

The SEPA Grant-Writing Program: Regional Transformation Through Engaged Service-Learning

Nathan Bigelow and Donald Rodgers

Abstract

This article describes the Social Entrepreneurship for Poverty Alleviation (SEPA) grant-writing program at Austin College. The SEPA program provides a service-learning experience in which students spend a summer writing grants with local nonprofit agencies. In the hope that others might choose to emulate our efforts, what follows is a detailed overview of SEPA's founding and operation. Also included is a three-part assessment of the program focused on student learning, grant-writing outcomes, and the role the program plays in building bridges between the college and its surrounding region.

Keywords: internship, grants, partnership



David Orr (1992) asks his students to consider how their liberal arts education prepares them to *reside*, not merely dwell, in their community. By committing to a place, Orr argues, the inhabitant and local community become “parts of a system that meets real needs for food, materials, economic support and sociability” (102). In this spirit, colleges and universities engage in innovative community partnerships that deliver high-impact learning opportunities to students (e.g., Archer-Kuhn & Grant, 2014; Beran & Tubin, 2011; Braskamp, 2011; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Butin, 2010; Gerstenblatt, 2014; Harkavy, 2004; Hollander, 2004; Kuh, 2008; Stevens, 2014; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008).

Through decades of innovation and experimentation in course design, we now recognize a wide range of service-learning models. Heffernan (2001), for example, found six categories that capture most service-learning experiences: (1) “pure service-learning,” where service is itself the intellectual core; (2) discipline-based service-learning courses, where specific knowledge frames the experience; (3) problem-based service-learning courses, where students act as consultants working for a

client; (4) capstone courses, typically used to bridge theory and practice; (5) service internships, with both agency and student benefiting from the experience; and (6) undergraduate community-based action research, often as independent studies with close faculty supervision.

Grant-writing internships, at least ones similar in design to the SEPA program described in this article, do not fall easily into any one of these categories; rather, they are informed by several. When students are placed with agencies that match their disciplinary focus (a public health student being matched with a breast cancer screening agency, for example), Heffernan's second category, focusing on discipline, makes sense. Grant-writing programs also feature strong elements of problem-based service-learning, as students see themselves as consultants sent into the field with skills and the ability to help their assigned agency (even if students do not always see the reverse, in the education that agencies provide for them). In fact, the mutual benefits realized in these programs make them align most closely with Heffernan's service internship model of service-learning. Nonetheless, factoring in the contribution of disciplinary and problem-based approaches

more fully captures how this program fits within the field of service-learning programs.

These categories of service-learning open a door to high-impact pedagogical practices that promote engaged learning (e.g., Arendt & Westover, 2014; Bowen 2005; Wehlburg, 2006). Bowen (2005), summarizing the literature, offers four necessary characteristics of engaged learning. First, students must actively participate in the learning process. That is, they must experience a spark that then drives their desire to learn. The second dimension requires engagement with the object of study. In other words, students must consider deeply the subject at hand, perhaps through close reading, historical analysis, cultural anthropology, or whatever particular method the matter requires. Third, students must understand the context of their study. The goal here is multidisciplinary—the ability to synthesize or translate their existing knowledge to different settings. The final expectation is for students to develop an engagement with the human condition through a social/civic experience. This requirement is perhaps the greatest goal of service-learning.

The service-learning opportunities that come with grant writing (which incorporate discipline-based, problem-based, and service [applied] internships) meld nicely with the pedagogical opportunities contained in engaged learning. Disciplinarity allows for a meaningful engagement with the object of study, which is critical to engaged learning (Arendt & Westover, 2014; Bowen, 2005). When the learning experience is problem-based and applied, students are found to learn more (Shulman 2002; Wehlberg 2006). Finally, the internship model, by its very nature, has the potential to promote engaged learning (Revere & Kovach, 2011; Shulman, 2002; Walqui, 2000), especially when it happens through civic engagement (Korgen & White, 2010). In summary, the type of experiences enabled by grant-writing service-learning programs, like the one addressed in this article, have the ability to spark engaged learning and provide a transformative educational experience.

Other Grant-Writing Programs

There is very little scholarship on the service-learning potential of community grant-writing initiatives. A notable exception is an article on the Community Grant Writing Project (CGWP) at Willamette

University (Stevens, 2014). This innovative program conceives of community grant-writing as an intensive writing experience within a poverty and public policy first-year seminar course.

Prior to this grant-writing experience, students in the CGWP are immersed in a multidisciplinary exploration of the myriad issues surrounding poverty. In addition, they learn about the partner agencies' mission and initiatives through time spent in the field volunteering and through agency visits to their classroom. Students are sorted into teams, and then in the grant-writing portion of the course they benefit from specialized writing instruction, periodic presentations to agency partners, and reflection papers where they consider issues of poverty, or perhaps their career goals, through the lens of their service experience. Assessment of this dynamic program shows not only positive results for student learning, but also success in securing grant funding for partner agencies.

