CVTC students in the applied marketing experience class have to work in the schools retail store. Marketing students from left, Corrin Hayes (buying manager), Rachel Julson (sales associate), Sheila Lehto (human resources manager) and Brandon Winneshick (inventory manager).

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Student-operated gift store allows the employees to gain work skills

By Dan Holatz
Leader-Telegram staff

Arturo "Pacho" Schwencke finds it almost amazing that he and his classmates in Chippewa Valley Technical College's applied marketing experience class were ready to open a small business just 16 days into the fall semester.

"You get a group of people you've never seen before and in 16 days you get a business up and running," Schwencke said.

Schwencke and his 26 classmates operate Bridgeport Apparel and Gifts, a retail store on CVTC's main campus on Clairemont Avenue. The store is operated each semester by the applied marketing experience class.

Schwencke, a native of Santiago, Chile, who now lives in Eau Claire, is this semester's general manager at Bridgeport.
The hardest part was figuring out everybody's skills, he said. "You learn you have to work with others and you are not always right. You need to recognize the jobs the others do. We need each other."

"It's just fantastic to see how the process works in a business," Schwencke said. "It's a great experience. I wouldn't change it for a thing."

CVTC marketing instructors Carol Robarge and Dave Rowe are available for questions and advice, but students pretty much have free rein operating and managing the store.

Running Bridgeport is a third-semester course in the two-year marketing program at CVTC.

"In the first two semesters, they get hit over the head with all the tools they need to know about marketing," Rowe said.

Students apply to be on one of six teams: promotions, merchandising display, sales, buying, inventory and human resources. They are assigned to a team during the second week of the class.

Only a few other schools in the state offer a similar classroom experience, Rowe said.

"It's an excellent and unique opportunity for them to run a small business," he said. "For the most part this is a pretty unique thing in the state of Wisconsin."

**Earning experience**

Bridgeport starts from scratch each semester. Students buy the merchandise, have a grand opening, keep the store open weekdays while school is in session and close it down at the end of the semester, Rowe said.

"It's fun, sometimes exhilarating, but a challenge as well," he said.

Rowe and Robarge meet with the store's student management team weekly.

"We give our input and give them the opportunity to manage and develop their teams," Robarge said. "They're operating a small business."

In August the buying team went to a Twin Cities wholesale market to buy merchandise for Bridgeport to sell.
Gift items make up about two-thirds of the goods sold in the store. CVTC logo wear, the majority of which comes from local vendors, makes up the remaining inventory, Robarge said.

Among the store items are candles, greeting cards, recycled paper bowls, picture frames, games, environmentally friendly sponges and dish towels, drink shakers, slippers and hats.

This semester the store also is featuring items from local artists and entrepreneurs, such as jewelry and baby blankets, she said. "These are unique items that you can't necessarily get at Walmart and Target."

Students receive no monetary compensation.

"The only earnings they get is class credit for running and working in the store," Robarge said. "Some of them put in incredible hours. It's personal satisfaction for them."

She and Rowe often get feedback from marketing graduates about the applied marketing experience class, she said.

"When they apply for positions, especially management positions, when they talk about (their Bridgeport) experience, the interviewers are very interested," she said.

Graduates "feel a lot of times they get the job because of this experience at Bridgeport," Robarge said.

Taking ownership

The store has been part of CVTC's curriculum since 1981. It started under the fashion and merchandising program. It closed for a few years when CVTC eliminated that program, but it returned under the marketing program, Rowe said.

Bridgeport customers are primarily CVTC students and staff. Community members may shop at the store but few do.

"Most of that has to do with the lack of (public) parking," Rowe said.

Several students in this semester's class said they appreciated the hands-on learning at the store.

"It's definitely been a great experience," said Andy Eyers of Menomonie, Bridgeport's sales team manager.
He had prior retail experience, but students start "from literally nothing" at the store each semester, he said.

"This was very different from my real-world experience. This is more personal," Eyers said. "You can take more ownership from it. It's your baby. We didn't have any limitations or restrictions. It's the class I've gotten the most out of here."

One way students took ownership is giving Bridgeport a new look in terms of merchandise and its placement from the previous semester's class, noted Amanda Veith of Menomonie, the store's merchandising manager.

"It keeps people more interested when we change the windows," she said. "They're not looking at the same things all the time."

Corrin Hayes of Fall Creek, Bridgeport's buying manager, isn't sure about her career goals yet. But after working at the store, she said she thinks she would be prepared for a management position.

"The teachers are there, but they just stand back and let us go," Hayes said.

Kristen Smith of Eau Claire, Bridgeport's promotions manager, learned how much work being a manager involves.

"You have to treat each person differently and find out their skills," she said. "(Bridgeport is) a good résumé builder."

**Building a business**

What impressed Brandon Winneshiek of Eau Claire, Bridgeport's inventory manager, is students start the store from the ground up.

"Here you have hands-on learning, doing the work, managing people and dealing with people's problems," he said.

A former Marine, Winneshiek graduated from CVTC's business management program in May and expects to graduate from the marketing program next May. He then plans to pursue a bachelor's degree in business from UW-Stout in Menomonie.
Winneshiek, 28, is starting a recording company in the Chippewa Valley called P-Dub Productions, which will specialize in Native American music. In putting together a business plan, he is working with the Small Business Administration and SCORE, an organization of retired business people who provide free counseling.

"I hope to be up and running in April," he said.

Sheila Lehto of Eau Claire, Bridgeport's human resources manager, said the class taught her a lot about solving problems.

"The amount of extra time we put into working this job has been unbelievable but truly fun," she said. "It's helped me work better with people and situations. It's hands-on. It's a very good learning experience."

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If You Go

What: Bridgeport Apparel and Gifts.


When: 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Mondays; 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays; 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Fridays.