

Senior Experience gives CSUSM business students real-world experience

By: BRADLEY J. FIKES - Staff Writer

Refill the paper in the copier. Here are some reports to file. Oh, and can you get some more coffee?

College internships can amount to such menial gofering for unlucky students. It's different with the Senior Experience program at Cal State San Marcos. The program, which ended its most recent round of projects in December, is mandatory for graduating business students.

"An internship is a much more directed activity," said Keith Butler, director of the university program. "The Senior Experience students work more like consultants."

The decade-old program puts teams of four to five graduating business students at work on a project submitted by a business, Butler said. The companies pay \$1,000 to cover expenses.

Satisfied companies

"They did a spectacular job," said James Kelley, chief executive of San Marcos-based Discovery Bank. He asked the student team to determine and rank the 10 services most important to its banking customers, which are small businesses.

The report contained a surprise: Free courier service, which the bank thought a big selling point, wasn't as important to customers as expected. So the bank is attempting to find out why that is so.

Another team worked up a business plan for the California Surf Museum at the request of the Jane McVey, Oceanside's economic development director, and Mike Francis, tourism director for the California Welcome Center in Oceanside.

"They never had a business plan. ... It gave them some good direction and something on paper, so the directors can use what they want," Francis said.

Recommendations included hiring a director in addition to the museum's two part-time employees and volunteers, and offering more items for sale, Francis said. The museum's emphasis on old surfing artifacts doesn't appeal much to children, the report also found, so it suggested including contemporary surfing gear.

A third team's assignment was to help establish a new business in North County: the aviation-themed Wingstop Restaurants Inc. chain, which opened its first restaurant in the county ---- in Vista ---- in May.

"The project was how to bring a restaurant chain with no brand recognition into San Diego County," said Earl Wong, managing partner for VS Venture Partners, the developer of Wingstop restaurants in San Diego County.

Wong said the team helped develop a "guerilla marketing strategy" focused on participation in local events. These included Vistans R.O.C., an annual community refurbishment program that sends volunteers to paint, landscape and clean up houses in the city's Townsite area. The students helped feed volunteers.

In addition, Wong said he wanted to see if the marketing strategy was "moving the needle," that is, increasing sales. That was the case, he said, as the various events caused sales spikes on those days.

Stone Brewing Co., which is moving from San Marcos to Escondido this year, had its student team plan the most efficient use of space at its new 50,000-square-foot headquarters, which can be expanded to 100,000 square feet. Space has been a big constraint for the growing microbrewer at its current location, which has just 26,500 square feet of storage. The new headquarters is expected to open in September or October.

The team examined how the brewery operates at its current location and how equipment is used and stored, said Greg Koch, the company's chief executive.

"I was impressed with the project," said Koch (pronounced "Cook"). "On a cost/benefit ratio, it was extremely good."

Learning and contributing

James Wade, one of the student team members for the Discovery Bank project, said he and his colleagues not only put their finance education into practice, but exercised social skills such as working in a group and dealing with a client.

Wade, a Carlsbad resident, said some faculty members thought his team was "a little crazy" for being made up of five finance majors. Usually, the teams include students from different majors so that each can contribute from a different perspective.

"We all had high work ethics, and we had all worked together at some point in time," Wade said. "We're all 3.5 (grade point average) students who had the willingness to win, basically, and that's what we did."

The Discovery Bank effort was chosen by the university as one of the fall semester's "projects of distinction."

Greg Lucas, a student who worked on the Wingstop project, said he already had restaurant experience from a decade in the industry. For Lucas, a Perris resident, the project gave him a better appreciation of "the networking part" of building a business.

Meetings with Vista city officials helped him understand how to work with a city government, Lucas said, and the community outreach efforts drove home the importance of how a restaurant's local activities and reputation affects the bottom line.

For more information on Senior Experience, contact Keith Butler by e-mail at kbutler@csusm.edu or visit the program's Web site at www.csusm.edu/seniorexperience.

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