

Rethinking the Classroom: One Department's Attempt to Connect Student Learning and National Events

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Communication programs have a rich anecdotal history of connecting student learning to real-world experience. Yet, the same programs, including ours, often privilege classroom-based instruction and instructor-led experiential learning over other types of experiences. When community organizers announced a national mega-event for our city, faculty in our communication department knew that we wanted to use it as a learning experience. We brainstormed ideas, most of which were classroom- and semester-based concepts typical of traditional topics courses. But, one of our faculty members suggested that we think outside of the concept of classroom. What resulted was a unique experience unlike any we had offered before: a valuable and compelling learning event that emerged from a successful faculty-staff-student-community partnership.

Key Words: experiential learning, community partnership, communication, classroom, internship

This case study seeks to share our experience as a framework for other departments and universities for innovation around the concept of classroom and program administration. For context, this study will first present the individual case and experiential opportunity that faced our department. Next, the analysis will illustrate the administrative process that advanced the program and its resulting impact among students as well as in the department, university, community, and city. Finally, and most importantly the paper illustrates the lessons learned that emerged from the experience to provide suggestions for other programs seeking to explore similar opportunities in their own contexts.

Context

Queens University of Charlotte is a private, co-ed, Presbyterian-affiliated comprehensive university with a commitment to both liberal arts and professional studies. Located in the heart of historic Charlotte, North Carolina, Queens serves approximately 2,500 undergraduate and graduate students through its College of Arts and Sciences, the McColl School of Business, the Wayland H. Cato, Jr. School of Education, the James L. Knight School of Communication, Hayworth College for Adult Studies, and the Andrew Blair College of Health—which features the Presbyterian School of Nursing.

Queens is nestled in a historic neighborhood just 2 miles from uptown Charlotte. In summer of 2011, a bi-partisan group of community organizers announced that the 2012 Democratic National Convention would occur in Charlotte, North Carolina.

As the university is gaining reputation as an intellectual and cultural leader in the city, the university's leadership suggested that faculty and students should consider ways that the university could engage with the city during the convention, scheduled for September 3-7, 2012. Moreover, the university's motto—*non ministrare, sed ministrare* (not to be served, but to serve)—lays a compelling foundation for our students and faculty to interact with the city and

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community on a regular and recurring basis.

Faculty and staff in the James L. Knight School of Communication took this call seriously and were challenged by our community advisory board to invest in learning experiences surrounding the convention. The school's dean, a former journalist and media innovator, was also attuned to the importance of the event for the city and advanced the development of convention-related learning opportunities. The communication faculty members at Queens have the decision-making power for curricular experiences and agreed to answer the call for a convention-related learning experience.

Notably, the faculty of the school were quick to state that, for us, the political nature of the event was not as important as the opportunity for our students to learn. We would like to think that we would have taken similar actions if the mega-event approaching our city was Republican, Democrat, bipartisan, or apolitical. This emphasis on student learning is a hallmark of our communication program, and the faculty routinely makes curricular decisions with student learning as the leading concern of decision-making processes.

Case Analysis

Stage One: Brainstorming

To launch the discussion, the dean of the Knight School of Communication appointed an ad-hoc committee led by the director of undergraduate programs. The committee consisted of the undergraduate curriculum committee, a staff member, and solicited members from any interested parties in the school.

At the first committee meeting in late January 2012, 3 tenured and tenure-track faculty members were joined by a visiting professor, a part-time faculty member, two adjunct faculty members, the dean, and two staff members. The agenda for the first committee meeting was a brainstorm.

The initial brainstorm generated ideas including a special topics course, internship opportunities, partnerships with the department of political science, and some communication-related research opportunities (e.g. analyses of protests, speeches, and media coverage). At the time, we liked all of these ideas, but one confounding variable stood in our way: the convention was scheduled for the second full week of class in a new academic year.

This one issue influenced our subsequent discussion. At one point, one of the committee members said, "What if the university just cancelled all of its classes and invited students to go experience the event for the week of the convention?" We laughed.

Later in the conversation, we realized that while we did not have control of the university's vast array of courses, we did control the courses within our school. As a committee, we talked through the idea of "bringing down the walls" of our school during the convention by unifying all of our students in a single course for the convention. Immediate issues arose: What would happen to classes scheduled to meet that week? What would happen to students who had classes outside of the department? How would we ensure student learning, and toward what aim? How might we prepare students to engage with the convention? We left the meeting to ponder these issues.

