

Creating a greater good

Nonprofit students give back with support from Giving Back Endowment

By Abby Ponder

A spreadsheet is displayed on a whiteboard in Carr Hall, black lines and numbers shining in the light of the projector as names of local nonprofit organizations dance up the sheet's left-hand side.

A group of nearby students are arguing among themselves about the spreadsheet's contents. They have a vision, their own intrinsic values and voices that sometimes clash, but they also have a collective purpose: to select one of the organizations displayed on the screen to grant \$3,000.

Voices ring out as the students make their cases for why a particular organization should receive the money. Each reason and the weight behind it is different from the last, but the students are united by their desire to make a positive impact in the community of Murray and Calloway County.

But how can they most effectively do that? Is it better to split the grant money among several organizations, they wonder, thus lowering the monetary amount? Or can they create more substantial change through a single organization? It is a lot to consider. And the students? Well, they're certainly considering it.

"I tell them from the beginning that you are 15 to 20 students with your own values and that you will have big fights if your only confrontation is 'I feel this,' and 'you feel that,'" said Dr. Peter Weber, who oversees the conversation unfolding before him but is careful to let the students find a solution on their own. "The only way you can get out of it is if you explain. That's when you can reach a compromise and move forward."

One of the priorities at Murray State is

the concept of experiential learning: the idea of students pursuing real-world applications of material they've studied in the classroom. That concept is in action as students in the nonprofit leadership studies program in the College of Education and Human Services experience those lessons first-hand in Weber's annual Grant-making and Philanthropic Foundations course.

Weber's course on grant-making takes students' experiences with grants and nonprofits to the next level. Rather than engaging in hypothetical problems and solutions, the students work with real money and real organizations. The stakes are raised considerably.

"With real money, you're actually doing something and not just thinking about how you might," Weber said. "That's kind of the goal: to put pressure on the students to take it seriously."

Funding for use by the class comes from a pillar of the Giving Back Endowment, which was established by Dr. Bob and Patricia Long in 2008. Bob, who previously served as a distinguished visiting professor in the College of Education and Human Services, first came up with the idea based on the many years of work he did promoting youth philanthropy with the Kellogg Foundation, where he previously served as vice president for programs.

"I think at the time we really didn't know how we were going to do it, but we knew we wanted to do something impactful — something that really meant something to young people," Patricia recalled.

The goal of the student-centered pillar for the Giving Back Endowment was to allow students the opportunity to create and lead change themselves — to see how their actions could make a difference and how



Dr. Bob and Patricia Long established the Giving Back Endowment in 2008 to allow students the opportunity to create and lead change.

their voices could resonate.

"I think that what students take away [from the class] is that their involvement in the community is worth something," Patricia said. "They find a voice."

"I'm not sure whether you can teach self-confidence," Bob added, "but you can give people experiences where they can practice and put their voice out there."

The class was an opportunity for Abby Siegel Hyman, '17, to do just that. Since graduating from Murray State and completing Weber's course in the spring of 2017, the Shelbyville native has gone on to pursue graduate work at Vanderbilt University in the community development and action program.

"I was able to adventure through unfamiliar territory — like grant making — and succeed because of the support of my professors and the empowerment to use my voice," Hyman said. "Looking back, this course was one of my favorites of my undergraduate career, and it awakened me to the possibilities of philanthropy."

The students spend the first third of Weber's course learning the concepts of philanthropy and the structure of foundations. Then, once they have a solid grasp on the underlying principles, they are responsible for researching local needs, such as hunger, poverty or sexual abuse, and going on to define the problem, identify causes and name local organizations that address that specific issue. In a separate project, the students then rank their own personal values before coming together to look for commonalities.

Those trends and themes play a crucial role in the subsequent class periods, allowing students to create mission and vision statements for the grant. And, once the mission and vision are determined,

the request for proposals begins to come together.

"That process took a lot longer than I thought it was going to because of the wordsmithing," said Amanda Royer, a senior from Henderson, Kentucky, who took the class in fall 2017. "We had to be very precise in what we wanted to say. And some of us didn't necessarily agree on the words."

Disagreements would arise on occasion as each semester progressed, particularly as students grew more invested in the project. The crucial part was to work through those disagreements to come out on the other side.

"Students come in at the beginning with pretty strong ideas," Weber said. "Oftentimes they have already worked with some of these organizations through internships or service-learning opportunities, so they're familiar with some of them and automatically gravitate toward what they know. The challenge, then, is to push students to go from 'I feel I like this organization' to 'I think this is a good organization because.' They're learning to use objective criteria."

Once all the grant submissions are in, students begin to review and score them: beginning as a class before splitting off to rank them individually. Shortly thereafter, they come back together and those rankings are projected for all to see and discuss.

"You couldn't hide your opinions very long," Royer said. "I was very vocal in class but others were not as comfortable, so it was really great to have that up there."

From there, the students work to narrow down the applicants to a top 10, to a top five, to a top three and then to a final organization. To help make their decision

easier, the students visit the nonprofits in person to meet with the grant applicants and see their work in action.

"We visited and heard from so many great nonprofits in Murray that genuinely deserved the money, but we had to think of who could benefit the most," said Kayla Thompson, a senior from Red Bud, Illinois, who took the class in fall 2017.

"It was more than just another class. We truly were able to make an impact."

— Kayla Thompson

One of the recurring priorities for the students, Weber observed, was sustainability: the idea that focusing on overhead costs means an organization can focus on their mission without the stress or distraction of worrying about paying bills.

"For a nonprofit to work, you need to be able to pay the bills," Weber said. "You need to be able to keep the lights on. If you have a homeless shelter without water? That's not good."

Sustainability was ultimately among the deciding factors for the fall 2017 course as the group decided to grant the money to Way of Wellness, a new residential mentoring facility for women with children who are homeless or victims of domestic violence. The organization plans to use their funding to pay for the facility's electric bill for an entire year and thus increase their

service capacity.

"It's awesome that we can say our contributions to allow this organization to get on their feet is going to help them reach so many people in the community," Thompson said. "It was more than just another class. We truly were able to make an impact."

The Grant-making and Philanthropic Foundations course has now been supported by the Giving Back Endowment for two semesters with more than 160 donors to date joining the Longs and the Kellogg Foundation in supporting the endowment's efforts. The course and endowment will continue to impact lives in the classroom and greater community in perpetuity.

"The fact that we were giving real money away that someone else had invested brought a deeper level of stewardship and responsibility to the work," Hyman said. "It no longer was a hypothetical process we were practicing in class. Rather, there were real consequences and results of our collective decision."

The class is also, Weber points out, open to any students who wish to attend — regardless of their academic major. After all, he said, the lessons the class teaches are invaluable for everyone.

It's a sentiment Bob seconds.

"No matter your degree or your major, the chances of you working in or volunteering for an organization based on community service are actually pretty good," Bob said.

Visit murraystate.edu/giving to make a gift to the Giving Back Endowment.



Students in Dr. Peter Weber's Grant-making and Philanthropic Foundations course present a check in the amount of \$3,000 from the Giving Back Endowment to Way of Wellness, a local nonprofit organization.