

Phoenix Project looks to build young leaders

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Body

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STAUNTON -- A nonprofit educator took his cause to the students and faculty of Mary Baldwin College on Monday, inviting them to be part of a new form of service leadership.

The concept is called social entrepreneurship, and it's an idea that Phoenix Project Executive Director Greg Werkheiser hopes will transform Virginia.

"A social entrepreneur is a person with a passion for social change who also has the business (ability) to build a profitable, sustainable organization," Werkheiser explained.

In other words, as he told his audience Monday, it's not enough to have a heart for change. You need the skills -- and the savvy -- to keep going when others fail.

The purpose of the Phoenix Project is twofold: To train the social entrepreneurs of tomorrow, and to fight poverty by bringing together both those who know it and those with the resources to fight it.

To achieve those goals, the Phoenix Project reaches out to Virginia colleges and

universities, creating partnerships between the schools and the communities that most need a hand.

The Phoenix Project's approach is different, however, in that the partnership includes asking the targeted communities to identify both problems and potential solutions, Werkheiser said. That, he said, helps create a true partnership with both sides invested in the project.

"The smartest university in Virginia understands that they have as much to gain and learn from a community as they can give," Werkheiser said.

Werkheiser's visit Monday marked his first on-campus discussion about the Phoenix Project with students and faculty at Mary Baldwin College. He said after his speech that he was encouraged by his reception at Mary Baldwin and he hoped to create a stronger relationship between the college and the Phoenix Project in the future.

It's a hope shared by college president Pamela Fox.

"We want to continue to work with the Phoenix Project and to make it part of our program in social entrepreneurship," Fox said.

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The concept of social entrepreneurship is part of the same driving force behind the creation of the college's new Spencer Center for Civic and Global Engagement, Fox said, adding that any future projects would begin there.

Freshmen Kennita Ballard and Jordan Wilson said they were ready. The two immediately signed up for the Phoenix Project's six-week summer leadership program after hearing Werkheiser speak.

Both women have experience working with nonprofits, and each said she felt her generation was ready for the challenge of tackling the world's problems

"If we have the voice, we're going to use it," Wilson said.

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