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Northeastern University

Northeastern Voice Electronic Edition

Office of Marketing and Communications

May 14, 2008

Northeastern Voice: May 14, 2008

Northeastern University - Division of Marketing and Communications

Recommended Citation

Northeastern University - Division of Marketing and Communications, "Northeastern Voice: May 14, 2008" (2008). *Northeastern Voice Electronic Edition.* Paper 21. http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d10015036

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Electronic edition, Vol. 1 No. 20, May 14, 2008

In This Issue

Main Page

Corporate directors honor Finnegan's career of service

Workshop gives students a cultural competency boost

CBA tourney modeled on successful Business Beanpot

Featured Article

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What Northeastern University always knew has now been recognized by New England's corporate leadership.

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Workshop gives students a cultural competency boost

Students in Northeastern's Dialogues of Civilizations program will be spending time this summer in 24 countries. The common thread: They're not the United States. And what's commonplace American behavior may be seen in other places as odd, confusing, even insulting. Enter the Department of Communication Studies, and the new "Cultural Competency" seminar.

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Riding high on years of victories in Boston's annual Business School Beanpot Case Analysis competition, Ray Kinnunen is hoping to roll out his winning formula to a larger group of budding business gurus. The associate professor of international business and strategy hopes to tap as many as 60 students to participate in the newly created Internal Business Case Competition.

In the media

• Law professor Deborah Ramirez proposed to a federal panel that there be a database to keep track of racial profiling and police abuse.

• The Center for Labor Market Studies' research on the teen summer employment market is cited in a story about job hunting in Texas.

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Neal Finnegan, NACD President Edward Pendergast, emcee Natalie Jacobson and event chairman William Earon. / COURTESY PHOTO

What Northeastern University always knew has now been recognized by New England's corporate leadership.

When the National Association of Corporate Directors chose to fete "shining examples of good corporate governance," the New England chapter honored Neal Finnegan, chairman of Northeastern's board of trustees since 1998, with its Lifetime Achievement Award.

The honor, citing Finnegan's "professional resume that spans three decades of senior leadership posts," was bestowed during a ceremony last week at Boston's Intercontinental Hotel.

"To be recognized by one's peers gives this honor special meaning," said Finnegan '61, Hon. '98. "While the award encompasses board work in all sectors of my life, the selection committee, I am certain, took special note of my more than 20 years of service to my alma mater."

Besides leading "a dozen of Boston's most storied financial institutions," Finnegan has served on the boards of several nonprofits; NACD cited the Boys and Girls Club, Junior Achievement, Catholic Charities and, of course, "his beloved Northeastern University."

"Neal was the perfect choice for this honor," said university President Joseph Aoun, who introduced Finnegan at the ceremony. "His involvement and commitment to Northeastern have defined who we are today."

The president cited Finnegan's early push for Northeastern to embody both practice-oriented education and "cutting edge research to better the world," and his leadership in helping redefine Northeastern during the early 1990s, as well as his devotion to students and to expanding interdisciplinary research.

"He is a bridge builder in every sense of the term," Aoun said. "He recognized that a truly great university cannot be great alone. He believes in the importance of building partnerships that capitalize on the intellectual and cultural assets both within the university and in Boston."

Earlier this spring, Aoun presented Finnegan with the university's inaugural Presidential Medallion, citing his "values and leadership qualities" at the university.

And following the NACD presentation, Finnegan was honored by the New England chapter of the Ireland Chamber of Commerce in the U.S.A. with its Emerald Award. The award was presented at ICCUSA's annual gala, a benefit for Special Olympics.

"As a founder of ICCUSA in the Boston area, and as a benefactor of the Special Olympics in Massachusetts, the partnership between these two programs is of special importance to me," Finnegan said. "I am grateful to all of my friends and associates who are supporting this event."

"I know I speak for the entire Northeastern community when I say your vision has made us stronger," Aoun told Finnegan at the NACD ceremony. "Your ideas, leadership and heart will live on at Northeastern for many years to come."

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Marcus Breen / Photo by JIM CHIAVELLI

Students in Northeastern's Dialogues of Civilizations program will be spending time this summer in Benin, Brazil, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Chile, China, Czechoslovakia, Egypt, Ghana, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Spain, South Africa, Switzerland, Thailand and Turkey.

The common thread: They're not the United States. And what's commonplace American behavior may be seen in other places as odd, confusing, even insulting.

Enter the Department of Communication Studies, and the new "Cultural Competency" seminar for every Northeastern student heading abroad with Dialogues.

"There are now 25 Dialogues programs and a lot of different countries with — let's be diplomatic here — a range of views about young Americans," said Marcus Breen, associate professor of communication studies and the creator of the competency program.

