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**Virtual Study Group for the GPC Exam:
Results and Recommendations**

*Katherine F.H. Heart, GPC, M.Ed.
President, Heart Resources, LLC*

*JulieAnna Carsen, GPC, B.S.
Principal, JVG Synergy, LLC*

GPC Competencies:

- 03. Effective Program & Project Design and Development
- 07. Professionalism

Abstract

This strategy paper describes the start-up, implementation, and results of an independent, volunteer-led study group for the Grant Professional Certified (GPC) exam that was conducted nationally in a virtual learning environment. This paper also describes participant feedback, resources, and recommendations from which to offer future virtual study groups for the GPC.

Introduction

Since the implementation of the Grant Professional Certified (GPC) credential in 2008, grant professionals have developed resources on how to prepare for the exam. The Grant Professionals Certification Institute (GPCI) is the nationally recognized authority on grantsmanship competencies and manages professional certification of the GPC credential. GPCI provides eligibility guidelines, exam procedures, verification of GPC attainment, and a certification maintenance program. The GPCI website publishes study materials including field-driven articles, a literature review, recommended resources, and study guides. This paper describes the process and outcome of the first nationwide virtual study group for the GPC, coordinated by volunteers and unaffiliated with GPCI, and discusses the effectiveness of this method to assist candidates who are qualified and preparing to take the GPC exam within a year.¹

¹ Volunteer facilitators had no prior or concurrent role with GPC exam development or GPCI. Study group materials were drawn from existing study guides or developed by the volunteer study group facilitator. The study group was conducted in compliance with GPCI standards and materials did not violate the non-disclosure agreement that all GPCs sign before sitting for the exam.

Start-Up and Planning

The first virtual study group for the GPC was organized as a spontaneous voluntary study group in response to a Grant Professionals Association (GPA) member requesting “*other members to study for the GPC exam*” in *GrantZone* (Pacheco, 2018). Thirty-six members replied to the post within one week. Some individuals cited their reasons.

- Wanted a “virtual” or “remote” or “online” study group for the GPC (7)
- Does not have a GPA Chapter or unsure when chapter will hold a study group (2)
- Meet other grant professionals across the country (1)
- Keep us (me) accountable and on track (1)
- Plan to sit for the exam this year (1)

The authors volunteered to coordinate the group and established self-defined roles of Study Group Facilitator and Technology Coordinator. A retired grant professional with the GPC credential volunteered to co-facilitate specific sessions and other group members volunteered for tasks as needed.

Some early career professionals in the group had insufficient experience to meet the GPC eligibility requirements which led the Study Group Facilitator to recommend the free webinars and educational resources available on the GPA website. The GPA Executive Director posted information and links to the GPCI website. The Study Group Facilitator questioned the feasibility of leading in-depth discussions with a large group and posted a preference for individuals planning to take the exam by the end of 2018. Within two weeks, twenty GPA members from 17 states confirmed their interest in joining the group by submitting email addresses to the Technology Coordinator.

Implementation

Weekly meetings were scheduled on Fridays at 2:00-3:00 pm EST from February 2 to April 13, 2018, based on facilitator availability. Table 1 summarizes the study group meeting schedule and the grant competencies that were discussed each week.

Table 1. 2018 Virtual Study Group Meeting Schedule

Meeting	Date	Virtual Study Group Structure and Content
1	2/2	Technology Coordinator hosted a web conference to establish a meeting schedule and platform and created a shared Google Doc.
2	2/9	Group Facilitator held introductory session to meet attendees, answered questions about the GPC eligibility and exam process, and discussed readiness issues (costs and benefits, time for study). Posted Scenario #1 Funder Research.
3	2/16	Group Facilitator and group discussed Funder Research. Posted Scenario #2 Organizational Development.
4	2/23	Group Facilitator and group discussed Organizational Development. Posted Scenario #3 Good Project Design.
5	3/2	Group Facilitator and group discussed Good Project Design. Posted Scenario #4 Grant Proposal Development.
6	3/9	Group Facilitator and group discussed Grant Proposal Development. Posted Scenario #5 Post-Award Grant Management.
7	3/16	Group Facilitator and group discussed Post-Award Grant Management. Posted Scenario #6 Ethical Practices and Scenario #7 Professional Practices.

Table 1. 2018 (continued)

Meeting	Date	Virtual Study Group Structure and Content
8	3/23	Group Facilitator and Co-Facilitator discussed Ethical and Professional Practices. Posted Scenario #8 Funder Relations.
Off	3/30	Group Facilitator not available.
9	4/6	Group Facilitator and group discussed Funder Relations. Posted Scenario #9 Writing Prompt (Optional Writing Exercise) due 4/9 at 5:00 pm. Confidential written feedback provided.
10	4/13	Group Facilitator and group discussed strategies for Writing Exam and test taking from Chapter 9 and 10 in <i>Prepare for the GPC Exam</i> .

For the first meeting, the Technology Coordinator purchased and tested a professional Zoom (<https://zoom.us>) web conference account and created a Google Doc to share the meeting schedule and notes among the group. The Technology Coordinator sent an email to interested members explaining how to download and use the Zoom software and access the Google Doc. The Technology Coordinator led the first meeting in which participants discussed virtual meeting options and communicating through Facebook or Twitter. Participants agreed that Zoom would satisfy the group's logistical needs.

At the second meeting, the Group Facilitator introduced the content to be addressed in the group sessions and answered general questions regarding the GPC exam. An informal poll showed only a few individuals had submitted an eligibility packet to GPCI or received formal acceptance to take the GPC exam. Most attendees were deciding whether to pursue GPC credentialing. As an informal group with different levels of understanding, the Study Group Facilitator suggested members take the online Eligibility Survey to assess individual qualifications to sit for the GPC exam.

