SCALING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROJECTS: MEETING SOURCING AND OUTCOME CHALLENGES — THE BUSINESS COMMUNICATION/FOUNDATION PROJECT

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Full Paper
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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning activities are an important part of the curriculum in many business classes. Just as employers have increasingly demanded that students graduate with "job-ready" skill sets, instructors have developed projects with and for actual clients, focused on "authentic" workplace problems. Unfortunately, most of these projects are single-use and tailored to single classes. Scaling projects for large numbers of students while retaining high-quality standards is rare; even more rare is a project that aligns the student experience with specific needs of an actual client. This paper describes an experience-based learning project by 450 students in a required core business class in the College of Business Administration at the University of Pittsburgh for a start-up operation. The course is "Fundamentals of Business Communication;" the assignment sequence is "The Business Communication/Foundation Project." This student/client interaction occurred during the fall semester, 2022 (and is continuing during the spring, 2023, term). Preliminary anecdotal and survey data regarding student and client satisfaction are provided, as well as recommendations for replicating a similar large-scale project going forward.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, experiential learning has become a regular feature of management-education curricula in undergraduate business schools. Responding to employers' demand that students graduate with skills applicable to career success (Strohl, 2006), instructors, working with companies to address "real-world" problems faced by those firms, have developed authentic, team-based learning opportunities (Revans, 1982). Hard and soft skills requested by many employers include analytical, function-specific technical knowledge and analog and digital research experience, to be sure, but also effective written, oral, and interpersonal communication skills, as well as empathy. Together, these abilities allow employees to better understand the context and culture within which a client's business must operate and thrive. Further, students who successfully complete experiential-learning projects tend to exhibit these "employability skills" (Lee, Foster & Snaith, 2016). Accordingly, experience-based learning has become increasingly popular in classrooms.

The growth of management-education projects, however, has presented sourcing challenges to instructors (McKeen, Laufer, & Jester, 2018). Addressing those issues has led to the development of many single-use projects tailored to the objectives of individual classes. Scaling projects for use by large numbers of students, while still retaining high quality standards and customizing the project experience for individual needs, has been developed far less frequently.

This paper describes an experience-based learning project for 450 students in a required core business class ("Fundamentals of Business Communication") in the College of Business Administration at the University of Pittsburgh during the 2022-23 academic year: The Business Communication/Foundation Project. The project objectives, learning outcomes and means of assessment are outlined herein, as are the processes by which the college's students became intellectually and emotionally engaged in important and timely issues. The paper charts how the executive director of a fledging start-up described actual opportunities and challenges to students, information that, rearticulated by instructors and developed through student assignments, transformed classrooms into working learning environments — thinktanks — for an actual client. Students' final recommendations — their often well-researched and empathic answers to the director's questions and the instructors' assignments — represent vital experiential learning for the students. In fact, some of these recommendations are now under review for implementation by the client.

Finally, this paper analyzes student, client and instructor evaluation for recommendations on sourcing and scaling future projects, with The Business Communication/Foundation Project as a template.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A 2013 Gallup Poll survey indicated that only 11 percent of business leaders believed that college graduates had skills that would make them "job ready" (Reed & Levy, 2020). A similar "skills gap" was noted in a 2018 study by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, in which employers described students as overconfident about their skills and abilities (Reed & Levy, 2020). Following almost three years of online or hybrid learning for many of today's college students due to Covid restrictions, it is likely that this skills gap remains, especially in the core/power skills areas of emotional intelligence, creativity and communication that employers find so necessary for entry level employees' early growth and development (Loretto, 2019). Indeed, the gap has likely widened.

Many of these skills, noted by employers as important, are not developed by traditional classroom "seat time," but through "hands-and-minds-on" practice, most notably through experiential learning. Reed (2010) notes the importance of providing students the opportunity to "apply what they are learning to the real world while they are still in school." Hoover (1974) and Hoover and Whitehead (1975) point out that experiential learning is essential in cognitive, affective and behavioral engagement. This high-level involvement of students leads to better student-learning outcomes than the use of more traditional learning methods (Morgan, et. al., 2005). Kerner (2018) suggests that the outcomes of experiential learning lead to the types of skills that employers seek in order to bridge the skills gap (the aforementioned research, written, oral and emphatic skills). As such, experiential learning through real-world client projects is now a regular part of the curriculum in many business school classes. Cannon, Cannon, Geddes and Smith (2020) suggest that experiential learning is "inherently individualized in nature." How best, then, to scale projects so that large numbers of students can reap the benefits of experiential learning noted by Kerner (2018), including the ability to immediately apply knowledge, access real-time coaching and feedback, promote teamwork and communication skills and develop reflective practice habits?

