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## Real Money, Real Lessons: In a course called learning by giving, students pursue and allot funding for area nonprofits

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# REAL MONEY



# REAL LESSONS

**By Laura Meader**

## IN A COURSE CALLED LEARNING BY GIVING, STUDENTS PURSUE AND ALLOT FUNDING FOR AREA NONPROFITS

“Consensus?” Professor Tom Morrione '65 asked his students.

“Does anybody object to zero?” a student added.

“Oh my god,” whispered another student, and then silence filled the room.

“Okay,” said Morrione, “the grant is not fundable.”

It was decision day in Sociology 398B and the students, acting as the governing board of a granting foundation, were evaluating grant proposals written by fellow classmates. With their consensus they had essentially voted someone off the island.

This was, however, more than an academic exercise in how to write and assess grants. The students had real money—\$10,000—to award. Money that could make a difference in the Waterville community.

**M**orrione's class, titled Learning By Giving, required students to be grant writers for Waterville-area nonprofit organizations. Their assignment: to identify a particular need within their partner organization and write a grant addressing that need. At the end of the semester, they would switch from grant writers to grant funders and decide how much, if any, each organization would be awarded.

The Learning By Giving program, funded by Doris Buffett's Sunshine Lady Foundation, “supports and promotes the study of philanthropy” nationwide by giving students the opportunity to wrap more than just their heads around what it means to run a nonprofit—it invites them to put heart and soul into the learning experience by working directly with nonprofit leaders.

During the semester teams of students met with executive directors, development directors, or entire boards for an insider's view of nonprofits. Along the way students developed a passion for and an intimacy with their partner organizations that fueled their desire to write a fundable grant. The same students collectively made up a foundation board with its own mission statement and parameters for the grant applications. The student board would review the grants at the end of the semester.

Colby is the only college in Maine to receive the \$10,000 grant, and this spring Morrione, the Charles A. Dana Professor of Sociology, offered Learning By Giving: Nonprofits and Philanthropy for the first time. But it's not the first time Morrione has exposed his students to real-world situations.

In a spring 2009 class Morrione linked students with nonprofits to learn about topics such as board composition, fundraising, volunteer management and recruitment, and day-to-day operations. The class was so well received, he said, that students wrote letters to President William D. Adams suggesting that the class be required for all seniors.

The experience got Morrione thinking. This sort of engagement, he said, “struck me as being the best way to learn.” In conversations with colleagues, Morrione discovered the Learning By Giving program and sent in the syllabus from the 2009 class for consideration. Add philanthropy to the syllabus, Morrione was told, and the class would be a natural fit. During his sabbatical year in 2009-10, Morrione restructured his syllabus, applied for the grant, and was awarded the \$10,000 in August 2010.

Morrione said he knew from 40 years of teaching that the Learning By Giving class would give students the real-world experience they crave. Project-oriented classes such as this one are the “essence of a non-alienated kind of learning

experience,” Morrione said. “Students are not only learning but they are creating their own learning environment, which to me is a lifelong lesson of great potential use.”

And many students will put the experience to use. Mandy Ferguson '12, a sociology major from the Chicago area who planned to intern with a nonprofit this summer, said the class offered a view of organizations she'd never seen. “I've always been interested in service and service learning,” she said, “and this is a great way to get experience from a different vantage point.”

The project began last January when Morrione mailed about 130 applications to nonprofits within a 50-mile radius of Waterville. Approximately 60 organizations returned the application with information about their structure, mission, and annual budget—and expressed a willingness to mentor students.

In February the class had its first exercise in finding consensus when it winnowed the applicants from 60 to five. Students selected partner organizations based on potential impact and sustainability of the grant and also on general interest in the organization's mission. Nonprofits with relatively small operating budgets tended to win out, since students believed the money would have a greater effect. The winners? Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Center, Maine Children's Home for Little Wanderers, Children's Center of Augusta, Literacy Volunteers of Waterville, and Viles Arboretum. Teams of three or four students worked with each nonprofit, and one student worked individually with the Waterville Opera House.

