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## **Preschool/Early Learning Educational Options**

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### Abstract

For my capstone project, I created a resource that gathered information about local preschool and early learning options in the Pensacola, FL area. I identified the need for this resource because of the utter lack of resources available to parents seeking to learn about educational options for their children. The resource I created is in the form of a publicly-accessible website that summarizes information about multiple educational institutions in the local area. I supplemented information available online by visiting schools and collecting information in the form of brochures, pamphlets, and business cards. In the end, I think the resource I created is valuable and will provide benefits to all stakeholders.

### **Section 1: Introduction to Capstone Project**

My capstone project, found at the link in the appendix, was the creation of an electronic resource to help parents make a decision about preschool and early childhood education options for their children. The inspiration for this project came from my own difficulties in trying to find options for my 4 year old son. My career in the military put my family at a disadvantage because we did not have a support system to help us make this decision; we had to rely on the information we found ourselves. I wanted to create something to prevent other parents from going through the painful process I went through. My project's problem statement was: How might I create a resource that summarizes local pre-kindergarten school options to enable parents to make informed decisions about their children's education?

My approach to the research portion of my project was split between the educational institutions and the supporting research that helped me create the resource website. To gather information from the schools, I combined in-person visits with gathering of publicly-available information. The supporting research involved researching the state regulations into early learning programs as well as the Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) program available in Florida. (Florida Department of Education, 2023) I also had to do research on the website that I hosted my resource on; I had to consider the pros and cons of 5 popular blog sites in order to find the one that best suited my needs.

Another driving force behind my capstone project were the differences in educational options available to members of the Armed Forces. I've served in the Air Force for over 20 years and was accustomed to having schools on base for my children. I was disappointed to find that the Navy does not require that their bases contain schools for service members' children.

## **Section 2: Elements Coming Together**

### **Innovative Approach**

I embarked on the journey to find an early learning option for my son before beginning this capstone project. The frustrations I experienced with the process helped motivate me to pursue an innovative approach to solve the problem. I realized that I was searching multiple locations to find information about early learning programs. Many of these resources had zero or very old google reviews, which is what I've used in the past to find businesses. I tried calling phone numbers to get information about early learning programs, but over 50% of the numbers I called did not work or were not answered over the span of a week. I resigned myself from having to take time during the workday to physically visit these locations in order to find information that would help me in my search for the perfect early learning environment for my son. My wife, who has a full-time job taking care of our son and daughter, wasn't able to pack both our 4-year old son as well as his 1 year old sister into the van to make these trips, so I decided to take time off work to put "boots on the ground". In addition to using these trips to gather information, I found that they helped me gauge other factors, such as the surrounding neighborhood, friendliness of staff, and cleanliness of the facilities.

I knew that if I was going to be able to help parents in the future, I needed a location to gather information for them in a place that would be easy to browse, free to access, and have the ability to change as I received feedback from the users. I originally thought about using a Facebook group, but I realized that many people don't use that social media site and that using Facebook would limit my reach. During my capstone proposal phase, my research revealed that a blog/website would be the best approach because it wouldn't limit my audience and would

provide a customizable interface that I could tailor to my needs. I decided to use Wordpress because of the fact that 43% of all websites by market share are created by this business. (Bahic, 2023) It was also appealing that it was free (more to come on that). This was an innovative approach because there was no resource like it in the local area. The sites that did exist that gathered information about schools were clearly generated by algorithms and had broken/outdated links, ads, and didn't provide any feedback system for users. I was encouraged that I received positive feedback on this capstone project from people that I talked to who experienced the same frustrations that I did.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

I firmly believe that emotional intelligence is a trait that's helped me succeed in both my personal and professional lives. Even though my career started in military aircraft maintenance, a profession that is not known for its respect for people and their feelings, I have taken it upon myself to deliberately improve this aspect of my life because I've experienced negative repercussions for lacking emotional intelligence in the past.

