In both good and bad economic times, Garden State companies always need the most talented and motivated employees to help their businesses thrive. There's often no better way to locate the best potential hires — and take advantage of their wide range of skills — than by tapping into the vast resources available at New Jersey's colleges and universities.

These days, local businesses aren't just helping students succeed by offering internships and other employment opportunities; instead, it's the crop of highly skilled students who are the ones lending a hand to businesses to ensure the latter's continued success.

Richard White, director of career services for Rutgers University in New Brunswick, notes that there are myriad areas where students have been applying their skills and talents to assist employers at New Jersey companies, including: technology; website and graphic design; marketing; business; accounting; project management; communications; and, of course, social media.

Like many of the state's colleges and universities, Rutgers helps its students connect with members of industry via internship and co-op programs, as well as a variety of other volunteer, shadowing and externship experiences.

“Student interns contribute their ideas, time, creativity, skills and flexibility to businesses large and small,” White says.

According to Sandra Bloomberg, Ph.D., dean of the college of professional studies at New Jersey City University (NJCU), Jersey City, undergraduate and graduate students taking the initiative to apply for internships and other on-the-job opportunities provide employers with sound alternatives to posting job openings and poring through resumes to identify potential hires. Instead, these opportunities allow employers to observe students over extended periods and evaluate them as potential employees upon graduation.
“Students help businesses by coming in at entry-level wages and providing a skilled labor force, but internships and other programs also give the business owner a pro-longed job interview with a student,” Bloomberg says. “Employers have the opportunity to get to know students and their competencies, and that helps them determine whether they’re a good fit for the company.”

Beyond internships, many of the state’s institutions of higher education offer structured programs to connect businesses with students who can help devise solutions for a wide range of specific business initiatives, from brand development and project management to launching a company website.

Each semester, Madison- and Teaneck-based Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU) provides MBA students with the opportunity to form consulting teams and partner with New Jersey-based companies in a capstone course titled “Business Ventures.” Under the watchful eye of successful entrepreneurs, investors and faculty members, students tackle complex business situations and provide innovative perspectives through a combination of comprehensive business models, strategic analyses frameworks and innovative entrepreneurial thinking to selected companies that apply for the program.

“Students are required to come up with specific actions and tactics that the company can put into place, so employers walk away with some kind of executable plan rather than a pie-in-the-sky, nebulous strategy,” explains FDU adjunct professor and entrepreneur Gina Tedesco, who oversees the program.

Ruta Shah, a finance major who graduated from FDU in December 2010, collaborated with three other students to build a strategic plan for Hillsborough-based Taste of Crete, LLC that covered branding, marketing, operations and a financial model. The students also prepared a questionnaire to assist the owner, Esther Luongo Psarakis, in conducting customer surveys and industry research to generate strategic analysis for the company.

“Students bring a fresh perspective to an organization, and they might be able to help break the monotony of the way the business has operated in the past,” Shah says. “[Business Ventures] puts all the skills, capabilities and knowledge that you’ve gathered to work in creating a strategic plan for the company.”

“It’s eye-opening and enlightening to consider other ideas or approaches you may not have thought of because you’re in the trenches every day,” Psarakis says.

Donna Albano, director of Pomona-based Richard Stockton College’s Hospitality and Tourism Management Studies program, notes that similar initiatives offered at Stockton ensure that a business client is receiving the best of both worlds: a student’s entrepreneurial thinking combined with the advice and expertise of successful entrepreneurs serving on the faculty.

“It’s a triangle in which the faculty becomes an important piece of the puzzle. We don’t just send students out on their own; business owners have access to our expertise, too,” she says.

“The professors bring a sense of

A Rutgers student meets a potential employer at the university’s Career Day event.
reality, practicality, and a true understanding of what it’s like to be in an entrepreneur’s shoes, and they impart that wisdom to students so they don’t get too theoretical,” Psarakis says.

Similarly, the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) School of Management’s Small Business Institute (SBI) program teams MBA students with industry members to tackle business plans, strategy and other business analysis projects, while faculty members oversee the students’ work. It’s part of a national program of small business consulting services designed to match graduate students’ interests with small manufacturing firms in need of assistance in management, marketing and business analysis. Many companies are housed in NJIT’s Enterprise Development Center, the institution’s business incubator program that’s home to nearly 86 high-tech and life-science companies, and have benefitted from such efforts.

Undergraduate business majors at the Newark-based institute may also get involved in student teams that have been charged with developing international marketing strategies for companies. Many of NJIT’s other undergraduate colleges and departments offer capstone proj-

Fairleigh Dickinson University MBA students have the opportunity to form consulting teams and partner with New Jersey-based companies in a capstone course titled “Business Ventures.”

ects in which a company outlines a specific task or project, and student teams form around the areas that suit their expertise or interest. Students have completed projects for firms from within the business incubator as well as other New Jersey-based corporations like Johnson & Johnson in New Brunswick and hospitals like Saint Barnabas in West Orange. NJIT also offers sponsored research opportunities to connect students with many of the state’s pharmaceutical companies and a variety of other industries that often take advantage of the on-site equipment and technology students can access on campus.

“Not only are these experiences valuable for the company, but from an instructional standpoint, we always make sure the project provides a learning experience for our students,” says Judith Sheft, NJIT’s associate vice president of technology development.

