

Saint Mary's Vested Interest in Local Economy

By Sophie Braccini

The St. Mary's Center for the Regional Economy is launching an economic impact report addressing the Campus' effect on the neighboring cities. The Center was founded two years ago by Economics Professor Kris Chase with the Dean of the School of Economics and Business Administration, Dr. Roy Allen. "The core of the mission of a college like Saint Mary's is to teach people how to think and be life-long learners," says Chase, "However, another part of the mission is to be a service to the local economy, with a focus on those who need help in participating in the fruits of economic success. Currently, there is no institution of higher education in Contra Costa County devoted to studying and boosting the local economy, and that is why we are developing this new Center, we want to become that place."

The economic impact report will assess the College's contribution to the local economy. "We employ more than 600 full time employees, and our students visit daily the surrounding towns" says Chase, "our budget is in the \$100 million range."

She goes on to explain that the College is a non-polluting business that contributes to the cultural, social and sports life of surrounding communities. "We provide a lot of in-kind services. For example, we are the largest park in Moraga with trails that connect to Bollinger Canyon and Sanders Ranch, the campus is the designated area in the event of a major disaster, many community groups use our facilities and students and faculty are very active locally; 40% of St Mary's students are engaged in community service."

The impact of the campus is one of several studies conducted by the Center. One recent study looked at users' response to a potential disruption of the East Bay Water Source. It studied the possible implications for businesses of a severe



(L to R) Roy Allen introduces Kris Chase, Brian Lofman and Cheryl LeMay at the Conference on the Local Economy Photo Sophie Braccini

disruption in the water supply, either by accident or drought. Such a report should help shape public perceptions of water supply and consumption patterns in the East Bay, and influence public policy toward conserving and minimizing disruption to this significant asset. Another report analyzes the potential impact of a policy that requires businesses to prove that their new products are safe to the public, rather than just complying with existing regulations (a principle called "the precautionary principle" that's applied in Europe, Brazil, and San Francisco). The report analyzes the principle's potential to affect business, government, the environment, and economic vitality in Contra Costa County.

Those reports are the first steps for the Center. "On the other side of the tunnel you have the big Berkeley think-tank," says Chase, "but they do not focus on the specific needs of Contra Costa, and that's what we are doing. The Center's activities incorporate the fact that a very large part of Contra Costa's economy is driven by small businesses, many of which are formed by an entrepreneurial base that reflects the diversity of the region. They have specific needs and demands that the College wishes to address."

One of Chase's objectives is to maintain a pool of potential interns who could work in partnership with local businesses. "We are partnering with the Small Business Council," explains Chase, "already some students get internship through different classes. The Center would like to centralize these resources and establish a continuous relationship with the local economy."

The Center wishes to be a resource as well for Chambers of Commerce and local governments. "For example, we would love to assist towns who wish to assess the economic impacts of new development," proposes Chase. She points out that two St. Mary's students worked for Moraga and Lafayette to carry out an inventory of their energy consumption for the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ECLEI). "Students want to be involved in the local economy and their energy and fresh perspectives can be of use to businesses and administrations."

Chase's challenge today is to secure long term funding for the Center. "We are looking for grants," she says, adding that if someone wants to make a difference in the local economy, a donation would be a great way to do so.