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“Writing the Watershed”: The Place of Bioregional Pedagogy and Student Grant Writing in a Community-Based Professional Writing Course

Alex Ozbolt
John Hopkins University

Andy Ross
John Hopkins University

James Wolf
Vice President, Friends of Stony Run

The Trail: Access and Ambiguity

The trail is broken in places, washed out, or pocked with scraggly turf. It’s not definitively marked at entrances, and at times, a visitor is unsure if they are trespassing or walking along a well-loved thoroughfare. Changes in elevation provide views of the creek below, shining in the gaps around the shady canopy. A late-nineteenth-century rail tunnel represents the park’s transportation history, a history that is now largely covered by graffiti. The space’s natural history continues to evolve as dedicated stewards try to rebuff choking invasive plants and revitalize this liminal space into a hearty native woodland.

Stony Run Park is a three-mile unpaved trail surrounded by woodland stretching north and south through the heart of Baltimore. Its eponymous stream, which runs near the trail, is a tributary of the Jones Falls, a larger waterway that leads to the Baltimore harbor before finding its way into the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean. One offshoot from the trail connects to the Homewood campus of Johns Hopkins University (JHU), where several university buildings overlook the park. Here

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community space blurs into campus, thanks, in part, to the use of the trail as a thoroughfare between JHU and nearby neighborhoods of Wyman Park and Hampden.

The trail, considered one way, is a common ground crossing fifteen neighborhoods that connect churches, university campuses, residential back alleys, and city parks. Framed differently, it is at times unclear who is responsible for the trail's upkeep, and thus it appears as space that doesn't really "belong" to anyone. Even as an ambiguous space, Stony Run Park is an access point, a way for neighborhoods and a university campus to integrate. Such access requires effort and intention—on the part of users and facilitators. The trail, if left unattended due to competing priorities, might languish in a state of disuse and disinterest.

A class that teaches grant writing is a bit like this winding trail, aspirational in its goals regarding connecting dispersed-yet-tangential communities. It requires thoughtful pedagogical orientation and navigation. It puts students into dialogue with other people, places, and issues as they write grants to support community initiatives. This type of course, or even an assignment that asks students to write public-facing proposals, is meant to connect—like the trail that connects the campus to the nearby neighborhoods. That connection asks writers to be both students enrolled in a credit-bearing course and participants in a largely non-academic discourse, generating work that can be driven by considerations other than grades.

In assuming the role of eligible applicants for real-world grant funding opportunities, students can operate from a unique and empowering vantage. In this case, the community partner brought in local NGOs who eagerly participated in the course.¹ NGO personnel provided tutelage and feedback as students identified and fleshed out projects that could be brought to life. Working with real-world players on a local stage provided a rare sense of civic circumspection. This exercise is intrinsically unique and compelling whether the funding is obtained or if the endeavor serves as a blueprint for later pursuits (as was the case with this class). Community connections that grew from the course remain, and the ideas that were kindled into projects live on to inspire possibilities for the work ahead in designing and advocating for a sustainable future.

In this article, we investigate what grant writing specifically offers to students enrolled in a place-based professional writing course. What unique contributions does a grant writing project make for facilitating connections to place and for developing what Phyllis Mentzell Ryder calls "a sense of how the world is, and what it may become" (6)? How might instructors meaningfully integrate pedagogies emphasizing

¹ NGO, a non-profit governmental organization.

the social and environmental literacies of grant writing “in place”? In short, how should professional writing courses invite students to become not just professionals-in-training, but actual participants in projects with non-academic stakes?

We respond to these questions from three different, interconnected perspectives: student, community partner co-instructor, and faculty instructor. As a student enrolled in the course, Alex Ozbolt provides a clear view of what it meant to navigate the process of designing and tailoring a grant proposal. James Wolf, in the role of community partner and co-instructor, describes what drew him to the opportunity and reflects on his approach to the course as a chance to bring various communities together around an issue he is passionate about. Andy Ross provides the full-time faculty perspective by drawing on the framework of rhetoric and composition pedagogy applied to the environmentally-informed lens he applies to many of his courses. Together, these perspectives contribute to a larger dialogue about what it means to use grant writing to help students access people and places they might otherwise not.

