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OFFBEAT

By Erin Chambers

A Dorm for Dreamers and Doers

At Babson College's E-Towers residence, student entrepreneurs craft startups, brainstorm, and even throw the odd party

Most college students look forward to winter break as a time to sleep, indulge in home-cooked meals, and recover from the fall semester's final exams. Mark Prondzinski has different plans. Over the next three weeks, the Babson College sophomore will be coding a shopping-cart software program, finalizing the technology for a new online dating service that his friend is starting, and juggling two other Web-design jobs.

"I might give myself a couple days off, but I've got a lot of development to do," says Prondzinski, 22, founder of Multimedia CD ROM Company. He started the business in high school, and his first big client was International Multifoods -- at the time, the half-owner of baking giant Pillsbury and now part of J.M. Smucker ([SJM](#)) -- which bought a \$10,000 design and \$5,000 worth of direct-mail CDs to promote a new product.

IDEA FACTORY. Now he's one of 21 entrepreneurs living in Babson's E-Tower dorm -- an idea factory of sorts for students determined to launch the next big thing. The alternative housing option for undergrads is currently home to 12 businesses, from a maker of organic apple chips to a clothing line and a mobile DJ outfit. Located on Babson's Wellesley (Mass.) campus, E-Tower is equipped with a central office with a server, printer, copier, fax machine, and a conference room. Residents meet there for Sunday night brainstorming sessions -- and no one leaves until 100 ideas are up on the massive whiteboard.

There are similar programs at other business schools, like the R.H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland, but E-Tower is the first of its kind started for students, by students. In 2001, a group of undergrads pitched the idea of a living space where they could live and breathe entrepreneurship 24/7, and the higher-ups gave it the green light.

"It's student-run and organized, and they have full say in their policies and how they manage their group," says Fred Grant, director of campus life at Babson and the dorm's adviser. "It makes a world of difference in how successful they are."

ENTREPRENEURS ONLY. Now that the word is out, landing a spot in the E-Tower residence is a challenge. First, students must be accepted into Babson, the veritable "it" school for entrepreneurs. Then there's an interview process with the current residents and a series of written essays about history and views on entrepreneurship. Current residents then vote on who gets in each semester.

Once they are accepted, the money to fund their businesses comes from their own ingenuity, not Babson handouts. The college pays for their E-Tower housing and meals, but the students are responsible for finding startup cash -- from high school graduation gifts to freelance work.

"We're college students, so we don't have that much money, but somehow we always come up with it," says Prondzinski, whose Web-design company has pulled in about \$20,000 a year since high school. "We probably should be saving it or something, but, oh well, this is more fun."

STARTUP STARS. Freshman E-Tower resident Joel Holland is considered one of the dorm's biggest mainstream success stories. His company, Footage Films, also began in high school. He sells footage of city landscapes and generic scenes to production companies -- royalty-free -- so they don't have to send an entire crew out to get just a few shots. The Discovery Channel, *Oprah*, and the WB network have all purchased his 60-minute reels.

Sophomore Rich Botten calls leadership within the dorm "loosely organized," and says his only real purpose as general manager is to be a liason with the greater campus community and, along with a communications director, organize weekly meetings. Other than that, he is just another one of the nearly two dozen entrepreneurs working on his business plan -- running a mobile DJ company similar to the one he started in high school and sold to "some guy in Michigan." He's also working on a new online shopping venture with Prondzinski.

"I personally don't enjoy class, writing papers, and studying for tests," says Bottner, 19. "What I really enjoy is working new concepts and working with people."

The E-Tower students all take full class loads, and despite the time crunch, many make the honor roll and are involved with other campus organizations. Senior Mike Mandel has lived in E-Tower since it opened in 2001 and serves as president of The Entrepreneurial Exchange, the largest entrepreneurship organization on campus. He says booking big names like Reebok (**RBK**) CEO Paul Fireman and Boston Scientific (**BSX**) CEO Jim Tobin for the center's speaker series will help him with access to clients next spring, when he plans to launch his consultancy, Corporate Pride Innovations. "Hopefully," says Mandell, "I'll just make a few phone calls."

TRUMP ON THE TUBE. If sleeping late is their biggest sacrifice, these students don't seem to mind. "Some people like us consider working on their business fun, whereas others would go into Boston and party or something," says Prondzinski, who says he sleeps "sometimes" and expects his revenue to continue growing, time allowing.

And with their booming companies, the E-Tower crew has plenty of reason to celebrate. One resident admits they have "a great space for parties," and they often get together for movies, dinners, and a weekly TV break in the common area. You guessed it -- *The Apprentice*, every Thursday.

But don't expect to see any nondisclosure agreements *a la* The Donald lying around the E-Tower hallways. Prondzinski is helping Botten with his Web site, and Mandel called a meeting to get input on the design of his new logo. All three agree that, at this stage, there's more to be gained from sharing ideas than keeping secrets.

"All in all, E-Tower is just a bunch of really good friends who share a unique entrepreneurial spirit from all over the U.S. and the world," says Prondzinski, who doesn't list his multimedia company on the E-Tower Web site alongside all the others, because he's already working to capacity without the extra publicity. "If I did," he adds, "the response would be such that I'd be turning business away." Overbooked at 22? Nothing like getting a running start.

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