3-4-2003

UNH Students Learn to Write Grants that Bring Much Needed Money to Health and Human Services Agencies

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DURHAM, N.H. -- University of New Hampshire Professor Jerry Marx's students are learning about entrepreneurship. But instead of seeking angel investors for start-up companies, they're pitching foundations and government agencies with hopes of securing funding for health and human services nonprofits.

The graduate level social work course, Program and Resource Development in Health and Human Services, draws students of many levels, from those completing degrees to others working in the field. What connects them is a desire to learn how to research and write grants to build programming.

"Grant writing is the life blood for non-profit organizations," says Claudia Moore, who works with Child & Family Services (CFS) in Manchester. "In today's economic environment it is crucial for students entering the field to know how to raise money. As a community and administrative practice student in the UNH social work program, the course was as important to me as Biology 101 is for a pre-med student."

Moore is one of Marx's many success stories. The grant she wrote for the course was submitted to the New Hampshire Charitable Trust for the Invest in Kids project. It brought in $30,000 for the project, a grassroots advocacy initiative to raise public awareness about the state's childcare crisis and involve parents and members of the business community to find solutions to the problem. The program received a national award from the Child Welfare League of
America.

Thomas O'Connor wrote a federal grant to fund the development of post-adoption services for families who adopt children out of the child welfare system. Leah Gordon wrote a grant for the Community Council of Senior Citizens in Portsmouth to start a new program for elder volunteer advocates.

It's a course requirement that students write a "real" grant application for an agency in the community, Marx says. "The course is unique in that it teaches students these important skills, and, as a result, positively impacts the community by raising money for program development."

Students learn to assess the organizational needs of their community and develop programs to meet the long-term objectives of the agency they have chosen to represent. They learn about a variety of donations -- individual, corporate and planned giving -- and research what organizations are available for funding opportunities.

"The class helped me take a concept for which funding was needed and give that concept 'hands and feet,'" Moore says. "It's one thing to need money for a project. It is quite another to write a request that invites support for the project."

Deciding what project is best funded by what organization is one of the most critical questions, Marx says. It's not enough to know how to write the grant. It's equally important to know where to look for money. "While some might be suited for large national organizations, others are better matched with local, state or federal funding sources."

The course was invaluable for Nicole LaPointe, a 2001 MSW graduate, who is now a community organizer for The Caring Community Network of the Twin Rivers. The network is a coalition of health and human service agencies, schools and groups that work to improve community and public health in 12 New Hampshire towns in northern Merrimack County, southern Grafton County and Belknap County. LaPointe has successfully secured two $600,000 federal grants for programming focused on substance abuse prevention and rural health.
"I could not have come into the workforce and done this so successfully without the foundation Jerry provided," LaPointe says. "In addition to being a great hands-on experience in grant writing, the curriculum included vital information about the private nonprofit environment. We learned about the changing funding landscape, where money comes from, and what funders are looking for. For example, I've learned that right now successful proposals require collaborations among agencies."

Marx is a recognized expert on philanthropy and has published several articles in national journals on American charitable giving and volunteerism. His expertise comes from first-hand experience. He was executive director of a Maine non-profit organization that provided educational opportunities for children in state care and for those of young mothers trying to finish their education. He wrote more than 40 successful grants for the agency.

"The excellence of his abilities as a professor are reflected in the successes his students are having in the field," says Moore. "Many of us are bringing in much needed dollars for our projects and agencies. Jerry's class helped us make a difference."

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