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American Higher Education at the Crossroads: Between Liberal Arts and Entrepreneurial Education

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Abstract: Background: American higher education faces declining public trust, rising costs, and growing skepticism about its relevance to the job market. As artificial intelligence and globalization reshape societal and economic landscapes, universities must prepare students for complex, real-world challenges.
Research objectives: Text This study investigates the role of entrepreneurial experiential learning in addressing these challenges by fostering critical skills, enhancing engagement, and cultivating entrepreneurial mindsets.
Research design and methods: Using a practitioner self-study approach, the research analyzes two case studies—Education Entrepreneurship and Education Consulting courses at a large private university. Data sources include instructor observations, student feedback surveys, and reflective memos analyzed through thematic analysis.
Results: The findings demonstrate that entrepreneurial experiential learning enhances students' problem-solving, collaboration, and social impact assessment skills while preparing them for leadership in the social economy.
Conclusions: Entrepreneurial experiential learning bridges theory and practice, equipping students with essential skills for navigating societal challenges and driving reform in higher education. By addressing the skills gap and prioritizing human-centered problem-solving, this model contributes to the ongoing evolution of universities as catalysts for social impact.
Keywords: entrepreneurship education, experiential learning, higher education reform, social economy, career readiness, project-based learning
JEL Codes: I23, L26, J24

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1. Introduction

In the 21st century, higher education in the United States stands at a crossroads. Confidence in universities has sharply declined, driven by rising tuition costs and the perception that degrees no longer guarantee value in the job market. Enrollment rates continue to drop as public trust erodes, and universities face growing pressure to prove their relevance in preparing students for an increasingly dynamic and uncertain world. Employers, meanwhile, have voiced concerns that graduates often lack the critical skills needed for the modern workforce, such as teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability.

At the same time, global challenges such as climate change, global migrations, income inequality, and workforce disruption demand innovative and socially conscious leaders. In this context, higher education must ask not only how to prepare students for individual success but also how to equip them to address these collective challenges. The traditional liberal arts approach, while still relevant, has struggled to adapt to these shifting priorities. Students and employers alike are seeking more interdisciplinary, hands-on learning experiences that bridge academic theory with practical application.

Entrepreneurial experiential learning has emerged as a promising model to address these challenges. Rooted in constructivist learning theories, this approach emphasizes problem-solving, innovation, and reflection through real-world projects. It allows students to engage deeply with societal issues while developing critical skills like creativity, collaboration, and adaptability. More importantly, it fosters an entrepreneurial mindset focused not only on financial success but also on making meaningful contributions to the social economy.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What skills and competencies do students develop through entrepreneurial experiential learning in undergraduate education?
2. How do students apply these skills to address real-world problems in the social economy?
3. What are the broader implications of entrepreneurial experiential learning for higher education reform and workforce readiness?

To address these questions, this article examines two case studies: Education Entrepreneurship and Education Consulting, courses taught by the author at a private university. Both courses challenge students to identify and address real-world problems while developing actionable solutions. By focusing on applied learning and stakeholder engagement, these courses provide a model for how universities can respond to declining public trust and shifting educational priorities.

Through this analysis, the article argues that entrepreneurial experiential learning offers a pathway to bridge the growing divide between higher education and the workforce while preparing students to become leaders in the social economy. By equipping students with the tools to address complex societal challenges, universities can reclaim their relevance and contribute meaningfully to the communities they serve.

2. Methods

This article presents findings from a practitioner self-study (Samaras, 2010), where the author reflects on teaching practices and classroom observations to analyze the impact of entrepreneurial experiential learning in two undergraduate courses: Education Entrepreneurship and Education Consulting. This approach focuses on qualitative, classroom-based insights to identify patterns in student learning and engagement. Data were collected over eight semesters in the two courses.

Data Sources

Instructor Observations

a) The author engaged in ongoing observational practices throughout each semester to assess student engagement, collaboration, and skill development. While formal notes were not systematically recorded after each class, observations were informed by multiple interactions and reflective processes, including:

– Grading and Feedback: Detailed assessments of student assignments, project deliverables, and presentations provided opportunities to evaluate evidence of problem-solving, teamwork, and communication skills.
– Office Hours and Informal Discussions: Regular one-on-one and group interactions with students during office hours and class sessions offered deeper insights into their learning processes, challenges, and progress.
– Classroom Interactions: The author carefully monitored group dynamics, participation, and collaboration during class activities and discussions, drawing on these observations to tailor instruction and support.

b) These observations, while informal, were continually integrated into the instructional approach and guided by the author's reflections on teaching practices. This iterative process aligns with the principles of practitioner self-study, which emphasize reflective engagement with students as a means to understand and improve learning outcomes (Woods, 2021).