The Business Communication/Foundation Project offers preliminary answers to this question.

BACKGROUND OF THE FOCUS PROJECT

On November 11, 2012, a young Black man was shot five times by a (city) police officer after being pulled over and mistaken for someone else. He was left paralyzed. His name is Leon Ford. Despite the incident, Mr. Ford has grown into a prominent activist and a well-respected voice for police reform and reconciliation. In the decade that followed, Mr. Ford and then-Pittsburgh Chief of Police, Scott Schubert, built an unlikely friendship that, in June of 2022, resulted in the establishment of the HEAR Foundation, a nonprofit whose mission is to "convene, implement and fund programs that bring Pittsburgh's police and residents together to build relationships that strengthen our community."

Three months after the launch of the HEAR Foundation, Pitt's College of Business Administration (CBA) partnered with this social-justice start-up. The client foundation's executive director asked for input and recommendations from students on programming for the city's neighborhoods, programming that would bring together police officers and community members. The college and university administrators and faculty were determined to challenge students, to put them into positions to understand the diversity of their neighborhoods, as well as to begin to appreciate the acute social issues facing each of those neighborhoods. Further, the college is determined to develop leaders who will effect change in their local communities.

SCALING THE PROJECT STEPS

Students in fifteen sections of the college's "Fundamentals of Business Communication" course (nine instructors covering 450 students) were introduced to the project in August, 2022. Business-communications instructors created an RFP, approved by the foundation's executive director, for distribution to each student in all sections of the course. (The RFP is found in Appendix 1 of this paper.) The RFP details the nature of the new foundation and highlights initial core issues that the foundation will focus upon across the neighborhoods within the city. Those core issues were identified as:

- gun violence reduction
- workforce engagement
- housing
- education
- drug addiction

- return from incarceration
- trauma.

Students were placed into "consulting" groups — teams of four to five members — and were assigned a core issue from the foundation's RFP. Consulting teams completed research throughout the month of September, 2022 on those topics. All students had access to university library databases and were offered opportunities for consultation with the college's librarian when gathering information on relevant programming and initiatives regarding their topic in other organizations and cities regionally or nationwide. Instructors engaged students in classroom discussions on police reform and neighborhood crime related to the assigned topics. Group meetings were held on a regular schedule during class and questions arising from the meetings were aggregated for the foundation's executive director to address.

In parallel, student groups were assigned to research and describe one of the 90 neighborhoods in Pittsburgh. Each neighborhood was to be examined with regard to its background and historic development, its geography, demographics and psychographics. In addition, the research on the core issue tied to the foundation ("gun violence reduction," "workforce engagement," etc.) assigned to each group was to be examined.

As this project was embedded in business communication courses, three individually written communication assignments were tied to the research done on the neighborhoods and core issues.

As part of an investigation of informative business writing, the first assignment tied to the neighborhood/core issue was to individually develop a "backgrounder" on that neighborhood that might be used by anyone interested in coming to know more about the area. For instance, many realtors develop background material on local towns in which they sell homes so that prospective buyers get a "feel" for each of neighborhoods. (See Appendix 2.)

The second individual assignment was in the persuasive genre. The foundation, it was explained, is contemplating the development of community centers where citizens and officers, could meet to discuss issues and socialize. Students composed a blogpost to introduce the center to their chosen neighborhood and persuade residents to come to the center's grand opening, a "call to action." (See Appendix 3.)

The third writing assignment took the form of a bad-news letter sent by the foundation informing residents of a meeting to discuss neighborhood responses to a city announcement that four blocks of older buildings in that neighborhood had been purchased by a developer and would be torn down to make way for new apartments and retail stores. In the process a number of lower income and older residents would be displaced. (See Appendix 4.)

Student/client interaction in experiential learning projects is key. On a Friday in October, 2022, the foundation's executive director met with all students from all sections of the class. The executive director responded to questions from the students. The meeting was recorded for future student viewings. Questions not addressed during the 90-minute meeting were subsequently responded to in writing; all questions and answers were posted on each classes' page of the Canvas Learning Management System. During the month of November, 2022, student groups met to develop recommendations for programming in the topical areas assigned for each neighborhood or for the city as a whole.

Student groups delivered final written reports featuring programming recommendations to foundation representatives in December, 2022. In addition, each student group offered the foundation a 20- minute presentation of those programming recommendations that was evaluated by a panel of two-to-three individuals drawn from the foundation, college partners, college administrators and company recruiters. (See Appendix 5 for the Final Project Details.)

