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Top graduate students support economic development, gain real-world experience

By Flori Meeks

Oakland University graduate student Shannon Dougherty has her share of experience in the work world, but it was the SBA's new **Experiential Learning and Innovation (ELI)** program that gave Dougherty a real taste of the business world she plans to enter.

Shannon
Dougherty

"It's different in an entrepreneurial start-up environment," Dougherty says. "I was able to see that. I got the experience of working in a company, but I still had a mentor to guide me."

Dougherty is one of the first students to participate in the ELI program, which is based in the SBA's **Center for Integrated Business Research and Education (CIBRE)** and gives graduate students an opportunity to conduct research and analysis for Michigan companies preparing to make significant business decisions.

"ELI provides our graduate students with invaluable real-world experience and learning opportunities, while giving Michigan businesses access to the minds of our top graduate students. The program is especially valuable to businesses in light of today's economic climate," says SBA Dean Mohan Tanniru.

Dougherty worked with energy conservation company Hammerhead, on market readiness of a new product that conserves phantom energy. "I did secondary market research, some primary research and I assisted with their business plan," says Dougherty, who completed the project in fall 2008.

ELI is loosely based on the model of the SBA's award-winning **Applied Technology in Business (ATiB)** program, which gives undergraduate students practical learning opportunities in technical applications by meshing classroom instruction with real world experience. Through ELI, top SBA graduate students now have similar opportunities as they work with corporate partners and faculty advisers. The students also receive a stipend and tuition assistance from the sponsoring company.

The energy conservation project was one of three inaugural ELI projects last fall.

MBA student Ajay Gupta worked with real estate development company KIRCO as it considered expanding into the medical building field. Under the guidance of faculty adviser Wayne Blizman, Gupta developed and implemented a market research project to determine the expansion's feasibility. He also attended a steering committee meeting on the proposal. "I was very lucky and fortunate to be in the meeting," says Gupta, who is specializing in finance. "The knowledge shared was enormous."

KIRCO Executive Vice President Mike Piette appreciated the opportunity to work with Gupta. Gupta was asked to tackle a sophisticated project, Piette says, and he devoted a great deal of energy to it. "I was impressed that he spent quite a bit of time working to understand the nuances of the business we're in."

Piette is excited about the ELI program as a whole. "I think it's a great, great program. When I was in graduate school I would have loved to work in a business setting and to have an opportunity to work on a business plan. This program is a phenomenal idea, and was a great asset to me."

A third ELI project employed the analysis of two SBA graduate students for Oakland Family Services (OFS), Macomb Family Services and Family Services Inc. of Detroit and Wayne County as they prepared to consolidate. Pallavi Inamdr, a recent MBA graduate, and Dean Przymusinski, a master's student in SBA's Information Technology Management program, analyzed the integration of business practices, from billing to quality assurance (click [here](#) for story).

"The OU students brought a unique perspective, an incredible energy and a very professional approach and execution to the analysis," says Michael Earl, president and CEO, OFS, and managing partner of the resulting consolidation, Family Service Alliance for Southeastern Michigan.

Dougherty considers herself fortunate to have been a part of ELI. "It was a great experience. It's work – it's not for the faint hearted – but it's worth it. I definitely would do it again."

Businesses that want to take advantage of this unique model to gain high-level attention from top graduate students, should contact Faculty Director of Graduate Programs Balaji Rajagopalan at rajagopa@oakland.edu or (248) 370-4958 for more information.

SUMMARY

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