

Implementing Business Plans in Student-Led, Project-Based Service-Learning (that's a lot of hyphens)

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Having students write business plans for their service projects requires the kind of rigorous thought and preparation that might go into a class project but which is more difficult to solicit in programs. Writing business plans also equips students with project management skills that will transfer to future careers, and it produces an artifact which can be added to their portfolios or e-portfolios. Finally, requiring students to produce business plans produces stronger, more effective projects. Below is our template for business plans, and is only one of many models.

Note: Students are asked to complete a new business plan every semester. Between the fall and spring semesters, teams are permitted to merely refresh their old business plan as necessary. Likely, they will be continuing the same work with the same population into the new semester and will not need to completely reevaluate. Over the summer, however, teams are expected to write an entirely new business plan, not merely to copy and paste an old plan and update it slightly. Teams should work on these together as a team. They should not split up sections and assign them to one person only to mash them together before the deadline (which we set prior to the start of the semester – this requires solidifying project leadership teams by the end of each semester). Rather, they should plan several hours over one or more sessions to think through each section as a team and to challenge old practices and assumptions and write a cohesive plan. To do this, students are instructed not to refer to the old plan and rather to discuss the sections as if they are writing their first business plan ever and there is no former version. This is difficult to enforce, but it is easy to tell whether these instructions have been complied with.

We consider this process to be a valuable learning opportunity for project teams. Those who merely adapt old plans rather than going through the process of actually creating and thinking through a new business plan do not reap the full benefits either of the process for planning or for professional development and critical thinking.

Some teams will struggle with this process more than others and it is recommended to meet with or call each team at least once before they submit their final plan to clarify expectations and help guide the teams. Often, too, we send business plans back with comments and requests for edits to push students' thinking and planning.

You may find that initial plans are cumbersome, wordy, and over-developed (or the opposite). Part of the learning process here, too, is how to be concise and to the point, and how to communicate effectively only that which your stakeholders need to know. Our plans tend to be comprehensive since we use them as a planning document, but you may ask that students prepare something more concise which they might present to a potential funder, for example.

Template for Business Plans

In no more than 10 pages, if that, a project business plan should include:

- an executive summary;
- a description of the project;
- what your organizational structure is and information about the management team;
- information about the community partner;
- your tools and process for measuring success;
- your financial needs;
- some analysis of the other players in the space your project occupies;
- your key challenges; and
- how you will implement this plan.

In the **executive summary**, you will describe briefly what your project is all about so that an uneducated reader might begin to understand your venture. In no more than one-half of a page you should discuss your service, your clientele, your goals, and how you will achieve this goals, *briefly*. This is your elevator speech in brief. Often, you will write this section after you have completed the rest of the business plan as a sort of abstract/at a glance summary.

In the section about the **description of your project** you need to include a brief description of the larger issue that your project addresses. For example, it might be that your project aims to address the yawning gap between family income and SAT scores. You need not get into all the details here and should describe the problem in 1-3 sentences at the most. You should then state your goal for your project. Your goal should be achievable and measurable. World peace doesn't count. Better reading scores is not sufficiently precise. Improving some certain score by 25% is more like it. Enhancing a soft skill is certainly possible if you have a way that you can measure whether your project is achieving this goal. You will also provide more information about the recipients of your service, the providers of the service, what that service is, how you are providing it, and critical resources that you will need to succeed.

In a section about **organizational structure and management team** you will describe how your project is structured, who is running it, and how it will operate on an on-going basis. Who will do what? Who are the leaders and what do they do? What are your staffing needs? Who is providing the service? How will your team function? How will you monitor the project? What can you anticipate in the way of changes that you would be prepared to make? An organizational chart or graphic may be helpful here rather than merely text.

A section about your **community partner** will educate the reader about this critical feature of your Bonner work. Tell the reader who the partner is, how we are working with them, what we need from them to be successful, and your strategy to obtain whatever it is that you need. For example, you might identify School A as a partner and then go on to be specific about who it is at School A we need to focus on and why.

In a section about **the process and tools to measure success** you need to detail what you are measuring, how you are measuring it, who is measuring it, and how you plan to utilize this information to shape your effort. We are data-driven. Let's be smart about what data we collect and why we are collecting it and what we intend to do with the data.

Your **financial needs** need to be detailed as much as possible in a budget. This is particularly important in these times of budgetary constraints. Even if you can't provide a traditional budget provide as much information as you can about how frequently you need money, what that money would be used for, and estimate how much.

Your success might well depend upon **knowledge of the competition in this space where you are working**. Think of this as a kind of market analysis: who are our competitors, if any, providing the same or similar services and what are they doing that we need to be cognizant of. Are we needed in this space? Why?

In a section on **key challenges** you will anticipate the most likely causes for failure and you will identify ways to prevent them from derailing your work.

Your team will educate the reader about the **implementation of this plan**: what is your start date? Let's get fired up! Actually doing your work will require you to plan to begin your service. You must consider any resources that you need to have ready. Be specific about how will you actually provide this service. Do you need workbooks? Is there someone critical to be at the site? How are you getting to your site? Is there resilience in your plan? Is your plan sustainable? These sorts of questions should be driving you to identify resources that you need so that you are ready to act on a certain date. You can pick the date but our goal, in general, is to get getting as promptly as possible in the fall semester. Provide a timeline.