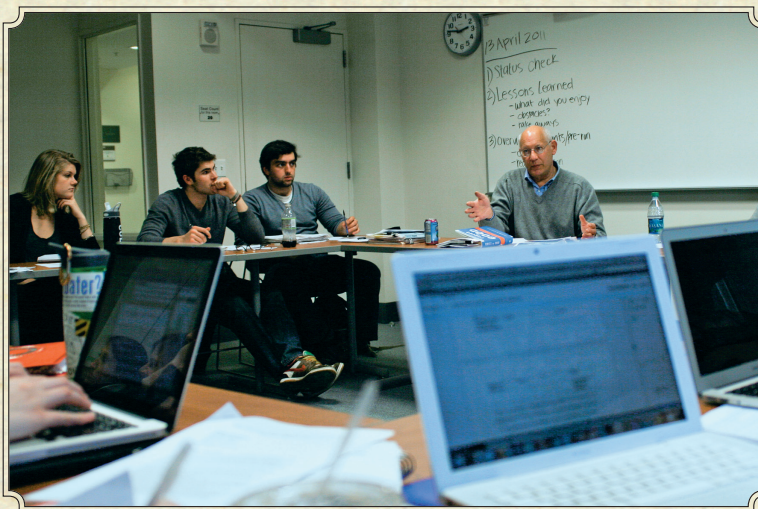
Ferguson and three of her classmates teamed up with Literacy Volunteers of Waterville (LV), which had the smallest operating budget of all 60 organizations. “They've been making such a difference on a small budget,” Ferguson said. “Imagine what they can do if they have just a little bit more to rejuvenate the organization and really get them off the ground again.”

Ferguson's team met weekly with LV board members to get familiar with the organization and to identify its modest needs: a photocopier, new tutors' manuals to replace the 20-year-old version, and a laptop for computerized instruction. Total grant request: \$1,556.45.

The students brought vitality and enthusiasm to the LV board. “To see young people interested in doing things like this—helping out a community and people in need—gives you more hope for the future,” said Judy Larson, secretary of the LV board.

The feeling was mutual. “Our passion comes from their passion,” Ferguson said.

At Viles Arboretum in Augusta, executive director Mark DesMeules was teaching his team of Colby students the ins and outs of nonprofit management. DesMeules said he applied to be part of the project as much for the opportunity to work with students as to be awarded grant money. “I finally got a chance to actually maybe make a difference and share my enthusiasm,” he said. A 25-year veteran



Professor of Sociology Tom Morrione '65, right, discusses students' grant proposals in his Learning By Giving class.

to help DesMeules meet his five-year goal of increasing membership from 250 to 1,500.

DesMeules taught his Colby team how budgets are organized, how to establish overhead, and, most importantly, how to distinguish themselves in a grant. “You need the nuts and bolts as a basis,” DesMeules said, “but then dress the nuts and bolts with your passion and individuality.”

The nuts and bolts were one of many topics discussed back in the classroom. The course was designed for students “to learn and practice skills needed to be effective philanthropists.” Morrione brought in guests with areas of expertise including marketing, grant writing, networking, and philanthrocapitalism. Textbooks supplemented the lectures, and in-class discussions furthered students' understanding of both writing and assessing grants. “We've learned how to turn the needs into a grant,” Ferguson said. Their challenge, she said, was “how to make it seem like a photocopier is the most important thing in the world to this organization and how to explain that on paper.”

In addition to learning how to write a grant, Hill, a government and international studies major who plans to start his own NGO, gained insight into the funding process. “It's not all that often that I'd be able to see ... how the decision process is being made,” he said.

Out of the 23 colleges and universities that have participated in the Learning By Giving program since its inception in 2003, Colby was one of only three where the same students filled both roles—grant writer and grant awardee. Morrione admits this was a challenging assignment. Yet playing dual roles, Morrione said, highlighted the fact that consensus was the goal.

The decision process culminated April 27 when the six grant requests were orally evaluated in class by the student board. The proposals ranged from \$1,556 to \$10,000. Clearly not every team would get what it asked for.

While the student board assessed each grant, the corresponding grant writers recused themselves from the classroom and waited anxiously in the hallway. The board evaluated each grant using predetermined criteria such as demonstration of real need, timeliness, outcome, organization credibility, clarity of budget items, sustainability, and sound methodology.