Although the SEPA program differs in terms of mission, scope, and design (as described in detail below), many of the elements that make CGWP a success have been considered for incorporation at Austin College. One specific example is our work to integrate the grant-writing experience into the college's writing requirement. The writing curriculum at Austin College requires students to complete a series of foundational and advanced writing classes across the curriculum. Unlike the CGWP at Willamette, grant writing fits better as an upper level writing experience (which asks for applied work) at Austin College.

The Social Entrepreneurship for Poverty Alleviation (SEPA) Program

The remainder of this article describes and evaluates the Social Entrepreneurship for Poverty Alleviation (SEPA) program at Austin College, a private liberal arts college of approximately 1,300 students in Sherman, Texas, 60 miles north of Dallas. Each summer the program pairs approximately 20 students with area nonprofit agencies. Through a focus on grant writing, students are able to practice and apply their academic training in meaningful service to the community. They go into the field with not only a passion to help, but also a clear idea of how they can best help. The total amount of student-generated grant funding

over the past 6 years stands at \$855,977 and has averaged \$8,734 per student. These funds, provided to a resource-deprived region (described in more detail below), are a material legacy left behind by each student.

Founding

In summer 2011, President Marjorie Hass laid the groundwork for an overall strategic plan that was to incorporate a plank stressing the meaningful engagement of Austin College in the life of its surrounding region. The final version of the text read,

Global Vision, Local Engagement: We will serve as an accelerator for the cultural and economic growth of our surrounding region. We will make better use of the unique opportunities our location provides for learning, service, and scholarship. Concurrently, we will build international partnerships that have a local impact and further build on our long-standing reputation as a leader in international education.

Reflecting back, President Hass recalled:

It was necessary to break down barriers and recognize the inherent connection between the college and region . . . I wanted to find a way to share with the community, in the most meaningful way possible, the talents of our students. (Personal communication, June 15, 2017)

In preparation for the plan's unveiling, she invited Donald Rodgers, associate professor of political science, to design an academic program that would help meet this goal. Early in this process, Rodgers consulted with the Texoma Council of Governments (TCOG) about ways the college could leverage the skills of its students in service of the community. TCOG is a voluntary organization of local governments that works with private and public sector agencies to advance quality of life and economic development in the region.

Katherine Cummins (manager of the Community and Economic Development Program), the primary point of contact at TCOG, had recently been approached by Beverly Santicola (executive director, Center for Rural Outreach & Public Services, Inc. [CROPS]) about ways in which partner-

ships might form to help build capacity in local nonprofit agencies. (It is important to note that neither TCOG nor CROPS has a formal affiliation with Austin College.) With those conversations in mind, Ms. Cummins brought together this three-person working group to discuss programming that might originate from Austin College.

Two key questions motivated the discussion: (1) How do we make our liberal arts college and its students an asset to the community? (2) How do we make our community an asset to the college and its students? The idea was for students to become engaged learners through an extended service experience. The small working group recognized that in addition to a passion for social justice, a practical skill liberal arts students should have is the ability to write well. The identified community need was for dedicated grant writers who could help nonprofit agencies grow their capacity to deliver services. The group framed their partnership approach in terms of social entrepreneurship aimed at improving conditions for people struggling most in the region, and thus the program gained its name.

Operation of the Program

Fast-forward to summer 2018. The seventh cohort of students is in the field writing grants for agencies, yet the basic mechanics of the program have remained unchanged. At Austin College, a small team of faculty and staff (four people) contributes a portion of their time to administering the program. Three staff members in the Institutional Advancement Office work to recruit agencies, raise money for the program, organize student and agency applications, administer payment to students, track the progress of grant applications, and even teach sections within the grant-writing workshop (described below). One faculty member serves as the SEPA coordinator and is responsible for recruiting students, working to match students to agencies, organizing the workshop, supervising the student experience over the summer, running reflection sessions, and assigning grades.

Recruitment. Recruitment begins with an understanding of the changing profile of Austin College students. Since 2012, the percentage of Austin College students who are Pell Grant eligible rose from 22% to 27%. Of the 98 SEPA students over the same time period, 32% have been Pell eligible.

As such, summer work is a necessity for many of our students, and consequently the SEPA program has always paid its students a \$2,000 stipend in exchange for 200 hours of work. Starting in 2018, students also receive a scholarship to pay for related course credit.

In the early part of the spring semester, student recruitment takes place with announcements in classes, e-mail notifications, and signage around campus. Perhaps the most critical role for the faculty coordinator is identifying potential participants and encouraging them to apply. Interested students submit an online application where they answer a variety of questions about their background, academic preparedness, and motivation for participating.

