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**Client Guidelines for Grand Challenges Senior Team Projects**

These guidelines will help clients, project sponsors, and community partners scope a Grand Challenges student team project, establish norms when working with student teams, understand roles and responsibilities, and develop a positive learning environment.

**Grand Challenges Program – Background**

The Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management at Cornell University established the [Grand Challenges Program](https://dyson.cornell.edu/programs/undergraduate/academics/degree-requirements/grand-challenges/) to provide experiential learning opportunities for undergraduates to apply their business skills to the most pressing societal challenges of our time using the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](https://sdgs.un.org/goals) (UN SDGs) as a framework. The curriculum is required of all students, and the program seeks to build awareness of the broader impacts of business on society and, through the process of public engagement, to strengthen their leadership and professional skills.

The Grand Challenges Program demonstrates our commitment to our ethos of “Our Business is a Better World,” and we have created intentional touchpoints for all Dyson students starting in their first year (or first transfer year). The first year course provides students with a deeper understanding of the undergraduate experience at Dyson, develops problem solving skills, and introduces students to the UN SDGs. A sophomore-level written expression course is designed to improve writing skills while developing ethical awareness and a critical understanding of the positive and negative impacts of business. A junior pre-project skills course focuses on the human dimensions of team performance and business success. The Program culminates in a semester-long, client-facing experiential learning project, in which teams of 4-5 seniors work under the close supervision of a faculty member on a real-world problem at the local, regional, national, or global level.

**Project Guidelines and Best Practices**

Grand Challenges team project topics may include (but are not limited to): corporate finance; market research; consumer behavior; decision-making; strategy; market entry; data analytics; innovation or new product development; and operations. Students may also support organizations in concept development, social media or website development, incorporation or tax status determinations, business plan development, competitive analysis, event planning or fundraising, and any work that increases diversity, equity, inclusion, and community engagement.

**All projects meet the following criteria:**

* Working with a real client or partner on an issue with direct human impact in the community where the work takes place;
* Well-defined scope and clear deliverables;
* Integration with relevant topical course content;
* Team-based work with a critical self-reflection component; and
* Connection to the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](https://sdgs.un.org/) (e.g., reducing poverty, increasing food security, reducing inequality, and promoting sustainability).

Students work on a range of subjects and final deliverables vary, but the best project experiences have several things in common:

* **Human-centered and community-engaged work, where students interact with “stakeholders beyond shareholders.”** As students assess the central problem or issue, research should focus on stakeholder interviews and conversations. Research with google and independent exploration are also part of the learning process, but students are encouraged to use design thinking strategies to understand the human dimensions of their project.
* **Realistic expectations.** Students complete their project as part of a 3-credit course, and a typical student is concurrently enrolled in 3-4 additional courses. Students are full-time learners and not paid employees. Additionally, everyone involved in the project should be adaptable and flexible. Student projects may change or pivot due to on unforeseen circumstances or new learnings.
* **Clients as project partners, not thought partners.** While the project scope may change slightly over the course of the semester, students should be working on concrete deliverables that are clear from the beginning. When checking in with your team, avoid brainstorming sessions and instead focus on feedback and next steps toward achieving the agreed upon deliverables.
* **Appropriate importance to the organization.** Projects assigned to student teams should not be “mission critical” for the project sponsor or client. Projects that are back-burner or that would benefit from a fresh perspective are better models for success.
* **Compels students to think beyond deliverables.** We use the critical reflection framework “What, So What, Now What.” In other words, what is the project, why does it matter, and how will you apply this learning experience to your own life?

**Project Timeline**

Students are expected to devote approximately eight hours per week to the project course. This time includes team meetings, client meetings, research, and work on class assignments or project deliverables. In general, a project team works approximately 400 hours on their project over the course of a 15-week semester. The semester begins the fourth week of August (Fall semester) or January (Spring semester).

