Business Students Practice a New Bottom Line

BY HEATHER MILLER

“At La Sierra University, our goal is not only to teach students how to maximize profits,” says Johnny Thomas, assistant professor of economics and finance, “but also to make them discover the meaning of ‘profit maximization’ from a personal and humanistic perspective.” That’s where Students in Free Enterprise comes in.

Started in 1975 by Sam Walton, Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) is an international non-profit organization that educates college and university students about the free enterprise system through hands-on, practical experience.

The La Sierra University SIFE team, organized in the fall of 1991 through the university’s School of Business and Management, has won two SIFE International Exposition Championships, in 1994 and in 1995. In 1995, the students brought back six trophies and $7,500 for their championship and wins in four special competitions.

“What caught the attention of the judges at the competition,” says Thomas, “was the idea of service. Everyone else had great business ideas. So did we. But what was different about La Sierra University was the fact that so many of our projects were based on serving our community.”

What SIFE Does

“In the free-enterprise system, the purpose of government is to maximize the individual’s freedom to pursue his or her own self-interest,” Thomas explains. The problem arises when, in their passion for acquiring capital, businesses fail to take into consideration “the human factor” as Thomas puts it. “When this happens,” he says, “the economically disadvantaged may be left to fend for themselves on an uneven playing field.” When the role of the state becomes more limited, as is currently the trend in a number of countries, this creates a vacuum that voluntary organizations—such as charities, service clubs, or organizations like SIFE—need to fill.

Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) is an international non-profit organization that educates college and university students about the free-enterprise system through hands-on, practical experience.
From the very beginning, the La Sierra SIFE club wanted to find a way to spread the message of free enterprise and give the economically disadvantaged the opportunity to survive in a competitive environment. "Our goal was to teach people how to fish, rather than to give them fish," Thomas says. One of their goals through 122 business projects. This year's projects build on previous success but take the ideas a step further: more education, more targeted markets, and the addition of professional consultants.

Find a Dollar in the Debt—In an effort to make the community aware of the vastness of the U.S. national debt, the SIFE team created a giant sand-pile in February 1995, containing an estimated 4.5 trillion grains of sand to represent the $4.5 trillion national debt. SIFE students buried imitation coins in the sand and invited the public to dig for the coins to win dozens of prizes, including a trip to Hawaii. Former Congressman Bill Dannemeyer of Fullerton, California, who served as a member of the House Budget Committee, spoke about the national debt.

Blow Away the Debt—Following the success of Find a Dollar in the Debt, the 1995-1996 SIFE directors decided to sponsor another debt-awareness event. But this time, instead of using sand, they used balloons—5,000 of them—each one representing $1 billion, to represent a $5 trillion debt. "It's hard enough to understand what one billion is, let alone one trillion!" Wise says. The SIFE team invited 500 local students to the event to launch 10 balloons each. Classroom discussions helped the children understand the issues.

SIFE Virtual Reality—The La Sierra University SIFE team created SIFE Virtual Reality as an educational tool to bring to life places, situations, and issues of global significance. SIFE students created software to help students at a local intermediate school get acquainted with the new technology before their school had access to the World Wide Web. The LSU team was the first SIFE entity to use this tool for one of their projects.

Campus Cleaners—SIFE students manage the Campus Cleaners, a local dry-cleaning business. In its third year of operation, the cleaners employs eight students, providing them with valuable entrepreneurial skills in the areas of customer service, accounting, advertising, and employee relations. Sales exceeded $100,000 for the 1994 fiscal year.

Rent-a-Brain—In its fifth year, Rent-a-Brain provides a variety of consulting services to local businesses. Under the guidance of faculty, SIFE students analyze current economic and political trends, consumer needs, advertising strategies, tax planning, and employment management.

Homeless Shelter Employment Weekly Seminars—SIFE students have presented ongoing seminars at a local homeless shelter on job search techniques, drafting résumés, interviewing skills, and dressing for success. Approximately 50 individuals from the shelter completed the eight seminar sessions, and more than 20 résumés were created. The hands-on seminars motivated many shelter residents to change their attitude and outlook on life and their future. Two attendees have enrolled in the local community college.
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La Sierra University students tutor pupils in math and reading at a local elementary school as part of the “Touch the World, Teach a Child” program created by the LSU SIFE club.
major, have joined SIFE to give something back to society.

The entire La Sierra University SIFE team has adopted this philosophy and seeks to develop in its members a basic tenet of Adventist education: the moral and social values of serving others.

"As Christians, you've got to learn how to give back to your community," says Thomas. "Try to make a difference in your community and feel the joy and pain of helping people find opportunities amid scarce resources. It's still in students' the need to understand the limits of profit maximization and World Services and the Hancock Center for Youth Ministry, and others," he says.

While the La Sierra SIFE team has achieved significant external recognition for themselves and the university by winning the International Competition in 1994 and 1995, "even more important," says Lawrence Geraty, La Sierra University president, "are the effects that the SIFE team has had on the university and its community. The whole campus has shared in the success of the individual projects and basked in the team's international attainment. Both have brought the university important recognition in the print and electronic media," Geraty says.

Thomas concludes, "The key to a free market is to give everyone the opportunity to compete. Promote merit as a yardstick, challenge students to be the best they can be, and develop in them a mindset that attending an Adventist college will provide them with an education that is among the best in the nation."

How Your Campus Can Get Involved

This year, SIFE involves some 460 colleges and universities in the U.S. and abroad. While the majority of SIFE chapters are in the U.S., there are also chapters in Mexico, Canada, Poland, Hong Kong, and Australia. There is also a new focus on Eastern Europe, where several teams have sister campuses in other countries.

Although a college or university must be invited to join Students In Free Enterprise, the opportunities to participate in free enterprise and community activities are up to the individual campuses.

For more information about joining SIFE, call SIFE National Headquarters at (417) 831-9505.

Heather Miller is Public Relations Director at La Sierra University, Riverside, California.

Johnny Thomas, assistant professor of economics and SIFE faculty sponsor, examines prize-winning "coins" found by those participating in 'Find a Dollar in the Debt,' a February 1995 event in which SIFE members hid coins in 4.5 trillion grains of sand to help the community grasp the enormity of the U.S. national debt.