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Fiore Talarico gave the University of Dayton a $1 million gift because he wants students to make mistakes — here.

Talarico worked closely with School of Business Administration faculty to design a state-of-the-art center that will give professional sales students hundreds of hours of experience making high-stakes sales calls, coupled with tough, real-world critiques from working sales professionals.

"We sat down one day and decided we wanted something that would take our students one step ahead of other students," said Talarico. "We needed something practical; we needed something that was real. We needed a place where students can make mistakes here, not in the field."

That place — the Fiore Talarico Center for Professional Selling — will be dedicated in a ceremony Oct. 17 and formally named for the retired Houston businessman and 1974 graduate, who bought and sold around 40 companies in a sales career that's still going.

"When I ran all these companies, I used what I learned from the University of Dayton. Now it's my turn to give back," said Talarico, who keeps a house in Oakwood just to stay close to the University.

Paul Bobrowski, dean of the University's School of Business Administration, said the University deeply appreciates Talarico's gift: "He's taken a very personal interest in the center, which is just one part of his commitment to and involvement with the University and our students."

The center is singularly focused on developing sales professionals as strategic partners for business-to-business selling, concentrating on high-technology industries, products and services. That focus plays to the strengths of both the University and the region, and addresses a growing national need and high demand for sales specialists, said Tony Krystofik, center director.

It's one of only about 70 professional sales programs at colleges and universities and has a place on the Sales Education Foundation's list of Top University Sales Programs in the U.S.

"We graduated 49 sales management emphasis students in May and 96 percent of those students had jobs before commencement," Krystofik said. "Base starting salaries for our sales graduates range between $50,000 and $65,000. One of our 2012 graduates made $122,000 in just his second year."

In the Talarico Center, students have a state-of-art facility to hone their skills in a variety of role-play settings: office-sized sales labs, a large conference room for group or team sales presentations, even a lobby area, where students can practice the pitches that will get them past the front door and into a meeting.

Krystofik said sales professionals from a select group of high-tech corporate sponsors participate in role plays with students, play back their digital video performances for what he says are honest, tough, real-world critiques.

"We want to accelerate their learning and give them the experience they need to go into these demanding, complex, high-tech companies and become a top producer very quickly," Krystofik said.

The corporate sponsors — Reynolds and Reynolds, Henry Schein Dental, TEKsystems and LexisNexis — get to see the students in action and track how they grow and develop.

"We've worked closely with the University of Dayton's professional sales program for several years and always have been impressed with the program’s focus and the caliber of the students," said Ron Lamb, president of Reynolds and Reynolds. "The new Talarico Center is an outstanding resource with a state-of-the-art environment that challenges students by simulating real-world selling."
It's working for May graduate Chelsea Cooper. Now based in San Francisco, she was recruited by corporate partner Henry Schein Dental, part of the world's largest provider of health care products and services. Cooper said she's thriving in a job she loves and a city she was able to select because her skills are in such high demand.

"Dentists go to school to learn to be dentists," she said. "When you're a dentist, you don't want to focus on the business side, you want to put your education and skill to work as a dentist."

Cooper said the University's sales center gave her opportunities to make mistakes and learn from them, and that instilled the confidence and assurance she's bringing to her job.

That's exactly what Talarico wants. Eventually, he'd like to see sales education expand beyond business students, available to all University of Dayton students, regardless of major.

Talarico said: "If you want to get a job, you have to know how to sell yourself," he said. "Everything in our life is a sale. It's about believing in yourself and projecting that confidence."

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