

### Abstract

Many nonprofits operate with a only a handful of full-time staff members, and even if those staff members have training and experience with professional writing, they do not necessarily have the time and energy to pursue all of the communications-based projects they would like to pursue: the application deadlines slip by for grants that could help purchase equipment or expand services; the social media posts are not as strategic or frequent as they could be; the materials for a fundraiser get thrown together at the last minute; the annual report to donors does not adequately capture the impact the organization has had in the community over the past year. To help address this problem, the principal investigator of this project will teach a course called Communications Consulting Project in the fall of 2020 whereby senior English and creative writing majors will consult with local nonprofit organizations to understand their needs and, with the organizations' guidance, create high-quality, professional communications materials to help the organizations pursue their mission. This partnership will be mutually beneficial: as a result of this experience, the nonprofits will get high-quality, well-written, and vetted communications materials that they may use to fulfill and further their organization's mission; and the students will develop professionally as they increase their understanding of nonprofit organizations and how they work. Even more importantly, since both partner organizations address issues of poverty, the course will take a critical service-learning approach to "foster a critical consciousness" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 54) about the causes of, conditions of, and potential solutions to poverty. The principal investigator will draw upon analysis of survey data and written reflections to evaluate the effectiveness of the partnership, in terms of the impact both on the students and on the community partners. This research will help to bolster future embodiments of the Communications Consulting Project and will lead to the publishing of longitudinal

research to enable other higher education institutions and community partners to develop similar partnerships. In addition, the principal investigator will draw upon her expertise to offer a series of workshops on grant writing to help area nonprofits understand how to identify grant opportunities and write successful proposals, and she will also evaluate the effectiveness of those workshops in helping organizations secure funding.

SAMPLE

## Project Narrative

### *a. Education and Personal Philosophy*

At the heart of my educational philosophy is love—love for my students, love for my college, love for my community—and it is from this perspective that I approach my scholarly pursuits. I was trained as a medievalist, studying British and French literary narratives of the High Middle Ages, and while I find that literature interesting and enjoy teaching it, I struggle to pursue scholarship consistently in that area. It simply does not improve the world when I write a literary analysis of an obscure detail in one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that only a handful of people will read. As I have moved further into my career, I have found myself drawn to community-engaged practices and scholarship because I feel that such pursuits do make a difference in the lives of students, my institution, and my community. Community-engaged scholarship allows me to strive every day to make the world a better place.

So far, childhood literacy has been my focus in community-engaged scholarship. In 2015, I developed a course in partnership with the local school corporation for Franklin College's immersive January term. For this course, called *The Power of Literacy*, my students research and discuss issues surrounding literacy on a national level and then spend time each day working one-on-one with struggling students at two local elementary schools to help them improve their reading skills. Because a majority of the students at the elementary schools qualify for free or reduced lunch, we pay particular attention to the connection between literacy proficiency and poverty. As a result of the month-long experience, my students gain a better understanding of their own literacy journey and of how to advocate for change in our local community. I have now taught the course three times and will continue to teach it every few years, and I have recruited other professors on my campus to teach the course in the years when I

am not slated to teach in January. Those colleagues and I have an IRB-approved study we are conducting to determine the impact of the course on the college students, the elementary students, and the elementary teachers.

As a result of this course, I started a nonprofit organization, the Imagination Library of Johnson County, which is an affiliate program of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. This organization sends a free book each month to children from the time they are born until they turn five, for a possible total of sixty books by the time they enter kindergarten. All children within that age range are eligible within a defined geographic area, regardless of income, and the twenty years of research on Dolly Parton's Imagination Library has demonstrated that the program helps children to be better prepared for kindergarten and to perform better academically in later years than their peers who were not enrolled in the program. I am tracking the effectiveness of the Johnson County program through a longitudinal study modeled on the prior studies that have been conducted.

My identity, then, is both academic—teacher and researcher—and nonprofit director. This dual identity will allow me to bring to the Faculty Fellows program an uncommon perspective, one that can provide perspective from both sides of the community partnership. I have experience with successfully initiating and facilitating community partnerships, and I am also in the position to be a community partner.

