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# STUDENT VOICES

## Community Engagement in Social Work

Jessica Herald, L. Faye Perkins, and Hannah Powers

As first year Master of Social Work students, we were introduced to community engagement through our Communities and Organizations practice course. Our class participated in the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project (MSPP), housed at Northern Kentucky University. We focused on a local community, and ultimately awarded \$4,000 to nonprofit agencies serving that community.

The MSPP seeks to educate students about service and nonprofit organizations in the community through hands-on service-learning, with the goals of fostering a student commitment to community service that persists beyond graduation, and developing a mutually beneficial relationship between the university and the community. The MSPP is funded by a grant from the Manuel D. and Rhoda Mayerson Foundation and other community donors. Faculty members apply for MSPP funding through the Scripps Howard Center for Civic Engagement at NKU. The application process is designed to mentor and support faculty and students, and involves syllabus and course content review and planned meetings with community agency representatives and other engaged faculty. Each class selected to participate is given a sum of money to award as a grant to a community nonprofit agency that the class deems most deserving of the award. Under the guidance of the class instructor, students visit nonprofit organizations of their choosing and meet with agency staff to learn about the various programs. Students are involved in requesting and evaluating grant proposals from these agencies to assess which agency will make

the best use of the grant funds. Following critical analysis of the proposals and debate among the class, the students determine to which agency the grant will be awarded. Each section of our class was given \$2,000 to award to the organizations we felt would best meet the community needs.

In order to research and select appropriate community nonprofit agencies, we needed to understand the needs of our chosen community, Census Tract 505, the westside neighborhood of Newport, Kentucky. The first step in this process was a walking tour of the region, organized by students and guided by the leader of the neighborhood coalition. This walking tour enabled us to gain a greater appreciation of the area's physical characteristics, community needs, and residents. The community is home to approximately 6,000 residents within an area of less than 3 square miles. Despite a rich history of industry and a wealth of architecturally beautiful buildings, this neighborhood struggles with generational poverty, drug abuse, and crime. Over 15% of the housing units are vacant, and of that number, almost half are abandoned (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Children living within the area attend a school district with the highest rate of poverty in Northern Kentucky and a graduation rate below the statewide average (Kentucky Department of Education, 2013). Despite these weaknesses, we discovered that one of the major strengths of this community is a wealth of nonprofit agencies that serve its residents.

The process of awarding the funds involved many steps, guided by assignments provided by our instructor. Students were organized into

teams, each of which selected three nonprofits on which to focus our research. We personally visited these organizations and interviewed the staff regarding the agency history, mission, structure, budget, and nature of services. For many, these agency visits were the highlight of the course, as we were able to witness firsthand the passion these agency staff have for the individuals and community they serve.

Our teams then issued requests for proposals to each of the agencies we visited. Teams used a standard rating tool provided by our instructor to review the proposals, and narrowed the candidates to one agency per team. At that point, representatives from each agency were invited to present their grant proposal to our class section. Each team was able to advocate for their chosen agency, which resulted in lively debate among our classmates. In addition to advocating for an agency based on the organization's missions and goals, students discussed the sustainability of the proposed projects, the number of individuals served and the ways in which they would be served by the projects, and the current funding structure and budget of the agencies. Finally, each section selected the community agencies we determined most worthy of the grant funding.

In total, between the two classes, \$3,000 was awarded to the Henry Hosea House. Founded in 1991, the Hosea House is located in the heart of Census Tract 505 and has been the only soup kitchen in Northern Kentucky to serve an evening meal seven days a week, 365 days a year. Each night they serve approximately 175 hot meals to individuals and families of all ages and backgrounds. The money awarded to the Hosea House contributed to the creation of a garden in an effort to lessen the problem of nutritional poverty in the community. Due to a combination of factors, Census Tract 505 is considered a food desert. Lack of financial resources, transportation, and fresh food retailers in close proximity prohibits many residents from accessing a nutritionally balanced diet.

With the help of the MSPP, Henry Hosea House has treated the soil of the garden and has planted a variety of fruits and vegetables, as well as a "living fence" of greenery to surround the garden. Two tons of fresh produce were cultivated and distributed to Hosea House patrons in the first year. According to Hosea House Executive Director Karen Yates, "The plants include blueberry bushes that were planted where our

guests sit and wait to come in. They loved being able to sit there and eat right off the bush as they waited." One client was surprised to learn he liked blueberries, as he had never been exposed to them before they were grown at Hosea House. This year, they expect to double the harvest of the previous year, as they reserved some of the Mayerson funds for additional plants this summer.

The remaining \$1,000 grant was awarded to Brighton Recovery Center for Women (BRCW), located in Florence, Kentucky. BRCW is a 100-bed residential substance abuse recovery facility serving adult females who experience substance abuse, poverty, and homelessness. While it is not physically located within Census Tract 505, it serves the community directly; many of BRCW's clients are residents of Newport, Kentucky. BRCW utilizes a peer-driven model for recovery that seeks to help women maintain sobriety and to reintegrate clients successfully as productive members of their communities. The \$1,000 grant awarded to BRCW was used to fund medical services and prescriptions for clients. With the grant funds, numerous residents will be able to access individual mental health counseling services, dental services, prescription medications, and other necessary medical services.

Participation in the MSPP greatly enhanced our learning experience in several meaningful ways. We had the opportunity to engage in charitable giving and were inspired by the investment made in our community through student philanthropy. We were exposed to nonprofit structure and operations, and we participated in the solicitation and review of grant proposals. We expanded our knowledge of nonprofit agencies and their services within our community and were able to advocate among our peers for agencies whose missions are important to us. Many of us maintain a connection to these agencies and have volunteered our time or made monetary donations as a result of this project. This hands-on approach to learning has provided us with an experience we will remember long after our graduate studies are complete.

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### **About the Authors**

The authors are students in the Master of Social Work program at Northern Kentucky University. Faye Perkins received her B.A. in psychology from the University of Kentucky. Hannah Powers received her B.A. in psychology from Northern Kentucky University. Jessica Herald received her B.A. in psychology from Miami University.