COMMUNITY SERVICE PROJECT
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CAREER CLOSET

SIGMA EPSILON
CHAPTER #4972
SOUTH ARKANSAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE
EL DORADO, ARKANSAS
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Career Closet Community Service Project

Two old adages say that “clothing maketh the man (or the woman)” and that “you don’t get a second chance to make a first impression.” Nowhere are these sayings truer than in the business world where potential employers make judgments about personality, skills, and attitudes based on attire. Most interviewing experts emphasize that interviewers form a subjective opinion about a candidate within the first two minutes of the interview.

**PURPOSE OF PROJECT**

Phi Beta Lambda’s purpose is to give students help beyond what they get in their college classes to develop the skills, confidence, and the knowledge to develop successful careers that lead to advancement. South Arkansas Community College (SouthArk) offers academic classes and vocational training to help students obtain the skills to acquire jobs. Other classes and workshops provide training and job search assistance. Unfortunately, many students cannot afford the clothes they need for interviews. The community lacks resources to provide appropriate business attire on a college student’s budget. Being appropriately dressed allows SouthArk students to feel more self-confident, present professional images at interviews, obtain employment, and leads to financial independence.

Area FBLA and PBL members who need proper business attire to attend conferences are encouraged to visit the Career Closet. In addition, the Career Closet provides visibility for Sigma Epsilon and opportunities for members to make a difference in and around their community.
STATEMENT OF PROJECT GOALS

When Sigma Epsilon members voted to revive the Career Closet as one of its community service projects, they set specific goals to implement the project. Goals for the project are as follows:

Φ Obtain a larger facility that is accessible to students, volunteers, and donors.

♦ Expand the services to provide assistance with hairstyles and cosmetics, résumé critiques, and mock interviews, as well as the business attire.

B Develop a marketing campaign that will reach everyone at SouthArk as well as the community.

♦ Cultivate a boutique atmosphere that will encourage more visitors.

Λ Build a database with donors and alumni that can be used as a resource.

Melissa Boykin, Professional PBL member, with scarves she donated to the Career Closet.
SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

Sigma Epsilon’s community service project offers students the opportunity to acquire business attire at reduced prices and receive personal evaluations to determine the styles that make them look their best. Ideal Silhouette® is a computer program that evaluates an individual’s figure. This analysis shows the individual how to improve his/her appearance and camouflage imperfections. After knowing which clothing styles best fit their body type, they can shop confidently and make better selections.

The members wanted to make a difference that would have a lasting impact in the community and on students. Over 90 percent of the PBL members participated in this project. The members contributed over 1,000 hours planning the project, organizing the facilities, obtaining donations, organizing the items and marketing the project. This project gave students an opportunity to work in a business-like environment, network with the community, and apply many of the concepts learned in their business classes.

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT OF PROJECT

PBL members founded the Career Closet in 2012, but it has been a struggle to keep it open due to lack of space and the isolated location. During the summer, someone rented the building that housed the Career Closet. Workers dumped everything including the clothes in the back of another building immediately behind the SouthArk Technology building. The building had been empty for over a year.

When the fall semester began, the members realized that the Career Closet had no home. Members knew the Career Closet needed to be a success. Over 70 percent of the
students at SouthArk receive financial assistance, and most do not have professional business attire to wear to job interviews or conferences.

Several steps were taken to revitalize the Career Closet. First, members and advisers met with a variety of SouthArk administrators to determine if members could use the empty house for the home of the Career Boutique. Everyone agreed that SouthArk students needed the Career Closet. Members cleaned up a room and started sorting the clothes. It was almost Thanksgiving, and members had many projects and final exams to finish before the college closed for the holidays. Members developed a timeline for reopening the Career Closet in February.

**IMPLEMENTATION OF PROJECT**

The preparations for the Career Closet presented many challenges. While several members sorted clothes by size, others began rearranging and cleaning the building. One student volunteered to set up a desk and office area. Another member put in requests to have the bathroom plumbing repaired. One member volunteered to touch up the painting in the front rooms.

Professional PBL member, Melissa Boykin, volunteered to help with the project. With the help of the members, Boykin designed two surveys to determine how to best market the Career Closet. The first survey was given SouthArk students to see how many knew about the Career Closet and how many visited the previous location. Survey results indicated that the majority of the students did not know the Career Closet existed. The other survey distributed to SouthArk alumni asked if they were familiar with the closet, to identify the
dress code where they worked, and to consider donating business attire to the closet.

Alumni working in 41 area businesses completed the community survey. Most were not aware of the closet. However, over 65 percent expressed an interest in donating clothes or sponsoring a clothing drive at work for the Career Closet. The survey was an excellent tool for advertising the Career Closet.

