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MARKETING

## STUDENTS BOOST IMAGE OF COMMUNITY NONPROFIT

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | April 26, 2024*Read time: about 4 min*

Armed with vast knowledge, innovative ideas and lots of data, Jake Reimann exuded confidence and focus as he stood on a stage, looked his client in the eye, and presented a detailed marketing plan that he and classmates had worked hard on all semester.

The moment proved to be an opportunity that allowed him to marry the marketing prowess he learned in the classroom with the needs of a community nonprofit organization in search of a brand refresh.

"The project gave me great insight into how real-world marketing pitches are developed and how to present them in front of actual clients," said Reimann, '25 [Marketing](#). "The project definitely prepared me for my future career and gave structure and answers to any uncertainty I had within the marketing career field."

Six teams of Christopher Newport students offered their ideas to [Alternatives](#), a community youth development nonprofit, based in Hampton. The presentations were the final piece of a project assigned in Dr. Matt Hettche's digital marketing class. They represented a culmination of research and collaboration. The project proved to be a real-world lesson in learning to work productively within a group, together creating interesting marketing solutions.

"It was important for our group to present them with goals and new ideas that aligned with their goals and expectations. That could actually be implemented within their company," Reimann said.

"It was honestly one of the most important experiences this semester because it was a semester-long project that was to be presented in front of an actual company," he said. "The combination of the pressure of the assignment while balancing the rest of my obligations on campus allowed me to prioritize the project in a way that I did not necessarily expect. I was very excited with the outcome and glad I prioritized this project ahead of my other commitments."

At the start of the semester, representatives from Alternatives, whose charge it is to provide assets to help youth develop into compassionate and responsible adults, came to Hettche's class to provide his students with insight about the organization and marketing goals they needed help developing. From there, students got to work, delving deep into the nonprofit's structure, history and market.

Reimann and his teammates poured themselves into the effort, and showcased a detailed plan, complete with social marketing strategies, value propositions, and brand initiatives with the hope of helping Alternatives get its message out into the community in a way that will allow it to broaden its client reach and share its message and mission with the public in the most effective way possible.

"This project had a significant impact on my academic and career trajectory," said Maureen O'Hearn, '25 [Business Marketing and Management](#). "It has provided practical experience that will prepare me for challenges in the workplace. I've developed skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and communication that will be invaluable in various professional settings."

"Working with Alternatives provided firsthand experience in understanding the dynamics of client collaboration," she said. "Preparing and presenting to Alternatives was both very challenging and rewarding. So much research, brainstorming and refining ideas went into our project."

Making the pitch to the nonprofit was both rewarding and challenging, said Melanie Diaz Ostolaza, '25 Marketing and Management.

"The presentation itself required clear communication, engaging visuals and the confidence to handle questions for feedback," she said. "This project allowed me to strengthen my soft skills through a real-world goal and preparation process. Overall, it required a blend of creativity, strategic thinking, and strong interpersonal skills."

As the students presented, Ragen Johnson, executive director at Alternatives, and Charles Robinson, communications manager, listened intently, took notes, and asked lots of questions.

"CNU is one of a few universities and colleges where young people are teeming with brilliant ideas and perspectives. In an age of technology, they have insights that those in the workforce may not have. Their individual perspectives have the potential to augment our work. Also, because they are learning the latest theory in their field, we have the opportunity to blend the news research with real-life experience."

The teams wowed them with innovative concepts and clarity in their presentations.

"I was impressed by the students' attention to detail, realistic implementation plans, and how carefully tailored their projects were to meet our needs," Johnson said. "Each team brought unique, well thought-out and relevant ideas. We appreciate how the students really took time to listen to our needs and who we serve in the community. We loved their creativity and ideas!"

Alternatives plans to bring the students' marketing ideas to life, using the suggestions to power the organization's marketing agenda.

"Now, it's time to determine which of the ideas to implement. We are excited to get started on implementing their ideas to increase community awareness to our agency and continue our partnership with CNU," Johnson said.

The alliance between CNU and Alternatives not only helps students to sharpen their marketing skills, but also allows them to meet the goal of service, one of the four pillars of a Christopher Newport education. Alternatives proved to be a dynamic partner for the project, said Hettche, whose digital marketing class has partnered with the organization for several years.

"Alternatives is an ideal class-client for our marketing students. As an organization, they are well known in our area,

they have established social media channels, and they accomplish such great outcomes,” he said.

Working with Alternatives on a value-driven project elevated the class assignment to a professional pitch, giving students the opportunity to widen their skill sets.

“Gaining insight on how ideas are received and understood, from an authority separate from the course instructor or professor, really forces students to think carefully about how they frame and provide support for their marketing strategies and ideas,” Hettche said. “Feedback from knowledgeable experts is simply invaluable in the learning process. We are lucky to have such great community partners.”

Dr. Stephanie Valutis, Associate Professor of [Social Work](#), is also president of Alternatives’ Board of the Directors. She said Social Work students at CNU have been collaborating with Alternatives for 15 years. Broadening the partnership to include marketing students has been a win-win for both students and the organization, she said.

“Dr. Hettche’s work with Alternatives and guidance in his students’ development of marketing ideas, tools and strategies for Alternatives has been priceless,” Valutis said. “The presentations his students made were so impressive, and the ideas and information they presented are invaluable!”

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