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EWU project wins grant

Work focuses on social data

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Foundation Northwest has awarded Eastern Washington University a \$108,000 grant to launch a large database that groups here will use to gauge community goals such as reducing poverty, raising incomes and protecting the environment.

Foundation Northwest, a nonprofit that manages charitable foundations and provides support for regional organizations and projects, obtained the money from another nonprofit foundation based in Minnesota.

Foundation Northwest was free to choose where the grant money would go. It selected EWU's Community Indicators project because it will have an ongoing role in helping groups here tackle serious issues, said Foundation Northwest President and CEO Mark Hurtubise.

The Community Indicators project, started two years ago, is similar to efforts in hundreds of cities nationwide. Its goal is to gather data that track social, economic and demographic trends and make it quickly available through an interactive Web site.

That site is expected to launch in August.

Spokane's database will have more than 150 different indicators, grouped into eight categories, said Patrick Jones. Jones is executive director of EWU's Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis.

Those indicator categories, for now, are economics, arts and culture, education, environment, housing and transportation, health, public safety and civic engagement.

"One thing we'll do is have benchmarks, so people can track what progress Spokane has made" over a period going back five or 10 years, said Jones. The project will also allow groups, government bodies, nonprofits, businesses or researchers to measure Spokane's benchmarks against state averages, he added.

The value of the database will be quick access to a vast collection of important information, said Hurtubise.

"Whether it's the issue of the homeless, crime, education or the arts, this has the value of helping us see where are the gaps and what areas we should focus our resources," he said.

The grant will help EWU complete the launch of the Web site and continue gathering data, said Jones. It will help add one more full-time worker plus an intern, he said.

"This is huge. This grant gives us the opportunity to do few things we couldn't have done otherwise," said Jones.

Among the unusual data being gathered is a set of reports that can track the release of greenhouse gases in this area, said Jones.

"At first we didn't think that was possible, but now we think we can, thanks to some major assistance from Washington State University," Jones said.

Two other goals were included in the grant proposal, said Hurtubise. The money will pay for a community conference next spring focused on the indicators project, and it will provide assistance to Kootenai County to initiate a similar database.

The grant comes from the Northwest Area Foundation in Minneapolis. That nonprofit organization supports efforts to fight poverty in eight central and Northwest states. It has also launched a community indicators Web site.

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