Summary

Community Partners

- City of Hamilton
- the Trillium Foundation
- the Social Planning & Research Council of Hamilton

McMaster Partners

- ROADS

Total students and postdocs registered for training – 188

Total community projects initiated – 6

Total community projects completed – 1

Impacts of this FWI funded project

The Research Shop Initiative led by the Faculty of Social Sciences [http://researchshop.mcmaster.ca/](http://researchshop.mcmaster.ca/) has partnered with the School of Graduate studies and the Network for Community-Campus Partnerships as a result of the Grant Writing Training & Placement Program. Some of the lessons learned from this FWI project have been applied to the Research Shop.

The Research Shop works with public, non-profit, and community organizations in and beyond Hamilton to provide plain-language answers to your research questions. It meets many of the objectives of the original FWI application to provide opportunities to students and to support the broader community priorities.

Full Report

The Grant Writing Training and Placement Program comprised two aspects: training for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows on academic and non-academic (community-based) grants and a placement program that allowed participants to apply their skills and knowledge on an actual grant application for a partner organization. The program ran in the spring/summer of 2015 with support from FWI and the School of Graduate Studies (SGS).
To deliver training on facets of academic research grants, SGS collaborated with ROADS. The first event, Identifying Funding Sources, was delivered by Sherisse Webb and Susan Gordon of ROADS in April, 2015. 122 graduate students and postdocs registered for the session, to learn how to identify funding sources for research beyond the Tri-Agencies, and how to craft a strong application. The session was extremely well-received by students, with strong demand for more offerings in future. As a result of the interdisciplinary focus of the session, ROADS staff were able to answer the most commonly asked questions regarding writing research grant applications. Subsequent sessions specifically focusing on SSHRC and NSERC were cancelled due to low registration.

In May 2015, SGS organized and hosted a comprehensive one-day grant writing training conference for non-academic or community-based grants for 66 registered students and postdoctoral fellows. SGS collaborated with grant writing professionals from the City of Hamilton, the Trillium Foundation and the Social Planning & Research Council of Hamilton to deliver a series of sessions designed to address components of a strong grant application, the use of grants in community building, and professions related to grant writing. Experts drew upon their own experiences in the field, and provided additional resources and suggestions for students to continue developing their grant writing competencies.

In addition to providing training, the conference served as a pre-requisite for students and postdoctoral fellows interested in obtaining a grant placement. SGS developed relationships with multiple external organizations to provide experiential learning opportunities for students to work on actual grant applications over the summer. Partner organizations included the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board Foundation, the Social Planning & Research Council of Hamilton (SPRC), and the Fit Active Beautiful (FAB) Foundation. SGS also contributed a grant project, to fully participate in all aspects of the program. Over 40 students submitted applications to participate in more than 6 grant teams. Students were able to meet and network with partner organizations at the conference, and learn about the projects before selecting their top choice of placements.

The placement portion of the program proved more difficult and less successful than the training activities. Student feedback from surveys indicates support for the training conference, and a desire to learn more about the potential application of graduate studies to careers that include grant writing as one of the competencies. Exit interviews with students and placement supervisors indicate that both the students and the placement supervisors were overwhelmed by the time commitment that would be required for successful completion of the project. Students did not communicate with team members or supervisors, and several groups specifically mentioned the absence of student leaders on the grant writing teams which necessitated placement supervisors invest significantly more time to manage the student teams.

While the placements were not as successful as hoped, one group managed to exceed the expectations of their host organization. Sharon Gallant, founder of the FAB Foundation, a non-profit organization that provides young women with coaching and positive decision-making skills via physical fitness, proposed an extremely broad feasibility study as the first step in a significant grant application. After working closely with her team throughout the summer, Sharon expressed her gratitude to McMaster for this project. She and her team redefined the scope of the summer activities and ended up finalizing a proposal summary that will strongly influence the strategic direction of the organization’s activities going forward. Sharon was extremely impressed with her graduate student team, and spoke very highly of them. One of the participants, a PhD candidate in
Chemistry, made significant contributions to the success of the project, and has arranged with Sharon to continue her involvement after the program ended.

SGS employed two methods to evaluate the program, a survey and exit interviews with students and placement supervisors. The survey was distributed to participants following the training conference, which asked them to rate their satisfaction of the event, the impact of the content in relation to their professional development, and for feedback for future incarnations of the program. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Students were interested in the topic, and wanted to learn more about potential career applications. They also made some helpful suggestions for future grant training conferences related to speakers and additional areas of interest. In the exit interviews, students were positive regarding the training, but mirrored the same disappointment over the placements as supervisors, citing a lack of communication between peers and an absence of group leadership. One participant, a PhD graduate from Biology, stated that he tried to assume a leadership role for his team, but found that his colleagues did not respond to his requests for additional meetings, share their findings and progress, or exhibit the level of engagement for the project that he expected. He described the experience as a lost opportunity, and encouraged SGS to regroup and try the placement program again in the future.

Despite difficulties with the placements, Grad Studies has received requests to continue the program. The YWCA contacted SGS to offer their organization as a host for future placements (unsolicited), and the Faculty of Social Sciences began investigating the possibility of expanding their existing Rapid Research Response pilot to include grant writing in collaboration with SGS. The structural model proposed by the Faculty of Social Sciences would address many of the gaps identified by participants and supervisors – communication and leadership – and would allow graduate students to continue to apply their research and writing skills by working on grant proposals for community organizations. This pilot has morphed into the McMaster Research Shop.

The Grant Writing Training & Placement Program was an innovative approach to addressing the skills and experience gaps that challenge graduate students in their post-academic job search. By providing students with an experiential learning opportunity, they had the chance to develop skills and demonstrate their competency. The FAB grant team is an excellent example, showing that the students were able to apply their academic skills to a topic outside of their research discipline, gain professional experience, and cultivate a strong relationship with their supervisor that they can use in their job search and career transition.

This program allowed students to demonstrate the value of their research skills, rather than their subject area expertise, and to communicate the importance of research in the broader Hamilton community. The demand for grant training for both academic research and community-based funding is extremely strong, and while SGS will explore partnership with the Faculty of Social Sciences, it will also commit to developing training in the area of grant writing to benefit students academically and professionally, through info sessions and the development of a training program potentially delivered via Avenue to Learn to increase access and availability.