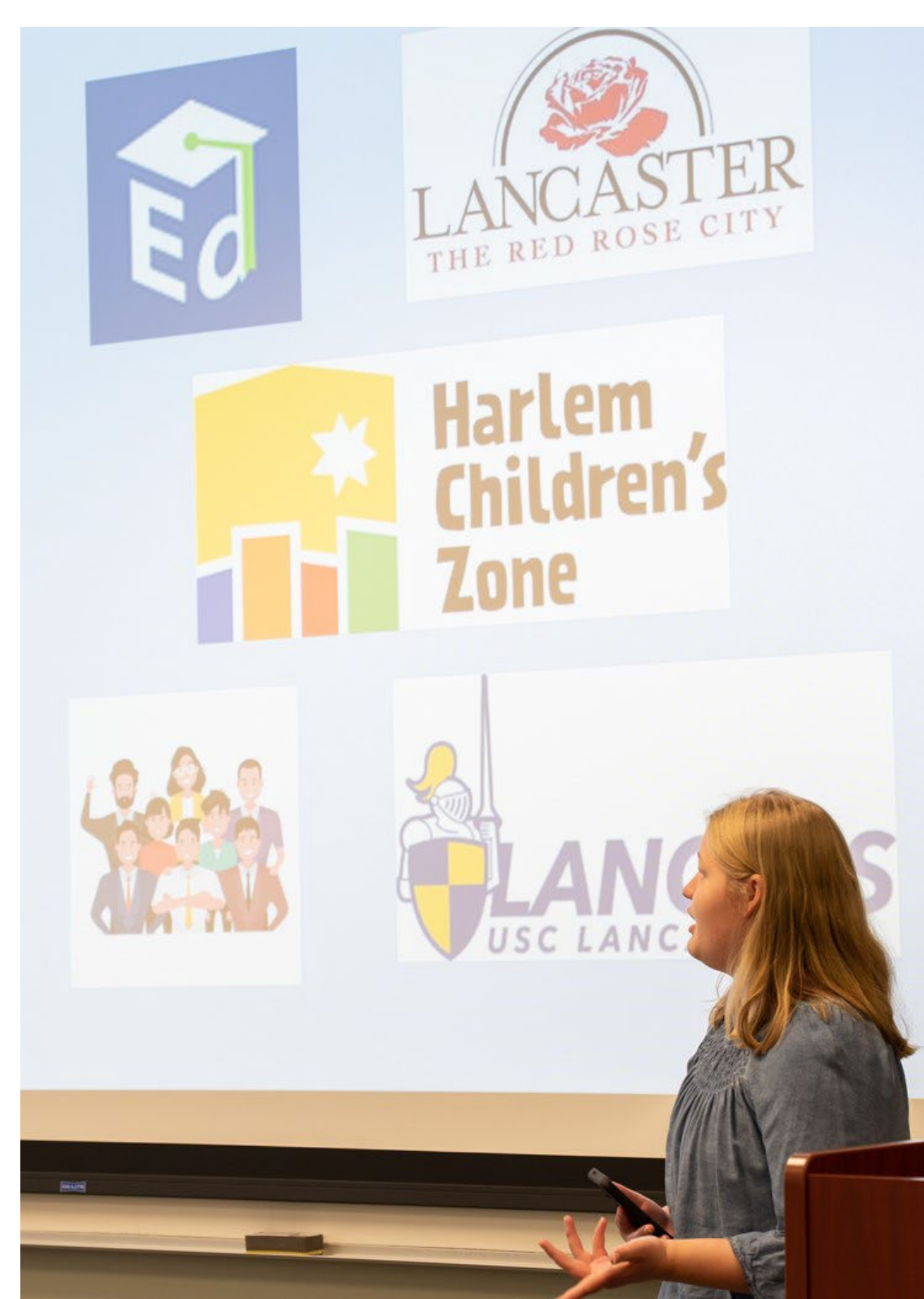


The Partnership

With the impetus of incorporating Project-Based Learning into a business writing course, I partnered with the Lancaster Promise Neighborhood, a community organization in Lancaster, SC with a U.S. Department of Education grant to restore and revitalize “The Hill,” an historically Black neighborhood in this former mill town with high rates of poverty and crime, low-performing schools, and poor health indicators.

The Project

Student teams revised LPN’s grant narrative, wrote an executive summary, and presented their work to LPN’s staff. My students and I considered our positionality in relation to LPN’s staff, mission, and role in the community to avoid reifying a top-down hierarchy and to create a mutually beneficial partnership. Students interrogated the history of the neighborhood and the harms done to the community when the textile mill shut down, while detailing the restorative practices of the LPN organization in the community.



Photography:
Ebony Mitchell

“Our project was to critique what these guys did, and when they are doing this for millions of dollars, it creates a tightrope to walk on because we don’t want to offend them, but you want to get your point across.” – Quinton Huntley, student

Navigating the Town and Gown Trope: Community Partnerships through Project-Based Learning

Amy Spangler Gerald



The Challenges

There was some difficulty in getting buy-in from LPN initially, possibly due to their having a new director, other new hires, and moving to a new facility, so they were very busy. I sensed, however, some skepticism and wondered how I could build a sense of trust. I sent a letter to the director, outlining my proposal and offering to meet and I worked with a LPN board member who is also a faculty member and is from the neighborhood. But in the end it was a USCL staff person’s connection with the director through the Rotary Club that made it happen.



“Working with the Lancaster Promise Neighborhood made me proud to be from Lancaster.” Caroline Bailey, student.

The Results

- Student team presentations attended by LPN staff, university staff and administrators, and community volunteers. Article in the local paper.
- Student learning in context of real life organization in their own community (a resume-worthy experience).
- Stronger partnership between the two institutions
- Students’ greater sense of engagement and investment in their own community
- New set of LPN volunteers (students interested beyond the classroom)
- Multiple goals of all parties met.



“I was impressed with the student’s high positive energy. I’m excited about the energy created from this project. I love seeing people working with others for the greater of everyone.” – Dianne Evans, former Partners for Youth trustee

The Lessons

- Being the local college isn’t enough. Find a way to make connections and build trust.
- Leverage contacts beyond the university.
- Plan more than a year in advance. Don’t move forward without full buy-in.
- Ensure project meets goals of all parties.
- Have students understand the rhetorical situation of their task and sensitivity to their audiences and partners.