

## ***Teaching Brief/GIFT***

# **Facilitating Students' Career Readiness Through Social Media Micro-internships with On-Campus Clients**

Denisse Vasquez-Guevara, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona  
Preeti Wadhwa, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

### **ABSTRACT**

Facilitating student career readiness is one of the key goals of baccalaureate communication programs. Specifically, employers seek professionals with technical skills (copywriting, editing, and content creation) and soft skills (critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork). However, first-generation students face disparities in accessing internship opportunities. This GIFT highlights a micro-internship experience offered to students enrolled in the course titled "Online and Social Media." As a part of this course-embedded experience, student teams developed social media strategies and content for on-campus clients. The student learning objectives included (a) creating a social media strategy aligned with the client's goals; (b) developing social media content adapted to varied target audience so as to increase reach and audience engagement; (c) helping students develop critical thinking, negotiation, teamwork; and last, but not the least, (d) exposing students to professional behavior and expectations. The associated assignments, rubric, teaching materials, and students' qualitative self-evaluation results are discussed.

*Keywords:* social media, micro-internship, soft-skills, public relations, journalism, communication, first-generation students

### **Overview**

As a part of this course-embedded micro-internship (MI) experience, students majoring in Multimedia Journalism, Public Relations, and Communication Studies enrolled in an upper-division required course titled “Online & Social Media” to offer real-world consulting to on-campus clients. The class had a total of 25 students between the ages of 20 and 25 years, with 15 juniors and 10 seniors. 90% of the students were first-generation college students. The sample consisted of 68% females and 32% males. In terms of ethnic backgrounds, 56% were Latino/a, 28% identified as White, and 8% each as Asian American and African American.

In teams of 2-4 members, students engaged in providing real-world consulting to three on-campus clients, including the Poly Post (student-run newspaper), the Farm Store (Grocery Store), and the Communication Department at Cal Poly Pomona (CPP). These clients, which included an academic unit, a non-profit business, and a news outlet, exemplified prospective employers for communication professionals. Media outlets use social media platforms to report news. Retail stores utilize social media to share information about their products and related promotions with customers. Educational institutions use social media to connect with current and prospective students, among others, to promote academic programs and events.

The course instructor negotiated partnerships with each site with the dual goal of providing students with a course-relevant experience that mimics the real-world, while addressing clients’ problems, a win-win for all. Students chose clients aligned with their majors and interests and worked on developing a social media strategic plan guided by client briefing. Students who completed the MI received a small stipend of 600.00 USD. This stipend was made possible through the MI initiative launched by the Office of Academic Innovation at CPP. This experience

enabled the development of transferable knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) in participating students including professionalism, negotiation, teamwork, critical thinking, effective communication, leadership, and diversity, equity, and inclusion practices (DEI) which are critical for successful college-to-career transition of students (Toth & Bourland-Davis, 2023).

The following section outlines the briefing provided by clients:

### **The Poly Post**

CPP's student-run newspaper since 1940, The Poly Post, provides coverage of the campus and local community news to a student body of more than 28,000 and about 2,400 faculty and staff members. (The Poly Post, 2023). Student journalists report news through a printed newspaper and online weekly editions. Aligned with the university's "learning by doing philosophy, the Poly Post offers a learning lab for students in multimedia journalism (Communication Department, 2024)."

For the MI project, the multimedia journalism students' majors oversaw this client. The newspapers' main goals were to (1) promote reader engagement through Poly Post's social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and their website; and (2) position the media as an independent student-run media by showcasing students' work as reporters and future journalists.

### **Communication Department, Cal Poly Pomona**

CPP's Communication Department, with over 400 students, offers BS degrees in science in Communication Studies, Multimedia Journalism, and Public Relations. The Department is a diverse and vibrant community where students, faculty, and alumni actively engage in scientific research, events, and service-learning projects with non-profit organizations, private companies, and advocacy groups. Moreover, as part of the California State University system (CSU), the Communication Department offers frequent scholarships, professional development events, and networking

opportunities to support students' career readiness. The Communication Department uses Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn as social media platforms to connect with its audiences.

In its briefing goals, the Communication Department emphasized on (1) developing a strategy to acknowledge students' and faculty achievements (i.e., awards, scholarships); and (2) showcasing its events, learning experiences, and unique opportunities to students to support campus-wide recruitment strategies.

This client was assigned to students majoring in public relations and communication studies given their specialization in organizational communication.

