# Marketing Students Take on University Library as Client in Experiential Learning Assignment

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*Abstract:* In this collaboration between university librarians and faculty, advertising students were given the unique opportunity to treat the university library as a client in a rebranding initiative. This partnership allowed students to work in agency-style teams, simulating a real-world professional setting where they were responsible for developing a comprehensive branding strategy aligned with the library's newly implemented strategic plan. Acting as consultants, they conducted research, analyzed the library's current branding, and identified areas for improvement, all while considering the library's goals, values, and desired image within the university community. This experiential learning project provided students with an immersive experience that went beyond traditional classroom learning. By engaging directly with a real client (the university library), they gained hands-on experience with the dynamics of the advertising industry, including client communication, project management, creative strategy, and ad development. Furthermore, the project generated numerous actionable recommendations for the library's branding and outreach efforts, demonstrating the practical value of the collaboration.

*Keywords:* academic libraries, library branding, marketing academic libraries, partnerships, faculty outreach

## Introduction

Strong branding is a critical component for attracting and engaging an audience. This is as true for big brands like Nike and Apple as it is for a university library looking to engage students. Fairfield University updated its brand identity in 2021 which inspired the university library to explore how the library brand could come to life in a way that best connects with stakeholders, primarily students.

In 2022, the DiMenna-Nyselius Library at Fairfield University unveiled a 4-year strategic plan laying out a new mission and values to align with University strategic priorities. The library's strategic plan established future ambitions and goals, including a communications objective with initiatives focused on building the library brand, and increasing awareness of the library's contributions to student and faculty success.

To begin the process of building its brand, the library established a task force composed of library staff from the departments of Public Services and Technical Services. This task force identified a number of knowledge gaps:

- current perceptions of the library brand
- appropriate tone and voice for library communications
- strategies to differentiate the library from other campus organizations

The task force determined the need for additional stakeholder feedback and enlisted the expertise of a University marketing professor with extensive

industry experience in branding and advertising. The professor had previously collaborated with library staff, and recognized the venture as an opportunity for the undergraduate marketing students enrolled in *MKTG 2231: Advertising* to engage with a real-world client and assignment. As campus experts in the student experience and one of the library's primary stakeholders, incorporating students in the development of future library branding was essential. Students were charged with acting as the advertising agency for their library client, and completed tasks they would experience in an advertising career, including setting up a client meeting, reviewing existing research, analyzing current brand assets, and presenting recommendations. Through this project, students were exposed to critical job tasks and gained experience navigating obstacles, collaborating with a team, and creating engaging presentations – all critical course objectives.

**Course Objectives**

- Provide exposure to Advertising industry dynamics and deliverables
- Build confidence in making an oral presentation and defending a point of view
- Demonstrate creative thinking, problem-solving, and ideation skills
- Develop effective teamwork and collaboration skills

## Literature Review

Some research suggests that student interest and engagement increase with the opportunity to solve a real-world problem (Krain, 2010). When the client and challenge are real, students are more invested and engaged (Kong, 2021). Experiential learning opportunities help to prepare students for success in their professional journey and provide them with an example of what it's like to work in the advertising industry (Ranta et al., 2020).  A critical component to success in the industry involves relationship building and navigating the dynamics of the client/agency relationship (Miaomiao et al., 2022). Agency partners need to succinctly diagnose their client's challenges, establish trust, and communicate effectively and honestly.

There are many examples in library literature of promoting services *to* college students, but fewer describe instances of library staff working *with* college students to develop marketing materials, a marketing plan, surveys, or other typical outreach material. A few key features of these projects are described in this section.

The type of students involved in the articles found in a review of the literature varied in composition, including a chapter of the American Advertising Federation (McGeachin & Ramirez, 2005), a business capstone course (Meulemans & Fiegen, 2006), marketing courses (Duke et al., 2009; Brock & Tabaei, 2011), public relations courses (Hines et al., 2019), and a business writing course (Bartholomew & Irwin, 2020). Most implementations

spanned a semester, with the exception being Meulemans and Fiegen (2006) which took place over an academic year.