Ideal timeline:

* At least 2 months prior to the first day of classes: meet with the Grand Challenges Program Team for early project scoping
* 1 month prior to the first day of classes: Project refinement and faculty introductions
* 2 weeks prior to the first day of classes: Project description finalized, project agreements executed
* Week 2 of classes: Student project selection, project team formation
* Week 3 of classes: Organization scan and initial research by the student team to prepare for a project kick off meeting with the client
* Week 4 of classes: Kick off meeting and introductions
* Week 5-6 of classes: Research, planning, and discovery
* Week 7-13: Focused project work (transition from research to deliverables)
* Week 14: Final project deliverables due, final presentation, and project hand-off to client
* Week 15: Team evaluations and debrief with the Grand Challenges Program Team

**The Project Working Group**

The project working group includes the client or project sponsor, the student team, a supervising faculty member, the Grand Challenges Program Manager, and an MBA Coach who provides ongoing mentorship. The success of the project relies on the contributions of each individual member and the collaboration of the whole group. Below are some general guidelines and expectations for the project working group.

*Client / Project Sponsor / Community Partner:*

* Work directly with faculty and staff to determine project scope, objectives, and deliverables.
* Designate a point person within the organization to serve as the primary contact for the student team. The point person enables the team to fulfill the project objectives by providing information, guidance, and access to key resources in a timely fashion.
* Meet regularly with the student team (in person or zoom) to give feedback, set deliverables, and discuss next steps. We anticipate a commitment of 1-2 hours per week from the client.
* Help obtain key resources from the organization which may include data, connections to individuals with relevant domain knowledge, or any specialized software relevant to the project. Resources and/or data should not include confidential information. Data sets and documents should not include any personally identifiable or proprietary information.
* Execute any project agreements in a timely manner and prior to the beginning of the semester.
* If feasible and appropriate, help plan a site visit for the students. Please note that there is no cost to work with a student team and sponsor a project, but certain expenses such as specialty software licenses or market research with paid participants are the responsibility of the client.
* Attend the final presentation (in person or zoom).
* Give feedback. Client feedback is part of the team’s final project course grade.
* Subject to any confidentiality restrictions or commercial concerns the client may raise, allow Cornell to post a brief project summary on our public-facing websites (with text approved by the sponsor prior to posting).

*Students:*The primary responsibility of the student team is to fulfill the project objectives in a timely and professional manner. At the conclusion of the project, the student team will deliver to the client a formal written report, an oral presentation, and/or any relevant supporting materials. Students are encouraged to discuss deliverables and expectations for the project directly with the client, this skill is also part of their professional development.

*Grand Challenges Faculty and Staff:*

We work with the client to scope the project and help the client identify goals and deliverables that support Grand Challenges objectives and align with the skills of the students. The supervising faculty member and Program Manager host a client orientation and attend the final presentation. The supervising faculty member also meets regularly with the student team(s) and assigns periodic assignments or reflections that are part of the student’s final grade. After the project is complete, we gather feedback from clients and post basic information about the project on our website.

*MBA Coach:*

Each student team is assigned an MBA Coach. The Coach is not expected to be a subject-matter expert or a project manager. The Coach is expected to:

* Help to keep the project on track and moving forward
* Support the team by assisting with team dynamics and asking thoughtful questions
* Provide guidance and feedback during regular meetings with the team to help them prepare for client meetings
* Attend client meetings as their schedule allows
* Surface issues, provide input on grades, and report to the faculty member

**Project Goals and Outcomes**

Our goal is to create experiential learning opportunities for our students while providing a service to clients and a benefit to society. While sponsors are usually highly satisfied with project results, we cannot guarantee successful outcomes. Moreover, since our students graduate and move on, we are often unable to provide ongoing support for deliverables developed by the student team, although, in some cases, a new student team can resume the work the following semester. To help the project transition, supporting documentation is typically provided and a formal handoff is made at the project’s conclusion. We also encourage clients to develop working relationships with the students after their projects are completed if this is of mutual interest.

We invite you to connect with the Grand Challenges Program to learn more about sponsoring a senior team project. Please contact Lisa Gerber, Grand Challenges Program Manager, to discuss opportunities and next steps.

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