### **The Farm Store, Huntley College of Agriculture**

Founded in September 2001, the CPP Farm Store is a grocery store selling fresh produce grown on campus and also by small businesses in Southern California. Its target customers include the campus community and the local community. The Farm Store sells farm-to-table fruits, honey, jams, and vegan food options locally sourced from over 400 acres of farmland across the campus and the greater Pomona in Southern California (The Farm Store, 2020).

CPP's Farm Store primarily uses Facebook and Instagram to promote its products and services. This client's goals for their social media strategy development were to (1) position the Farm Store as a farm-to-table grocery store open to the campus and the broader community at large, and how its sales support polytechnic learning experiences and (2) attract new customers by showcasing trending products.

Public relations majors were assigned to this client, given their focus on developing promotional campaigns for goods and services.

### **Rationale**

This assignment incorporated several directives recommended by the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE). Most of all,

CPRE strongly recommends that educators and practitioners partner to create experiential learning opportunities that enhance students' exposure to workplace behavior and expectations, thereby facilitating their career readiness (Toth & Bourland-Davis, 2023). This assignment strives to achieve precisely that. Further, the CPRE 2023 report reiterated the emphasis placed by the public relations practitioners on the critical strategic thinking skills as the most sought-after skill for entry-level professionals. Consequently, CPRE encourages educators to design capstone experiences that allow students to apply their learning to a real-world problem. This assignment is aligned with the recommendation.

Finally, CPRE encourages educators to explicitly embed DEI as a part of the ethical social responsibility in the curriculum design (Toth & Bourland-Davis, 2023). When incorporating client-specific key performance indicators (KPIs), the project guidelines emphasized developing inclusive strategic communication for target audiences representing a diverse population. Precisely, emphasis was placed on respectfully representing audiences' culture and identity when developing social media strategies.

To provide a learning experience that simulates the job market, students applied for the micro-intern position through Parker Dewey's online portal designed specifically for CPP students. This process required students to write a cover letter emphasizing how they would contribute to the client's goals. The MI experience embedded in the course required six weeks of in-class training before completing 40 hours of work per student. The experience culminated with students presenting their final recommendations to the clients in an in-person session, receiving feedback, and accordingly incorporating the same in the final project report.

Additionally, students who achieved an A as their letter grade received a digital badge (*Creative Content Creator- or Social Media Journalistic Content Creator*) through the Badger program of CPP.

Students were encouraged to include these digital badges in their LinkedIn profiles, curriculum vitae, and email signatures to convey their academic excellence to prospective employers.

**Micro-internship Challenges**

First-generation students face barriers to accessing internship opportunities. A primary barrier is their inability to pursue unpaid internships, which interferes with their work schedules and, consequently, the income that sustains their livelihoods and education (Hora, 2022). Not to mention that, as the first in their family to attend college, these students often lack the connections necessary to secure one (Blumenstyk, 2019). Even when the internships are paid, the life circumstances of these students and gendered family obligations come in the way (Wolfgram et al., 2021).

Moreover, paid internship programs are very limited for underrepresented minority students (Goldberger et al., 2021). Therefore, course-embedded MI projects enable first-generation students to access experiences that mimic an internship, thereby reducing the inequalities that often characterize traditional internships (Wingard, 2019). Micro-internships also enable faculty and community partners to co-mentor the participating students. In addition to contributing to students' career readiness, these experiences can be included as work experience on students' resumes. When funded, micro-internships also offer a stipend, which supplements students' income.

**Micro-Internship Pedagogy**

The extant literature on public relations pedagogy emphasizes the importance of real-client case studies as an effective learning and assessment tool for fostering student skill development (Motion & Burgess, 2014). Recent studies also reiterate the importance of real-life projects as class assignments in fostering students' skill development (McCollough et al., 2021). As mentioned earlier, the CPRE's 2023 Report

recommends that educators partner with practitioners to offer experiential learning opportunities to students, thereby facilitating their college-to-career transition. Moreover, students also benefit from the networking opportunities with potential employers, which further enhances their professional development (Saffer, 2015).

### **Connection to Theory and Practice**

Social media platforms offer effective ways to engage with audiences through public relations and marketing communication strategies (Albanna et al., 2022; Kim, 2020). Nevertheless, social media platforms challenge professionals as these constantly update functions and features for content creation and advertising (Quesenberry, 2020). Therefore, future communication professionals must develop their professional skills beyond the classroom by engaging with real-life clients to gain skills and experience (Freberg, 2021). However, first-generation students, owing to the systemic disparities, need additional support (Cruz Paul, 2023). Course-embedded experiential-learning projects that enable students to work on real-world problems under the joint mentorship of faculty and community partners serve as opportunity brokers to enable first-generation students' professional development (Beard, 2021).

