Roles of Academic Writers in a Department: Benefits, Structures, and Funding

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BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES: Despite the prevalence of published opinions about the use of professional academic writers to help disseminate the results of clinical research, particularly opinions about the use of ghost writers, very little information has been published on the possible roles for professional writers within academic medical departments or the mechanisms by which these departments can hire and compensate such writers. To begin addressing this lack of information, the Association of Departments of Family Medicine hosted an online discussion and a subsequent webinar in which we obtained input from three departments of family medicine in the United States regarding their use of academic writers. This discussion revealed three basic models by which academic writers have benefitted these departments: (1) grant writing support, (2) research and academic support for clinical faculty, and (3) departmental communication support. Drawing on specific examples from these institutions, the purpose of this paper is to describe the key support activities, advantages, disadvantages, and funding opportunities for each model for other departments to consider and adapt.

In academic medicine, faculty roles typically include clinical care as well as the teaching and research expected in other fields of academia. For these faculty, the time investment to initiate, organize, find funding for, and disseminate findings from an area of scholarship is formidable. One option for supporting scholarship is to work with an academic writer. Although academic writers are often used to support research efforts specifically, these individuals can support a department in roles beyond those related to research as well.

Published information about the roles of academic writers within departments is limited, however. Searches of the published medical literature using the terms "academic writers" or "medical writers" elicit articles that focus on how to write manuscripts,[1-4] give opinions about working with professional writers,[5-7] highlight the need to acknowledge medical writers in publications as part of "good publication practice" standards,[8-9] and strongly discourage the use of ghost writers.[10-14] Alternatively, an internet search for "academic writer" returns multiple commercial websites, and it is difficult to know which to choose without any framework or prior knowledge. It is also clear that some academic writers work as part of the infrastructure of departments or research centers, but little information about their specific roles exists outside of local institutions.

Given the limited information available about the roles of academic writers within departments and following a robust online discussion, the Association of Departments of Family Medicine (ADFM) sponsored a webinar about the role of academic writers within departments

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of family medicine, which provided the genesis for this article. ADFM is the membership organization that includes virtually all allopathic departments of family medicine in the United States, as well as some osteopathic departments and some departments in large academic health systems that are not part of a medical school. Department members attending the webinar expressed a need for the support of an academic writer, but most knew little about finding and funding these individuals or about their specific roles. Recognizing this widespread challenge, we explored some of the creative and adaptive solutions departments have found. Three department chairs and their academic writers, two other chairs who had academic writers in their departments, and two academic administrators and researchers formed the writing group for this paper. We share the three main models we identified through our discussions about academic writer positions: grant writer, research/publication support, and departmental communications. In addition, we describe the roles and responsibilities for each model (Table 1), the necessary skill sets, the expected returns on investment (Table 2), and common mechanisms for funding academic writers (Table 3), recognizing that department or institutional needs and resources will vary and shape the role(s) of their particular academic writer.

Three Models of Academic Writers

Model #1: Grant Writers
In the quest for funding, identifying agencies to help fund a program or research may be the easiest step; addressing the unique and often extensive requirements for each grant application in a clear and concise manner may be the most difficult. Our discussion provided insight regarding ways in which a department or faculty member could employ academic writers to improve or expedite the process of writing and submitting grant applications.

To facilitate the submission of grant applications, the University of Alabama at Birmingham Department of Family and Community Medicine (UAB DFCM) has worked with a contracted grant writer. This medical writer, who reports to the department chair, has doctoral and postdoctoral experience in preclinical research and focuses professionally on writing and editing health-related research grant applications and manuscripts pertaining to research and training in health-related fields. With the assistance of this individual, the UAB DFCM recently secured a Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) grant for $7M (T99 Medical Student Education Grant, $1.75M for 4 years). Alternatively, the University of Utah Department of Family and Preventive Medicine has a grant writer on staff. This individual has a humanities PhD and is embedded as part of the proposal development team in the Central Research Office, reporting to the director of research.

