Dr. Suzanne Boys, the public relations program director for the University of Cincinnati's Department of Communication, stands in the front of a full classroom. Instead of the standard rows of desks, several tables have been clumped together in clusters around the room. Around each group of tables sit five or six students huddled together over laptops and notebooks.

As the clock shows that class has started, Boys claps her hands together once. "You know what you have to do," she says. "Get to work." That is all the explanation the students need to get started on their work for the day.

Many classes at the University of Cincinnati deal with hypothetical problems or past situations as case studies. Students will make plans for what could or might happen, and professors compile case studies to show what has been done in the past. Some students may not get to work on real projects until they go to work on a co-op or when they graduate and enter into the workforce.

But students in Boys' Public Relations Campaign class, a required course in the Department of Communication's public relations certificate, get first-hand experience working as PR managers for a business or organization creating a campaign the company could use in the future.

Every semester, Boys reaches out to local businesses and potential contacts to see if they would be interested in becoming a client for her class. She contacts co-workers, former students and is even using her veterinarian as a client this semester. And for several years, Boys has partnered with The Cincinnati Project (TCP) to help secure contacts with local nonprofits.

TCP is an organization that works with faculty, staff and students at UC's College of Arts and Science to conduct community-driven research for marginalized groups. TCP partners with different groups in Cincinnati to tackle justice and equity issues related to race, the economy, gender and health. The idea for TCP came from three UC professors, Earl Wright II, Farrah Jacquez and Jennifer Malat.

Dr. Malat, the divisional dean of social sciences, co-founded TCP with the idea that they wanted to connect university faculty and staff to help the community. "We wanted to find a way to bring together more researchers in the college and in the community to answer questions that would make our city more equitable," Malat says.

Boys first heard about TCP around three or four years ago when she was included in a listserv about needs that staff and students could fill. Boys got in contact with the group's leaders after realizing they regularly work with nonprofits in the area. Since then, she has used several TCP partners as clients for her class, including the YWCA and the Child Poverty Collaborative. Boys even accepted a position on TCP's advisory board after having attended several TCP meetings.

Malat admits that TCP wanted Boys on the advisory board because they knew that she taught classes with real-life applications.

"We asked her to join the advisory board because she teaches public relations courses that take real organizations as clients," Malat says. "Often these organizations' mission is to serve marginalized people in Cincinnati. We want her expertise on how to foster positive relationships between community groups and A&S faculty and students."

Despite having worked closely with TCP for several years, this year's PR Campaigns class is forging a new relationship with TCP "One thing [I thought] we can do is have TCP be a client," Boys said. "Because the branding is ready to be strengthened, it's not that clear, and there's not a lot of visibility. It's a great opportunity."

In Boys' class, organizations present themselves and explain what they are wanting out of a PR campaign. Students then rank their options of which group they most want to work with, which determines their small group assignments. Students spend all semester working on their campaign and present it to their client at the end of the semester. Each member of the group takes on a different role in order to complete all necessary parts of the campaign. The final report includes research and analyses conducted by the students in order to help their clients. Group workdays are offered during class time before an assignment is due, replacing lecture days.

This kind of hands-on application in a class is appealing to groups like TCP. "I add something that others don't," Boys says. "I'm not doing quantitative research, I'm not working with doctoral students. I'm working with students who are able to help in a really pragmatic way: on the ground, helping local organizations to get the word out."

Boys says when she approached TCP's leaders about this potential apartment, it wasn't an immediate yes. "They were anxious," Boys says. "They want to serve people who have not necessarily been well served by the media. There's an intent to protect and preserve relations."

One student who is working on the campaign, fourth-year Emily Fernback, recognizes the positive change TCP has had. "Their whole mission statement is to fight for equity in Cincinnati," Fernback says. "They acknowledge the racism and the problems they face systemically. They're not trying to take away from the fact that it's a systemic problem, it's a long-winded historical issue. They can definitely help."

In her group, Fernback is the project manager. The project manager is the only member of each student's group who is in contact with the people at TCP and is responsible for explaining the group's ideas to their client. Other group members fulfill an array of roles. The editor in chief edits all of the group's papers; the researcher is in charge of structuring a research plan; the strategist helps create and execute the plan on how what actions to take next with the research gathered; and the designer is responsible for creating the bound book that will be given to the client at the end of the semester.

Fernback appreciates the work TCP has done and hopes that her group will help publicize the organization's work more. "They have great work, it's just the matter of putting it out there," Fernback explained. "They're not very good at marketing, which is what they need us for. A big plan for ours is a social media initiative. They are not active on all on social media and that's a goal of theirs. Social media is such a huge way that people now get all of their news."

Malat agrees with Fernback that one aspect she wanted the students to focus on is their online presence.

"I know that the students do good work, and we need help with our social media," she says. " In the meeting I attended, I was amazed by how many ideas they had. We hadn't considered some pretty simple ways to increase our social media presence. I look forward to hearing their final presentation."

When given the option to choose which group she wanted to work with for this semester, Fernback knew that TCP would be a great option for her.

"Their whole mission statement is to fight for equity in Cincinnati," Fernback says. "They talk about things in Cincinnati I want to be more aware of. I grew up in the suburbs but my mom worked downtown, so I would go downtown with her and see all the murals of the awareness campaigns with all of the kids. I know housing is a huge issue in Cincinnati. It's a big city with a lot of money, but not always money where [people] need it. It was really interesting for me to learn about it because I want it to be more accessible and for people to know about TCP and the work that they do."

Boys is also appreciative of the work she is able to do with TCP. "It's an honor to work with them because they connect with real people," Boys says. "They help solve community problems. It's one of the ways I feel I can meet people who are doing good in the community and I can help students see how they can use their vision to make the world a better place."

As she continues her work on the project, Fernback says she values the opportunity to take a step back and see why and how the unfair housing practices have occurred and recognize what role we all have in it.

"We're lucky to be in a good part of Cincinnati where housing doesn't seem to be a very pressing issue," Fernback says. "But it's good to know what's going on around you. Recognizing that these people do face these hardships, whether it's based on income or race or how they identify. [There are] a lot of factors that are important to recognize, even if it doesn't affect you, it will eventually. Just think about how it affects other people and how you would want other people to recognize. It's really cool to know that [our] PR plan that we give to them could really make positive changes and affect the kids and the people in Cincinnati who aren't receiving the fair treatment that they deserve."

Back in the classroom, Boys looks out at her students who are diligently working on their newest assignment. They might not know that the work they are doing could positively affect the community around them, but their professor does.

"I'm really grateful I found TCP," Boys says. "Students benefit and hopefully the community will too."