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THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE
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Christina Clarke, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in the spring of 2010, successfully completed the Lee Honors College Thesis on April 19, 2012.

The title of the thesis is:

Deriving Significance from the Capstone Experience

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Keith M. Hearit", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Keith Hearit, Office of the Provost

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Diana Berkshire Hearit", written over a horizontal line.

Diana Berkshire Hearit, Office of the Vice President for Research

Deriving Significance from the Capstone Experience

Christina Clarke

April 19, 2012

Senior Honors Thesis
Lee Honors College
Western Michigan University

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Abstract

This thesis is a cumulation of my experience as a participant of Western Michigan University's COM 4500: Public Relations Program Development and an observer after completion of the course. I took the course in the fall of 2011 and in the spring of 2012 interviewed previous clients. I was most curious with what the process of the course was like for the clients and what recommendations they had for the future. The biggest take-away from my interviews is the notion that the capstone course is essentially the finish line for the students and the starting point for the clients.

This thesis contains recommendations for future students and clients of the course and other courses with similar formats. The incorporation of research, electronic submission of campaign proposals and the implementation of an internship opportunity are all suggestions I pooled from my interviews. The methodology used for data assembly and analysis was the general interview guide approach. This qualitative method provided deep insight from the clients' perspectives. Although drawn from one course, this report contains information that can be applied to other capstone experiences.

Overview of Course

As stated in the Western Michigan University course catalog, COM 4500: Public Relations Program Development *“is an advanced course in public relations emphasizing research, methodology, developing planning objectives and program evaluation for corporate, governmental, educational, and social service organizations.”*

As a student of the course the lessons taught throughout the semester touch on all of the topics outlined in the catalog. However, the course is much more intense and geared toward the professional world than the average undergraduate class.

Throughout the semester the students work for a client within the Kalamazoo area to develop a public relations campaign. Although the general format is the same as the precursor course, COM 3500, the client is real, the campaigns are judged by the client as well as the professor and a true “winner” is selected at the end of the semester. Further, the implementation of primary research is emphasized in this capstone course. This requires students to physically conduct their own directed research throughout the campaign process.

The class, comprised of approximately 20 students, is divided into four work groups for the entirety of the semester. Each group has an account executive, assistant account executive, media director, budget director and creative director. One client is selected for all of the work groups. Campaign development for the client is where the majority of the course time is spent. The groups are presented with a public relations problem that the client needs assistance with. After an initial meeting, a small amount of direction on the development of each campaign is given from the professor. The direction that each group decides to take their campaign is largely up to the account

executive and fellow group members. While there are a few in-class work days, the bulk of the work is done out of class time at the discretion of each group.

Each group works to develop a campaign book that addresses the public relations problem. The books vary in length from approximately 60 pages to over 100. The book is delivered to the client one week before the campaign presentation for his or her review. On the presentation day all four groups pitch their campaign to the client and in front of their peers. The presentation accounts for the student's final exam. At the end of the two-hour time period the client selects the one campaign that most fits their organization's needs.

The communication between the client and the groups is done solely through the account executives. There are three formal meetings arranged with the client and the students on behalf of the professor. The first is at the start of the semester and the client presents his or her organizational dilemma to the entire class. The second two meetings are with each of the groups for approximately 20 minutes each. The last meeting is the presentation day. This does not mean that there are only four interactions throughout the semester. It is up to each group how much or how little contact is made with the client. From my experience, email communication was heavy at the start and faded through the semester. Further, my group communicated with more than just the point person for the organization. It is also up to the groups if they would like to visit the client's office, interview other staff members or attend special events hosted by the client to gain further insights into the organization's culture and modus operandi.

Overview of Interviewed Clients

Kalamazoo Christian Elementary School

Kalamazoo Christian Elementary School was the client of COM 4500 in the fall of 2011. This was the client that I worked with for my campaign. The elementary school is part of the Kalamazoo Christian School Association (KCSA) and the principal, Marc Verkaik, was the primary contact. The association is comprised of pre-school, elementary, junior and high school levels. All levels of education are private and emphasize the importance of religious inclusion in academia. KCSA has operated in the Kalamazoo community for over 130 years.

