Students help fine arts gallery expand markets

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As part of their business capstone consulting project, Freeman students toured M.S. Rau's art galleries. From Left: M.S. Rau Director of Digital Marketing Mark Daunis, Jessie Chen, Alyssa Oliva, Jack Solmo, Katharine Brian, Christian Lynch, Jake Miller and Professor Ana Rios Fuentes.

Portraits by Picasso. Landscapes by Monet. Napolean's desk and Lincoln's opera glasses. A10-carat blue diamond ring.

These are just a few of the treasures you'll find in the galleries of M.S. Rau, the New Orleans-based fine arts, antiques and jewelry dealer that's been serving customers from its French Quarter showroom since 1912.

A fixture in the New Orleans art scene, the gallery is now bringing its collection to buyers around the country. To gather insights for that business expansion, the gallery turned to the Freeman School and students in Professor Larry Merington's business capstone class.

“We decided to partner with Freeman because we were looking for some fresh ideas,” said Kristin Core, marketing director at M.S. Rau. “Business students often bring a really strong way of analyzing things, and we felt they could offer some valuable insights."

With Merington overseeing the project, Ana Rios Fuentes, an adjunct lecturer in the business school, acted as advisor to the team, which included Alyssa Oliva (BSM ’25), Jack Solmo (BSM ’25), Christian Lynch (BSM ’25), Katharine Brian (BSM ’25) Jessie Chen (BSM ’25) and Jake Miller (BSM ’25). Rios Fuentes said she was inspired to help the seniors apply the skills they’d learned in the program by working on a real consulting project.

The students were inspired, too.

“We were really excited when we found out we’d be working with M.S. Rau,” Oliva said. “Even though we have diverse interests, none of us have ever been in the ultra-high-end fine art space, which made the project even more energizing.”

To gain a deeper understanding of M.S. Rau’s operations, the team toured the galleries and met with staff across several departments, including research, sales, operations and art handling, and jewelry. Their conversations gave them insights into the high-end art market. During their visit, they also learned about M.S. Rau’s first seasonal pop-up in Aspen, the company’s process for acquiring and authenticating museum-quality pieces, and their approach to cultivating relationships with clients.

“We got to go see their location, and it looked almost like a museum,” Oliva said. “We also learned how they operate and what the company prioritizes, which was really helpful for our consulting work.”

Rios Fuentes said visiting the galleries gave students a wholistic perspective on how the business operates. “With capstone, you’re looking at a problem from many different perspectives,” she said. “You’re not only looking at a problem from the marketing perspective, but you’re also looking at it from a financial perspective and from other angles. It’s a comprehensive approach.”

After the team got an understanding of the company’s history and operations, they began researching locations, exploring partnerships and collecting demographic data. From their research they developed a proposal, which they shared during a

dry-run presentation.

“At first, the students were a little hesitant to present creative ideas, and their presentation was very safe,” Rios Fuentes said. “Playing it safe usually results in a good grade, but capstone is not about that. We wanted to push them to go further and present bolder ideas.”

For Lynch, the critique was valuable. “I learned that there’s never just one approach to solving a problem. Getting the feedback taught me to think outside the box and not limit yourself,” he said.

Following feedback, the team revised their proposal, determined to make their recommendations bigger and bolder.

They ultimately presented M.S. Rau with three expansion options using a mix of traditional and innovative strategies. To build on the success of the Aspen pop-up, they recommended opening a seasonal gallery in Southampton, New York, a popular summer destination for wealthy clientele. For a more creative strategy, the team recommended M.S. Rau team up with high-end hotels overseas, placing mini-galleries in hotel common areas to reach international customers. For its most innovative solution, the team proposed partnering with a luxury cruise line to display art and antiques onboard the ship. They noted that these displays could be tailored with art from the cruise’s destinations and could feature presentations from expert curators.



The capstone team and professors pose with M.S. Rau representatives after the final presentation. From left: Professor Ana Rios Fuentes, Jack Solmo, Jake Miller, M.S. Rau Chief Revenue Officer Lori Page, Katharine Brian, Christian Lynch, Professor Larry Merington, Jessie Chen, Alyssa Oliva, M.S. Rau Marketing Director Kristin Core and M.S. Rau Director of Digital Marketing Mark Daunis.

M.S. Rau's Core was impressed.

"The students came up with some incredibly creative ideas that we honestly weren't expecting, and they definitely showed a good understanding of our business and how to grow revenue," Core said.

"The data they showed us, especially for the Southampton idea, was pretty convincing," she added. "Their work has definitely given us some great potential strategies and creative ideas to think about."

That response doesn't surprise Rios Fuentes. Over the course of the capstone, she said she saw the students become more confident, more self-aware and better able to organize their thoughts.

“There’s no number of classes that can prepare you for the experience of actually working in the real world,” Rios Fuentes said. “It’s a very different experience once you’re out there doing presentations, making real business decisions, performing real analysis and interacting with people of different backgrounds. These students rose to the challenge during capstone.”

For Solmo, the capstone was a unique way to learn about consulting while rounding out his time at Freeman.

“M.S. Rau wanted our perspective,” he said. “They could hire anyone, but they chose Tulane. It was a meaningful project to end my senior year.”