It’s been a busy week for Natalie Digenaro ’15. She queried a vendor about designs and pricing, reviewed order forms and discussed an email marketing campaign for a new T-shirt offered by Heartfelt Designs, which designs, produces and markets T-shirts for a philanthropic cause.

“Sometimes working for Heartfelt Designs can be tiring,” she admits, “because we have to learn new things every day as we face unexpected challenges.”

That’s a good thing, since that was exactly the impetus behind Sacred Heart University’s launch this past year of two student-run businesses, Heartfelt Designs and The Walnut Beach Creamery, an ice cream shop housed in Roncalli Hall. In this mercurial, competitive global economy, a college degree is a must-have in your toolbox—but that degree is even more valuable if you also earn experience and marketable skills along the way to graduation.

“Our students are learning best business theories and practices in class, and then our student-run businesses give them live experience with actual customers or industry challenges where they apply those theories and learn to think on their feet,” says Sean Heffron, director of the Student Experience in the John F. Welch College of Business.

For instance, students trying to launch the Creamery had to push their opening date back because of Hurricane Sandy and construction issues. Meanwhile, their colleagues at Heartfelt Designs faced other worries, like what if the T-shirt they’d created for St. Patrick’s Day didn’t get produced in time for the holiday.

“Sacred Heart is ahead of the curve by establishing student businesses that can serve as teaching tools,” says David Taylor, assistant professor of marketing and sports management. While internships serve a purpose, he explains, they only offer students a “small sliver of the business world,” as students typically work in just one department. “Students running their own businesses function as a company, not a department. They have an opportunity to see the whole picture and how everything fits together. That’s really our goal in business education, and we’re accomplishing that.”

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human resources,” agrees Steve Scarpati, associate professor of accounting and information systems. “Along the way, they often discover new things about themselves, too.”

Scarpati has been closely involved in the launch of Heartfelt Designs. After the idea for the company originated in spring 2012 with President John Petillo, students from a wide range of academic programs—including business, marketing, fashion marketing, communication and art & design—jumped on board to get the new company up and running. Proceeds benefit the University’s spring mission trips, although the initial shirt, with a Newtown theme, raised $4,400 for the Sandy Hook Elementary School Memorial Scholarship Fund.

At the Creamery, launched by the John F. Welch College of Business, 11 Welch Scholars—sophomores and juniors chosen by faculty for their academic achievement and entrepreneurial abilities—serve as middle managers. Freshman and sophomore work-study students serve as “point of sale” employees, making sauces and waffle batter, scooping ice cream and running the cash register, with opportunities to work their way up the management ladder.

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**Brianna Carolan ’16**

**STUDENT PROFILE**

**Hometown:** Bayville, N.J.

**Major:** Business

**Why SHU?:** It came down to Marist and SHU. When I walked onto the Sacred Heart campus, I felt at home. Everyone was so friendly. I also wanted to be involved in activities like I was in high school, and I thought it was the right distance from home—far, but not too far.

**First Year at SHU:** I love it here. At first, it was a little hard to get adjusted, but my activities helped a lot. The Living Learning Community helped me make friends in my major. I have had to learn to balance schoolwork with activities, but I did that in high school, too. Overall I feel like it’s a family. I like that everyone knows who you are, and you are not just a face in the crowd. It’s nice to walk around and know people and have people know you.

**Activities:** Treasurer of freshman class and president-elect for next year; Fashion Club; Students Today, Alumni Tomorrow; Chi Omega; WCOB Living Learning Community. I also have a work study job in Admissions and a job in the Walnut Beach Creamery. Next year, I plan to go on a Habitat for Humanity mission trip.

**Passion for Ice Cream:** I work in an ice cream shop at home in the summer. When I was applying for a job, I only wanted to work at an ice cream store, so those are the places where I applied. I always wanted to scoop ice cream. I love the happy atmosphere when people are buying ice cream. I applied for a Welch Scholar position and if I get it, I want to be a manager in the creamery.
“Whether today’s new student-run businesses at Sacred Heart end up being profitable or not “is clearly secondary to the lessons learned,” says Scarpati. “The bottom line is all about gaining experience that will impress future employers.”

