

THE NISOD PAPERS



An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

An Entrepreneurial Mindset for Student Success

Student engagement is a growing challenge for many community colleges as funding models shift from access to completion. Meanwhile, as the skills gap widens, employers are increasingly demanding a workforce with innovative and entrepreneurial attitudes and skills.

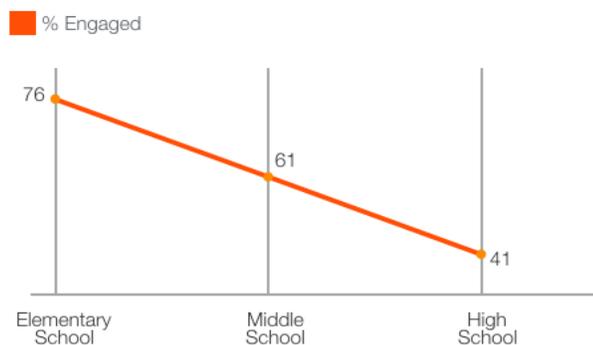
The key to meeting these complex challenges is to equip students with an entrepreneurial mindset at the onset of their academic journey, encouraging them to take ownership of their learning while developing the attitudes, behaviors, and skills that will enable them to succeed in college, in work, and in life.

This paper explores the connection between entrepreneurial thinking, its effect on student engagement, and the widespread demand for innovative and entrepreneurial workforce skills. We also examine a promising new approach that has yielded significant results.

The Engagement Challenge

Engagement is a common challenge that community colleges and the general workforce currently face. For students, the lack of engagement begins long before they arrive at community colleges. Research published by Gallup indicates a 35 percent decline in engagement that begins in elementary school and continues through middle and high school, resulting in what Gallup refers to as “our monumental, collective national failure.”¹

Student Engagement Cliff



Engagement further declines when graduates arrive in the workforce. A 2014 Gallup report shows that less than one-third of U.S. workers are engaged in their jobs while a majority (51 percent) were “not engaged” and 17.5 percent were “actively disengaged.”²

In addition to the lack of engagement, community colleges are also tasked with producing employable graduates who are prepared to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing and highly complex world. Consider the following:

- 50 percent of college graduates are unemployed or underemployed³
- 77 percent of employers report entrepreneurial “soft skills” are as important as technical skills⁴
- More than one-third of core skills that will be in demand by 2020 are not critical today⁵
- 40 percent of the workforce by 2020 will be independent contractors⁶

Community colleges are no longer preparing graduates for a single career, let alone a single employer. Today’s graduates are likely to have multiple careers over a lifetime, as well as the potential to grow into independent contractors, working to solve problems and create value for multiple employers. In fact, a recent World Economic Forum report estimates that 65 percent of students now entering primary school will work in jobs that do not currently exist.⁷

Employers further indicate that it is not enough to prepare graduates with technical skills; rather, we need to instill the entrepreneurial “soft” skills that enable them to adapt to highly dynamic, changing environments. In other words, in addition to technical skills, students also need skills that enable them to adapt.

So, how do we drive student engagement while producing college graduates with the entrepreneurial skills needed to survive in the new world of work?

Dr. Tony Wagner, an expert in residence at Harvard University’s new Innovation Lab and as a Senior Research Fellow at the Learning Policy Institute, has recognized the need for innovation and entrepreneurship, identifying the following essential survival skills that every student will need to thrive in the 21st century:

- Critical thinking and problem solving;
- Effective written and oral communication;
- Collaboration across networks;
- Agility, adaptability, and initiative;

- Accessing and analyzing information; and
- Curiosity and imagination.⁸

In a nutshell, what Dr. Wagner is describing are entrepreneurial skills.

The Entrepreneurial Solution

While students and workers struggle to remain engaged, entrepreneurs are self-directed, critical thinkers that are highly engaged.⁹ Gallup defines engagement as “those who are involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work and workplace.”¹⁰ Entrepreneurs are highly engaged—enthusiastic and committed to their work—because they have compelling goals that drive their behavior. They work to solve problems that they care about, and they are self-directed in seeking solutions to those problems.