End-of-Course Student Feedback Surveys

a) At the conclusion of each semester, students completed anonymous feedback surveys provided by the university.
b) The surveys, administered as part of course evaluations, included multiple agreement scale questions about the quality of the course and teaching and two open-ended questions:
– "Is there anything else you would like to share about the course?"
– "Is there anything else you would like to share about the instructor?"
c) Surveys were collected primarily for teaching improvement purposes.

Student Reflection Memos (Education Consulting Course Only)

a) Students submitted reflection memos as part of their graded coursework.
b) The memo's prompts encouraged students to reflect critically on their learning, team dynamics, challenges encountered, and connections to real-world contexts.
c) This structured reflection process aligns with Kolb's experiential learning cycle, emphasizing the crucial "reflective observation" stage (Kolb, 1984). Memos prompt students to connect academic concepts with professional skills, bridging their learning with broader personal and career development goals (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Eyler, 2002).

Informal Feedback

Additional feedback was gathered through informal discussions during class and office hours. These conversations were not systematically recorded but contributed to the author's overall reflections.

Other factors

Sample Size and Demographics

a) The study involved around 172 undergraduate students across eight semesters:
– Education Entrepreneurship Course: 85 students.
– Education Consulting Course: 87 students.
b) Demographic insights were drawn from classroom observations and interactions, indicating roughly:
– 65% of international students (predominantly from Asia).
– 35% of domestic students from diverse socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds.
c) While no formal demographic survey was conducted, this diversity is notable for understanding varied perspectives on entrepreneurial learning.

Data Analysis

a) The qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method identifies recurring patterns and themes within qualitative datasets. The analysis followed these steps:
b) Data Familiarization
– Student work, feedback surveys, and reflection memos were reviewed multiple times to identify patterns.
c) Initial Coding
– The author conducted inductive coding by identifying recurring words, phrases, and ideas (e.g., "teamwork," "confidence," "problem-solving," "real-world issues").
d) Theme Identification

Codes were grouped into broader themes aligned with the research focus. Emergent themes included:

– Skill Development: Students reported communication, teamwork, and critical thinking growth.
– Engagement: Experiential projects provided meaningful, applied learning opportunities to develop professional skills.
– Reflective Growth: Students highlighted how feedback and iteration deepened their learning.

e) Cross-Referencing
– Themes from feedback surveys and reflection memos were compared with student work and classroom observations to identify areas of convergence or divergence.

Ethical Considerations

a) Data Collection Context: The data for this study were derived from routine teaching practices, including observations, feedback surveys, and coursework. However, students were not explicitly informed at the time that their reflections and survey responses might be used for research purposes.
b) Anonymization Measures: To ensure privacy, all data analyzed were fully anonymized, and no individual student could be identified in the study. Reflection memos, part of graded coursework, were included retrospectively to provide qualitative insights into student experiences.
c) Study Framing: As this study was conducted retrospectively without explicit informed consent, it is framed as a self-study of teaching practices rather than formal human subjects research.
d) Future Compliance: Future iterations of this research will seek appropriate institutional review board (IRB) approval to adhere to formal research guidelines and ensure transparency in the use of student data.

Limitations

a) This study has a few limitations that should be acknowledged:
– Self-Reported Data: Feedback surveys and reflection memos rely on students' subjective perceptions, which may introduce bias.
– Potential Researcher Bias: As the instructor and researcher, the author's dual role may influence interpretations of the data.
– Absence of Peer Validation: The analysis was conducted solely by the author without external validation or inter-rater checks.

b) Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable practitioner insights into entrepreneurial experiential learning's potential to foster skill development, student engagement, and reflective growth. This study aligns with classroom-based qualitative approaches often used in practitioner self-studies (LaBoskey, 2004), where instructors reflect on pedagogical practices to identify student outcomes and areas for improvement.

