

A PROFITABLE EXCHANGE

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When student projects tackle nonprofit problems, both sides benefit.



Check the jobs posted on Monster.com or in your local paper's classified section and the new graduate's dilemma becomes clear: "Qualified candidates must have a minimum two years experience..." "Proven track record..." "Experience necessary..."

Many departments at Rivier have found a way to help students gain experience while advancing the College's mission to serve others. Courses across the curriculum incorporate real-world projects, often focusing on challenges facing nonprofit organizations. Students in business, art, computer science, and other disciplines have built their résumés—and communities—through their work for nonprofits.

Against All Odds, Nashua

Against All Odds gives cancer patients, their families, and caregivers information to help them fight their disease. The entirely volunteer-driven organization wanted to update their website. Board member

Lisa Kaplan Howe said, “We wanted to make it more up-to-date, build a design around our new logo, and add more content. The website itself can be a resource for cancer patients, not just a number to call.”

Howe approached several colleges in search of students with the expertise to create the type of site Against All Odds had in mind. “Rivier jumped at it,” she said.

Bryan Higgs, Associate Professor of Computer Science, saw the website project as a great opportunity for students in his graduate Multimedia and Web Development course. “It’s an incredibly large, quickly changing topic. Students come in and want to increase their job opportunities—many want to learn specific technologies that I may not be teaching.” Higgs uses team projects to allow students to learn from one another and leverage the different skills of people in the class.

When Higgs e-mailed the class to suggest the Against All Odds website as a course project, several students expressed interest. Jose Tubianosa, Anchal Gupta, and Charu Sublock developed a template for the site’s new design. After the class was over, Jose continued to add content to the website, www.againstallodds.org, and make it more dynamic, working with a web host to develop a form that allows visitors to the site to request more information.

“Rivier has been wonderful. Professor Higgs has been so supportive and Jose has been so professional,” Howe said. She believes that working with the College allowed Against All Odds to do more with their website than they could have accomplished if they had paid a company for web development. “This collaboration has surpassed what we could have hoped for.”

St. Philip Orthodox Church, Nashua

When a graduate Advertising Management class worked with St. Philip Orthodox Church to advertise an annual Greek Food Festival, both sides were pleased with the results. “This truly was an excellent example of real world problems meeting academic curriculum,” said Chris Houpis, co-chair for the Greek Food Festival.

Associate Professor of Business Eric Drouart’s students were given complete access to the event’s material and history. Drouart helped the class understand the challenges facing St. Philip and apply what they had learned to build brand awareness, draft positioning statements, and develop a new identity for the event.

“They developed excellent plans to propel our event forward,” Houpis said. “The brand positioning statements and identity the students presented were given to a local advertising agency who in turn produced actual graphics for the event’s new look.” The positioning statements the students developed have been incorporated into the festival’s marketing and advertising materials.

Several students said that it was rewarding to see that St. Philip was able to use their ideas, and working on a case helped them develop a more thorough understanding of advertising.

Student Erin Mansur said that the reality of the church’s budget forced students to think differently. “Eric encouraged the class to think of creative ideas, while still focusing on the advertising process,” she said.

Nashua Symphony Orchestra

Drouart set the M.B.A. students in his Strategic Management course to work on developing a strategic plan for the Nashua Symphony Orchestra. They presented their plan to Rivier Academic Dean Dr. Albert DeCiccio, Chairman of the symphony’s Board of Trustees, Vice Chair Richard Foemmel, and Executive Director Eric Valliere.

Susan Van Abs, a student, said that the class examined many different issues facing the symphony. They researched national trends in symphony subscribers and endowments, and evaluated internal aspects of the organization such as financial statements, mission, structure, and leadership. The class also analyzed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

“We found many strengths, as well as some weaknesses they need to look at,” said Van Abs. While the class discovered some threats, they found more opportunities. Van Abs pointed out that the New Hampshire Symphony’s season cancellation could mean new subscribers for the Nashua Symphony. “We gave them strategic and tactical suggestions,” she said.

Valliere said that the class presented the symphony with a lot of information. “They brought up many things we hadn’t thought about and gave us new avenues to explore.”

