Experience a win-win for businesses, students

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RINDGE — The get-your-feet-wet benefits of student teaching is hardly a new concept. However, college small business advisory groups have taken this model and turned it on its head. Instead of leading a classroom full of juice-box toting 5-year-olds, the charges of student consultants are seasoned business professionals.

Jason C. Little, associate professor of marketing at Franklin Pierce University, calls this “reverse mentoring“ and says it can prove a valuable asset to students and companies alike.

“You’re looking at a team of consultants,” he said of his students, while describing the real-world experience they gain. “Just the value in that, compared to just a classroom setting, is just really much more striking.”

Little works with Franklin Pierce’s Small Business Advisory Group program, which he said colleague Benjamin Gardiner started more than a decade ago.
Through the one-credit course, students lend the skills they’ve learned on campus to the real world.

Past clients have included the town of Marlow, Jaffrey’s Park Theatre and Keene’s New Hampshire Dance Institute.

More recently, Little’s students worked with Nancy M. Petrillo and Charles R. Criss, co-owners of Lindy’s Diner in Keene.

Like other former clients interviewed, Petrillo said she learned about the Franklin Pierce University group through the Keene branch of the N.H. Small Business Development Center.

While the iconic diner that boasts the slogan “Hot, Fast, & Cheap” is no secret to locals, the Franklin Pierce student group spent a year targeting ways to help increase the diner’s exposure.

A team of students designed Lindy’s first Web site, which features a link to a slide presentation on the video-sharing Web site You Tube.

“In this day and age, I think that you need to have a Web site if you want to be in business,” said Petrillo, while saying she doubted the undertaking was something she had the talent or patience to accomplish on her own.

Senior Timothy J. Anson-Pritchard approached a Keene State College resident adviser about the possibility of advertising in campus dormitories.

Students also researched the cost of advertising in the student newspapers at Franklin Pierce and Keene State College.

They priced promotional products ranging from coffee mugs to umbrellas. And they suggested various ways to revamp the restaurant’s menus.

“They did ... a great presentation and they treated us like a client,” Petrillo said. “It was just like the real world.”

About two years ago, a Franklin Pierce small business advisory group also lent its services to Swanzey firm M.C. Wheel Repair & Powder Coating.

In addition to making a sample promotional flier and advertising the business on the Franklin Pierce radio station, the students helped address what owner Noah Sax described as his greatest business hurdle — making the public understand what his company’s all about.

“My biggest challenge is people even knowing that this can be done,” he said of his firm’s motorcycle and car wheel restoration work. “Most people just wind up throwing away their wheels and just buying new ones.”

Sax said the students schooled him on using meta tags to improve his ranking on search engine returns and to reach out to what he calls his “bread and butter” business — customers from all over the country who send him their busted wheels by mail.

Before working with the Franklin Pierce students, Sax said his company consistently popped up within the top 10 results of Internet searches of motorcycle wheels.

Now, he said, he finds himself more regularly in the top 5.

A Google search Thursday, using the phrase “motorcycle wheel repair,” placed M.C. Wheel Repair at the beginning of 290,000 hits.

It is in this realm — technology — that Little said his students can provide some of their
most valuable assistance to their clients.

Franklin Pierce students demonstrated their tech savvy a couple of years ago when they worked with the Peterborough beauty product company Le FP Green Body Care.

During that semester, students created a short film that owner Josee Dupont said she had posted on her Web site until recently.

In the video, which Dupont called “icing” for her site, she spoke about her best-selling “Anti-Monster” immune-boosting sprays.

“If I had (the video) done professionally, it would have cost me an arm and a leg,” she said.

Leaving business clients with the best possible “deliverables” — or concrete marketing tools — is a primary goal Little says he has for the program.

But several business people said one of the greatest values of the students’ work is a little less concrete.

Deborah B. Buxton, who co-owns New England Forest Products Inc. in Greenfield with her husband, David, said when the Franklin Pierce students worked with her company, they brought with them a “good, young energy.”

“They’re my kids’ ages, so it was a different lens that we could see our business through,” she said.

Petrillo, of Lindy’s, echoed her.

“They looked at the diner with fresh eyes, saying, ‘It’s a little too crowded.’ ... It was really nice to have someone come in and tell me that,” she said.

Petrillo said she hasn’t yet determined what printing the colored take-out menus the students designed would cost. But, she said she is taking their advice about using an extra page to de-clutter her in-house menu.

“I think that we will take a lot of their suggestions,” she said.

As Sax, of M.C. Wheels, continues to work toward increasing the public’s understanding of his business, he said meeting with the Franklin Pierce students showed him how well he’s accomplished this.

“It’s always good to get a fresh perspective … to see how other people see the things that we do,” he said. “I’ve been doing it so long that it’s hard for me to even imagine.”

Of course, the students also get something out of the deal.

“I think just being able to work with a client — actually communicate with them — that’s the main thing that I took out of it,” senior Trisha A. Slowinski said. “And it wasn’t learned in an actual classroom.”

Little and the students who worked on Lindy’s Web site described that certain “je ne sais quoi” of dealing with unexpected technology failures and a looming deadline.

And senior Josh M. Lupinek learned that better communication with clients from the get-go saves time redoing work later.

Meanwhile, the students are emerging from the class with their own “deliverables” to help market themselves — an electronic copy of the group’s work and testimonial letters from the small business development center and their clients.
And the fact that they can boast in-the-trenches experience might also make them more attractive to employers, according to Susan B. Newcomer, workforce development coordinator for the Greater Keene Chamber of Commerce.

The chamber of commerce called on Franklin Pierce students several years ago to do a survey about the level of retail customer service skills in Keene.

“Any time a student can get outside of the campus and work,” she said, “They make the contacts, but they can also add something to their resume which distinguishes them from others.”

Deborah Buxton of New England Forest Products similarly seemed to recognize her role in helping bring up tomorrow’s workforce.

Buxton described her and her husband’s work at New England Forest Products as rooted in concepts of sustainability.

On this front, she said new workers will need to resume where her generation leaves off.

“This next generation of college students, they need to pick up the gauntlet,” she said.

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