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Program is Win-Win for Businesses and Students

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/kwamie_dunbar/10/
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Professor Josh Shuart, right, discusses real business problems with his students.

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The Sacred Heart University (SHU) Problem-Based Learning Lab (PBL) – launched in January through the John F. Welch College of Business – is now working with regional clients and is seeking corporate and community partners to submit potential projects for fall 2014 and beyond.

Announced in fall 2013, the interdisciplinary, experiential learning program has been designed to expose students to real business problems. The program targets community organizations and businesses looking to address growth and marketing opportunities, enhance or influence public perception, develop new business models and implement innovative action plans.

According to Kwamie Dunbar, assistant dean and assistant professor of Finance, student work typically includes market studies, examining current business models and recommending new strategies for product development and future direction. The PBL teams function like an internal consulting group and are already working with several organizations focused on various challenges and audiences.

Their inaugural project for the City of Bridgeport involves an economic-impact study of City facilities and events on the local economy. Dunbar says this will allow the City to have metrics on job creation and to examine tourism revenues and local business activities that will be used in its marketing campaigns and as economic updates to local news outlets. Later this spring, the PBL also will work on two projects with a major telecomm provider involving market studies and creating business models for new business opportunities, and a product launch opportunity with a Kodak subsidiary. Another project examining the viability of an indoor cycling facility will be completed later this spring. For fall 2014, there will be a project from TranSigma Partners, a risk-management company. This long-term project, Dunbar says, includes the potential for students to work on international projects with TranSigma’s global teams in Europe.

The lab’s process model, Dunbar explains, involves organizing internal teams for each assignment, conducting client-directed research and meetings, reviewing options, formulating strategic potential solutions and then working with the client to communicate plans. Student
candidates interested in participating are screened and interviewed in a competitive process to
determine qualifications and interest, and then are assigned to teams. As projects are identified,
the PBL team seeks out subject matter experts from corporations in the area, SHU’s alumni and
WCOB networks.

Dunbar stresses that this program has been well received in the university and business
communities, and that these practical, hands-on learning opportunities are reengineering the way
students tackle problems and seek solutions.

“We’re always looking for ways to bring real-world practice into the classroom and to connect
the theoretical and practical through guided, interactive, hands-on learning,” he says. “This effort
mutually benefits our students and the local business community by providing high-quality
business solutions to some of today’s complex business problems.”

Scott Gaffney and Maggie McCabe are two SHU students participating on PBL teams. Both
believe the practical experience and opportunity to work with real companies outside the
classroom has proven invaluable.

“This has taught me to actually speak with customers and how a consulting team works together
to solve unique problems,” McCabe explains. “In the real world, there are tough deadlines to
meet and projects that don’t necessarily come with clear instructions or a syllabus. You have to
put yourself in your client’s mindset, understand what he or she is looking for and work with that
information to find creative solutions that meet his or her needs.”

Gaffney has been working on a client assignment that involves marketing to students, and has
found his experience gratifying – and eye opening. “One of my roles has involved researching
trends in credit card usage, data on credit markets and specifically how college students
understand their finances in terms of security, payment methods and future products,” he says.
“The PBL demonstrates efforts to apply theoretical knowledge to real-life situations. These skills
will help students work in high-demanding marketing, finance and accounting jobs and are
reinforcing the image of SHU and the Welch College of Business as a top-tier university.”

SHU has posted a link to the PBL which highlights some of the potential benefits for corporate
and community partners and details how interested parties can get involved. It can be found at
http://www.sacredheart.edu/academics/johnfwelchcollegeofbusiness/wcobinnovationcentersprob
lem-basedlearninglab/