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# Building Nonprofit Capabilities to Continue Growing After Starting with COVID-Driven Demand

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## ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the Spring 2023 results of students enrolled in an MBA Capstone at Molloy University's School of Business. During an immersive 7-week semester, students in this online synchronous class worked in teams to address needs presented by the Founder and Executive Director of Elite Community Foundation (ECF), a young nonprofit organization based in Laurelton (Queens County), New York. The start-up organization had high demand for its services and programs during the COVID-19 pandemic which coincided with its start. With the worst of COVID behind us, ECF turned to Capstone for help building capabilities to help it grow strategically. Challenges and opportunities were aggregated into two projects: (1) fundraising ideas, opportunities, and pitches; and, (2) a social media strategy with tactics. Teams delivered recommendations in a business report and presentation at the end of the semester. Recommendations were grounded in academic and industry research, and featured implementation plans, projected results, potential risks and mitigation efforts, and more. Students pursuing degrees at Molloy's School of Business are required to complete a Capstone course in their final semester or year. The course pedagogy involves the flipped classroom with community engagement to deliver an experiential learning opportunity.

## Keywords

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

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Capstone courses are an established part of the curriculum of the Molloy University School of Business and help fulfill its 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 is required for both undergraduate (BS) and graduate (MBA) level students. It provides students with the opportunity to participate in a culminating interdisciplinary course during their final semester or year in their degree program (e.g., accounting, economic, finance, management, or marketing). This Spring 2023 MBA Capstone involved 12 students working in two teams to address real problems and challenges faced by Elite Community Foundation (ECF), a young nonprofit organization and its Founder and Executive Director, Dr. Carol M. Brown (i.e., the client), a Molloy alumnus. This paper reports on the student efforts. Since Capstone's introduction in Fall 2012, Molloy business students have worked with more than 70 not-for-profit entities including local governments, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

Before the semester starts, Capstone professors usually reach into the community and identify a nonprofit to work with. In this case, Dr. Brown learned about Capstone from a Molloy business student interning at ECF after completing his Capstone course. After discussing some of the organization's COVID-related growing pains, the Professor and Dr. Brown worked together to craft projects for the MBA students to work on. Working in two teams, students developed feasible solutions and recommendations complete with implementation plans to help the organization and client. MBA Capstones are taught in an immersive 7-week semester with an online synchronous modality. This Spring 2023 MBA Capstone course had 12 students who were divided into two project teams as per the client's needs and their interests. The teams-based structure that empowers students to tackle the projects is the main focus of Capstone. Small and large 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 guests that ends with a question and answer session. Capstones provide a unique community-engaged, experiential learning opportunity facilitated by the flipped classroom. The projects guide the students' experiential learning.

## 3 ABOUT THE CLIENT AND PROJECTS

The Spring 2023 MBA Capstone client was Elite Community Foundation (ECF), a young 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with

a tri-fold mission: (1) to reduce poverty, illness, and illiteracy and facilitate activities for the betterment of local and global individuals, families, and communities; (2) to assist deserving and the underserved populations in need with access to resources, information, education, and training; and, (3) to support the underserved, unemployed, lower-income, women, immigrants, minorities, youths, single parents, and children, and anyone in need via direct and indirect services that will generate wellness, independence, and productivity. To learn more about ECF, visit <https://www.ecfnys.org/>.

Dr. Brown started ECF in 2019 just as COVID was turning into a global pandemic. As a healthcare provider and educator, the organization was a vehicle to promote volunteerism, and provide vital services locally and globally to individuals, families, and communities. ECF provides access, knowledge, and resources for the underserved or anyone in need of assistance; and, programs for the advancement of individuals and the betterment of families, and communities. These services and programs specifically address barriers that impact employment, health, and education with contemporary, diverse resources and solutions. According to Dr. Brown, “No individual, family or community should be left behind ... everyone matters. When we evade the issues, the individual, family, community, and world suffer.” ECF experienced (very) high demand for its services and programs during the COVID-19 pandemic which coincided with its start. Nevertheless, the young organization managed to keep up. With the worst of pandemic over, Dr. Brown engaged with our Capstone Program to get help building some core business capabilities to help manage its growth strategically. ECF’s needs quickly became two class projects: (1) fundraising ideas, opportunities, and pitches; and, (2) a social media strategy with tactics.

#### **4 TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS AND POTENTIAL RISKS**

The final deliverables were presented to the client on its last class meeting date of the semester, Tuesday, May 9, 2023. Two lengthy and heavily researched business reports were emailed to Dr. Brown by Team leaders that afternoon. Final presentations were delivered via Zoom that evening. A summary of each Team’s recommendations and potential risks follow. Recommendations were grounded in academic and industry research, a review of what ECF was or was not doing, SWOT analyses, and best practices used by larger, well-known nonprofits that could serve as models.

