Columbia’s Career Center Harnesses Students’ Entrepreneurial Spirit

Managing one of Columbia’s five student businesses is an education all its own

By Anne Ray

A first year on the job at a career center might be spent learning the hard truths about business. But for others, the jobs are not easily pleased, bureaucratic red tape is hard to negotiate, and the greatest detail can lead to the largest of problems.

But several of Columbia’s most entrepreneurial students have already seen the dicey parts of business firsthand, as managers for Student Enterprises, a program sponsored by the Center for Career Education (CCE). Each student is home to five student businesses, each of which has a contract with the University, hires its own student employees, and is responsible for making its own profit.

In the past two years, all five businesses have not only operated profitably and have expanded operations. Profits, though, are not what constitute the program’s greatest success—real-world business experience is what counts.

As managers, students learn lessons that give them the ability to deal with failure. "If you can’t afford to fail, you’ll never be successful," said Rodriguez. "We’re responsible for generating their own successes and failures."

"We won’t tell them how many people to hire or how much inventory to order," Rodriguez said. "But we are there to help when problems arise; encouraging them to find innovative solutions."

Rodriguez said that Student Enterprises will soon be widening its program by hosting monthly management seminars—"Entrepreneurship 101," and "How to Start a Business," by adding a sixth enterprise, a babysitting agency modeled after a házigazda firm run by Barnard College students. According to Rodriguez, any one interested in starting a business should keep an eye out for job postings on Interview/TRAK.

"I’m undecided about where my career is going next. I was an intern with the fashion designer Rodarte this summer, and I continue to be interested in the arts as well as arts administration. I’d like to find a job where I can have a creative edge of business with my interests, but that will still keep a few of the skills one needs.

In addition, the program has taught me how to work within a bureaucracy. You have to learn how to use the resources you have.

‘It’s great being a student and managing. You’re managing your peers, so you understand exactly their position. But it can also be hard to juggle the responsibilities of managing with being a student—figuring out what you need to do tonight, right now, how to prioritize.

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Brandon Arbiter says he was inspired to try out a job as a manager after finding a database of student businesses through CCE. His business, CU Snacks, is a virtual supermarket that allows students to place online orders for everything from beer to tuna. Judd, his comanager, is also a senior in the School of Engineering.

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