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Rebounding After Loss: A Nonprofit Organization's Recovery After the Untimely Death of Its Founder

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ABSTRACT

Students pursuing degrees at Molloy University's School of Business are required to complete a Capstone course in their final semester or year. This signature course uses a mixed methods approach that combines the flipped classroom with community engagement to provide students with an experiential learning opportunity. This paper presents the results of student efforts in an undergraduate Capstone in Fall 2022. During the 14-week semester, students worked in small teams to address challenges presented by the Executive Director of the Learning Institute of Tennis, Life Skills, and Sportsmanship (LITLSS), a young nonprofit organization based in Freeport (Long Island), New York. The challenges were aggregated into three projects for the class to solve: (1) fundraising ideas and opportunities; (2) winter programs focused on life skills and enrichment; and, (3) social media strategy with tactics. Teams delivered their recommendations in a business report and presentation at the end of the semester. Recommendations were grounded in research and supported with implementation plans, projected outcomes, potential risks and mitigation efforts, and more. The untimely death of the organization's founder led students to also learn about the importance of documentation and succession planning to prepare for possible, predictable, and untimely "bad" situations.

Keywords

Flipped Classroom, Community-Engaged Learning, Experiential Learning, Capstone, Student Consulting, Nonprofit Management

1 INTRODUCTION

Founded in 2012, the Molloy University School of Business Capstone Program celebrated its Tenth Anniversary during the 2022-2023 academic year. This Capstone Program provides undergraduate (BS) and graduate (MBA) students with the opportunity to participate in a required interdisciplinary course in the final semester or year of their degree program (e.g., economic, finance, management, or marketing). Capstone courses are a signature part of the curriculum and support the School of Business mission: blending transformative education, executive-based learning, and the Dominican ideals of study, service, spirituality, and community in preparing students for a meaningful professional and personal life. Capstone involves students working in small teams throughout the semester to address real problems, challenges, and/or opportunities faced by nonprofit organizations (NPOs). In Fall 2022, this undergraduate Capstone class worked with the Learning Institute of Tennis, Life Skills, and Sportsmanship (LITLSS) based in Freeport, (Long Island) New York and its Executive Director, Daniel Burgess, Jr. (i.e., the client). This paper reports on the student efforts.

2 METHODOLOGY

Capstones uses a mixed methods approach that combines the flipped classroom with community engagement to provide students with a unique experiential learning opportunity. Before the semester starts, Capstone professors reach into the community and identify a nonprofit to work with. The professor and an organization executive discuss problems, challenges, and/or opportunities the NPO faces, and then work together to craft projects for students to address a few of them. These projects guide the experiential learning. Working in small teams, students develop viable solutions and recommendations complete with implementation plans to help the NPO and client. This 14-week Fall 2022 undergraduate Capstone course had 13 students who divided themselves into three project teams as per the client's needs. The teams-based structure that enables students to tackle the projects is the main focus of Capstone. Several small and large iterative assignments are required throughout the semester and lead to two main final team deliverables: (1) a detailed business report for the client, and (2) a final presentation to the client and invited guests that includes a question and answer session with the audience.

3 ABOUT THE CLIENT AND PROJECTS

The Fall 2022 undergraduate Capstone client was a young 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides educational enrichment opportunities through tennis and learning programs for children and teens between the ages of 5 and 15 years-old living in

Freeport (Long Island, New York) and its surrounding areas. Founded in 2018 by tennis professional and instructor, Daniel Burgess, Sr., LITLSS was severely disrupted by his untimely death in 2020. After months of legal, financial, and other work required to gain control and settle his estate, the founder's family members recommitted themselves to the organization's mission and to fulfilling his vision. This led to a successful and promising Summer of 2022 for the rejuvenated NPO. With a focus on growth, LITLSS's new Executive Director, Daniel Burgess, Jr. – the founder's son, a tennis professional and instructor in his own right – turned to Capstone for help with three needs that became student projects: (1) fundraising ideas and opportunities; (2) winter programs focused on life skills and enrichment; and, (3) a social media strategy with related tactics.

4 TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS AND POTENTIAL RISKS

The final deliverables were presented to the client on Monday, December 12, 2022. Three comprehensive business reports were emailed to the Executive Director by each Team leader that afternoon. Final presentations were delivered in-person and on campus that evening. A summary of each Team's recommendations and potential risks follow. Recommendations and implementation plans were grounded in industry research, an analysis of what LITLSS was or was not doing, SWOT analyses, and best practices followed by other NPOs and for-profit businesses.

Team 1: Fundraising Ideas and Opportunities

This Team of five students developed a comprehensive fundraising program for the organization. Ideas ranged from small, one-time only donation opportunities to large, repeatable annual events. The most ambitious event was modeled after Major League Baseball's Roberto Clemente Award. This large annual fundraising event would honor the LITLSS founder while recognizing someone who exemplifies sportsmanship, community involvement/service, and individual contributions to children and teens. The Team 1 recommendations were to: (1) raise money by working with Amazon Business for Non-Profits; (2) build and launch a new website that better promotes the organization's mission and events, and includes the ability to raise funds online; (3) pursue sponsors for programs and activities; and, (4) plan and host small and large repeatable fundraising events. With low, medium, and high projections modeled for all recommendations, Team 1 projected LITLSS could raise between \$15,000 and \$40,000 in the next two to three years, depending on how quickly its recommendations were implemented. Implementation plans were included for all recommendations. The greatest potential risks associated with the recommendations were a lack of promotional support for the new fundraising program, low turnout for fundraising events, rumored changes in the Amazon program (that have since materialized), and the inability to implement the large events given the organization's limited resources. Mitigation efforts were included to minimize each risk.

