Grant Proposal Development à la FLC (Faculty Learning Community) Mode

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ABSTRACT

Although the Faculty Learning Community is not a new structure or initiative in the higher education arena, adapting this model for faculty development focused on grant proposal writing is relatively new. This article describes how the concept developed by Milt Cox of Miami University has been successfully modified and implemented twice on the Appalachian State University campus in Boone, NC, with planning underway for a third FLC during the next academic year. Given the short history of this nascent initiative, faculty participants were allowed to select either internal or external funding opportunities for proposal development, since initiative goals included cultivating interest in the process of securing funding and developing faculty members' grantsmanship skills.

INTRODUCTION

The Faculty Learning Community (FLC for short) concept calls for a small group of faculty to convene around a shared responsibility. The more traditional version of a FLC is "…a group of trans-disciplinary faculty, graduate students and professional staff group of size 6-15 or more … engaging in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, transdisciplinarity, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and community building" (Miami University, 2012). The FLC for Grant Proposal Writing (FLC: GPW) at Appalachian State University uses a modified structure to achieve the desired outcome of creating competitive proposals for internal or external funding opportunities. Modifications include

keeping the FLC size relatively small (six participants), compressing the FLC length to less than one semester, and focusing exclusively on proposal writing. This structure does incorporate standard FLC "ground rules" to which participants agree to adhere, like a commitment to active participation; an agreement to operate by consensus; and being respectful of others' work.

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Appalachian State University, one of 16 higher education institutions in the University of North Carolina system, carries the Carnegie Classification of Master's – Larger Programs designation, and has 871 full-time faculty. Fall 2011 enrollment figures reflected an undergraduate student population of 15,460 and a graduate student population of 1,884. Grants Resources & Services (GRS), which leads the FLC: GPW initiative, has two full-time employees and one graduate assistant. GRS also is

responsible for locating and disseminating funding opportunities and related information; conducting faculty professional development as it relates to grantsmanship; and, managing internal competitions for programs with limited submission restrictions.

FLC: GPW ORIGINS

The first FLC: GPW was an outgrowth of a May 2010 weeklong professional writing retreat for 50 faculty members hosted by the Hubbard Programs for Faculty Excellence at Appalachian State University. Throughout the week, participants attended workshops that focused on different writing styles; grant proposal writing was one of the featured workshops. Because of the amount of interest expressed by the 23 participants in the grant proposal writing workshop, the first FLC: GPW invitation was offered exclusively to these workshop attendees.

The FLC: GPW launched during the fall 2010 semester with three participants and the facilitator (Frantz). The initial meeting focused on achieving consensus about ground rules for participation; it also included participants sharing information about their research and scholarly interests with each other. The facilitator covered the mechanics of utilizing the institution's AsULearn course management system, which was used to create a course to facilitate posting of program guidelines and

participants' narrative drafts. The AsULearn site features a forum that participants used to communicate with each other outside of the face-to-face meetings.

Participants also met face-to-face for six 90-minute sessions over a seven-week period. The bulk of the time was spent critiquing proposal narrative drafts and offering constructive criticism. Other topics covered during these sessions included discussions about unclear application instructions, like the distinction between different sections of the guidelines and how to best address the instructions given space limitations; discussions about constructing accurate and complete budgets; and discussions about future funding opportunities and strategies for pursuing them. Participant proposal activity included one proposal submitted for an internal funding opportunity and a second proposal developed for the next internal funding opportunity deadline. Although both proposals were declined during the first submission, one of the proposals was revised and awarded funding in a subsequent review cycle.

Despite what appears to be a relatively low output from the first FLC, the participants identified several beneficial aspects, including the following:

- The planned meeting structure helped them more effectively manage their time, thus enabling them to meet deadlines.
- The compressed meeting schedule (six meetings over a seven-week period) was "doable" because it was a finite time span.
- Peer pressure was positive in that participants felt an obligation to present their work by established deadlines for others to critique and vice versa (the "gym buddy" effect).

Participants liked the group meeting format because it allowed them to talk about sentence structures and word choices in a face-to-face setting, which resulted in more fruitful discussions. Through the process of reviewing others' writing and having their work reviewed in return, participants also gained a better understanding about what readers look for when reviewing proposals. Participants reported feeling increased confidence in their own writing ability as well as the ability to offer constructive criticism about others' writing.

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SECOND GENERATION FLC: GPW

Minor modifications were made for the next FLC: GPW, like early registration to facilitate sponsor and program identification, and establishing deadlines for uploading materials into the course management system. Six faculty members initially registered for FLC: GPW during the fall 2011 semester but only four were able to fully participate in all six face-to-face sessions. The blended format combining online access through the course management system and the face-to-face meetings worked well for this group. Especially notable is that this group had an easier time getting proposal drafts uploaded into the AsULearn site far enough in advance of the face-to-face meetings to allow sufficient time for review. Meeting these internal deadlines allowed for more productive discussions during group meetings. Several participants were preparing proposals for the same internal funding opportunity, so the review and critique of their drafts benefitted both individual authors and the larger group

since they all were working from one set of guidelines during the sessions.

