

A handful of grant makers support efforts To teach college students how to give intelligently

By Jennifer C. Berkshire

When Kristin Caufield, a college sophomore with a longtime interest in community service, was looking for economics courses to fulfill requirements for her major, she found herself drawn to a popular new class: "Economics of Philanthropy and the Nonprofit Sector."

The course, taught by the University of Mary Washington economics professor Robert Rycroft, offers students at the Fredericksburg, Va., institution a firsthand look at the inner workings of the world of philanthropy. Students don't just read about charities and how they operate, they select real organizations and give money away: \$10,000 per class.

"Even students who sign up for the course because they're more interested in the nonprofit area may not know much about how these organizations actually operate," says Mr. Rycroft. "This is a way for them to get tremendous hands-on experience."

The course is one of several scattered at colleges and universities across the country, many of them supported by family foundations, that seek to foster a culture of giving among young people. Ms. Caufield and her classmates spent the fall semester learning by doing: They formed a grant-making foundation, complete with a mission statement, and solicited applications from local charities. The students winnowed down the 20 grant proposals they received, debating the merits of each.

As the semester's end approached, judgment day arrived as well. The students ultimately voted to split the money between two organizations: Homes for America, a nonprofit housing group, which was awarded \$7,000 to establish a Homework Club at an apartment complex the group manages, and Rebuilding Together, which was awarded \$3,000 to establish a training program to teach young people home-repair and maintenance skills.

Doing Out 'Real Cash'

Ms. Caufield says the course gave her a new understanding of the importance of the nonprofit field - "I had no idea how many people devote their life's work to nonprofits," she says - and also changed her view of her own future.

While she concedes that she hasn't made any definite plans yet, Ms. Caufield says the class inspired her to consider a career with a charity, something she had never given much consideration to before last semester.

That's exactly what the philanthropist Doris Buffett hoped would happen when she came up with the idea of teaching young people about the joys of philanthropy by letting them give away real money.

Since 2003, Ms. Buffett's Sunshine Lady Foundation, in Wilmington, N.C., has provided \$300,000 to support philanthropy classes at not only the University of Mary Washington but also Cornell University, Davidson College, and the University of Virginia, all institutions where the foundation had what it calls "Sunbeams," members of its nationwide network of volunteers.

Ms. Buffett, the older sister of the billionaire investor Warren E. Buffett, says her goal was to reach bright, idealistic young people and, if all went according to plan, inspire them to become philanthropists.

"There's nothing like having the real cash," says Ms. Buffett, whose foundation has awarded more than \$30-million since its creation in 1996, largely to charities that work to curb domestic violence and provide its victims and their children with educational opportunities.

"The students get turned on to the idea of giving money away, but they also learn a lot about nonprofits and how they work," she says. "They learn to understand fund raising and how boards work, how to read a balance sheet. The best part is that the students are avidly interested, and they come up with some great ideas."

Ms. Buffett's approach to the hands-on classes is decidedly hands-off; it is up to students to determine which charities will receive the money. She does, however, ask that students focus on awarding money to local groups so they will learn more about the needs of the communities that surround their colleges and universities.

"Many of the students start doing things in their communities right then and there," says Ms. Buffett, noting that the courses are consistently oversubscribed. "I like to think that this is the beginning of something that will certainly outlive me."

Giving for a Grade

Ms. Buffett isn't the only philanthropist who is teaching undergraduates how to give money away. The Brennan Family Foundation, of Akron, Ohio, recently donated \$50,000 to support a new two-semester philanthropy seminar at Colgate University, in Hamilton, N.Y., from which family member Jay Brennan, son of the foundation's creators, graduated in 1981.

The grant will support the courses for five years, allowing the students who sign up to give away \$10,000 each year to charities in upstate New York.

Mr. Brennan said that he began to develop the idea for teaching college students about the importance of giving in 2001, after a discussion with a fellow graduate at the 20th reunion of his graduation from Colgate. As chairman of the committee raising money for a class gift, Mr. Brennan asked his classmate to consider making a donation to the institution - only to be told that the alumnus didn't feel that he "owed Colgate anything."

Says Mr. Brennan, "I realized that the concept of giving back, something that's like breathing to me, was totally alien to him."

That conversation soon gave rise to an inspiration: Since faculty members and administrators already have the opportunity to shape the values of the students in their charge, Mr. Brennan thought, why not incorporate the concept of giving into education?

And by giving Colgate money to give away, even students who weren't yet in a position to donate to charity on their own could get a sense of what philanthropy was like.

Mr. Brennan says his father, David Brennan, who made his fortune in manufacturing and is now a prominent operator of charter schools, taught him the importance of giving back. "But a lot of kids aren't taught that," Jay Brennan notes.

The younger Mr. Brennan notes that while he had no trouble persuading Colgate to give the idea a try, he did run into a skeptic closer to home: his mother, who controls the family's foundation: "She was a little wary of donating money that would then go to other causes, especially since she'd have no say over where the money went."

The course is now entering its second semester; students spent the fall learning about how organized philanthropy works and will spend the spring honing a mission statement and soliciting proposals from local nonprofit organizations, some of which will eventually receive some of the Brennan foundation's financial support.

"I don't particularly care where the money goes," says Mr. Brennan, who notes that he played no part in Colgate's decision to focus on local charities. "I'm just hoping that we'll have an opportunity to encourage the next generation to give."