Enrollment throughout the association has been on a steady decline for approximately seven years. KCSA reached out to the students of the course to help the association increase its student body at the elementary level. The association's chief concern was the retention of students from the pre-school to kindergarten levels. Additionally, Verkaik and his peers wished to know the public perception of its school system. Enrollment and community awareness guided much of the campaign process with this client.

Home Builders Association of Greater Kalamazoo (HBAGK)

As stated on their website, HBAGK "exists so that members of the residential construction industry can ethically and efficiently provide our communities with safe, quality, and affordable housing. The vision of the organization is to advocate on behalf of members so they maximize their capability for success in the housing industry. The goals of HBAGK are to promote home ownership, be a recognized voice of the

community, support economic growth and development of the community, and to promote the professionalism of members in the industry.”

HBAGK was contacted by Professor Diana Berkshire-Hearit because it had been contemplating a branding campaign. The course was an opportunity for the organization to get an outside perspective. This goal made research an important element of the campaign process. The primary contact, Faith Cervin, stated that the winning campaign provided supplemental information and understood HBAGK’s audience. Further, Cervin stated that they were excited to get input from young adults who will be future home purchasers.

Communities in Schools of Kalamazoo (CIS)

Communities in Schools of Kalamazoo (CIS) was the client of COM 4500 in the spring of 2011. As stated on their website, CIS of Kalamazoo “brings together major service providers, school officials, community volunteers, business leaders, and other concerned citizens to meet the various physical, social-emotional, and academic needs of students in Kalamazoo. Through its network of community partners, CIS surrounds students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life.”

CIS became a client to help increase the organization’s presence in the community and to increase participation levels in their programs. Successful campaigns were those that focused on parent and donor inclusion. The primary contact was Jennifer Clark.

Alzheimer's Association

The Alzheimer's Association of Kalamazoo is a small non-profit whose mission "is to eliminate Alzheimer's disease through the advancement of research; to provide and enhance care and support for all affected; and to reduce the risk of dementia through the promotion of brain health." The primary contact for the organization was Beth Peck.

The organization wished to know where it stood in the community. What it discovered was that numerous individuals could not identify the Alzheimer's Association logo. Thus, the campaign proposals largely focused on community awareness of the organization. According to Peck, the students in the course acted as the public relations department for the organization.

Methodology

The methodology used to gain research data for this thesis was informal interviews with past clients and analysis of the responses. Three types of informal interview methods include: (a) informal conversational interview, (b) general interview guide approach, and (c) standardized open-ended interview (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). The first, informal conversational interview, relies on spontaneous questions that are formed in the moment of interaction. The second, general interview guide approach, was the exact methodology I employed for my research. In this type of interview, all interviewees are asked the same questions but, based on their responses, each interview varies. This approach keeps the interviewer in control of the situation but allows for flexibility in the form of prompts and follow-up questions. The third type of informal interview, standardized open-ended, is very structured in the wording of questions. Interviewees are asked identical questions but no follow-up or prompting is done (Turner 2010). In the end, the general interview guide approach was the most appropriate because as the interviewer I had the ability "... to ensure that the same general areas of information are collected from each interviewee; this provides more focus than the conversational approach, but still allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting information from the interviewee," (McNamara 2009).

With the interview guide approach I used ten questions as a template for all of the clients. Should the conversation not flow as freely or if I had lost my train of thought I consulted the questions. Frequently the interviewees answered more than one of my questions in their responses. Due to this the questions were often ordered and worded differently as deemed appropriate. The types of questions asked were follow-up,

probing, specifying, direct, indirect, structuring and interpreting. I also employed periods of silence to allow the client ample time to reflect and gather his or her words. (Kvale 1996).

The strengths of the general interview guide approach are what drew me to this methodology. According to Steinar Kvale, interviews are good indicators of attitudes and “provide information about participants’ internal meanings and ways of thinking.” Because this thesis aims to gain insight into the experience of COM 4500 from the client perspective, open communication that allowed me to read nonverbal cues, tone and inflection were important. These signals and gestures could not have been picked up on had I simply emailed the clients my questions and asked for their written responses. Further, because the experience was different for each client I was able to tailor the interview for each public relations campaign. That is, I personalized the interaction with the individual clients based on the verbal and nonverbal responses I elicited from the questions.