The Institutional Context for “Professional Writing and Communication”

The student body at JHU is remarkably diverse and involved in many extracurriculars. During the 2019-20 academic year, individuals from all fifty states and fifty-one foreign nations attended the University (“Get the Facts”). With approximately 400 registered clubs, twenty-two athletic teams, and 51 major programs, the University has opportunities for everyone to find a community that shares their passions or interests. Group chats for club organization or professional networking often evolve into social forums, and in public spaces like the library or the dining hall, people on teams or in clubs sit together because their extracurricular schedules inevitably align. Even during class lectures, people typically sit next to their friends so they can work with them as partners and spend more time together. This interest in academic and extracurricular diversity was also visible in our grant writing course, even though it fulfilled a university-wide writing requirement.

“Professional Writing and Communication” is a composition course designed to introduce students to the genres of communication most common beyond academia. It combines approaches from business and technical writing courses and supplemental components relating to public speaking. The goal of this course is to give students structured guidance and feedback that prepares them to communicate across a wide range of industries and audiences. Instructors select a theme for their course in the form of a broad and multi-faceted question or topic that can give the

course a “flavor.” The class is capped at nineteen students and meets synchronously, either online or in a face-to-face modality. It fulfills a university writing requirement, drawing students from many different majors and across all undergraduate levels.

This Spring 2022 version of “ProfComm” was sponsored by the JHU Center for Social Concern (CSC), an office charged with facilitating meaningful interactions between the university and its wider community. To promote “a lifelong commitment to active citizenship by integrating education, action, and reflection,” the CSC sponsors faculty discussions and reading groups, hosts topical forums and events open to the campus and public, and provides financial support for community-based courses through a faculty fellowship. This last form of investment is essential, as it allows for community partners like James to be compensated for their time spent as co-instructors. Even before the semester began, the institutional support of the CSC was instrumental in introducing the course co-instructors and helping them find shared intellectual and social interests.

James joined the course as a community partner and representative of two Baltimore-based environmental advocacy organizations: Friends of Stony Run and the Baltimore Weed Warriors. Friends of Stony Run (FSR) is a volunteer-led organization that spearheads efforts to promote the well-being of the Stony Run watershed. As part of its mission to “improve the health of the stream valley and enhance the quality of life in the surrounding community,” FSR routinely organizes cleanup projects, community gatherings, and educational events, and has been instrumental in developing civic cooperation through strategic planning. Baltimore Weed Warriors is a city-sponsored organization that certifies volunteers on the removal of non-native and invasive plants from city parks. For instance, as a certified “weed warrior,” Mr. Wolf has hosted invasive species removal events in his Wyman Park neighborhood.

As a community partner, James felt as though the allurements of place—what Lucy Lippard calls “the lure of the local”—brought him to the course (5). The conviviality and unpretentiousness of Baltimore resonates with him, and he sees how universities have facilitated a breathtakingly rapid growth of understanding of the natural and continue to be home to many intellectual and economic resources applicable to environmental stewardship. Over time, the relationship between the city and its universities became more intimate in James’s mind, and having long been interested in environmental issues, he enrolled in a graduate program at Hopkins studying environmental policy. He now lives at the doorstep of the university—drawn there in a subtle, organic way through a series of investments in place and the concepts they evoked.

To James, the opportunity to be at the front of the classroom as a community partner for the student grants felt like a moment of selection—like “being harvested” for the class. In thinking about this process of bridging the campus and its margins, he reflects that most or all university-centric communities have people deeply invested in what Robert L. Thayer calls “a life-place”—the “most logical locus and scale for a sustainable, regenerative community to take root and to take place” (3). The course served as a chance to promote this kind of community orientation to the needs and qualities of a particular watershed. For this reason, though the emphasis of the course was uniquely informed by the particularities of the place, the general pedagogical spirit and commitments could be transportable across ecological or geographic contexts.

