

PLU looks to the future with its ePLU center

Art Popham; News Tribune columnist

From the standpoint of the past, present and future, April 7 will be a big day for the Pacific Lutheran University School of Business.

The PLU business school will do a little looking back and ahead as it commemorates its 40th anniversary at that night's special alumni celebration at the Sheraton Tacoma Hotel. I'll be writing more about this event in an upcoming column.

Earlier that day, PLU will focus on the today and tomorrow of business during E-Business Day, a public event on the Parkland campus. At this day-long gathering, speakers from the tech-biz world will discuss such topics as the future of e-business and entrepreneurship in the digital economy. For information, call 253-535-7252.

E-Business Day is sponsored by PLU's new Electronic Commerce Resource Center, an organization usually abbreviated as ePLU. Launched last June, ePLU states its mission is "to make PLU the leader in the study of e-commerce and provide services for organizations in the Internet economy."

Oh, is that all? It's a lot to bite off in an e-needy business world. Consider this.

In five years, almost half of all workers will be employed in industries that produce or are intensive users of information technology, the U.S. Department of Labor reports.

Nonetheless, U.S. News & World Report says most of this country's 359 accredited business schools initially dismissed the Internet frenzy as irrational. Now, most of them are scrambling to catch up in preparing students for today's economy. And tomorrow's. EPLU is a tool to meet that end and benefit for-profit companies.

So, what exactly is ePLU?

"It's a resource center for students and the business community to promote learning of electronic commerce in the digital economy," said Chung-Shing Lee, PLU business professor and ePLU program director. "Each Tuesday evening, 15 or 20 students, mostly from the School of Business, meet. Students from the computer science department also are involved. They discuss topics like Web site development, business development and outreach to the business community."

That outreach is a key element of ePLU. At minimal cost, a commercial enterprise can bring a particular problem to the students. They will come back to the company with proposed solutions. Cantamatrix, a Bellevue music classification and identification technology company, used ePLU's consulting service.

"A start-up company doesn't have unlimited resources to throw around on consulting," said Hans Bjorne, Cantamatrix product manager. "From ePLU, I got good and cheap

consulting. They did a general review of our business plan and strategies and a market overview of our competitive strategies. A lot of their solutions were things we'd already thought of, but they presented a lot of new theoretical concepts about those solutions.

"The most valuable insight we got was confirmation we were doing the right things. We'd definitely use ePLU again, no doubt about it. We were so pleased that we've hired one of their students part time."

The Cantamatrix response represents the three major attractions Lee thinks ePLU offers to private business.

* Unlike a typical consultant who addresses a short-term solution to one particular problem, ePLU takes a more academic approach that provides a broad theoretical foundation for proposed solutions. Businesses gain knowledge along with answers.

* When companies work with today's students, they see what will become the new business models of the next five years. They get ahead of the curve. And at precious little expense.

* Contact with students is a great recruiting tool. Companies gain an inside track on the scarce intellectual capital represented by future employees.

Don Bell, dean of the PLU School of Business, sees another ePLU plus.

"ePLU has attracted not only business students and faculty but students and faculty from the rest of the campus," Bell said. "Math, business and computer science will be the tenants of the new building we'll move into in fall 2003. EPLU may be the way we integrate those programs together. It's hard in academe to do that. Our silos are very high. It's hard to knock down those silos, but ePLU may at least be a bridge between them."

Historically, music has been considered the universal language. Could it be technology is now assuming that unifying role?

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