

Outreach works for businesses, students, too

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Special to The Business Journal

Founded in 1994 as an extension of the Portland State University's School of Business Administration, the Business Outreach Program offers long-term mentoring relationships with start-up businesses, including technical assistance on specific projects.

The free program has two key goals: 1) Reduce the failure rate among new business start-ups and emerging firms; and 2) Identify projects that can be assigned to business students to give them first-hand experience and provide another form of assistance to the firm.

Students have created business plans, researched new markets, developed human resource plans and helped implement financial and accounting systems. The program can also improve the profitability of businesses, create new jobs and generally improve the economic well-being of the city. There are Outreach Program centers in North Portland and Southeast Portland.

A variety of businesses take advantage of the program, including ones that are just a gleam in the eye. "I'd say it's about 50/50 between businesses that are running and people who just have an idea for a product or service," said Brad Robertson, an Outreach Program counselor and instructor at PSU.

Many people come to the centers because they have a skill or an idea, but they haven't done the research to see if there's truly a market for their product, said Cody Gray, another counselor. "People who already run businesses are buried in the day-to-day routine and can't see the forest for the trees," he added.

Most small business owners have no formal business education and don't know how to set up balance sheets or how to formulate a business plan. Those are usually the first things Gray helps them to focus on.

"If they're looking to expand, they need to seek outside funding, and to do that they have to have a business plan," he said.

The Northeast Portland features a computer lab that offers classes in word processing, spreadsheets, database setup and management, and creation of marketing documents.

In addition to the counseling and student teams, the program sends out a newsletter to participants and offers occasional "brown bag lunch" seminars with speakers on a range of topics of interest to small business owners.

Learning how much effort is involved sometimes dissuades people with a business idea from plunging ahead. "They come to understand it isn't an eight-hour-a-day job. That's not necessarily a bad thing," he said. "If we can keep someone from taking out a second mortgage and being miserable, I consider that a success, too."

Although the program is free to its users, Portland State encourages businesses that become profitable to give back to the program by becoming mentors to other startups or donating funds to the program.