The meeting evolved into a discussion of the anticipated challenges of the GPC exam. Participants were primarily concerned with the cost of the exam and the newly revised deadline from six months to three months between notification of eligibility and expected exam completion. The Study Group Facilitator answered questions regarding the effort, cost, and benefits of earning the GPC from personal experience. The *GPA Salary Survey* was mentioned as a source of information about salary levels reported by grant professionals with and without the GPC. The study group included professionals with various years and levels of grantsmanship experience and several members who needed more experience to qualify for the GPC exam. Everyone was welcome to continue attending the weekly sessions.

The remaining virtual meetings focused exclusively on GPC exam preparation with the Technology Coordinator managing the virtual platform and Study Group Facilitator leading discussions focused on the grant competencies. Before each meeting, the Technology Coordinator scheduled calendar reminders, managed web conference meetings, archived video recordings, and updated the Google Doc with notes and study materials to discuss the following week. Meetings were recorded by video, archived and linked to the shared Google Doc for independent study. The Study Group Facilitator posted a disclaimer to the shared document explaining that participants were not guaranteed to pass the exam and all scenarios discussed during the study group were hypothetical. Participants were encouraged to prepare during the week prior to the scheduled sessions any questions and challenges related to each competency and scenario.

Each session followed the same format: (1) review the specific grant competency and skills; (2) pose a question to start discussion; (3) read through the scenario and exam questions inviting participants to share their grant experiences and discuss which answer they would choose and why; and (4) if time allowed, discuss related questions from *Prepare for the GPC Exam* (Annarino, Blitch, Hays deMuga & Mitchell, 2016).

Participants had the option of submitting a writing sample based on a writing prompt provided by the Study Group Facilitator, followed by confidential scoring and feedback on strengths and suggestions for improvement. During the final meeting group members discussed their experience with the writing exercise and test-taking strategies.

Results

The Study Group Facilitator developed a survey with questions on attendance, satisfaction, and feedback for improvement, based on similar surveys conducted as a GPA Approved Trainer using SurveyMonkey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com>). Everyone on the sign-up list received an email explaining the request for anonymous feedback immediately after the group ended and one week later. The Study Group Facilitator checked the public list on the GPCI website of verified GPCs in mid-December 2018 to determine the number of group members earning the credential. The following summary of the overall group results showed strong initial interest in attending the virtual study group with one-third achieving the GPC. Six out of seven (85%) of those with higher participation rates in the study group achieved the GPC.

- 20 GPA members from 17 states signed up to receive notifications
- 14 (70%) participated in at least one discussion session
- 7 (35%) participated in half or more of the 9 sessions
- 6 (30%) participants passed the GPC exam by December 2018
- 6 out of 7 (85%) of regular attendees passed the GPC exam by December 2018

Eight participants completed the survey. Feedback focused on (a) uncertainty about time/cost commitment and readiness for the GPC exam, and (b) time zone changes that made the live sessions less convenient. Some participants offered feedback in letters and emails such as the following comment.

The Virtual Study Group was helpful in preparing for the exam. I found the opportunity to write a timed exercise to be good preparation for the written exam. I believe my performance was enhanced by the opportunity to participate in the study group. It is worthwhile for those who commit to attending regularly.

After the survey results were captured, the Group Facilitator and Technology Coordinator archived the materials created during the meetings and discussed the strengths and difficulties of providing a nationwide virtual study group. Logistics and planning presented the most significant challenges. After reviewing attendance data and survey feedback, it was apparent that the change from Standard Time to Daylight Savings Time (DST) before Session #7 resulted in a decline in participation. The Technology Coordinator was based in Arizona (where DST is not observed) and would have been unable to facilitate meetings after the change in DST. The remaining meetings had to be rescheduled an hour later for all other participants and raised concerns on how to best serve a national study group across multiple time zones. This issue should be considered during the planning stage of future virtual study groups.

Recommendations

During the formation of future groups, a Technology Coordinator can assess technology needs and manage virtual meetings. A Study Group Facilitator can encourage learning about the GPC process, offer scenarios and guide discussions on the grant competencies. Holding an orientation session to answer questions and explore concerns about testing requirements enables individuals to assess readiness to start an application and invest time participating in the study group. Candidates should be aware of the requirement to test within three months after receiving an eligibility decision. Scheduling and participation levels can be improved by forming study groups within the same time zones or GPA regions. Virtual meeting platforms such as Zoom are affordable and available. The archived *Virtual GPC Study Group* (2018) is available for group or independent study and the *GPC Exam Prep GrantZone* can assist interested individuals and facilitators to form and support virtual groups.

Conclusion

The first independent virtual study group for the GPC was carried out by GPA members interested in a virtual study group option and led by volunteer coordinators. Due to low participation in the post-survey, causes for non-attendance could not be fully explored. Six out of seven regular group attendees achieved the GPC by the end of 2018 and expressed satisfaction with the live online discussions with colleagues from across the nation. This paper provides a framework and encouraging results from which to offer future virtual study groups for the GPC.

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AUTHOR'S BIOSKETCHES:

Katherine F.H. Heart, GPC, M.Ed. is the President of Heart Resources, LLC at www.heartresources.net and the author of *Grantpreneur™-Getting Started in a Grant Career and Business* (2016). She is a GPA Approved Trainer who facilitated the virtual study group for the GPC after conducting a study group for GPA-Western PA Chapter.

JulieAnna Carsen, GPC, B.S., is a Senior Grant Support Specialist for the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University and found of JVG Synergy, LLC. She earned the GPC credential after participating in the virtual study group.