Also in the early part of the spring semester, interested agencies complete an online application that asks a number of questions assessing their suitability for the program. It is important, in terms of suitability to participate, for agencies to be well enough established that students are likely to have a meaningful experience, but also that they have unmet needs to which the students can contribute. As it turns out, many local agencies find themselves in this position. New agency recruitment, as well as relationship maintenance with existing organizations, is a year-round effort for program administrators.

Matching. In April, the administrative team meets to review applications, decide on participants, and do the matching. This process is more of an art than a science. Administrators primarily consider the substantive interests each student has expressed in the application, but they also consider their strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis the nature of the various agencies. Some agencies, for example, have a reputation for being warm and nurturing, whereas others operate at a fast pace. We expect different types of students to succeed in each of these environments and match them accordingly.

In addition, newer agencies are often less prepared for the grant-writing process generally. For these agencies, students will likely spend a good portion of the summer working with staff to articulate their story, create logic models, and organize records—before they ever begin actually writing grant applications. In more established agencies, this material likely exists, and the students

will be searching for, drafting, and submitting grant applications right away. In even more established agencies, fund-raising routines already exist, and the student will perhaps work on grant applications to previously supportive foundations. Finally, experience suggests that it is useful to pair the strongest students in terms of writing and interpersonal skills (perhaps even students participating for a second time) with first-time agency partners. This will likely produce a good experience for the agency while allowing the experienced student to help SEPA administrators better understand their new partner. Knowing all of this, and understanding the preparation of each student, helps with successful matching.

Following this meeting, e-mails go out to all students letting them know whether they will be participating and, if so, with whom. Students not admitted find out what they might do to improve their application next time. The SEPA program very rarely turns down agencies that want to participate. In the few cases where this has happened, the agencies were so new that they did not have a physical location and had not yet begun to deliver any services to the community.

Grant-writing workshop. In the week following spring commencement ceremonies, participating students and representatives of the agencies (usually executive directors) convene on campus for a 2-day grant-writing workshop. During this intensive 16-hour training seminar, professional grant-writing instructors lead sessions with students and agency staff on a variety of topics: how to search for grant opportunities, strategically targeting and tracking progress with foundations, organizing and presenting institutional data, developing a case for support, and proper structuring of applications. The workshop instructors come from organizations that advise agencies on fund-raising campaigns. Beverly Santicola (one of the SEPA founders), of U.S. Government Grants, in Houston, and Carole Rylander, of Rylander Associates, fill this role for SEPA.

The workshop is a program requirement for both students and agencies. Agencies participating for the second or third time will often send different staff members to benefit from the training. We view the instructor stipend and food service costs associated with the workshop as an in-kind contribution to regional agencies by the SEPA program and Austin College.

Table 1: Characteristics of SEPA Grant-Writing Students

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Number of SEPA interns	7	8	21	22	18	22
Distinct majors represented	6	4	8	12	13	17
Distinct minors represented	5	4	10	13	12	12
Average GPA (at time of application)	3.20	3.31	3.48	3.36	3.34	3.37
Percent women	100	78	57	55	83	86
Percent non-White	43	11	38	45	44	41

Note. For purposes of comparison, in 2017 the average GPA of all students at Austin College was 3.14, with 37% identifying as not White and 53% women.

Summer contact. Before concluding the grant-writing workshop, students and agencies negotiate a work schedule and make plans for the beginning of the internship. Because not many Austin College students are from Sherman, SEPA administrators negotiated a reduced-rate housing option for students who wish to live on campus during the summer. In 2017, seven of the 22 participating students exercised this option. Other campus resources include a library subscription to Foundation Center Funding Information Network, a powerful grant-searching resource. This database is a critical component of the program and remains available, but accessible only on campus, to students and agencies year-round.

Students remain in contact with the faculty coordinator during the summer. In order to receive course credit, students must submit reports each time they finish a grant application or complete a significant activity. In addition, all participants join a closed Facebook group to communicate with each other and share success stories and frustrations. Interventions occur when students do not perform as expected or agencies fail to deliver the agreed-upon learning experience, but this has happened only twice in the program's history. Before the use of Facebook, students met on campus in the middle and end of the summer session for debridement sessions.

A Profile of Participants

Table 1 summarizes characteristics, by year, of participating students. The first two "trial run" years saw seven and eight students participating, respectively. Since then, the program has averaged just over 20. The SEPA program recruits students from across campus. In 2017, for example, participating

students came from 17 of Austin College's 37 major disciplines. Students majoring in science disciplines participate at a lower rate for a variety of reasons, including summer research expectations. SEPA students are above average in terms of their GPA, which is not surprising given the application process. The racial composition of SEPA students is comparable to the college as a whole, although slightly more diverse overall. In terms of gender, notably more women than men participate. Interestingly, this gender gap (around 80% women) aligns with industry demographics. According to the Grant Professionals Association (2017), 88.3% of its members are women.