There are a few drawbacks of the general interview guide approach. First, this method did require a time commitment from both myself and the clients. This was perhaps the most difficult aspect of the methodology, as I had to coordinate my student schedule with that of the client and his or her organization. Additionally, interviewees could not recall all information from their time as a client. While I tried to remain neutral, another drawback is that my reactions could have influenced the feedback given to me. I attempted to maintain adequate interpersonal skills (i.e. nodding, leaning forward, et cetera) without indicating that one response was favored over another. This was

perhaps the most difficult aspect of the process as I wished to voice my experience at certain times in the interviews.

Compared to the research I conducted as a student in COM 4500 this methodology was similar. In the capstone course my team and I went into the Kalamazoo community and spoke with residents, parents and churches. Some of these interviews were conducted face-to-face and others were electronic. I can verify, from my group's experience, that we gained more insight from the in-person interviews as opposed to the electronic submissions. With the electronic submissions, participants have time to think about and polish their answers. When individuals are interviewed in the moment you are able to pick up on more subtleties and capture their true emotions.

To evaluate the responses of the interviews, I looked for themes common to each of the four interactions. Due to the qualitative nature of the research, it was more difficult to compile the data than a typical standardized survey. I began with the separation of the data into observations and recommendations. I used my experience as a student of the course and my role as interviewer of past clients to pull out the most prominent aspects from each theme. I made sure to take paper notes of key recommendations or repeat ideas that the clients spoke about. Based on the amount of suggestions and flow of all four interviews, my selection of guided open-ended questions worked to reveal some key themes and a set of recommendations for how to proceed in integrating public relations theory into an experiential experience for a capstone course (Turner 2010).

Research/Interviews

Before a review of the observations and recommendations derived from the client interviews, this monograph will discuss the interview structure and method: specifically the questions asked, how email exchanges occurred and other logistics of the interview process. Appendixes A through C contain the questions, interview appointments and the initial client email.

The following ten questions were asked to each of the interviewed clients:

1. What was the process like for you?
2. Did you gain useful information as the client?
3. Did you fully implement the chosen campaign?
4. Did you use information from the campaigns you did not select?
5. What was the most valuable part of the process for your organization?
6. Do you feel the campaign you chose was implemented with ease? (i.e. Clear instructions and minimal confusion)
7. How was the communication between yourself and the account executives?
8. If you could repeat the process, what would you want to have done differently?
What would you want to have remained the same?
9. What was your impression of the presentation of the campaigns?
10. Do you have any additional feedback or recommendations?

The above questions were first reviewed for appropriateness by Professor Berkshire-Hearit. These questions were asked in a conversational manner and in some cases not in the presented order. As the interviewer, I allowed the interviewees to speak

freely with minimal guidance and provoked responses by asking additional questions based on their initial responses. Interview times ranged from 25 minutes to one hour and occurred at the client's place of business. All interviews were electronically recorded.

All clients were sent an email from Professor Berkshire-Hearit with a request for their participation in this thesis. I then sent six previous clients a personal email with information about this thesis and a request to meet for the interview. I heard back from four of the six and completed the interviews over the course of one month.

Interview Results

Theme 1: Observations

The Balance of Student and Professional

Throughout the 4-month process, students in the course are torn between the desire to please both the client and the professor. Clients desire a campaign that will boost their numbers and provide them with tangible results in a short time frame. Put simply, clients want to see behavior towards their organization change. However, as taught in the course, behavior change is the last step in a three-part process.

Awareness/knowledge must be built first, and then attitude/opinion change comes next. With attitudes and opinions changed, the third step results in altered behavior. I know that in my group there were many occasions where we had an action plan we knew the client would like, but it was not backed by knowledge. This meant we had to sacrifice certain ideas in order to develop more beneficial points that perhaps were more well-received by our professor than our client. This dichotomy was felt by my own group and by others in my class, as discovered by interpersonal interactions.

A further strain on the student-professional relationship with the client and the professor is the issue of time. As students, we are expected to attend other classes, group meetings, possibly jobs and other commitments. This makes it difficult to take up professional-level public relations tasks for the course. From my own experience, my group could only meet late in the evenings which led to fatigue and burn-out rather early into the meetings. When we managed to meet during the day, we noticed those daytime meetings outside of the class produced much higher quality work than meetings in the late afternoon or evening.