In this project, students utilized communication theories and public relations campaign models as the foundation for the social media strategy developed for clients. For example, the medium theory created an understanding of social media's features and functions as communication conduits (Meyrowitz, 2008), thereby providing guidelines for choosing platforms' post formats to engage audiences with targeted messages effectively (Windah, 2012; Qvortrup, 2006).

Framing theory was also utilized as a guideline for content creation and messaging. Framing refers to the process of selecting and highlighting specific characteristics in a communication piece (Entman, 1993). For this project, students focused on visual frames and textual frames. Visual

frames analyze how images enhance specific communication efforts (Kuan et al., 2021). For example, students used Instagram Reels videos to promote farm-to-table products from The Farm Store, featuring content such as tips for making charcuterie boards and shopping hauls for preparing recipes. Textual frames that guide how texts can highlight specific events or ideological views (Zhou & Xu, 2022) were applied for caption texts on posts. For example, The Poly Post's social media strategies used textual frames to make news pieces more salient in static posts.

Finally, we analyzed the effects of content creators and influencers on their audiences through the two-step flow theory, which explains their interpersonal influence on audiences' decision-making (Katz, 1957). In the context of strategy planning, the two-step flow informed our curation and selection of content creators and influencers for each client, based on the theory's constructs related to the social impact of representation and self-identification (Al-Adwan et al., 2023; Stansberry, 2012).

Students were required to work in teams to develop their proposals. For this purpose, we drew upon teamwork in PR agencies' collaborative work (Luttrell & Capizzo, 2021), where students worked in account executive teams to develop a strategy. Additionally, action learning for digital communication informed social media content creation lectures (Olivares et al., 2019). Students had a hands-on experience creating static and video content, thereby practicing their copywriting, editing, and graphic design skills.

Public relations dialogical communication theory serves to interpret users' interactions, enabling the development of strategies for building sustainable relationships with audiences and stakeholders (Wang & Yang, 2020). Additionally, students employed the public relations campaign model ROPE (research, objectives, planning, and execution; Freberg, 2021a) when developing their digital campaigns.



At each MI stage, students utilized digital content tools that PR and advertising agencies use for creative work. Specifically, students developed mood boards to collect clients' brand kits and product/service information, supporting the content creation processes (Omwami et al., 2024). Brand/corporate personas (John, 2017) were also incorporated to develop brand characteristics.

The audience persona tool was used to summarize critical demographic and psychographic identifiers of target audiences (Kopacz, 2022). The instructor also included a lecture on DEI implications in social media guided by the Diversity and Inclusion Wheel for PR Practitioners (Luttrell & Wallace, 2021). Moreover, students were introduced to guidelines for AI prompt engineering to create images (Oppenlaender et al., 2024). Students also used survey data provided by clients to develop the persona profiles and used AI image generators from Canva to practice AI image generation. Students' proposals were graded using a rubric informed by the CPRE guidelines (See Appendix A).

#### **Assignment Learning Goals**

- Create a social media strategy aligned with the client's goals through a briefing, platform audits, and audience and brand personas.
- Develop digital content adapted to diverse target audiences to increase reach and audience engagement.
- Develop negotiation, critical thinking, teamwork, and other relevant soft skills of future communication professionals.
- Familiarize students with professional behavior and expectations at a typical communication workplace.

#### **Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes**

The MI had five assignment deliverables, including two discussion boards for students to assess student learning outcomes. The first discussion was completed at the beginning of the MI experience. Here,

students reflected on their career goals and discussed how social media is a tool—or even a medium—for their work. The second discussion forum prompted students to reflect on their MI experience and its contribution to their career readiness. Students also provided feedback to improve this MI project.

In the first discussion board, students frequently mentioned possible career options in the field of social media. Ten out of 26 students expressed a desire to work as social media managers, and five profiled themselves as content creators. Eleven journalism students shared how they will use social media for reporting, while six emphasized how they would also like to use Instagram or TikTok to position themselves as journalists and create an online community.

In the second discussion board, students' reflections referred to MI as an exploratory experience that provided them with a realistic preview of what it entailed to be a journalist or a PR and communication professional. Here, some students reiterated their desire to be social media managers, content creators, or journalists reporting through social media formats. For other students, the exposure made them discover their strengths and areas of development. In this regard, students mentioned:

I didn't like the video editing part, so definitely I will shift to a role of social media manager more than a content creator, because I would rather like to work in a team with a videographer... I discovered that I am a team player rather than someone who works independently.

Moreover, students recognized the MI as an opportunity for networking. One student commented: "As challenging this project was, I felt like it was a real job. I showcased my skills to my peers." Another student agreed, "I liked getting feedback and learning from a real client." Additionally, students mentioned, "...the MI taught me how important it

is to be open to feedback for making adaptations after client reviews.”