At our second meeting, every committee member returned resolved to pursue a unique learning event. We decided to consider cancelling all classes in our school for one week. We agreed that a possible format was a two-day class (20 contact hours) before the convention and then structured learning opportunities during the convention. We imagined that the two-day class would be joint meeting of all of our classes with different components taught by different faculty

members. Then, structured learning opportunities would be faculty-imagined and led, like a mini-study-abroad trip inside our city. (Note that the final result only resembled this plan). The committee agreed that a student should receive academic credit for enrolling in this experience, and decided to offer one-credit hour for student participation.

The committee agreed that the plan was so unlike any learning experience we had seen and should therefore seek administrative support before the idea progressed further. The committee chair wrote a formal proposal and circulated it among the committee members, ensuring that it reflected the spirit of the committee's thinking.

Stage Two: Seeking Support

As the conceptual framework for this experience emerged from the faculty, several administrative units needed to be supportive of the events for them to move forward. The director of undergraduate programs sought feedback and support from the following divisions and units, in order:

- Dean and school staff
- Departmental faculty
- Provost's Office and University Academic Affairs
- School Advisory Board Members
- University Faculty
- University Marketing & Community Relations

Dean and School Staff. The dean and school staff were immediately supportive. Having been represented on the committee, both constituencies were optimistic about the success. The rationale for approaching this constituency first was to ensure that the committee did not waste faculty discussion time on a proposal that would not be supported (philosophically or financially) by the administrators within our school.

Departmental Faculty. Before the next regular faculty meeting, the proposal was circulated so that a formal vote could occur. Faculty had hallway conversations and meetings to vet the proposal and unresolved issues were clarified during the meeting. These included the following key decisions:

1. If approved, all regularly scheduled classes in the Knight School of Communication would not meet during the week of the convention, including two class days prior (August 30 – September 7, 2012).
2. If approved, all faculty would formally support the cancelling/rescheduling of coursework during the week of the convention by arranging their syllabi to correspond with the dates of the experience.
3. If approved, faculty members were not required but could elect to participate in the conference-style course. Faculty members would also not be required to take on additional work, such as leading learning experiences.
4. If approved, all faculty and academic advisors would encourage all Knight School majors to participate in the program.

The faculty voted unanimously to approve the proposal and to adopt it into the curriculum as a 1-hour, special topics course under our existing COMM 360 topics course designation.

Provost's Office & University Academic Affairs. Academic Affairs was notified of the faculty decision and given copies of the proposal. The office had no objection to the proposal and indicated to the dean that the faculty had control of curricular decisions, including this one.

School Advisory Board Members. The advisory board of the Knight School had previously requested a report on the school's plans to engage the convention. At the next regularly scheduled meeting of the advisory board, the director of undergraduate programs

presented the proposal. The advisory board gave feedback and suggestions. One unforeseen outcome of the board meeting was that several of the board members offered to host students for learning experiences during the convention. These sites included local broadcast news affiliates, *The Charlotte Observer*, and via board member connections, the Democratic National Convention Committee itself. This concept influenced our later mindset about the experiential learning opportunity portion of the proposal.

University Faculty. All school deans were sent copies of the proposal and all university faculty were notified of the upcoming event through the faculty newsletter. The committee encouraged other departments to collaborate as they saw fit. A university-wide committee comprised of faculty and staff from across the campus was also tasked with organizing convention-related events. A copy of the proposal was issued to that group as well. This committee did not provide formal feedback. The course moved through the university's curriculum process without incident.

University Marketing & Community Relations. The proposal was shared with the university's external marketing office which immediately realized the outreach potential of the event. The office supported press contacts and also directed external partnership opportunities to our organizers.

Stage Three: Implementation

By late March 2012, the committee was prepared to move forward and, given that the end of the semester was approaching, chose to delegate responsibility for the conference to a faculty and staff team: the director of undergraduate programs and the community coordinator, a staff member in the school tasked with developing community partnerships.

This team divided tasks for the event. The director of undergraduate programs was tasked with the curricular development and assessment of the course; the community coordinator was charged with identifying and directing the experiential learning opportunities for students at the convention. The team met at least once a week for the months leading to the convention and invited critical partners to the meetings as needed. Faculty and staff who were present over the summer were invited to participate in the design of the overall experience and give feedback on the selection of events.

The team issued two calls for support: one for students and one for speakers. The marketing materials sent to students are found in Figure 1, and were distributed via email and paper flyer corresponding with student registration for fall classes.