"One of our motivations was to encourage students to be aware of their behavior and the deeply embedded nature of their behavior as Americans," said Breen, who co-taught the 40-minute sessions with assistant professor Kumi Silva. "Some things that students or young people do that they're unaware of — talking in a loud voice, standing very close to people, looking at people directly when talking — could be inappropriate in other cultures.

In traditional Australian culture, for example, "looking an Aboriginal person in the eye — well, you can't do that. Knowing that sort of detail can help someone be an effective communicator," he said.

"Cultural Competency" doesn't walk students through every social more of every world culture; rather, Breen said, it helps plant reminders that

differences exist and students should pay attention. “Think about them and take the effort to avoid what I call dramatic faux pas,” he said. “They can make it uncomfortable.”

The presentation reminds students to “recognize that you are a visitor and therefore must respect the laws, both legislative and cultural.” It also urges: “Be patient!”

Breen, an Australian who worked as a consultant in the United States, Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe as well as Australia, remembered his own small lesson in cultural mores and patience years ago when first dealing with a Silicon Valley firm. “I had an agreement to call an executive in a large tech company,” he said. “His executive secretary told me she would get back to me. I’d called her at 10 in the morning. I heard back from her at 7 at night. I had no understanding of how Americans apply concepts of time, how they prioritize their time, and how I was very low down on the list. But every culture has different measures.”

Students were required to attend (some faculty members heading on Dialogues trips attended as well), and that “was very important,” Breen said. “It meant that everybody went out knowing at least they’d been informed about what would make them more effective learners and envoys for the university.”

The new program is vital, Breen suggested, with Northeastern’s growing emphasis on international experiences for students and the university’s desire to project itself globally. But it’s also useful for students who travel within the United States, he noted. “There are profound regional differences,” said Breen. “People in the Northeastern, for example, are much more direct in their speech, much more terse in their communication attitudes … This is now an area that’s being extensively studied within the communications field. And that’s a significant contribution that a department like ours can make to the education of our students.”

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Ray Kinnunen / CRAIG BAILEY

Coach K is at it again.

Riding high on years of victories in Boston's annual Business School Beanpot Case Analysis competition, Ray Kinnunen — "Coach K" to his students — is hoping to roll out his winning formula to a larger group of budding business gurus.

About 10 students are selected by Kinnunen every year to compete in two teams in the Business Beanpot, the competition that has yielded victories for Northeastern students against highly trained competitors for 10 out of its 12 years. Many alumni describe their participation as "life changing."

Now, Kinnunen, an associate professor of international business and strategy, hopes to tap greater numbers of students — as many as 60 a year —to participate in the newly created Internal Business Case Competition.

Taking a page from the yearly case-analysis tournament that pits Northeastern against Boston University, Boston College, Babson, Bentley, Suffolk and MIT, the internal contenst — the first was held April 12 — promises to be every bit as valuable for developing analytical and critical thinking, team-building and presentation skills, Kinnunen said.

Offered through the Advanced Strategy course, which is taught by Kinnunen and lecturer Joseph Chevarley, the competition invited students to solve a complex strategy case involving a company that had made numerous acquisitions, Kinnunen explained.

They had only a brief amount of time to prepare a presentation for judges and get ready to respond to questions, Kinnunen said, noting that students first saw their special business "case" scenario on the Friday evening before the Saturday competition, and had only five hours to prepare.

"When you put a student in this situation, you raise their skills to another level in so many areas, from analytical and critical thinking to how to work on a team," Kinnunen said.

In many ways, performance in a boardroom mimics the experience of an athlete, he said, noting that it was fitting Peter Roby, Northeastern's director of athletics and recreation, gave this year's keynote address at the internal competition.

Roby described how the attitudes and teamwork that make up a successful athletic experience, also makes a better business competitor.

"There are many similarities between business and athletics, and

certainly I feel that the training one gets while competing in athletics can help prepare someone for success in the business world," he said. "Just as in athletics, practice and the willingness to accept constructive criticism is key to being successful in business.

"The humility to be self-reflective of one's performance and to make the needed adjustments to bring about better results is as important in athletics as it is in business."

Jon Gbur, a judge in the internal competition and a graduate of the business school, said he was "exhilarated" by the competition. A Marine for 23 years, Gbur said he was impressed with the level of self-confidence students showed, and their aptitude for communications.

"Some of the most important lessons learned here were how to communicate, work well as a team, develop self-confidence, organize work and function under pressure," he said.

Said student Michael Guccione: "I feel very fortunate to have gotten the Beanpot experience. This class, while time-consuming, was one of the best classes I've taken at Northeastern."

Kinnunen's goal is to broaden the scope of the case competition even beyond the College of Business Administration.

"I envision the competition as a wonderful tool to offer to students in arts and sciences and other colleges," he said. — Susan Salk

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