Through this dual role, I have learned in these past few years that community-engaged scholarship is far more meaningful to me than traditional scholarship, and I would love not only to pursue community-engaged scholarship more but also to continue to refine and develop my skills in that area. The Faculty Fellows program will enhance my professional growth because I am still relatively new to community-engaged scholarship. I have published in traditional

literary scholarship and in the scholarship of teaching and learning, but I have only recently begun to pursue community-engaged scholarly projects, and I have not yet published anything in that area. At the Pen-to-Paper retreat in July 2019, I began developing a journal article about my *The Power of Literacy* course. I learned good practices for communicating with community partners and identified ways to improve the quality of data I have been collecting, as well as techniques for explaining my results clearly in journal articles. The Faculty Fellows program would allow me to be part of a learning and research community with other engaged scholars and to develop new community partnerships and engaged teaching and learning techniques for my newly developed *Communications Consulting Project* course (See details below in section b.).

In addition to the above, I can offer to others what I learned at the Pen to Paper Retreat, as well as my (albeit limited) forays into the IRB process, literature reviews, and the typical structure of a community-engaged scholarship article.<sup>1</sup> At the Retreat, a recurring point of advice from the journal editors was to write clearly, which is a strong point of mine. I have 25 years' training and experience in that area, and I have taught composition and advanced grammar classes now for 20 years. I would be happy to draw upon this experience to help other Faculty Fellows, if desired, with the writing of their own research projects.

***b. High-Impact Community Engagement Practice***

My department recently revised our curriculum, and I am delighted that we added a course for the students' senior year that combines community engagement and professional development. This course, titled *Communications Consulting Project*, asks senior English and

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to *The Power of Literacy* study and the Imagination Library study, I began a collaborative research project on faculty perceptions of engaged learning, and my colleagues and I conducted phase one of that research on Franklin College's campus in January and February.

creative writing majors to draw upon their finely honed skills to serve as communications consultants for local nonprofit organizations.

The idea for this course came from conversations with directors of local nonprofits. Many of these organizations operate with a only a handful of full-time staff members, and even if those staff members have training and experience with professional writing, they do not necessarily have the time and energy to pursue all of the communications-based projects they would like to pursue: the application deadlines slip by for grants that could help purchase equipment or expand services; the social media posts are not as strategic or frequent as they could be; the materials for a fundraiser get thrown together at the last minute; the annual report to donors does not adequately capture the impact the organization has had in the community over the past year.

The students will work in teams of two to three and will be paired with their respective nonprofits the first week of the semester, based on the students' interests and strengths relative to the mission and needs of each organization. During the first two weeks of the class, the students will learn about organizational theory, best practices for consulting, and how nonprofits work, and they will visit their organization so they can observe and ask questions to understand better how the organization works, whom it serves, and how it lives out its mission. The emphasis will be on building a relationship of trust and respect between the team and the organization, with the goal of serving the organization's needs, rather than the students deciding on a project and then trying to make it work for the organization. Because the projects my students do will fit the needs of the organization, the projects may take a variety of forms: writing or revising website content, managing social media and marketing communications, writing grants, creating

brochures and fliers, and researching and writing reports on topics of interest are some of the ways the teams might engage with their respective organization.

Both community partners for this course are focused on alleviating poverty in Johnson County, and so to “foster a critical consciousness” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 54), the students will have readings on the causes and conditions of poverty, and I will invite our community partners to join us in the classroom as we discuss those readings (Please see a draft of the Syllabus in the Appendix.). We will consider such questions as “What are the causes and consequences of income disparity?,” “What social services are available to and what social spaces are limited to those living in poverty?,” and “What kind of changes could lead to the elimination of poverty?” In addition to these conversations and regular electronic communication with their community partners, the students will visit their respective organizations at least three times during the semester so that they may participate in the work the organization does, thereby deepening their understanding of the complexity of poverty and developing authentic relationships with their partners. To synthesize their knowledge and experience at the end of the semester, the students will write a letter to a government entity, advocating for measures to address poverty (Please see a draft of the Assignment Guidelines in Appendix.).

