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EMCC students help cities keep businesses

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Students from Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale are showing they mean business.

This month, students involved in the campus' Business Retention Internship Program will deliver a complete report to the city of Avondale highlighting findings from a year of informational and analytical research gathered from the West Valley business community.

"This whole program started as a need for local economic developers to find out what is going on in [West Valley] cities with those businesses," said Clay Goodman, vice president of Occupational Education at EMCC.

"A lot of work is done on attraction, bringing that business to the city, but very little on, once they're here, what's going to keep them," he said.

Goodman oversees the two-year-old Business Retention Internship Program, which won a Best of the West award last year.

He said students interviewed 156 different businesses across the region, and were on the look-out for "red flags" and "problems that could be addressed immediately" to ensure businesses succeed.

Students were also updating contact information for each of the businesses, which he said was often either outdated or incomplete.

"It was very important to the economic developers from all those cities to gather information on those businesses, how they're doing, if they're growing or if they're contracting," Goodman said.

In addition, interns were on the hunt for successful westside companies to study "why were they successful, what was the business climate like, what was their sense?" he said.

Business trends

Among the findings students have reported thus far:

- Businesses express a number of concerns, including signage issues, high taxes, the need for more commercial development, and an excess of empty stores.
- Easy access to Interstate 10 and potential for expansion are positives touted by West Valley companies.
- Businesses claim the current economy, slow housing market, foreclosures and nearby businesses shutting their doors are barriers to growth.
- The biggest accomplishment for many of the businesses over the last three years has been "just staying in business at all."
- Some 50 percent of the businesses interviewed stated they are adding new product lines; 37 percent said they are investing in new equipment; and 40 percent said they are increasing sales when compared to last year.
- Approximately 75 percent of business owners have said there was a decrease in the number of employees over the last five years.
- About 60 percent of businesses said they will either increase or have no change in number of employees next year.

Avondale Vice Mayor Jim McDonald said this type of data is extremely helpful for the city.

"Being a third party, nonbiased [entity], you're probably getting better answers than we could if we sent staff out to do the exact same thing. I think people are going to be more open with you," he told students from the program at a council meeting last month.

"I'm one of those weird people who like statistics. I like that you got a lot more numbers now; it makes it more statistically significant when you get those numbers, and the trending we have for it is going to be very, very valuable," he said.

Lessons learned

Otis Alexander, a second-year student in the program, said his time as an intern has been a tremendous learning experience.

I truly appreciate what everyone involved in the program has done to help us students succeed," he said.

Alexander said students were exposed to various speakers from the Greater Phoenix Economic Council and the Arizona Commerce Authority, and were taught how government is structured to attract and meet the needs of businesses statewide.

Students also learned interview techniques for the Business Retention survey, and learned how to build relationships within the business community, he said.

"We are now, I believe, all of the students that went through this program are prepared to be better leaders because of it," Alexander said.

Moreover, he said, the internship program has been a huge asset to the community and to the local business environment.

"We help businesses to present their concerns and the issues to our partners for resolution, and we are the voice for many managers and owners assisting them in becoming more sustainable," Alexander said.

Having worked with five cities, two chambers of commerce and among one another at the community college level, "the benefits go on and on," he said.

Mayor Marie Lopez Rogers said she was impressed with the work the students have done so far.

"These are great lessons learned; this is fantastic. You have a lot of great information here, and I can't wait to get the full report," she told the interns. "It was well worth the effort and I thank you for the time you put into it."

For information on the EMCC Business Retention Internship Program, visit www.estrellamountain.edu.

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