

## **OPTING FOR OPPORTUNITY: LESSONS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

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When we set out to write the first book ever published on community college entrepreneurship, we suspected that there were many lessons to be learned. First, we had a hunch that community colleges that opted for opportunity by embracing entrepreneurship were garnering benefits far beyond monetary rewards. Next, our research findings underscored the role of leadership in sustaining innovations while facilitating organizational change. We knew that pursuing the story of how the power of entrepreneurship helps community colleges respond to environmental challenges would result in a few raised eyebrows. We also believed that a number of administrators and faculty would be intrigued by the idea of innovation. It was no mystery to us that suggesting that college leaders move away from traditional practices by considering new ways of doing business was like navigating a hot bed of coals. Our intuition may have suggested that we would be burned, but our passion for the journey carried us safely across. Of course we did have an advantage. We had observed the success of many entrepreneurial colleges and knew that their stories—their strategies—produced successful results that were capable of being replicated at any college in the nation.

Perhaps the hesitation of some to embrace innovation as a solution to change is based on the fact that entrepreneurship is a relatively new phenomenon in higher education. Certainly when we completed our book, *The Entrepreneurial College*, in 2005, we were unaware of the level of interest in the topic that existed among community

college faculty and administrators. Subsequent to its release, the book has become a best seller for the Community College Press, a success which might suggest that college leaders are well-aware of the environmental challenges threatening their open door missions. Consequently, *The Entrepreneurial College* has been one resource for seeking realistic measures that introduce change that is positive and profitable.

As a summary for those not familiar with the book, we set out to study 11 community colleges identified as entrepreneurial, i.e., meeting a set of defined criteria related to entrepreneurship. We were unsure of all the lessons to be learned, so in addition to requesting two-to-three specific examples of innovations from each college, we conducted extensive research on entrepreneurship in higher education. As a result of the stories told by these colleges and an analysis of our research, we identified successful strategies, or lessons learned, about becoming an entrepreneurial college, including building partnerships, leveraging resources, implementing fund - and friend-raising strategies and cultivating change that supports innovation. The following sections highlight some of the lessons learned as well as additional research on entrepreneurial leadership that we pursued subsequent to the release of the book. It is our hope that these lessons serve as a starting point for community colleges willing to opt for opportunity.

## **OPPORTUNITY: INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES**

Entrepreneurship requires both the recognition and pursuit of opportunity. Beyond the anticipated outcome of increased revenue, it encompasses any endeavor or combination of endeavors which seeks to identify new opportunities, engage in risks, or

leverage resources through a variety of innovative strategies. The colleges that we profiled in the book demonstrated great agility in developing realistic strategies focused on meeting institutional needs. A review and analysis of these strategies resulted in the creation of critical concepts or categories, such as the implementation of strategic alliances and the development of foundation offices, as well as philosophical strategies that address competitive advantage and entrepreneurial vision.

### **Strategic Alliances**

Strategic alliances can be any partnership that the college has with an internal or external entity that is formed to seek and respond to opportunity. From our research, myriad examples emerged of successful partnership. We recognize that much has been written about how colleges can work with business and industry leaders or with non-profit organizations to generate revenue or to share resources; however, what was interesting to us were the lessons learned about how to maintain a cohesive connection with each partner—a critical factor in sustaining innovation and fulfilling the entrepreneurial mission. Some of the tips that we included in the book for ensuring that strategic alliances contribute to the entrepreneurial mission include:

- Understand how a partner will benefit from the alliance
- Work with leaders from business and industry to lobby the legislature for policy changes and funding needs
- Work with leaders throughout the community to identify programming needs
- Seek multiple ways to share resources

## **Foundations**

Perhaps the first step in a college becoming more entrepreneurial is to establish a Foundation Office which operates as a separate 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation, ultimately existing to benefit the college and its students. Typically, a Foundation has its own governing board and as a profit center is free to raise and invest money and accept donations of real estate, bequests or other gifts. Some of the common lessons learned about successful Foundations suggest that they:

- identify successful business leaders to serve on the board
- ensure the longevity of the chair
- invest time and energy to host annual retreats
- focus on making, not raising money
- share the college president's vision

## **Competitive Advantage**

The entrepreneurial colleges that we studied for the book all had one thing in common—an awareness of their competitive advantage. “Competitive advantages hinge on the philosophy, methodology and approach taken to enhancing and expanding a college’s entrepreneurial pursuits” (p. 13). For a college to realize this advantage, it must:

- understand the competition and position itself successfully within the marketplace

- maximize existing resources
- identify future opportunities
- expand visibility in the community

### **Entrepreneurial Vision**

According to Dr. E. Ann McGee, president of Seminole Community College in Florida, “fund-raising is everyone’s business.” Dr. McGee’s entrepreneurial vision is succinct and understood and embraced by the college community. Dr. David Daniel, president of Midland College in Texas, has a shared vision that friend-raising is the key to entrepreneurial success. He recommends that colleges pursue potential donors even when they are not engaged in a capital campaign.

For a college to transform its culture and to embrace change through innovation, the president must have a clear vision. Often articulated in minimum words, the strength of a vision statement is its capacity to influence individuals within the organization—to identify a direction which is understood and embraced by all. This is the first lesson that we learned about another opportunity, leadership, and the foundation upon which all other lessons are built.

