

By Abby Ponder

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

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.