2016-2018
University of Nebraska
Rural Futures Initiative
Teaching and Engagement Grant Program:

Facilitating the Implementation of Social Media Plans
for Small Businesses & Local Non-Profits through Service Learning
at the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK)

In today's world, social media plans are vital for organizations to fully engage with their audiences. Many rural Nebraska small businesses and non-profit organizations do not have the expertise or resources to implement one. Yet by not doing so, they limit their organizational reach. This project adds a service learning component to an existing course, where students work with organizations to develop and implement social media plans, in partnership with the Economic Development Council of Buffalo County. This program meets the mission of the Rural Futures Institute by utilizing University resources to address and solve challenges faced by organizations in rural Nebraska.

Undergraduate Service Learning Component

The UNK general education (GS) program concludes with an interdisciplinary capstone course, which is viewed as a best practice in GS nationally (aacu.org/leap/hip). The capstone course requires students to employ appropriate methodologies from multiple disciplines to create a significant original semester project, allowing students to demonstrate higher level critical thinking skills. Its learning objectives are: 1) evaluate information from more than one academic discipline; 2) formulate logical connections between disciplines as they relate to the topic; 3) employ the approach of more than one academic discipline in completing a capstone project; 4) synthesize knowledge related to the topic in completing a capstone project; and 5) communicate effectively in the medium chosen for the capstone project.

The UNK Computer Science and Information Technology (CSIT) Department has offered a GS capstone course entitled Social Networking since the fall of 2011 (/unknews.unk.edu/2015/04/02/students-learn-how-to-effectively-use-social-media-in-unk-capstone-course/). In addition to the GS capstone learning objectives, the Social Networking course objectives are: 1) To understand the historical role of social networking in information technology and marketing communication; and 2) To understand the current and future roles that social networking plays in society, how it affects the world we live in, and how it influences how people and businesses interact and market themselves.

The capstone project in this course is a team-based social media plan for a non-profit organization or local business. The project outcomes include a written document outlining the plan and a multimedia presentation of the plan. The plan is based on content students learn throughout the course about social media best practices. Student teams take on the role of a social media consulting group. They are required to meet with their client to analyze the client's needs and present a new (or revised) strategic social media plan. The teams are responsible for evaluating the current social media presence (if the organization has any) and presenting ideas as to how to change and improve the organization's presence.

The social media plan should meet the client's specific needs, identify audiences, set measurable goals, and describe a minimum of three recommended social media strategies and tactics to reach the identified goals. Student teams submit a proposal during the fifth week of the semester, outlining which organization they are working with and the plan's overall goals. In week 13th, the teams submit their

written social media plan. The instructor provides feedback on the paper, which the students should incorporate into their final plan submitted to the organization. During the final week of the semester, students submit their multimedia presentation of their social media plan to both the instructor and the organization. Students are encouraged to do this as a YouTube video or another streaming service, but they can also give a live presentation. Finally, students are required to individually reflect on this project. The reflection includes the student's belief that the organization will implement what was recommended; why/why not; what benefits the student's service provided to their client; how the project related to the learning goals of the course; what the student learned through the completion of this project as it applies to his/her future; and what the student learned about him/herself as they completed the project.

Due to the popularity of the course, students have completed about 80 social media plans for local area businesses and non-profits per year. Organizations assisted in 2015 include Barista's, Kearney Area Humane Society, the Kearney-area Family Advocacy Network, and Flippin' Sweet Pizza. Thus far, student groups have been required to select their own organization, but instructors usually have a few organizations that have contacted them requesting this service. (We keep a list of organizations that have already been used as class projects, to avoid re-using the same organization.)

In the current form of this class project, clients are not required to use the social media plan developed for them by the students. Unless the students have a personal connection with the organization, once the class is over, the plan is rarely put into action. Unfortunately, a service learning opportunity is not utilized and the benefits to the community partners are not fulfilled. This program seeks to address these issues.

This program revises this course to form a service learning component, with the following initiatives:
1) Work with the Buffalo County Economic Development Council to identify local businesses and organizations who want to work with the students in the Social Networking class, as interested organizations will be more likely to implement the social media plan;
2) Provide funding to develop online training materials for the most commonly used social networking platforms with a focus on workable solutions for local Central Nebraska organizations;
3) Make minor adjustments to the capstone project, including the requirement that the final project reference appropriate online training materials;
4) During a two-year study period, provide funding to hold training sessions for the instructors, students, and organizations;
5) During a two-year study period, provide funding to tutor the organizations during their implementation phase; and
6) Provide funding to research ways to make the Social Networking course project a sustainable service learning tool for the foreseeable future.

Project Goals

Improved student learning. As a capstone project, the social media plan already provides many benefits to student learning. By incorporating service learning interventions that increase the likelihood of the implementation for the social media plan, we believe students will be more enthusiastic and motivated. We find that motivated students, no matter their knowledge, skills, or experiences, are more likely to succeed and have richer learning experiences. Additionally, students who assist with the other interventions in this program will deepen their understanding of this process.