A grant writer, whether hired as a contractor or as an employee, can assist faculty throughout the entire application process, from helping determine which grants best fit their needs and focus to drafting or editing the proposal, ensuring clarity and readability, and confirming that each application-specific requirement is appropriately addressed. This person may perform many of the most time-consuming, but critical, tasks required to produce a competitive proposal. Notably, a grant writer can ensure that information is consistent throughout the various components of the application, which is critically important for center grants, program project grants, or other large multidisciplinary grants involving multiple departments or institutions. One of the most valuable aspects of enlisting a grant writer is their ability to point out weaknesses in logic and gaps in clarity.

In our experience (at UAB and Utah), grant writers provide a good return on investment in the number of grants submitted and funded.

Financially, grant writers are likely to pay for themselves by increasing the number of awarded grants. Moreover, our experience indicates that the assistance of a grant writer also allows the faculty members submitting the grant to better concentrate their efforts. This in turn increases faculty satisfaction and allows them more time to concentrate on publications and research or other work to support further grant applications. Returns on investment for all three models described in this paper are summarized in Table 2.

It is worth noting here the alternate role of expert grant reviewers as well. These individuals, usually from outside the institution, are experts in the field and review grant proposals prior to final submission to a funding agency. The detailed critiques provided by these expert reviewers allow the submitter to preemptively address concerns that may otherwise be raised by the review panel or study section.

Model #2: Research and Scholarship Support to Clinical Faculty

Dividing research support resources among faculty can be a delicate and complicated balancing act. If done appropriately, faculty will feel more valued and connected to the greater department, which in turn increases productivity, satisfaction, commitment, and retention. Clinical faculty in particular often have much less exposure to the publication process and limited time to learn it. Indeed, clinical faculty may feel intimidated by the research and publication process and undervalued by their research-driven counterparts, who in comparison may have significant staff support, often funded by their grants. Our collective experiences show that offering basic research and publication support to clinical faculty increases the likelihood of clinical faculty publications, promotion, job commitment, and job satisfaction—all worthy returns on investment.

Table 1: Key Support Activities for Three Models of Professional Academic Writers Used by Three Separate Departments of Family Medicine in the United States

Contracted Grant Writer/Agency (Mainly Supports Research Faculty and Programmatic Expansion)	Clinical Faculty Research and Scholarship Support (Mainly Supports Clinical Faculty)	Departmental Communications (Mainly Supports Department Administrative Needs)
Preparation and Planning		
• Identify appropriate funding agency • Consultation regarding application concept, message, and budget • Perform literature review • Compile reference library	• Identify research questions • Identify areas of overlap within department or institution • Perform literature review • Compile reference library • Write IRB applications	• Identify strengths and weaknesses of departmental presence in written materials (online and printed) • Assemble and maintain standard documents describing the department • Examine department's prior P&T actions
Writing		
• Draft entire grant application or specific sections • Draft or adapt biosketches • Draft letters of support • Obtain and modify boilerplate institutional information • Insert citations	• Help write various sections of grant applications or manuscripts; help produce posters or other presentation materials • Draft surveys and focus group discussion guides • Insert citations	• Organize and update boilerplate language, logos, graphics, templates, and other communications resources • Interview faculty and prepare drafts of press releases, newsletters, and sections of grant applications • Early drafts and edits of P&T materials (personal statements, teaching/service portfolios) • Draft letters of support for grant applications and award nominations
Editing		
• Check for clarity, logic, grammatical accuracy, and readability • Fact check background information • Ensure information is consistent among sections and documents • Ensure formatting is appropriate and consistent throughout all documents • Check and format references • Perform final proofread	• Perform initial edits of manuscripts, posters, and grant applications, checking for clarity and grammatical accuracy • Fact check background information • Ensure information is consistent among sections and documents • Ensure formatting is appropriate and consistent throughout all documents • Check and format references • Perform final proofread of any documents or presentations	• Perform initial edits of all written materials and presentations (both for internal and external audiences), checking for clarity and grammatical accuracy • Review materials as an "informed, educated" reader • Assist in editing to achieve submission page limits • Perform final proofread of any documents or presentations
Processes		
• Ensure deadlines are met • Coordinate materials from sub-award institutions • Ensure institutional signoffs are incorporated	• Support data collection • Create research tools such as schedules, interview guides • Clean data • Perform basic data analysis	• Edit recruitment and/or educational materials • Create newsletters, reports, announcements, Twitter feeds, and other communication materials • Maintain websites
Dissemination		
• Ensure application requirements have been met • Assist in the online submission of documents/ensure the grant is received in total by funding agency • Ensure notification of submission is received by the institution	• Format manuscripts and letters of submission for publication • Check and format references	• Track faculty publications and oral and poster presentations • Share what is being disseminated from the department with stakeholders