As a result of this course, both the community partners and the students will experience outcomes, outputs, and impacts (Beckman & Wood, 2016). The nonprofits will get high-quality, well-written, and vetted communications materials (outcome); having others develop these materials will save the organizations time and energy and will allow them to focus on other, more pressing needs they have so that they may fulfill and further their organization’s mission (output). These materials even have the potential to help the organizations achieve their long-term goals, such as raising money for a new physical space (impact). The students will also

experience a number of outputs, outcomes, and impacts. For example, they will increase their understanding of nonprofit organizations and how they work, as well as better understand the causes of, conditions of, and potential solutions for poverty (outputs). This knowledge will allow those pursuing employment or volunteer positions with nonprofits or governmental agencies addressing poverty to be better poised for such positions (outcome). As the students interact with their community partners, they will practice their composure, professional correspondence, and professional dress and comportment, which are skills that will serve them in their careers for years to come (impact). Please see the Appendix for drafts of the relevant assessment tools.

*c. Community-Campus Partnership for Professional Service*

Because my students will be working in teams and will be engaging with different nonprofits, we will be partnering with two organizations: Michelle's Little Free Pantry, a local food pantry and community garden that seeks to "provide the community with a way to alleviate food insecurity and assist those in need in a nonjudgmental, sustainable manner" (Michelle's Little Free Pantry, 2020); and Bridges Alliance of Johnson County, an organization seeking "to end poverty by providing proven tools, resources, support, and relationships to foster stability and independence" (Bridges, 2020) I chose to partner with these organizations because their missions are similar, and they both have an all-volunteer staff. They are also local to Franklin and are therefore easily accessible for the students in the course.

**Michelle's Little Free Pantry:** I met Michelle Dahl, the founder and president of Michelle's Little Free Pantry, about a year ago. My Girl Scout troop designed and built the pantry's community garden last fall, and we started seedlings for the garden this spring. Michelle's organization became a 501(c)(3) organization last year, and she provided guidance to

me when I was beginning the process of converting my own nonprofit organization, the Imagination Library of Johnson County, to 501(c)(3) status.

**Bridges Alliance of Johnson County:** I was part of the planning process when Bridges Alliance was beginning a few years ago. I have co-sponsored two Community Action Poverty Simulations on campus with them through their sister organization, Circles Indy;<sup>2</sup> and through professional contacts, I know many of the volunteers who help run Bridges.

For both organizations, I will further strengthen the relationships I have already built by maintaining clear communication and asking for regular feedback. For example, before the semester begins, I will meet with each organization and use Diane Doberneck's Abacus Tool (2019) to facilitate a discussion about our expectations and responsibilities so that the partnerships are balanced and mutually beneficial. I will also be in continual contact with the organizations throughout the semester to understand their potentially changing needs, and I will ask for additional feedback in January, after the *Communications Consulting Project* course is over.

I foresee my relationship with the organizations continuing into the spring of 2021, when I will build upon my strength in professional writing to facilitate grant writing workshops, both for the two community partners and for other nonprofit organizations in the area. In addition to the workshops, I will offer free consultation sessions to the individual organizations to help them find and successfully win grants. These organizations have varying experience with grant writing and some have no experience, so some sessions will be tailored towards those organizations that have little to no experience, with additional sessions for those looking to advance their skills. The workshop topics will be "Finding the Right Grants for Your

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<sup>2</sup> For further information, I have included both the Poverty Simulation and Circles Indy websites in the References list.

Organization,” “How to Write a Successful Grant Proposal,” and “How to Increase Your Chances of Winning Grants.”

I anticipate that these workshops will help these organizations increase their understanding about how to find grants and how to write a successful proposal (outputs). I will assess the effectiveness of these workshops through a pre- and post-workshop survey that gauges the participants’ confidence levels in their grant-writing knowledge and will follow up with additional surveys six months later and then a year later to determine whether the strategies discussed in the workshops translated to successful grant awards (outcome). Through the same surveys, I will be able to assess whether successful grant awards have allowed the organizations to pursue their mission in new and broader ways (impact). Please see the Appendix for drafts of the relevant assessment tools.