Furthering institutional and departmental goals toward institutionalization of civic engagement and service learning. Instructors benefit when working with motivated students. They also benefit and are more motivated when the results from their teaching have lasting impacts, both on the students and on the community. This project also augments CSIT's current service learning and community engagement activities, as outlined on the website unk.edu/academics/csit/community_engagement.

Addressing community needs/issues. Providing interventions that manage the implementation of the social media plan at the end of the semester is critical to helping the organization use social networking efficiently and effectively. The goals of this project are to have a 90% implementation rate for organizations served; and have 80% of those organizations sustain their social media presence one year after the initial implementation. By serving numerous organizations per year, this project should have a tremendous lasting impact on small business and non-profit success in Central Nebraska.

Advancing the field of civic engagement and service learning as the pedagogy of engagement. The research goals of this project are to study the impact of the interventions in increasing implementation and sustained use rates of social media plans developed through service learning. The projects completed in previous semesters will be used as a baseline to quantitatively measure the impacts. A long-term study will evaluate the sustainable impacts on projects that are completed after the conclusion of this project. Qualitative analysis will involve interviews with students and organizations, to gage the added value on a personal level. Assessment instruments will be used to measure the significance and impact of the community engagement on the students, instructors and organizations involved. Data will be evaluated and training materials and implementation procedures adjusted accordingly and shared appropriately.

Results have wide potential for dissemination. This program provides a mechanism to explore, develop and evaluate new strategies for service learning, as well as implementing social media plans for small businesses and local non-profit organizations everywhere. In general, we hypothesize that the interventions introduced will increase implementation rates and long-term success of using social media for organizations in the Central Nebraska area. Data supporting or rejecting this hypothesis will be presented at conferences of professional organizations and computer science education conferences and journals. Possible venues include the Special Interest Group for Computer Science Education (SIGCSE) and Pathways to Achieving Civic Engagement (PACE).

Community partnerships including the role of community representatives in the design and implementation of the program/project/course(s). Utilizing the expertise and resources of the Buffalo County Economic Development Council to identify organizations that want to work with the students in the Social Networking class, is critical to the success of this project. The Council is a non-profit corporation that strives to develop and implement programs designed to promote startup, relocation, expansion and retention of business in the Buffalo County area. The expertise of its board and staff, a diverse group of management and business professionals, will be utilized in the development of the training material, delivering the training sessions, and in meeting the research goals.

Timeline
Summer 2016: Develop a webpage that introduces the project and its goals, and provides a mechanism for local small businesses and non-profits to apply to participate. Initiate marketing efforts announcing the program. Work with the Social Networking instructors to coordinate and make adjustments to the social media plan assignment across all sections. Hire a student to start developing online training materials.
August 15, 2016: Deadline for the first group of local small businesses and non-profits to apply.
Fall 2016: Maintain the project website, offer several sections of the Social Networking course, and develop initial online training materials.
Early each semester (first two weeks) (Fall 2016-Spring 2018): Conduct pre-assessments of the organizations and students.
Late each semester (last two weeks) (Fall 2016-Spring 2018): Hold an implementation training session for the organizations, with involvement of the instructors and students.
Each semester end: Conduct post-assessments of the organizations and students.
Each remaining semester of the project (Spring 2017-Spring 2018): Set the deadline for new organizational applications one week prior to the start of the semester; maintain the project website; offer several sections of the Social Networking course; revise online training materials based on feedback; meet

with instructors to make minor adjustments to the capstone project based on feedback; and provide tutoring to the organizations from the earlier phases of the project.

Summer 2017: Aggregate data from the first year of the project and analyze results; continue to revise items as needed, based on feedback; and post initial results to the website and disseminate appropriately.

Summer 2018: Aggregate data from the entire project and analyze results; and continue to revise items as needed, based on feedback; post results to the website; and disseminate appropriately.

Fall 2018-forward: Maintain Social Networking course with its service-learning component using the lessons learned, training material, and data analysis that were developed as outcomes from this project.

Program Details

1. The Buffalo County Economic Development Council will assist with informing local small business and non-profit organizations about this program, and encourage applications each semester, over the life of this project. The Council will assist with the website development, marketing the project, developing the training materials and training sessions.
2. UNK students will develop online training materials for commonly used local social networking platforms with a focus on workable solutions for local Central Nebraska organizations. These training materials will be revised as needed over the life of this project.
3. The UNK instructors teaching these courses will assist with the coordination and data collection required for this program, within the individual sections of the course.
4. We will hold a training session at the end of each semester of the project for the businesses and non-profit organizations in the program.
5. UNK students will provide tutoring and support to the organizations during the implementation phase. Organizations will be allowed to contact this tutor during the implementation phase of their social media plan. We are confident that organizations will see the benefits of their plan and be motivated to implement them. We believe that by providing them with this support during the initial phase, along with the online training materials, they will be able to incorporate their social media activities into their own normal business/organization activities. The tutor will provide feedback to improve training, course and website materials, and future tutoring.