### **OPPORTUNITY: LEADERSHIP**

Entrepreneurial leaders invest considerable time seeking out new opportunities, engaging in innovative activities and evaluating resources needed to move the college forward. Comfortable with uncertainty and risks, the entrepreneurial community college leader understands the role of culture in organizational change and deftly maintains a balance between the two. Gerber (2001) offered a salient distinction between entrepreneurial leaders and managers: “If the entrepreneur lives in the future, the

Manager lives in the past. Where the Entrepreneur craves control, the Manager craves order. Where the Entrepreneur thrives on change, the Manager compulsively clings to the status quo” (p. 25).

As we compared our secondary research to information gained from the 11 colleges profiled in our book, we noticed some common themes, or lessons to be learned related to entrepreneurial leadership. We have already shared the first lesson: ***Leaders must formulate a clear vision for the future***; the following section highlights other opportunities for leaders to become entrepreneurial.

***Leaders infuse the entrepreneurial spirit throughout the organization***

According to Carl Kuttler, president of St. Petersburg College (SPC) in Florida, entrepreneurial organizations are not just motivated to succeed, they are spirited. “An e-spirited institution thrives on inspiration and energy . . . as enrollments continue to increase and traditional funding sources diminish, e-spirit ensures SPC’s survival and success” (p. 37). The lesson learned from SPC and other entrepreneurial colleges is that leaders infuse the entrepreneurial spirit throughout the organization. Some of the strategies that can be implemented to accomplish this include:

- Challenging old assumptions and beliefs by taking responsible risks
- Communicating effectively and building lasting relationships
- Unwavering integrity and loyalty to all constituents
- Motivating the best in others
- Engaging in creative problem-solving needed to identify new paradigms

***Leaders must create organizational structures and processes that help transform culture and sustain innovation***

One of the greatest obstacles to a college becoming entrepreneurial is its organizational structure. In bureaucratic institutions where decision-making is based on hierarchy, power structures can contribute to fear-based management, preventing employees who live at the bottom of the structure to take risks or to be empowered. Additionally, a college that adheres to traditional administrative departments will miss opportunities to promote entrepreneurship at the highest organizational level. Each of these challenges leads to the next lesson learned about leadership.

***Leaders must create organizational structures and processes that help transform culture and sustain innovation.***

We found a good example of this at Springfield Technical Community College (STCC) in Massachusetts. Dr. Andrew Scibelli, president emeritus of STCC, recognized the importance of aligning organizational structures to the college's mission, ensuring that the new structure supported the implementation of innovative strategies. According to Schibelli:

The college developed a plan of action to reorganize itself in a way that would define a new way of thinking. The most significant outcome of this plan was the creation of two vice presidential positions focused on revenue generation—a vice president for grants and development and a vice president for economic and business development. (p. 10)

***Leaders must recognize that who they are and how they lead contributes to successful transformation of organization.***

Robert Greenleaf once observed that “Good leaders must first become good servants.” The successful transformation of an organization is not just focused on possessing the requisite knowledge and skills needed to run a business, but on the values and beliefs of the leaders. We were inspired by the many examples that we found of entrepreneurial leaders who recognized the import of demonstrating integrity, loyalty, compassion and genuineness when fostering relationships with others. It is easy to assume that the key to entrepreneurial success is the bottom line; however, what we found was that success came from the heart and passion of leaders—not from a mindset focused on dollars; therefore, leaders must recognize that who they are and how they lead contributes to successful transformation of organizations. We recognize that all the leaders profiled in our book share an affinity for this lesson and have highlighted one example from Humber College Institute of Advanced Learning to share in this article.

Robert Gordon, president of Humber College, attributes much of their success to the stability of a long-serving and committed leadership team which has instilled a self-sustaining entrepreneurial tone throughout the college. Committed to establishing a positive culture where innovations can thrive, Gordon provides the following suggestions:

- Promote conditions for self-actualization for all staff—high morale, self-esteem, a sense of worth, and pride in work are strong motivators;

- Respect all staff for their competencies . . . always ensuring that staff are treated with compassion and can maintain personal dignity, regardless of the situation;
- [Leaders] act as visible role models and mentors, walking the talk of the stated goals and philosophy;
- Reward behavior that reflects trying something different.

## **CONCLUSION**

For approximately 100 years, two-year colleges have been the most responsive institutions within higher education to keep pace with changes in the environment. The introduction of entrepreneurial strategies during the past five-to-ten years may not have been the most desired approach to mission fulfillment for some; however, the reality of dwindling state funds and escalating enrollments requires a new way of doing business. The question is no longer a matter of how much money the college has to expand programs and services; rather, the question is how much money the college must have to remain open. This is why the pursuit of entrepreneurship is so important. Colleges that opt for opportunities via new innovations are doing so, not to transform the basic mission of the community college, but to generate additional funds and resources needed to sustain current practices.

The positive outcome for colleges that have elected to become more entrepreneurial has been the ability to serve more students, to increase the number of students who persist and succeed, and to hire more faculty and staff needed to meet student needs and to accomplish the college's mission.

In *A Learning College for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Terry O'Banion (1997) noted, "After 100 years of experimentation, the community college has emerged as an institution with a strong penchant for innovation and for risk-taking. The community college is not afraid to reach out and explore new ideas and new concepts" (p. xvi). We believe that the community college has always possessed an inventive spirit and that by opting for opportunity, its mission will survive for another 100 years.

## **References**

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