Since 2012, 57 different agencies have participated in the SEPA program. Table 2 lists all of these community partners and indicates their number of times participating. There are 21 agencies that have returned for at least a second time, and eight that have been with the program for 3 or more years. These multiyear partners tend to have had very good experiences with the program and provide high-quality learning environments for students. Recruiting first-time agencies helps advertise the SEPA program to the region, and admitting a diverse typology of organizations helps with student recruitment across campus.

The Texoma Council of Governments publishes a resource directory yearly (TCOG, 2017a). From this list, there are approximately 170 local nonprofit agencies identified by their mission as being "highly suitable" for the program (including the 57 who have already participated), with many more added yearly. This local nonprofit society is more than sufficient to provide opportunities for Austin College students, but also not so large that SEPA might go unnoticed in the community.

Table 2: Agency Participation in the SEPA Grant-Writing Program (2012-2017)

Agency	Years	Agency	Years
African American Museum	1	Pottsboro Area Development Alliance	1
AGE Museum and Learning Center	1	Pottsboro Area Public Library	4
Behavioral Concepts	1	Preston Voluntary Emergency Services	2
Bells 4A & 4B Economic Development Board	1	PVES Foundation	3
Callie Clinic	3	Reba's Ranch House/Texoma Health Foundation	1
Chahta Foundation	1	Serve Denton	2
Child and Family Guidance Center	1	Share: Taking it to the Streets	1
Children's Advocacy Center of Grayson County	1	Sherman Community Players	5
City of Denison—Main Street	6	Sherman Independent School District	1
Covenant Presbyterian Church Preschool	1	Sherman Symphony	2
Denton Assistance Center, Inc. Serve Denton	1	TCOG	1
Downtown Sherman Preservation	2	TCOG Area Agency on Aging	1
Family Promise of Grayson County	1	TCOG Energy Services	1
Fannin County Children's Center	1	Texoma Community Center	2
Friends of Sam Rayburn/Rayburn House	1	Texoma Craft Beverage Alliance Foundation	1
Grand Central Station	2	Texoma Health Foundation	1
Grayson College Foundation	3	Texoma Housing Partners	1
Grayson County Department of Juvenile Services	1	Texoma Senior Citizens Foundation	1
Grayson County Shelter	4	The HOPE Center	1
Habitat for Humanity Grayson County	2	The Rehabilitation Center	2
Home Hospice of Grayson County	2	The Salvation Army	1
House of Eli	2	The Sherman Museum	1
Keep Whitesboro Beautiful	1	Theatricks	1
MasterKey Ministries of Grayson County	2	United Way of Grayson County	2
Meals on Wheels of Texoma	1	Whitesboro Economic Development	1
Minienounters Mini Therapy Horses	1	Women Rock	4
Mosaic Family Services	2	Women's Gift Exchange	1
New Life House	1	Young at Art	1
North Texas Youth Connection	1		

Table 3: A Profile of the Texoma Region

	Cooke County	Fannin County	Grayson County	Texas	United States
Total Population	38,437	33,915	120,877	24.26m	309.3m
Percent under 18	28.5	24.6	27.2	30.4	26.9
Percent over 65	15.9	17	15.6	10.4	13
Percent White	85.7	86	83.9	70.4	72.4
Percent Black	2.7	6.8	5.9	11.8	12.6
Percent Hispanic (of any race)	15.6	9.5	11.3	37.6	16.3
Percent low birth weight	8.3	7.7	7.6	8.1	6
Percent of adults smoking	NA	NA	27	19	15
STI (cases per 100k people)	214	214	258	422	83
Teen birth rate (births per 1k women)	70	64	64	64	22
Percent of adults uninsured	30	27	27	30	13
Percent over 25 with high school degree	75	90	80	72	92
Percent unemployed	6.6	8.8	8.1	7.6	5.3
Percent in poverty	14.8	17.2	15.7	17.6	14.4
Percent of children in poverty	19	20	19	23	11
Violent crime (incidents per 100k people)	381	223	265	512	100
Percent with access to healthy foods	17	33	47	62	92

Note. Information in this table comes from the TCOG's (2017b) Texoma Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy with data originating from the 2010 U.S. Census and the Robert Wood Lowe Foundation.

