When Russell Bertwell first visited Dr. Hope Koch's upper level Management Information Systems class, it was simply as a guest speaker. But the day he was scheduled to speak was also the day that students were turning in projects they had been working on nearly all semester. The projects had students taking in-depth looks at using technology to create business solutions.

Learning about the projects sparked an idea in Bertwell.

As a senior manager at the technology consulting firm Accenture, Bertwell recognized an opportunity to expand the learning experience for Baylor students.

"As a Baylor grad, I'm always looking for ways to foster new talent and be supportive of the Hankamer School of Business," he said. "I wanted to do something beyond a career fair."

After brainstorming a bit with Koch, they created the IT Intervention Competition.

"WE ASK THE STUDENTS TO IDENTIFY A PROCESS THAT ISN'T WORKING SO WELL," SAID KOCH. "WE TELL THEM TO LOOK WHERE THEY GO TO CHURCH, WHERE THEY DO VOLUNTEER WORK, WITHIN THEIR CAMPUS ORGANIZATIONS, AND EVEN WHERE THEY WORK. ONCE THEY IDENTIFY A PROBLEM AREA, THEY DESIGN TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE THE PROCESS."

The competition is designed to mirror real-life job situations. They need to create a plan, come up with a budget, and then "sell" their ideas to Accenture employees who are surrogates for the real clients.

"We like being involved from the very beginning of this project," said Bertwell. "What makes it unique is that we are there to guide the students from the start."

In an attempt to embed technology in every aspect, the project is kicked off via a video conference, where a representative from Accenture explains who they are, what the competition is about, and why it's relevant before giving the assignment.

"About a month later, a team of Accenture consultants comes on-site to the classroom," he said. "At that point all the groups should have evaluated the potential benefits and risks and come up with a business plan."

The groups make presentations to the Accenture representatives, just as they would at a real job.

"We evaluate the ideas as if we were working with them on a real project," Bertwell said. "We try to point out things they wouldn't think of, like pitfalls or hidden costs. We help them see the real-world things."

After the projects are initially evaluated, Koch leads the students through the business-case, development and implementation process, preparing them for the final presentation.

"In the end, they give their final presentations to their peers and consultants from Accenture, just like we were their client," said Bertwell. "We evaluate their solutions and try to determine if their IT intervention would be successful. We make it as much like a real-life presentation as possible. We try to give good feedback and put them in the hot seat, just like a client would."

In his nine years at Accenture, Bertwell has plenty of experience in those types of situations to be able to convey a very accurate picture to the students.

"This small simulation is a microcosm of what we do on a larger scale, with millions of dollars at stake, every day," he said. "The stakes are very different, but it's all the same concepts. And learning this way, with very real processes and very real solutions, is extremely valuable as these students enter the workforce."

This is a safe place to make mistakes and to make change."

Koch has been pleased by the wide variety of projects her students have tackled.

"Students tend to first identify troubled processes that are closest to home for them," she said.

For example, one group was frustrated by the way the laundry rooms operate in residence halls. Often, after hauling all of their clothes to the laundry rooms, students found that all of the machines were in use, either because it was a busy time or because other students had not removed their items in a timely manner after they were done.

"This group set out to create a solution that would not only monitor open machines and allow you to check before you go all the way to the laundry room, but also would tell you when your laundry is done and remind you to go get it," said Koch. "We tell the students that they need to do something where they know the whole process. This was something that fit that very well."

Two of last year's winning projects also suggested improvements to campus-centered processes.

BioPaw improved the log-in and printing processes for students accessing Baylor computing resources. Another involved Baylor Dining Services, which streamlined the ways dining halls communicate their offerings and made it easier to identify establishments that accept BearBucks.

IT INTERVENTIONS

BY FRANCI ROGERS

LEARNING IN 360°

The third winning project last year was more universally applicable. Students created an app for mobile phones that allows users to save and organize receipts. "While Accenture awards the winning teams a $250 cash prize, the students are more concerned about representing Baylor well to the Accenture consultants," said Koch. "I impress upon them that they are competing for jobs with other students from top-tier schools across the country, and we want to make sure Accenture thinks well of our programs." Other projects have involved computerizing processes at churches, time cards for student workers and even a marketing tool for a retail business.

"I'M EXCITED FOR THIS PROGRAM TO CONTINUE AND FOR OUR PARTNERSHIP WITH ACCENTURE TO GROW," SAID KOCH. "IT'S SUCH A GREAT WAY FOR STUDENTS TO GET REAL EXPERIENCES AND EXPAND THEIR WAYS OF THINKING. Accenture's consultants [Russell Bertwell, Margaret Moul, Rory McKenna and Catherine Zaruba] are so good with them. The feedback they give is personalized and tailored to exactly what problems or successes they are encountering.

We video record all the students' presentations so they can critique themselves and get better. They just learn so much."

For the third consecutive year, the IT Intervention Competition began again this semester with Koch's MIS 3305 classes. In December, the students will present their final projects to Accenture and their peers.

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