Like the first group of FLC participants, the second group represented multiple academic disciplines, including the social sciences, creative and performing arts, and computer science; this diversity among areas of expertise allowed for rich discussions during the face-to-face sessions. Additionally, the group represented both qualitative and quantitative researchers. Most of the participants were near the beginning of their academic careers (untenured assistant professors), although a few held the rank of associate professor. Most possessed at least basic-level grantsmanship skills, and all were pursuing funding to support their research. See Table 1 for specific information on session format, scheduling, and topics. Topics discussed and revisited throughout the six sessions included developing budgets; human subjects research (multiple aspects); and interpreting guidelines and assessing fit between idea and sponsor.

Table 1. Session Format, Scheduling, and Topics, FLC: GPW

Date(s)	Activity	Content	Content Deadline
June 1 & 22 July 13	Invitation to participate (publicity)	Publicity materials included FLC content and structure, including meeting dates and times, which facilitated decision-making for prospective participants	Aug. 1 (application to participate)
August 1 through September 9	Locating & evaluating funding opportunities	Grants Resources & Services staff conducted funding opportunity searches based on project topic description and funding needs profile forms completed by faculty participants	September 9 (funding opportunity searches completed and disseminated for consideration)
September 29	Session #1	• Welcome and introductions • FLC overview: orientation and ground rules • Faculty project descriptions (discussion)	N/A
October 6	Session #2	• Analysis and discussion of guidelines for four internal funding opportunities • Group discussion of one proposal draft	October 3 (proposal drafts uploaded to AsULearn site for review prior to meeting)
October 20	Session #3	Group discussion of three proposal drafts (approximately 25 minutes per proposal)	October 17 (proposal drafts uploaded to AsULearn site for review prior to meeting)
November 3	Session #4	• Group discussion of one proposal draft • General discussion: proposal development and submission policies and procedures	October 31 (proposal drafts uploaded to AsULearn site for review prior to meeting)
November 10	Session #5	Discussion: future proposal roadmaps for each participant (three federal sponsors and various programs for each sponsor identified and evaluated, timeline crafted—"game plan" created)	November 7 (proposal drafts uploaded to AsULearn site for review prior to meeting)
November 17	Session #6	• Group discussion of one proposal draft • Group discussion and analysis of sponsor guidelines, especially research project description section • Celebration and conclusion	November 14

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This second group was productive as well: three of the four participants submitted five applications to three different internal funding opportunities during the course of the FLC; all five proposals were awarded funding. This support helped the three faculty members collect pilot data in preparation for seeking extramural funding. Two of the three internally funded faculty members also have proposals pending with federal agencies like the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Institutes of Health. All four faculty members expressed sentiments similar to the first FLC participants about how the FLC structure facilitated better time management and honed their ability to meet deadlines. Participants also noted that the FLC: GPW improved their ability to explain their research and scholarship to people outside their disciplines. Both sets of participants liked using the AsULearn site: they're already familiar with it since they use it for their academic courses.

In determining what worked better during the second iteration, anecdotal evidence suggests that participants in the second group were more established in their roles at the institution and therefore more familiar with the process at Appalachian State University for seeking internal or external funding. Having identified and reviewed the funding opportunities they wanted to pursue prior to the first face-to-face meeting increased their receptivity to outside accountability since they were working with defined application deadlines. Later reflection on the group's productivity led the facilitator to surmise that the individual personalities did play a role; quite simply, the personalities clicked, which facilitated positive and productive discussions about the proposal drafts. Learning objectives achieved in this initiative include the ability to provide and receive constructive criticism related to grant proposal writing; enhanced writing skills specifically related to grant proposals; and, expanded knowledge of the proposal writing process.

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CONCLUSION

After a relatively small amount of work establishing the FLC: GPW structure and schedule, it is alive and well, with plans for a third cohort to start during the fall 2013 semester. Faculty to be recruited for the third FLC are those who plan to resubmit previously declined proposals for extramural funding. The author anticipates that targeting this population will again result in a variety of academic disciplines and writing styles being represented as well as a different starting point for participants, since the faculty members will be revising previously written proposals using reviews from external readers as well as current reviews from other FLC participants.

The FLC: GPW has been a mutually beneficial experience for both faculty participants and Grants Resources & Services (GRS) personnel at Appalachian State; through the process of providing individual faculty assistance, participants gain an understanding of how research development professionals can facilitate their efforts to secure internal or external funding. As this initiative matures, it is anticipated that future participants will move beyond focusing primarily on internal funding opportunities and instead concentrate their efforts on preparing competitive proposals for extramural funding.

LITERATURE CITED

Miami University of Ohio. (2012). Website for developing Faculty and Professional Learning Communities (FLCs): Communities of practice in higher education. Retrieved May 3, 2012 from http://www.unit s.muohio.edu/flc/whatis.php

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