A Note on the Region

The Texoma region is located north of Dallas along the Red River border with Oklahoma and contains a mix of urban and rural areas. TCOG recognizes the region to encompass Grayson, Fannin, and Cooke Counties. The major cities are Sherman (population 41,500), Denison (23,700), Gainesville (16,300), and Bonham (10,100). A number of smaller cities and towns dot the region. A quick look at population characteristics in Table 3 shows significant demand for social-service-oriented nonprofit programming.

Many of these demographic indicators speak for themselves, but a few stand out as particularly concerning. Health indicators in the region are rather poor. High rates of smoking, low birth weights, high rates of STIs, low access to healthy foods, and a high level of uninsured people all represent problems that exceed national and usually state averages. Although poverty levels in the region are lower than the state average,

they remain high in the national context, especially among children (Bray & Galvan, 2015).

Evaluating the SEPA Program

The SEPA grant-writing program is at a stage where preliminary program assessment is possible in at least three areas. What follows is an assessment of the program's impact on student learning, the community, and programmatic fund-raising efforts at Austin College.

Learning Outcomes

To evaluate student learning, a number of items are analyzed. Student feedback in the form of course/program evaluation provides quantitative and qualitative information from both students and agency partners. We also track senior exit surveys in the Political Science Department to compare SEPA students with other departmental graduates who are academically similar.

The quantitative part of the student and agency evaluations measures a number of items related to student learning and issues of responsible fulfillment of program expectations (see Table 4). There is very little variation in response to any of these questions. Students rate the program highly, as do agency partners.

The first four items offer students' evaluation of their own learning. On average, students rate themselves in the 4 range

on this 5-point scale. There appears to be a slight trend upward over time; however, the difference of means across years is not statistically significant. In the few cases where students rated themselves at 3 or lower, a match was done with agency evaluation of the same student, and in each of these instances the agency rated the student higher (on Questions 12 and 13) than the students rated themselves on the four learning-focused questions. Similarly

Table 4: Evaluation of SEPA Grant-Writing Students

	2015	2016	2017
Student Self-Evaluation	n = 15	n = 19	n = 10*
<i>Learning Focused</i>			
1. This internship gave me a realistic experience in grant-writing	4.1	4.5	4.5
2. The work I performed was challenging and stimulating	3.9	4.4	4.1
3. I am comfortable with finding grants and other funding resources for different projects/programs	4.0	4.6	4.7
4. I have more knowledge on finding relevant data or research required to write a successful grant proposal	4.3	4.7	4.6
<i>Responsibility and Program Evaluation Focused</i>			
5. I was given adequate training or explanation of projects	3.7	4.1	4.5
6. I had regular meetings with my supervisor and received constructive, on-going feedback	3.6	4.3	4.2
7. I was provided levels of responsibility consistent with my ability and was given additional responsibility as my experience increased	3.5	4.2	4.2
8. My supervisor was available and accessible when I had questions/concerns	4.0	4.7	4.1
9. I had a successful grant-writing experience	3.8	4.6	4.2
10. I received adequate training in grant-writing	4.1	3.9	4.5
11. Would you be willing to engage in a peer-to-peer grant training effort?	73%	79%	70%
<i>Agency Evaluation of Student</i>			
	n = 15	n = 20	n = 13
12. The intern displayed initiative, imagination and effective communication	4.4	4.3	4.3
13. The intern has displayed growth in knowledge and understanding of organization's mission and services	4.5	4.5	4.7
14. The intern followed instructions and completed work assignments in a timely manner	4.6	4.4	4.6
15. The intern maintained professional demeanor and appearance	4.3	4.5	4.4
16. The intern followed organization's rules and regulations	4.7	4.7	4.8
<i>Note. Scores represent the average rating on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale. The final student evaluation item shows the percentage of students answering in the affirmative. Due to a turnover in program staff, follow-up surveys were not sent in 2017, resulting in a smaller than normal sample.</i>			

favorable evaluations appear on issues related to responsibility and general program evaluation. Although all of these quantitative responses indicate positive effects and reflect program vitality, they do not portray the transformative experience we believe occurs when students engage with the program. Insights into that aspect are provided by the open-ended, qualitative assessment that the students and agencies volunteer in their evaluations.

It is the hope of all engaged learners that they understand the social/civic context for the activities in which they engage. This understanding is at the heart of meaningful service-learning. The open-ended comments show that students are well attuned to the social context of their work and the role it has in shaping society. The following examples are presented because of their clarity, but these are representative of many similar comments:

I had only positive experiences with [Agency] and everyone there. I got to meet several members of the Board, and staff, as well as regular patients that receive treatment there. I am thankful Dan took the time to take me to an additional meeting about grant-writing to give me further insight into the process. Most of all I see that Sherman has a strong non-profit presence and community. (Student program evaluation, September 1, 2016)

Working as a proposal writer in the Grayson County area is an immense challenge. This internship immersed me in the unique socio-economic climate of this area. There is extreme wealth and extreme poverty just miles away from each other in a relatively small population. This region does not receive the financial support or recognition that larger cities, such as Dallas, receive. The challenge I experienced this summer made me realize that grant-writing is not only standing up for the impoverished individuals of Sherman, but also fighting for an under-funded region. (Student program evaluation, September 1, 2016)

These reflections show sensitivity to the object of study and appreciation of context as well as the beneficial effects of exper-

iential learning/service-learning. The comments of supervisors also identify the realization of engaged learning.

