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Business projects flowering at Rowan

Colleen Henry understands about growing things, as in plants and flowers. The owner of the new “Flowers by Design” florist shop on High Street in Glassboro has worked in the business for 17 years.

But since she opened the shop in November, she’s also learned about growing things, as in expanding her business. And students in the nearby Rohrer College of Business at Rowan University have been right there beside her.

Henry tapped into the brainpower of Rohrer’s profs and students who work with community groups, small businesses and government organizations through the college’s project-based learning classes and its related Center for Innovation & Entrepreneurship.

She knows competition is stiff for a new establishment and the economy is weak. “That’s probably why it’s so important to have the opportunity with Rowan,” she said.

Each semester students tackle real-world projects under the guidance of highly experienced professors. Those projects not only help the students build their business skills but also enable them to contribute to local and regional communities.

In Henry’s case, MIS assistant professor Dr. Darren Nicholson, from the Department of Marketing and Business Information Systems, oversaw 17 undergraduate students in his Business Web Applications class who worked in five teams on innovative web designs for the start-up business.

The teams originally “competed” for Henry’s business during the fall 2008 semester, with each team analyzing Flowers by Design and designing and implementing a web application that met Henry’s needs. At the end of the semester, all five project managers met with the business owner to discuss their work, and Henry selected the elements she liked the best.

This semester, the team leaders of the two groups that produced the web applications she favored will work with Henry to finesse the final product. “They’re taking the five prototypes and building the best of breed,” Nicholson said.

When they are done, the web site will go beyond the ordinary quick electronic look at where she is and what she offers; Henry’s site will allow visitors to take a peek at her stock and fashion their own arrangements, which she will tweak into flora perfection.

“You can choose from pallets of colors while interactively building your arrangement as well as monitor the creation’s price in real time as it’s being built,” said Nicholson, who noted the site will be up in March, well before the busy Mother’s Day season.

The web site also will feature an “administrative back end” where Henry can change any feature of the web applications, from pricing to negotiations with suppliers to the overall look.

The project was a hit with both Henry and the Rowan teams.

“What they’re doing with that web site — in this day and age you really need that,” said Henry, who estimated it would have cost her \$3,500 if she contracted a firm to handle the design. “They’ve allowed me to grow.”

“The project sounded very challenging because we weren’t aware of any other floral website where people could create dynamic floral arrangements online

without going to a store and saying I want this, this, this and this,” Nicholson said.

The project was just one of about 10 project-based efforts Rowan business students tackled last semester, including a business plan that another group developed for Henry’s operation. Those efforts are a hallmark of the Rohrer College of Business, and they make a difference for students as they begin their job searches.

“The thing that employers love is that instead of just learning theory from books and lectures these students are engaging real customers with real problems and real opportunities,” Nicholson said. “They’re having to be creative and negotiate. They’re having to deal with real time constraints — both technical and social.”

Henry witnessed the skills that should take the students far in their careers. “They were a unique bunch of individuals. They were the best of the best, all very nice, very committed, very dedicated,” she said. “I was really impressed by their individualized attention. I was really impressed and still am by their high level of excellence. It’s a great partnership.”

“What we do bridges the technical and the social and builds what the customer envisions,” Nicholson said. “If you don’t build what the customer needs, it’s worthless. You can know all the technical stuff in the world, but if you don’t know how to dance, it just doesn’t work.”

Erin Donegan, 21, of Wharton, N.J., believes the effort will benefit her as well as the florist. The management information systems major said, “This project prepares me for my future career by giving me real-world consulting experience. You learn not only to meet demanding deadlines, but you also have to focus on other important project management skills. Teamwork is a vital aspect of this project that can prepare one for a future career. You are working with a real client on a real project and not just a scenario assignment. In a recent job interview, the interviewer was extremely impressed at the project management experience I am learning from this project. The interviewer also could not believe

that an undergraduate program was offering a course with such a rewarding set of challenges and experiences. This is what makes Rowan students stand out over others, and that is so important for ones career outlook.”

Classmate Marlon Farlow, 22, a management information systems major from Williamstown, and like Donegan a leader of one of the top project teams, echoed her sentiments. “To me, this project means experience, and any experience that we can bring with us in our career is important. By experience, I mean working closely with a client and working with and leading a small team to meet our goals and her expectations,” he said.

And he enjoyed the work. “The highlight of the project for me was seeing it all come together,” Farlow said. “After a couple months of trial and error with different design aspects and trying to figure out what the Colleen really wanted/needed, it is nice to see the final product come to fruition.”

(To learn more about working on project-based learning initiatives with the Rohrer College of Business and the Center for Innovation & Entrepreneurship, contact Sarah Piddington at Piddington@rowan.edu. To view the Flowers by Design web site later in March, visit www.flowersbydesignnj.com <<http://www.flowersbydesignnj.com>> .)