



Spring 4-24-2012

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Recommended Citation

Fields '12, Kristin, "Grant-Writing Course Gives Back to the Community" (2012). *News and Events*. 1911.

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Grant-Writing Course Gives Back to the Community

April 24, 2012

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Each fall, Deborah Halperin, coordinator of the Action Research Center (ARC), teaches the Action Research Seminar, a course that takes on a large community project and focuses on the skills students need to bring about positive change in their community.

"Every year, no matter what project we select, the issue of money always surfaces," Halperin noted. "All not-for-profit organizations are trying to develop a diversified income base. Grants can be part of the formula, but it's complicated, not a guarantee and requires hard work. All of that seemed like a great basis for a class."

Doug Faulkner, executive director of the Immanuel Bible Foundation, and Illinois Wesleyan President Richard F. Wilson break ground at the new Peace Garden. Danny Kenny '13 (back left) wrote a successful grant request to support the project.



What followed was the creation of Illinois Wesleyan's first course dedicated to grant writing. During the 2012 spring semester, twenty-one students were officially enrolled in the 300-level course cross-listed under political science and sociology. The students spanned a wide range of majors, including English writing, political science, sociology, and environmental studies, among others. Six community members also joined from a variety of organizations, including the YWCA, the Illinois Shakespeare Festival, the Children's Discovery Museum and marcfirst.

Grant writing is a collaborative process conducted by organizations looking for financial support and institutions that provide grant money. Institutions, such as government departments, corporations or foundations, issue requests for proposals (RFPs) to find suitable partners, Halperin explained. In turn, grant writers submit applications to these institutions, outlining the community needs, program design, evaluation methods and a budget. "A successful application aligns with the mission of the foundation and

intention of the fund, crafts a compelling argument and makes the case for being a good steward," said Halperin.

One of the course's strongest features is perhaps its emphasis on practicality. Halperin noted that members of the class wrote "real" grants in hopes of raising "real" money, rather than writing grants solely to learn the process. Achieving this goal, students secured funds for the organizations they worked with.

Junior environmental studies and Hispanic studies double major Danny Kenny received \$500 from the McLean County Wellness Coalition (MCWC) to be put toward his work with the Illinois Wesleyan University Peace Garden.

"It is our hope that through this garden, we will address issues of environmental sustainability, nutrition, and food justice, which align perfectly with the mission of the MCWC 'to improve the overall health of the community through the promotion and adoption of nutrition and physical activity systems, policy and environmental change,'" said Kenny.

The Peace Garden project is part of the Weir Fellowship Kenny was given this year, a \$2,000 award given to students who have previously worked closely with community partners and proposed collaborative projects with them. When first assigned the task of raising funds for garden tools, Kenny noticed the grant writing course and saw it as the perfect opportunity to accomplish the goal.

Kenny plans on using his grant writing experience outside of his current project at Illinois Wesleyan. "Whether it is formally through my job, or informally through my passions in the community, I plan on writing grants to help support the organizations and causes I care about," he said.

Zoe Gross, a junior political science major, wrote grants for the West Bloomington Revitalization Project (WBRP), specifically their Community Greening Initiative, which focuses on gardening and natural beautification efforts in the neighborhoods. Over the course of the semester, Gross drafted six grants for the WBRP, ranging from \$500 to \$2,000. The Illinois Prairie Community Foundation and the McLean County Wellness Coalition are among the foundations that awarded funds.

Gross plans on attending law school after graduating from Illinois Wesleyan. Although she does not intend to directly use grant writing in her field of work, she has noted that her persuasive writing skills have improved since taking the class. Gross believes the course is a unique experience few college students have. "Usually people learn grant writing on their own in a trial and error type process. It has been great to have the class teach us grant writing step by step," she said.

Also among those who have secured grant money is senior English writing major Natalie Lalagos, who has received \$2,000 from the Hummiston Foundation for the American Red Cross of the Heartland in Bloomington. The grant highlights the work that the Heartland chapter has done in the Pontiac

community, where the Hummiston Foundation is based, and largely focuses on increasing disaster preparedness.

"Pontiac is unfortunately susceptible to both man-made dangers involving power plants and rail road tracks, as well as natural dangers," said Lalagos, who explained that in the past, the community has experienced flooding from the Vermilion River. "By educating people about the best ways to prepare for and respond to disasters, it increases the likelihood that the community as a whole will fare better," said Lalagos.

Lalagos has considered pursuing this profession after graduation. "I like the idea of using language so purposefully to acquire funding for programs that have a positive impact on members of our community," she said. In the immediate future, Lalagos plans on volunteering with the Red Cross to continue writing grants and gain further experience.

These students' efforts are just a few examples of ARC fulfilling their mission to close the gap between campus and community, or what is commonly referred to as "breaking the IWU bubble." The choice to incorporate community members in the class, in addition to holding half of the class meetings off-campus, was another way of achieving this.

Halperin described the symbiotic relationship that comes out of experiences like the grant writing course. "Community partners have a need for grant funding and we have a need for meaningful community experiences for our students. The two came together in this class," said Halperin. "I think more IWU classes could reinvent themselves in this way with community partners. ARC would like to see that happen and can be a resource for on- and off-campus partners to come together."

As the academic year draws to a close, students continue to be notified of grant earnings. Sophomore environmental studies major Kyli Wagner was recently awarded \$1,100 in Spanish books from the Illinois Prairie Community Foundation for the Book Bike, a part of the WBRP that distributes free books throughout the community via a three-wheeled bike with a built-in bookshelf. In total, the class has asked for \$215,600 in grant money for a variety of organizations.

Halperin intends to teach grant writing again in the spring of 2013. In addition to writing grants, she hopes to add other aspects to the course, including development and fundraising for not-for-profits, strategic planning and innovation in social service outreach and program design.

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