

PROJECTS STUDENT GUIDEBOOK

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Students:

You have embarked on an important journey by enrolling in PA662 Nonprofit Financial Management in the School of Public, Nonprofit, and Health Administration at Grand Valley State University.

During the course of your academic studies you will complete several projects for organizations. These projects may include for example, fundraising case statements, program evaluations, personnel manuals etc. Projects may be completed in groups, pairs or solo. Depending on the course you and/or your teammates may select projects for your own organizations, your classmate's organization, or in some cases, organizations that have submitted a Request for Proposal for a project.

This manual was created to give you tips for doing a successful project. The manual includes tips for selecting your team, selecting and communicating with organizations, and how to interact with the organization after the project is complete.

Important lessons for successful projects found by University of Pittsburgh (Bright, Bright and Haley, 2007) and our own research:

- A pre-project discussion with the students and organization
- A commitment for the project from both the organization's Executive Director and board of directors
- Clarity among students, faculty and organizations about the expectations of projects.

We hope you will utilize these tips and important lessons during your project's process.

Good luck!

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SELECTING YOUR GROUP MEMBERS

Team interaction and involvement are important for project success. At the beginning of the semester, students choose their team members. Depending on the course requirements, students select to work with an organization which employs one team member as a staff or volunteer or, with an organization that does not have a student represented in the program. Most projects are carried out in teams of 2-5 people.

Over the course of the semester, teams may meet as frequently as once a week. These meetings can take place in-person or virtually. Teams should also meet on regular basis with the organizations for which they are completing a project. Ideally, team members distribute work evenly across the entire team, and each team member is in charge of a different aspect of the project. At the end of the semester, student teams are asked to rank the relative participation of each team member as a way of conveying to the professor how much effort everyone contributed to the project. Your final grade will be based in part on this team member ranking.

Here are some advantages and challenges of group selection and interaction:

- Find members of a group you are comfortable working with, are accessible by email or phone, and are able to meet at a convenient location for everyone.
- Select group members that have similar work schedules – that are morning or evening people-- and are available similar days of the week.
- Try to work with people who share different perspectives and areas of expertise – leadership and learning happens in this space, too!
- Have team members self-disclose their strengths and weaknesses so team members can work on parts of the project that tap into their strengths (e.g. finance, communication), or to give members a chance to work on skills they want to develop.
- It is good if one person on the team works for the organization while one or more others are outside volunteers (i.e., students who volunteer for the organization for the purpose of the project). Teams benefit from having an outside team member be part of the project team as they may be more objective about the organization and the project process.
- Remember, if there are difficulties with team members you will have the opportunity to rate their contributions at the end of the semester.

SELECTING AN ORGANIZATION

The most important part of the applied projects process is selecting the right organization. Many teams choose organizations that members work with or volunteer for. If you have trouble finding an organization the service-learning center is here to help. Also, Dr. Carpenter has many organizations approach her every semester so it is important to check with her before contacting the service-learning center. The service-learning center's contact information is: service@gvsu.edu Phone: 616-331-2468, Fax: 616-331-2355, GVSU - Allendale, 1110 B Kirkhof Center, Allendale, MI 49401

This section provides advantages and challenges of communicating with a organization, working within your own organization, working with a teammate's organization, or working with an organization where no Grand Valley students are employed.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE ORGANIZATION

Communicating and engaging with the organization is a delicate process and influences project use. Please be sensitive to the needs of the organization for example, in some cases, confidentiality, anonymity and other issues may arise. Some organizations have requested to remain anonymous even though they were assured the paper would only be shared internally for the purpose of the assignment. Also, keep in mind that sometimes these papers are chosen later for capstone projects.

Here are some advantages and challenges for communication between teams and the organization.

- Bring a copy of the syllabus and group project information to the first meeting with the organization.
- Complete the information in the letter to organization and bring a copy to your first meeting.
- Clarify and agree upon project goals with key contacts within the organization.
- Communicate with the organization about the steps involved in developing the project as this will lead to clear and useful project designs.
- Meet with one or more people at different levels of the organization (for example, meet with the Executive Director, Program Managers, and board members about the project process).
- Meet with the organization no fewer than 3 times during the semester. In other words, meet frequently with the organization throughout the project process.
- Internalize what the organization says and communicate clearly with the organization when you are working on the project.
- Check with your teammates to be sure that all of you correctly heard the feedback from the organization so that you can tailor the project to the organization's needs.
- Be sensitive to the organization's culture and be sure your project outcome reflects that culture.
- Promptly return phone calls and e-mails to and from the organization.