Pedagogical Affiliations: Community, Place, and Bioregion

Having outlined some of the particularities of the course’s institutional context and community partner perspective, it will help to describe the larger pedagogical goals for the course, which can best be described as a series of tightening concentric circles: a commitment to “community” at its widest audience orientation, then “place” as a more focused geographic locale that grounds the work of the course, and finally “the bioregion” as the most narrow, philosophically-specific commitment for our semester’s work.

Writing, to be communicative, requires an ambition to connect. “We write to commune” (16), Brian Jackson reminds us in his book *Teaching Mindful Writers*. As a discipline, composition provides students with the chance to practice alongside other developing writers and the prospect of writing in public. “Communicating in Community” is one of the pillars of a contemporary writing course, particularly those influenced by Marilyn Cooper’s ecological model of writing that emphasizes “engaging with a variety of socially constituted systems” (367). In a course like “ProfComm,” students balanced several such systems: the academic community represented by their peers and instructors, the Baltimore environmental community as represented by partnerships with Friends of Stony Run and Baltimore Weed Warriors, the community of their grant organizations (whom they had not previously met but were now writing to), and finally the larger Baltimore community (represented by the neighborhoods or schools served by grants).

Answering Cooper’s call for an ecological view of writing and how it is taught in the college classroom, “ecocomposition” has become a subdiscipline. Weisser and Dobrin, the first to offer a sustained theoretical model for this approach to writing, frame the term as signaling the mutual influence of composition and ecology on each

other or “the coconstitutive existence of writing and environment” (2). More ambitious than simply reinstating nature as a subject deserving of written attention, Dobrin and Weisser posit ecocomposition as a bridge connecting the “hard sciences” (traditionally thought of as the domain of environmental study) and humanities discipline, thereby providing a “more holistic, encompassing framework for studies of the relationship between discourse and environment” (Dobrin and Weisser, *Natural Discourse*, 6).

While this capacious definition has inspired approaches to environmental praxis in the writing classroom, the most salient application of ecocomposition for our class has to do with the concept of “place.” Julie Drew has advocated for a composition version centered on how “place plays a role in producing texts,” including the academic writing that most college classrooms focus upon (57). Many students are asked to apply their writing to their own social context. In other versions, place is a more nuanced and inextricable part of the course—the character of a particular place made more front and center as the object of study. Drawing upon a long history of theory about public discourse, Jenny Rice has reinvested “public subjectivities” in place to understand better how individuals confront “those publics that populate, change, and undergo the effects of material places” (13-14). In this version, students respond to work from local writers and write for local readers.

The “ProfComm” approach to place-based learning was informed less by relation to other writerly subjectivities and more intended to introduce students to the unique character of the Stony Run watershed or bioregion. Bioregionalism, a school of environmental philosophy and activism, is deeply rooted in the notion of sustainable relationships to nature being best formed at the watershed scale. In his essay titled “A Rehearsal to Bioregionalism,” Michael Vincent McGinnis defines a bioregion as “the intersection of vernacular culture, place-based behavior, and community” (3). “Bioregionalists,” McGinnis continues, “believe that we should return to the place ‘there is,’ the land itself, the place we inhabit and the communal region we depend upon” (3). This return to the land is not necessarily about homesteading or some kind of performative primitivism. Rather, bioregionalism advocates “rehabitation,” a social, political, and even educational practice that, in the words of Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, “involves learning to live-in-place” (81).

To thinkers like Berg and Dasmann, a bioregion refers both to a geographic area that can be identified on a map and a mental model— “a terrain of consciousness”—that inspires an ethical relation to community (36). This condition is what we aspired for in our course: we wanted students to see that there is a place from which they learn and live, and that they could actively shape that place through the

work of writing. In particular, our course focused on environmental restoration, a collaborative, community-based process that Michael Vincent McGinnis, Freeman House, and William Jordan III describe as “a scientific exploration of the past with the present in mind” (208). Many course readings investigated approaches to this work, and all of the students’ grants were built on a foundation of restoration ecology. As a hopeful, collaborative attempt to rehabilitate landscapes and the communities that share them, bioregional environmental restoration provided an analog for the mutual investment necessary in successful grant writing.