Presentation Day: An end for students, a start for clients

A huge awareness I gained while interviewing clients was the notion that on the final presentation day students are ready to end the process, whereas the client is ready to begin. The course, and other capstone experiences, is the last piece of the puzzle for a degree in public relations and many students in the class are seniors. I know for myself I frequently saw the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel when thinking about the client presentation. However, for the clients, the presentation day is where they are ready to begin their campaign trail.

Jennifer Clark of CIS mentioned that after she chose her favorite campaign, she and her co-workers felt the relief and sense of completion from the students. What in fact happens on the final client presentation day is this: as soon as the winner is announced, the room clears out and most students do not see the client again. As many of the organizations do not have much public relations experience, this results in a feeling of confusion and being lost as to the next immediate step. This concept will be further explored in the internship opportunity section.

All Groups are Valued

Due to the fact that the client must choose a winner on the presentation day, the groups not selected walk away with the thought that their material will be forgotten. I myself was in a group that was not selected as the winning campaign and was quite upset. In a moment of poor judgment I thought that all the hard work my team and I had done was for nothing. However, after my interview with Marc Verkaik of KCSA, I learned

the error in my thinking. As it turns out, Verkaik and all other clients used material from all of the presented campaigns.

Specifically, Verkaik said that a committee had been formed to review all four campaign proposals. The committee is comprised of parents from the kindergarten to twelfth-grade level. Verkaik chose not to be a member of the sub-committee so as to not taint or sway the decisions made. The members of the committee will take material from all four proposals and develop a composite campaign. Other clients said similar techniques were used after their experience with the course.

Impact of Age

I initially thought that the age of the students would have a negative impact on the campaigns as viewed by the clients. It was my assumption that these clients work with community members who are not of our same generation. The schools work with parents, the Home Builders Association works with professional adults and the Alzheimer's Association with the elderly. This led me to believe that perhaps the information the students give the clients is not as valued as information given to them from their own clientele. However, this presumption was discredited by all of the interviewees. In fact, the young age of the students was well-received by the clients. Each client knew that the students would be the next generation to be served by their organization and respected the suggestions made.

One specific example came from Beth Peck of the Alzheimer's Association. Peck stated that she was surprised by the amount of personal experience the students in the course had with the disease. Like me, she had thought that younger adults would not

have much experience with a condition that affects senior citizens. However, this was invalidated when students shared their stories of grandparents and other relatives affected by Alzheimer's. Their stories offered Peck and the Alzheimer's Association a perspective they had not considered before the course.

Further, the age of the students helped the organizations break their way into the world of social media. Before their interaction with the course all of the clients reported either a lack of social media presence or a limited interaction. I know for my client an increased online presence was suggested by all four groups. All of the interviewees mentioned how they now use Facebook and Twitter on a more regular basis and how their friends and followers have increased since their experience with the course.

Theme 2: Recommendations

Importance of Research

Emphasized by all the clients was the importance of research within the campaign. The clients I interviewed are all small to medium sized not-for-profit organizations. This means that the employees and volunteers often do not have adequate time or the skill set needed to conduct research. Additionally, each client stated that the campaign process provided them with a unique perspective of their organization. This perspective was made possible through the research conducted by the students.

In meeting with Professor Berkshire-Hearit as a student and as a mentee for this thesis she stands by the need for primary research. It is imperative that groups go out into the community of their client and seek input. As stated before, the start of a solid

campaign is awareness and that is often the piece of the puzzle the client misses. The level of community awareness is found through primary research. As a student of the course, it was simple to set up an online survey and email it out to our key publics. This method is especially useful for groups that have limited free time. Also, in a last minute pinch, my group and I went to our Facebook friends for help with our campaign slogan; this method was quick and provided us with more insight than we thought possible.

Based on my experience, when groups are told they must conduct primary research, they foresee a massive time commitment that will expose them to strangers and vulnerabilities. Students need to know that research does not need to be as elaborate and formal as they make it out to be. Some of the best research results my group and I obtained were from a one hour, closed-ended, four question survey given to community members at the grocery store. Put simply, the clients usually do not have the time to go out and conduct research; therefore anything students can provide will be of assistance to their organization and the campaign proposal.