While a seasoned small- or mid-sized business owner may have years of experience in his or her industry, tapping into the talent at local colleges and universities often uncovers a vast wealth of knowledge and expertise in the most cutting-edge business and marketing techniques — like social media and web design.

“Social media is the No. 1 area where students are helping businesses. I often joke that today’s college students were born with a mouse in one hand and a cell phone in the other,” says Joe Molineaux, director of the NJ Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at Stockton, which serves Atlantic, Cape May and Cumberland counties. “Since everyone is getting their information digitally and making their buying decisions online, if businesses don’t engage in some form of social media, there’s a good chance they might get left behind.” Stockton students are often recruited to offer their expertise in finance, accounting and bookkeeping, Molineaux adds.

NJIT’s Career Development Center offers programs for both co-op and student interns to assist industry executives in businesses of all sizes, from small start-ups to Fortune 100s, in addition to providing assistance to government and social service agencies. Students are often matched with companies to com-
New Jersey Institute of Technology student Sabrina Baby completed a summer internship within the information and media division of McGraw Hill Companies, Manhattan.

plete projects in business planning, marketing, e-commerce, project management, quality assurance, design and development.

Of course, these are all areas for which outside contractors may be hired. But for a start-up or small business, it’s often difficult to allocate the funds necessary to hire an outside firm.

“A common request we get from small businesses is that they’re in need of IT students to help design their website. Employers know what it costs to hire designers and consultants, and they may not have the budget,” explains Greg Mass, executive director of NJIT’s Career Development Center. “For organizations that do not have the employees who
possess the technological capabilities to modernize the workplace and facilities — nor the resources to hire a consultant to do it — the university provides a cost-effective, reliable means to accomplish these technological functions.”

Marc Rothenberg, owner of Warren-based Intercept Silver & Jewelry Care Co., was trying to take his business to the next level when he applied to FDU’s Business Ventures program. He was paired with four graduate students who provided him with dozens of pages of strategy at the conclusion of the semester — and all for the $250 donation required to apply for the program.

“If I hired a consultant to do what they did, it would have cost me $20,000,” he says. “I agreed with everything they said and I’m implementing almost all of their suggestions, which included a more consumer-friendly brand name and logo ideas for marketing my product.”

Along with pitching in to help employers juggle day-to-day tasks, many employers agree that college students’ or recent graduates’ true value lies in their fresh, unbiased viewpoint in evaluating a business’ current practices in the marketplace.

“You’re getting a set of bright, fresh, young eyes and ears, who come in with a skill set that some businesses — particularly small businesses — are really benefiting from,” Albano says. “They have the ability to make suggestions, tell the employer what they think works and what doesn’t, and they can speak on behalf of their demographic, which employers find refreshing.”

Jon Rosky, project manager and designer for JEM Associates, Inc. in Pleasantville, is one of the employers who works with Stockton — he also serves as an adjunct professor — to gain new perspectives from students via the internship program. “Our interns have lots of great insight to share about how to get the job done,” he says. “They don’t come in and rewrite the book for our company; they just pose some interesting questions and make observations.”

Caitlyn Bradley, director of catering and sales for Ram’s Head Inn in Galloway, is a Stockton alumna who also pays it forward to her alma mater by regularly recruiting current students to help the business thrive.

“Stockton students make up the greater part of our employees. We’re happy to employ them as a way for them to learn, gain experience prior to graduation and support the college’s program,” she says. “They have also helped our business in supporting and promoting our services, and they bring in a fresh perspective.”

Not only are college students combining an unsullied outlook with their learned knowledge of contemporary practices and technologies to businesses, but many employers agree that students’ enthusiasm and motivation to succeed can be just as valuable as their ability to help launch the business into the social media realm or provide novel marketing ideas.

“Students are excited and energetic, and they aren’t bringing a lot of baggage to the table — they know there’s more than one solution to a problem,” NJIT’s Sheft says.

Additionally, the state’s institu-
tions of higher education realize the importance of providing a strong business education for students in a variety of educational disciplines, and thus today’s students are learning precise entrepreneurial skills they’ll need to help take a business to the next level.

“In all of our courses, we emphasize certain core competencies - the requirements that business leaders are always talking about. We teach students to write and communicate well, to reason and orally argue their case, and to report and analyze,” NJCU’s Bloomberg says. “So many companies tell us they need students who think critically and on their feet, and who communicate well, so we thread those skills throughout our curriculum.”

Helen Dao, president and CEO of Dao Management Consulting Services, Inc. in Jersey City, discovered that her intern from NJCU already brought many of the necessary skills to the table when it came to managing projects, building and maintaining client relationships, and thinking critically and strategically.

“As the employer, we work to enhance a student’s skills while they think strategically about how to address specific problems and find solutions for our business,” she says.

Having the opportunity to supplement what they learn in the classroom via real world collaborations with business owners is truly a win-win situation for both students and employers. When Ian Sullivan, a chemistry major and 2010 graduate of Georgian Court University in Lakewood, was introduced to researchers Liquid Light, Inc. in Monmouth Junction by his professor, he gained crucial lab experience via a part-time paid internship before being hired to work for the company full-time in January.

“It benefited me because I learned quite a bit about how a working lab functions — it’s not exactly the same as a lab in academia,” Sullivan says. “But it can also end up being a learning experience for the business when they realize that a college student is anxious and excited to utilize what they’re learning in class … and that they really want to get things accomplished.”

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