3. Background

3.1. Declining Confidence in Higher Education

Today, the American higher education system is at a crossroads as the public's trust in universities has eroded significantly over the past 25 years. In 2015, 57% of Americans surveyed expressed confidence in higher education as an institution. By 2023, that number had dropped to 36%, with an alarming 22% expressing little confidence (Gallup, 2023). This was the most significant drop in confidence of any institution, including banks, the military, health care system, etc. This shift also reflects growing skepticism about higher education's value within the context of the rising costs of tuition and the general perception of the institutions' elitism. These divisions have also been divided along political lines, with voters on the right (Republicans) showing a 37-point decline in trust compared to a 9-point drop among voters on the left (Democrats) (Gallup, 2023).

This declining trust also comes at a time of shifting enrollment trends in higher education. Over the past decade, higher education institutions have faced a steady decrease in student enrollment. Between 2010 and 2021, total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting higher education institutions decreased by 15%, dropping from 18.1 million to 15.4 million students (NCES 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic appears to have accelerated this decline. From fall 2019 to fall 2023, undergraduate enrollment fell by over 900,000 students, representing almost a 6% decrease in students (Best Colleges, 2023). As a result, the proportion of Americans without a college degree remains relatively high; around 42 million have only "some college, no degree" (Brown, 2023).

Part of this decline is no doubt due in part to the demographic shifts brought on by lower birth rates, which has resulted in a decrease in actual high school graduates (O'Connell-Domenech, 2024). However, other factors might account for this shift, particularly the rising costs of attending university, which has outpaced inflation and wage growth. This has resulted in more students taking on more debt to afford a university education (The Change Leader, n.d.). This cost increase has occurred primarily due to the increase in non-teaching administrative roles at universities and a perceived lack of efficiency (the Change Leader, n.d.).

Employers have also raised concerns about the disconnect between higher education and the economy, reporting that graduates often lack essential skills required in the modern workforce. A 2021 survey by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) revealed discrepancies between the importance employers place on certain skills and industry perceptions of recent graduates' proficiency in those areas. For instance, while 62% of employers deemed teamwork essential, only 48% felt recent graduates were well-prepared in this skill. The largest gap was in critical thinking, with a 21-percentage-point difference between importance and preparedness (Finley, 2021). Although the report noted that employers overall have faith in the value of a higher education degree – 87% said it is "definitely" or "probably" worth the investment of time and money -- they also see room for improvement (Finley, 2021).

3.2. A Shift in Educational Priorities

In recent years, students have started moving away from traditional liberal arts disciplines toward career-oriented and technical fields. The liberal arts, which emphasizes critical thinking, interdisciplinary learning, and a broader understanding of the human experience, is intended to develop a wide range of skills in youth to prepare them for various fields. Most 4-year university programs (as opposed to more technical 2-year programs) in the U.S. will provide their students with a liberal arts curriculum and even require students to take specific courses in the liberal arts.

The popularity of the liberal arts, however, is starting to lose ground among students. We see this shift at various institutions, including the most elite. For example, at Harvard University, only 7% of the 2022 entering class majored in a humanities field, down from nearly 30% who studied the humanities in the 1970s (Heller, 2023). Students increasingly seek programs that they perceive are better aligned with job market demands and provide clearer pathways to employment.

This trend is not merely a reflection of changing preferences; it mirrors evolving workforce needs. In addition, the rise of automation, AI, and globalization has shifted the focus toward building technology, business, and communications skills. Liberal arts programs that fail to incorporate these elements risk becoming irrelevant. In fact, in the AAC&U report, employers also favored students who during their period in university had completed an internship or apprenticeship (49%), worked in a community setting with people from different backgrounds and cultures (47%) or had a job or engaged in work-study while in college (46%) (Finley, 2021).

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) reported in its Jobs Outlook 2022 survey that employers identified significant gaps between what they considered important in specific competencies and the actual capacity of recent university graduates. For example, although critical thinking and communication skills were highly valued, employers noted that many university graduates were not strong in these areas (Gray, 2021). The hiring platform Monster.com has conducted its own research on skills and found that a "third of U.S. employers say the skills gap has increased compared to last year (2020), and 80 percent of employers say they have difficulty filling openings due to skills gaps as opposed to a year ago." (Monster 2021).