Discussion of Project Outcomes

When the Business Communication/Foundation Project was launched in August, the initial objectives were to:

- **Understand** significant forms of current business communication such as persuasive and informative documents and apply the correct form to the appropriate situation
- **Use** the conventions of current business communications, including, for example, the forms of written and oral communications genres, business etiquette among and between colleagues and clients
- **Follow** directions accurately
- **Provide and receive** constructive critique of written and presentation work, as well as interpersonal communications

- **Acquaint** students with the nature of the 90 neighborhoods in the City (name withheld for blind review purposes)
- **Acquaint** students with the DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion), social and social justice issues in the city neighborhoods
- **Devise** a suggested solution to a DEI, social or social justice issue in one of the city neighborhoods that could be supported by the Foundation.

How well the project as implemented met these objectives will not be determined until results of student surveys taken over a full academic year are available by May, 2023. Those surveys have been and will be administered to all students taking the course through announcements on the Canvas Learning Management System. (The survey from the initial fall term [2022] is found in Appendix 6 of this paper.)

Anecdotal information provided by students, however, serves as a preliminary indicator of those results. Following the oral presentation of each group, final reports were submitted. Students were then asked to evaluate themselves as well as each team member on all group projects throughout the semester with regard to individual involvement and application. In addition, class debriefs were held in each of the 15 sections of the course discussing the various assignments throughout the semester with special attention paid to the semester-long Business Communication/Foundation Project.

Some anecdotal comments made by the students include following the course-wide meeting with the foundation's executive director in October, 2022, include:

- "Mr. Nigam (HEAR Foundation Executive Director, Kamal Nigam) made me feel like as a young person I have the power to change things."
- "Even though I just go to school here, I understand that I should know more about the place I live in for eight months each year."
- "Mr. Nigam was really a motivating speaker. I left there feeling like even though I'm just a sophomore, I can make suggestions that will make a difference. Just because I'm young, I still have good ideas that can change things for the better."

Students then also commented on the use of material across a number of connected assignments:

- "I like that the research we gathered was used for more than one assignment. Usually, if you do research, it's a 'one-and-done' thing. And that usually means you spent a few days grabbing information that you use for five minutes and then never look at again."
- "Doing research like this was a well-balanced use of my time. What I gathered in data was used on three or four assignments and as I went along I saw how the pieces fit together."

Finally, students commented on the overall impact of the project on the students themselves:

- "I thought I'd hate this class because all we'd do is write and deliver speeches. We did that but making us look at a specific neighborhood and learning about it and then getting the chance to come up with some things to make the place better, makes it easier to write. Mr. Nigam was also 'cool'; he really does think that we (students) can make a difference."
- "Our recommendations in this project were good. I know they can make a difference and that means I might have made a little bit of a difference, too, because I came up with those ideas."

Business Communication students were asked to voluntarily complete an anonymous survey following the project presentations and report submissions. Results from the survey (Appendix 6) are summarized in Appendix 7. It must be noted that response rates for the survey were low 70/450 (15%). The timing of the survey distribution the week after classes ended likely contributed to the lack of participation. Such timing was intentional as instructors wished to emphasize the fact that responses were confidential, would be reported in the aggregate and did not impact grades. Lack of future contact between the instructor and the students following survey administration and student confusion between the university teaching evaluation and class project survey are contributing factors to the limited responses. The timing of this survey will be addressed during the spring semester.

In spite of the low response rate, the survey, scored on a "1" (Strongly disagree) to "5" (Strongly agree) scale, indicated that 81% of the responding students found the project helped them gain an understanding of the nature of the neighborhoods of Pittsburgh and 71% felt they gained an understanding of the police-community issues pertinent to those neighborhoods. In

addition, 80% of respondents felt the project helped them to gain competence in the communication skills that are the focus of the course. This data, though incomplete, suggests the project helps develop skills sought by today's employers.

TABLE 1
Summary Survey Results

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Percentage Answering "Agree or Strongly Agree"
The HEAR Foundation project helped me to gain an understanding of the different types of neighborhoods in Pittsburgh.	70	3.99	.93	81.43
The HEAR Foundation project helped me to gain a better understanding of the key neighborhood resident-police issues in Pittsburgh.	70	3.74	.95	71.43
The HEAR Foundation project gave me an opportunity to contribute to the community outside Pitt.	70	3.27	1.11	44.29
The HEAR Foundation project helped improve my informative and persuasive writing skills	70	4.00	.83	80
The HEAR Foundation project helped me improve my group speaking skills	70	4.16	.68	81.43

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTRUCTORS

Experience-based learning is a foundational pillar in the college and, thus, group projects are a regular part of most courses. The unique challenge for the business communication class was to scale a complex, authentic project that could be individualized for students (McKeen, Laufer & Jester, 2018) while still addressing course specific objectives within a context that offers exposure to diversity, inclusion and social issues in a community-based setting.

