that around the streets every day.” Staff also reported clients helping more with the cleanup and putting away of chairs. As Andrea mentioned, all of these upgrades were not budgeted within the shelter’s annual profit and loss but made serving ever increasing numbers of clients possible. Focus group participants acknowledged that the grants allowed the shelter to expand services as the grant funds fit into categories not covered by other existing funding.

**Shelter Board and Staff Perceived Benefits**

**Record Keeping**

In a focus group discussion with the board and staff, they raised several other benefits of this partnership that we had not considered. The chair of the board commented:

“I think one of the things that the grant-writing—having the students do it for us—that’s highlighted for us is we need better record keeping so that we have this information available. Particularly, the stories, the anecdotes, the number numbers, without having to go back and trying to pull it together in any one time.”

When we started the first iteration of the project, we found that the shelter was not eligible for a number of grants simply because it did not have the appropriate data needed for reporting. For example, the shelter only recorded total visits and not total unique visitors, and did not keep track of veterans using its services. Andrea, who participated in the first class, noted in her interview that the shelter’s
record-keeping made writing grants difficult and had even dedicated time during her internship to helping redesign intake sheets:

“First and foremost, the numbers and the record-keeping made this incredibly difficult to write because of the . . . Not bad record-keeping, just inconsistent I think is what we discovered—different numbers being kept in different places, confusion since we at that point in time we weren’t really familiar with the record-keeping at the shelter and what went into each number, so what each numerical value represented. I remember that being the hardest thing to overcome because you have to have good record-keeping. If you’re confused about the numbers I think that can come off in a grant and that will result in probably not getting funded since you’re a little confused as to where your funding’s actually going to be going.”

The frequent and often frantic emails from the students brought attention to the issue of record-keeping at the shelter. With awareness raised about this issue, the board has sought solutions and this attention to statistics may enable future iterations of the class to be more competitive for larger, federal grants.

**Students’ Fresh Perspective**

A staff member and a board member mentioned that students’ writing was an asset to the shelter. One focus group participant thought that “they told a good story,” while another focus group member more specifically mentioned a fresh approach to the plight of the homeless. This participant recounted, “These kids don’t have it rote in their minds already.” For many students, homelessness was a novel issue. Maddie even mentioned in her interview how surprised and sad she was that Census data indicated that a quarter of the people in our town fell below the poverty line. Civically engaging college students with writing grants for a homeless shelter may have in fact raised awareness of this issue within our community. As another focus group member explained, “We need every generation because it’s an inter-generational community problem. We’re all a part of it, but you don’t always have those spokes going out to all of the folks.” She thought the grant-writing class reached an essential but often out-of-touch generation.

**From Maintenance to Growth**

Another issue that was raised was that “the price is right”: the students write for free, whereas a professional grant-writer may charge. For a small organization that is barely able to stay afloat financially, it is beneficial that the grant-writing is more of an in-kind donation and this helps maintain the shelter. One person in the focus group mentioned that at her previous nonprofit, the grant success
rate was close to one percent. With the students’ help, the shelter has been able to maintain a 70 percent success rate in the small foundation grants it pursues. The students benefit from the experience, but do not charge for this service. One reason the students may have been this successful is that the students are trained to problem-solve, and do so creatively, in effect helping the shelter plan strategically for next steps in improving services and the shelter facility. The first Frost grant was a good example of this, as it not only helped the shelter maintain food services but increased the shelter’s capacity to store frozen meat donations, which helped decrease overall overhead for food costs. Kitchen renovation led to discovery of plumbing issues, which then became one of the next grants pursued and won for the shelter.

Finally, one focus group member mentioned that the grant-writing is “taking us to the next level.” She further explained that these extra funds help the shelter grow and move in a direction to provide more services and help the shelter plan long-term to reach greater goals. In particular, money from the Wells Fargo grant helped the shelter experiment with opening another day of the week, and gave the flexibility to try different days, streamline services, and provide additional salary for employees. This helped the shelter expand services. Also, the plumbing renovation led to better water pressure for both showers and laundry. Both services have tripled since the renovation. Also, the director reports that clients frequently don’t want to get out of the shower, a problem we have not had before.

**Conclusions and Implications**

As a result of this project, we see benefits to the community and to students through our sustained model of service-learning. We also see costs, particularly to the faculty involved in maintaining these relationships. Elisabeth continues to sit on the shelter board, attend meetings year round, and write grants even when the class is not running. She also participates in creating the annual budget, and reporting on grant implementation, and consults with board members throughout the year to make needed adjustments as grants are implemented. This involvement takes time but ensures successful projects. Sometimes, students also need more supervision in completing work for the shelter, and not all grants or flyers created are used. We feel that we are modeling civic responsibility for students and encouraging them to take these lessons with them wherever they end up as technical communication professionals. Though the level of civic engagement varied among the students, many appreciated the opportunity to give their time and talents to help the shelter in the community. Two students saw job opportunities in the nonprofit sector. The students were concerned, like Michael and Alicia mentioned in their interviews, about making sure the organization benefitted from the grants, even if that meant extending the work beyond the boundaries of the semester. Yet we realize that some students remain focused on the line on the résumé even with ample opportunities to connect to
the community partner. In the following sections, we provide suggestions for program directors or instructors interested in starting similar service-learning partnerships.