This skills gap has also had a concrete impact on employment. Data from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York indicates that as of December 2021, 41% of college graduates in the United States aged 22 to 27 were underemployed, working in jobs that typically do not require a college degree. This rate is higher than the 34% underemployment rate among all college graduates, suggesting a persistent issue for recent graduates (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Colleges have responded in part by developing programs that merge the liberal arts with more technical fields, like data science, equipping students with analytical skills alongside critical thinking ones. For instance, the University of Illinois is combining information sciences, statistics, computer science, and math to prepare students for careers that involve data and research (see Illinois's Bachelor of Science in Information Sciences + Data Science: https://ischool.illinois.edu). Some institutions are offering majors that integrate fields, like environmental science, with the liberal arts (See Wildavsky 2024 for a discussion of the "career arts" as a blend of liberal arts and a focus on careers). For example, the University of Toronto's School of the Environment claims to provide a "hub for researchers and students from many different disciplines spanning the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities, bringing together many different perspectives to bear on today's pressing environmental challenges."

Given the challenges facing higher education and the increasing demands of the social economy, entrepreneurial experiential learning offers a promising pathway forward. The following literature review explores the theoretical foundations and pedagogical approaches that inform this educational model, while identifying critical gaps in the current scholarship.

4. Literature Review: Experiential Learning and Entrepreneurial Learning

Experiential learning emphasizes active student engagement through real-world challenges, hands-on projects, and reflective practice. According to Kolb (1984), "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 41). Experiential learning immerses students in authentic, often complex tasks to develop collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving skills.

The experiential model of learning is rooted in the broader educational philosophy of constructivism, which argues that knowledge needs to be constructed through experience and interaction within the students' environment. Dewey (1938) argued that education should blend theoretical knowledge and practical action to provide students with the skills to engage with society critically. This principle of learning by doing contrasts with more traditional objectivist and behavioralist approaches, which emphasize lecture-based teaching and mastery through practice and repetition (Dewy, 1938).

The constructivist approach is at the core of the growing trend toward more student-centered pedagogies, such as project-based learning (PBL) and entrepreneurial education, which aim to bridge academic theory with tangible, real-world problem-solving. David Kolb's (1984), experiential learning theory (ELT) offers a structured model for understanding how experience drives learning. According to Kolb's, experiential learning involves a cyclical framework with four stages:

1. Concrete Experience: Active engagement in a task or problem.
2. Reflective Observation: Reviewing and reflecting on the experience.
3. Abstract Conceptualization: Formulating theories or ideas based on reflections.
4. Active Experimentation: Testing these concepts in new, practical contexts.

Kolb's ELT framework is significant because it highlights the dynamic relationship between experience and reflection, a process critical for developing higher-order skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving. Within this cycle, learners are encouraged to alternate between "doing" and "thinking," making learning both interactive and reflective (Kolb, 1984).

At the higher education level, PBL generally means providing students with an opportunity to work on a large project that develops career ready skills and mirrors the professional world before they graduate. Through projects, students master skills that are hard to teach in traditional lecture-style classrooms (Glenn, 2016). Studies have found PBL in higher education to also provide "enhanced student engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and authentic problem-solving" (Evenddy et al., 2023).

Entrepreneurial education offers an ideal application of Kolb's model. According to Hägg and Gabrielsson (2020), entrepreneurial education evolved from a focus on traditional business knowledge to incorporating pedagogical approaches that emphasize real-world engagement, opportunity recognition, and risk-taking. In entrepreneurship education, students:

– Identify a real-world problem or challenge (concrete experience)
– Reflect on the relevance of the problem within a global context (reflective observation)

– Develop innovative solutions to address the problem (abstract conceptualization)
– Test these solutions iteratively (active experimentation)

Entrepreneurial education is inherently experiential, allowing students to integrate theoretical knowledge about venture creation with practical applications (Motta & Galina, 2023). As Bell and Bell (2020) suggest, effective entrepreneurial education requires learning environments that support iterative, reflective learning experiences, and not simply knowledge transfer. As such, students in entrepreneurial education engage in activities like brainstorming, customer interviews, prototyping, elevator pitching and even sales.

Experiential entrepreneurial education is intended primarily to create more entrepreneurial intentions among students, it can further enhance student engagement by fostering innovation, agency, and a clearer connection between students' educational experiences and their future goals, particularly as it relates to starting their own business. While venture creation is a common focus, Motta and Galina (2023) argue that entrepreneurial education also supports the development of soft skills such as adaptability, critical thinking, and communication – skills that are transferable to various career paths, not just entrepreneurship.