Design of the project was led by the Eight Principles for Good Practice for All Experiential Learning Activities (NSEE, 1998). These principles are:

- Intention
- Preparedness and Planning
- Authenticity
- Reflection
- Orientation and Training
- Monitoring and Continuous Improvement
- Assessment and Evaluation
- Acknowledgement

A review of the principles as the project concludes at mid-point offers opportunity for recommendations for preparing the next large-scale project in this college course.

Intention

University-wide initiatives are offered each year, and it is incumbent upon individual college faculty to incorporate those initiatives in whatever way possible into their courses and research. Such initiatives are reflections of issues that are pertinent and provide vehicles for the instructor, the college and the larger university to make an impact on a variety of levels. Pertinent issues at this university this academic year are DEI, social justice and community engagement.

The Business Communication/Foundation Project attempts to address all three areas to provide students with a perspective on how multiple issues intersect, and though they may seem complex, can be "attacked" one step at a time through individual insight and pointed action. As such, the success of a project as large as this and with such complexity can only be achieved if the teaching team enthusiastically supports the activity and shares that enthusiasm with the class. It is recommended that such enthusiasm be built at the outset to the degree that it is possible, however tempered by the realization that there will be challenges to effective implementation. A supportive, united teaching team can overcome all obstacles.

Preparedness and Planning

Palia (2021) notes that a client-based consulting experience actively engages students in the learning experience. It is imperative that students feel the results of their efforts will be seen, appreciated and maybe even implemented by that client. Accompanying that recognition of involvement needs to be a detailed understanding to the client's organization and the issues the client wishes to investigate.

The foundation's Request for Proposal (RFP in Appendix 1) was created by members of the business communication teaching team with final approval from the executive director of the foundation. The scope of the RFP was designed to allow creativity and enhance engagement. The issues for investigation noted in the RFP are reflective of topics covered in other required and elective classes in the college curriculum so students were, at a minimum, aware of the issues though perhaps not the specifics as the issue applied to their given neighborhood for study. It is recommended that the RFP documents the involvement of leadership in the preparation of said proposal and that students are reminded regularly of the interest of leadership in student ideas and proposals.

It is also recommended that a meeting with a representative of the client organization be scheduled so that all students can "put a face" to the organization. Posted pictures on school learning-management systems are important as are videos of the organization's leadership, but providing an actual opportunity to attend a meeting with that representative is invaluable in creating and sustaining engagement. In addition, it is advised that the client representative offer on-going support to students throughout the project by, at a minimum, offering to field questions via email.

Authenticity

Students live, work, and play in the neighborhoods surrounding the university, yet many of them take a very detached view of their "second home," centering their energies on the university proper location. Having the students research the neighborhood in which they live, one that they frequent for play or one that they were simply assigned, gave them perspective on the diversity and social issues that exist even in a concentrated area. The authenticity of the subject matter made the delivery of lessons on how to perform secondary research much more palatable to students. Delivery of that research in an academically non-traditional form of communication (a blog) also increased the interest in and quality of the research completed. Using a subject-matter expert on research such as a school librarian in person or via video to highlight relevant databases and offer tips about using them is a technique that has proven to be successful.

Reflection

Designed activities that scaffolded the core project were completed throughout the semester. As this is a business communication course, the primary focus must be developing an understanding of the nature and application of specific communication genres in the business area. This course highlights the informative, persuasive and bad news genres. Each topic is covered in a two-day format with instructors detailing the core elements of the genre during the first day's session using various activities during the class to demonstrate those elements and how they are presented in various communication forms (e.g. letters, memos, blogs). Day two is dedicated to student workshops where the evaluated assignment is worked on during the class with individualized instructor and peer interaction as the work progresses. Clearly those interactions allow for individual reflection on the work at hand.

Instructors are encouraged to seek additional feedback from students on assignments during office hours or scheduled virtual meetings, feedback that might address the needs of students hesitant to ask for assistance in a classroom setting. Anecdotal evidence from student teaching evaluations have shown that this approach to teaching these writing forms is perceived by students to customize the instruction to their needs. Preliminary analysis of assignment grades indicates an increase in scores year over year once the workshop approach was instituted.

