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Janine Tramont, program coordinator of the University at Buffalo's Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership, second from right, talks Thursday with, from left, Justine Hawkins, Aaron Fields and Jorge Torres, students at the Charter School for Applied Technologies.

Robert Kirkham / Buffalo News

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Imagining possible career paths

Charter school students get exposure to entrepreneurship and networking

By Matt Glynn
 NEWS BUSINESS REPORTER

Jon Weir of Weir Financial Resources listened to the business plans, then offered up questions and suggestions to the presenters.

Will you be able to buy supplies cheaply enough? Think of a cool name for your restaurant that will grab customers' attention. What sets your concept apart from what is already out there?

There was no funding at stake, but the young people Weir chatted with on Thursday got a taste of what budding entrepreneurs go through when they try to convert an idea into successful reality.

About 90 juniors and seniors at the Charter High School for Applied Technologies met with Weir and about 30 other entrepreneurs, to talk about business plans and product marketing strategies that emerged from their classroom studies.

The University at Buffalo's Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership worked on the program with the Town of Tonawanda school, in collaboration with Canisius College's Richard J. Wehle School of Business Entrepreneur's Organization.

Tom Ulbrich, executive director of the UB center, and other participants said entrepreneurs must be imaginative, resilient and believe in themselves.

"I personally feel it is imperative to expose our youth to the concept of entrepreneurship, as a path they may choose at some point in their careers," said Tom Ulbrich, executive director of the UB center. "It may not be now, it may be later."

During a "speed networking" segment, groups of students moved from table to table, spending a few minutes receiving feedback on their business ideas.

Janine Tramont, program coordinator at the UB center, asked Aaron Fields, a senior, what would be unique about the record label he had proposed.

"As a business owner, you're constantly asking yourself questions at every stage," Tramont said.

Fields thought it over and said his label would feature artists from a variety of music genres, instead of just one.

Jorge Torres, a junior, presented a concept for a retail store. Tramont offered tips to narrow his focus. "Entrepreneurs have a lot of great ideas. You have to pick the best seeds to grow."

After the session, Torres said he appreciated the input. "It was very useful," he said. "Now I can actually use that advice in my classes and my goals in my life."

Teachers at the charter school involved in the program said it helped make entrepreneurship more understandable to the students.

"You bring it in and make them sort of realize that it's happening all around them," said Danielle Wallenhorst. "It's not just something that rich people who are born into money can do. It's kind of what we've been trying to drill home, but it's a little bit better when someone who has been there and done it is sitting in front of them."

The program also tapped into the students' creativity, said Lisa Mendolia, also a teacher. They came up with business plans for everything from a day care to an after-school hangout with space for entertainment, athletics and studying, to edible party decorations.

During a Q&A with the entrepreneurs, the students learned the path to running one's own business isn't necessarily direct or predictable. One said he was motivated by losing his job and watching the bills pile up. Another who worked in the arts now has a construction company.

Will some of these 90 students one day become entrepreneurs? Ulbrich clearly hopes so. "I think entrepreneurs are the lifeblood of the U. S. economy," he said.

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