

## **Students, graduates embrace challenge**

### ***Twenty-one teams vie for eight awards totaling \$117,000***

Luis F. Molina/Tri-City Weekly  
Posted: 04/05/2011 09:39:25 AM PDT

Economic Fuel challenges ambitious students to turn their hobbies into an opportunity and to make their plans for the future a reality.

The Humboldt County community wins in the long run. The competition stimulates the local economy either by launching new businesses or helping young professionals find a niche in one of the many local industries. The competition inspires a spirit of entrepreneurship.

Economic Fuel: the Humboldt County Business Challenge is in its sixth year. The 21 teams compete for one of eight prizes totaling \$117,000. There are four \$25,000 awards; one \$10,000 award; one \$5,000 award and two \$1,000 honorable mention awards. Security National funds the competition.

The program has a new coordinator, Samantha Conway. Conway was a competitor in 2007. She was not a prize recipient, nor did she continue on with her business plan, but she received her first job opportunity out of college from the networking made possible through the competition.

"Economic Fuel is near and dear to my heart," Conway said. "It was one of the hardest, best things I did in college," she said. "It helped define where to take my education."

Conway graduated from Humboldt State University with a bachelor's in business administration in 2007. She is one of the many students who've turned a skill into a profitable trait.

Nancy Vizenor, an HSU lecturer and advisor, has been involved with the competition since its inception in 2005. She said there's no quantifiable way to measure Economic Fuel's success, but "it is a success when a student becomes gainfully employed."

"Economic Fuel builds a student's confidence and self-esteem," Vizenor said. "It teaches them how to research and write a business plan."

Economic Fuel is meant to be a bridge between college life and the professional world. It gives the teams a platform to advertise to the public. The competition has rippled to the lower levels of education. In September 2010, a junior achievement pilot program was started in several of the county's middle schools.

"The single greatest benefit the community sees from the competition is the infused interest of a whole slew of young people," said Michael Kraft, executive-director of the Small Business Development Center.

This year's competition started on Jan. 28 with 61 teams turning in their registration packets. To qualify for the competition at least one-half of a team must be HSU or College of the Redwood students or recent college graduates. Of the teams that registered, 21 submitted a business plan. The proposed business plans run the gamut of service-based companies.

"Some teams are very serious and very ready to go," Conway said. "Others are just starting. They are all welcomed."

Conway and her team is responsible for publicizing the competition, setting up the guidelines and enforcing the rules. She also coordinates several events and workshops that Economic Fuel puts on to help the teams.

The last event held by Economic Fuel was the judged elevator pitch presentations. The teams had two minutes to pitch their business ideas. Each team also had the opportunity to set up a booth where they could demonstrate their product. The next event will be the "hiring your first employee workshop" on Wednesday at the Prosperity Center in Eureka.

Among the 21 competing teams, there is an environmental conscience and a community emphasis.

Monica Topping and Gabe Paredes are competing as the team, Music Lives On, based on their two existing businesses. Paredes' business, Pressure Drop Apparel, uses recycled fabric to manufacture shirts to sell to thrift stores in the area. Rock Chick Designs, Topping's enterprise, offers "repurposed" music-related items such as vinyl-disc sleeves and guitar strings made into clothing, accessories and jewelry.

Together Topping and Paredes have more than 15 years working in the Humboldt County music scene or media. They said they knew about the competition for a while, and now want to take a "hobby and make it into a real job."

"I said 'wow.' We can really do this. We have a solid idea. It is a viable business option, not just a fly-by-night idea," Topping said, "We appreciate the opportunity. Of course it would be great to win the \$25,000, but if we don't win Music Lives On will live on just at a slower pace."

The Music Lives On team has been working at their craft in one way or another for six years.

Many of the teams got their start in the classroom. Vizenor said she has advised or lectured six out of the 21 teams this year. She has seen a plan go from the classroom to the competition. Vizenor said that the teams take the time in between the end of the school session and the start of the competition to "polish" their business plans.

The Venatore Media team has five HSU students. The students' enterprise provides a promotion and advertising service to Humboldt County. Last September, they began taking snapshots at high school football games and selling those photos to parents. They also provided photos for Eureka Mayor Frank Jager's successful campaign.

Recently, Venatore Media raised \$3,200 to send a photographer to Japan. The company will be selling the pictures and donating the profits to Red Cross relief efforts.

Venatore Media marketing manager Melissa Hutsell said the team plans to stay in the area and continue their work regardless of the competition's outcome.

"We want to make money in Humboldt, doing the stuff we like," she said.

The finalist will be announced April 15. The finalist will then have a short time to prepare a presentation. The award ceremony will be held at 6:30 p.m. April 29 at the Wharfinger building in Eureka.