Orientation and Training

Coordinating and delivering a project of this scope with this number of students and faculty members were challenges that were recognized long before the project actually began in late August. To reiterate, 15 sections with an average of 30 students per class were engaged with the Business Communication/Foundation Project. In addition, only two of the nine members of the business communication teaching team in this college are full-time faculty. The remaining seven are adjunct members covering one- to-two sections of the course each semester and are usually only on campus during their class time and for scheduled office hours. This creates obvious coordination and common-focus issues and, therefore, the course coordinator (to whom, the teaching team reports) must develop a purposeful plan to ensure success in the endeavor. Accordingly, a virtual team meeting was scheduled in August prior to the opening of the academic semester to discuss the details of the RFP with all course instructors. Special attention was paid to the "definition" of each of the social issues so that common focus could be provided to the students. The college and university had also undertaken initiatives to highlight DEI and community engagement during the academic year and the ties between this project and those initiatives were conveyed during the RFP meeting. Additional individual meetings were held with specific teaching team members as the semester progressed to clarify various aspects of the RFP and project in general. Regular communication between teaching-team members via face-to-face or virtual meetings or simply emails as necessary. Such a process addresses the unplanned when it occurs.

Monitoring and Continuous Improvement

Periodic "flex" days were built into the course calendar to provide opportunity for students to work on topics of their choice and to offer additional opportunities for instructors to provide even more customized feedback to individual students on any assignment or topic of the students' choice. Students regularly used this flex period for groupwork, where instructors circulate from group to group, interacting with groups and making inquiry on any individual needs. Anecdotal evaluations also note the value perceived by students of these flex sessions as a means to further customize the course to their needs.

Assessment and Evaluation

Rubrics for individual informative, persuasive and bad-news assignments, as well as one for groups' final project were created. (To limit the length of this document, rubrics are not provided here, but are available upon request). These rubrics are posted at the outset of the class in the college learning management system and serve as the basis of evaluation for each assignment but also as tools for students to monitor their assignment development ensuring that all relevant aspects of each genre are addressed in their submission. Instructors should take the time when the assignment is first officially announced to review the language of the rubric as well, so students are clear on the items to be assessed.

The three assignments and their evaluations are both formative and summative in nature. Each of the business communication genres covered in this course are important course requirements in and of themselves.

Given the scale of The Business Communication/Foundation Project, individual genres and their impact and import can be lost on students and the project can diverge into a social issues or social justice exercise (important but not the focus of this course) without careful monitoring. Spending two days of class on each genre, devoting class time to the assignment preparation and individually evaluating the assignments, provides assurance that the core requirements of the business communication curriculum are being addressed and that students are able to continue to develop knowledge and skills related to the nature and form of each requirement for later application in the final project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the past, final presentations in business communication were often held in the last week of classes prior to the term's final exam week. In fall, 2022, however, a deliberate decision was made to schedule the presentations during the week prior to the college's final week of classes. Unfortunately, that week coincided with students' return to campus following Thanksgiving break. The desire to debrief the project was a key factor in making that decision. It is recognized that groups suffered some performance issues due to Covid cases and other factors triggered by the week-long break. Due to these problems, splitting the presentation delivery from the project-report submission is being considered to be proactive to these situations.

CONCLUSIONS

McKeen, Laufer & Jester (2019) note the challenges faced by universities in scaling experiential learning activities, including the demands placed on faculty and staff in their development and execution, such as the monitoring of individual and team progress. This paper recounts the development and implementation of such a large-scale experience-based learning project: The Business Communication/Foundation Project. Though final results are not yet available, preliminary evidence suggests that the project was a success with discipline specific, and broader social- and community-based issues being recognized and recommendations for addressing them offered. During the course of the project specific individual technical skills and group interpersonal skills were also addressed. In sum, The Business Communication/Foundation Project offers a template for others to use in assuring students can effectively learn and display the types of skills most sought after by today's employers.

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APPENDIX 1
Foundation Request for Proposal (RFP)
Request for Proposals

Background: The Need

Like many cities, city's challenges are acute in urban neighborhoods. These challenges include intergenerational poverty, lack of affordable housing, lack of employment, poor education systems, structural racism, trauma and drug addiction. These and other social issues are the root causes of many public-safety issues – higher crime, rising murder rates and poverty.

Americans have asked police to be the vanguard of ensuring public safety. Their legitimacy and effectiveness derive from the trust granted to them by the public. Historically, however, the collaboration between some communities and the police has been challenging, even hostile.

Close to half of Americans interact with police each year and many of those interactions are, in fact, hostile. This is a serious concern for African Americans. More than 25% of Black Americans report not being fairly treated or treated with respect in those interactions. On the other hand, two-thirds of police report being verbally abused by a community member per month.

