

MSU class tasks students with awarding grant money

By PARKER FRANKLIN • pfranklin@murrayledger.com | Posted: Thursday, September 21, 2017 12:00 am

MURRAY – A Murray State University class is preparing students for the world of philanthropy by assigning them a grant to disburse to local charities.

The class, part of Murray State’s nonprofit leadership studies program, is called NLS 305 Grant-making and Philanthropic Foundations.

“The overall goal of the program is to provide students with knowledge and skills, and what it means to lead and manage a nonprofit organization,” said MSU Director of Nonprofit Leadership Studies Peter Weber, who has been teaching the course since 2015. “Part of that process is focused strictly on the leadership and management side, but we also look at what giving means, what charity means and how you can be more scientific and strategic in being philanthropic.”

It’s no surprise by now, but NLS 305 isn’t your typical college course.

“They start the semester with the more traditional learning strategies,” Weber said. “They read about charity, good philanthropic practices and the ideal relationship between who gives and who receives. And part of one of the first major assignments is to research a local community and find out about local needs.”

From there, it evolves into more of a forum between classmates, and Weber said the course often encourages students to navigate their own values as they relate to charity work.

“Students can select their own area of emphasis,” Weber said. “I’ve had students in this class focusing on poverty and (the) homeless, some on sexual abuse and so on. They focus on one specific issue and determine to what degree that problem is in our region.”

Throughout the semester, the course’s 12 students will assess need in Calloway County, draft mission and vision statements and work with local nonprofits to determine the best fit for this year’s \$3,000 grant.

“Everything is in the hands of the students,” Weber said. “I just make sure the conversation is civil, and they have the responsibility. It’s a major opportunity for them.”

Weber added that a large part of the course is teaching students about the value of objectivity in making philanthropic decisions.

“You want to give money and be driven by personal values, but it also needs to be somehow objective and focused on the reality,” Weber said. “It cannot just be about what matters to you personally. It is about the



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Murray State University Director of Nonprofit Leadership Studies Peter Weber leads a NLS 305 class Tuesday morning. The course tasks students with allocating a grant to a local nonprofit. The recipient will be announced Dec. 7.

community. We focus on teaching students on how difficult it is to be intentional in their giving strategies.”

As the semester winds down, the students become more involved with those nonprofits that applied for the grant. They’ll break up into groups and visit each organization’s office space to get a feel for what they do and how they address specific needs, as outlined in their submitted proposals.

The class uses a rubric to narrow down potential candidates, and this year’s grant will be awarded in a ceremony Dec. 7. Past recipients include Soup for the Soul, Merryman House, CASA by the Lakes and the Purchase Area Sexual Assault and Child Advocacy Center.

“Students have the choice on whether they want to give the money as one individual grant to one nonprofit or split it up,” Weber said. “That’s part of the conversation we have.”

As many of these students volunteer at those organizations, Weber said he asks them to disclose of any potential conflicts of interest at the start of each semester.

“They need to learn to objectively analyze a grant proposal,” Weber said. “It cannot be driven by emotions. There’s nothing bad about having a conflict; they just need to disclose it.”

The grants come from the Giving Back Endowment, started by MSU professor Bob Long and his wife, Patricia. Weber said he stresses to his students to not take it all for granted.

“You have been tasked by a donor with money and you’re giving it away, so your task is to be respectful of that donor who gave you that money,” Weber said. “It needs to be taken seriously.”

The professor said one of the most important ways students pass the class is by developing their teamwork and communication skills.

“If you don’t participate, your voice is not heard,” Weber said. “There are also the specific skills to the profession – how you measure impact and success, which is not that obvious. How do you evaluate and write grant proposals? Then there are other skills, and that has a lot to do with learning how to make an argument. You need to try to convince somebody else about your position and saying ‘I feel like...’ is not enough.”

Weber added that the kinks usually iron themselves out at a certain point in the semester.

“You see, at the beginning, a lot of emotion and feelings,” Weber said. “And as the class progresses, they get more used to saying things like ‘I support this organization because...’ and they explain why. They also learn how to work with others. It’s not just about them, so they learn how to compromise, how to listen and how to make their own points.”

Class member Mikayla Marshall, a senior at MSU, said the class has opened her up to new ways of thinking.

“I like seeing how everyone works together,” Marshall said. “We all talk about our own leadership styles, and so it’s been really cool to work together, but also see how each other works differently.”

Her classmate, MSU senior Maisie Lemont, added that the class is a chance to get real-world experience working in a nonprofit.

“I’ve applied for grants and you hear all about it, but this is a hands-on class,” Lemont said. “We actually get to give the money. We are personally making an impact. It’s not a simulation or anything like that.”

Both Lemont and Marshall are active volunteers in the community, bringing experience working with local groups representing the Special Olympics, Need Line and the Girl Scouts to the class. Both are also active in the Conversation Partners program at MSU, which pairs ESL students with those that speak English for weekly conversations.

Weber said he’s proud to see how the course shapes his students across their academic and personal lives.

“You have students that come in who are very shy,” Weber said. “And at the end of the semester is our award ceremony. I always ask a few students to say a few words and I have a few that volunteer that, at the beginning, did not want to speak at all because they’re so shy. You really see how students transform.”