

Better Business Builders

High school and college clubs teach business

By Jennifer Lind-Westbrook

James Elias and Wilson Enriquez share a common goal. As state officers for national business organizations, they strive to make their organizations the best they can be. At **South Plantation High School**, in Plantation, senior Elias, 17, is the current president of Florida DECA (Distributive Education Club of America) while at **Northwood University**, in West Palm Beach, senior Enriquez, 21, serves as president of Florida Delta Epsilon Chi, DECA's college division.

The main goal of both groups is vocational understanding, and membership prepares students for careers in marketing, management, entrepreneurship, advertising, and other business-related professions. "Say your career path involves owning a hotel," Elias says. "We would train you to better understand the reality involved in running that type of business."

Elias learned about DECA—an association of marketing students—his sophomore year after transferring to South Plantation. He enrolled in a marketing class taught by DECA Chapter Advisor Jerry Holt. "I thought it would be a good idea to join," Elias says. "It would make me eligible to do more things like going to competitions and participating in the school's fashion show," an annual event organized by DECA chapter members. Students handle everything from the advertising to securing sponsors. Proceeds from the event go to local charities and also are used to subsidize chapter scholarships, Elias says.

After serving as chapter vice president as a junior, Elias decided to run for state office. "DECA had become part of my life—it was my focus," he says, "I figured why not step up and go for the best position I could get and make the club the best it could possibly be."

Elias faced a personal challenge early in his term when Edgar Fleming, executive director of Florida DECA, suddenly passed away. "When I first met Mr. Fleming, he scared me to death," Elias says. "After attending a training conference, I grew close to him. He was hopelessly devoted to DECA. He was my first real role model. It was like watching a superhero die."

To lend his support to DECA members following the loss of Fleming, Florida Delta Epsilon Chi Executive Director Jack Rose attended DECA's 2001 fall leadership conference where he witnessed Elias' leadership capabilities firsthand. "It was evident that the high school officers were upset," Rose says. "Jimmy went into action. He took people from being upset to being happy for having had the opportunity to know [Fleming]."

"[Fleming] set a great example. He inspired us to work harder to live up to his expectations," Elias says.



Florida Delta Epsilon Chi President Wilson D. Enriquez (left) and Florida DECA President James Elias lead complementary business clubs.

Enriquez also was present at the event to publicize Delta Epsilon Chi to high school students. With 116 chapters and 7,000 members, DECA is a significant source for potential college-division members. "We held a couple of seminars to give them tips on how to be strong, motivated, and successful and to relay information about Delta Epsilon Chi," he says. "Once members go to a competition, they get hooked. They build an emotional bond, and they want to stay involved." Unfortunately, many high schoolers don't realize they have the option to continue in the college division, Enriquez says. "We want to make sure our name is out there and make ourselves more visible."

It was during this conference that Enriquez and Elias met for the first time. The two leaders have maintained periodic contact to brainstorm on how to make the two groups more interactive in the future. Although Delta Epsilon Chi members often make time to visit local high schools and help their younger counterparts prepare for competitions, Elias would like to see a more formal mentor program put into place. "We're in the dark about the whole college thing," he says. "Often, clubs are the last

thing on people's minds. They can show us that DECA does continue on."

"I would like to see a lot more members [visit] local high schools and explain what it's like at the collegiate level—competition and life," Enriquez says.

Enriquez also visits college campuses statewide in an attempt to get administrators, educators, and students excited about starting new groups. There are currently 21 chapters, and membership has increased from 400 to 2,300 in the past two years. Rose attributes much of the growth to Enriquez's promotional efforts, charisma, and professionalism. "He's the type of person who will enter a room and walk up to the one person standing by himself and make him feel comfortable," Rose says.

Enriquez joined DECA his senior year while attending **Taravella High School** in Coral Springs and was anxious to take his involvement to the next level as a collegian. At the start of his freshman year, Enriquez joined the Northwood University chapter. After serving as state parliamentarian and communications director for the organization his junior year, he decided to run for president. "I wanted to do more for the organization like it had done for me," he says. "I had hopes of making the organization grow."

In addition to professional development, DECA and Delta Epsilon Chi members share a commitment to community service. Elias says that promoting civic consciousness is a major aspect of DECA's Program-of-Work, the group's annual agenda. "Throughout the year, we try to help out people in any way we can," he says. In fact, Elias' campaign slogan was "In Just One Second." He stressed how much students can accomplish in their communities if they effectively utilize their time. "Society tends to look down on teens as a nuisance," he says. "It's important for us to be recognized for our contributions."

Both leaders acknowledge how vital the other officers on the State Action Teams—the organizations' executive boards—are to their success. "You have to take care of the people who work for you," Enriquez says. "They make you look good."

"My voice doesn't carry any more weight than the others," Elias says. "We're a team. I'm just in the limelight more."

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