Abbreviations: IRB, internal review board; P&T, promotion and tenure

Table 2: Direct and Indirect Returns on Investment for Using Professional Academic Writers

Direct ROI	Indirect ROI	
Easily counted and quantified	Harder to quantify or prove but likely greater than direct ROI	
For Faculty and Departments	For Faculty	For Departments
• Grants, abstracts, publications, presentation, or posters • Total funding awarded • NIH research funding ranking • Indirects from grants • Involvement of/supporting careers of co-authors (i.e. other faculty besides lead author) • Depends on the needs of the faculty for a given grant application or manuscript (from just a final edit to everything from literature review) Individually negotiated at least annually	• Job satisfaction • Publication • Promotion • Retention – thusly avoiding recruitment costs (for family physician, estimates range from $100,000 to $250,0000) • Time	• External communications • Reputation • Alumni outreach - may result in support for teaching and later gifts, as well as referrals to the institution • Community outreach • Internal communications • Departmental knowledge, trust, and cohesion

Abbreviations: ROI, returns on investment.

Table 3: Funding Models for Professional Academic Writers and the Associated Advantages/ Disadvantages, Sources, and Costs in the United States in 2020

Model	Advantages	Disadvantages	Possible Sources	Costs
Contractual arrangement with an individual academic/ medical writer	• Could be accessed by or available to all faculty based on need • Could hire the same writer for an ongoing role in the department or contract for a specific grant application, manuscript, or other communications-related project • Can hire a writer experienced in writing applications for various agencies (eg, HRSA, NIH, or DoD) and/or with expertise in the field of interest • Could be local or remote/online • Time-limited and non-employee arrangements often easier to get approval for than an employee position	• Writer may be less familiar with the culture of the department • Writer may have variable specific knowledge of the focus of the grant proposal or manuscript	• Directories or job posting opportunities offered by professional associationsa • Online marketing tools (such as LinkedIn) • Colleague referrals	• Rates depend largely on the project type, scope of work, individual's writing experience and education level, and the geographic location, among other factors, and may range anywhere from $500 to >$10,000 – contact individuals directly for project-specific estimates • Fees often paid through individual faculty accounts, departmental or institutional funds, or out of pocket if necessary

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Table 3: Continued

Model	Advantages	Disadvantages	Possible Sources	Costs
Contractual arrangement with a medical communications agency	• Usually remote/online • May provide an entire team (consultant, writer, editor, copy editor) • Other advantages similar to those of a freelance academic/ medical writer	• Usually remote/ online • Team may be less familiar with the culture of the department • Team may have variable specific knowledge of the focus of the grant proposal or manuscript	• Request for proposal released by the university/ institution • Agency booths at academic conferences • Directories or job posting opportunities offered by professional associations[a] • Online marketing tools (such as LinkedIn) • Colleague referrals	• Prices vary by project type and scope of work, number of individuals involved, and geographic location, among other factors, and may range anywhere from $500 to >$10,000 - contact agencies directly for project-specific estimates • Fees often paid through individual faculty accounts, departmental or institutional funds, or out of pocket if necessary
Full/part-time employee within department	• Employee works for the department and addresses defined priorities • The department is in charge of evaluating employee performance and responsible for performance improvement	• Areas of support depend on individual's skill set • The department, school, or institution will have to fund position • Potential for bandwidth issues (ie, demand may exceed capacity to complete requests; prioritization can get complicated)	• Identify individuals who teach humanities, worked in journalism, are returning to the workforce, or are working for temporary services • Contact college or academic partners at the institution	• Understand local human resources titles, position descriptions (writer, program manager, communications specialist) for these types of roles • Role can be priced as an administrative support individual; cost will vary by experience and location (estimated $50,000-$90,000/ year)
Shared employee within institution	Allows needed services for smaller departments and for start up	• Access may be limited and defined by the priorities of the institution and not only the department • Bandwidth issues (ie, demand may exceed capacity to complete requests)	Contact college or academic partners at the institution	Role can be priced as an administrative support individual; cost will vary by experience and location (estimated $50,000-$90,000/year)