A Charitable Component

At Xavier University, in Cincinnati, students who sign up for courses on subjects like theology, biology, or accounting, are increasingly likely to find philanthropy on the syllabus.

"The idea was to reach people who wouldn't otherwise think about philanthropy or community engagement," says Eugene Beaupre, who oversees the university's five-year-old philanthropy program. "Students who walk into these classes don't know that there's a philanthropy component."

Faculty members who participate in the program must integrate a philanthropic component into the core of their courses' missions.

A class on environmental biology, for example, might include a search for - and a donation to - environmental-advocacy groups in the Cincinnati area. Students enrolled in a course on computer networking might help local nonprofit groups install and make use of new technology.

Participating faculty members receive \$1,000 to compensate them for their extra effort, while the four courses chosen by the university each semester are supplied with \$4,000 to give away. So far, says Mr. Beaupre, the program has donated more than \$75,000 to local charities.

"It's a vehicle that gets the students out into the community," he says.

Edna Burns, president of Historic New Richmond, applied for \$4,000 from students at Xavier who were enrolled in a theology course titled "God on the Underground Railroad."

Ms. Burns asked for the money to pay for a walking tour and commemorative plaques of Underground Railroad stops in New Richmond, a small town 25 miles south of Cincinnati, and ultimately beat out 20 other charities, including the much more prominent National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.

"The students could have split the money among several groups but they chose to give it all to us," says Ms. Burns.

She says the experience was positive one, not just for her charity but for the students as well.

"It was a big deal for us because our annual budget is less than \$10,000," says Ms. Burns. "And the students had their eyes opened a little bit about the history of New Richmond. You might think there isn't a lot here, but even a small sleepy town can play a big part in history."

Evolution of an Idea

The Xavier program, and the money behind it, came to the university via Roger F. Grein, a local philanthropist and successful accountant who made his fortune investing in the stock market.

In addition to supporting courses at Xavier, Mr. Grein provides money to allow students in courses at two other Ohio institutions - Chatfield College, in St. Martin, and Wilmington College - as well as at Loyola University Chicago, to participate in grant making. His goal is to see the program spread across the country.

"I'll consider any university," says Mr. Grein. "Potentially it can work anywhere. It's just a matter of finding a structure and finding the charities."

While Mr. Grein is now a self-proclaimed evangelist for the idea of teaching philanthropy at universities, he admits that he didn't invent the concept, but instead followed the lead of an effort at Northern Kentucky University.

That project, paid for by the Manuel D. and Rhoda Mayerson Foundation, in Cincinnati, began in 1999 with a conversation between Neal Mayerson, the foundation's president and the son of its creators, and James Votruba, who had recently become president of Northern Kentucky University, says Breta Cooper, the foundation's executive vice president.

Since that initial brainstorming session, the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project has endowed five to seven courses each semester with \$4,000 each for students to give away, totaling nearly \$200,000.

The Mayerson Foundation, which supports arts, civic engagement, and education projects, also provides additional money for faculty training and administrative costs.

"From our perspective this was money that we were giving away in the community anyway," says Ms. Cooper. "To have it funneled through young people who might give money away in the future means that we're getting so much more out of those dollars."

She notes that survey data collected three years after students complete the courses indicate that the philanthropy training is making a difference. "Three years out, 80 percent of the students are telling us that they've made a donation to a nonprofit since taking the class," says Ms. Cooper. "A third of them tell us that they're thinking about pursuing careers in the nonprofit sector."

As for whether programs like that at Northern Kentucky University are having a long-term impact, no one knows yet. No empirical studies have been done on these college-level courses, says Dwight F. Burlingame, director of academic programs at the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University. But anecdotal evidence indicates that similar courses make students better evaluators of charities, says Mr. Burlingame, who has looked at philanthropy-education programs at the Westminster Schools, a private school in Atlanta.

"The story that's really coming across about these programs is that they teach students how to assess nonprofit organizations so that they can make decisions," he says. "That's an important tool to have."

Starting Small

At Chicago's DePaul University, Laura Hartman, a professor of business ethics and legal studies, has also been teaching students about philanthropy by providing them with money to give away.

Each semester, Ms. Hartman donates \$50 of her own money to each of the six business ethics classes she teaches and asks her students to decide what to do with the funds.

The inspiration for the gesture was twofold, says Ms. Hartman. DePaul, a Catholic university, stresses charity and its connection to urban Chicago in its mission. But Ms. Hartman also saw the small-scale philanthropy lesson as a way to help her students who are preparing for careers in the business world to become better corporate citizens.

"It's very hard in an ethics class to give students a sense of how to make a real decision," she says. "We're asking them to judge the decisions of corporations and what they choose to do with their money. This puts the students in a similar situation."

Each semester, Ms. Hartman asks her students to do some research into charities or causes that might benefit from the contribution. The class priorities, she notes, tend to be driven by current events, and there are often disagreements over whether the money should go to large charities versus smaller groups, or even to needy individuals.

Last spring, for example, students debated giving the money to a charity that aided people made homeless by Hurricane Katrina, or to an individual homeless person. Students decided to support one person, she says: "This is a way of showing them that even a tiny bit of effort has an impact. My purpose is to allow them to see the implications so that they are better able to gauge the impact of their decisions when they make them in the larger business environment they will join when they graduate."