

Writing and Nonprofits: Rhetoric, Reciprocity, and Real World Writing  
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An Environmental Studies major digs deep, researching local challenges—lack of health care providers, for instance--faced by rural communities as their populations age. At first, he considers how elderly people might improve their health by making better use of green space. But the more he collaborates with the Center for Rural Policy Development, his community partner, the more his perspective widens. Soon, his project shifts. He's writing about Tai Chi classes and how they help elderly people retain both body strength and mental capacity. Meanwhile, across town at Ecumen Prairie Hill, an assisted living facility, two English majors test their creative writing skills as they lead "Our Stories," a writing workshop for Ecumen's elderly residents. I marvel as my own students change right in front of my eyes; now they are the teachers in the room.

These students are enrolled in English 310: Writing and Nonprofits, a community-based service and learning (CBSL) course that pairs Gustavus students with local community partners. The ENG 310 students serve as writing consultants for their partners, using their knowledge of rhetoric and narrative skills to help nonprofit organizations tell their own stories and solve real world problems. The course combines opportunities for service with reflection, as students consider ways that they can truly make their lives (and their writing) *count*.

In CBSL classes like Writing and Nonprofits, students form reciprocal relationships with their community partners, pushing the boundary between theory and practice. Together, the partners, professor, and students decide how the students can be helpful—in this case, as writers—and develop projects to meet real needs. "Service" and "learning" become intertwined. For instance, students consider various forms of philanthropy and service as they study their community partners' missions and observe on site. They read more specifically about the problems their partners tackle—rural communities and aging, for instance—while learning the nuts and bolts of grant writing and newsletter writing. Most importantly, ENG 310 students learn how nonprofit organizations use rhetoric to communicate with possible donors, volunteers, and recipients of services. Students study rhetorical terminology and analyze how their community partners use traditional and digital texts to communicate their assumptions, values, and needs to their audiences. Then ENG 310 students write texts for their community partners, including newsletter articles and grant proposals, while simultaneously reflecting on their experiences and their learning via essays and class discussion.

When I visit each community partner, I see the reciprocity between the students and their nonprofit partners. At the Saint Peter Community Center, for instance, I observe ENG 310 students attending a new technology class for local senior citizens. The older students grip smart phones and tablets, staring at them quizzically, while the instructor guides them through the "Appy Hour" class. At first, the Gustavus students take field notes diligently, but soon they, too, are engaged with the class. They sit beside community members, helping them with iphone settings or Facebook posts. The Gustavus students will ultimately share their field notes with the Senior Center, recommending ways to improve future Appy Hour sessions. But that's not the only way these Gustavus students will help. Each also writes a grant proposal for the Senior Center's future use. That proposal is a major writing assignment for ENG 310. The community partner provides feedback and mentors the students; the students learn real world skills that will

help them when they graduate. Both the partners and the students engage in service for/ with members of the local community.

Our spring 2017 Writing and Nonprofits class comes full circle as students benefit from multiple publishing opportunities, sharing their writing beyond our campus. For instance, two students partner with the YWCA's signature program, "Girls On the Run," interviewing young girls, their coaches, and parents. Then, the students write blog posts for the YWCA web site. The students who partner with the Center for Rural Policy Development produce articles for the Center's web site. In each community partnership, the students put their writing skills to work for these nonprofit organizations. They live the Gustavus Mission, working toward a just and peaceful world. As they write for others, they also look inward, reflecting on their own lives, their own cultures and identities, and learning how they might serve other communities, including their own, in the future.