[Student] was an absolute asset to [Agency]. She was diligent in using her time wisely and producing many documents that will be extremely useful in this coming year. In addition, she volunteered with [Agency] and participated in our work, which was not only was [sic] a blessing to us but also helped [Student] to “meet” the need. She saw that the children were real and I believe that her heart and perspective were changed. That perspective change definitely showed up in her writing. She is an accomplished writer. Already, I have used a lot of her writing in a case statement and used it for another grant proposal. For me, she helped to express what we deal with every day, not from inside the trenches, but a “looking in” perspective. Having fresh eyes and the ability to communicate effectively, is the icing on the cake. (Agency program evaluation, September 1, 2016)

Student comments also reveal practical motivations for participating. Although close observers will note the market value of a liberal arts education (e.g., Humphreys & Carnevale, 2016; Jackson, 2017; Sentz, 2016), students and parents are understandably anxious about preparation for the first job (Pearlstein, 2016). Representative comments, in this regard, include “I feel very confident that the skills I learned this summer will be assets in the workplace” and “I believe the skill set I gained from the SEPA program is transferable to any professional context, not just non-profit work” (student program evaluation, September 1, 2016).

Sorting through all student evaluations shows that four students over the years had clearly negative experiences with the SEPA program. One of these students internalized the negative experience, questioning their own preparation and skill. The other three externalized their frustrations. In each case, the primary frustration was that the partner agency was not prepared enough to be hosting a grant-writing intern. This is something that speaks to the matching process, previously discussed, which

ties directly to the success or failure of the learning experience.

Although SEPA students are drawn from across campus (see Table 1), the most common major is political science. Of the 98 total SEPA students, 28 have been political science majors. This weighting probably reflects the influence of faculty sponsors, both of whom have been from that department. This group of SEPA-affiliated political science majors presents an opportunity for outcome assessment.

We looked at departmental exit surveys of the 28 SEPA students in political science and compared them to a sample of 30 political science majors with the same GPA (both average and standard deviation). On many standard items, like self-assessed writing ability and understanding of theoretical concepts, the two groups did not vary significantly. However, notable differences appeared on the open-ended question of future plans. For the 28 SEPA students in political science, 12 were planning careers related to nonprofit or other service-based endeavors (including work with local agencies and organizations like AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps). Of the remaining 15, most (11) were going to graduate school, and four fell into a miscellaneous job searching category. In the comparison group, four were planning to enter nonprofit professions, seven were planning on grad school, and 19 were moving on to various jobs or searching for work.

The SEPA students self-selected into a service experience, so it is not surprising that they would also want to work in the nonprofit world following graduation, but the differentiation from the control group is rather dramatic. Furthermore, despite the endogeneity of this relationship, it is reassuring to see SEPA students pursuing a related career and to know that their participation in the program supplied them with connections, strong resumes, and a specific set of skills.

Contributing to Regional Transformation

The SEPA grant-writing program was born of the desire to transform the skills and creativity of Austin College students into tangible resources for the region's nonprofit agencies. Comprehensive data collection

began in the second year of the program and carefully tracks how many grant applications students submit, as well as how many are funded. Table 5 summarizes these outcomes.

The most exciting finding is that students have indeed been successful in securing funds for their partner agencies. Each year the total grows, but in 2017 (the last fully reported year), the 22 students were successful in securing \$229,500 in grant funding. Over the years, the total amount raised stands at \$855,977; on average, each student secures \$8,734 in grant funding during a summer of work. These outcomes have exceeded expectations. Responding to

Table 5: Summary of SEPA Grant-Writing

	2012*	2013	2014	2015	2016**	2017	Total
Number of students participating	7	8	21	22	18	22	98
Number of grant applications submitted	Unavailable	37	42	46	25	51	201
Number of grants funded	12	12	14	13	11	39	101
Percent of applications funded	Unavailable	32.4%	33.3%	28.3%	44.0%	76.5%	50.2%
Amount requested	Unavailable	\$939,800	\$1,176,708	\$1,302,029	\$486,470	\$405,750	\$4,310,757
Amount funded	\$33,547	\$84,300	\$113,650	\$224,480	\$170,500	\$229,500	\$855,977
Average funds per student	\$4,792	\$10,538	\$5,412	\$10,204	\$9,472	\$10,432	\$8,734

*In 2012 we were still learning what to track.

