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Peter L. Kraus

University of Utah, peter.kraus@library.utah.edu

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The Evolution of Instruction in Grant Writing and Research in the Libraries at the University of Utah

Peter L. Kraus

Associate Librarian

J. Willard Marriott Library

University of Utah

Salt Lake City, Utah 84112-0860 USA

Introduction

In academic medicine and health sciences grant writing is a skill that is often self taught or acquired informally by trial and error. Nevertheless, it is a critical skill for graduate students, post-doctoral students, academic fellows, and new tenure-track faculty. Along with publishing and the ability to create and define a research project, obtaining external funding is a key element in a successful career in medical research (Inouye and Fiellin 2005). In fact, writing can have an economic impact on a career in academic medicine and the health sciences. Successful grantsmanship leads to research, research leads to an increase in publications, which in turn leads to an increase in earnings (Freeman, Weinstein, et al., 2001).

In some cases, an academic department or college is fortunate enough to have a full-time grant writer on staff who might be available to provide instruction or guidance, but the primary responsibility of these individuals is generally to help senior faculty and administrators write and obtain grants. The grant writer, therefore, often has neither the time nor the willingness to teach these skills to others. When a new fellow in Cardiology was asked whether there was instruction in grant writing, his response was, "We need to learn on our own." Asked the same question, a new assistant professor of Internal Medicine replied, "It's just something you're expected to pick up if you want to stay around here." Interestingly, a review of the medical education literature suggests that surveys of new physicians in fellowship programs show grant writing to be one area in administrative skills in which new physicians have asked for increased training (Medina-Walpole, Barker, et al. 2004). Success in academic publishing is also tied to formal training in grant writing: A 2005 study stated that 54% of first-time authors in academic medicine had received formal instruction in grant writing (Reed, Kern, et al. 2005).

Grant writing in Medicine and the Health Sciences remains a competitive venture. Each year, some 60,000 grant applications are received by the National Institutes of Health, but only one third are funded (Coelho 2006). In a trend that many in the sciences find disturbing, it was reported in 1994 that NIH grants awarded to young investigators (those under the age of 37) had decreased by 50% during the preceding eight years (Marshall 1994). In 2001, NIH awarded 6,635 "competing grants"; of these, only 251 went to researchers under the age of 35 (Goldman & Marshall 2002). A number of reasons have been offered for this, but the fact remains that for younger tenure-track faculty, these numbers make the grant process even more daunting.

As resources in all areas of academia become more finite, the need for faculty to obtain support from outside entities increases. That creates an increased demand for grant-related knowledge and services at the reference desk as well as new demands in instruction for grant writing and grant research.

Grant Instruction in the University of Utah Libraries

In the fall of 2001, librarians at the [J. Willard Marriott Library](#) and [Spencer S. Eccles Health Sciences Library](#) at the University of Utah had a series of instruction-related “sharing classes.” Librarians from the health sciences library taught at the Marriott Library, and vice versa. One area where a strong need was anticipated was grant writing and research for faculty in Medicine and the Health Sciences.

The training and background of the librarian who would teach these courses was a central concern. There had been no formal education in this area for anyone at either library; however, there were numerous opportunities to learn to teach the basics of grant writing to varied audiences. The workshops at the Foundation Center, for example, were highly recommended and reasonably priced. Initial support for continuing education in this area was provided by the Assistant Director for Public Services at the Marriott Library for a librarian to attend continuing education courses at the Foundation Center branch library in Cleveland, Ohio.

In the spring of 2002, the first courses in grant research were offered at the Eccles Health Sciences Library. Two one-hour sections were offered at the beginning of the semester. The average attendance for these new offerings was six students per class, but the feedback from the attendees at the classes was overwhelmingly positive. Patrons who took these courses began requesting more instruction in grant research and grant writing. At the same time, the new Head of the Technology Assistance Curriculum Center (TACC) was very enthusiastic about offering an introductory course in grant writing and grant research as part of TACC's services. TACC is housed in the Marriott Library and its purpose is to help University of Utah faculty members integrate technology into their teaching. It offers a series of short courses each semester in applied technology for improving teaching. “Grant Writing and Research” is now among the short courses offered to faculty. Additional funding was provided by TACC for continuing education for the same librarian through the Foundation Center.

Expansion of Instruction

Courses were expanded in the fall of 2002. The new two-hour short course included an overview and introduction to grant and proposal writing, a summary of the roles of the Office of Development and the Office of Sponsored Research at the University of Utah, and instruction in using databases relevant to grants research. Informal observation indicates that individuals with a clinical background seem most interested in learning to use the grant databases. Graduate students and individuals from non-clinical backgrounds seem most interested in how to write a grant and the thought process that goes into writing one.

Currently, two sections, with an average attendance of eleven, are offered each semester at the Eccles Health Sciences Library. Maximum enrollment is fourteen, to ensure individualized instruction. The courses are tailored for the Health Sciences. Those taking the courses have included departmental coordinators, study coordinators, medical editors, new tenure-track faculty in the health sciences, and doctoral candidates from the College of Science, College of Health, the College of Nursing, the School of Medicine, and the Huntsman Cancer Institute.

Faculty in the departments of Foods and Nutrition and Biochemistry now regularly refer their graduate students to the courses. The Department of Political Science and Public Administration has a librarian teach a section on grants research as an integrated library instruction component in a graduate course in non-profit management. Interestingly, doctoral candidates from several departments within the College of Science and the College of Social Sciences have stated that they were expected to write mock grant proposals for their research as part of comprehensive exams for the doctorate, but that there was

little or no formal instruction in grant writing in their graduate program. The short courses were the only formal instruction they received. In addition, customized presentations have been made to several academic departments on campus to reflect grant opportunities in their disciplines.

The same librarian instructor offers courses to other areas of the university, via the TACC. These courses tend to have lower faculty enrollment, about four on average. Departments on campus that are always seeking outside funding (arts and humanities) have not taken particular advantage of this instruction. The courses are being publicized to those departments in the hope of attracting more interest. In undergraduate instruction, grant writing and research have been included for fine arts students in the university's LEAP program, concentrating on community grants for the arts. LEAP stands for Learning Engagement Achievement Progress and is defined by the university as "a year-long learning community for entering University students. It consists of two three-credit-hour courses ... taken with the same professor and classmates, allowing students to build community. LEAP's two classes fulfill the diversity requirement and two general education requirements and are linked to optional classes in writing, library research, major selection, and service." It is an excellent audience for an introduction to the library's resources and services.

Community Interest and Participation

Individuals affiliated with pharmaceutical and biotechnology firms with ties to the University of Utah have also attended the library's short course on grants. Unexpectedly, professionals in the community's non-profit arena have discovered these courses, although there was no advertising to promote them outside the university. Among those who have attended are social workers, public health professionals, and development officers from such organizations as the Department of Health of the State of Utah, US Public Health Service, the United Way, the ARC of Utah, Catholic Social Services, and the LDS Church Foundation. When people from outside the university were asked how they learned about these classes, the answer was always the same. The classes were found through the Eccles Health Sciences Library web pages in a Google search for grant writing classes at the University of Utah.

Well-attended presentations on grant writing and research have also been given to several professional organizations, including the Utah State Library Association, the New Mexico Library Association, the Mountain Plains Library Association, the Utah Museums Association, and the Western Association of Social Scientists.

Conclusion

A modest investment in grants education for a public services librarian has resulted in a value-added service offered at two libraries on the campus of the University of Utah. This has led to an unexpected avenue of outreach and an increase in instruction for both libraries through offering additional classes and promoting the collections and services of the libraries.

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