On Campus

Engineering Business Smarts

By
Cindy Rodriguez
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Rebecca Rodriguez address local entrepreneurs at Harlem's La Pregunta Arts Café. (Jenica Miller)

La Pregunta Arts Café is one of Harlem’s most lively new establishments, bringing together people for poetry, music, and community meetings. The café, which opened in March 2008, is also the passion of owner Yscaira Jiménez ’03CC.

Last summer, however, Jiménez found herself struggling to keep up with expenses. Fortunately, word got to Rebecca Rodríguez, director of the Columbia-Harlem Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at The Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science. The center provides free assistance to local entrepreneurs by pairing them with engineering students trained as business counselors. (Many Columbia engineering students take business courses and go on to to become entrepreneurs themselves.)

Rodríguez dispatched four Columbia students to help Jiménez create an energy-saving plan. This included finding a recycling company to take away old cooking oil for free, switching to fluorescent lightbulbs, and using the café's air conditioner sparingly. Other students conducted a formal assessment of the café's financial value, which will be useful if Jiménez chooses to court investors, take out a loan, or sell. Jiménez, acting on Rodríguez's advice, also launched a catering business.

"I'm still struggling a little," says Jiménez, "but I'm in a much better place now."

So far, SBDC has provided assistance to 176 businesses. Clients have included a moving company, a doctor, a provider of educational services, and a manufacturer of organic health products. They've learned how to create business plans, design Web sites, establish boards of overseers, and attract capital.

Jack McGourty, an associate dean at the engineering school who oversees several public-service programs there, says SBDC has a twin mission: "to help the community while encouraging students to become leaders in science and engineering with a socially responsible lens."

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