**Due to a turnover in program staff, 2016 grant-tracking numbers are incomplete.

a question about how she views the grant-funding success of students, President Hass remarked, "That our students are so successful at competing for and securing grant funding is a secondary [to student learning and community engagement], but very exciting, result" (personal communication, June 15, 2017). Asked to comment on SEPA's community impact, Susan Thomas, the executive director of TCOG, wrote:

The increased grant funding SEPA has generated for local non-profits in our region is significant, but the significance grows exponentially when you monetize staff development (grant writing training) and increases in staff support with student service hours. We hear the same three capacity issues from almost every nonprofit we work with: the need for more financial resources generally and challenges raising funds, imbalance between work load and staff availability, and an ever widening knowledge gap as it relates to identifying, writing, and securing funding from grants. SEPA address each of these common organizational challenges, helping the students and agencies alike build quality of life in Texoma. (Personal communication, August 14, 2017)

The following comments from an agency that fights homelessness offer an example of how SEPA students help agencies overcome these organizational challenges.

Because of [Student], we have found 23 potential foundations to write grants for! In total, she has found us \$212,000 in potential grant opportunities. [Student] completed one grant, 8 LOIs, and started 12 grant applications for us. (Agency program evaluation, September 1, 2016)

When students succeed in getting grants funded, they feel a great sense of accomplishment. In reflecting upon her experience, a student from 2015 reported, "I'm excited that a grant proposal I wrote helped my organization secure \$8,000 of funding for a community garden" (student program evaluation, September 1, 2015). More difficult to assess is the impact of students who were not immediately successful in securing

funding. Perhaps their work writing logic models or organizing financial records contributed to fund-raising efforts after they left, but these results are challenging to track.

In recognition of its success working within the community, SEPA has been recognized in a number of ways. It earned the 2013 NADO (National Association of Development Organizations) Innovation Award and was recognized by *Borgen Magazine* as a college program committed to making a difference in the fight against global poverty. In 2016, the city of Denison named SEPA its "Partner of the Year."

Donor and Public Relations

The SEPA program is, in multiple ways, a practical asset to the college. Administrators reference it when they discuss the college mission, and development staff use it as a vehicle to raise money from individuals and foundations. In this regard, President Hass noted,

I often talk to donors who are torn between giving to a social justice cause or helping the college, but SEPA allows them to do both. Not only that, but by funding a SEPA student, I like to explain how their gift compounds itself [in terms of students raising an average of \$8,000 for their agency while being paid a stipend of just \$2,000]. . . . I also find that fundraising for SEPA is a very good way to attract new donors to the college, who we then groom for involvement in future fundraising campaigns. (Personal communication, June 15, 2017)

In addition to fund-raising from individuals, program administrators team up with development staff and write grants to help support the SEPA program. As confusing as it may sound, our experience shows that it is possible to secure grant funding for a program designed to secure grant funding. Funding the program each year requires a combination of fund-raising from individuals, local foundations, and in some years assistance from other sources of money from around campus. In total, the program requires approximately \$57,000 per year to operate. By far the most significant cost associated with the program is the \$2,700 (stipend and scholarship for course credit)

that goes to each participating student. Additional costs include instructor stipend and food service for the workshop, which are less than \$3,000 in total.

Next Steps

Although pleased with these three main areas of impact, the SEPA program continues to explore programmatic improvements. One, already mentioned, is to integrate the grant-writing activities into the college writing curriculum (see Stevens, 2014). Other ideas include growing the number of partner organizations and increasing the number of agencies returning to participate multiple times. This would be an important sign of program value to the community.

Also under consideration is a model for implementing the program during the regular semesters or, perhaps, extending student involvement from summer into the fall. This might involve the partner agency deciding to pay their student for continued work. Finally, the SEPA model has the potential to clone itself in other programs at Austin College. Nonprofit accounting (out of the Economics and Business Administration Department) as well as community be-

havioral health (out of the Department of Psychology) may consider partnership programs in the community that look very similar in design to SEPA.

Conclusion

Programming in higher education often involves uncomfortable zero-sum tradeoffs—resources directed one way and thus restricted in another. Our experience with the SEPA grant-writing program is entirely win-win. Students get a transformative educational experience as well as a paid summer job. Agencies, at no cost to themselves—beyond time spent hosting interns—get fund-raising training and student assistance that averages over \$8,000 in new funding. Finally, through building bridges into the community, the college becomes a better neighbor while at the same time bringing positive attention to its programming. But most importantly, beyond all our success stories, lies the essential point of it all—the lives of people served by these agencies. It is through working with partner agencies that students are able to focus their talents and passions in meaningful service to their neighbors.



