

M.B.A.s Offer More Than Degree of Knowledge Classmates, teachers are support system

By Elizabeth Browne

ebrowne@bizjournals.com / (415) 288-4949

San Francisco Business Times

9/21/07

Some Bay Area women are finding that their Master's in Business Administration is more than just a degree.

Female entrepreneurs who have attended local M.B.A. programs are using their schools' resources, alumni networks, and professors to start and grow their own businesses.

And as those enterprises get off the ground, women business owners are returning to their alma maters to get advice and support, navigate business crises, hire employees, and even attract funding.

"I'm a poster child for using the resources at Stanford," said Alyssa Rapp, founder and CEO of online wine club Bottlenoses. "I used my time and relationships (at Stanford) to start this company."

Rapp received her M.B.A. from Stanford in 2005, the same year she started Bottlenoses. Two professors she worked with on independent studies that informed her business plan are now on her advisory board. And while Rapp was at Stanford, she was co-president of the 500-person wine club.

The club brought in big names from the industry for tastings and wine education – big names Rapp was able to meet and learn from. Jack Cakebread, CEO of Cakebread Cellars, is now on her board of directors.

Kristin Groos Richmond met her future business partner, Kirsten Tobey, while studying for her M.B.A. at Haas Business School at the University of California, Berkeley. The pair enlisted the advice of professors to write a business plan, and, eventually, got their company, Revolution Foods, off the ground.

Revolution opened in the summer of 2006 to provide healthy meals and nutrition education to students in the Bay Area. A social entrepreneur lecture series at Haas brought a speaker from the Bay Area Equity Fund – which ended up providing seed funding to Revolution Foods, Richmond said.

As Revolution Foods grows, Richmond said she plans to have an intern from Haas next year. And, she said, she hopes to recruit from the school when the company fills out its next level of management.

It's a common refrain from M.B.A.-holding entrepreneurs. Rapp said she's already hosted an intern from Stanford (M.B.A. students commonly intern between their first and second years of school) jointly funded by Stanford's Center for Entrepreneurial

Studies and Bottlenoses. And half to two-thirds of the people Rapp hired at Bottlenoses have come through her Stanford network.

The M.B.A. programs have another perk for female students who go on to start businesses: support and encouragement.

“My training at USF, especially in the area of entrepreneurship, gave me the courage to leave the warm arms of corporate America,” said Lori Teranishi, who co-founded Van Prooyen Greenfield LLP, a law firm specializing in litigation communications. Teranishi graduated from the University of San Francisco’s executive M.B.A. program in 2002, but said she got input from an entrepreneurship professor and still feels she can call the members of her cohort (business school students are commonly grouped into sections that take the same group of core courses together) for advice and support “at any time.”

That may be the greatest ongoing reward of M.B.A. programs for female grads.

“Stanford has been in many ways my lifeline,” says Monisha Perakash, co-founder of the College Co. and a 2003 Stanford business grad. Perakash, whose company provides personalized guidance to make college more affordable, described entrepreneurship as “pretty lonely.” But she – along with fellow alumni – takes part in a once-a-month “entrepreneurship commitment group” at Stanford’s Center for Entrepreneurial Studies, where business owners meet to exchange information and turn to each other for help in a confidential setting.

“It allows you to exchange information with kindred spirits who are going through it with you. You can allow yourself to be vulnerable,” she said.

Perakash said she’s also remained linked through alumni email lists, through which she’s gotten additional customers and formed business partnerships.

“Having gone to Stanford and having continued access had given me the courage and conviction to do this,” she said. “There have been a lot of points at which I would have thrown in the towel.”

Sidebar:

Fem-Preneurs

- Female enrollment in business schools lags that of other professional graduate schools – women make up about 35 percent of M.B.A. classes compared with about half of medical and law school classes.
- As of 2005, an estimated 10.1 million majority women-owned, privately held firms were operating in the United States, employing 18.2 million people and generating \$2.32 trillion in sales.
- Women-owned businesses account for 55 percent of new startups.