



Left: Jennifer Truex MBA '11 (standing far right) and her group discuss the team's recommendations for the non-profit organization MANNA. Right: Matthew Barbieri MBA '11 and his team members make their pitch as the final component of the Non-Profit Consulting Practicum.

Learning a Lifetime of Business Lessons

MBA STUDENTS FIND UNEXPECTED WAYS TO SERVE AND LEARN

JENNIFER TRUEX MBA '11 HAS

always had an interest in helping others, and so she was especially excited to enroll in a new MBA course at the Villanova School of Business titled “Non-Profit Consulting Practicum,” in which students seek out a non-profit organization (NPO) and then find a way to help the organization function more effectively.

Truex didn't need to search for long. When she moved to Philadelphia six years earlier, she had heard about a charity campaign called “Pie in the Sky.” The program is a Thanksgiving fundraiser run by the Metropolitan Area Neighborhood Alliance (MANNA), which provides food to nutritionally at-risk medical patients who face life-threatening illnesses.

“They serve a really specific need in the community,” Truex says. “I found it fascinating because they cater to many people who are living with HIV/AIDS, cancer, or other life-threatening illnesses. I think we all know someone who has gone through chemotherapy, for example, and the challenges associated

with eating during treatment can be very severe.”

Truex told her fellow students about the campaign that had impressed her years before, and they, too, were interested. The group then spent the next few months applying what they learned in the classroom to a real-life situation.

“Once Villanova MBA students have taken their basic courses in the functional areas of accounting, marketing, and finance,” says Ronald P. Hill, PhD, the marketing & business law professor who taught the course and who was a member of the committee that created it as part of the recently revamped MBA curriculum, “we want them to recognize the ways those areas interrelate. So we spend some time getting them to understand how to think across these disciplines to make good decisions as managers. Then they apply this concept to a non-profit organization that's trying to do good things in our community.

“The course has two goals,” he continues. “The first is that students learn how to synthesize across all the different

disciplines. The second, and I think this is the really important part, they learn how to give back to their community, which is already part of our students' mindset. A lot of MBA students want to serve, but they figure that's something they can't do until they're 50 or 60 or 70 years old. We want to illustrate that they have valuable assets to offer these types of organizations now.”

Working in groups of three to seven, students choose an NPO in the Delaware Valley to approach. If their assistance is accepted, the group meets with the organization, learns about its mission and values, and determines a particular issue they can help resolve. The students' roles might range from helping with branding to organizing a better management structure. Hill also teaches the students how to give an executive-level presentation, a skill they later use to pitch their plan to the organization itself.

The work is in the students' hands—Hill guides them throughout the semester, but the class meets formally only three times. The remainder of their



guidance comes from another reliable source: VSB alumni. A former Executive MBA student advises each group.

“The Executive MBA alumni are a resource,” Hill says. “They’re not holding the students’ hands; they are truly internal consultants. They tend to interact with the students on a weekly basis and help them resolve any issues they have related to group dynamics, scheduling with their clients, resolving disputes, and so on. This support is valuable for the students because they learn how to utilize experts as consultants rather than bosses, coworkers, or employees.”

One of those internal consultants is Chris Mattingly EMBA '06, an asset manager for the Portfolio Management Division of the U.S. General Services Administration. Mattingly has advised three groups since the course began and sees the experience as invaluable to MBA students. “It’s not like a case study—the problem isn’t identified for you, but you still have to solve it,” he says. “You have to develop a relationship with a customer, figure out what the problem is, and then come up with a solution.

“This is very challenging,” he continues, “because the solution and

the deliverable are open to the team to decide, which can cause anxiety because of the intrinsic gray areas they need to navigate. They’re learning how to do meaningful work in teams, and the whole dynamic that comes with that: communication, delegation, accountability, and time management. In some cases, students have other classes, full-time jobs, and families to balance, so these also are valuable soft skills they learn in this course and in the MBA program overall.”

Mattingly also likes that the students undertake this project with community organizations that really need assistance, and not with traditional for-profit businesses. “This project is even better because they’re not doing it to make money,” he says. “The people who work for NPOs do it because they love their mission. To give back in this way is hopefully going to resonate with more and more not-for-profits, and I hope it gets to a point where they start seeking Villanova out.”

In just a short time, students have assisted a wide variety of area NPOs, including Monster Milers, Animal Lifeline, Mutt Match, Love146, the Players Club of Swarthmore, Community Partnership School, and the Philadelphia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

“On the day of the final presentations last semester, the buzz from the clients who attended was overwhelmingly positive,” Hill says. “Most were blown away with what the students prepared—one was already thinking about how they could hire someone to begin putting the plans in place, one asked the students to come and present their findings to the mayor of Chester, PA, and one even remarked that they have had students consult with them before but that the output was nothing like that which the MBA students produced. One group member was even able to get his company, Clear Channel Communications, to provide a billboard on which the non-profit could advertise for free.”

Two semesters of the course have

already had an impact on the community. “In our first year,” Hill says, “every one of the clients came away thinking they got something of real value.” Additionally, many of the students have completed the course with no intention of leaving their projects behind. “At least 20 to 25 percent of the students wanted to offer their services into the future to help these organizations,” Hill says.

One of those students is Truex. “I learned that I actually had a lot more to offer than I thought I did,” she says. “I realized that I could make a difference in non-profit organizations without doing typical volunteer work, and that there are a lot of business aspects these organizations need help with. Being able to apply my talents in those areas was a great use of my time.”

Truex continues to work with MANNA. She was invited to be part of the advisory committee for their new campaign, “Meals that Matter,” which directly uses some of the strategies and tactics she and her group recommended.

The impact of this one class, however, is broader than just her own intentions. “Now that we’ve initiated relationships with some of these organizations, there’s an opportunity to continue to work with them in the future—not just myself, but the students and staff at the Villanova School of Business now have a connection to them,” she says.

Hill sees that as exactly why the course has been a success for everyone involved.

“We wanted to get students excited about two things,” he says. “One is to see that non-profit organizations need that kind of management help, and my hope is that some of them will consider non-profit work as part of their vocation as well as their avocation. The second part is for them to realize that they can be very passionate about something that isn’t their job, and they can provide value to that something. If they start this kind of work when they are 25 or 30 years old, there’s a lot of good they can do throughout their lives.”

—by *Chris Nicholson*