#### ***d. Cultivating a Culture for Community Engagement***

When I returned from the Pen-to-Paper Retreat, I held a workshop on campus to share community-engaged scholarship tenets with my colleagues and to help them brainstorm ways that they could create community partnerships and engage in such scholarship in their own subject areas. With the administration’s blessing, I would ask Indiana Campus Compact to provide a single-day customized training in the form of *Community-Based Learning Curriculum Development, Creating Campus-Community Partnerships, Creating Campus-Community Partnerships: A Networking Event, and Project Development Consultations*. As a Faculty Fellow, I would follow up on this customized training by facilitating a faculty learning community so that other faculty on my campus could learn about community-engaged scholarship and develop their own courses, and I would seek funding to provide a stipend for

their participation and course development (perhaps similar to Doug Grant's "Course Development for an Engaged Curriculum" grant from ICC in 2015).

Since I teach on a small campus, I already know which of my colleagues teaches or is open to teaching courses that involve community engagement. In addition, many of my colleagues work with community partners for our immersive January classes, so I would reach out to these colleagues with a specific invitation to join the learning community, and the potential stipend would provide extra incentive.

## **Assessment Strategies**

### **High-Impact Community Engagement Practice**

Outputs: The partners will get high-quality communications materials, and the students will increase their understanding of poverty and how nonprofits work. Assessment will be an analysis of the materials, as well as the students' final exams (rubrics) and a pre- and post-course survey for both students and community partners (paired simple t-test).

Outcomes: The community partners can use the time they save to fulfill and further their organization's mission. The students who want to work for or volunteer with nonprofits will benefit. Assessment will be via a paired simple t-test of surveys for community partners and for students, delivered before and after the experience, six months after, and one year after.

Impacts: The community partners will be better able to achieve their long-term goals. The students will develop professionally, which will enable success when seeking employment. Assessment will be via a paired simple t-test of the same series of surveys described above.

### **Community-Campus Partnership for Professional Service**

Outputs: The participants will better understand how to find grants for their organization, and they will better understand how to write a successful grant proposal. These outputs will be measured using a paired simple t-test of a pre- and post-workshop survey.

Outcomes: The participants' organizations will be awarded grants as a result of their increased knowledge from the workshops. This output will be measured using a paired simple t-test of a workshop participant survey six months and again one year after the workshops.

Impacts: This increased funding as a result of grant money will allow the community partners to pursue their missions in a more robust way. This output will be measured using a paired simple t-test of a survey six months and again one year after the workshops.

**High-Impact Community Engagement Practice:**

<b>Output/Outcome/ Impact:</b>		
<b>Activity</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Assessment Technique</b>
<u>Output:</u> Students will develop high-quality communications materials for organizations.	Documents themselves that students create	Rubric
<u>Output:</u> Students will have increased understanding of how nonprofits work.	Students' final reflections; students' pre- and post-course surveys	Rubric for final reflection; paired simple t-test for surveys
<u>Output:</u> Students will have increased understanding of poverty and of actions they can take to address poverty.	Students' final reflections; students' pre- and post-course surveys; community partners' post-course survey	Rubric for final reflection; paired simple t-test for surveys
<u>Outcome:</u> Students' work will allow community partners to focus on other important work of the organization.	Community partners' pre- and post-course surveys	Paired simple t-test
<u>Outcome:</u> Students pursuing employment and volunteer positions with nonprofits will be better poised to do so.	Students' post-course survey, +6 months survey, and +1 year survey	Paired simple t-test
<u>Impact:</u> Organizations will be able to achieve long-term goals.	Community partners' pre- and post-course surveys, +6 months survey, and + 1 year survey	Paired simple t-test
<u>Impact:</u> Students' professional development leads to job market success.	Students' pre- and post-course surveys, +6 months survey, and +1 year survey	Paired simple t-test

**Community-Campus Partnership for Professional Service:**

<b>Output/Outcome/Impact:</b>		
<b>Activity</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Assessment Technique</b>
<u>Output:</u> Participants will have increased understanding about how to find grants that are a good match for organization.	Pre- and post-workshop survey	Paired simple t-test
<u>Output:</u> Participants will have increased understanding about how to write a successful grant proposal.	Pre- and post-workshop survey	Paired simple t-test
<u>Outcome:</u> Participants will successfully be awarded grants.	Surveys of workshop participants +6 months and +1 year	Paired simple t-test
<u>Impact:</u> Organizations will have increased funding to pursue their missions.	Surveys of workshop participants +6 months and +1 year	Paired simple t-test

### References

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