

# Nurturing the Best IN THE BUSINESS

*Orfalea College students reap the benefits of local community and accessible experts*

BY CATHY ENNS



Ronda Beaman (fourth from left) and Orfalea College students from her Leadership Summit.

If you're a budding business student, conventional wisdom might guide you to apply to a University of California business school in one of the state's large cities. Or you might set your sights on a traditional MBA program at a university near a commercial center like Boston or Chicago.

But choosing to attend the Orfalea College of Business at Cal Poly could be one of the most strategic decisions you make.

In the heart of the Central Coast, Orfalea College students find professional resources much like those of a larger area, plus the advantages of a more accessible, involved community. These attributes, combined with the unique characteristics of Cal Poly, offer business students an experience like no other.

San Luis Obispo County's coastal settings, friendly communities and pastoral countryside make it a magnet for professionals who can choose to live almost anywhere. After relocating, many of them connect with Cal Poly and contribute to the stature of the Orfalea College and the success of its students.

Take Denise Dudley. After founding SkillPath in the late 1980s and growing it into the world's largest training seminar company, Dudley decided she could help run the Kansas City-based organization from afar. After a careful search, she moved to San Luis Obispo County where, in her words, "Cal Poly changes the face of what would otherwise be a more isolated community." Today Dudley mentors as many as 25 students at a time for the Executive Partners Program at the Orfalea College.

Ronda Beaman is another successful professional mentoring Cal Poly business students on real-world skills. The chief creative officer of Peak Learning, a global research and consulting firm, Beaman chose to make her home in San Luis Obispo, a place "where the kids would want to vacation."

The accomplished executive coach, author and public speaker now heads up the Orfalea College's immensely popular Leadership Summit, a two-quarter experience that helps students evaluate their strengths and learn, as Beaman puts it, "what leaders do." Students form teams and develop leadership consulting plans for companies across the nation—performing real consulting work. The young leaders present their plans to C-level executives and often "blow them away."

## **An Interconnected Community**

The opportunity to bring skills and experience to a setting where hands-on learning is a core value attracts recent transplants and local professionals alike. Phil Cohl, a senior portfolio manager in the San Luis Obispo

po office of Stifel Nicolaus, a 120-year old brokerage and investment banking firm, volunteers time with the Student Managed Portfolio Project (SMPP).

Students working on the SMPP manage investments worth nearly half a million dollars for their client, the Cal Poly Corporation. The goal is to beat the S&P 500 Index by at least 1 percent, a benchmark the SMPP routinely achieves.

Cohl teaches alongside Cyrus Ramezani, SMPP supervisor and chair of Orfalea's finance area. "Cyrus handles the theoretical," he said, "and I do the 'real life.'"

Cohl prepares for class just as thoroughly as his students do, as each session opens with a discussion of market activity from the prior day. He loves the work because, he said, "The students keep me sharp. I am amazed at the questions they ask."

It is this intersection of Cal Poly's Learn by Doing tradition and the tendency of San Luis Obispo County residents to be active and get involved that really makes a difference for business students at the Orfalea College. So believes Marina Alvarado, who graduated earlier this year with a Master of Science degree in accounting, specializing in taxation.

Members of the business community help drive Learn by Doing in a number of ways, she said. "They seek us out as interns because we're known to be hard workers with good attitudes." And local professionals regularly attend speaking events and support career fairs, she said.

Professors typically live close by, and Alvarado notes that many students who initially intend to return to their home cities end up falling in love with San Luis Obispo and going into business here. In this way, Cal Poly and the community become increasingly interconnected. Before and after graduation, students energize the community and vice versa.

Attributes of Cal Poly, including small class size, also influence how accessible students, professors and community members are to each other. According to Alvarado, mentors really care about their students. "They give so much of their own time," she said. "They help students not only to graduate and get a job but also to join your profession and make a meaningful contribution."

Alvarado's most memorable Learn by Doing experience was serving in the Cal Poly Low Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC), the brainchild of Cal Poly Professor Eddy Quijano, who served as its founding director. After eight weeks of intensive training, Alvarado and her fellow LITC students tackled formidable challenges, including filing delinquent tax returns and representing clients involved in disputes with the IRS. It was a rare and valuable opportunity to get involved in the emerging field of tax controversy.

Alvarado believes that in a big business school, she might have been overlooked. Whether or not that's true, she was a standout, tapped by Quijano for a leadership role in the LITC. Upon graduation, she received several job offers and signed on as a staff accountant for a local CPA firm, cementing yet another Cal Poly-community connection. □

.....  
Phil Cohl speaks to students  
in the Student Managed  
Portfolio Project.  
.....

