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It's Not Easy Being E

Alex Stewart
Marquette University, alex.stewart@marquette.edu

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THE CHALLENGES WE FACE

It’s Not Easy Being E

By Alex Stewart, Coleman Foundation Chair in Entrepreneurship
Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Entrepreneurship is a huge territory and ventures differ in multiple ways. Nobody can know all the terrain. How, then, can we help all would-be entrepreneurs with their specific efforts? We have to be able to recognize the expertise they need and help them gain access to it. We need a network of mentors, which could include the (typically neglected) adjunct faculty.

Can the course materials be useful? Textbooks summarize common bodies of knowledge, which suits subjects like organic chemistry. But venturing is too vast and diverse for this, and the needs of our students are not well served by first-or second-hand academic writings. Our challenge is finding practical writings that work well in the classroom. This is made harder by the proliferation of trade books and the short time before they go out of print.

Can our instructors help real entrepreneurs? Experienced entrepreneurs could be ideal entrepreneurship instructors. The challenge is finding practitioners who can stay for years, have the time available, and who can teach. They also have to be motivated to help our students and to build our programs and not mainly to advance personal agendas through access to college resources like technology.

Are the administrators’ motivations appropriate? Unfortunately we may also need to keep a skeptical eye on our administrators. For them, entrepreneurship might be just a means for meeting wealthy people – i.e. donors. Their backstage actions (such as funding for positions) may not match their supportive rhetoric in public.

How can students learn what entrepreneurs really do? Students may be attracted to particular markets but not see the realities of running a business. They might adore little children or sports bars but not understand what is involved in owning a day care center or a bar. Guest visits, shadow visits, and biographies can help. So also can internships.

How can we find entrepreneurial internships? Internships are easier to find in large, established companies. Simply finding a company is easier when it’s bigger. Just as we need a network of sources of expertise, we also need a network of potential internship sites. Keeping up with this network takes time. However, an ideal internship for our students does not need employers: students can “hire” themselves in actual startups, however small. Therefore, the more we succeed overall, the more we will succeed with this challenge also.

How can we sustain outreach by our students? Another way our students learn up-close from entrepreneurs is through consulting. Students learn a lot from these projects: client service, project management and division of labor, applied research skills, and insights into an entrepreneur’s experience. These projects also serve the community sustainably, insofar as we always have a supply of student consultants. However, a timing challenge arises from the linkage to the semester or the quarter system. Some schools surmount this with a year-round student consulting operation.

How much rope should we give entrepreneurship students? Student consulting operations need faculty oversight but offer opportunities for students to manage the everyday operations. This is true of the consulting projects themselves: although we are ultimately responsible for the advice, our students learn most when they make decisions themselves. My experience with over 200 such projects is that students do rise to the occasion. Further, entrepreneurs need personal initiative. Still, we always face the dilemma of how much rope to let out. How long do we let them pursue a venture we know to be fatally flawed? Students learn best from experience, not from us. But would they be better off spending their time following a more promising avenue?

Are business students entrepreneurial? Truly entrepreneurial students would argue for giving them more rope. However, they don’t represent business students as a whole. Many students major in business because it’s safe and pleases their parents. This isn’t the profile of entrepreneurs. This is also why I started a course in self-understanding as the prelude to entrepreneurship.1

Are other business disciplines entrepreneurial? Business courses too are often non-entrepreneurial. True, we might discover which other instructors to recommend, or succeed in encouraging some of our colleagues to teach with entrepreneurship in mind. But none of this much dints the bias towards established companies. We also can’t change the way accounting is taught: to train

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ing, creative thinking, innovation, and entrepreneurship concepts into your classroom without having to create new curriculum. The NET Force planning committee structured the symposium to introduce creative and innovative concepts to the instructors on day one, which included these sessions:

- Creativity and Innovation in the Classroom
- Planting the Entrepreneurial Seed
- Rubric-Free Teaching
- Problem-Based Case Learning
- Tour of Local Business Enterprise Center

The second day brought in the examples of how many secondary and post secondary instructors are currently instructing through all curriculum and industry focuses with the entrepreneurial approach. These sessions included:

- Lincoln Public Schools Entrepreneur-Focused High School
- Fostering the Intrapreneurial Spirit of Students
- Post-Secondary Instructional Panel
- Networking and Curriculum Coaching

Also included in day two, former Congressman Dr. Tom Osborne addressed the group regarding the origination of NET Force and why he has championed small business education in the state of Nebraska as a way to grow youth into the future leaders of the state’s economy.

The event ended with the participants pitching to the group on what they learned, what they took away from the event and how they will implement the strategies into their classrooms. The group was given a multitude of resources to access as well as many tips on how to use current technology in the classroom to reach today’s students. Throughout the three days, the event was very hands-on with open discussions, mainstream music, creative activities and challenges during breaks, networking, networking and more networking. The participants were surveyed following the event and responded favorably.

The NET Force group will continue to stay in contact with participants and receive follow-up status reports of progress and successes regarding entrepreneurship with their students. Measuring the results of this training is critical as the group moves forward with educational initiatives. The goal is to offer this type of training on an annual basis in the state of Nebraska and to expand to other states in the future.

“This was one of the most amazing professional development opportunities that I have ever been given! Thank you for the honor of participating! I have learned so much from this experience!” – NEET Program Participant

NET Force presented this unique initiative at NACCE’s 9th Annual Conference. To download the NACCE 9th PowerPoint presentations, please go to: http://www.nacce.com/?page=Presentations

Contact: tmittan@southeast.edu.

A Defibrillator?

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higher education sector. We have always been willing to go where other colleges have been reluctant to go. Our markets are local markets, but our impacts extend widely.

Sometimes our approaches to the solutions of local workforce problems require us to engage in “phased-in” strategies – an “incubator without walls” model of non-credit or credit courses and/or support services can be as critical to the community today as a more expensive bricks and mortar model. Sometimes our approaches build on our strong partnering capability with others in our service area. Sharing the risk is often a more viable approach to entrepreneurial efforts. This is the case here in Worcester, MA, as two private colleges and my community college work jointly to lift an incubator to support the cluster-based development of video game ventures. We hold our collective breaths and our pulses quicken as we build the political, financial and technical support to advance this bold new enterprise.

Entrepreneurship is not for the faint of heart, but jump-starting our regional economies may require us to engage in heroic measures. Are we ready for the exciting task before us?

Contact: gcarberry@qcc.mass.edu.

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accountants. The upshot of that approach is business majors who are averse even to reading financials. Ideally, we should teach accounting and finance based on what entrepreneurs really need to know. In fact, we have launched a new minor for non-business students and for this purpose developed just such a course. That course is the topic for my next column, co-written with the course’s instructor.

Contact: alex.stewart@marquette.edu.

1 A first course in entrepreneurship fundamentals, Community College Entrepreneurship, 2010, Spring/Summer, 12, 26-27; Fall/Winter, 12: 12, 29.