Several studies involved the design, administration, and analysis of surveys to collect information on the campus student population (Meulemans and Fiegen, 2006; Duke et al., 2009; Hines et al., 2019; Bartholomew & Irwin, 2020). Librarians were also interviewed to collect client information (McGeachen & Ramirez, 2005, Brock & Tabaei, 2011; Hines et al., 2019; Bartholomew & Irwin, 2020).

The end result of student projects varied. Students shared an advertising plan and budget, final recommendations in the form of a group presentation, a business report, and a 'campaign book' presented to library staff (McGeachin & Ramirez, 2005; Duke et al., 2009; Bartholomew & Irwin, 2020; Brock & Tabaei, 2011; Hines et al., 2019).

## Assignment Details

Thirty third- and fourth-year students were organized into 6 teams. To reconcile the goals of the library with the demands of the course curriculum, librarians and the professor collaborated to create a comprehensive briefing document. This document included a list of required project deliverables and adhered to the conventional agency/client new business briefing format. It contained background information about the strategic objectives of the library and delineated the specific deliverables of the assignment.

Teams had four weeks to develop ideas and prepare to present them to stakeholders. While presentations were individually evaluated and graded for their merits there was no ultimate winner.

**Project Deliverables**

- **Brand Image & Personality:** recommend tone and personality the library should adopt

- **Logo:** provide feedback on the current logo and suggestions for how it can be improved

- **Tagline:** create new tagline that captures the essence of the library in an engaging way

- **3-5 point plan:** develop recommendations for how to improve the library experience (with a <u>thorough</u> explanation of why and how)

- **Social media audit:** assess current outreach efforts and develop recommendations

- **Media strategy:** identify appropriate communications channels the Library should use to communicate with students and at what frequency

- **Communications:** construct a piece of content suitable for dissemination through one of the library's media channels, such as a social media post, email, or poster

Before work commenced, each group was required to create an original team name and logo as well as three commitments that would serve as established ways of working for all members. The goal of these ungraded tasks was to get teams comfortable working together, learn each other's skill sets, and to unleash their creativity.

As an initial step, each team was directed to coordinate an information gathering session with the participating librarians. In the role of agency partner, students crafted questions for librarians, clarified the assignment parameters, delved into library goals, and solicited feedback on preliminary concepts. Librarians documented each team's performance with regard to professionalism and creativity and shared this feedback with the professor – these factors contributed to the teams' final evaluation.

To inform and substantiate their recommendations, the teams were tasked with designing and administering electronic surveys to a minimum of 20 students. By eliciting feedback about the library experience, resources and services, the teams identified opportunities for optimization.

Shortly before the final presentations, the professor met with each team individually to practice their presentations, provide feedback and ensure all deliverables were addressed. After 4 weeks of research and ideation, the teams made their presentations to the professor, librarians, and the Dean of the Library. Following each presentation, the teams fielded questions and received

immediate feedback from stakeholders. Upon completion of all presentations, a collaborative debriefing session took place where the teams were evaluated against an established rubric that included presentation organization, creativity and depth of ideas, originality, and presentation skills.

## Impact and Implementation of Student Work

Within days of the presentations, the library acted on a number of the team recommendations. These changes included updating the library Instagram profile and highlight reels, launching polls, and creating humorous short videos with a more informal tone. Based on the team recommendations, the library collaborated with the university Marketing & Communications Department on partner video posts.

*Figure 1: "Study Like a Stag" Instagram Post*

Based on student recommendations, the library posted their first poll on Instagram leveraging an approachable and humorous tone to drive higher engagement. One of the recommended taglines "Study like a Stag" (the University mascot is a Stag) was immediately implemented for finals week programming promotion. Finals programming graphics were standardized with a modern template including the library logo, which students noted was missing from many library communications.
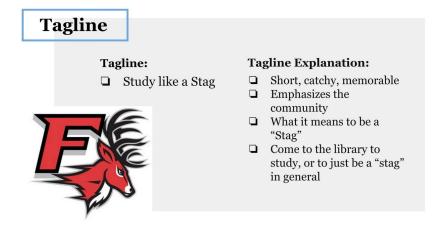
*Figure 2: Excerpt "Study Like a Stag" tagline*



*Figure 3: Student resources brochure leveraging "Study Like a Stag" language*

Many ideas proposed by the teams had been previously identified by the task force, confirming their merits, including the need for a unique library logo to distinguish it from other university departments.  Similarly, some ideas such as the importance of considering new social media apps like Tik Tok, were presented by most teams and reflected that those ideas should be given particularly close consideration. Ideas outside the library's purview were shared with appropriate departments including recommendations for an outdoor study space, longer cafe hours, and expanded food options. The primary reasons that some ideas were not implemented are budgetary, or that they did not clearly align with the strategic plan and vision of the library. A full list of student recommendations is available upon request.