Team 2: Winter Programs Focused on Life Skills and Enrichment

As a young organization, LITLSS focused primarily on its outdoor tennis programs which operate in summers and during spring and fall months, weather permitting. Since the founder's vision extended beyond tennis to the teaching and learning of life skills and sportsmanship, winter months provide a good opportunity for non-tennis playing programs in free or low cost indoor facilities like the Freeport Memorial Library and local high school. As such, this Team of three students developed a winter program of workshops with age-appropriate content for two participant groups: a young group of 5-to-9 year-olds and an older group of 10-to-15 year-olds. The first workshop theme was "*The Rules of the Game*" with two workshops: "*Tennis Basics*" (young group) and "*Tennis on Another Level*" (older group). The workshops were designed to teach both groups about tennis rules and regulations, how to keep score, and how the game is played. The second theme was sportsmanship with two more workshops: "*Being a Good Winner and A Better Loser*" (young group) and "*Win Some, Lose Some*" (older group). The goal here was to teach the importance of sportsmanship by having participants play popular games (e.g., Go Fish, Tic-Tac-Toe, Jenga, House of Cards, 5-Second Rule) in fast, timed rounds repeatedly during the workshop thereby giving all participants the opportunity to win or lose, and to learn from the experience. The third theme was health, fitness, and nutrition with two workshops for each group. The workshops for the young group were "*Feed the Body*" and "*Raising the Bar*" and those for the older group were "*New Healthy Horizons*" and "*More Than Muscles*." The purpose of these workshops was to educate participants about the importance of taking care of their young bodies. Low, medium, and high expenses were projected for the games, snacks, and instructors based on estimated numbers of participants. Funding and participant subsidies were expected to come mostly from the Team 1 recommendations and small participant fees, if necessary. Implementation plans were included for all workshops. The greatest potential risks associated with the recommendations were a lack of demand for the winter workshops, in-fighting among the children, injuries during game play, and having to pay workshop instructors if LITLSS is unable to get volunteers to conduct them. Mitigation efforts were included to minimize each risk.

Team 3. Social Media Strategy and Tactics

Jaclyn Schuman, a marketing major and co-author of this paper, led Team 3. Shane Salam, another co-author, was also on this team. LITLSS had fewer than 100 followers on Facebook and only 30 followers on Instagram when the course started. And both profiles lacked engagement. Given the free and viral nature of social media and its popularity and growth, Team 3 believed LITLSS could build larger more engaged audiences on Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms. And that the organization could leverage these audiences to more effectively and efficiently build awareness, promote its (year-round) programs, raise funds, secure volunteers, and more. Following a review of social media industry growth trends and individual network/platform

statistic, the study of best practices in content creation and posting, and an analysis of how several larger NPOs and for-profit firms use social media effectively, Team 3 made three recommendations. They were for LITLSS to: (1) revamp the organization's profiles on all social media platforms with new brand assets (e.g., logo, biographies, profile pictures, and mission statement); (2) conduct a hashtag campaign featuring the founder's popular directive, "keep the ball in play" (i.e., #Keeptheballinplay) in all social media postings; and, (3) maintain and update a social media posting calendar and guidebook of all appropriate networks that the Team wrote to help LITLSS with content creation, scheduling, posting, and more, to drive engagement. The Team 3 business report included creative mock-ups (e.g., before and after), screenshots of best practices that could be "copied," how-to instructions, and the posting calendar and guidebook members created. With low, medium, and high projections, Team 3 projected LITLSS could acquire 100 to 500+ new social media followers in six to 12 months, depending on how quickly it implemented the recommendations. Implementation plans were included for recommendations. The greatest potential risks associated with the recommendations were questions and concerns about time, talent, and capability. For example: Can new LITLSS brand assets be created and deployed quickly? Does its Executive Director have the time needed to successfully manage the organization's social media efforts or should this be handled by someone else? Can a paid student intern from Molloy's School of Business help? And, can LITLSS keep up with the constantly changing nature of social media? Mitigation efforts were included to minimize each risk.

5 CONCLUSION

The final deliverables were very well received by the client and invited guests as evident by their reactions to the three team presentations and since the business reports were read. The client was so impressed with the students' performance that he revealed his great fear of public speaking and admitted he could not do what the students had just done. Questions that followed the presentations were probing and gave students the opportunity to showcase more of their research, analysis, thinking, and rationale in their answers. As of this writing, the client has already implemented some of the student recommendations and is seeing positive results. He has also expressed interest in working with another Capstone class in the future.

Student feedback is collected informally throughout the semester and formally at the end. Although the semester-end feedback was overwhelming positive, there were a few comments about the heavy workload, time management, and sense of obligation felt to develop viable solutions that could *really* help the client given the NPOs limited resources. The positive student comments can be summarized as follows. First, students all claimed to have much more confidence in their research, writing, and presentation skills after completing the course. Second, they developed a greater appreciation for time management, strong team leadership, and what it takes to be part of a high-performing team. Third, students enjoyed the flipped classroom and "learning by doing" to address the real needs of a real organization. Fourth, they valued the interdisciplinary nature of Capstone and working with teammates pursuing different majors because it reflected a real-world work situation. Fifth, students learned to accept and incorporate a new type of constructive criticism from the professor, client, and each other. Equally important, they learned to give better feedback to their teammates, other students/teams, and the professor as well. On a final note, the elephant in the room throughout Capstone was the sudden untimely death of the LITLSS founder just as the organization began to grow. This left his family and the organization in a lurch. So, in addition to the many valuable lessons students are expected to learn from Capstone, they also learned about the value of documentation and succession planning to help all types of organizations prepare for possible, predictable, and untimely "bad" situations.

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7 REFERENCES

References will be supplied upon request.