Even though this particular version of “ProfComm” narrowly focused on efforts to restore sustainably the Stony Run watershed, as co-instructors, James and Andy made clear that the course’s lessons applied anywhere the students settled professionally and geographically. The lessons and the products of their assignments were widely applicable, both in terms of rhetorical fluency and environmental literacy.

The Rhetorical Role of Grants in a Community-Based Professional Writing Context

Because professional writing courses often focus on rhetorical strategies associated with technical, business, or other forms of skilled work, they rarely are pinned to a particular place (and are more focused on the ambiguous “workplace”). A grant writing component can shift a writing course from learning “about” a place, to learning “in” a place. In other words, students become more deeply invested and connected with a place when they actively write for it through an assignment like a grant. Thomas Deans calls these “writing-for” courses, suggesting that through a pragmatic orientation these types of learning experiences “value workplace literacies and thus differ significantly from most courses that abide in the writing-about-the-community paradigm” (*Writing Partnerships* 18).

The place of grant writing in a place-based course is that such a project naturally moves students’ perspective on local issues from discourse to action. Many composition courses themed around “writing about the environment” will include important genres of environmental writing: nonfiction “nature writing,” rhetorical analysis of environmental representation (say, of a public service announcement or documentary film), multimodal writing that promotes science literacy, etc. A grant assignment convincingly complements these types of learning outcomes, as students familiar with the rhetorical character of particular environmental situations will feel all the more confident approaching their proposal.

Grant writing and community-based professional writing have in common an emphasis on teaching students to identify meaningful problems and respond to them from multiple perspectives (Eyler, Giles Jr., and Braxton). Thus, when students are presented with a specific community context and a narrowly-defined need, their work takes on a greater sense of energy. The more their project seems fundable, the more enthusiastic they become about the writing process and about the community need that inspires it.

However, as a genre, a grant is not the same as an “essay” or “paper,” forms of academic writing most familiar to students. Similarly, students generally have little reason as undergraduates to seek funding in writing. Ironically, many of them will become much more familiar with grant writing in the immediate next phase of their careers, especially as they move into graduate study or other arenas that require soliciting various forms of funding. Thus, it makes sense to help students become familiar with the process and rhetorical constraints of producing viable grants as undergraduates to accelerate their confidence with the form.

Beyond the seemingly-inevitable professional need for proposal writing, grant writing teaches key composition skills that are crucial to other genres. For instance, the concept of “audience” and awareness of one's reader takes on a new vitality in the context of designing and composing a grant proposal. Specifically, whereas an academic paper might be directed to an instructor with interest in seeing how a student writer is interpreting a larger conversation about a given issue or research question, the audience for a grant is more pragmatically invested in the document's claims, reasoning, evidence, and logistics.

It makes sense then to teach students how grants are both written and read. The more a student writer is strategically aware of a grant evaluator's priorities, affordances, and constraints of grant evaluators, the more likely it is for their writing to find confident purpose. In our particular class, students needed to have a deep understanding of the real priorities of their audience and partner, engaging what Paul Heilker calls the “real tasks, real audiences, real purposes for writing” in a service-learning context (75). Instead of a course being built around a potentially abstract “topic,” Heilker suggests that grant-focused service-learning makes the course cohere to supporting the genuine “mission of the agency” (75).

A grant writing course can be both pragmatic and ambiguous—less a semester describing “the right way to write” and more an open-ended question about how best to communicate given a very particular set of social circumstances. Such a shift feels akin to what Paula Mathieu describes as “tactics of hope”—projects that “encourage an orientation of frank questioning of the ethically troubling aspects of work in the

streets” (*Tactics of Hope* 20). Focused upon “personal relationships, mutual needs, and a shared sense of timing,” such projects pursue just, reasonable, and nimble partnerships—no matter how long they may last (Mathieu “After Tactics,” 17).