Internship Opportunity

It was in my interview with Beth Peck of the Alzheimer's Association that the idea of an internship opportunity arose. Peck stated that after her experience with the course the association took on one of the students as its intern. The job of the newly appointed intern was to look through all of the plans books and pull the most beneficial information to implement. The intern was later hired by the association as a full-time employee. Peck stated that throughout the semester she seriously considered students from the

course as intern applicants. My recommendation is to take this one instance and encourage future clients to do the same.

At the time of the client selection, the professor should recommend that the organization should consider taking on a student (or students) from the course to implement the campaign(s). This internship opportunity could be paid or unpaid and the amount of time is up to the discretion of the client. When the client meets with the students for the first time, he or she should explain the organization's intention to take one individual at the end of the process onto their team. Throughout the semester the students should be reminded of this opportunity and encouraged to produce their best work.

The implementation of an internship opportunity could help ease the stress of campaign implementation for the client. As stated earlier, the end of the semester is the starting point for the client. If the organization has one student from the class able to join the organization's team throughout the implementation process, confusion can be avoided.

Electronic Campaign Submission

It is no secret that the campaign books submitted to the client and to the professor are lengthy and detailed. We were told on numerous occasions that a smaller campaign book runs approximately 60 pages in length. In my own group our book exceeded 100 pages. A key recommendation that was stated by all the interviewed clients was the submission of the plans book electronically. This will help both the client and the students in two ways. First, the client tends to bring a team of people with him

or her on the final presentation day. However, only one book is given to the client beforehand. If an electronic copy were given to the client this would allow multiple organizational members to access information about the campaigns before the presentation day.

Second, the appendix items in each plans book are items that students made specifically to be distributed with their campaign. Typically the appendix consists of press releases, brochures, public service announcements, flyers, mailings, sign-up sheets and other visual pieces uniquely created by the students. The problem is that these materials are stuck in the back of the campaign books. The client has no way to use the appendix items other than to completely recreate them. My recommendation, based on the interviews with past clients, is to provide the original files of all appendix items. Specifically, instead of a PDF or JPEG file of an appendix item, the original format (Adobe PhotoShop, Microsoft Word, Adobe Illustrator, et cetera) should be provided to the client. This will remedy any corrections or changes the client wishes to make to a visual piece without the need to recreate the item from scratch.

Finally, an electronic copy of the campaign will speed up the process of information distribution. While there is only one contact person for the organization, the process with the course is shared to co-workers. All interviewees said they brought additional team members with them to the presentation day; however not all of these individuals saw the campaign books. Electronic submission will allow immediate campaign distribution to all members of the organization. If all who attend the final presentation have some idea of the campaigns beforehand, it will allow for more deliberate and decisive selection of the winner.

More Material Given to Client

At the start of the semester we as students are told to not give away too many of our ideas to the client. This is done to help in two ways: one it keeps an element of surprise and novelty on the presentation day; and two, it does not limit the groups should the client not be receptive to an idea. However, the interviewees indicated that perhaps more material be given to them along the way. This would not be done so the client could scrutinize the direction of the campaigns, but rather to have a better idea of what work is being done. This will then help with group differentiation, a dilemma outlined below.

Group Differentiation

One issue that clients had was the ability to differentiate between all four groups. The clients meet with the entire class once to introduce their organization and discuss the public relations problem. The client then has two official meetings with each group during class time before the final presentation. For some, these two individual meetings are all the face-time the client has with certain groups. As a result, clients stated they had a difficult time discerning which groups had what ideas throughout the semester.

A simple way to remedy this problem is for each group to be given a number or a color and introduce themselves with that label at each client meeting and in emails. Therefore, instead of the client attempting to remember which account executive emailed about billboards or websites, they can have four different folders that information is put into. Additionally, the interviewees responded positively to the idea that a paper copy of the questions each account executive wishes to ask during

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meetings be handed in. That way the client has a physical copy of what the group asked as well as questions they may not have had time to ask. If nothing else, this will help the client better separate the groups throughout the semester and on the final presentation day.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I found the process of transitioning from a student of COM 4500 to an observer beneficial. I believe that the tangible skills I gained as a student will help me to advance in the public relations profession. As an observer, I have gained insight into how individuals with little or no public relations experience perceive campaign development. Specific to the capstone course, students must continue to balance the responsibilities of both professor and client desires.

