

INSTITUTE STEERS COMPANIES IN RIGHT DIRECTION

by Darlene Slack

Four years after Mike Alamo (PE '73, MS PE '81) decided to turn his biking hobby into a business, Alamo Bicycle Touring is a thriving company.

Alamo believes the help he received from the College of Business's Small Business Institute (SBI) Program made his efforts successful. In return, he has provided hands-on business experiences for numerous students.

The SBI Program links finance, marketing, and accounting students with small businesses needing planning and analysis assistance. Started at Cal Poly in 1974 by Professor Emeritus Eugene O'Connor, the program is currently under the direction of Finance Professor Alan Weatherford.

"Our students are able to complete their senior projects by putting their classroom knowledge and skills to work," Weatherford says. "This is often the students' first exposure to the real world and to the difficulty of running your own business. At the same time, small businesses get quality consulting services they might not otherwise be able to afford."

With 95 percent of small businesses failing because of poor management, getting the right advice — from marketing surveys to business plans to product development — can make a big difference.

"Knowing the SBI Program was available encouraged me to take the chance with my own business," Alamo says. He and his wife Lynda (HE '73) had, over the years, gone on bicycle tours through 25 states and four countries for their own pleasure. But going into the tour business was a new challenge. They were now arranging 35 tours a year in different locales from San Francisco to Catalina Island for up to 30 people each.

"When you own your own small business, you get up in the morning, start answering the phone, and don't have a lot of time to evaluate what you're doing," Alamo says. One of the several studies students did was an analysis of the company's

phone system. "This sounds like a simple issue until you realize we have an 800 number, regular number, a fax machine, computer modems, cell phones, and pagers. How do I take the time to determine whether we're getting the best rate for everything?"

College of Business students are not the only ones involved. Alamo provides learn-by-doing experiences for recreation administration students as well. He's had four interns who each spent 400 hours helping him set up bicycle tours.

Over the years, the SBI Program has assisted many local businesses, ranging from the more common,

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Tour participants Steven Imbagliazzo (left) and Andrea Leeb consult a route map with Alamo staff member John Kammer. (Photo by Doug Allen)

