



# Charter school chief learns business lessons

News By You  
Oct. 12, 2007 01:15 PM

*This story about a Surprise charter school was authored by Bill Jenkins of Grand Canyon University.*

In Arizona's open, competitive education market, establishing and marketing a charter school is a daunting task - and one in which sophisticated business skills are as important as a strong curriculum. Melissa Holdaway, chief operating officer of Arizona Charter Academy, knows this perhaps better than most people. For the past six years, the Surprise resident has been part of an administrative team overseeing the growth and development of the fast-growing West Valley institution and its staff of 60.

"Our school is situated in the original square mile of Surprise, a community that has grown from a small farming enclave into a very socio-economically diverse city. When we started this, we realized that critical to our success is finding ways to connect with those around us and maintain a strong identity with the community," Holdaway said.

Efforts to enhance the school have been bolstered through first-hand teachings from one of the foremost experts in business, Ken Blanchard, author of the bestselling *One Minute Manager* and CEO of the Ken Blanchard Companies in San Diego. Blanchard's business philosophy is the basis of the curriculum of the 12-month Executive MBA program offered at Grand Canyon University, of which Holdaway is an eager student. Holdaway has long admired Blanchard's work, respected his philosophy and "servant leadership" approach and saw an opportunity to learn from him directly, since he would be an active participant in the program, spending one-on-one time with the students and interacting with them personally - an uncommon attribute of executive MBA programs.

"The best part of this program is having access to high-level leaders. Having Ken Blanchard grade your papers? You can't put a price on that," she said.

Holdaway has already applied several lessons from the program, which started in January, to her everyday worklife. In a paper about her leadership style, she cited her passion for setting a course of success for the teachers and students at Arizona Charter Academy. Blanchard was quick to give her feedback, praising her efforts and offering suggestions of how to stay on track and enhance her efforts. She's communicating better with staff, and thanks to her face time with Blanchard, believes she's enhancing the community around her.

For example, after completing the MBA's module on social responsibility, Holdaway's team incorporated the school's neighborhood into plans for a \$5 million expansion. In addition to a new gym, cafeteria and classroom

space for the high school, plans call for a separate community resource center - a freestanding building with 7,000 square feet of meeting rooms and classroom space, at which the school's leadership team would eventually like to offer adult education and English classes. The center is a valuable way for the school to connect to its roots in the community, which varies in demographics from low-income and monolingual families to very wealthy.

"In every class, I've taken something with me that helped make our school better - from accounting to human capital," she said.

Blanchard isn't the only high-profile leader participating in the program. He's brought in an A-list of advisors to also interact with the students, bringing them all together in person quarterly during the 12-month program. The "residencies" take place in Phoenix and at Blanchard's headquarters in San Diego. Advisory board members include Southwest Airlines President Colleen Barrett and *New York Times* bestselling author Harvey Mackay, among others. Other classes are taught online with direct contact and feedback from instructors on a regular basis.

"I'm one of those people who's a lifelong learner. Although it's a lot of work, it's been a phenomenal program."

More information on the program, which is recruiting for students for its next class beginning in January, is available at [www.gcu.edu/emba](http://www.gcu.edu/emba).

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