As valuable as writing like a reader is, it’s not easy for students working in this genre. If they are unfamiliar with writing grants, they are even more unfamiliar with what it is like to assess and fund such proposals. For this reason, “ProfComm” included time in class to examine the various Calls for Proposals (CFPs) student teams had selected, interpreting the questions and modeling rhetorical strategies that best appealed to their target audience. Students used these documents to construct their reader—tracing in them currents of priorities and aims, and identifying key terms that could be applied to their submissions. For this reason, students in a community-based composition course are not only “inventing the university” (Bartholomae), but they are also inventing their readers outside of the confines of academia. This challenge, though novel to many students, is exciting and fruitful for the way it reveals the pragmatic potential of writing.

While this interpretive practice translates nicely to other academic and professional genres in which the reader is somewhat obscured or ambiguous, as co-instructors James and Andy wish that they had connected student teams with funders in a more direct way. By being able to speak directly with a representative of the organization—perhaps even a grant writer themselves—student teams could have vividly experienced that “audience awareness” in this context means speaking to a very small group of readers with specific concerns. This is another opportunity to blur the lines between class and community that we wish we had pursued.

One challenge associated with this approach is that students may feel like their work is “unsolicited,” or like they lack the credibility to make a meaningful contribution to their community partner. Reflecting on students’ experience writing proposals in a service-learning course, Ryder suggests that students acutely felt their position as being outside of the community partner’s rhetorical situation. Even when positioned as “consultants to organizations whose staff had been on the ground” much longer than members of the class, students felt they “had little authority” (9). “There was no exigency for the proposals,” Ryder acknowledges. “No one at the organizations had asked for their advice. The task felt like an exercise in thinking, as something for the class; it did not bridge the divide between academic and public writing” (9).

Sometimes the challenge of a service-learning grant project goes the other way—that students unintentionally take on a relationship with community collaborators that feels judgmental, overly-intellectual, or politically lopsided. Even if

inspired by a sense of service, the interaction can feel either like a shallow form of academic “professing” or institutional grandstanding. For this reason, Mathieu warns against approaching community partnerships from a “strategic” mindset that prioritizes what the university stands to benefit in terms of public relations (*Tactics of Hope*, 17). Aaron Schutz and Ann Ruggles Gere helpfully argue that community-based writing must move students from monolithic views of their community and issues it represents to more of an openness to multiple views on social questions, learning to value the “local, messy, and complex context” of their work (142). This value echoes Linda Flower’s aspiration to a community literacy that is “an intercultural dialogue *with others* on issues that *they* define as sites of struggle” (19, italics original).

In all, a grant writing assignment or course has the potential to shift students’ approach to writing from a passive “writing about” their community as outside observers to a mode in which they write “with” or “alongside” community collaborators. By focusing on clearly delineated problems worth solving, such projects can expand students’ views of their social and environmental context and deepen their understanding of the purpose of professional writing.

Unconventional Utility: The Lived Experience of a Collaborative Grant Proposal

Before the semester began, the course’s co-instructors met along the Stony Run Trail to set goals and learning objectives for the course, make plans for assignments related to those goals, and generally discuss how to provide a meaningful experience for the students. During these discussions, Andy expressed some reservations as a faculty co-instructor about the potential viability of students’ proposals—it was hard to guarantee in advance how committed students would be to the work. James affirmed that the collaboration would be valuable independent of the final product, and that, as community partner, he could anticipate the goals of the course being reached even if the final proposals were still works-in-progress.

Beginning in the first week of the semester, Andy and James introduced the bioregional frame of the course by asking students to reflect on their relationship to the watershed. For some students, this was their first time meaningfully learning about this ecological concept and becoming familiar with the local terrain helped to open their eyes to the environmental character of their academic home. In one of our first meetings, the students collaborated on a bioregional quiz titled “Where You At?” which playfully highlighted gaps in our group’s collective ecological literacy.

