Prime Planners

The Baldwin-Wallace Business Plan Clinic Helps Entrepreneurs Build Maps to Success.

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When it comes to starting a business, dreams can only get you so far.

Just ask Lisa Yessenow. Three years ago, she launched Pretzables, a Cleveland-based gourmet dessert and catering company specializing in custom-made and artistically packaged sweets. Hiring help on an as-needed basis, she amassed a client roster including University Hospitals, MBNA Corp., Ohio State University football coach Jim Tressel, and even Great Britain’s Royal Ballet. This fall, she’ll be on the Food Network show Food Finds.

But by the end of 2003, Yessenow reached a critical juncture. She needed to hire a full-time staff and expand into a larger retail space or risk going out of business for not being able to keep up with demand. Yessenow, 44, had the vision, the ambition, and the energy. What she wanted was an infusion of capital and a partner. What she needed was a business plan.

That’s where Phil Bessler and his students at Baldwin-Wallace College’s Business Plan Clinic come into play. They are taking her through the process of creating a business plan, step by step.

“It’s overwhelmingly complicated,” Yessenow says. “Their help has been invaluable. With their guidance, I’m putting all my ideas in a concrete form so I can go to banks and private investors.”

The Business Plan Clinic is part of Baldwin-Wallace’s Entrepreneurship Center, a clearinghouse for the college’s programs and initiatives aimed at fostering the entrepreneurial spirit. Undergraduate and graduate curriculums, continuing-education seminars, internships, and services for small-business owners fall under the center’s umbrella. The Entrepreneurship Center was christened in 2002, but Director Sandra Stark describes it as “more of an evolution than event, more of a virtual center than a bricks-and-mortar building.”

Stark came to the Berea college in 1999 as an assistant professor, after 21 years as vice president of small-business services at KeyBank. She saw a need to leverage resources and expand the entrepreneurship program.

“Being a business owner is very different than being an employee,” Stark says. “Our primary mission is to provide our students with the kind of specialized education entrepreneurs require.

“People usually start their own businesses because they’re passionate about something,” Stark continues. “That passion is the key to their success. But they often are not prepared for the day-to-day realities of running a business, and the fact that, especially in the early stages, it means having the ability to be a CEO, CFO, COO, and CIO. That’s what we teach in our entrepreneurial programs.”

The Business Plan Clinic provides students with hands-on experience while assisting small-business owners in the community. Students work as consultants alongside volunteer executives.

Melissa Paleo recently graduated from B-W with a degree in business administration. For her, interning at the clinic had unexpected benefits.

“The clinic is a startup itself,” she says. “So not only was I a consultant, but I was also running a small business. Just like my clients, I had to get involved with marketing our services and managing the office. I’m currently looking for a job in banking, but down the road I can see myself starting my own business. It’s a challenge I never considered before.”

The clinic, established in September 2003, is Bessler’s brainchild. He holds B-W’s Herzog Chair in Free Enterprise and serves as its director.

“The clinic provides a great opportunity for our students to take what they study in the classroom and put it into action, and learn from people with a wealth of real-world experience,” Bessler says. “Our volunteers have a chance to give back to the community, and small-business owners get the support they need to be successful.”
Clinic clients pay a modest fee. They're assigned a student adviser and an executive coach. The team meets regularly for two-hour sessions. They review the elements of a business plan, discuss how those components apply to the client, and then work through the plan, section by section. Clients write portions on their own time, and then bring them in for analysis and critique.

David Pusti and his partner, Ron Makovich, had never written a business plan. They have run Makovich and Pusti Architects Inc., a commercial and industrial architectural firm in Berea, for 18 years. Pusti heard about the assistance available in his own back yard and jumped at the chance to create what he describes as “a road map for the firm's future.” Last summer, Pusti and Makovich began working with the clinic.

“I've always known a business plan is important, but it's not something architects are trained to do, so we never bothered,” Pusti says. “We discovered that one of the big benefits is the decision-making that goes with writing the plan. It's forced us to deal with issues like transition arrangements and contingency planning.”

Bessler is the volunteer executive on the architects' team. Having worked for both startups and Fortune 500 companies, he brings 32 years of professional expertise to the table.

“Ron and I have to explain what we do and why,” Pusti says. “The process has gotten us thinking in new ways and it's helping us become forward-looking instead of just reactive.”

The clinic depends on corporate volunteers like Gabe Rosica.
SBDC COMES TO CLEVELAND

CLEVELAND — The U.S. Small Business Administration and the Ohio Department of Development have awarded a grant to a partnership among John Carroll University’s Muldoon Center for Entrepreneurship, Baldwin-Wallace College, and the Urban League of Cleveland to establish a Small Business Development Center (SBDC) for Greater Cleveland. The SBDC is an SBA initiative providing entrepreneurs access to management education, training, and business counseling services. The Urban League will serve as the program’s headquarters. Through a satellite office on campus, JCU will consult with the Urban League in developing education and training programs for the Muldoon Center, support the center’s business counseling efforts, and establish partnerships with community organizations to assure that

SBDC programs and services are accessible to entrepreneurs. Volunteers from JCU’s Entrepreneurs Association will serve as mentors to SBDC clients and provide management service at the center. Baldwin-Wallace College will provide resident graduate students from its international MBA program to assist with early-stage entrepreneurs. Programs are targeted to begin in early July. For more information, log on to www.udleveland.org/main/sbdc.html.

HIGH-POWERED NETWORKING

CLEVELAND — It’ll be business as usual at the Council of Small Enterprises’ monthly Business Unusual event. Come hear Caribou Coffee CEO Micheal J. Coles tell his company’s great American success story from 8 to 10 a.m. May 10 at Embassy Suites in Independence. Bring a raffle gift ($15 value) and get the chance to give a 10-second commercial on your business. Registration is required. Call (216) 592-2222 or visit www.cose.org for more information or to register.

AWARD LUNCHEON

CLEVELAND — Business Advisers of Cleveland will hold its annual Pinnacle Award Luncheon on May 18 at Avon Oaks Country Club in Avon. Awarded since 1990, the Pinnacle Award goes to an entrepreneur deemed the most successful as a result of advice given within one year of the entrepreneur’s first encounter with the BAC. For more information or to register, contact Executive Director Lynn Shaw at (216) 426-2052 or lshaw@busadvclde.org.

DIALOGUE ON HEALTH CARE

CLEVELAND — Corporate College’s monthly Taste of Training Breakfast Series will be held 7:30 to 9:30 a.m. May 21 at the college’s facility in Westlake. The topic will focus on the state of health care in the United States. Entrepreneurs will hear from a panel of experts as they discuss trends and best practices, including wellness initiatives and consumer-driven health care plans. The cost is $10, and a continental breakfast will be provided. Send questions or RSVP to amy.butrey@tri-c.edu.

STUDENT INNOVATORS

AKRON — University of Akron students Pritam Das and Deenu Kanjackal of India and Dave Young of Parma won first place in the university’s Third Annual Business Plan Competition, held April 3. They won the $3,000 top prize for creating Polymeric Drug Delivery Systems LLC. The business develops PolyRing, a time-controlled, local-delivery drug device. The University’s Fitzgerald Institute for Entrepreneurial Studies, part of the College of Business Administration, sponsored the event.