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The best \$1,000 I spend: WKU Sisterhood awards nearly \$100,000 in grants

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WKU Sisterhood presents nearly \$100,000 in grants to five University initiatives in November in honor of surpassing its 100-member goal.

Courtesy of WKU Sisterhood

When Grace Stephens arrived at Western Kentucky University, she knew she wanted to be a journalist; she just didn't know which type. She tried print, photojournalism and broadcast, but none quite fit. Then she found video.

Now a senior, Stephens has implemented the College Heights Herald's first official video team so other students can find their niche like she did. However, it's been an "endeavor" to keep it going due to a lack of equipment, she said. Between WKU's student publications – the College Heights Herald, the Talisman and Cherry Creative – there are only four camera bodies, the newest of which is six years old.

Too often, Stephens' staff has had to shoot video on their phones because there was no equipment available to use. She hopes the "musical chairs of equipment" will be a thing of the past after receiving an \$32,900 Impact Grant from the WKU Sisterhood to buy several mirrorless cameras, new camera lenses and other updated industry standard video equipment.

WKU student publications is one of five recipients of the 2022 WKU Sisterhood grant, and one of two Impact Grant winners. WKU Sisterhood is an organization of women, including WKU alumnae, faculty, staff and friends, that pools its money together each year to give back to university initiatives of its choice.

Each member contributes \$1,000 for the ability to vote on which grant applications the organization will fulfill at its annual luncheon. There, grant finalists give presentations on the impact the money would have on their cause.

2022 is a special year, said WKU Sisterhood co-founding member Julie Harris Hinson, since it's the first year the organization has surpassed the 100-member milestone.

The philanthropy group was established in 2010 with an initial grant of \$36,000. This year, the five grants total \$96,057.38.

The grant will help WKU Student Publications digitalize along with the rest of the industry so students can gain the experience needed to land a job upon graduation, said Chuck Clark, director of student publications. They wouldn't have been able to privately support the cost of the upgraded equipment without it, he added.

"It's going to revolutionize how our students tell stories," Clark said, "They've reached the point where they're hampered by a lack of equipment. This will take away that barrier."

The second Impact Grant was awarded to the WKU Summer Math Academy to support its second year. The WKU Summer Math Academy, a summer transition program for first-time, full-time students, received \$45,062.38 to pay for participating students' meals and housing so that the entire cost of the program will be \$750 per student for tuition, housing, meals, books and social programming.

"This grant really makes this option affordable to all incoming students, and not just an option for only the students who have financial resources," said Heather Stuart, WKU assistant director for retention programs.

The WKU Summer Academy's pilot year saw a lot of positive feedback from students, faculty and staff, Stuart said. In the five weeks before fall semester began, the 42 participating students got to move to campus early, take two general education college courses, meet with their academic advisor and interact with their peers to get a little ahead of the game.

The grant will give the program a second year of funding, and if the positive feedback continues, Stuart hopes WKU will determine it is a sustainable program moving forward.

"We knew ourselves that it was a program that had the ability to really positively impact students, but having this grant also serves as additional validation," she said. "It helps reinforce that we're doing good work."

WKU Sisterhood chose three additional university initiatives for its "Small but Mighty" grants.

Minding my Math Business, a sixth- through 12th-grade rigorous math program infused with mindfulness and meditation practices specifically targeted toward African American and Hispanic/Latinx students, received \$10,000.

The WKU Department of Biology got \$6,000 for advanced technology to conduct a research project on DNA sequencing of virus genomes.

Herstory@WKU, a female empowerment program, won \$2,095 to fund its second event in February 2023. The first event was in February 2020, but the program needed a community sponsor to help underwrite it to make it annual, said Dr. Christy Spurlock, Kentucky Museum education curator.

Herstory@WKU invites girls from first to eighth grade to participate in an afternoon of programming involving hands-on activities, visits from professional local women to expose girls to the wide range of career possibilities, a costume contest as each girl's favorite woman, real or fictional. In its first year, 18 WKU departments participated; next year, Spurlock is aiming for over 35.

The goal is to celebrate women of the past, present and future to empower girls to follow their passions and see themselves in all kinds of professions, even the typically male-dominated ones, Spurlock said.

"We'll be able to scale everything up," she said. "It was very positive the last time we did it. I think anywhere in America is hungry for this type of event because we live in a patriarchy, and this shifts the focus on girls."

To date, WKU Sisterhood has awarded 39 grants totaling \$661,619. Hinson said that she always comes back home with a grin on her face after the annual luncheon where grants are awarded.

"It's the best 1,000 I spend," she said. "The impact can really make or break a program starting at WKU."

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