During his first presentation to the class as co-instructor and community partner, James carefully considered how to frame where students stood in relation to the topic of environmental restoration and sustainability. Visual snapshots of the stress the natural world is under right under our noses helpfully paved the way for a broader discussion of sustainability and its ethical implications. Moving back to the region and city, he shared examples of groups of people (including Friends of Stony Run and Baltimore Weed Warriors) not unlike the class who are strategically working to heal the wounds of neglect. This situated the work of the course as actively concerned with repair and maintenance of our watershed, the immediate territory we all exert some influence upon. In reintroducing students to this physical terrain, we wanted to remind students that writing “takes place”—it happens in real and vibrant spaces and communities. Thankfully, in one of the first class meetings of the semester, a student in the back row raised their hand to ask if we could hold class outside, a suggestion that prompted a subsequent trip to the Stony Run.

In February 2022, the class met along the trail to discuss the issues it represented as a case study for ecological restoration and conservation. Students had previously read about concepts like biodiversity, topography, urban ecology, invasive species management, and the stability of biotic and human communities. Now the group saw those issues “on the ground” and directly in the domain of advocates like Friends of Stony Run and Baltimore Weed Warriors, groups students would soon see as interlocutors.

The next few weeks of class were scaffolded around a series of research, writing, and public speaking assignments geared to help students connect to these environmental issues and participate in the discourse around them. First, students collaborated in teams to research and write a Stony Run watershed assessment report, an assignment that taught technical writing and research skills and the craft of articulating concise, well-supported assertions for a professional audience. During this assignment, guest speakers from various Baltimore-based environmental nonprofits joined the class to present their work around urban hydrology and waste management and also to share their professional perspectives as writers communicating environmental issues to public stakeholders.

“ProfComm” draws students from many different major programs and interest areas across campus. Our class had representation across the board, from athletes to artists, engineers to economists, and first-year students to graduating seniors. Each person had their reasons for enrolling in the class: for some, it was to fill a requirement, others to develop career-oriented skills, or even to explore their passion for sustainable Baltimore initiatives.

Alex took this course mainly as a senior to satisfy his final writing-intensive credit. Having enrolled in one other writing class in the past, he expected to compose weekly papers related to whichever subject we talked about in class. In reality, he was taken aback by the way the class was designed around a productive curriculum. Specifically, the grant project helped to flip his expectations. Sure, the course included more traditional or familiar resume and poster design assignments. However, unlike in other courses, students applied these skills to a community-inspired final project which will have real impacts on the lives of many. A class that otherwise might have been a weekly grind became an outlet for employing Alex's strengths and developing his weaknesses in order to improve the community around him—the course became one he truly enjoyed and in which he wanted to succeed. Paradoxically, the curriculum felt extracurricular because of the immediate, measurable impact the course's work had on the Stony Run watershed.

Alex felt refreshed having discussions with people—both in the Hopkins community and outside of it—which he would never otherwise have. Especially after several semesters of virtual classrooms and meetings, the thought of engaging with people outside his sphere as a student felt foreign and unfamiliar. In March of 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted his fourth semester of college. Following the lack of in-person team meetings for over a year, Alex mainly looked forward to engaging with fellow students and community partners alike. While group work in other courses largely bordered on the theoretical side and did not require any collaboration past splitting up the work evenly, in this grant writing class, the division of work felt different and more organic. Team meetings felt enriching rather than compulsory because we each brought our own complementary strengths to the table.

Students had the chance to develop their own interests by writing a “source synthesis” on a topic they felt passionate about. This type of assignment, akin to a literature review, gives students freedom to select a topic about which to research and use as an opportunity to become immersed in a research area. Many students chose to deepen their understanding of watershed ecology through this assignment. Having synthesized existing research and identified a research trend or limitation regarding their topic, students made a short pitch presentation (in no more than 5 minutes) about what kind of grant they might design around the local application of such a topic. These presentations helped to identify common interests around which teams could form. For the first time within a class, Alex found he belonged to a group formed on the basis of interest rather than technical skill. This allowed the team to leverage their personal skills toward a common goal rather than simply dividing the workload into identical parts.

