

**Mellon Initiative Course Revision Grant Report**  
**HCOM3364-1 (Communication & Effective Leadership)**  
**Research module: qualitative interview research project**  
**Submitted by: Jamie Thompson**

**COURSE DESCRIPTION & OBJECTIVES**

A qualitative research project was integrated into HCOM 3364-1 (Communication & Effective Leadership) because it served as an intentional method to connect undergraduate students with Trinity alumni in a research project. The “alumni in the classroom” initiative was used to generate interest and select participating alumni.

The study of leadership stands at the union of the social sciences and humanities with many disciplines contributing to our understanding and practice. In nearly all contexts of human interaction, good leadership and followership are necessary components. Communication is the means by which leadership is practiced and provides a useful entry point for its study. This course primarily serves juniors and seniors, although about one-third of students are first-years and sophomores.

The course includes opportunities for evaluating leaders, leadership behavior, and communication in a variety of contexts (private, public, civic, etc.) and requires individuals to explore their own leadership. Class includes theory-to-practice activities, small and large group discussions, and individual reflection.

Learning objectives:

1. To examine theoretical perspectives within which leadership is approached and expand their communication dimensions.
2. To determine the strengths, weaknesses, and applicability of each leadership perspective.
3. To gain personal insight through an exploration of one’s leadership style, including constructing a leadership philosophy and preparing a leadership defense.
4. To reflect on one’s experiences while thinking critically about the responsibilities of leaders in today’s increasingly diverse and interconnected society.

**ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION & GOALS**

This research project will allow students to learn about leadership experiences from a first-hand source and acquire and practice qualitative research (interview) skills. In teams of three, students will be assigned a Trinity alumnus/na, develop a relevant research question, and conduct a structured qualitative interview (in-person or virtual) with this individual. The APA-formatted research paper should be no more than seven pages in length. This project will also include a class presentation (10 minutes). Local alumni will be invited to come to class for a panel experience to share their insights with students.

Discussion and analysis of the findings should include the following elements:

1. Compare and contrast interview data to at least one leadership theory;
2. Respond to the communication implications of leadership;
3. Connect to at least one supplemental scholarly article selected by your group and summarize it in the paper;
4. Comment on qualitative interviews as a research tool (advantages and limitations)

Project Learning Outcomes: Students will be able to –

1. Identify the types of qualitative interviews
2. Apply qualitative interview techniques
3. Compare/contrast data from the interview with course content in a formal paper

**ASSIGNMENT SELECTION & ASSESSMENT**

A qualitative interview project was appropriate for this course given students' experiences and course objectives to overlay course content with current leaders.

The project was assessed at various points throughout the semester:

- Groups developed, edited, and finalized research questions with instructor feedback.
- Groups crafted draft interview questions and submitted them to the instructor for review prior to the interview taking place.
- Students edited draft papers in class for peer review and feedback.
- The instructor reviewed and evaluated final papers using a rubric shared with students at the beginning of the project.

## **PROJECT ANALYSIS**

*Successes:*

- The majority of student feedback on course evaluations indicated that this research project was the highlight of the course. They thoroughly enjoyed meeting in person with a Trinity alumnus/na who shared personal and career journeys, insights into leadership, and lessons learned from risk-taking and mistakes. The alumni panel also helped to bring to life course material through narrative, humor, and reflection. (Note: Comments from alumni following the panel were overwhelmingly positive. The alumni likely enjoyed the experience more than the students!)
- Breaking down the project and instruction into smaller components and utilizing a checklist (which students were required to submit with the final paper) set students up for success. Individual components included: qualitative research overview, developing a research question, designing structured qualitative interview questions, preparing for a qualitative interview, research paper format, and peer editing of draft papers.

*Areas for improvement:*

- The assignment description and project rubric should be more closely matched to avoid student confusion.
- To ensure a thorough understanding of and adherence to APA formatting, an additional project component may be considered, or a librarian may be invited to class to provide APA resources and answer questions.
- One of the seven groups felt the page limit kept them from fully responding to the project requirements and sharing their findings. This will be re-evaluated next time the course is offered.
- In two instances, group dynamics (group size, individual personalities, etc.) prevented all members from fully participating and contributing to the end product. A "member observation form" was developed for students to provide feedback about their group members' contributions to the project. When appropriate, this feedback was shared with students by the instructor. The "member observation form" will continue to be utilized as a way to hold team members accountable. Peer grading may also be incorporated into the project or make up a percentage of the individual's final grade.