And there is much students can learn from entrepreneurs that will enable them to develop the attitudes, behaviors, and skills needed to be successful in college, at work, and in life. Academic and business leaders are now taking heed, recognizing entrepreneurship as a set of essential life skills that every student will need to survive and thrive in a rapidly changing and highly complex world.

A recent *Harvard Business Review* article cited the need to invest in and scale entrepreneurship education, noting that “business creation is not the only beneficial outcome of entrepreneurship education.” Entrepreneurship is a key 21st century workforce skill and is also linked to higher academic achievement.¹¹

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* also recently reported that colleges are turning to entrepreneurship education to produce work-ready graduates and next-generation innovators through experiential learning with the entrepreneurial process, preparing students to apply knowledge, skills, and judgment in uncertain environments.¹²

Other research indicates that students are embracing entrepreneurship as an essential life skill. One study conducted at New York University found that 90 percent of students linked learning entrepreneurial skills to academic success in other subject areas, while 95 percent of the students indicated that entrepreneurial skills would help them in their life.¹³

Policymakers have also begun to identify the need to encourage and support entrepreneurial thinking at all levels of society in order to establish smart, sustainable, and inclusive economies. As the World Economic Forum stated, “It is not enough to add entrepreneurship on the perimeter, it needs to be at the core of the way education operates.”¹⁴

Yet, while entrepreneurship education initiatives permeate campuses, the entrepreneurial mindset is not well understood, hindering our ability to engage all students and to prepare them with 21st century skills. As such, we must begin by redefining entrepreneurship in a way that anyone can embrace.

Redefining Entrepreneurship

For most, the term “entrepreneurship” is associated with starting a business, and many college programs encourage students to focus on venture-backed, high-growth firms. However, very few businesses—less than 1 percent—actually start this way¹⁵ and some individuals have begun to express growing concerns over programs that are focused primarily on “high-tech, fast-growth companies, pushing students toward competitions and ventures prematurely or inappropriately.”¹⁶

Other college programs are focused on small business initiatives that encourage aspiring entrepreneurs to develop business plans and financial projections in the hopes of acquiring small business loans. While these skills may be important for managing an existing business with a proven product or service, they often inhibit the entrepreneurial process—the process of searching for a problem-solution fit.

In short, entrepreneurship is not management; it is a search process of discovery. And, it goes without saying that the search process requires search skills—skills that anyone can learn to develop, yet skills that have historically been undervalued, overlooked, or ignored.

Searching begins with curiosity and observation—an awareness and understanding of the broader world around us. Searching requires empathy—the ability to listen, understand, and truly see others’ problems in order to effectively solve them. Searching requires looking at the world in terms of creating value for others by solving problems.

Searching also requires us to think critically—to formulate hypotheses and test assumptions. It requires us to experiment, to learn from experience, to reflect, to self-regulate, and to adapt. Searching requires us to think and act when the rules are unknown, where no one is in charge, and no one is coming to the rescue. Searching also requires one to be self-directed and highly engaged.

Searching requires what Harvard’s Clayton Christensen refers to as discovery skills¹⁷—skills that have become necessary for anyone to thrive in today’s interconnected, rapidly changing world, whether they intend to work within an established organization or create something new.

A Promising New Approach

For a growing number of colleges, the answer is the Ice House Student Success Program, a student success course that inspires and engages new students during their first semester in college with the perseverance and determination of an entrepreneurial mindset needed to succeed academically and in life. Ice House empowers students to take ownership of their futures while helping them develop the attitudes, behaviors, and skills that enable them to succeed.

Inspired by the life story of Pulitzer nominee, Clifton Taulbert, and the influence of an “unlikely” entrepreneur, students learn how an entrepreneurial mindset provides a powerful framework for thinking and acting that

can empower them to succeed, regardless of their circumstances or chosen path. The program provides for problem-based and experiential learning beyond the classroom, making connections, and building relationships that can support students throughout college and beyond.

