Clients Become The Teacher

Students don’t have to leave the classroom to step into the professional world. Through experiential learning in their capstone course, senior Public Relations majors at Webster University’s School of Communications gain real world experience by completing a project for local businesses or charitable organizations. Students spend a portion of the term reviewing theory and techniques learned in their PR course work, then apply them to solving a client’s communications challenges. During the past 12 years, 40 clients have been served by the students. By letting the clients be their teachers, students gain invaluable insight and experience into the public relations profession through application of David Kolb’s experiential learning theory where “knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.”

Setting Up The Class and Project

Capstone Experience – Final class in PR Program reviews theory and practice.
Client Selection – Local businesses and organizations who meet requirements and have time to work with students.
Team Assignments – Students assigned to small teams with a student supervising as account executive.
Client Meetings – Teams spend seven weeks working with client to formulate a communications plan.
Presentations – Formal presentations are made the last week of class and finished reports are presented to clients.
Evaluation/Grading – During the project, the class is structured as a small PR Agency. Team members are reviewed by their student supervisors and appraisals are presented to the instructor who serves as agency manager.

 Clients Benefit From Student Knowledge

➤ “I felt that some of the results of the project rivaled our paid consultant’s findings. I would not hesitate to give the team a high score.”  -- Bob Connors, president, Connexio Media
➤ “We truly appreciate how many of the components and strategies VOYCE will be able to begin executing with relative ease and timeliness. This is so crucial in the world of nonprofits where time and resources are never enough.”  -- Julie Darnold, development and public relations coordinator, Long-Term Care Ombudsman
➤ “I felt I saw them grow during the experience. They had to learn about our organization and programs, understand our mission as well as our marketing challenges, and then decide what products and processes needed their greatest attention. The end result was amazing.”  -- Christine Vancil, director of marketing & development, Care & Counseling

Students Let The Unknown Teach Them

➤ “I think getting to work with real clients helps because it shows the expectations of the real world and what I will be doing in the future.”
➤ “Best course offered that gives a realistic view point of professional life.”
➤ “I feel I am prepared for what I will face on the job in the future.”

Stepping Into The Professional World Through Experiential Learning

Life Long Experience – The Capstone Public Relations project introduces students to the concept of life long learning. Once classroom training is completed, students will be responsible for their own knowledge acquisition through “here-and-now” experience to test ideas and feedback to determine their validity. (Kolb 1984: 21-22)
Applying Theory and Practice – Success in the professional world requires more than a thorough knowledge of theory. Strategic planning and intuitive application of the concepts, gained through experience, is necessary.
Professional Advances – The Public Relations and Communications professions are evolving as quickly as technology advances. Common practices now, such as the use of social media for message delivery, were unknown just a few years ago. Students quickly realize they must stay current in their fields to stay ahead of technology advances. Common practices now, such as the use of social media for message delivery, were

Bring Experiential Learning to Your Class

An experiential learning class project for your program could serve as a capstone experience and prepare your students for work in a professional setting. For more information on the PR project described here contact:
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