The symphony plans to implement some of the students’ recommendations immediately. “They recommended that we increase the size of our board; we’re adding six new members,” said Valliere. “They also pointed out that we need to increase the visibility of our organization—many people in Nashua don’t know we exist. We’re starting an awareness campaign separate from our concert advertising.”

Valliere says that working with the class was a learning experience for him as well as for the students. While introducing the organization to the class, he found that people didn’t know a lot about the symphony. “Getting an outsider’s perspective was valuable,” said Valliere.

Anne Marie House, Hudson/Greater Nashua Interfaith Hospitality Network

The fall 2006 Strategic Management class worked with the Greater Nashua Interfaith Hospitality Network (GNIHN) to create a strategic plan. GNIHN provides emergency transitional shelter, meals and support services for homeless families. Several of the organization’s board members gave a presentation to the class to introduce GNIHN and its current challenges.

Student Laurie Sealund said the class made many recommendations. While GNIHN has a clear mission and commitment to homeless families, students encouraged them to consider a new, more memorable name. The class also suggested ways to make better use of their existing network. “They have staff and volunteers at 20 congregations for outreach to other spheres of influence—many of these people may have skills they don’t know about,” said Sealund.

Students suggested creating a database to track volunteers and to use for direct mailings for fundraising and events. They recommended sending out more press releases, making some changes to the web site, and increasing fundraising efforts. They also explained search engine optimization and ways GNIHN could use it to their advantage.

Students appreciated the chance to work on a real-world project, as well as to contribute to the community. “The nonprofit gets the benefit of 20 people thinking on their behalf,” Sealund said. “Even if they only implement two or three of our ideas, it makes a difference.”

One of the class’ suggestions was that GNIHN tap the resource of students at Rivier who need to do service learning or education majors who could help with planning programs for children. GNIHN got more creative and asked Rivier art students to create a mural to decorate space at Anne Marie House for children and families.

As part of the Rivier Design Studio, four senior design majors worked on a variety of projects for nonprofits and other clients. Joe Thomas, Nicole Sawyer, Jessica Senn and Amelia Fountain all contributed to the Anne Marie House mural. “We all drew different ideas and figures,” said Thomas. “The mural is a synthesis of all our ideas, both stylistically and in content.”



Rivier students created a mural for Anne Marie House that celebrates families.

Since Thomas had previously worked on murals in downtown Nashua for service learning projects, the group chose him to design the mural and draw it out. The group presented the design to Anne Marie House, who liked the Sunday in the park theme focused on different families. Then the students and Associate Professor of Art Sheli Petersen painted the mural in the parlor at Anne Marie House.

Thomas said the experience helped him gain skills that make him more competitive in the job market. “The fact that I could please the client and fulfill the assignment with minimal costs in a short amount of time definitely helps in my job search. It also shows I’m able to work with other people,” he said.

Stephenson Memorial Library, Greenfield

Two of the senior design majors who worked on the Anne Marie House mural also designed a piece for the Stephenson Memorial Library in Greenfield, N.H. to recognize donors who had supported the building’s recent renovation. The neoclassical building includes a rotunda and hardwood floors and desks. “They wanted a piece that would reflect the style of the library,” said Petersen.

Fountain, an illustrator, took photos inside the library and designed a frame based on four Greek columns and pediments. Sawyer did the typography and layout of donor names.

Petersen says that projects in the capstone course allow students to experience all parts of a design job from start to finish. “Students get professional experience before they get their sheepskin and have real-world projects in their portfolios,” she said. She also sees it as a transition from being a student to being a professional. “Class work doesn’t affect anyone else—now they’re working for a client.”

Résumés and Relationships

“As a Catholic college, we have a focus on reaching out to the community,” Petersen said. “If we take on projects for nonprofits, students learn that their talents and skills can be a gift to the community, and that’s important.”

Many students have stated that they feel they learn more from real-world projects than they would from simply studying cases in a book. Students become more deeply invested as they grow familiar with the organizations and the people they serve. Through their projects, students become more involved with the community. “This is the type of experiential project that goes well for a capstone course,” Drouart said.

The nonprofits who have worked with Rivier appreciate students’ expertise and recognize that they often get value far beyond what they could afford if they hired professionals. Students gain experience that makes them more marketable. Rivier’s many nonprofit projects truly offer both sides a profitable exchange. ■

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