Jacob Leppek
REI Application

Abstract

High school and university students are increasingly engaging with their communities, capitalizing on resources available to them in looking to differentiate themselves in a crowded job market. However, most students are forced to work within the confines of existing organizations as volunteers or interns, limiting potential innovation. Moreover, students have limited contacts, funds, and mentoring to implement their innovative ideas. This proposal aims to develop an easily-reproducible and comprehensive program for high-school students which teaches them strong writing and speaking communication skills through the process of crafting a grant proposal and collaborating with community organizations.

Introduction

Improving a community is a lifetime dedication – as such, involving younger members in this work is an opportunity that has lifelong benefits. Current high school students are the future community leaders, and yet they are rarely asked to aid in projects or even educated on the choices that determine how their local governments and associations operate, creating a mindset that discourages younger members from contributing in the future.

To solve this issue, I am proposing the creation and evaluation of a mentoring program for high school students, *Stugrants,* which builds strong writing skills and community involvement through the process of writing a grant application. This proposed program will serve as a practical tool for local school systems, non-government organizations, afterschool programs, and similar stakeholders to increase students' involvement in the community. Additionally, a comprehensive written resource booklet will act as a simple-to-use guide details the setup and operation of a program to teach high school students how to apply for grant opportunities, collaborate with local organizations, and become community leaders.

Plan of Work

The scope of this project is to research and develop a grant writing and community engagement mentoring program for high school students. Constructed through extensive collaboration with the community resources, this workshop will empower students by demonstrating the basics of turning their ideas to improve their community into a reality. First, a brief listing of similar skill-based workshops in Michigan will be compiled and evaluated using a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) to demonstrate, in general, how programs can be improved, and which traits result in success or failure. As this occurs, the writing of the guidebook will begin through extensive research on curriculum creation and discussions with industry professionals. By examining current grant writing resources, work will be done to simplify materials into an easily digestible source for high school students. Professors and teachers will be consulted to determine most effective instructions, and community organizations will be consulted in relation to grant expectations. No specific individuals or resources are necessary; rather, a focus is placed on filtering through enormous troves of information to produce specific and accessible instructions.

The primary question here is how to construct the most useful and productive structured program that is still flexible enough for widespread use by any organization within a variety of settings. Preliminary discussions with afterschool programs such as MSU's Upward Bound program, high-school teachers and administrators in the East Lansing and other districts, persons within economic development organizations, the MSU "Hatch" business incubator, and other community input have made is clear that such a program would be widely appreciated.

Moreover, students involved in their communities and learning valuable job skills are great public relations assets for schools, and as such, could increase enrollment or draw the attention of highly-ranked universities, for example.

Project Narrative

The Stugrants program is intended to create new opportunities for students taking advantage of existing nonprofit initiatives while operating within the boundaries of existing infrastructure. As "low-cost, high reward," is a key objective of the program, partnering with community organizations will limit the need for monetary investment. Ideally, only three components are necessary for the program: a willing teacher, interested students, and internet and/or printing access.

Significant incentives exist for research and implementation. Any organization that is community-focused and interested in promoting the success of community members and encouraging innovative economic growth has incentive to implement StuGrants. Secondly, this program appeals to high-achieving students looking to differentiate themselves on college applications; to entrepreneurial students looking to implement their ideas and bored of spending years simply sitting in class; to students in distressed communities who are passionate about improving their neighborhoods; to low-performing students, who may simply need another avenue to apply themselves in; and to other students looking to spend their summers outside and building something. Thirdly, public schools, private schools, and charter schools would find value in utilizing the free StuGrants framework to encourage their students to achieve more than required.

While the opportunity to win and implement a community service project if a student wins a grant is of clear significance, this is seen as a secondary benefit to the actual process of grant writing. As these are high-school students, it is obvious that their work may not be on par with the experience of professional grant writers. To mitigate this concern, a primary focus is placed on the benefits of the process. The primary objective of Stugrants is to give students an initial experience into community improvement opportunities and the industry itself. The program is developing strong writers and community-engaged individuals, and is not framed as a win-lose program. The collaboration with community organizations, the exposure to community leaders, the writing experience, and the reflection on the process are seen as the four key objectives of Stugrants for students. The industry average of winning grants is often less than 50%; thus, it is important to demonstrate that the real benefits are found within the process of community engagement and develop a lifelong interest in local improvement.

Project Results

As this proposed project focuses on economic empowerment and the investment of nonprofit grant dollars being directed to active youth within a community, Stugrants would directly result in the creation of few, if any, salaried jobs. However, the enormous community benefits are obvious, for both the organizers of and participants in the Stugrants program. For the organizers, a few benefits are: participation increases due to the offering of Stugrants; improvement in public relations due to increased direct involvement in the community; and increased prestige as students win prominent grants and utilize the program on competitive college and scholarship applications. For participants: strong communication skills to engage in public discourse; knowledge of the grant writing process without any costly university classes; increased appeal to employers and college admissions counselors; and the chance to implement an idea of their own within their community.

To reiterate, the primary focus of this program will be to research and develop the most constructive and accessible written guide to implement a mentoring program focused on community involvement through teaching the grant application process at the high-school level. Ideally, any community member will be able to access the finished guidebook, either online or in print, and implement this program to encourage community involvement for the area's high school students.

Dissemination

Dissemination of the resulting program is integral to future implementation. As discussed throughout this proposal, outreach to interested parties is inherent within the actual development of the program. By actively seeking out partnerships and interested community organizations to collaborate with on the development of Stugrants, not only does the program receive a large amount of essential feedback from industry professionals, but also prepares these organizations for implementation; for example, organizations feel as if they have a personal stake in the final product and collaborators see first-hand the opportunities which this program can offer. Presentations to administrators in community programs and other parties are intended to connect with interested teachers. This process will be continued; after the guidebook is finished and implementation is occurring, implementing organizations and myself will work through community resources such as social media, board postings at libraries or schools, and local news to encourage participation.

Budget

Personnel	$0.00
Travel	$25.00
Supplies	$50.00
Other	$50.00
Total	$100.00

As this is primarily a service-based system, required funds are low in the developing stage. In the implementation stage, costs stay extremely low, as volunteers are expected to contribute their time. Expected costs include transportation and writing costs, and supplies for marketing (e.g. printing costs).