



## Teaching

# RBS professor named a “Favorite Undergraduate Business Professor” by BusinessWeek

By Tracey Regan



Credit: Nick Romanenko

Caring and interactive in the classroom; a mentor to students and alumni navigating the work world, It's not surprising that "Dr. Ben" would be named top teacher by BusinessWeek magazine based on student feedback.

It's Friday afternoon and the weekend beckons – but for a motivated group of Wall Street-bound seniors, Advanced Corporate Finance is the hottest gig in town. The attraction? Today Professor Ben Sopranzetti is leading the class on a fast-paced tour of some real-world deals.

As he paces about the room, describing the relationship between business risk and investment returns, Sopranzetti watches his audience intently, alert for the slightest sign of confusion. He pops a question here and cajoles an answer there, pressing the tongue-tied to think out loud.

These elite business students soon will be stepping into high-pressure investment banking and corporate finance jobs, and he wants to make sure they are fully engaged – not just taking notes and memorizing equations – as they work their way through honors-level business case studies. “Do you get it?” he asks excitedly. “Now you’ve earned *real* money for *real* people. I want you to feel it!”

About an hour into the class, he surveys the sea of faces and notes with satisfaction: “Is everyone with me? Good. It's an epiphany. You've learned to see something old in a new and clearer way.”

It is this sort of compelling performance that recently helped Sopranzetti, an associate professor of finance and an expert in business valuation, win the accolade “Favorite Undergraduate Business School Professor” from *BusinessWeek* magazine, a title awarded to 20 or so professors each year based on student feedback.

“What's made me successful as a professor is that I pay careful attention to how people learn. I read their reactions in class,” he says. “And I use a variety of pedagogical tools to engage them. Some kids learn in a systematic, concrete way, and they like examples and lots of structure. Others learn better with less structure and

prefer group assignments and class discussion.”

But for Sopranzetti, who is better known as "Dr. Ben," the classroom is but one of many avenues for nurturing and promoting up-and-coming deal makers.

Indeed, much of his mentoring takes place outside of school hours, as he preps students for interviews and introduces them to Wall Street contacts from an alumni network built over a decade of teaching both undergraduates and Executive MBA students here and in China. He is not the least bit annoyed when well-dressed stragglers show up 20 minutes late for class, particularly on a Friday. He usually knows where they have interviewed and to whom they've spoken. Often, he has provided the introduction.

Before they've even had that first interview, his students have typically spent at least one Saturday at the well-attended "Dr. Ben's boot camp." Over the course of eight hours, they "learn the skills to survive a Wall Street interview," he said, by polishing résumés, fielding questions that different members of a firm are likely to ask them, and even practicing how to shake hands properly.

Juniors in Sopranzetti's course on business valuation work in pairs with an investment banker, usually a Rutgers alumnus [or alumna, as they learn to analyze and prepare real-world deals. They earn their grade at the end of the year based in part upon the 10-minute pitch they make on taking a company private, for example, or diversifying a company's product lines. Some of these students get to see their plans realized, and that can lead to a plum job.

The two student groups that Sopranzetti advises, Little Investment Bankers of Rutgers (LIBOR) and the Financial Management Association, also provide access to alumni in various stages of their careers in investment banking and in corporate finance. As with all of these ventures, the goal is to "provide Rutgers kids with extra skills and savvy," he said, as they compete with top students from across the country for coveted jobs.

"The only undergraduate business school that out-placed us at Citigroup last year was Wharton. We tied with Harvard," he said.

Sopranzetti continually solicits feedback from students on lesson plans and tests, as well as the broader curriculum, and says he makes changes based on what he hears. Three years ago, he and John Longo, a hedge fund manager and clinical associate professor, established an alumni group called the Wall Street Council to help them evaluate Rutgers' business program. The school now is beefing up the financial modeling component of its program based upon the group's advice.

But despite his keen focus on jobs, Sopranzetti said he hopes he is not merely preparing his student to compete.

"It's important that we prepare young people to enter the workforce and help them with career management," he said.

A few months ago, he advised a recent graduate on how to negotiate her way out of a first job that turned out nothing like the one for which she interviewed. He called a friend and found her a more suitable position at another company within two weeks. It would have troubled him, he said, if she'd wasted her time by sticking it out with her first employer.

"We're responsible not only for students' intellectual development but also for their psychological and spiritual well-being" he said, adding, "I wish I'd had that sort of help when I was a student."