The culmination of the course was a team-based proposal assignment, in which teams of students would conceive, design, write, revise, and pitch a grant manuscript in response to a CFP from one of a set of local funding agencies. While teams developed their grants independently from each other, several themes were shared among the group. Many teams wrote grants with educational aspects—one team's grant sought funding for a watershed field trip intended for local primary school children hosted by JHU undergraduate students. Another group proposed a rain garden project to be installed at a local elementary school as part of a stormwater mitigation effort. Other groups focused on biodiversity and conservation through projects directed at invasive species removal and tree plantings, including in underserved areas facing environmental inequalities. One group directed their proposal to the campus sustainability office, pitching improved infrastructure along the Stony Run Trail in order to improve accessibility and safety in the area.

As the semester progressed, anxieties over the end product shifted to a trust in the process of pursuing shared aims. It became clear that the most valuable aspect of the course would not be the grants themselves but rather the networks formed in the process. This may sound a bit trite. But beyond being about heartwarming friendships, we argue that developing a mutual association, a collaboration that felt productive and professional, was as equally important in the end as a viable grant. In addition to facilitating greater confidence navigating a new professional genre in a grant, one of the most rewarding outcomes of this project was seeing the way students revitalized a portion of their home geography that was otherwise empty space. Many students who said that they had previously been unaware of Stony Run now affirmed a familiarity with the place.

In addition to filling-in their environmental map, many students found expanding their social network by working with a community partner like James to be refreshing and inspiring. James took an active role in defining students' goals and advising them on the characteristics and needs of the watershed. Often, groups appeal to the university to receive help from classes and organizations but do not actively participate in the process. As an engineering student, Alex has often heard about consulting jobs bogged down by unreliable communication of project expectations and specifications from the clients. On the contrary, the course's community partner was there for us every step of the way, vastly exceeding Alex's expectations for how an organization gets involved in class. James was always available within 24 hours via email and participated in class virtually whenever he could not make it in person. He also invited us to get personally involved with the campaign to tackle invasive species and spread awareness of such issues which plague the Stony Run watershed. Toward

the end of the semester, the classroom felt more like “collaborative workplaces” (Reither 197) than top-down instructional spaces, as groups met and worked together, sometimes moving into a hybrid mode to consult with the community partner and faculty instructor over a question or draft.

In our final class meeting, student teams presented their grant proposals to their classmates and to members of the Stony Run community, including several environmental advocates who are experienced grant writers. A nervously-excited energy pervaded the room, as teams readied their slides and speaking notes. In the presentations and the discussions that followed them, students experienced what it is like to receive immediate feedback from someone other than their instructor and answer questions presented from a practical, non-academic vantage. As a capstone to the project, this experience demonstrated the effort and care that students had invested in delivering feasible, audience-sensitive proposals. It also highlighted the potential benefit of facilitating interactions with non-class readers earlier in the semester so that their helpful questions and suggestions could be integrated more fully into the grant proposals themselves.

At the end of April, a few members of the class, including Alex, attended the annual Friends of Stony Run general meeting, where they supported James as he was inaugurated as the group’s president. This was a special moment that capped the end of the semester in which students dove headfirst into an immediately relevant problem, an experience that felt far different from taking exams or completing assignments. Participating in an active grant proposal for a real-world organization helped students realize that curriculum can be delivered in unconventional ways, often making more sense and delivering more utility than a traditional lecture-style class.

Recommendations and Reflections: The Trail Forward

Below are some concluding recommendations regarding approaches to planning and executing sustainable, place-based writing courses in which a community partner is actively involved in leading a grant assignment.

- Instructors and community partners should set realistic expectations for the collaboration, mainly what outcomes would be most meaningful for the various stakeholders. Ideally, all parties would articulate a clear definition of success and reasonable means for accomplishing such a goal.