In congressional testimony on June 16, 2020, Chief (name withheld), President of the Major Cities (Police) Chiefs Association said, "Police should look to engage with leaders in the community beyond the conventional religious, nonprofit, and business leaders; sit down with activists, rappers, athletes, and other pillars of the community." Locally, while still in office in 2020, former mayor (name withheld) commented, "The relationship and trust between police and communities, particularly communities of color, are in need of urgent repair." This is where your team comes in…

The Opportunity: (name withheld) and the Chief

On November 11, 2012, a young Black man was shot five times by a city police officer after being pulled over for a traffic stop and mistaken for someone else. He later became paralyzed. His name is (withheld). Despite being shot and later paralyzed, Mr. (withheld) grew into a prominent activist and well-respected voice for police reform and reconciliation. Nearly a decade later, a few months before the 10th anniversary of this event, he and the then chief of police took action together and publicly launched the foundation, a 29-year veteran of the force, over time built an unlikely friendship that resulted in a relationship grounded in mutual respect. They share a passion for social justice, fostering healing, and addressing the cycle of gun violence in. This relationship is the genesis of the foundation. (While Chief retired from the police force in the summer of 2022 to take on a new position with the FBI in, he remains an active member of the foundation's board.)

The Foundation Launch

Launched on June 22, 2022, (foundation's name withheld) is the only nonprofit in city that is dedicated to collaborating with and listening to community leaders, city police, residents and the city to create a safe, thriving community for all.

> **Our Vision:** *We envision our community members, including residents and police, engaging and working together in making City safe and thriving for everyone.*
>
> **Our Mission:** *We convene, implement and fund programs that bring city's police and residents together to build relationships that strengthen our communities.*

The Foundation, with its diverse and dedicated group of leaders representing a cross-section of the community, plans to convene residents, police, activists, community groups, and national experts to actively listen to and learn from one another. The foundation will collaborate on strategies to build trust, save lives and make our communities safe. Grantmaking initiatives and programs funded by The Foundation are initially focusing on three key issues: gun violence reduction, trauma, and workforce development.

THF has already awarded three inaugural community microgrants at its launch with the support of a $75,000 grant from Heal America called The Summer of Healing project. These projects focus on those key issues of gun violence reduction, trauma, and workforce development.

Each project aligns with THF's vision to create a safe and thriving City where residents and police collaborate on solutions and strategies from a foundation of trusted relationships and authentic engagement, and with the goals established in (name withheld) that he unveiled on June 3, 2022.

 At your earliest convenience, please review the background (video, news clips on page five of this document, as well as (link withheld) It will help you to get started.

The RFP Challenge

In the coming months, the foundation will focus on convening events and building consensus around strategies and special programs. The foundation will also collaborate with community partners to promote the organization's programs and advance its next set of community microgrants in new focus areas.

Thus, the foundation is inviting aspiring student-business teams at the university to respond to this RFP as an important class assignment and potential gamechanger for the foundation and the city.

- Three initial three focus areas have already been launched; they will continue be focus areas to address that can have an impact on improving public safety. Nevertheless, the foundation seeks perspective on prioritizing which of seven focus areas to consider in the near term (including new potential areas of focus #4 - #7).

  Each team is assigned one of the following focus areas for this project:

    1. Gun violence reduction
    2. Trauma
    3. Workforce development
    4. Housing
    5. Education
    6. Drug addiction
    7. Return from incarceration

- Instructor will randomly choose the focus area for each team. Each team will then make the case for prioritizing their area of focus.

- In addition to drafting a premise resulting from your research and analysis, the Report should include the development of at least three programmatic recommendations or ideas.

  - First, summarize your research findings and remember to include data or visuals as appropriate. Following your analysis, articulate the premise of why this focus area should be a priority.
  - Then, develop three recommendations or ideas for the focus area by articulating or describing the idea or specific project, how it relates to the focus area, to public safety, and to the target audience.
  - Draft a brief description of how it works, what it will be called, and define the next steps for implementing it. Remember to include how this idea is substantiated or rationalized based on any data or research, or where it may already be successful. Make the case for implementing your ideas.

