Developing Grant Writing Skills in the Humanities and Social Sciences: A Case for Increasing Program-Level Supports

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Abstract

Grant writing is a crucial part of graduate students' careers. In this opinion piece, the authors discuss graduate students in the humanities and social sciences grant-writing related problems. By understanding students' unique challenges and motivations and including a systematic grant writing course into their curricula, humanities and social sciences departments can improve student success.

Keywords

Grant Writing, Graduate Students, Funding, Humanities and Social Sciences

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Suggested citation:
Gopkinar-Shelton, E., Asomani-Adem, A. A. (2020). Developing grant writing skills in the humanities and social sciences: A case for increasing program-level supports. *Journal of the Student Personnel Association at Indiana University*, 138-141.

Securing external grant funding for research is an essential element of professional development for graduate students in today's financially hard-pressed higher education institutions (Leak et al., 2015). Reduced university support has created an increased need for graduate students to procure their own research funds (Mitchell et al., 2015). Moreover, most advertisements for academic positions expect applicants to be capable of securing external funding, making the need for grant writing skills even more pressing for doctoral students (Solomon, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2015). Despite these realities, grant writing is an emerging and intimidating concept for graduate students in the humanities and social sciences (Sisk, 2011). Highlighting the current state of grant writing for graduate students in the humanities and social sciences, this article argues a need for intentional departmental support, such as integrating grant writing courses into the curricula to advance student success.

Today, only a few humanities and social sciences programs offer instruction on grant practices (Sisk, 2011). This lack of training leaves students to feel unsupported in where and how to look for funding opportunities. Furthermore, students find the process of drafting and polishing research proposals and ensuring they have met the submission requirements to be daunting (Heflinger & Doykos, 2016). Leak et al. (2015), when examining student perceptions about grant writing, found that students rated their research proposal writing skills as an area in which they feel the weakest compared to other types of writing. The students reported that they feel incredibly uncomfortable and are stressed out when asked to write a grant application. Similarly, in Heflinger and Doykos (2016), students expressed a desire for increased support with advancing their grant writing skills and available grant resources to improve their knowledge base.

One main factor behind such concern and uneasiness is the unfamiliarity of students with the genre of grant writing (Porter, 2007). Research shows that grant writing can be distinctively different in its rhetorical structures and moves from other types of academic writing, such as a manuscript publication (Connor, 2000; Porter, 2007; Walden & Bryan, 2010). In a manuscript publication, the research has already been conducted, and the researcher argues for the validity and reliability of the conclusions reached with precise details (Porter, 2007). Differently, the grant writer describes a future research project and is expected to convince reviewers in a personal and lay tone that this line of research will be completed with the most appropriate theories, methodologies, and staff (Porter, 2007; Walden & Bryan, 2010). Furthermore, the alignment between the project and the defined mission and vision of the external funding agency is considered a matter of utmost importance in grant proposals (Connor, 2000; Gitlin & Czaja, 2015). The expectations and motivations of private and corporate foundational grants, for example, may be quite different than those in applications for public, government-funded grants. Students without a solid understanding of such nuances or knowledge of the strategies necessary to shape a research study into a project a funding agency is interested in, may find the grant writing process complex and challenging to manage.

To remedy this problem, some institutions have launched grant writing centers specifically to motivate and help graduate students with their external grant applications. Indiana University, University of Nevada, as well as the Cleveland State University are among those that have grant offices dedicated to grant searches and proposal development. These offices support graduate students from all disciplines by providing one-on-one consultations, grant-writing workshops, boot camps, and a collection of other selected guides to suit each stage of the writing process (Cleveland State University, n.d.; Indiana University, n.d.; the University of Nevada, n.d.). While these initiatives provide essential training opportunities for ensuring an increase in the number of and successful grant applications (Porter, 2011), they are often tailored to institution-wide audiences. However, some of the most reputable grants in the social sciences and humanities (e.g., National Science Foundation, Social Science Research Council, Fulbright, and Mellon) require an in-depth knowledge of the trends, theories, and concepts relevant to the specific field in which staff in centralized grant offices may not be expert. More active involvement of

departments, therefore, is needed to increase the impact of help available to students from these offices (Leak et al., 2015; Sisk, 2011).

The preliminary findings of a study conducted by a researcher at the Indiana University GradGrants Center also support the need for specialized mentorship. Students in the study asserted that they would feel more motivated to seek and apply for major grants in the humanities and social sciences if they had the opportunity to work with their professors and content experts in the grant-writing process (Gokpinar-Shelton, 2018). Because grant-writing is rather time-consuming, students suggested that their departments could create individualized incentives that would allow them to contribute to their area of research interest during coursework. An example offered was submitting grant proposals as a final paper for their class (Gokpinar-Shelton, 2018). Such incentives and working under the guidance of a faculty mentor can help students become independent grant writers.

The integration of a grant proposal writing course or boot camps into graduate program curricula has indeed proven to be effective (Leak et al., 2015). Although a little late compared to medical schools and STEM-related departments that have long initiated such efforts to help their students, a few humanities and social sciences programs have introduced semester-long grant proposal writing courses, and the results are promising (Sisk, 2011; Walker et al., 2016). One such program, a semester-long course provided at the School of Education at the University of Rochester, has produced positive results since its introduction in 2007 (Sisk, 2011). The majority of the study respondents reported having won grants since taking the course using the tools they learned in the class (Sisk, 2011). While such studies are few and often limited in their methodology, the initial results demonstrate that humanities and social sciences programs would benefit their students by supplementing the services of centralized grant writing centers with program-level resources.

In summary, as internal research dollars become scarce in the humanities and social sciences departments, students feel the need to be more active in grant writing and searching for external grant funding opportunities. To systematically support students in their grant writing endeavors, humanities and social sciences departments must seek their students' perceptions of motivators and barriers in grant proposal writing and put appropriate resources in place.

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