Another student commented, “... I learned that is a normal process in PR agencies. Before that, I would have thought I was not doing a good job if I was asked to make changes and be upset.”

Most students agreed that this experience enabled them to integrate knowledge and skills from prior courses, including communication research, public relations writing, media design, and video journalism. Additionally, students mentioned how MI offered an increased opportunity to promote their work to prospective employers by allowing them to build on their professional portfolios.

Students’ success was achieved with improved grades in the research, planning, and creativity stages (See Appendix A). Students in this course successfully developed situational analysis and creative insights to enhance audience engagement and meet clients’ goals for social media content. However, students earned lower grades in professional communication, a critical soft skill. For instance, students did not meet deadlines or promptly address the client’s feedback. This aligns with their comments regarding their experiences.

This project offered a hands-on learning experience for students. The exposure to a professional scenario allowed them to be self-aware and learn how to be open to feedback and adapt their project to meet clients’ expectations. Moreover, students could compare their prior expectations about specific job positions with real-life experiences to make informed career choices. The instructor’s teaching evaluation demonstrated that 56.5% of students strongly agreed that they achieved a high-level understanding of the learning outcomes. Over 43% of students agreed that this course was a meaningful learning experience.

Clients executed several proposals from students and achieved their engagement goals. The Poly Post increased its engagement and followers (100 on Instagram and 100 on YouTube). The Communication Department experienced improved user engagement and gained new

followers (100 on Instagram and 388 on LinkedIn). The Farm Store adopted user-generated content creation strategies on Instagram to promote the CPP product line in cooking recipes. As a result, they had a 10% increase in user engagement.

### **Template Assignment Guide**

The project was developed through scaffolded assignment deliverables submitted to advance toward the final proposal during the course of 40 work hours per student.

#### **Deliverable 1: Briefing.**

- Develop a briefing, research, and platform audit of your client. Include an audience and brand persona about each of your target audiences.

**Points: 10.**

#### **Class Discussion: Socials and your future.**

- Think about what you would like to do when you graduate and envision how social media can be part of your work or even your own business. Share your ideas on our discussion board with the class.

**Points: 5.**

#### **Deliverable 2: Project Planning Presentation.**

- Create three social media strategies for your client.
- Develop a [mood board](#) inspired by the client and an audience persona representing each target audience.
- Develop a [slide presentation](#) for 5-10 minutes (maximum). All the team members need to present a section of the project.

**Points: 15.**

#### **Deliverable 3: Content Development.**

- Develop three posts for the strategies proposed in your plan with a text caption.
- Explain how each post addresses the client objectives developed in

the briefing.

- Present this work in progress to the client during the scheduled class visit.

**Points: 20.**

**Deliverable 4. Final Project.**

- Present all the prior deliverables addressing the feedback provided by the client.
- Describe the strategy and explain your proposal in terms of how it addresses the goals and needs of the client.
- Present a calendar detailing the publication date, time, and format.
- Include each content piece, caption text (with hashtags).
- Present in a slide presentation format.

**Points: 15.**

**Deliverable 5. Final Reflection.**

- Reflect on what you have learned about this class and how it relates to your career goals and plans. Did micro-internships teach you something relevant to your ideal job? Finish providing feedback and ideas on how the micro-internships can be improved. (150 characters limit).

**Points: 15.**

**Teaching Notes**

Partnering with on-campus clients, this MI engaged students in an action-learning project that allowed them to integrate their prior knowledge in public relations, video journalism, copywriting, and media design. Consequently, it is recommended for courses with students who have met these prerequisite requirements.

Developing weekly sessions for feedback and mini-student presentations improved students' proposals and enabled them to learn from each other while honing their presentation skills. For groups larger than 27 students, instructors may require the support of a teaching assistant. This course required a computer lab with internet access to develop the

lectures and assignment deliverables. Additionally, students also used their smartphones for pictures and video recording. Design apps such as Canva, InShot, and CapCut were handy for developing social media content.

### **Conclusion**

The MI was an impactful learning experience. Students gained the professional skills and competencies required of communication professionals in a safe environment while working on real-world problems in a setting that resembled communication-related workplaces (Toth & Bourland-Davis, 2023). It also offered a realistic job preview of what pursuing a career in social media strategy, management, and content creation implied.

Similar to an internship opportunity, students gained work experience that could be included on their resumes. Micro-internships differ from traditional internships as these involve the active mentorship of instructors who guide students as the latter applies what they learned in the classroom. For first-generation students on a commuter campus, this project offered an enriching real-world experience while adapting to their life circumstances. Students were highly motivated to see their work incorporated into clients' communication strategies and include this experience in their professional portfolios. The stipend was an added incentive for students.

