

PLOWING THE PATH TO SUSTAIN- ABILITY

WHEN **DALE BARRON** WAS ASKED ABOUT YET ANOTHER GROUP FROM BAYLOR COMING TO THE **WORLD HUNGER RELIEF FARM** TO WORK ON A PROJECT, HE — AS ALWAYS — HAPPILY AGREED. BUT HE DIDN'T REALLY BELIEVE THERE WOULD BE MUCH **BENEFIT FOR THE FARM.**

BY FRANCES ROGERS

LEARNING  IN 360°

Barron is the director of development for World Hunger Relief, Inc., a Christian organization committed to alleviating hunger through education (like training interns and volunteers at their farm in Elm Mott, Texas) and sustainable development programs (such as community garden projects with Waco schools, organizations and churches).

The farm plays host to several Baylor students from all departments each semester, so Barron wasn't surprised to hear that students from a new program at the Hankamer School of Business were asking to study the farm.

"What usually happens is students come out to the farm, get their information, write their paper, and *maybe* we get a copy of the paper," Barron said. "The projects are always weighted toward the benefit of the student. And that's OK. They're well-intentioned, but it takes time away from our work."

That's why Barron was so surprised that at the end of the business school's project, the farm was the benefactor. "This one helped us more than any other student project had in the past," he said.

The project was a complete study of the operational structures of the farm by a class in Nonprofit Management, led by Charles S. Madden, director of the Baylor Center for Nonprofit Leadership and Service and the Ben H. Williams Professor of Marketing. Ten students (both graduate and undergraduate) participated in the Directed Studies in Marketing course, which focused entirely on the farm.

"We have had students act as consultants on an individual basis in the past," Madden said, "but we had never run a comprehensive consulting project with a larger group of students."

The students, who came from a diverse background within the School (Finance, Marketing, Management, Entrepreneurship, etc.), spent the spring 2008 semester studying every aspect of the farm's business.

"For a project like this to be successful, your organization has to be completely transparent," Barron said. "You need to give students access to your financial books, databases, board members, donors, everything. And that's what we did."

After learning the mission of the farm and the basics of its operation, the Baylor students began to look at the image of the farm. Stephanie Kraemer, who graduated in May 2008 as a Marketing major, said she was on one of the teams who interviewed groups of people connected with the farm. Students asked about the image of the farm among the general public, donors, local churches, mission organizations, volunteers, interns, board members and staff.

"Once you start hearing the same responses over and over, it becomes a great place to start looking for solutions," Kraemer said.



THE WORLD HUNGER RELIEF FARM STUDENT PROJECT



When asking churches about their image of the farm, for example, students found that church leaders were generally unaware of the mission of the farm and didn't see its approach to hunger as "direct." Knowing the perception of the farm among different groups, Kraemer said, gave them a place to start with their marketing plans.

Alex Knight, an Entrepreneurship major who also graduated in May 2008, was part of the student team that studied the farm's donor management systems.

"The database they were using, which was basically just spreadsheets, had been working for them up to that point," Knight said, "but after learning the amount of information they had and what they wanted to do with it, we knew they needed to be looking to something bigger that could help them into the future."

The suggestions made by the team about the technology and information organization were some of the most helpful to the farm, Barron said.

"They gave us a lot of information about donor management that is going to be very useful for us," he said. "We are also implementing some of their suggestions about the Web site, making it more interactive, so we can do things like take donations and have people sign up for the mailing list on-line."

The students' findings and recommendations were presented at the end of the semester in a meeting with the farm's staff.

"We got to see not only where we have opportunities to grow and improve, but also where our strengths are currently," Barron said. "It was very helpful to us, and it was a great learning experience for the students."

Both Kraemer and Knight believe the things they learned as students in the course are helping them in their newly launched careers.

"This wasn't just a case in a book that we studied," Kraemer said. "It was a real project that we did from beginning to end. It helps to be able to point to that kind of experience."

Knight feels he uses what he learned from the project in every part of his current sales job with ReadyTalk, a company that specializes in audio and Web conferencing.

"Learning the process of consulting is something that helps me with each and every one of my clients. I have to figure out what their needs are before I can recommend something," he said.

Knight also feels he has a better understanding of the process when his clients are nonprofit organizations.

"Having some insight, like knowing how board approval works with nonprofits, makes me something of an insider," he said, "and that's invaluable."

Madden hopes that as the Nonprofit and Development track major develops more fully, this project-centered class will become the capstone study for students.

"One of the great things about the business school is that we're willing to give away our secrets," Madden said. "When these nonprofit agencies open their doors to our students, we want to be able to share our knowledge in return. It really is a great trade. **We see this as a way to try to build a new generation of leaders in the nonprofit world and beyond.**"