- Grant collaborators can recognize that, as Laurie JC Cella suggests, many community-based projects “don’t fit neatly into a standard definition of success” (3). This reality carries some risk for instructors and community partners alike. Even still, stepping outside the comfort zone of traditional academic norms can generate relationships that, over time, form sustainable links between academic and community institutions.
- While remuneration may present an institutional roadblock, instructors interested in collaborating with community partners should pursue meaningful ways of providing compensation. This added benefit is especially important if the community partner acts as a co-instructor for the course.
- A grant project can seem more deterministic than assignments based on loose parameters intended to inspire student autonomy. We recommend deliberately planning how to balance the needs of a community partner with student autonomy. Confidently advising students to develop projects within the framework of a community partner’s goals will require some advanced planning.
- Consideration should be given to who will be responsible for “executing” the course of action the grant proposes. We recommend securing a willing matching partner from the university—a group willing to provide funding, volunteer hours, or both. Many schools have service centers or similar community engagement programs that could help identify how a grant might become a meaningful campus-community collaboration.
- Be intentional about timelines and set expectations for completion. Is the grant finished when written? Submitted? Funded? Relatedly, if the grant is funded, who will do the work proposed by the application? We suggest celebrating the short-term accomplishments and acknowledging that even semester-long projects can have long post-semester lifespans (Cella 8-9).
- We recommend that instructors follow the framing of Thomas Deans, who argues that developing the relationship with the community partner is usually “the most critical part” of a community-based writing course (“Sustainability Deferred” 104). Students should reflect periodically on how their relationship with a community partner has formed, its norms, and the ways that

interactions with non-student partners are influencing their research, writing, and larger views on an issue.

- It will help to find meaningful ways to discuss writing as service and what community service informed by genuine engagement and community literacy can accomplish. Establishing with students the norms and expectations of the community partnership can help students become rhetorically flexible and more comfortable participating in iterative, ambiguous, non-linear projects.
- Consider partnering with the university's writing center. "Writing center values" (Nichols and Williams 88) often align well with the goals of non-profits and other community organizations. Because writing centers often bypass semester calendars and grade-based assessments, they are uniquely positioned to collaborate with community partners less bound by traditional academic norms.

No class is perfect—the goal of this manuscript has not been to present our teaching and learning as such. Many elements of the course might have worked better with a different approach, and nothing here is intended as incontestable pedagogy. It is perhaps best left to the reader to determine whether the expansive nature of this course is the most fruitful track considering its specific objectives and institutional context. A wide exploration of the ecological and organizational landscape allowed for much free thinking and project diversity. However, if the objective is for a project to gain funding and to be implemented, a narrower focus on fewer projects or a single project is advisable. We hope that our research and reflections have provided a framework that other instructors might adapt to their unique institutional and ecological locale.

The trail winds on, sometimes circling back on itself, sometimes moving purposefully through a clearing. The work of connecting, of providing students with access to communities and places that they can find sustaining dialogue with, continues. Though that work can be ambiguous and unguided, it models for students the potential of community-based collaborations and the agency it affords to participants. A grant thus becomes an invitation to a reinhabitation, a dialogue between a place and its inhabitants, and a path forward toward progress.

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About the Authors

Alex Ozbolt was an undergraduate student at Johns Hopkins University when this study was written. He is currently a graduate student at Johns Hopkins in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering.

Andrew B. Ross is a lecturer at Johns Hopkins University in the Professional Communication Program in the Center for Leadership Education, where he teaches community and place-based courses in public speaking, scientific communication, and data design. He has published research on the rhetorical function of scientific visualization methods in *Science Communication* and *Oxford Bibliographies Online*. He is a graduate of the doctoral program in literature and environment from the University of Nevada, Reno.

James Wolf is the Vice President of Friends of Stony Run, a non-profit organization working to improve the environmental and social wellbeing of the Stony Run Stream Valley in Baltimore, Maryland. He is additionally involved as an advocate for invasive species removal and landscape restoration as part of the Baltimore Weed Warriors collective.

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