“In this job, I’m doing a lot of the same things I did when I worked in an ice cream shop in high school, but I see it all from a business perspective now,” notes Brianna Carolan ’16, who has her sights set on a career in human resources.

“I’m in a marketing class right now, and I can already see how the different things we do at the Creamery relate to what we’re learning in class,” says Charlie Holland ’16, “like finding more ways to draw customers to our products when our competition is outselling us.”

Fellow Creamery employee and aspiring business owner Brian Reilly ’16 was drawn to Sacred Heart because the Welch Experience and opportunities like this one give him a chance to experience what it’s like to be an entrepreneur. “Sacred Heart

Professor Jonathan Walker
FACULTY PROFILE

Professor Jonathan Walker, chair of SHU’s Art & Design Department, first got involved with the student-run business, Heartfelt Designs, after President John J. Petillo was so impressed with the student work he saw at Senior Portfolio Night that he thought it could be incorporated into a social cause to help finance the annual student mission trips.

Over the summer, Graphic Design Professor Mary Treschitta and Vice President for Marketing & Communications Michael Iannazzi joined Walker to brainstorm about the project. They concluded it could be more than just art turned into T-shirts; it could also be a student-run business. “Running the project would teach students how to operate a business, earn money, raise social consciousness and develop life skills,” Walker said. The business brings together students and mentors from across departments and even colleges. Participants come from Art & Design, Marketing, Accounting and more.

“This semester has been a great pilot for the program. There have been bumps along the way—as there are with any new business—but we have all learned a lot,” Walker noted. “There is so much that goes into a business—design, printing, advertising, bookkeeping, sales, etc. Our students are learning that.”
definitely offers the opportunity to find out what it’s like to work for yourself at a young age,” he says. “Not many schools do that.”

Even before student-owned businesses arrived on campus, SHU was preparing enthusiastic entrepreneurs. Gina Liebhauser ’95, who “knew from the age of eight that I wanted my own business,” declared her accounting major second semester, built her leadership skills by serving both as a student ambassador and on the student athletic council, and was secretary for the Accounting Club. “I came out of Sacred Heart one hundred percent prepared to become an entrepreneur,” she said.

After working for a small CPA firm right after graduation, Gina made the move to a big accounting firm in Manhattan. She was on maternity leave with her first child in 2004 when her boss asked her to become his partner. They started Piemonte and Liebhauser together and moved the growing practice to New Jersey five years later. Since his death in 2010, Gina has been at the company’s helm; she says the appeal of having her own business is the same now as it was back when she dreamed of owning a candy store: flexibility and responsibility. “I’m in control of my life,” she says.

Meanwhile, social entrepreneur Jason Guberman-Pfeffer ’09 is focused on building broad coalitions and melding intellectual and technical innovation. A summa cum laude graduate of SHU, he is the founding executive director of Digital Heritage Mapping and Diarna: The Geo-Museum of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish Life, an online museum providing free virtual access to historic Jewish sites worldwide.

During his undergraduate years, Jason studied everything from political theory to Holocaust literature, graduating from the Departments of Government and Politics (major) and History (minor), the Middle East Studies Program (minor) and the Honors Program (minor). His broad liberal arts background prepared him to launch Diarna as a nonprofit organization that puts once vibrant, now vanishing Jewish communities on the map for everyone to explore. Diarna was recently hosted for presentations at Stanford University’s Digital Humanities Center and at the University of Southern California’s Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education. Diarna was also chosen to present on methods of digitally preserving and presenting Jewish historical sites at the “Managing Jewish Heritage Conference” held recently in Krakow, Poland. This past year Jason was a member of the second class of the highly competitive Tikvah Fellowship, a year-long residential program offering participants an unparalleled opportunity to study and work with leading thinkers and practitioners in fields such as Jewish thought and history, Israeli and American politics, religious leadership, journalism, economics, education and community life.

While at Sacred Heart, Jason says he “was blessed with the intellectual freedom to pursue independent studies with the best of faculty mentors.”