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EDITORIAL

Delancey Street's business keeps getting better

One of San Francisco's best-run businesses isn't in it for the money.

Delancey Street Foundation is a leader in the field of rebuilding lives. For a quarter of a century, the nonprofit has been successfully turning drug addicts and criminals into productive citizens. During that time, the rehabilitation program has launched a spate of commercial enterprises — one reason it has been able to turn out 11,000 graduates without costing taxpayers a cent.

If employee development were the yardstick, Delancey Street Foundation might be the top business in America.

"For years, I've been describing Delancey Street as a university," said Mimi Silbert, the organization's president and CEO. "I compare myself with Harvard. Snootily, Harvard looks for the top 2 percent of the population. Equally snootily, I look for the bottom 2 percent."

Delancey Street moved a step closer to Harvard this month when it became a satellite campus of Golden Gate University. The designation means that Silbert's bottom 2 percent — who average an eighth-grade education — will be able to earn bachelor's degrees. Silbert is calling the first crop of recruits the Class of the Millennium and introducing a

new major called building community. The major parallels Delancey Street's philosophy, which encompasses individual responsibility, self-reliance, entrepreneurial spirit, quality academics and caring for one another.

Like other well-run businesses, Delancey Street has never stagnated. Its roughly a dozen enterprises — including a restaurant, a moving company and a Christmas tree sales operation — serve as training grounds for its residents. The businesses generate \$6 million a year. That cash, along with \$4 million in donations, has enabled the organization to establish 15 training schools teaching everything from accounting to automotive repair.

Now Delancey Street is on an expansion tear. Silbert has roped in Bay Area business leaders to serve on an advisory board called CIRCLE — an acronym for Coalition to Implement Revitalized Communities, Lives and Environments. Former Bank of America CEO Richard Rosenberg, Gap CEO Mickey Drexler and Williams-Sonoma chief Howard Lester are just a few of the leaders supporting plans for the Delancey Academy of Environmental Science and Art. The program will teach marketable skills in the environmental field to troubled youngsters.

For Silbert, the program represents an expansion into a new market — youth. For America, it may turn out to be Delancey Street's most profitable venture yet. ■