- The topics to be researched before embarking on developing recommendations include:

  - The selected focus area and its connection to public safety
  - What secondary research suggests as potential, meaningful and effective strategies
  - Relevant and current national organizations and national experts to consider engaging
  - Strategies (or programs) employed in other cities to consider
  - Local organizations doing related work
  - Recommendations for initiatives/projects/organizations to fund locally
  - Top key individuals to engage with and build partnerships
  - How success could be measured for each recommendation

- Early in this project, teams will submit questions to their instructors to be consolidated and shared with The Foundation's Executive Director as part of the due diligence process for this project. (Please do not contact the

executive director directly.) <u>He will participate in a team Q&A session on Friday, Oct. 7, 2022, from 12 Noon until 1:30 p.m. Each team is expected to send at least one representative to this forum that will take place at 117 Hall.</u>

- Each team will submit a formal report that includes its research findings and analysis (including a premise with compelling data) along with three recommendations or ideas for developing or creating programmatic activities or events for a focus area. (Refer to the separate document – "Outline Suggestions for Your Report/ Recommendation Document" – to develop full content for the Report.)

Submission Deadline

Ask your instructor about your report due date which may vary by class/section during either the last week of November or first week of December based on your class meeting and due-date calendar. Each team will be informed of its presentation order the week prior to the presentation.

Format

Reports must conform to the required format outlined below. Reports are generally 12-15 pages, including graphics and charts. Reports are to be formatted on 8.5" X 11" paper with one-inch margins on all sides. This document is to be single-spaced, single-sided, and in a 12-point easy-to-read, contemporary font (e.g., Calibri, Arial).

Teams are required to use graphics, charts with data, headers and sub-heads for each section. Submissions should be provided in a Word document. The title page of the document must include your consulting team's name, the names of all members of the team, and the title of your report (and your corresponding presentation).

Report Structure

While the actual section titles may differ, teams can be guided by this list in considering what sections their reports might include:

- Title Page
- Table of Contents
- Executive Summary
- Introduction
- Background
- Research (secondary) Findings
- Conclusions
- Recommendations/Ideas
- Summary/Closing
- Citations
- Appendix

Should members of a team have any questions about this RFP document or process, please let the instructor know along the way. Also, please consult with the instructor about recommended structure of your process, report and presentation.

We appreciate the opportunity to be the "client case" for this semester's BusComm project. Thank you, in advance, for your interest in this important social-justice cause, and for your thoughtful analytical observations, strategic recommendations and resulting written reports and presentations to help us consider further development of priority focus areas.

Executive Director
THE FOUNDATION

Additional background information and selected links to news coverage of THF's launch

Links withheld.

Appendix 2
Informative Assignment

Each team has been assigned to research one of City's 90 neighborhoods to develop a "backgrounder" for the executive director of The Foundation, Mr. Z. A backgrounder is a briefing, a document that contextualized a subject for an audience that may have some interest but little knowledge of the topic. Format the backgrounder as a memo to Mr. Z. The neighborhoods for fall of 2022 are:

- The Strip District
- Lawrenceville
- Squirrel Hill
- Herron Hill
- South Side
- Oakland

The backgrounder (at about 1.5-to-2 pages of single-spaced 12-point copy) should include:

- *A brief history and current state of the neighborhood.*
- *The geographics of the neighborhood.* It is said that "geography is history." First, where is the neighborhood in relation to other neighborhoods and within the context of the city? How might this placement affect the neighborhood's role? What are the opportunities of challenges presented by the geography?
- *The demographics of the neighborhood:* What are the "facts" of the neighborhood? Gender, race, religion, education. Hard data.
- *The psychographics of the neighborhood:* This is trickier data to gather, more abstract than the other areas of inquiry. What can you intuit about what the overall population of the neighborhood feels or thinks or believes about the concerns of the foundation?

The backgrounders create foundational material for The Foundation —snapshots of the city. Subsequent BusComm teams in future terms will work on other neighborhoods until eventually the whole city comes into focus. It's important work. And it starts here with you.

Graphic https://www.discovertheburgh.com/90-pittsburgh-neighborhoods/

APPENDIX 3
Persuasive Assignment

Much of the writing we do in business communications (both in the course now and at the office later) is persuasive — convincing the reader of your professionalism, conveying an appealing company image, or promoting goodwill. Sometimes, the core goal of the communication is distinctly persuasion — in short, you want to move readers from their position to one more favorable to your organization (e.g. you want them to hire you or purchase your product). Review Chapter Nine for the process and tools of persuasion.

Your assignment is to create a blog post. Imagine, if you will, that your neighborhood you've researched, has a blog you will post this persuasive message to.

First, consider this: One of the goals of the foundation is to improve relations and communications between the police and the citizens of city's neighborhoods. To that end, the foundation is funding what it's currently (and internally) calling "Black, Gold and Blue Centers," places where citizens and officers, the police and the people, can meet or gather to discuss and socialize. The centers are a non-threatening place to link people with those charged to serve and protect.