The team also used a webpage on the university's learning management system to answer student questions about the impact of the course on their fall schedule. Over one hundred students registered as participants. All communication majors and minors who did not register for the course were contacted individually at least three times to ensure that all who wanted to participate were given the option.

The call for speakers was issued online and via email to faculty and community partners. The marketing materials read:

The Knight School is sponsoring an innovative learning experience for undergraduate students in the fall surrounding the Democratic National Convention: a conference-style seminar and field work during the DNC 2012.

The two-day seminar held on Thursday, August 30, and Friday, August 31, 2012 will feature a variety of sessions including:

- Charlotte's history

- The role of mega-events in the life of urban centers
- The history of political conventions
- Glimpses of unusual circumstances surrounding past political conventions
- The role of citizens in the political process
- The influences of faith, rhetoric, race, finance, and media technology in politics and citizenship
- The need for digital literacy in current citizenship
- Political protest
- and more...

CALL FOR PRESENTERS

If you're an expert in one of the topics above or another topic related to Charlotte and the Convention, we want you to be a part of this unique learning experience.

Presentations will vary in length from 15 – 75 minutes. Proposals should include a title, a description, the names of the speaker(s), and the proposed time allotment proposed for the session. Panel discussions, lecture-based presentations, multimedia sessions, experiential learning, and other innovative sessions are welcome.

The response for presenters generated four programs, so the team devised and invited panel discussions and community-led sessions to round out the proposals.

Stage Four: Event Coordination

The learning experience was divided into two parts: (1) the two-day conference, and (2) the experiential learning opportunity.

The two-day conference. As noted above, the conference struggled from a lack of applicants to present. The team devised a series of sessions in an attempt to vary the style and format of the sessions. Session formats included 75-minute presentations, themed panels, moderated discussions, a rapid-fire “Pecha Kucha” session (a visual presentation style in which multiple presenters each offer an oral presentation alongside 20 slides for 20 seconds per slide), and “TECH-niques” sessions in which students could build skills using digital technologies. The team then intentionally recruited moderators for specific panels, arranged panelists for vibrant discussion, and invited speakers including both faculty and community partners.

The conference included 10 plenary sessions and 3 sets of concurrent session blocks featuring 36 different presenters. Presenters included a well-known Charlotte historian, the editor of *The Charlotte Observer*, local media icons and innovators, members of the convention host committee, university marketing staff, and university faculty members from the departments of communication, political science, history, philosophy, religion, Spanish, art, and environmental science. Several sessions were open to the public and to interested Queens students who had not registered for the course.

The team also decided to frame the event as a professional conference. Registered attendees (enrolled students) were given official nametags, checked in at a registration table, and received printed program guides. Before, between, and after sessions, music played throughout the conference area. Snacks were provided in common areas during breaks. Event staff set the stage for each session using a variety of tables, podiums, and chairs. The lighting of the room was planned and scheduled for each presentation, and all sessions were recorded by university staff. The room also included a live Twitterfall projecting any tweets using the hashtag #comm360. The hashtag and the university's Twitter profile trended in Charlotte and the region during the event.

Figure 1
Marketing Materials for COMM 360



The experiential learning opportunity. Based on the feedback from the advisory board, the community coordinator began seeking placements for student experiential opportunities. Brownell and Swaner (2010) lists high impact practices for student learning, one of which is service learning. Their framework for effective experiences includes (1) a connection between course material and the opportunity; (2) enough hours of service for a meaningful experience; (3) direct contact between students and the placement’s clients; and (4) oversight of activities at the service site. The community coordinator sought out sites with these issues in mind.

The response was shocking to us. Placement opportunities during the convention included:

- *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (students worked in digital media production);
- *ABC World News* (students supported the anchor desk featuring Diane Sawyer & George Stephanopolous);
- Democratic National Convention Committee Communication Center (students performed event and media management tasks, including:
 - Running on the floor of the convention;
 - Serving a press liaisons for American media with convention credentials;
 - Facilitating the foreign press gallery;
 - Event management on the conference podium committee; and
 - Hosting and escorting dignitaries in the city and at the convention.)
- *The Charlotte Observer* (students worked alongside reporters and independently to produce digital content about the convention);
- The PPL, a press center for non-credentialed media that hosted a variety of speakers and from which broadcasts and internet reporting could occur inside the security perimeter (students served as event staff); and,
- Local and regional news organizations, both broadcast and print (students served on reporting teams).

