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

The class, part of Murray State’s nonprofit leadership 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 can’t 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

composability. Weber focuses on teaching the 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 graduate with the objective to analyze a grant proposal,” Weber said. “It cannot be driven by emotions. There’s nothing bad about having a conflict; they just sr.

“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.”