



MINI GRANTS, BIG POTENTIAL FOR STUDENTS, STATE

Earlham Entices Graduates to Stick Around

By Charlee Beasor

What would you do with \$3,000? And no, this isn't a purely hypothetical fantasy. For students at Earlham College, a \$3,000 grant to study almost anything in Indiana is a reality.

Through the Lilly Indiana Fellowship for Exploration (LIFE) grant, students can essentially name their own adventure – if it relates to being able to potentially live or work in Indiana.

"It's challenging for us to get students to see Indiana as a place they want to live after they graduate. The LIFE grant gives students an opportunity to explore Indiana on their own terms," offers Caitlin Fleenor, Indiana Pathways Coordinator at Earlham.

Earlham is a private, liberal arts college in Richmond with about 1,100 students.

Student demographics pose a specific challenge in keeping graduates engaged in their state of study. While only 20% of the student body comes from Indiana, another 20% are international students (from up to 70 different countries), and the remaining 60% come from around the nation (about 45 states at the last tally), according to Brian Zimmerman, director of media relations at Earlham.

The most recent *U.S. News and World Report* guide ranked Earlham College sixth among all liberal arts colleges nationally for the percentage of international students.

The school's Office of Institutional Research surveyed alumni from 2002 to 2012, and discovered 81% left the state after graduating (the number drops to 50% when only Indiana residents were considered). Zimmerman also highlights that respondents pointed to lack of employment opportunity as the No. 1 reason both groups left the state; and alumni identified more internships, mentoring, early career advising and more as opportunities that would have better prepared them for careers.

Fleenor works out of the school's Center for Integrated Learning, which is dedicated to students' experiential experiences. She notes that the department is tackling the challenge of keeping students in Indiana post-graduation through a cornerstone internship program, as well as a place-based initiative designed to show students that the state is a desirable place to stay after graduation.

The LIFE grant falls under the place-based program and is funded through the Indiana Pathways grant, which the college received in 2013 from the Lilly Endowment.

"The purpose is to keep our graduates in Indiana once they graduate from college, to stop that brain drain that's happening," she adds.

Fleenor acknowledges the perception of some that Indiana is about "cornfields and people that aren't very open or accepting."

“We try our absolute best to show them that’s not the case,” she asserts.

Discover the possibilities

The LIFE grant offers students the opportunity to explore Indiana through any number of ways; and the grant’s web page offers examples, including visiting historical sites or state parks, attending festivals, touring graduate school campuses, learning firsthand about sustainable farms and more.

Students can apply for the mini-grants and take on projects that will broaden their professional network or gain skills specific to their industry. Faculty can also apply for grants (typically between \$50 and \$1,000) and use the money to learn about opportunities to help their students, or by incorporating trips into the students’ coursework throughout the school year.

The faculty grants were popular right away, Fleenor recalls, but it took some marketing to build excitement for the student portion. Once it caught on, however, she says that participation expectations were exceeded: 20 applications were turned in, with six awards given (originally only five were planned but the entries were so exceptional, Fleenor notes).

The students had from Thanksgiving to around spring break to work on their projects. Participants had to budget their grant money, keep detailed records and turn in a report at the end.

“The program, while they oftentimes got to see the fun they were having, it built a lot of skills that I think will help them in their future endeavors. They can all put on their resumés they have written a grant proposal and been awarded it,” Fleenor declares.

Diverse experiences

The six winning projects showcased a wide array of topics, including facing fears through extreme sports, studying thriving Catholic communities around the state and visiting farm-to-table restaurants. One group investigated the coffee roasting culture in Indiana, with plans to build a coffee roasting business. Another team studied upcycling – the process of taking trash and making it into art or other reusable items.

And a group researched start-up businesses and what it takes in various areas of the state to launch a company. That group included two members of the team currently competing as finalists for the prestigious Hult Prize, which awards \$1 million in start-up funding to one of six groups globally with world-changing ideas. Earlham’s team, Magic Bus, advanced from a regional competition in Boston; the idea is a text-based ticketing service that makes bus transportation more reliable by reducing waiting times and increasing productivity. The winning team will be named in September.

Tremayne Abazs was part of the group that studied upcycling. He and project partner Nicol Chinchilla Cordero (Abazs is from Minnesota, Chinchilla from Costa Rica), traveled around the state learning from artists about the environmental impacts of mitigating trash through upcycling. They took classes on woodworking, and saw how artists were weaving carpets and large shawls out of leftover material from a sock factory.

“If it got to a larger scale, it could have an awesome impact on trash dispersal in the country,” Abazs offers. “I don’t know if it’s capable at that scale, but it’s an inspirational way that people can, on an individual level, make less trash.”

Different opinions

Abazs, who sought out Earlham specifically because it was a school with a larger international population, recently graduated with a degree in psychology. He doesn’t plan to stay in the Midwest (he’s heading to Rwanda next to work on a book project about genocide memorials there), but his viewpoint on Indiana changed after the project.

“It was really enjoyable. We traveled to a lot of cool areas. The most surprising thing, I guess, is there are some really hip places in Indiana. Even in Indianapolis, which is just about an hour away from Earlham. I liked Indianapolis fine, but never had the opportunity or interest in exploring it much,” Abazs admits. “But we went there and went to Indy Upcycle ... and stayed at an international hostel. It was an environment I didn’t expect to see.”

Participants were surveyed before and after the program on a number of opinions, including what they thought of Indiana.

Some of the qualifications on the surveys that saw the most significant increases included:

- “Indiana is the best place for what I hoped to do for a profession”
- “I am knowledgeable about Indiana”
- “I would consider seeking employment in Indiana”
- “Indiana is a great place to be as a professional”

“The responses we got were very positive, on their thoughts on Indiana, and the opportunities and perceived opportunities on Indiana,” Fleenor concludes. “Out of 17 measures (on the surveys) there was only one measure that did not increase from the pre- to post-surveys and it was very small. It absolutely had the desired effect we wanted it to.”



Tremayne Abazs studied the process of “upcycling,” or taking trash and turning it into something reusable – or art. He and his grant partner took woodworking classes, stayed in an international hostel in Indianapolis and learned from Hoosier upcycling artists.

RESOURCES: Caitlin Fleenor and Brian Zimmerman, Earlham College, at www.earlham.edu