



Is It So Hard to Give Away Money?

By Barbara S. Liggett, School of Public Affairs and Administration director in the College of Arts and Sciences, Western Michigan University

Students participating in a seminar for undergraduate students in the School of Public Affairs and Administration (SPAA) at Western Michigan University (WMU) this year provided grants of nearly \$14,000 to five Kalamazoo, MI, nonprofit organizations. The class, PADM 4000—a seminar in nonprofit leadership—was offered to undergraduate students participating in the American Humanics Student Association and to those interested in nonprofit leadership. The class challenged students to engage in service learning using consensus decision making for conducting research, determining criteria, reviewing organizations' proposals, selecting organizations to receive funds and announcing the recipients to the community.

The grant funding came from the WMU School of Public Affairs and Administration, Campus Compact/Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund's Students4Giving Program and friends of the SPAA.

Learning the basics

Students are taught a variety of decision-making tools they must apply in individual and group processes. The course's framework is set by using consensus to reach a substantial agreement within a determined time limit. The voting method also is used if necessary. Organization collaboration models are explored. Delving into demographic data sets and financial reports becomes a necessity as students read and interpret data to effectively analyze the community's needs and organizations' capacities.

Writing grants and critiquing already written grants places a priority on making judgments through a variety of lenses: the community, clients, organizations, donors and grantors. Looking for best practices, locating demographic information and prioritizing collaborations moves the students from learning the basics through textbooks to engaging in research and practice in the community.

Research leads to criteria

Prior to awarding the grants, students in Janice Maatman's PADM 4000 course researched local issues and determined by consensus that grants should go to agencies working toward the following outcomes:



- Strengthening families through parent education programs or adequate prenatal care.
- Developing youth through after-school programming, with an emphasis on skill building or mentoring programs.
- Alleviating and preventing homelessness through advocacy, which works to change the current systemic policies that perpetuate homelessness.
- Saving capacity for existing arts or cultural programming jeopardized by a recent funding shortfall attributable to the current economic downturn.

The selection process

Twenty-seven agencies responded to the call for proposals. Students reviewed responses, conducted site visits, interviewed finalists and spent more than seven hours determining which programs to fund. Students ranked proposals based on need, impact, organizational capacity, sustainability, financial soundness, diversity, consumer involvement, synergies, fit with priority and appropriate application process—all linked to the identified criteria and outcomes. At the end of the process, students selected five organizations to receive grants:

- Advocacy Services for Kids: \$4,200 for its leadership program for youth struggling with mental health issues.
- Kalamazoo Book Arts Center: \$2,100 for its summer program in which youth write poetry and make their own books.
- Kalamazoo County Michigan State University Extension: \$3,000 for breast pumps for mothers whose babies are vulnerable.
- Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra: \$3,450 for its music education program in public schools.
- Michigan Organizing Project: \$1,000 to organize a vote on the City of Kalamazoo's homelessness fund.

The recipients

More than 100 students and nonprofit professionals gathered at a community center for the award announcements. The 2010 event included a presentation by Joel Orosz, author of *The Insiders Guide to Grantmaking: How Foundations Find, Fund and Manage Effective Programs*. The students easily recognized the content of the book, which was a textbook for their class.



The nonprofits eagerly waited to hear if they were chosen for the grants. The students, knowing the decisions, wondered how those not selected for the grants would react. Several students continue to care for the organizations, as they want the organizations to be successful in a future granting cycle. For some students, the classroom experience becomes their entry as a volunteer or staff member into the world of nonprofit organizations. And, so the learning goes on.

The students in the class planned and delivered the community announcement and celebration event. Their acknowledgements and thank yous to the nonprofit organizations demonstrated their lessons learned in giving away money, using consensus decision making, and building collaborations in and outside of the classroom.

At the community celebration event, student Kyle Smith thanked all the agencies submitting the proposals. “We did not know the amount and quality of nonprofit work being done in Kalamazoo,” Smith said. “Even if you walk away without a grant tonight, we hope you know that you have made a profound difference in the lives of 17 students who will one day work for nonprofit organizations. We will forever know how difficult it is to decide among so many worthy organizations and causes. Thank you.”

Giving away money is hard work, but there are so many lessons learned in so many ways. It’s service learning at its best.

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Note: Portions of this article were previously released in the 2010 newsletter *Public SPAAce*, From the School of Public Affairs and Administration. Janice Maatman and Barbara S. Liggett also presented the classroom experience in a workshop at the 33rd annual National Teaching Public Administration Conference on May 14, 2010, in Grand Rapids, MI.