**Embrace the Chaos**

Chaos is inevitable, particularly in service-learning projects engaging small community organizations. In order for teachers to help students learn to handle the complex needs of a real audience, students will need to see the organization’s strengths and weaknesses, sift through extraneous information, and find ways to elicit the answers they need to complete the projects. At times in this partnership, specifically in the second iteration of the client project, we prioritized students’ needs to the detriment of connecting them with the community. We wanted to shield them from some of the organization’s internal conflict. Jared and Anthony both commented on how detached from the organization they felt. Our field trip in the third iteration helped with this. Also, we let students see some of the idiosyncrasies within the organization. We still believe in a very hands-on instructor approach, but we have taken steps to give students more opportunities to truly connect with the organization. From these findings, we assert that the more contact with the organization is involved, the better, even if some of those interactions prove awkward initially.

**Pursue Deeper Relationships Between Instructor and Organization**

From our findings, we conclude that deeper relationships between the instructor and the organization benefit these types of projects. We are able to uphold the reputation of our program (Cushman, 2002) through the final check of the proposals completed by the students. We also find ourselves discussing shelter needs with the community, as members of this community, rather than sitting on the outside telling the community what it needs. Elisabeth’s membership on the board, and involvement in the finance committee for the shelter, give her an insider’s look at the shelter’s annual operations. What we have found from these deeper relationships, however, is that they cost time. Elisabeth spends quite a bit of time outside the semester maintaining the relationship and following-up with projects. In an effort to make the deliverables quality (Mathieu, 2005), Elisabeth sometimes fine-tunes what the students have written, or even, in some cases, works with students outside the semester to revise proposals. One should also note that not all grants written by students were submitted, and not all grants submitted were funded. Nonetheless, as one of the students mentioned, because there is a significant database of gathered information about the organization and because of Elisabeth’s involvement with understanding shelter needs, the students are able to do more good for this organization than they might have if they had found their own clients. In light of this, we do recommend that programs and
instructors strive for deeper levels of involvement and knowledge of community partners than the “hit-it-and-quit-it” model allows.

**Model Community Involvement**

We are embracing our university’s mission to reach out to the community by working with the shelter and by expanding this project to now work with other community organizations. However, Elisabeth’s involvement with the shelter is an essential part of keeping this partnership connected. This may, as Stoecker (2016) identifies, rely too heavily on individuals, but it has meant that there is less a sense of sending students “out” (Ornatowski & Bekins, 2004), and the students have reported a sense of working with the organization. The students have trusted the relationships that Elisabeth has established with the shelter, and this gives them confidence in helping the organization through grant-writing (as mentioned by three students). By placing ourselves at the intersection of university teaching and community need, we are modeling for students how to embrace local opportunities. This has led to more student involvement in other community activities this last year outside of the class boundaries. For example, several of our students organized a weekend volunteer effort at PSI in spring 2017 to open the shelter for an extra day each week. These students felt empowered to make connections, offer support, and build new ties to the larger community. We recommend that students are encouraged to forge their own relationships to the community and see beyond the bounds of the university.

We are happy that this project, according to the board and staff, is helping the shelter grow. Future support for the shelter could be to work with the shelter board and staff on a five-year strategic plan, but that has exceeded the scope of our time available. As we expand this project to involve more students at different levels and from different classes throughout the university, we may be able to expand the benefits to the shelter. We are also happy to report that our success with this project—and the publicity that we have received through local news stories—has created other grant-writing opportunities and has generated community interest in our classes. We plan to expand on these opportunities, and we hope to see our efforts have some effect on the vitality of our small community.

**Note**

1. A note on terminology. In this chapter, we use *client projects* and *service-learning* interchangeably, though we acknowledge that in some contexts, these terms may refer to different pedagogies. *Client projects* typically refer to class assignments in which students fulfill a service or provide a deliverable to a real world “client” outside the class. This client can generally be either a nonprofit or for-profit partner. *Service-learning* refers to assignments that ask students to volunteer services generally for a nonprofit organization or charitable cause. In our case, students are volunteering...
proposal-writing services for a nonprofit client, which is an instance of overlap between these pedagogies. We acknowledge that not all assignments have this same overlap.

Discussion Questions

1) What are some techniques or checks that you could put in place to make sure that service-learning projects are beneficial for both students and the clients in the nonprofit organization?

2) One of the benefits and greatest challenges of working with a service-learning project is handling real audience expectations. Discuss what possible problems could arise for students in working with community partners in terms of audience and expectations.

3) What are some strategies for handling a bad experience with a client in a service-learning classroom?

4) What are some of the ethical considerations when working with real-world clients?

5) What would you do if some students in the class were not interested in the particular client or even had personal conflicts with the mission of the organization partnered for service-learning?

Further Reading

All website URLs accessed February 2018.


References

All website URLs accessed February 2018.