Boykin helped members develop a marketing plan for the Career Closet to increase the selection of sizes, colors, and styles. Publicity is important to inform faculty, staff and students at the college and community members of the need for donations. Most importantly, students need to know the Career Closet is a valuable resource and is available. After intensive cleaning, sorting and rearranging, the Career Closet was revitalized. Several PBL members designed ads, flyers, brochures, and a price list.

Members created a database that allows for accurate information on donors, items available, and items needed. The database is used to send electronic thank you notes and in the future will be used to send newsletters to donors. Then members hosted an Open House for the Career Closet on March 30 for SouthArk students, faculty, and staff. Potential and past donors received invitations. The Open House was a great success with over 50 guests. Members have planned a style show for the fall to encourage students to visit the Career Closet. Models will wear professional attire from the Career Closet and visited classes to invite the students to the style show.
In addition to *Ideal Silhouette*, several handouts and brochures are available to help students dress appropriately. The Union County Cooperative Extension Service is one resource for the Career Closet. The extension service includes information on how to plan wardrobes on a budget. Students can shop smarter and achieve fashion confidence at the Career Closet.

**Uniqueness of the Project**

The project is the only organization in the area that provides career wardrobe assistance and personal coaching to increase self-confidence. The individual image consultations can cost up to $500 at other agencies. The Career Closet also provides individual coaching on interview preparation and résumé critiques. The Career Closet is a place where a person can purchase Liz Claiborne, Antonio Melani, or other brand name suits with accessories for less than ten dollars. The project also gives PBL members an opportunity to interact with businesses community members. The response from the public, in regards to donations, provided encouragement to members working on the Career Closet project.

Other departments of the college partnered with PBL to offer additional services. SouthArk cosmetology students are helping with hairstyles and makeup. They shared a virtual hairstyle software program that allows a person to try countless makeovers on a personal photo and see exactly what he/she will look like before getting a haircut or new style. The project also provides graphic design and desktop students experience in planning
and designing materials for publicity. At the same time, PBL members have the opportunity to receive hands-on training in retail, management, marketing, and finance. When Boykin became involved and worked in the Career Closet with students at least five hours a week, members reached out to other alumni and invited them to become professional members and get involved.

**BENEFITS TO AND IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY**

The establishment of the Career Closet has the potential to affect many lives in Union County and surrounding areas. Perhaps the widest impact of the Career Closet is the help it will provide to the clients of the Union County Department of Human Services. As the clients of the Career Closet are employed and become productive citizens, they will gain self-esteem and become financially independent.

 Students in need of business attire acquire the wardrobe necessary to enter the corporate world. Students just graduating from college have little or no money to buy the clothing demanded for job interviews. When donations are not appropriate business attire, members donate articles to Turning Point, Salvation Army, or other non-profit organizations. Therefore, the project has a wider impact than just SouthArk students and FBLA members.

 SouthArk had an enrollment of 3,550 students last year. Many SouthArk students qualified as first-generation college students. If the Career Closet can help students develop professional images, it may increase retention of students and bolster their finances. If the
students obtain a job, many of the local companies provide tuition reimbursement programs. Hopefully, the students will continue their education while they are working. Although the full potential is not known yet, opportunities are unlimited if the Career Closet continues to receive assistance from the community.

**Evidence of Publicity**

The Career Closet has received a tremendous amount of publicity during the semester. PBL members have talked to their friends, family, and churches about the Career Closet. Word of mouth is still one of the best forms of advertisement for a service that is valuable to the client. Members have made presentations in business classes. Survey I was sent to 200 PBL alumni; Survey II was sent to SouthArk students. A total of 50 alumni employed locally and over 200 current SouthArk students responded in less than 2 weeks. The surveys provided excellent publicity for the project.

The Professional Projects class and the Administrative Technology class have also helped plan and organize the project. The students and members have developed and adopted this mission statement:

“Our goal is to facilitate the transition from student life to the workforce by maximizing the opportunity to make a great first impression, providing students with a professional appearance and insuring self-confidence and success in their future endeavors and their careers.”

PBL members sent news articles to the *PBL Business Leader*, the *Arkansas Press*, and the *El Dorado News Times*. Press releases have been sent to other local newspapers, the local cable company, and the local radio stations asking for donations resulting in over 40 items within the first week. Members are using Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn to publicize the Career Closet. SouthArk PBL has a Facebook page that members use to
display some of the clothes available in the closet. It also allows before and after pictures of students who agree to photographs. Social Media and the SouthArk website are tools members can use to stay in touch with donors so they can see how valuable the Career Closet is for the college and the community. Thank you notes are sent to all donors.

