



Posted on Sun, Nov. 08, 2009

Schools offer new entrepreneurial classes

BY JULIE KAY

Special to The Miami Herald

Shelton Ferrari was set to open a new car dealership in Fort Lauderdale, but a group of business students from Nova Southeastern University convinced the company otherwise.

The team of five students, part of an entrepreneurial program at Nova's Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship, advised the car dealer it would be wiser to open its next dealership in Pembroke Pines, based on a study of per capita incomes in that city. The Ferrari dealership eventually was sold, but the students are continuing to advise other local companies, such as Medallion, a Miami furniture manufacturer.

"When students leave here, they have a portfolio of a feasibility study, a business plan and a consulting assignment," said Tom Tworoger, chair of Nova's entrepreneur department.

Nova Southeastern is just one South Florida college to emphasize entrepreneurship courses in recent years in response to rising interest.

As the economy has faltered and the number of pink slips has risen, many workers have decided to start their own businesses. Additionally, new graduates, realizing their chances of securing positions at large companies have sharply declined, have been forced to rethink their careers and become their own bosses.

South Florida schools have responded to the shift in the marketplace by offering a cadre of entrepreneurial programs, courses and features.

LAUNCHING BUSINESSES

The University of Miami has established The Launch Pad, ensconced in the student center in the middle of campus. Here, students and alumni can meet with volunteers who are successful business people affiliated with the Miami-Dade Chamber of Commerce, the Beacon Council and other organizations. The volunteers provide one-on-one "venture coaching" to walk-ins.

Some 750 students have already signed up at the center, which opened a year ago with a \$75,000 grant from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, a Kansas City nonprofit dedicated to encouraging youths to become entrepreneurs.

"We want to present entrepreneurship as a viable career path, to help the students start new ventures in South Florida," said William Green, UM's senior vice provost and undergraduate dean.

ACROSS ALL FIELDS

Florida International University, one of eight Kauffman Foundation centers around the country, has been emphasizing entrepreneurship since 2004, when the university received a \$3 million

grant from the foundation to create programs and courses. While undergraduate and graduate business students have an entrepreneurship track, courses also are sprinkled throughout the university in the areas of religion, law, chemistry and other fields of study.

Irma Becerra-Fernandez, director of the Pino Global Entrepreneurship Center at FIU, teaches an entrepreneurial course on information technology. She focuses on social networking and Web-based businesses, and builds her curriculum around the concept of having fun. Modeling her class after the TV show *Shark Tank*, Becerra-Fernandez holds a mini-competition for students to present their best business ideas. She brings in prominent business leaders as judges. One year, the winning team developed a MySpace widget and won a video camera from MySpace Latina.

Two of her top students who graduated in 2008 went on to start a successful Miami energy business called Veterans Energy Solutions. Russell and Kevin Otway, who are twin brothers and both military veterans, conduct energy audits on homes and buildings, and they install energy-efficient and renewable-energy systems.

Kevin Otway said he applies 90 percent of what he learned in the FIU entrepreneurial program on a daily basis in his job. One example: He applied lessons about bootstrap and guerrilla marketing to find low-cost or free ways to market his company through strategic alliances. He quickly aligned his company with Energy Star, a prominent, government-backed energy company with a well-known logo, which the Otways can now put on their website and be linked to as a partner.

COMMUNITY CLASSES

FIU is also reaching out to people in the community who have been laid off and are looking to start businesses. Through a partnership with South Florida Workforce Development Agency, FIU is offering courses, boot camps and ``webinars."

Eight-hour seminars led by lawyers, accountants and other volunteers are held once a month and cost \$99. Those with limited time can listen in by telephone to lunch-time webinars, which cost \$25.

Miami Dade College has also added new courses this year on how to start businesses in import-export, wedding planning, catering, floral arranging and -- the latest -- auctioneering.

Nova Southeastern University has a more traditional entrepreneurship program, in the business department. But the degree's focus is increasingly entrepreneurial rather than geared to joining an existing company: Of the 14 MBA courses offered, six focus on entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship is a new focus for Broward College, which is starting to offer courses on how to set up home-based businesses and skills for small business owners who need a better marketing plan or a brush-up on bookkeeping, finance and marketing.

For the first time, BC also is offering a grant-writing workshop in which students bring an actual outline of a grant they're working on to get real-world advice. Starting in January: a course in project management, to teach people with small businesses how to take them to the next level.

The school also offers ``fast and fabulous" courses for people who want to become wedding planners, personal trainers or photographers -- either for new jobs or moonlighting. Those classes, which cost \$400 to \$500, are filling up fast, said Diane Peart, program developer for

continuing education.

“We recognize that people want to do something different with their careers,” she said. “The economy may be the wave that is forcing them in different directions.”

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