

Entrepreneurship Education Is More Than Just Business

By Erik R. Pages

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, more community and technical colleges recognize the importance of entrepreneurship education.

As our economy has changed and smaller firms have become important innovators and job creators, community colleges have responded by providing more entrepreneurship education opportunities. These offerings typically take the form of introductory courses in small business management, assistance with business planning and the like.

The goal? To introduce the basic concepts of small business, in hopes that students will be able to start and successfully run their own businesses.

These are laudable goals that colleges should continue to pursue. But we're also finding that entrepreneurship education need not be limited to wannabe business owners. Effective entrepreneurship education is not just about starting a business. It also teaches creative thinking, opportunity recognition, financial literacy, and the ability to understand and manage risk. These are important for all students, not just budding business owners.

Recognizing that these skills can and should be a part of everyone's education, a number of schools are experimenting with new approaches to entrepreneurship education. One area appears particularly promising: training for students who need remedial education.

Remedial Role

As trustees unfortunately know, community college involvement in remedial education is growing rapidly. More and more students are unprepared for general education classes when they enter community college.

Overall, one in three college freshmen is required to take a remedial course. At some community colleges, three out of every four new students must do so. Even worse, large parts of this population eventually drop out. More than half of new community college students leave school after their first year.

These sobering statistics have multiple causes, but one critical factor is that remedial education students are not engaged by their coursework. Traditional classes and teaching styles are not working. If we want students to stay in school and embrace education, they must be engaged in the process. Entrepreneurship education may be one effective tool for triggering such engagement.

Recent research from high school-level programs is quite promising. In Philadelphia, the Enterprise Prep program, helping more than 400 at-risk students, was introduced. Within a year, this group was passing classes at above-average rates, and most importantly, none of the students dropped out — in a school system where dropout rates exceed 10 percent.

Similar results were found in a Harvard University analysis of programs operated by the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), which has worked with more than 120,000 low-income students across the United States. Researchers found that NFTE graduates had more ambitious career aspirations, were more interested in attending college, and were more likely to assume leadership positions in school and in outside activities.

Teaching At-Risk Students

These promising results have led several community colleges to use entrepreneurship education as a tool for reaching at-risk

students. At Brooklyn's Kingsborough Community College, non-English-speaking students in the language immersion program have been using the school's Virtual Enterprise (VE) curriculum, a business-simulation tool. Students using VE have seen major improvements in their reading and writing scores, and their transition to full enrollment at the college was greatly shortened. Similar positive results have been found in another test at Seattle's Shoreline Community College.

These results are preliminary but promising. They indicate that entrepreneurship education can be used in areas other than a simple Small Business 101 course. At-risk youth and new immigrants are two populations that might benefit greatly from these initiatives. These learners are much more likely to persist in their studies and to retain what they learned when course material is placed in a meaningful "real-world" context. Starting and running a business is a real-world context that most students can appreciate and understand.

As leaders of the safety-net educational institutions in their communities, community college trustees face many challenges. They are charged with aiding marginalized and transitional learners as they complete their education and transition to the workplace. By engaging these students via entrepreneurship education, trustees can ease their transition into the workforce or to further education.



Erik Pages is founder and president of EntreWorks Consulting. He can be reached at epages@entreworks.net, 703-237-2506.