Over 10 different Career Closet flyers and posters designed by members are posted on campus bulletin boards. E-mails sent to students, faculty and staff announce special events for the project. A brochure will be distributed to all students at orientations and during registration.

**CONCLUSION**

By opening the Career Closet at 305 West Cedar (approximately 200 feet behind the SouthArk Technology Building), students have easier access than they did when the clothes were in a small room inside the building that housed the t-shirt production. The Career Closet will continue providing individuals with attractive, affordable business clothing to fit their budgets. Donations have been generous, and PBL members plan to make the Career Closet a continuing success through coordination, determination and hard work. The Career Closet has had more clients this semester than it had in the last three years. Best of all, the new location is much larger and provides a boutique environment so more students will want to stop by the Career Closet on a regular basis. Every member of PBL, SouthArk, and the community can benefit from this project.
APPENDIX

Press Release Sent to PBL Business Leader

Contact: Donna Hendricks
Sigma Epsilon Chapter 4972 of Phi Beta Lambda
South Arkansas Community College
Phone: 870.864.7177

Professional PBL Member Selects Career Closet as Capstone Project

The Sigma Epsilon Chapter of Phi Beta Lambda at South Arkansas Community College has a Career Closet, but it has struggled to survive. The Career Closet provides business apparel for students preparing for interviews, starting a new job, or attending conferences.

PBL Professional member, Melissa Boykin, offered to conduct a study on the Career Closet to determine how to revitalize it and improve its services as part of a capstone class at Arkansas Tech University. After two surveys, interviews and research, Ms. Boykin suggested a boutique setting to attract more students and donors. She has helped members create a marketing plan to increase donations and advertising materials to reach more potential customers. As members worked with Boykin, they decided to expand the services so the Career Closet also provides additional resources so individuals can improve their professional image.

Many local businesses as well as individuals donate to the Career Closet. Chapter members are using principles learned in accounting, desktop publishing, management and other business classes as well as gaining valuable hands-on experience with this project. Ms. Boykin’s help inspired Sigma Epsilon members. Everyone is excited about the additional services and the boutique atmosphere of the Career Closet.

Career Closet Mission
Our goal is to facilitate the transition from student life to the workforce by maximizing the opportunity to make a great first impression, providing students with a professional appearance and insuring self-confidence and success in their future endeavors and their careers.

South Arkansas Community College Chapter 4972 El Dorado, Arkansas

Article in El Dorado News Times

Donations sought for Career Closet

EL DORADO — The Sigma Epsilon Chapter of Phi Beta Lambda at South Arkansas Community College is seeking clothing donations for its Career Closet, which provides professional apparel for male and female students preparing for interviews, starting new jobs, or attending school conferences.

“Being professionally dressed allows students to feel more self-confident, present professional images at interviews, obtain jobs and become financially independent,” PBL organizer Donna Hendricks said. Clean, gently-used or new clothing and other professional accessories are sought. Items needed include men’s and women’s suits and blazers, slacks, ties, polo shirts, blouses, jackets, shoes, belts and briefcases.

Donations must be dropped off with Kathy Nelson in the Whitrfield Building on the West Campus. Receipts for tax purposes are available by request. For more information, call Nelson at (870) 864-7584, or email PBL at phbl@southark.edu-mail-to-phbl@southark.edu.
Email sent to all students and employees at SouthArk

Phi Beta Lambda, the business organization at South Arkansas Community College, is seeking donations for the Career Closet. Clean, gently-used or new clothing and other professional accessories are requested. These will be used for students seeking employment or attending events that require business attire.

Items needed include men’s and women’s suits and blazers, slacks, ties, polo shirts, blouses, jackets, shoes, belts, etc. The project will be housed in the Computer Technology Building until the opening of EDIE’s at 307 West Cedar. To make a donation or for information email pbl@southark.edu or contact Donna Hendricks, adviser at dhendricks@southark.edu or 870.864.7177. Receipts are available on request.

Article Sent to Arkansas Press
Career Closet Venture at SouthArk
The Sigma Epsilon Chapter of Phi Beta Lambda at South Arkansas Community College is re-opening a Career Closet that will provide professional apparel for male and female students preparing for interviews, starting a new job, or other business related ventures. Being professionally dressed allows students to feel more self-confident, present professional images at interviews, obtain jobs, and become financially independent. Many local businesses as well as individuals have been asked to make donations to the Career Closet. This project has allowed members to develop working relationships with members of the community and promote community awareness of the organization.

Flyers to Advertise Career Closet