##### **Team 1: Fundraising Ideas, Opportunities, and “Pitches”**

Team 1 was led by co-author Evan Rudolfsky, a finance major. This Team of six students recommended a comprehensive fundraising program along with new marketing materials for ECF to use. Ideas ranged from small, one-time only contribution opportunities to repeatable fundraising events. Team 1 developed three recommendations. First, ECF should partner with local colleges and universities, beginning with Molloy University, to recruit more volunteers and interns. Second, ECF should add to its marketing efforts with a brand story and elevator pitch, both of which were drafted for Dr. Brown’s consideration. The Team also created mock-ups of new marketing materials that could be used to promote ECF and its programs, services, and events, in print or online. Third, ECF should introduce a comprehensive fundraising program that includes: (a) opportunities for individual donations via traditional and digital methods including its website, social media profiles, and a proposed mobile text-to-give campaign; (b) fundraising events like a Bowl-a-Thon targeted at students including athletes, those in Greek life, and campus club/organization leaders; and, (c) securing corporate sponsorships by registering with CyberGrants FrontDoor, a free online portal that allows nonprofit administrators to manage matching gift and grant programs, and gain access to hundreds of corporate portals hosted on the platform for firms that support nonprofit organizations and their programs. Extensive academic and industry research was done to arrive at the recommendations and related implementation plans. Low, medium, and high fundraising projections were modeled for all recommendations. Five risks were identified with the recommendations: (1) poor turnout for fundraising events, (2) not having enough capital to host and pay for events, (3) a lack of interest in ECF’s brand story and elevator pitch or having them come across as inauthentic, (4) the (high) cost of printed marketing materials, such as flyers and signage for in-person events, and (5) staffing issues since ECF has no paid staff and is dependent on volunteers. Mitigation efforts were included to minimize each risk.

##### **Team 2. Social Media Strategy and Tactics**

Team 2 was led by co-author Thomas Bloecker, a marketing major. ECF had 139 followers on social media when the course started. The small presence came from three platforms: 65 followers on Facebook, 52 on Instagram, and 22 on Twitter. Given the organization’s mission, the success of its programs, and the demand for its services, Team 2 believed ECF could build larger and more engaged audiences not only Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, but also on LinkedIn. ECF could also leverage these audiences to more effectively and efficiently build awareness, promote its services/programs, raise funds, attract volunteers, and more. After a review of social media growth projections and analyzing individual platform statistics and best practices, the Team made three recommendations: (1) revamp the organization’s profiles on each social media platforms with new brand assets (e.g., consistent handles and biographies, new profile pictures, shorter mission statement, and more); (2) create a LinkedIn company page where Dr. Brown can share her research on behalf of ECF and attract a philanthropically-minded, professional audience to her cause; and, (3) maintain and update the social media guidebooks for each platform and integrated content/posting calendar for all social media effort that the Team created to help ECF. The Team’s business report included creative mock-ups (e.g., before and after), screenshots of best practices that could be “copied” from other NPOs, how-to instructions, and more. With low, medium, and high projections, Team 2 forecasted ECF could acquire 100 to 450+ new social media followers in 12 months,

depending on how quickly it implemented the recommendations. Implementation plans were included for all recommendations. The potential risks associated with the recommendations were functions of time, talent, and capability. Keeping up with the new proposed social media efforts could be a full-time job given all that ECF offers. Yet, ECF has no full-time employees. Next, the guidebooks could become quickly outdated due to the constantly changing nature of social media. Therefore, the people posting to ECF's social media profiles would need to stay current about the type of content that performs best on each network (e.g., reels on Instagram, carousels on Facebook, blog posts on LinkedIn). 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 student presentations and since the business reports were read. Most notable was Dr. Brown's high praise for the research that led to the recommendations. The question and answer session that followed the presentations was highly engaged and gave students the opportunity to showcase more of their academic and industry research, reviews and analyses, discovered best practices, and learnings from the websites and social media efforts of other nonprofits. Dr. Brown has already implemented some of the student recommendations and expressed interest in working with another Capstone class in the future.

Students regularly share feedback informally with the professor and each other during each online synchronous class. Yet, it is the formal semester-end feedback that surfaces the benefits of Capstone. Comments were all positive and the students felt good about the practical solutions that could *really* help ECF given its very limited resources and our 7-week course timeline. Students' comments can be described as follows. First, students felt that the 7-week immersive online synchronous course mirrored an actual consulting firm situation and engagement. Since most students in the class were working full-time while pursuing their MBA, they easily compared the coursework to their work in industry where project teams are generally interdisciplinary and include both in office and remote workers. Second, all claimed to have much better research, writing, and presentation skills after completing the course. Third, students enjoyed the flipped classroom and "learning by doing" to address the real needs of a real organization – a nonprofit organization especially, which was a first for many of them. Fourth, after taking many MBA courses with students who shared their majors, these MBAs valued working with teammates with different graduate majors, undergraduate majors, and work experiences. Here again, it reflected a real-world consulting firm environment and made for richer team dynamics. Fifth, students respected the "tougher" constructive criticism from the professor, client, and each other. Likewise, they grew more comfortably giving more candid feedback to their teammates, other students/teams, and the professor as well as the semester progressed.

## **6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **7 REFERENCES**

References will be supplied upon request.