The board first decided if it should fund the grant and, second, how

in nonprofit management, DesMeules had to “learn the hard way” while climbing the nonprofit ladder. “I've always said to myself if I had an opportunity to share this information and this experience, I want to do that.”

Scott Hill, a senior from Medway, Mass., was one of three students working for the arboretum. “A class like this can show kids that it's really rewarding to work with a nonprofit and it provides tangible benefits for a population that really appreciates them,” he said. Hill's team wrote a grant request for \$4,695 for membership materials, including a color newsletter,

much would be funded. In the end, four of the grants received full funding, the organization asking for \$10,000 received a fifth of that amount, and the remaining grant was deemed unfundable because its budget wasn't clear and it failed to show real need, according to the student board. The amount funded for all the grants totaled \$8,387.

During the prolonged discussion surrounding the unfundable grant, several students argued unsuccessfully for at least partial funding, while other students remained firm for no funding.

"Are we saying yes to the grant, or are we saying yes to [our classmates]?" one student asked.

"We're supposed to be an impartial board," said another.

"Consensus?" Morrione had to ask the question three times before the board declined the grant.

This debate highlighted what Morrione saw throughout the semester—the need for students to be professional in the decision process. The board resisted, wisely, he thought, the notion of awarding each grant an equal amount—or awarding all of the organizations some money.

After all the requests had been discussed, students canceled their normal mid-class break, eager for Morrione to list the award amounts on the whiteboard. When the students saw the numbers, silence again fell over the room as the reality of the situation sank in.

The empty-handed grant writers broke the silence by asking why their grant was not funded when a \$1,613 surplus remained. The student board explained what the grant lacked and the grant writers answered questions, offered clarification, and pitched for partial funding. It was a tough sell. At one point, one of the grant writers began to cry. "I'm sorry," she said. "I knew someone was going to cry today and I really didn't want it to be me."

Again the room fell quiet.

When discussion resumed, the board eventually granted \$1,000 to the previously unfunded nonprofit and split the \$613 surplus between two other organizations. Did the tears sway the board? "No, I don't think so," said Morrione. "It was an emotional event, and it drove home the point that people are invested in this process." The board empathized with the tears, Morrione said, but didn't cave in.

What about Colby's close-knit community—did it affect the



Mandy Ferguson '12 discusses her grant proposal with the Literacy Volunteers of Waterville board members.



Viles Arboretum Executive Director Mark DesMeules, right, with, from left, Geri Morris '11, Theo Papademetriou '11, and Scott Hill '11.

board's impartiality and its ability to compromise? "Not a whole lot," said Morrione. Because the class was composed primarily of seniors, "they're a little more prone to feel comfortable talking about things in more direct ways and a little less likely to be concerned about the immediate [social] fallout," he said.

Mature decision processes such as this please Louise Sawyer, a consultant to the Learning By Giving program. In their role as decision makers and as grant writers, students in this program nationally "feel more committed to being involved in the nonprofit community," Sawyer said, "and they certainly understand the function of nonprofits in communities in a way they may not have understood before, even if they had been very active as volunteers."

Morrione, who will apply for the grant again next year, said the class was a success on two levels. Academically, the students learned about the purpose, impact, and need for philanthropy. Psychologically, the students "derived a tremendous amount of personal satisfaction from the experience," he said. "They also gained satisfaction of seeing the results of their

work immediately and in a tangible way."

Sawyer agrees that it's a win-win situation. "The funding from the foundation is ending up as it intended—to help those in the community, responding to critical needs in the community ... and the students are able to have this important hands-on learning experience that we are finding, across the country, is having a transformational effect," she said.

The satisfaction was evident at an awards ceremony in early May when each team handed the grant award to a representative from their partner organization. Hugs and handshakes were exchanged in addition to money that the students knew would help people in central Maine overcome challenges and hardships through the work of these community-based organizations.

The powerful class experience "vindicated anyone who argued for engagement in the context of what the Goldfarb Center is doing and what we're doing in sociology," said Morrione. "You can't have that kind of emotional experience without being engaged with what you're doing in a meaningful way." 