DEI concepts were applied in practice through audience personas. This was a meaningful learning experience as students respectfully approached the culture, ethnicity, and personal identifiers of clients' audiences. Moreover, they learned key criteria for avoiding cultural stereotyping and overgeneralization in online communication campaigns (Bush & Lindsey, 2024; Mogull, 2024).

Embedding client-based projects that focus on a real-world problem requires a significant effort from the instructor in charge to prepare lectures, grade, and mentor students. However, it constitutes a

meaningful experience to explore public relations teaching and research on social media and strategic communication.

Extant research indicates that employers require entry-level public relations and communication professionals to possess strong leadership, teamwork, and technical skills focused on writing and social media management (Meganck et al., 2020). Additionally, media reporting must include diverse audiences and multimedia formats (Guo & Volz, 2021) for journalism positions. This project offered a safe space for students to hone their soft and technical skills.

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**Appendix A**  
**Grading Rubric based on CPRE guidelines (2023)**

<b>Client Research (20 points)</b>	High-quality, engaging, and diverse content aligns with the strategy and resonates with the target audience. Effective use of visuals, captions, hashtags, and calls to action. (18-20)	Good-quality content aligns with the strategy to engage the target audience. Appropriate use of visuals, captions, hashtags, and calls to action. (14-17)	Basic content aligns with the strategy but may not fully engage the target audience. Some use visuals, captions, hashtags, and calls to action but lack creativity. (10-13)	Poor-quality or incomplete content. It does not align with the strategy to engage the target audience. Lacks effective use of visuals, captions, hashtags, and calls to action. (9-0)
<b>Strategy Planning (20 points)</b>	Comprehensive social media metrics analysis. Detailed report including recommendations. Demonstrates a strong understanding of analytic metrics. (18-20)	Good analysis of social media metrics. Detailed report with some insights and recommendations. Shows a good understanding of analytics tools and techniques. (14-17)	Basic analysis of social media metrics. The report includes some data but lacks actionable insights. Shows a limited understanding of analytics tools and techniques. (10-13)	Incomplete analysis of social media metrics. The report lacks data and actionable insights. Shows a poor understanding of analytics tools and techniques. (9-0)
<b>Strategy Execution (20 points)</b>	Consistent and effective communication. Timely updates, clear presentations, and respectful interactions. Excellent teamwork and collaboration. (9-10)	Professional and effective communication with the client. Regular updates, clear presentations, and respectful interactions. Good teamwork and collaboration. (7-8)	Basic communication with the client. Occasional updates, adequate presentations, and generally respectful interactions. Demonstrates some teamwork and collaboration. (5-6)	Poor or inconsistent communication with the client. Infrequent updates, unclear presentations, or disrespectful interactions. Poor teamwork and collaboration. (4-0)
<b>Analytics and Reporting (20 points)</b>	Comprehensive social media metrics analysis. Detailed report including recommendations. Demonstrates a strong understanding of analytic metrics. (18-20)	Good analysis of social media metrics. Detailed report with some insights and recommendations. Shows a good understanding of analytics tools and techniques. (14-17)	Basic analysis of social media metrics. The report includes some data but lacks actionable insights. Shows a limited understanding of analytics tools and techniques. (10-13)	Incomplete analysis of social media metrics. The report lacks data and actionable insights. Shows a poor understanding of analytics tools and techniques. (9-0)

<b>Professional Communication (10 points)</b>	Consistent and effective communication. Timely updates, clear presentations, and respectful interactions. Excellent teamwork and collaboration. (9-10)	Professional and effective communication with the client. Regular updates, clear presentations, and respectful interactions. Good teamwork and collaboration. (7-8)	Basic communication with the client. Occasional updates, adequate presentations, and generally respectful interactions. Demonstrates some teamwork and collaboration. (5-6)	Poor or inconsistent communication with the client. Infrequent updates, unclear presentations, or disrespectful interactions. Poor teamwork and collaboration. (4-0)
<b>Creativity (10 points)</b>	Highly creative and innovative approach. Demonstrates original thinking and solutions that significantly enhance the client's social media presence. (9-10)	Creative approach with several innovative ideas. Demonstrates some original thinking and solutions that enhance the client's social media presence. (7-8)	Some creativity and innovation are present but lack originality. Demonstrates limited unique solutions. (5-6)	Lacks creativity and innovation. Demonstrates no original thinking or solutions. (4-0)

**Note:** Developed by the course instructor