By helping nonprofits improve operations and complete projects.

Students in UA’s Business Honors Program gain real-world experience by helping nonprofits improve operations and complete projects.

By Mary Shannon Wells | Photos by Dysen Neeb and Kristen Wallace

The Best in BUSINESS

Students in UA’s Business Honors Program gain real-world experience by helping nonprofits improve operations and complete projects.

The University of Alabama Culverhouse College of Commerce ranks among the top business schools in the nation each year, and the students of the Business Honors Program are some of its most impressive representatives.

In addition to mastering advanced curriculum, the 35 students admitted annually to the highly competitive program volunteer with businesses and nonprofit organizations during their junior and senior years. The program draws students from all business majors, including accounting, marketing, management, finance and economics. Through the GBA 481 Business Honors I & IV course, students work in groups of four to eight to assist their clients in improving operations and carrying out projects. They are required to dedicate at least one hour per week to their community partners, and most students work many more hours, says David Ford, director of the Business Honors Program and co-instructor of GBA 481. Each year, students in the program contribute approximately 1,500 volunteer hours to Tuscaloosa-area organizations.

Depending on their clients’ needs, BHP students complete a range of projects, from creating websites and developing marketing materials to assisting with budget research. Nonprofit organizations benefit from students’ knowledge and manpower, and students put their skills to use while exploring fields of interest.

“The Business Honors Program serves as classroom volunteers, leading kids through five lessons using the nonprofit’s teaching kits. During Fall 2016, BHP students also helped amp up Junior Achievement’s social media presence and recruit additional volunteers. The organization needed to cover more than 400 classes. The Business Honors Program’s ongoing partnership with Junior Achievement began three years ago. “The reason that I love Business Honors is because that group of students—they’re self-starters; they’re dependable,” says Carla Harris, senior program manager with Junior Achievement of Tuscaloosa.

Tuscaloosa Parks and Recreation Authority

Students revamped the Tuscaloosa Parks and Recreation Authority’s website and social media platforms, built a media package for the organization and worked with the PARA Foundation to raise awareness and funding for an adaptive playground. The playground will be the largest in the Southeast to serve people of all ages and abilities. Gabbi Oppenheimer, a junior from Chicago triple-majoring in finance, economics and telecommunications and film, worked with the PARA Foundation to organize numerous fundraising initiatives, including a golf tournament.

“I am interested in a career in finance, and helping a municipal entity raise money to improve the community is helpful in providing perspective to a different side of finance,” Oppenheimer says.

Forza Financial

A nonprofit founded by UA students in 2009, Forza Financial offers small loans and business coaching to Alabama entrepreneurs with little capital who are trying to start or grow a business. These business owners sometimes turn to payday lenders, which typically charge triple-digit annual interest along with finance fees. Through Forza, students provide uncollateralized loans, competitive interest rates and consultation using group lending.

In Fall 2016, BHP students working with Forza researched a tracking program for loans and assisted with fundraising events.

Culverhouse LIFT

Culverhouse LIFT (Learning Initiative and Financial Training), founded by a UA accounting instructor and a UA business graduate student in 2014, teaches basic computer, financial-literacy, resume-writing and professional development classes in the Tuscaloosa area with a goal of helping under-represented and disadvantaged groups start or enhance their careers. BHP students teach many of these classes and launched a career fair for LIFT participants.

McKinney says BHP students have been an integral component of LIFT since it began. “They’re extremely independent, and they’re not scared of this challenge,” McKinney says. “They’re not scared of the uncertainty of it.”

During the Fall 2016 semester, BHP students also developed a report for the West Alabama Chamber of Commerce on the socio-economic impact of nonprofits on the community. “It takes a lot of diplomatic skills, social skills, managerial and leadership skills,” Ford says of the students’ work. “And I’m hoping that they learn these things and see the value of all that from the two years they spend volunteering.”

In class each week, GBA 481 students learn from a variety of guest speakers representing companies such as Southwest Airlines and Regions Bank. Students also turn in weekly reports detailing their work with their community partners and explaining their project goals for the next week. They complete a mid-year project report and a final project report as well. The final report is delivered as a business presentation. Oppenheimer says she appreciates the diverse perspectives she has been exposed to through GBA 481. “I’ve had the opportunity to work with and learn from people from all disciplines within the business school,” she says, “and each person has brought something new and unique to our group.”

For more information about GBA 481 and the Business Honors Program, contact David Ford at 205-348-4631 or dford@culverhouse.ua.edu or Dr. David Heggem at 205-348-4537 or dheggem@culverhouse.ua.edu.