Your blog post should introduce the idea of the centers, suggest what might or could go on or be accomplished there. What good can be generated in such a space at which so many different communities converge? Use both copy and at least one visual that will speak to the people in your assigned neighborhood. This copy will be reviewed and approved by an official at the foundation before it's posted.

Your draft copy of no more than 600 words should give context to the concept of the center, what might occur there, what could come out of such connections. You should suggest at least one new name for the center that might be particularly germane to your neighborhood.

APPENDIX 4
Bad News Assignment

One of the most difficult tasks in business communications is to develop and deliver bad news. Fortunately, for most people, those messages are few and far between. Unfortunately, though, when they do crop up, they are extremely sensitive and high value. How do you tell people — clients, customers, coworkers — something that will upset them. This assignment asks you to compose a message that delivers content that will be perceived as "bad news" by its recipients.

After reviewing Chapter Eight, consider the following:

An account executive at the foundation has been informed that there is a real possibility that an outside company is in the process of purchasing four blocks of 1960s-era homes in the neighborhood you have been researching. Some of the buildings are abandoned. Others are occupied by mostly low-income tenants. Some properties will be taken through eminent domain. Others will be purchased through a fair-market evaluation. If the city approves the deal (and it looks like it will), the tenants will have no choice.

These blocks will be replaced with townhouses that'll rent for $1,200 a month and a few retail outlets that will improve the life and property value of the surrounding blocks. More professionals may move in.

"The time during demolition and construction will be challenging," the account executive told you. But she is also furious about this real-estate grab. She takes a deep breath and says to you: "Draft for me a letter explaining as much of this as I've just told you. What we finalize will be read at the neighborhood's next council meeting."

In addition to your draft, list five questions for the executive director. Prepare him to be ready with these questions. (But also, ask her what else you might need to know before moving on to the final draft of this bad-news message.)

APPENDIX 5
Final Project Assignment

Your efforts in writing, presenting and working with others in your group have led to two final assignments, 1) a written report of approximately 8-to-12 single-spaced pages, including graphics and works cited. and, 2) a 15-minute presentation augmented by PowerPoint.

Your assignment is to offer sound business advice. Convince the foundation's leadership to select your team's focus area for its next initiative. In other words, you and your group members have been researching the foundation, so, based on this research, make analytic insights and offer three recommendations to show why your focus area should receive the foundation's grantmaking priority. Use the RFP to guide your work.

The visually rich, well-informed and professionally delivered 20-minute presentation and this well-researched and appropriately cited report must involve every member of your team in some capacity. (Note: presenters may not use any support materials [phone screen, note card] for this assignment; the PowerPoint slides are your support. Your team can't simply read its report as the presentation.)

The report is due the day of the presentation. This term, the presentations will take place on November 29 and December 1. Your audience, the "client," will be your instructor and another member of the faculty.

Review Rentz/Lentz, Chapter 10, "Researching and Writing Reports," and Chapter 11, "Creating the Right Type of Report" for your report; Review Rentz/Lentz, Chapter 12, " Delivering Business Presentations and Speeches" for the presentation.

APPENDIX 6
Survey of Final Project

Fundamentals of Business Communication
The Foundation Project
Fall, 2022

Please respond to the following questions using the scale:

1: Strongly disagree
2: Disagree
3: Neutral
4: Agree
5: Strongly agree

	1	2	3	4	5
The Foundation project helped me to gain an understanding of the different types of neighborhoods in City.					
The Foundation project helped me to gain a better understanding of the key neighborhood resident-police issues in City.					
The Foundation project gave me an opportunity to contribute to the community outside University.					
The Foundation project helped improve my informative and persuasive writing skills					
The Foundation project helped me improve my group speaking skills					
I would recommend the Foundation project be continued in the Spring Business Communication classes.					

Gender
Current level   First Year   Sophomore   Junior   Senior
Current Major   Accounting   Business Information Systems   Finance   Global Management
                      Human Resources   Marketing   Supply Chain Management

APPENDIX 7
Fundamentals of Business Communication Project Survey Results

Questions	n	Mean	Std. Dev.
The HEAR Foundation project helped me to gain an understanding of the different types of neighborhoods in Pittsburgh.	70	3.99	.93
The HEAR Foundation project helped me to gain a better understanding of the key neighborhood resident-police issues in Pittsburgh.	70	3.74	.95
The HEAR Foundation project gave me an opportunity to contribute to the community outside Pitt.	70	3.27	1.11
The HEAR Foundation project helped improve my informative and persuasive writing skills	70	4.00	.91
The HEAR Foundation project helped me improve my group speaking skills	70	4.16	.82
I would recommend the HEAR Foundation project be continued in the Spring Business Communication classes.	70	3.69	1.10