## Collaborator Perspectives

### Faculty

The re-creation of the client/agency relationship within the framework of a practical case study generated high levels of enthusiasm and engagement from the students. Students noted that the hands-on experience afforded them valuable insights into the intricacies of a career in advertising. One student noted,

"I found that this was such an important project to be working on since it is beneficial to the school and the students. It also taught me how to

present better and focus on the research part of any presentation since, in the real world, we will have to present to clients and other companies all the time."

Additionally, the immediate application of their ideas by the library instilled a sense of pride and achievement among the students, reinforcing the significance of their contributions. Another student shared their experience, "Hearing the library's feedback and witnessing their actual applications from the presentation's take-aways will be a motivation for me to deliver high quality ideas at work in the future."

The designation of the library as the client facilitated a paradigm shift, enabling the professor to assume the role of coach, preparing students for their presentations and collaboratively refining their introductory remarks. This altered dynamic forged a strong bond between the students and professor, increasing motivation and a heightened sense of support. Consequently, the presentation skills of the students exhibited noteworthy improvement over the course of the semester.

The project effectively achieved the learning objectives of the course, provided above, by exposing students to industry dynamics and deliverables common in the advertising industry. The collaborative initiative proved to be mutually beneficial, with the University gaining from the intellectual prowess of

the students, while students cultivated skills that will prove instrumental in their professional journeys.

**Librarian**

The library found this course collaboration to be beneficial in several ways:

- Valuable feedback gained on current student perception of the library through the project deliverables.

- Creative ideas were developed by the teams related to programming, logo design, taglines, and communication strategy.

- Demonstrating to faculty that the library can work with courses in ways beyond just providing traditional information literacy instruction. This collaboration expands possibilities for collaboration and can be used as a model with other disciplines, i.e. communication, engineering or interior design to build mutually beneficial assignments.

- Students in the class became more knowledgeable about library resources and services, thus becoming library ambassadors.

- In order to better represent the student voice and leverage knowledge of campus culture a student from the class was hired as a part of the library outreach team.

- Feedback on building improvements were shared in the 3-5 point plan, which led to prioritized action by the library staff, i.e. sound mitigation between study rooms for added privacy.

## Optimizing Future Assignments and Collaborations

Following the debrief between library and professor the brand taskforce reviewed the presentations in detail and created a list of action items to be implemented in both the long- and short-term. Areas of optimization for future initiatives were identified:

- Require students to generate more robust survey data, potentially through the development of a single survey used by all students. A larger data set could be analyzed by different user groups like class year or major.
- Have one librarian conduct all student briefing sessions to ensure the same level of information sharing.
- Increase visibility of the collaboration through University communication channels and inviting stakeholders from other campus groups to attend student presentations.
- Brief students on a more narrow/specific topic to focus ideas and recommendations.

## Conclusion

This assignment was beneficial from the faculty, librarian, and student perspective. Librarians received useful feedback from their main stakeholder group while faculty provided students with a positive experiential learning

assignment that met course objectives in an engaging way. Students felt their contributions were valued, particularly when they saw their suggestions immediately put into action. Students gained experience working with a client and collaboratively with their peers. Additionally, students increased their knowledge of the library, which may benefit their coursework throughout the remainder of their student career.

Due to the success of the collaboration, the librarians and professor have partnered on a second initiative developing a program that builds more personal relationships between students and University librarians. This experience has also been translated into a pedagogy workshop with the campus center for academic excellence. The desired outcome is that more faculty will identify and partner with campus organizations to provide experiential learning opportunities for students.

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