

2016-17 Community Engagement Fellows Project Report

By Katherine Freimund

Project Overview:

Work with the WWU Leadership Institute to develop a program where upper class students serve on nonprofit boards of directors during their senior year as a bridge towards becoming community members upon graduation.

This project aims to create a meaningful opportunity for students to engage with local nonprofits during their senior year as a bridge towards becoming members of the community beyond WWU. This will be an opportunity for students to work with local leaders as peers, with a window on a role that provides the governance and fiduciary oversight of an organization with a worthy cause. Students will be exposed to the management of a nonprofit, and participate in meetings, committees, and other activities as an ad hoc (non-voting) member of the board.

Project Details: Karen Stout of the WWU Morse Leadership Institute has had valuable input, navigating the WWU bureaucracy to create a three quarter, one credit experience. Interested students will be advised to take a nonprofit management course through the Leadership Institute (taught by Sydney Jay) before starting their service on a board. The student would be asked to sign a form of commitment showing that they understand they will serve for the term September through June, and act as a professional colleague to the board and staff of the organization. Karen said that she already has about 25 students that have expressed interest in the program.

Participating nonprofits would have 501©3 status, Directors & Officers insurance, a paid executive director, and a statement that outlines a board member's role and responsibilities. Students would apply to work with the nonprofit, and the nonprofit would invite them to serve, typically from September through June. A nonprofit would not have to change their by-laws to participate because the student would be a non-voting, ad hoc member. The student would be treated as a board member, and be expected to act as and participate in full alongside the other board members. The nonprofit would be encouraged to assign another board member to be a mentor/friend for the student. I (Katherine) will be the person initially creating the list of nonprofits that are eligible and interested in working on this program; in the future this would likely be updated by someone at the Leadership Institute.

Trula Nicholas, Department of Health & Community Studies faculty, has also advised on the project. Trula serves on the board for the Washington State Nonprofit Association (WSNA), and many of her students do projects with local nonprofits. She has offered to help connect with local nonprofits to create the inventory of organizations that will participate. She has many ideas of activities and experiences that the group of students could take advantage of, but not be required to do. These include helping out at the WSNA annual conference in Bellevue, and participating in a monthly roundtable to share their experiences with their fellow participants.

Project Reflection: It has been wonderful to connect with Karen Stout of the Leadership Institute. She has really done much of the work that will make this a viable offering for students, something I could never have done on my own. I did not know that the Leadership Institute is the only department at WWU that works with all of the other

departments; the perfect home for a program that serves all disciplines. WWU has challenges for programs that extend beyond a quarter, and also for programs that involve so few hours that they could not be worth more than one credit. Sydney Jay and Trula Nicholas have helped us map out the course of the project with insights and ideas that have allowed the project to go from an idea to a wonderful experience for WWU seniors.

I feel that this is a good project because, as a nonprofit executive, I do not appreciate WWU people who think that I need undergraduate students to work for me. Unless a student is a highly motivated, mature individual, they typically do not have the skills, expertise or experience to really offer anything, and I do not have time to babysit people. This project allows for a meaningful experience for the student with very little burden to the nonprofit.

I had to work hard to find ways to articulate the value of this project to the nonprofits involved. I thought it was interesting that the feedback from my peer CE Fellows who work at WWU felt that the students would be an incredible asset to the nonprofit because they bring fresh and creative ideas, something I feel is not specific to one's age. The idea that young people may have a different point of view is valid but minimally valuable- everyone has different points of view. The concept that the student would be a liaison to the resources of WWU promoted discussion of the student understanding the difference between speaking for themselves vs speaking as a WWU student, and how we might encourage the student to become familiar with the resources and activities on campus as part of their experience.

I do feel that this will be a wonderful leadership opportunity for the students. Few students have attended a meeting with an agenda that follows Roberts Rules of Order, or understand that there are volunteer opportunities that are not field work. Exposure to the mission of a nonprofit, review of by-laws and related policies and procedures, and the understanding of how committees work will likely be new material. Hopefully at the end of the year the student will walk away from the experience with 12 or so new friends that serve on the board, professional colleagues who could potentially serve as contacts and references for future endeavors in Whatcom County.