Students team up to improve society

Penn State Great Valley offers innovative program

By BARBARA WORTHINGTON
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MALVERN – An innovative course offered during the fall at Penn State Great Valley partnered high school students with Penn State MBA students in an effort to enhance business and leadership skills at several county nonprofit organizations.

Six of the more than 30 nonprofit organizations invited to an information session prior to the beginning of the course were ultimately selected to participate in “Social Entrepreneurship and Community Leadership” taught by Barrie Lizzy, assistant professor in management and organization.

About 20 Great Valley High School students, 15 Malvern Preparatory School students and 10 MBA students participated in the program on six teams.

With each team analyzing an agency’s specific needs, the groups worked to develop business, strategic or marketing plans for organizations such as Home of the Sparrow, Friends Association for the Care and Protection of Children in West Chester and Adult Care of Chester County.

Numerous benefits came about as a result of the interactions that occurred throughout the 14-week course, according to associate professor Veronica Godshalk.

The high school students learned valuable lessons from the MBA stu-

See TEAM, Page B7
dents "who are significant players in their own organizations," she said.

They also learned about the workings of nonprofit organizations and how to develop and present business plans.

The MBA students assumed leadership roles, set goals for their groups and tackled the task of keeping the team on track, Godshalk said.

The groups' research, study and individual contributions produced professional business plans adaptable specifically for the agency with which the team had worked.

Godshalk noted that representatives of the agencies who worked with the various groups offered positive comments on the "very professional presentation of written and oral plans based on pro bono methods."

Godshalk and Litzky agreed that the course accomplished the desired intent in imparting a sense of "giving back to the community."

With a service learning component, Litzky said, the course offered students the opportunity "to immediately apply their knowledge in the field." She added, "It becomes immediately relevant for them."

Mark Gilleland, a product manager for SEI Investments by day, who is currently pursuing his MBA degree, eagerly embraced the concept of the course. Working with the Friends Association for the Care and Protection of Children, he felt satisfaction in "being able to make a direct impact in the community."

Gilleland remarked that the high school students, who acted as liaisons with the various agencies, "definitely brought a lot of enthusiasm."

His team made some discoveries and provided some solutions. "We realized that there is a significant need for foster parents," he said, adding that brainstorming sessions yielded more than 40 ideas and recommendations for their agency's consideration.

For Great Valley High School
junior Kelsey Donahue, participation in the program was a real eye opener. “I never imagined how difficult it was to run a nonprofit,” she stated. “I really learned a lot about how business works.”

The graduate counterparts played a significant leadership role in directing efforts toward the appropriate focus. “The MBAs taught us about how to get things done,” Donahue said.

Although she admitted that the graduate-level readings presented a challenge, she enjoyed a level of satisfaction in working to present viable solutions to some of the agency’s quandaries. “It was such a great feeling to give them such a substantial document,” she said.

Donahue stated that following the presentation of the business plan and the team’s recommendations, the agency indicated a willingness to implement many of the recommendations as early as next spring.

Malvern Prep senior Michael Calabrese played an integral part in developing the business strategy and creating the PowerPoint presentation for Adult Care of Chester County. “We actually got to make a difference in the company,” he said. “All the work we did paid off for them.”

Calabrese stated that, together with his team, he felt the group had provided a vision for the agency’s future. In return, he found, “They were very appreciative.”

Undaunted by the additional workload, Calabrese admitted that his participation in the course provided “an amazing opportunity.”

In light of the success of this pilot program, Litzky said the course will be offered again during the fall 2004 semester. It’s likely the program will include students from other schools, she said.

“We’re definitely open to other school districts.”

Litzky is particularly interested in partnering with people interested in starting social entrepreneurial ventures. “We’re hoping to work with people interested in starting a business that adds value to society,” she said.