Abbreviations: HRSA, Health Resources and Services Administration; NIH, National Institutes of Health; DoD, United States Department of Defense.

[a] At the time of writing, professional organizations with online options for posting job opportunities for or finding academic writers and editors include, but are not limited to, the following: ACES: The Society for Editing (aceseditors.org); American Medical Writers Association (amwa.org); Association of Health Care Journalists (healthcarejournalism.org); Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (alpsp.org); Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (bels.org); Council of Science Editors (councilscienceeditors.org); Grant Professionals Association (grantprofessionals. org); International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ismpp.org); International Society of Managing and Technical Editors (ismte.org); National Association of Science Writers (nasw.org); and Society for Scholarly Publishing (sspnet.org).

The specifics of clinical faculty support will vary by institution, depending on the types of resources available. In our described model, from the University of Michigan Department of Family Medicine, the department hired an administrative specialist who is shared among clinical faculty and functions as a high-level research assistant. She has a master's degree in sociology and experience in social science and market research and reports to the department administrator. However, similar to grant writing support, research and publication support can be obtained on a contractual basis as well.

A key to success is the ability of the clinical faculty support person to be flexible, supportive, and persistent while also understanding and respecting the clinical faculty culture, which often necessitates meeting cancellations due to clinical obligations, delays in deliverables, and other related complications. Clinical faculty appreciate the crucial research and publication assistance as well as encouragement, reminders, and overall coaching provided by this individual. Our clinical faculty support person provides assistance in four key areas.

First, she can help faculty identify interests, research ideas and questions, and the next steps necessary in their scholarly process, including short- and long-term goals. This may include identifying the areas in which clinical faculty would like support as well as connecting them to research faculty with overlapping interests or project content. Second, she can help with preliminary study preparation, including assisting faculty with a literature review, survey design, and document submission to the internal review board (IRB). Third, she can assist in project management and data gathering. In this regard, she may assign roles, create work aids (eg, timelines), and help keep the project on schedule. One role that is invaluable to clinical faculty is helping to check, clean, and prepare data for analysis and to

organize additional analytic or statistical support available in-house or accessible within the institution. Finally, she helps with the dissemination of results. This may involve preparing materials for presentation and posters as well as editing and formatting manuscripts prior to submission.

The success of clinical faculty in their scholarly endeavors benefits an entire department. In our experience, producing more engaged and expert faculty, with the scholarly products for promotion, leads to a cooperative and supportive environment. Such an environment enhances faculty satisfaction, retention, and connection to the mission of the larger department and institution.

Model #3: Departmental Communications (and Other Writing)

The administration of an academic department regularly engages with many constituencies, including current faculty and staff; community and public officials; the dean's office and the health system; alumni and donors; promotion and tenure committees; and legislators and national leaders. Necessary materials include everything from letters of reference to position papers and cross multiple formats, including digital materials for websites and social media feeds, print materials for newsletters, official correspondence, and reports. To ensure the high quality and consistency of internal and external communications for diverse audiences, the Emory University Department of Family and Preventive Medicine (Emory DFPM) hired an internal communications specialist to work closely with leadership and faculty. This communications specialist works under the human resources title of communications manager and reports to the lead department administrator and department chair. She handles a variety of duties ranging from faculty development to marketing and communications, to direct support for the chair. She has also provided research and publication

support, as described in models 1 and 2 above. A background in the sciences is not necessarily required for this position; the Emory DFPM communications manager has a doctorate in English literature and a master's degree in creative writing.