Key benefits of experiential entrepreneurial education include:
– Skill Development: Enhances critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and adaptability.
– Engagement: Motivates students through meaningful, real-world projects.
– Mindset Cultivation: Encourages innovation, resilience, and problem-solving.

Experiential entrepreneurial education also bridges the gap between academic learning and professional practice, addressing critiques that higher education fails to prepare students for real-world complexities (Finley, 2021). Other studies have also stressed how working in teams, such as those for entrepreneurial projects, provides students with opportunities to experience a more professional environment (Morai et al., 2021).[1]

However, while Kolb's framework is widely acknowledged, its application to entrepreneurial education—particularly in social entrepreneurship—remains underexplored. Hägg and Gabrielsson (2020) highlight a gap in scholarship regarding how experiential approaches cultivate entrepreneurial competencies specifically for societal impact, rather than profit-driven goals. This gap underscores the need for studies, like the present one, to examine entrepreneurial experiential learning in contexts that address challenges in the social economy.

5. Case Studies of Education Entrepreneurship and Education Consulting

The author currently teaches at a large private university as part of an interdisciplinary Bachelor of Arts degree in Education Studies that combines a comprehensive liberal arts education with opportunities for practical, hands-on learning experiences. The program emphasizes critical thinking, analytical skills, and preparing students for diverse career paths, including those in education, policy, and beyond.

Two of the courses the author teaches – Education Entrepreneurship and Education Consulting – exemplify the entrepreneurial experiential learning model that is critical for reinvigorating higher education. Both courses are designed to immerse students in real-world challenges, encouraging them to apply their academic learning to create innovative solutions to pressing issues. In addition, both courses introduce elements of the specific education market.

[1] It's important to remember that such preparation is crucial for future professionals, as they will often work in settings that require them to integrate perspectives and expertise from various fields. This alignment between educational methods and professional realities makes PBL an effective strategy for bridging the gap between academic learning and workplace skills.

For the entrepreneurship course, it is much more explicit, as students develop ideas for business ventures that address education challenges.

With the consulting class, the focus is on addressing solutions within the context of a mock professional advisory service. While these courses differ in the ways they incorporate the market, they share a common goal: to develop students' entrepreneurial mindsets and provide them with critical skills to address complex issues in the 21st century, including those in the social economy.

5.1. Education Entrepreneurship

Course Overview

The Education Entrepreneurship course blends theory and practice to explore how market forces can drive educational reform. Students begin by engaging with foundational debates in education research, political economy, and policy. The course quickly transitions to hands-on applications, requiring students to work in teams as education entrepreneurs tackling real-world problems. Students focus on identifying key educational challenges and designing innovative solutions to address them.

A core part of this process involves conducting customer research by interviewing potential users and leveraging insights to develop viable business ideas. Throughout the course, students present their findings to the class, iterate on the feedback received, and refine their projects. Past projects have addressed issues such as:

- The challenges faced by international students post-Covid-19.
- The mental health needs of university students.
- Financial literacy gaps among youth.
- Limited access to higher education resources for low-income families.

Core Skills Developed

The Education Entrepreneurship course immerses students in a process that mirrors real-world entrepreneurial ventures, focusing on three key experiential components: problem identification, opportunity recognition, and social impact.

Problem Identification. This is a fundamental skill in entrepreneurship, yet one often overlooked in traditional education. Students learn that most new businesses fail because they do not address a market need. To address this, students dedicate a significant portion of the semester to identifying and refining the problem -- the "hair on fire" issue that needs solving -- before progressing to solution development.

For example, in the class, one group of international students identified difficulties navigating the U.S. healthcare system. Through interviews with peers and potential users, they uncovered critical issues, including challenges accessing providers, navigating insurance, and addressing language barriers during medical appointments. By leveraging these insights, the team proposed an app that integrated provider directories, insurance tutorials, and live translation services. This group iterated on their project throughout the semester – starting with a focus on more general issues that international issues face and then zeroing in on health care as they conducted the interviews and gained new insights, demonstrating that customer research teaches students to be flexible and open.

Another group focused on recidivism among formerly incarcerated individuals. Initial research revealed that many of these former prisoners lacked basic technology skills, which hindered employment and reintegration. Through interviews with prison education admin-

istrators, nonprofits, and formerly incarcerated individuals, the students shifted their focus to developing a program providing digital literacy and workplace technology training. Reflecting on their process, the team wrote: "Each interview pushed our business idea forward by testing our hypotheses with real-world contexts."

