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High-schoolers put *business acumen* to the test

About 12,000 students are demonstrating their skills at the Orange County Convention Center.

For John Quinn, a tenth-grader at Olympia High School in Orlando, business was a bit of an abstract concept until last year, when he took an entrepreneurship class, followed by a marketing course this year.

"I originally was just looking for an elective, but it ended up being a lot of fun. . . . I've learned practical ways of doing things."

Quinn, 16, and several of his Olympia classmates hoped to further hone their skills at the 61st Annual International Career Development Conference opening this weekend at the Orange County Convention Center.

Organized by the Distributive Education Clubs of America, the event drew 15,000 teachers, vendors, business leaders and students from across the United States, Mexico, Canada and Germany, who showed up to trade their wares and engage in a fair amount of healthy competition.

About 12,000 high-school students will compete for \$500,000 worth of cash prizes and scholarship money during the four-day conference, which wraps up Tuesday. In Florida alone, 425 will compete and participate in leadership-building events.

Over the next few days, students' knowledge will be tested in several categories, such as business administration and management; entrepreneurship; finance; marketing, sales and service; and hospitality and tourism. They must also take a lengthy written exam to show mastery of basic concepts of marketing, management and math, among others.

A popular competition involves role-playing exercises.

"Students may be presented with a role-playing scenario he or she has never seen and may be asked to solve a specific problem. They may be asked to train a store employee, or play the role of employee trying to calm a customer," said John Fistolera, director of development with the organization.

Other events will require participants to present a business plan, demonstrate how to promote a specific product or even engage in a virtual business challenge, which consists of students running an imaginary store through the use of special software and then having their earned profits tallied over a period of time.

Megan Montgomery, a senior from Rockmart, Ga., prepared to compete in the entrepreneurship-promotion category. Montgomery, who wants to attend medical school and hopes to one day manage a hospital, also is running for office within the organization.

"I want to one day start my own business . . . I tried piano and that didn't work; I tried sports, but I'm not very well-coordinated. This is what I'm good at," said the 17-year-old as she received help with her attire.

Montgomery, who wore the organization's blue blazer and insignia, said participating in several of the organization's events throughout the year has helped her in practical ways, such as receiving a full scholarship for college.

"I learned the skills I feel got me chosen for that scholarship, thanks to *DECA*," she said.

A Virginia-based nonprofit, *DECA* aims to get students interested in the business world in part by giving them hands-on, practical training, such as running their own stores. More than 2,000 school stores are run by *DECA* students nationwide, and corporate partners often come into *DECA*-affiliated classrooms to talk to students.

"A lot of our students do go on to get their MBAs, but what we're doing at the high-school level is giving them that initial experience and applying what they're learning in the classroom in the real world," said Ed Davis, the group's executive director.

But civic participation is also strongly encouraged, with several students interviewed Saturday saying they engaged in such projects throughout the year.

Quinn, who wants to someday be a "lawyer, a judge or a politician," said he, along with his Olympia High chapter, raised funds to "adopt a family" last Christmas.

"We raised \$1,000 to buy them presents," Quinn said. "The year before that, we also helped [a family] pay rent. They were about to get evicted."

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