

Buy! Sell!

SCSU students get in the trading game

by Jen Sager

Students at **Southern Connecticut State University** are reaching beyond the confines of the theory found in their textbooks and into the real world of Wall Street, all without leaving New Haven campus. In a program that was piloted in 2007 – the brainchild of Dr. Robert Eldridge, a professor of economics and finance at SCSU – top-performing finance majors can earn the opportunity to put what they have learned in the classroom to work in the market.

"I had wanted to bring a student-run investment program using real dollars to Southern for more than 20 years. Nothing can focus your attention more than real gains and real losses," said Eldridge. Thanks to the SCSU Foundation, that dream became a reality nearly five years ago.

"I went to the foundation asking for \$50,000 to start this program. I wasn't sure they would give me anything, let alone what I asked for, but they did and I'm grateful they believed in my concept enough to do so."

With the funds secured, Eldridge got to work and the Ad Astra Investment Fund was born. 'Ad Astra' comes from the Latin term meaning, "to the stars," and "that's what it's all about – the students shooting for the stars." The program traditionally accepts second semester juniors to serve three semester terms as other members graduate and rotate off. The program has been so successful that in August of 2010 the foundation granted another \$50,000 to the project.

Ad Astra meets with Eldridge three times a week during both semesters in an on-campus trading floor equipped with a plasma TV, computers, telephone, printers and other office essentials. Students utilize the space to



SCSU Ad Astra team member Bryan Heafy works out some calculations during a trading session.

conduct research on the various market sectors, analyze trends, devise a portfolio of investments, implement their choices and follow the market's swings – all without ever leaving SCSU's grounds. Students attend these meetings in full business attire and present their research and purchasing ideas to the group as if they were paid professionals. Eldridge's role is that of the devil's advocate in these meetings. "I ask a lot of questions – What? Why? Who cares? What's the risk? I want them to really think every decision through thoroughly, to consider all the risks." The group makes decisions monthly regarding what to buy, sell and trade.

Elizabeth Womack, who just graduated with a degree in business administration with a concentration in finance, has been a proud member of the team for three semesters and currently serves as operations manager.

"The learning we get from this program is incredible. It's so much more than theory when you are investing real money. There is a sense of responsibility that you can't get from a simulation," she said. With 10 team members – eight undergraduates and two graduate students – and only one pool of funds, Womack said discussions on investment choices can get intense.

"We're all fully committed to this team, which means we all have our own ideas and opinions. What's great is how much we learn from one another in our discussions. Working collaboratively, we build on each other's ideas," she said.

Now that she has graduated, she's hoping to find a position in corporate finance with a focus on research analysis.

"I want to continue working on the same principles I have worked so closely with on the team. I know I am ready to excel in this type of role now," Womack said.

Of the project's success, Eldridge says, "The students have far exceeded my wildest expectations. This program gives students the chance to put into real practice all they have learned in the classroom at SCSU, and each year I am proud and impressed by how seriously they take this opportunity.

"In fact, they have surprised me over the years, in how conservative they actually are. They just don't make hasty decisions. I am continuously impressed with their dedication and commitment to seeing this team's success grow. They certainly haven't made a million dollars, but in a market as tough as this one, they have managed to grow their fund. That says quite a lot."