These examples highlight how the iterative process of problem identification requires students to challenge assumptions, adapt their thinking, and develop a deep understanding of stakeholder needs – skills that extend far beyond the classroom.

Opportunity Recognition. This is a cornerstone of entrepreneurship education, equipping students with the ability to identify problems that not only need solutions but also have viable market potential (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). In this course, students are encouraged to identify challenges that resonate personally or professionally, often leading to projects with long-term real-world impact.

For instance, one group identified a lack of accessible information about their university's courses and facilities. They noted gaps in understanding course structures, such as whether they used innovative teaching methods like project-based learning, and identified a need for real-time updates on resource availability (e.g., library seat occupancy). Building on these insights, the team developed a prototype for a university information system to enhance student decision-making. They continued refining the concept after the course ended, collaborating with faculty and administrators to test its feasibility.

Another group tackled the challenge of helping international families navigate the private school admissions process in the U.S. They proposed a specialized app providing tailored guidance on school profiles, application requirements, and scholarships. These projects demonstrate how entrepreneurial experiential learning enables students to carry their ideas beyond the classroom while fostering lifelong skills in critical thinking and adaptability.

Social Impact. What sets this course apart is its focus on social impact. Students are required to develop a process for measuring how their innovations contribute to the social economy, focusing on tangible benefits for specific populations. This approach encourages students to think beyond profitability, incorporating metrics and measures to evaluate their solution's impact.

In the project addressing recidivism, the team proposed metrics such as learning outcomes and longer-term indicators like career development and lifelong learning for their beneficiaries. Another project, aimed at improving career outcomes for university students, emphasized metrics such as increases in self-confidence and job satisfaction, alongside traditional employment rates.

These projects illustrate how students are challenged to balance financial sustainability with social impact, learning to design solutions that address the double bottom line. One observation is that when students are forced to come up with a process for measuring outcomes, they think more critically not only about the value of their innovations, but the importance of demonstrating impact to key stakeholders over time. This holistic approach not only enhances students' understanding of entrepreneurship but also instills a deep sense of accountability and critical thinking about the societal implications of their innovations.

Student feedback

End-of-course surveys and observations highlight several themes about students' experiences:

Opportunities for real world application of skills:

This course truly taught me a lot about translating our skills into abilities in the labor market, whether it's doing a start-up or entering a company. (2024)

This course is very hands–on and constructive in building my business skills and business mindset. I like the course… because of its real–world application value and how it gives us genuine (not fake and superficial!) team–work experience. (2024)

Opportunities to work collaboratively with others:

I consider this as a genuine team–work experience where we get to work together for a long time and truly tried to integrate our skills in the team. (2024)

Opportunities to incorporate theory into practice:

The ratio of education policy learning to entrepreneurship learning was perfect. I was able to incorporate important educational issues and statistics into my innovation project. The weekly homework presentations were great practice for the bigger presentations, including the final [project].

5.2. Education Consulting

Course Overview

In the Education Consulting course, students collaborate with university offices or external nonprofits to solve specific problems of practice given to them by their clients. Acting as consultants, they deliver actionable recommendations and solutions to real-world clients. Like the Entrepreneurship course, Consulting emphasizes teamwork, stakeholder engagement, and practical skill-building. Unlike the entrepreneurship course, the focus for students is not to develop their own ideas but to work with a client and address their issues.

Given that students are undergraduates, they are not expected to enter the course with any prior knowledge of the issues they will address. Instead, the course focuses on teaching students how to develop interview protocols, ask meaningful questions, and work professionally with clients to provide actionable results. Through this process, students learn how to uncover and leverage the resources within themselves to solve complex problems, help others, and deliver tangible value to their clients.

Students engage in a variety of consulting tasks, including conducting interviews, analyzing data, and producing professional deliverables such as evaluation plans, logic models, and strategic recommendations. These projects provide students with opportunities to apply their knowledge to real-world contexts, developing critical skills that prepare them for professional careers.

