

It Takes a Village: Institution and Community Resources for Experiential Learning

Monica Miller
Middle Georgia State University, monica.miller@mga.edu

Author Biography

Dr. Monica Carol Miller is an assistant professor of English at Middle Georgia State University. A 2018-2019 Governor's Teaching Fellow, Dr. Miller teaches courses in professional writing, composition, and American literature. Her first book, *Being Ugly: Southern Women Writers and Social Rebellion*, was published by Louisiana State University Press in 2017. She is currently the president of the Flannery O'Connor Association

As a part of Middle Georgia State University's growing Professional Writing program, I want to engage my students through authentic learning experiences. While I design much of the work in these courses around project-based, real-world examples, I wanted to give the students in my Advanced Professional Writing Course (PFWR 4660) a particularly authentic learning experience, one which included authentic writing projects.

We focused on the genre of the white paper: a problem/solution report. Students read the past two white papers released by the university president's office. This genre study allowed them to determine the characteristics of a white paper as well as learn more about the university. Most undergraduate students are not aware of their own institution's stated mission or long-term goals. Assigning these readings to advanced undergraduate students allowed for engaging class discussions about how the university's priorities have changed, as well as the students' perspectives on these goals.

Both white papers were solely text-based documents, so the first major assignment was to revise one of the documents with data visualizations: one graph or chart and one infographic. Infographics are becoming an important form of multimodal communication, especially in professional and technical communication; this is an important genre for students to become familiar with. This assignment provided an opportunity for both creation and analysis.

The infographic assignment was completed individually. However, since it was a small cohort of students who had experience working together, there was a significant amount of sharing of resources and knowledge. Students used a variety of products including Microsoft Word, Excel, and Canva to create their images, depending on their own experience and interests.

With this understanding of the white papers as a genre as well as practice in determining effective modes of communication, the rest of the semester was organized around a collaborative, experiential learning project with Macon's Tubman Museum as our experiential learning partner. The class researched the museum's history and the challenges it has faced. Students then drew upon project management strategies to develop a series of documents related to an issue they identified facing the Tubman Museum.

Over the course of the semester, students worked in small groups to research and identify a challenge facing the museum as well as propose a solution to this challenge. The artifacts they produced for this project included:

- SWOT Report;
- White Paper (including drafts and data visualizations);
- Identification of a possible grant to fund their proposals;

- Draft grant proposal; and
- Final presentation of their research and findings.

I credit much of the students' success not only to the authentic nature of the experiential learning assignment, but also to the group of experts on whom I called to provide their expertise to the class. To begin with, we had a session with Abbie Holmes, an instructional librarian at MGA. I often have librarians lead workshops for my students, but this session was focused specifically on their projects, including specialized database searching and resources for finding potential grants. Most of the students in the class were advanced English majors, all of whom assumed they were rather knowledgeable about academic research. It was gratifying to see how surprised they were at how much more there was for them to learn about research from Ms. Holmes; by the end of the class session, the students were exclaiming about how surprised they were at how much there was to learn.

In addition to the library workshop, we also had a class session with Barbara Ratzlaff, the Contracts and Grants Director for MGA. As many of the students had expressed interest in grant writing as a career, this session was an invaluable introduction to the surprisingly complex nature of the grant process. Ms. Ratzlaff provided students with a number of resources and models of grant writing which they found useful not only for their class projects but also in their understanding of institutional practices and effective writing.

And finally, Tubman Museum director Dr. Andy Ambrose spent a class period with the students, providing a brief history of the museum and his own involvement with the museum and discussing some of the museum's current priorities and challenges. When Dr. Ambrose visited the class, the students had all already visited the museum and done preliminary research on issues facing museums in general as well as the Tubman Museum specifically. This allowed the students to use the class time to ask focused questions about their research interests, which included accessibility, exhibit design, programming, and collection holdings.

For the final presentation day, we were joined by Ms. Holmes, Ms. Ratzlaff, Dr. Ambrose, as well as Amy Berke, chair of the English department; and Chip Rogers, director of the Professional Writing program. Students had prepared full-color copies of their white papers which included their grant proposals as appendices; on their own initiative, they had also prepared mock-ups of brochures and maps as part of their presentations. They produced professional-quality presentations and performed admirably during the question-and-answer part of the presentation, fielding questions from all who were present.

I credit quite a bit of the students' success to the generosity of my colleagues and community members, who not only took the time to visit our class but also responded to subsequent student queries as well as attended their final presentations. I learned that students took initiative to reach out to not only Dr. Ambrose but also other museums around the world to ask about their resources. Normalizing such outreach empowered students to be active agents in their work; it also provided authentic work experiences and allowed them to grow their professional networks. The fact that these professionals from the university administration and the community took the time to meet with the students and attend their presentations sent the message that they were taking the students' work seriously, which encouraged heightened student levels of engagement with their work that I rarely see. I continue to seek out new opportunities for community-based, experiential learning that will similarly engage students.