“Learning by Giving” course exhibits grant apps
by Alexandra Ojerholm on Apr 12, 2011

Students in “Learning By Giving: Nonprofit Organizations and Philanthropy” exhibited the products of their semester-long labor at the Maine Association of Nonprofits/Maine Business Leadership Conference, held at the College on April 6.

At the conference, the students displayed posters featuring the grant applications they had worked on during the semester. The presentation enabled them to experience what it would be like to be professionals in the philanthropic field. This exhibition was a progress report of sorts, allowing the students to receive feedback on their projects and reinforce the practical significance of their missions. The class had the chance to publicize their projects to the College community and beyond, advocating their own work and promoting their organizations.

Charles A. Dana Professor of Sociology Thomas Morrione ’65 designed the sociology course in hopes of enabling students to apply skills they learned in the classroom to effective philanthropic endeavors. Groups of students partnered with Maine nonprofit organizations, developing missions statements and writing grant applications in order to acquire funding for their philanthropic programs. Morrione provided his students with the unique opportunity to participate in what he called “a learning laboratory outside the classroom.”

Now that the conference is over, Morrione’s students must decide which nonprofit organizations receive the funding afforded to the class. This task is made more arduous by the fact that they cannot divide the sum equally among groups. Morrione knows that the decision will be extremely difficult, but he hopes that the students can come to a unified consensus rather than resorting to a vote. The grants will be awarded to the selected organizations in May during a public ceremony on the Hill.

Morrione has long been molding his sociology students into philanthropists since he began using student volunteers to collect data pertinent to his sociological studies in 1973. He came up with the idea for this course two years ago, when he was teaching a similar class. However, his course at the time “had no money, so we used our volunteer time collectively.”

Recognizing the potential a similar course with actual funding would have, Morrione devised a syllabus for a new course during his sabbatical last year. Morrione spent the year studying relevant course syllabi from other professors and worked with Louise Sawyer, a visiting scholar and senior advisor at Boston College’s Center on Wealth and Philanthropy and a liaison to the Learning by Giving Program of the Sunshine Lady Foundation. Ultimately, Morrione developed his own course guidelines, applied for and received a $10,000 Learning By Giving grant from the Foundation—which was founded by Doris Buffet, sister of billionaire Warren Buffet—to fund his course.

The College’s first course on nonprofits, the class is an “academically focused community-based educational experience” that will compel students to “behave as professionals and responsible contributors to their enterprise,” Morrione said. The students
participating in the course are mostly senior sociology majors with a keen interest for a
career in nonprofits, a group driven by the passion to actively make a difference.

After receiving applications from over 60 nonprofit organizations in Maine eager to work
with students on the Hill, Morrione’s class was responsible for selecting only five. Using
the mission statement they devised as a class, the students were forced to prioritize based on
their personal values and preferences—a lesson that Morrione noted is invaluable to aspiring
philanthropists. Hilary Walker ’11, a student in the class, reflected that the nonprofits “all
need[ed] it, and they all deserve[d] it, but we [couldn’t] give everyone money.” Eventually,
the class selected the Maine Children’s Home for Little Wanderers, the Children’s Center
of Augusta, the Sexual Assault Crisis and Support Center, Viles Arboretum and Literacy
Volunteers, and the divided into groups and began tailoring mission plans for each of their
organizations.

From this point on, Morrione allowed the students to take full responsibility for their
projects. Each group, working with professional members of the respective organization,
were grant applications intended for the $10,000 Learning By Giving grant. Diane Leinen
’11, who worked with the Literacy Volunteers of Waterville, said that she “gained a huge
appreciation for the people that always do this.” Walker said that because of the time
consuming process, “we all bonded because we were a bit in over our heads.”

Course discussions and readings taught the students the differences between for profit
and nonprofit organizations and the complex, elaborate theories of organizational structures.
“There is a lot of focus on the need to show how and what students learn is directly
applicable to the world,” Morrione said. Voicing a common sentiment, Walker said, “you
learn to engage since you feel like you are doing something important.” As Lienen added,
“everyone is positively impacted.”

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Morrione’s class, which is the College’s first course on nonprofits, is an “academically
focused, community-based educational experience” that will compel students to “behave as
professionals and responsible contributors to their enterprise,” Morrione said. The course is
largely composed of senior sociology majors with a keen interest in a career in nonprofits.
These students are driven to make a difference in and beyond their communities.

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with students on the Hill, Morrione’s students were responsible for selecting only five. Using
the mission statement they devised as a class, the students were forced to prioritize
according to their personal values and preferences—Morrione noted that familiarity with
these sort of decisions is invaluable lesson to all aspiring philanthropists. Hilary Walker ’11, a
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deserve[d] it, but we [couldn’t] give everyone money.” Eventually, the class chose to get
involved with the Maine Children’s Home for Little Wanderers, the Children’s Center of
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projects. Each group worked with employees of their respective organization, to write applications for the $10,000 Learning By Giving grant. Diane Leinen ’11, who worked with the Literacy Volunteers of Waterville, said that she “gained a huge appreciation for the people that always [write grants].” Walker said that throughout the time consuming process, “we all bonded because we were a bit in over our heads.”

Course discussions and readings schooled the students in the differences between for-profit and nonprofit organizations and the complex theories of organizational structures. “There is a lot of focus on the need to show how and what students learn is directly applicable to the world,” Morrione said. Voicing a common sentiment, Walker said that “you learn to engage since you feel like you are doing something important.” As Leinen added, “everyone is positively impacted.”