The community coordinator served as the liaison between students and these placements over the summer, inviting applications and placing students into opportunities of fit. The coordinator successfully developed and placed all 106 participating students into these opportunities. All placements were finalized and confirmed before the conference event began. Each of the placement sites were given a meeting time during the conference to interact with

students and give final instructions before the event.

Stage Five: Assessment

Formal assessment of student work was conducted by university faculty. The faculty-designed student learning outcomes for this experience as follows: At the conclusion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Understand the city of Charlotte and its history.
2. Investigate the role of mega-events, like this convention, in the history of urban centers.
3. Apply the concepts of digital literacy by:
 - a. learning the issues created by access to technology, or lack thereof;
 - b. acting as digital citizens by helping Charlotte citizens and/or visitors create and share information during the convention; and
 - c. reflecting on their observations of and use of digital tools surrounding the convention.
4. Contribute to the community during the convention.

In addition to student attendance and feedback about the conference sessions, these outcomes were assessed through three deliverables:

1. *Charlotte and the Convention, in my own words.* Each student created a video describing his/her experience at the convention, editing together the sights and sounds of the week, but also reflecting on the *experience*.
2. *Pinterest Archive.* All students joined a single Pinterest board and uploaded images from their experiences at the convention to a group archive. The resulting archive included 1095 pins, primarily comprised of student-created images of their own work.
3. *Digital Literacy Forums.* Students participated in asynchronous discussions about the role of digital literacy in their placement and at the convention overall. The discussions centered on the issues of digital and media literacy outlined by Hobbs' (2010) *Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action*.

These three deliverables were submitted using the university's online learning management system. All were assessed using a faculty-developed rubric and feedback was provided online.

Key Learning for Our Department

The following list highlights the key concepts revealed in our process for implementing a conference-style class in the university.

Buy-in

- **Department faculty should agree unanimously, if possible.**

Agreement by all meant that we had leverage to implement our plan without detractors. This allowed our faculty to collectively support and defend the decision for our students.

- **University faculty will bring many questions.**

As our decision impacted course work and sessions across the university, we had to inform and include university faculty. Our strategy was to invite their participation and issue reminders through the campus-wide faculty newsletter. We also identified one person in the department to respond to queries about student participation.

- **Administrative buy-in is highly important.**

If our administration had not been willing to advance this innovative classroom concept, we would not have had the resources or philosophical support to move forward.

Scheduling

- **Session format should be varied and appropriately timed.**

Our planning team brainstormed various types of sessions we wanted to see. These included lectures, panels, Pecha Kucha, media viewings, meetings, productive breaks, and concurrent production trainings. Then, we targeted speakers, presenters, and panelists to fill conference slots.

- **Session topics should be directed by student learning outcomes.**

From our list of student learning outcomes, we derived the types of topics we wanted to address. This allowed us to ensure that we had touched on every learning outcome during the conference as well as during the assessment.

Conference Feel (Designing the Experience)

- **Details matter.**

The items that made the conference feel like a conference were the small details, referenced by students in their evaluations: nametags, registration tables, programs, music during breaks, spontaneous snacks, changes in lighting and timing, and a professor acting as emcee.

- **Technology can add to the discussion.**

In our case, utilizing a Twitterfall and Pinterest archive during the conference allowed students to have public backchannel discussions throughout the event, and later during their placements around the city. Faculty monitored the discussion to ensure it remained respectful and professional.

Community Partnerships

- **Opportunities are everywhere.**

We were surprised by the availability of opportunities for our students. Four months before the event, people all over the nation were calling our school seeking volunteers. Because most schools in the area were holding class during the event, college students were forced to “skip” classes if they wanted to participate. Our decision made space for students to have a rewarding experience, and made our school a go-to site for volunteers. Ultimately, we had more volunteer opportunities than students.

- **Partnerships for one event open doors for students.**

Our students made connections with media organizations across the nation. Many parlayed their experiences into internships, summer study programs, job offers, and personal contacts that continue to provide support and guidance to our students.

Concluding Remarks

Our hope is that other faculty members at other institutions, as well as our own, can learn from reading this case. In a time of growing uncertainty about the future of higher education, we can all afford to innovate with approaches to the classroom. This story and event has inspired us to seek loftier goals for our students, and to trust each other to provide valuable experiences. We will do it again. And we hope you will too.

References & Suggested Readings

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