As related to my capstone project, emotional intelligence was useful in determining the need for my resource website, interacting with employees of the early learning centers, assessing needs of families in the local area, and creating my website.

Firstly, the positive effect of developing emotional intelligence in preschool kids was one of the motivating factors behind wanting to find an early learning program for my son as well as determining the need for my capstone project website. My research showed that preschool children that are taught emotional intelligence concepts in preschool experienced improved social competence and reduced conduct problems compared to children who did not receive this

education (Rivers, 2013). I made sure to include this information in the “About” section of the website so that parents know that there’s empirical data that proves the benefits of early learning programs.

Secondly, emotional intelligence was very important for me to use when interacting with the employees of the early learning centers. Understanding the emotions of people is central to the concept of emotional intelligence and is important for interactions with people in social settings. When visiting one of the schools, I realized that the staff was extremely busy with an unforeseen circumstance but was still willing to give me a tour. Having realized that the staff was stressed out by the issue that they were tackling, I elected to wait until it was less busy to get a tour of the building. Even though the staff told me that they could accommodate me while handling the emergency, I could tell my willingness to wait was much appreciated by reading non-verbal cues such as body language, facial expressions and gestures. Another example was when I realized that another institution’s staff was frustrated with people taking up their time for tours and not committing to send their children to the school. I addressed their frustration by telling the staff that I was not looking to send my child to their program and that I was trying to gather information to create a resource for families in the local area. My effort at being transparent about my intentions used emotional intelligence to empathize with another person’s frustrations and helped me build rapport with the staff.

Lastly, I used emotional intelligence to empathize with families trying to find early learning options and to tailor my website to address their needs. I realized that my frustrations with finding options for my son would likely be felt by others, and tried to imagine a solution to prevent others from experiencing negative emotions such as frustration. Empathy is an important

piece of emotional intelligence because it lets you identify negative emotions in yourself and help prevent or lessen their impact on others. I was given feedback that it would be a good idea to use a Pros/Cons list to help parents decide which school to send their child to, and I used emotional intelligence when altering items on these lists. Initially, I had put “Religious Affiliation” under a Con for one of the schools because of my own preference for a secular school for my son. I used emotional intelligence concepts to realize that even though this was a negative indicator for me, it could be seen as a positive indicator for other families. Because of this difference between my personal beliefs and the potential emotions of users of my website, I decided to remove the mention of religious affiliation from the Pro/Cons lists entirely. This allows the users of my resource website to draw their own conclusions about religious affiliation. Emotional intelligence helped drive the rest of the website creation process by reminding me to stay as objective as possible when presenting data about the schools.

### **Creative Thinking**

Creative thinking is not one of my strengths, and it was difficult for me to come up with an idea for this capstone project. I’m more comfortable with conceiving a creative solution to an already defined problem, but having to identify the problem and the solution was challenging for me. As noted in the “Reclaim Your Creative Confidence” article, “Creative efforts are hardest at the beginning...In a broader sense, we’re also talking about fear of charting a new path or breaking out of your predictable workflow.” (Gainsbourg, 2023) This fear of charting a new path contributed to my difficulties in choosing a project, but I was grateful for the brainstorming module in the previous course that helped me visualize the different ideas that I’d selected. I realized that this mindset was indicative of my unwillingness to step out of my comfort zone of



playing “whack-a-mole” by solving problems as they were presented to me. I was grateful for the opportunity to flex my creative muscles, and it eventually became easier for me to think of a creative solution to the problem that I identified. One of the biggest takeaways from this capstone project for me was learning that I need to continue to challenge myself to use creativity to combat complacency.