- Designate one contact in your group to avoid confusion and mixed messages to the organization.
- Respect the organization's time and make requests as far in advance as possible to maximize their time to full them.

WORKING WITH YOUR OWN ORGANIZATION:

The most successful projects are those completed by students employed by the organization. Students chose a project that the organization needed when it was the "right" time for the project. Here are some advantages and challenges of working with your own organization:

- Easier access to the information you need, more flexibility to work on the project (e.g., you may be able to use paid work hours), and an opportunity to assist your own organization.
- The opportunity to apply class concepts to work on projects that you are already familiar with
- The chance to exercise leadership to solve important issues your organization may be facing

Also remember to:

- Include other team members during the project process so that executives of organizations can remember external team members' roles in the project.
- Clarify your role and that of the other students working on the project with your organization. Sometimes it is easier for your organization to hear recommendations from you and other times it is easier for your organization to hear recommendations from your student colleagues.
- Be alert to your own biases. Working for your own organization can cloud your perception and reactions to its needs.

WORKING WITH A CLASSMATE'S ORGANIZATION:

Organizations benefit from having an outside perspective on the project. Here are a few advantages and challenges of working with a classmate's organization:

- Utilize this inside knowledge of the student employee to navigate the project process. Your classmate who is employed by the organization will most likely have greater knowledge of the issue being worked on, the culture of the organization, and the reasons why the organization wants this work done. This person is your "in" to the organization and is likely to be able to use some of their work time to gather information about the organization/issue. They have easier access to key players within the organization and constituents.
- Look for biases that may emerge from the student employee. The student employee may or may not be able to be objective about the dynamics of the organization, or its' policies/procedures.

- Recognize your valuable contribution as an outside volunteer consultant, utilize your strengths, and share your objective view of the organization when the time is needed.
- Gauge the comfort level of constituent/stakeholders (board members, senior staff, etc). Some constituents/stakeholders may not be comfortable giving honest feedback about an organization when they know that a staff member is collecting the data.

WORKING FOR AN ORGANIZATION WITH NO STUDENT REPRESENTATION:

There may be no student representative involved with the organization. Here are a few suggestions for working for an organization with no student representation:

- Establish communication early on in the semester with the organization. The project process can be delayed when the organization is hard to contact.
- Determine the organization's expectations to ensure that the group and the organization are on the same page.

AFTER PROJECT COMPLETION

Occasionally, due to the time constraints of the semester, some projects may require extra work after the semester is over. This is something that must be agreed upon by the students and the organization. Here are some advantages and challenges of project work that extends beyond the semester:

- Be clear about the project timeline and that you will need to leave the organization when the project has been completed.
- Be clear about the scope of work you will tackle and, if appropriate, recommend outside consultants to finish the work (for example, in cases of strategic planning, feasibility studies, advocacy projects, or other projects there is no set completion date). If you decide to take on the extra work after the semester is completed, speak to your professor to see if an independent study arrangement can be made.
- Make sure your final project contains e-mail and telephone contact information for the organization.
- If the student(s) are asked to present their project to the organization i.e. a Board meeting, the students should prepare and practice their presentation ahead of time, arrive promptly and dress professionally.

PROJECT TIMELINES

When you first begin to meet as a group it is important to create a mutually agreed upon project timeline. Here are some advantages and challenges for establishing project timelines:

- Create a timeline with your group, decide on meeting times, and then offer options to the organization to create a timeline that is realistic for the group's outcomes and for the organizational expectations. Be prepared to share your deadlines and deliverables with them.
- Be sensitive to the individual working styles of each member of the group. Some people prefer to work incrementally, day-by-day, while others prefer to gather data and put everything together in one session. It is important to discuss different time management styles and come to a compromise as a group at the beginning of the project and with the organization.
- Group members should respect and adhere to the agreed upon timeline.
- Use group-meeting times wisely. Ensure that you are being respectful of group members' times and accomplishing what was agreed upon for each meeting. Group meetings should be used to discuss key findings, create the direction for the group and to decide upon who will be assigned individual pieces of the project
- Be prepared to adjust/adapt the project timeline to the project and organization's needs.