

Center for Women & Business Teaches Women to Lead

By Dr. Mary Ellen Zuckerman, professor, school of business, SUNY Geneseo

Today's economic meltdown may have resulted from too many business leaders not having been trained to lead responsibly.

At SUNY Geneseo we are committed to helping our students gain the skills they need to be responsible, effective leaders in our society. Since women are the majority of our students, we have a particular interest in making sure our female students learn leadership skills and behaviors.

With the support of a visionary donor and local entrepreneur, in 2004 we established the Pamela York Klainer Center for Women and Business.

Why at SUNY Geneseo?

Establishing such a Center at our college made sense for a several reasons:

- More than 60% of students at SUNY Geneseo are female.
- While the Rochester NY area boasts a number of high quality colleges and universities, none has a Center focused on women and business.
- Several school of business faculty had expressed an interest in women's issues.
- Our business school has a long partnership with a Small Business Development Center (SBDC) in the business school, most of whose clients are women wanting to start or expand a small business.

How did we do it?

Dr. Pamela York Klainer is a local entrepreneur in the financial services field who likes to fund ideas and people. She provided what she called seed money for the Center when it was just an idea. After her initial commitment, she stayed involved and provided additional funds for other specific activities.

Pam is an alumna of Geneseo. Although she earned a masters degree in education, her experience in the business world has given her a strong interest in the issues confronting women in business. She agreed with us that a Center devoted to these issues would make a key difference to the students at Geneseo.

First we assembled an external advisory board primarily of businesswomen. These women were excited by the focus on gender issues in business and they provided great ideas, useful contacts and their time.

Working with them and interested faculty and students, we developed a mission statement outlining the Center's goals:

- To better prepare our students to be dynamic leaders and citizens through a better understanding of gender issues
- To serve as a resource for the surrounding community

- To carry out research on issues related to gender and the workplace

Second, we recognized the importance of the Center having an **actual physical space**. Luckily we were able to obtain the periodical reading room of a branch of the campus library that had recently closed. Posters of significant women leaders, past and present, soon adorned the walls and the periodical shelves were filled with books, magazines, videos and other materials focused on various aspects of women and business.



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Third, we selected two **student coordinators** to run the Center under the direction of a faculty member. This has been a fantastic experience for the student coordinators and for the businesswomen who interact with them. We are on our fifth team of student coordinators and each has brought their own talents and enthusiasm to the Center.

Fourth, we kicked off the Center's inaugural semester with a **Grand Opening**. It was complete with a keynote speaker, the announcement of winners of our first student business plan competition, a dedication by SUNY Geneseo president Christopher Dahl and participation by members of the college and business community.

This created a **buzz**: It got the word out about the Center and created a great deal of excitement and energy, which were essential as we moved forward.

Successful programs

One of our most successful and enduring activities has been the **speaker series**, just finishing its fourth year. Since it's critical for young women to have role models and mentors as they develop into business leaders, we brought in successful female business leaders from a spectrum of fields to speak to female and male students. Their topics include mentoring, particular industries, and negotiation skills among others.

Because it is open to students of all majors across the campus, speakers come from a wide range of careers, from the CFO of the regions' largest hospital system talking about health care economics to local small business owners.

We partnered with the Canandaigua Chamber of Commerce to bring that city's Athena Award recipients as panelists to discuss inspirational as well as practical topics. They focused on the eight tenets of the international ATHENA Leadership Model: The Authentic Self, Relationships, Giving Back, Collaboration, Courageous Acts, Learning, Fierce Advocacy and Celebration & Joy. They included the city's mayor, the CEO of the area health care system, and owners of an advertising agency and a pharmacy.

Some of the speakers have been male. All activities at the Center are open to male students, since they too can benefit from strong female role models.

Before there was a Center for Women and Business, most speakers from the faculty, business community and alumni were men.



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Annually the speaker series features about 14 speakers, presenting alone, in panels or in workshops. Having so many females speak to students is a departure from the past; before there was a Center for Women and Business, most speakers were men from the faculty, business community and alumni.

All speakers leave their contact information, encouraging students to get in touch with them if they're interested in a particular field or want career advice, which many students have done. Students fill out a form assessing how useful each speaker has been to them.

Another successful program has been the **funded business plan competition**. Groups of students worked for eight weeks on real-life business problems, submitting a written report at the end. Five teams won the right to present their recommendations to a panel of judges, and three teams won cash prizes.

Students were required to work in mixed gender groups, and to report back on the nature of the team interaction, how the leader was picked and the effect of gender on these activities. In addition to providing a dynamic opportunity for the students to work on real life problems, we also collected data for the research project from these teams.

Through the Center we also worked on **research** focused on the relationships between gender, mentor selection and development of traits deemed useful in business. This research was presented locally and several time at the International Women and Leadership conference in the United Arab Emirates. At our second time attending this amazing conference, we took an eight-person delegation of students, faculty, advisory board members and local businesswomen.

The conference gave us a unique opportunity to interact with the international community of women and focus on the significant role women can play in providing world leadership. In addition to these international conferences over the years, students from the Center also participate in national and local conferences, focused on various aspects of women and leadership.

Our most valuable asset has proven to be our donor, Pam Klainer, who has been incredibly generous with her time, money and contacts within the business community. Most importantly, she brings a real world business perspective, a useful point of view that she shares with the students on an ongoing basis.

As a businesswoman, she is a powerful role model, one that differs from academicians. She shares her own well-thought through ideas about effective, authentic leadership and how to develop it continuously over the course of a career.

Have we succeeded?

To date we have hosted more than 80 presenters in our speaker and workshop series, with hundreds of students attending over the four years. More than 100 students participated in the business plan competitions. Our research agenda continues to be strong. The Center itself continues to evolve and serve students in a wide variety of ways.

We have developed many relationships and partnerships, both with other divisions at SUNY Geneseo (the SBDC, the college's leadership program and various academic departments) and with groups outside the college, including a local bank, the YWCA and a local Chamber of Commerce, which sponsors the Athena program recognizing outstanding women leaders.

What are future plans?

Based on strong student interest, we created a student advisory board, which will work with the coordinators, faculty and the external advisory board to establish and run programs. We will continue to expand our research on gender and teen role models. We plan to better document the impact our programs have on students with assessment activities.

Serving as mentors to middle school girls is a future project, one that has become a passion for student coordinators. We envision this as part of chain: Our students receive mentoring from business women in the workplace, and then they will turn around and mentor younger girls.

What advice will help to set up a Center?

- **Partnering** with others is my biggest recommendation is to partner with others. Draw on students, faculty and administrators within the college community and female leaders outside academia. The idea of such a Center touches a chord with women who felt that they had to struggle to succeed without support. Many want to help young women today and are delighted by the prospect of assisting in a venture such as a Center for Women and Business.

- **Communication** is key. Send out word about Center activities to board members, the college community and those in the business world. You never know where the next idea, resource or relationship will emerge. One of our most successful partnerships came from parents who heard about the Center when their daughter toured the college as a prospective student.

- **Listen to the students** involved with the Center when choosing programs, speakers and topics. They have a keen understanding of other students' interests. Students benefit from a wide variety of presentations: When we hosted a folk singer who talked about her career and aspirations, a number of students called it the best event they'd attended.

- **Look internationally.** As business becomes increasingly global and our student bodies more diverse, connecting to international women's groups working to develop the next generation of leaders provides a critical dimension to any leadership training.

The world needs women business leaders who have been trained in the skills of leadership and motivated and mentored to believe that they can do the job successfully. Here at SUNY Geneseo we've created the Klainer Center for Women and Business to do just that. 📌

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