Ice House students begin by articulating the future they would like to create. Using their vision as a guide, students are then immersed into entrepreneurial experiences that encourage them to take ownership of their education, seeing—perhaps, for the first time—how engaging their academic experience can directly contribute to the lives they endeavor to create. Throughout the course, students are also exposed to video case studies featuring a variety of *unlikely* entrepreneurs and students who have overcome adversity to achieve their visions by embracing an entrepreneurial mindset.

Two promising Ice House pilots demonstrate the impact of instilling an entrepreneurial mindset to increase student engagement, persistence, and higher academic achievement.

At Edmonds Community College (EDCC) in Washington, 250 “high-risk” students participated in the Ice House Program. Impressively, 100 percent completed the course, and 90 percent persisted from semester to semester—a rate well above the national average. In a comparative data study, EDCC saw a 42 percent impact on student GPAs over a three-year period with 74 percent of Ice House students earning GPAs in the 3.0 - 4.0 range, 32 percent more than non-Ice House students in the same course with a different curriculum.

As a result, the Ice House students learned to view themselves and their college experience in a new way. Reflecting on her experience as an Ice House facilitator, EDCC’s Theresa Allyn noted, “If students learn that... they have choices to better their life, they are more apt to own their educational process and become active directors of it, rather than a bystander simply meeting course requirements.”



A larger sample at Pikes Peak Community College (PPCC), the second largest community college in Colorado, also yielded significant results. In a comparative data study, the Ice House students persisted to the following semester at a rate 28 percent higher than those who did not take the course. Additionally, students who completed the Ice House Program went on to pass college-level courses at a rate 14 percent higher than students who did not take the course. Finally, 7 percent more of Ice House students stayed in their course in the beginning weeks compared

to the non-Ice House student success course. To date, thousands of students have taken Ice House as a student success course at PPCC.

Dr. Regina Lewis, an Ice House facilitator at PPCC, saw a shift in her students, saying, “Some of them [students] see such a shift that they change their majors. Some of them change their attitudes about the class and about school. And some of them start to just change who they are as a person. And if nothing else, they start to change the fact that they can really believe in themselves, that they don’t have to depend on somebody else to solve their problems.”

Students are also reporting a significant impact on their personal and academic lives. As one student reported, “I know that my success in my three other courses is a direct result of what I learned in this course. This course has also allowed me to realize the value of dedication and perseverance. My personal vision has evolved from lacking confidence and understanding of what I was capable of, to courage and determination.”

Conclusion

Entrepreneurship begins with a mindset; a framework for thinking and acting that can empower anyone to succeed, no matter their chosen path. It offers a new perspective—one that exposes opportunities, ignites ambition, and fosters creativity and critical thinking. It also increases the perseverance and self-determination that are required for anyone to succeed in today’s rapidly changing and increasingly complex world.

If we are to bring entrepreneurial attitudes and skills from the perimeter to the core of the way education operates, we must begin by defining entrepreneurship in a way that everyone can embrace. We must also recognize that, while not all students aspire to manage a business or start a high-growth firm, most want to be engaged in work that matters, to be self-directed, and to have the opportunity to apply their interests and abilities to something greater than themselves.

As such, entrepreneurship must be reimaged and broadly applied so as to empower students to remain adaptable when facing obstacles, persist through failure, communicate better, and become problem solvers and opportunity finders. We now know that learning about entrepreneurship ignites an entrepreneurial mindset, which causes students to think and act like entrepreneurs in all aspects of their lives. And, entrepreneurship embodies the 21st century skills *every* student will need to be successful in the new world of work.

Call to Action

Based upon promising results, the Entrepreneurial Learning Initiative (ELI) is working to scale the impact from thousands of students to 10,000 students at multiple institutions, while continuing to measure and evaluate student success. With your partnership, we

can redefine what it means for students to succeed in school, at work, and in life. For more information about becoming a Student Success partner, please visit www.studentsuccesscampaign.com.

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Footnotes

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