### **Innovative Solution**

I was able to use creative thinking to identify an innovative solution to the problem, which was to create my own resource that centralized information. I incorrectly assumed that most of my capstone project would be completed once I had identified the schools, gathered information, and selected a website provider. Unfortunately, this was only the halfway point. Looking back, creating the website was one of the most labor-intensive parts of the project. Having never built a website from scratch before, I didn’t realize that website design was complicated and time-consuming. Even though Wordpress offers many templates to start with, I couldn’t find one that fit my needs: information dissemination without social media connection or flashy graphics. Since Wordpress’ templates all have built-in social media functionality such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter integration, I had to manually remove these items from each page on my website. Because the template I selected was a blogging template, I had to remove features such as “recent updates” ticker and streamline the layout so that it would be as simple as possible. I had to learn how to navigate Wordpress’ site creator, which involved a lot of Youtube videos. I was also able to use the Jetpack app to make changes while away from my laptop, which was an innovative way to stay involved in the creative process when not actively working on the website. I found that the app allowed me to quickly make changes as I thought of them

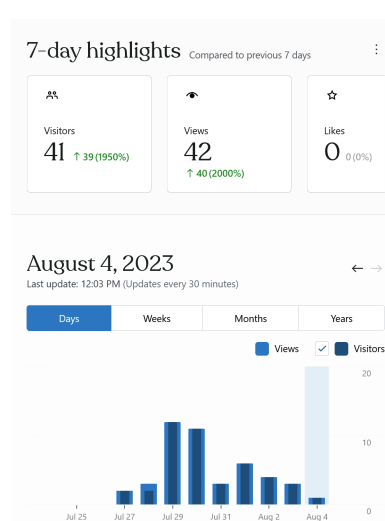
while doing something else, instead of waiting to get back to my computer.

I think that the result strikes a good balance between providing information and letting parents draw their own conclusions about where to send their children. Even though I've seen visitors to the site, nobody has left comments or feedback yet, but I'm hoping that will change.

### Section 3: Results

My website has information about 8 different educational institutions in the Pensacola area. Even though it was more effort to expand my resource site from the 4 schools that I originally planned on featuring, I think having more schools listed is beneficial for all stakeholders. I chose a black/white theme that helps keep the focus on the content, and also included information about Florida's Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten program.

I was encouraged about the number of visitors I was getting when I first launched the website, but since then, my visitor numbers have dropped. (Padhi, 2023)



When exploring options to increase viewership of my site, I found some local Facebook groups don't allow men (Pensacola Mom's Group) or focus only on homeschooling (Pensacola Homeschooled Families). There are no groups for Pensacola Preschools or Early Learning Programs. When seeking other options, I found that Wordpress will list your website on search engine result pages, but only if you pay extra (\$99/yr) for their Search Engine Optimization service. I'm hopeful that site visitors

will increase without having to resort to paying for more visibility.

#### **Section 4: Conclusion**

I think that this capstone project was a successful application of the skills and concepts that I learned during my time at Boise State University. I was able to conceptualize, plan, and build a resource that benefits all of my stakeholders while helping me practice crucial skills such as project management, emotional intelligence and time management.

In addition to providing what I think is a valuable resource for the local community, this capstone project helped me grow as an individual by pushing me out of my comfort zone. Committing myself to a project with very little structure was challenging to me but helped me realize that I have the skills needed to come up with innovative solutions. I was able to leverage topics from my Applied Leadership courses at BSU such as servant leadership, emotional intelligence, creative thinking and project management. I think that this capstone project is a good example of how a student can combine a variety of skills to create an innovative solution to a problem faced by the community.

With all projects, there is learning that occurs after the product is created, and this one is no different. Looking back, there are things that I would have done differently, such as seeking inputs from stakeholders before creating my site instead of soliciting feedback on an already-created product. I would also have done a lot more research on the website-building portion of the project instead of assuming that it would be the least time-consuming portion of the project.

Even though there are things I would do differently if embarking on this capstone project now, I think that life is about learning from mistakes while having a positive attitude. I'm grateful for the opportunity to practice skills, learn new ones and grow as a person!

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Appendix

A. Link to capstone project: <https://earlylearningpensacola.wordpress.com/>