Consulting for a cause

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Freeman School students Chelsea Ward (MBA '24) (left) and Sobin Sunny (MACCT '24) interact with children from NOLA Nature School, a nonprofit preschool program in New Orleans. As part of Jasmijn Bol's Operational Risk Management class, Ward and Sunny evaluated the school's financial operations and recommended practical solutions.

NOLA Nature School is a pioneering nonprofit preschool program that educates children through the wonders of nature, but as an organization, it faces many of the same challenges that for-profit businesses do.

To help the school to continue its growth, a team of Master of Accounting students from the A. B. Freeman School of Business recently took on the role of consultants,

evaluating the school's financial operations, identifying potential risks and recommending practical solutions.

The project was part of Prof. Jasmijn Bol's Operational Risk Management course, which explores how organizations use management control systems to mitigate risk and achieve goals. NOLA Nature School was one of four nonprofits Bol's students worked with to uncover problems or inefficiencies and devise strategies to mitigate those risks.

"In small nonprofits, the people who run the organization are primarily focused on the mission and may lack training in day-to-day business operations," said Bol, the PwC Professor of Accounting at the Freeman School and author of the book Operational Risk Management: Organizational Controls and Incentive System Design . "This is where our students can make a significant impact by applying their management accounting skills. They wouldn't have the same level of impact if they were working with a large for-profit organization."

For the project, the students engaged directly with NOLA Nature School founder Clare Loughran to understand the organization's unique mission and challenges. Established in 2017, the school operates on the belief that children are natural learners and nature offers abundant resources for their educational journey. Its program offers an educational experience that honors our environment, caters to children's interests, supports their holistic development and fosters a bond with the natural world.

In the course of analyzing the school's financial operations, the students identified a number of vulnerabilities in the school's donation process, primarily relating to the concentration of responsibilities on a single individual. This concentration of responsibilities exposed the school to a number of risks, including overburdening of staff, increased likelihood of errors from manual processes, potential data loss, and a lack of flexibility. Left uncorrected, these risks could lead to inefficiencies including the loss of donor information, impaired decision-making due to faulty data and suboptimal documentation practices. Ultimately, they could impede the school's fundraising efforts and resource allocation.

To address the risks, the students proposed a suite of solutions, including redistributing responsibilities and implementing a new donation tracking system, enabling the school to implement risk mitigation strategies that are feasible and

communicable within its structure.

Loughran praised the students' effort, adding that their recommendations were both practical and effective.

"The students were instrumental in tackling some of our challenges and devised a plan that aligns perfectly with our needs," she said.

For the students, the project offered a glimpse into the real-world challenges of running a business in general and a nonprofit specifically.

"I plan to pursue another master's degree and do nonprofit and for-profit consulting work in the future," said Chelsea Ward (MBA '24). "This was an opportunity to learn the ins and outs of a nonprofit so that I can better help other individuals and organizations in the future. I learned what it takes to make a nonprofit successful, the systems involved, and the importance of risk management to help an organization run optimally."

"The project involved creating a risk map and improving the donation process, which enhanced my skills in assessing and mitigating risk," added Sobin Sunny (MACCT '24). "Addressing risks such as data loss and breaches also gave me a better understanding of information security practices. Overall, I think the project significantly contributed to my professional growth in operational risk management and related areas."

In addition to NOLA Nature School, the class also worked with three other New Orleans area nonprofits: the Krewe of Mid-City Mutt Mamas Rescue, Crescent City Café and UNITY of Greater New Orleans. Funding for the management of these experiential learning projects was provided through a gift of alumnus Todd Schwartz (BSM '03) and family.

"I think all the organizations appreciated the collaboration and found it valuable," said Bol. "The primary objective was to create tangible value. Rather than merely drafting a report with suggestions that might be feasible but ultimately ignored, we aimed for concrete deliverables. These deliverables would streamline processes, enhance controls and directly impact the specific areas of focus within the organization. The feedback from the organizations indicates that the students did a great job achieving these objectives."