Faculty Research Grant Request  
Michael McClelland  
Department of English  

Project:  
Research for a novel, to be called The Magnitude of Her Fury  

Starting/Completion Date:  
Summer/Fall 2011  

Abstract:  
The Magnitude of Her Fury is a novel in progress, inspired by the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Magnitude will be a bitterly satirical novel, lampooning America’s oil gluttony, inept government and, most particularly, the incredible but irresponsible power of multinational corporations. It is a plea for some sanity in a world whose environment, people and cultures are too often seen as nothing more than markers in a grand game of profit-making. It is my hope, of course, that the novel will be published and widely read, and perhaps even wake a few people up.  

Background:  
I began work on Magnitude in late summer 2010, and finished a first draft of the first 50 pages or so before the new school year began and other demands on my time forced me to put the novel on hold. Fortunately, I will be on sabbatical in Fall 2011; this means I will have the summer and fall to work on the book, including doing a good bit of research. Some of that research will be pursuing written information about the BP spill, other spills, corporate finances and influence, and so on. I also need to do a good bit of on-site research in areas hit by the BP spill, notably Louisiana and Mississippi, where I could see the environmental damage a spill has inflicted and talk to people whose lives and jobs were affected by the BP spill. If possible, I also would like to spend a few days in the Florida Panhandle, where the book will be set (setting the book there Panhandle will allow me to explore a spill’s impact on tourism and fishing economies like those of Ft. Walton Beach and Panama City, and the environmental impact on the fragile Apalachicola Bay estuary, and political and legal action in the state capitol of Tallahassee).  

Projected Budget:  
By far the greatest expense will be travel; unfortunately, I cannot say precisely what that will add up to. The following is a minimum estimate, based on the idea of driving in a huge triangle from Springfield south to New Orleans, then west through the Florida Panhandle, then north back to Springfield, over the course of 14 days. I might be able to stay with friends a night or two, but mostly will be relying on hotels. I do not plan on staying in high-cost beachfront places; still, even the cheapest rooms (and meals) in places like New Orleans are not cheap. Because of that, I used a figure midway between Standard and Large Metropolitan Areas in figuring the following.
2200 miles @ .50 per mile: $1100
Hotels x 14 nights: $560
Meals for 14 days: $560
Books, journals, copies: $200
Incidentals, including entry fees, boat transportation, etc.: $100
Total: $2,520

Proposed Plan of Work:

Travel and research from June 1 – June 14
June 15 until December 31 – More research, and write!

Step one would be identifying, obtaining and reviewing literature on the BP spill, oil spills in general, the environmental impact of oil spills, and Gulf Coast ecological systems. A quick search of amazon.com shows there are already more than a dozen books out specifically on the BP spill; I know too that virtually every major news and science magazine did extensive coverage of the event. There are also several flims/DVDs available, most done by major broadcast news organizations. Some of that will be available in libraries or cost-free on line, but I fear that quite a bit will not be. I will also want to review newspaper coverage in large papers like the New Orleans Times-Picayune, and in smaller local papers. Hopefully much of that coverage will be available on line, but many newspapers charge a fee for access to their archives. I also anticipate I’ll be doing quite a bit of copying and printing.

Just as important will be speaking to people who were directly affected by the BP spill – fishermen, hoteliers, seafood processors, lifeguards, state and local officials, and many more. Here I’ll be looking not for science or statistics, but for the telling details and genuine human experiences that make a story come to life. In some instances – with state officials, for example – I plan to set up formal interviews. In truth though, I expect to get my best material simply by walking along fishing piers and recovering beaches talking to the people who were actually there.

As a writer, I have found that writing and research reinforce and inspire one another; with that in mind I will be writing while I travel and research. All that adds up to quite a bit of work. I cannot guarantee I would have the entire work finished by the end of the year, but I should certainly be well along the way. Nor can I guarantee that the finished novel will be published. I have published two novels in the past and am under contract with a well-established literary agent, but with the publishing industry in this economy nothing is certain. I can, however, guarantee that this project would make me a better teacher. The skills I’ll use in this project are the same skills I teach in my creative writing and journalism classes (and to a lesser degree, in my English 101 classes). The experience I would gain in the course of this project would be apparent in my teaching, and I would be more than happy to visit any other class that would benefit from my experience (marine biology and communications come to mind). I would expect to present an English Department colloquium based on this, and if the book were to be published, I would of course express my debt and gratitude to Wittenberg.

Thanks for your consideration.

Michael McClelland
English Department
P.S. *The Magnitude of Her Fury*, incidentally, is a line from an old Jackson Browne protest song called “After the Deluge”:

“Some of them were angry
at the way the earth was abused
by the men who’d learned how to turn her beauty into power.
And they struggled to protect her from them, only to be confused
by the magnitude of her fury
in the final hour.”