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At a Community College in Arizona, Interns Survey the Local Economy

By Joanna Chau

A recession makes small cities and towns want to retain their businesses and colleges try to equip their students for employment. Estrella Mountain Community College, near Phoenix, is trying to do both at the same time.

Towns and chambers of commerce in the city's western suburbs had long used employees or consultants to survey local businesses on their desire to stay in the area. But as money became tighter, government officials struggled to keep the surveys in their budgets.

At a Southwest Valley Chamber of Commerce board meeting in July 2009, Clay J. Goodman, vice president for occupational education at Estrella, offered an innovative solution. As a city official complained about the cost of surveys, Mr. Goodman recalls thinking, "Why can't students do the job?" He pitched the idea, and the board members welcomed it. That day, they drew up plans for the Business Retention Internship Program, in which students would design surveys, administer them to local businesses, and present their findings.

"It started with a need within the community—and being able to use our students and give them a great learning experience," Mr. Goodman says. Campus administrators took advantage of the opportunity to include survey questions that would help them, too. Did students' training, for example, match businesses' needs?

So far three groups of interns have gone through Estrella's internship. Each fall, 10 to 25 students submit cover letters and résumés to apply for the program. "We wanted them to learn what it's like to apply for a real job," says Landis Elliott, the college's manager of internships. "That's a learning experience in itself."

Most students advance to a panel interview with the program's directors, city officials, and business leaders, but a few applicants are screened out. "We're looking for students that will take this seriously," Mr. Goodman says.

Those who make the cut, about eight to 20 students, then register for a corresponding internship course. Because they earn academic credit, they have to pay tuition, but they also get paid: \$9 an hour for 10 hours a week in the classroom and the field.

During the fall semester, students begin training, which involves research on local businesses, practice with cold calling, and mock interviews. They also tweak the survey, modifying the college-focused questions in particular to try to generate clearer answers. And the students work with city and chamber officials to make sure their questions are on point. "It's important to have a survey that is better and better every year," Ms. Elliott says.

In the spring, the course officially begins, with pairs of students each approaching about 20 local businesses. The college instructs the interns to keep their schedules flexible, to visit offices when owners or managers are available. The businesses include small companies, such as Mr. Handyman, in Goodyear, Ariz., as well as large corporations, like Walmart and Lockheed Martin.

Students dress professionally for the meetings, and over the course of an hour, one serves as interviewer, the other as scribe. They ask, for example, "Are there any barriers to growth in the community?" "How do you feel the chamber could better provide services to aid your business?" and "Are you willing to open internship opportunities to the local schools or colleges?"

'Small Talk' and Assessment

Otis J. Alexander was an intern in the program after having been a businessman himself. Mr. Alexander, 49, returned to college in 2009 after his novelty-manufacturing company and computer-maintenance business both failed. He admits to poor communication skills: "I was not a people person."

But he slowly built those skills as an intern in the program—twice. Through cold-call training and repeated interviews with business owners, he learned to make people feel comfortable, he says, by "using small talk and revisiting difficult questions later in the conversation."

He also worked on his powers of persuasion. "Because business owners were busy or afraid to share info," he says, "there were rejections" at first. "We worked around their schedules and made sure they knew it was all confidential," Mr. Alexander says.

On one visit, the president of a large local supermarket chain took him and his teammate on a tour, where they got an unexpected business lesson. "We learned the ins and outs of how their supply chain worked," Mr. Alexander recalls. "And we were surprised to

hear that the company was going to buy out another, much larger Fortune 500 supermarket company."

Mr. Alexander has since transferred from Estrella to Arizona State University, where he is a junior studying business-management entrepreneurship. He hopes to start another company someday. "This time I'll have the skills to do it right," he says. "My success in the course depended on me building confidence in those skills, so I went out there and did it."

About 40 interns have finished Estrella's internship program since 2009, Mr. Goodman says, and most have graduated from the college with an associate degree or are on track to do so. Some have transferred to a four-year university, or plan to.

Deirdre Whitehead, an intern last year, is also now at Arizona State. The internship program, she says, helped her decide to pursue a major in urban policy there. The combination of number crunching and public service drew her to local government, she says: "I really fell in love with it."

Estrella, meanwhile, has gained valuable information on how to improve its programs, training students better for the work force. "If our students don't come out with the education and skills our business community wants," Mr. Goodman says, "then we need to be doing something different."

The survey has also reflected businesses' perceptions of the quality and availability of local workers, he says.

Companies' responses showed that they were looking for interns, for instance. So Estrella added more opportunities across all majors, increasing its number of internships from two to 75. Most are in the public sector, including in city governments, and several are in the hospitality industry and culinary arts, with students placed at nearby hotels and resorts.

With the job market difficult to penetrate, community colleges are increasingly interested in hands-on programs, says Jim Jacobs, president of Macomb Community College, in Michigan, who has spent more than two decades studying and creating work-force programs. He praised Estrella's effort: "This one seems like a win-win."

Nationally, only about 15 percent of community-college students have done an internship, according to the most recent data from the Center for Community College Student Engagement. But Estrella's program is getting attention. Chandler-Gilbert Community College, also under Arizona's Maricopa Community Colleges umbrella, has

adapted the model, giving students academic credit, not wages. Colleges in California and Florida are interested, too, and they're calling Estrella for advice, Mr. Goodman says.

An internship program grounded in the local economy is invaluable, says Maria Reyes, dean of career and technical education at Chandler-Gilbert. "Students are getting direct exposure to businesses, and they are learning what the work-force needs are," she says. "They can better understand the skills they should be developing or need to continue developing as they further their education."

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