

REGION: Companies turn to Cal State San Marcos business students

University begins 17th year of educating by selling low-cost consulting services

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What can students teach established businesses?

Apparently, quite a bit.

Seniors at the Cal State San Marcos business school are working with local companies, helping them with a variety of business development challenges. It's the 17th year the school has offered the program.

Students and executives say everyone wins ---- the students get priceless real-world experience, and the companies get focused research from teams of four students led by Jim Hamerly, director of business community relations at the school. Hamerly has been instrumental in starting several companies himself, including the one behind the Internet search engine Firefox.

The university's business school has completed about 1,100 consulting projects, Hamerly says. Student teams typically contract with companies to spend 1,000 hours working for a company on projects that tend to fall into one of two categories:

-- Helping big companies that lack resources for a specific challenge. Student teams have worked with Sony, Hewlett-Packard, Qualcomm and Legoland, among others.

-- Helping small companies that need skills in a particular area.

This semester, 36 teams of seniors are at work in San Diego County with various companies. Projects include a water usage study for a homeowners association and a study for a church that wants to build a medical clinic.

Companies typically pay \$1,500 for the business school's consulting service ---- a good investment, said Gordon Levinson, founder of the Levinson Law Group in Carlsbad, which focuses on personal injury, bankruptcy and estate planning.

Levinson has used two teams from CSUSM. The first looked at how the firm might better integrate its services.

The second team examined how the company could optimize its search-engine capabilities. As a result of the team's suggestions, Levinson said the firm is completely rebuilding its Web site.

For the students, the program "is a lab to test school skills in a real-world setting," Levinson said. For the firm, the research was solid and "it was a bargain," he said.

And Levinson received some unexpected benefits ---- some of the students have referred clients to the firm.

The program is a "great opportunity for seniors," said Victoria Garrow, whose team is working with San Diego Gas & Electric Co. to help the utility find out what incentives would work to get customers to adopt energy-saving techniques.

Some graduates are so inspired by the program, they launch their own businesses.

Adriana Liwski, a senior, has founded La Costa Adz, an Encinitas-based company that make drink coasters imprinted with advertisers' names and messages.

Liwski says when she graduates in June, she will devote her full efforts to the company. Among her plans: Hire a team from Cal State San Marcos to help her company.

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