Of particular relevance for the Emory DFPM leadership, the departmental communications specialist drafts appointment, promotion, and tenure letters and dossiers, as well as letters of nomination, support, and reference for faculty career development opportunities and awards. Because she is familiar with the faculty's scholarship, service, teaching activities, and honors, she has disseminated information in internal newsletters, annual reports, and university and school of medicine publications. She has also made strategic improvements in the department promotion and tenure process. For example, the Emory DFPM has far fewer than the average number of promotion dossiers returned for substantial edits. Additionally, she has created a tip sheet to which faculty can refer while writing personal statements, and she coaches individual faculty members through early drafts if needed.

While some large departments may have separate staff to support faculty development, marketing, and communications, smaller departments may find it advantageous to combine these roles. In our experience at Emory, an in-house communications expert has positively influenced all departmental missions (education, scholarship, and clinical care), thus we suggest that departments may realize distinct benefits from bringing in someone with a background outside of medicine. For example, someone trained in the humanities can bring the perspective of the intelligent and engaged general reader; someone with past teaching experience may have the ability to teach workshops on CV maintenance or personal statement writing; and someone with a background in business or marketing can inform this perspective.

Advantages, Disadvantages, and Funding Each Model

We have reviewed examples of roles within departments of family medicine using three department-specific examples shared from the perspective of the department chair and the writer. The key support activities for each of these roles are summarized in Table 1. These roles overlap, and the individuals filling these roles in our examples have adapted to meet the particular needs of their departments. However, the needs of other departments will vary, thus clarity about what duties are expected—traditional grant support, clinical faculty research and scholarship support, and/or overarching communications-focused administrative support—is necessary for the academic writer to be successful.

Although the models are broadly applicable, each academic writer described in these models came to their department with different skill sets to meet the varied departmental needs. Two critical position characteristics identified by these three individuals include a clear expectation of their primary responsibilities and a defined and respected position within the department. Each type of academic writer described ultimately frees up faculty members' time, further improving the success of individual faculty members and the department overall. Each writer also provides a worthwhile return on investment from the perspective of the department chair (Table 2). This return may range from more funded grants and faculty publications to faculty promotion, satisfaction, and retention, as well as overall departmental cohesion and success.

For those interested in applying one of these models in their own setting, logistics (eg, duties, reporting structures, and titles) and funding are often the main considerations.

Table 3 describes multiple funding models, each with advantages and disadvantages, that may support an academic writer. For example, a departmental salaried employee responds to departmental priorities; however, no individual can do everything, and the cost resides within the department.

Institutions often provide salaried individuals who can perform many of the tasks described in these models as well. For example, individuals supporting grant submission may be found in an institution's Clinical and Translational Science Award (CTSA) program or the research dean's office, but access to this expertise may be limited, especially if the grant application is not of strategic priority for the institution or if multiple faculty are submitting at the same time. Administrative communications support may come from an office of marketing and communications or public relations, but the work often needs to be prioritized by the institutional entity and those priorities may not always align with the department's goal.

Other support can be externally contracted by the department or by an individual faculty member. These services may be paid for by departments, other institutional units (eg, CTSA programs and training grants), individual grants or start-up funds, endowments, or philanthropy. However, careful evaluation is necessary to ensure that the contracted support has experience with the specific grant application, area of research focus, and/or the culture typically found in academic medical departments. Medical communications agencies and individual freelance academic/medical writers can be found through member directories and job posting opportunities provided by professional organizations, other online searches, or personal

referrals (Table 3). Another important resource for a contract writer may be a graduate student in the health sciences, humanities, or other fields who can grow with the department.

Conclusions

Using common search engines and phrases, we found no published research describing models or types of academic writers within academic medical departments, centers, or medical institutions in general. We have described three possible models of academic writers for departments to consider and offer criteria by which to evaluate the fit of the model or person with the needs of the academic unit. This review emerges from the experiences of departments of family medicine only, and each example is unique. However, the overview and examples described will help departmental and health care leaders more rigorously consider the role of academic writers and their potential return on investment.

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