Clear recommendations by former clients include the electronic submission of the campaigns, the implementation of an internship opportunity and in-depth research that legitimizes the campaign program developed for the client. As a former student of the course, I argue that these suggestions could be easily incorporated into the course; in so doing the changes will provide the students, the client and the professor with an even more well-rounded experience.

Although this thesis worked around a specific capstone course, the results are applicable to several capstone experiences. The first being that, when involved in strenuous group work, the highest quality of each member's contribution typically occurs in the daytime. The second take-away is that no matter the level of competition between groups or the age of the student, the work is valued and seriously taken into consideration by the organization served. Perhaps the most important application to other capstone experiences, and the most difficult, is the inclusion of primary research. Despite the time and rigor required to conduct research, this initiative is most valued by the client and most engages the student in the project's process. The fourth practice students in other capstone courses can apply is to put themselves out in the view of the

client through differentiation and material updates. Finally, it takes creativity and gumption on the part of the students to get the most out of their capstone experience. If the course does not require electronic submission of material, the students should take it upon themselves to do so. That would be one more way to prove to the client the authenticity of the project. Further, if the organization is one a student feels a strong connection to, it would behoove him or her to inquire about an internship opportunity. Regardless of the academic department, a capstone course is meant to bring meaning and practical knowledge to students. The above recommendations ensure this goal will be achieved.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. What was the process like for you?
2. Did you gain useful information as the client?
3. Did you fully implement the chosen campaign?
4. Did you use information from the campaigns you did not select?
5. What was the most valuable part of the process for your organization?
6. Do you feel the campaign you chose was implemented with ease? (i.e. Clear instructions and minimal confusion)
7. How was the communication between yourself and the account executives?
8. If you could repeat the process, what would you want to have done differently?
What would you want to have remain the same?
9. What was your impression of the presentation of the campaigns?
10. Do you have any additional feedback or recommendations?

Appendix B: Interview Schedule and Contact Information

Monday, February 6th 2012 - Marc Verkaik, Kalamazoo Christian School Association

Friday, February 10th 2012 - Faith Cervin, Home Builders Association of Greater Kalamazoo

Thursday, February 16th 2012 - Jennifer Clark, Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo

Monday, March 5th 2012 - Beth Peck, Alzheimer's Association of Kalamazoo

Name	Organization	Email	Interview Time
Faith Cervin	Home Builders Association of Greater Kalamazoo (HBAK)	Fcervin@HBAGK.org	Friday, February 10 @ 1:00 p.m. 5700 W. Mich.
Marc Verkaik	Kalamazoo Christian School Association (KCSA)	mverkaik@kcsa.org	Monday, February 6 @ 9:30 a.m. KCSA elementary
Jennifer Clark	Communities in Schools of Kalamazoo (CIS)	Jclark@ciskalamazoo.org	Thursday, February 16 @ 1:00 p.m. 125 Exchange Place
Mimi Otto	Kalamazoo CAN (Child Abuse & Neglect Prevention Council)	Mimi@kcan.org	No response
Audrey Lipsey	Crescendo Academy of Music	Aalipsey@crescendoacademy.com (269) 345-6664	Sent times, no response
Beth Peck	Alzheimer's Association	Beth.Peck@alz.org	Monday, March 5 @ 9:00 a.m. 350 E. Michigan, Suite 20

Appendix C: Initial Client Email Contact

Good morning (CLIENT NAME),

As you saw with Professor Berkshire-Hearit's email, I am contacting you to get your perspective as a client of COM 4500 and provide insight into how campaigns are implemented within an organization. This project will be completed for my honors thesis. It is my goal to interview past clients in person and use the responses to write my thesis paper. At this time I would like to set up a meeting with you, I would approximate the interview will last one hour. Please let me know if I should contact you or someone else to schedule a time.

I look forward to meeting with you,

Christina Clarke

Note: Professor Diana Berkshire-Hearit was carbon-copied on all emails to clients.