About the Authors

Nathan Bigelow is an associate professor and chair of political science at Austin College. His primary research interests are on legislative politics and political campaigning at both the national and state level. He received his Ph.D. in government and politics from the University of Maryland.

Donald Rodgers was an associate professor of political science at Austin College. His primary research interests were on political development and democratization in Taiwan. He had received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Georgia. While beginning work on this article, Don died unexpectedly. This article is presented in his memory.

References

- Archer-Kuhn, B., & Grant, J. (2014). Challenging contextual factors in university-community partnerships. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 7(2), 40–49.
- Arendt, A., & Westover, J. H. (2014). The meaning of engaged learning. *The International Journal of Adult, Community, and Professional Learning*, 20(2), 13–22.
- Beran, J., & Tubin, A. (2011). Shifting service-learning from transactional to relational. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 87(1/2), 88–92.
- Bowen, S. (2005). Engaged learning: Are we all on the same page? *Peer Review*, 7(2). Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/engaged-learning-are-we-all-same-page>
- Braskamp, L. (2011). Higher education for civic learning and democratic engagement: Reinvesting in longstanding commitments. *Diversity and Democracy*, 14(3). Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/higher-education-civic-learning-and-democratic-engagement-0>
- Bray, T., & Galvan, A. M. (2015). *Beyond ABC: Assessing the well-being of children in Dallas County and the North Texas Corridor*. Dallas, TX: The University of Texas at Dallas, Institute for Urban Policy.
- Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (1996). Implementing service learning in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education*, 67(2), 221–239.
- Butin, D. W. (2010). *Service-learning in theory and practice: The future of community engagement in higher education*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gerstenblatt, P. (2014). Community as agency: Community partner experiences with service learning. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 7(2), 60–71.
- Grant Professionals Association. (2017). *Salary & benefits survey results. Internal report provided to authors upon request*. Grant Professionals Association, Overland Park, KS.
- Harkavy, I. (2004). Service learning and the development of democratic universities, democratic schools and democratic societies in the 21st century. In M. Welch & S. Billig (Eds.), *New perspectives in service-learning: Research to advance the field* (pp. 3–32). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Heffernan, K. (2001). Service learning in higher education. *Journal of Contemporary Water Research and Education*, 119(1), 2–8.
- Hollander, E. (2004). *Connecting communities with colleges & universities: Strategies to strengthen local promise efforts through higher education involvement*. Alexandria, VA: America's Promise—The Alliance for Youth.
- Humphreys, D., & Carnevale, A. (2016). *The economic value of liberal education*. Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP), Association of American Colleges & Universities. Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/Economic Case2016.pdf>
- Jackson, A. (2017, February 17). CUBAN: Don't go to school for finance—liberal arts is the future. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/mark-cuban-liberal-arts-is-the-future-2017-2>
- Korgen, K., & White, J. (2010). *The engaged sociologist: Connecting the classroom to the community*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter* [E-book]. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges & Universities.
- Orr, D. W. (1992). *Ecological literacy: Education and the transition to a postmodern world*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Pearlstein, S. (2016, September 2). Meet the parents who won't let their children study literature: Forcing college kids to ignore the liberal arts won't help them in a competitive economy. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/09/02/meet-the-parents-who-wont-let-their-children-studyliterature/?utm_term=.63952abac9ad

- Revere, L., & Kovach, J. (2011). Online technologies for engaged learning: A meaningful synthesis for educators. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 12(2), 113–124.
- Sentz, R. (2016, October 19). What can you do with that (useless) liberal arts degree? A lot more than you think. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emsj/2016/10/19/what-can-you-do-with-that-useless-liberal-arts-degree/#4a06951d41b8>
- Shulman, L. (2002). Making differences: A table of learning. *Change* 34(6), 36–44.
- Stevens, C. (2014). The community grant writing project: A flexible service-learning model for writing-intensive courses. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 18(2), 261–280.
- Texoma Council of Governments. (2017a). *Connections! Texoma community resource book 2016–2017*. Sherman, TX: Author.
- Texoma Council of Governments. (2017b). *Texoma comprehensive economic development strategy* [Agency report]. Sherman, TX: Author.
- Walqui, A. (2000). *Access and engagement: Program design and instructional approaches for immigrant students in secondary school*. McHenry, IL: Delta Systems.
- Weerts, D. J., & Sandmann, L. R. (2008). Building a two-way street: Challenges and opportunities for community engagement at research universities. *The Review of Higher Education*, 32(1), 73–107.
- Wehlburg, C. (2006). *Meaningful course revision: Enhancing academic engagement using student learning data*. Bolton, MA: Anker.