Examples of Client Projects

- Supporting Military-Affiliated Students. A consulting team worked with a university office dedicated to providing holistic support to students, including time management coaching and financial literacy. Their project focused on addressing the unique needs of military-affiliated students, such as older veterans transitioning to university or part-time students actively serving in the military. To develop recommendations, the team conducted interviews with university officers and faculty and researched how other institutions address similar challenges.
- Evaluating the Impact of a Local Education Nonprofit. Partnering with a local education nonprofit, a team of student consultants developed a plan to evaluate the organization's impact. The team conducted stakeholder interviews, reviewed organizational documents

and data, and created a logic model to map the nonprofit's use of resources. Based on their findings, they provided actionable recommendations that the nonprofit later implemented to support its expansion efforts.

– Promoting Community College Transfer Programs. Another consulting project involved a university program focused on recruiting students from local community colleges and supporting their transition to complete their degrees. The student consultants conducted interviews and desk research to develop a plan for raising awareness about the program and providing support for transfer students once they arrive on campus.
– Enhancing Diversity in Global Admissions. A consulting team collaborated with a university office responsible for global admissions to design a strategy for recruiting a more diverse pipeline of students. The team conducted interviews with staff and performed desk research to identify local organizations in various countries that could serve as recruitment partners. The consultants also developed a logic model to outline the office's recruitment strategy and optimize collaboration with these organizations.

Reflective Memos

Themes in Reflections. Through these memos, students articulate the skills they developed and the lessons learned. The reflections also provide qualitative data that inform course improvements, allowing the instructor to refine teaching methods and adapt to evolving student needs (Brookfield, 2017).

Professional Skills. Students consistently highlighted the development of professional skills such as communication, organization, and public speaking:

> This class taught me how to conduct an effective interview and ask the right questions. (2023)
>
> I learned about the importance of communication and organization skills in consultancy. Translating these principles into my own work helped me gain confidence in speaking publicly, asking questions, and coming up with new suggestions on the go. (2023)
>
> Immersing myself in our consulting project for an extended period also proved to be a valuable experience, enhancing my ability to plan strategically and execute tasks efficiently to achieve our goals on time. (2023)

Teamwork and Collaboration. Students reflected on the importance of teamwork, recognizing how collaboration can improve outcomes and build confidence:

> My team taught me how much more confident you feel progressing in your project when you are aware of each person's capabilities. More importantly, when team members honestly communicate when they need help. It reassured me that I can also ask for help when I need it. (2023)
>
> While I thought I liked working alone, my team members helped me realize that I am more productive in a group. Working with others leads to more effective results as group members contribute diverse ideas. (2021)
>
> In modern days, group work is the nature of most jobs, so it's necessary to learn how to cope with a team's dynamics and take the role of a leader when required. (2021)

Feedback and Iteration. Another key theme was the value of receiving feedback:

> Overall, they were very good teammates and allowed me to take initiative while still giving me constructive feedback on things I could do better. (2023)

Meaningful Learning. Finally, students emphasized how the course enabled them to apply their knowledge in meaningful ways:

> This course has been extraordinarily meaningful to me. I have always preferred practical application over theoretical discussions, and I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to showcase our abilities. (2023)

Course Impact

The Education Consulting course provides students with opportunities to engage in real-world problem-solving while developing critical skills such as communication, critical thinking, and collaboration. By partnering with clients and producing professional deliverables, students gain practical experience that prepares them for impactful careers.

Both experiential learning opportunities not only foster skill development but also encourage personal growth, social awareness, and a deeper connection to the communities they serve. Together, the Consulting and Entrepreneurship courses demonstrate the transformative potential of entrepreneurial project-based learning in higher education.

6. Discussion: The Case for Entrepreneurial Education

In the ongoing debate about what to teach in universities, a key issue is often overlooked: how do we ensure higher education prepares students not just for individual success, but to address society's most pressing challenges? Much of the conversation has centered on questions like:

- How can we design programs that align with the demands of the future economy?
- How do we attract students who feel that higher education has lost its purpose?
- How can we maintain the tradition of the liberal arts while providing practical, job-ready skills?

While these are important questions, they are incomplete. What is missing is a deeper focus on teaching the skills needed to help society face future challenges. This shifts the discussion from individual outcomes to collective responsibility: How can universities foster the next generation of social entrepreneurs and change-makers?

This question is especially relevant today as artificial intelligence (AI) rapidly transforms education and the workplace, automating tasks we once took for granted, such as summarizing research, writing papers, and solving complex problems. As traditional skills become less relevant, universities must prioritize innovation, ethical reasoning, and human-centered problem-solving – skills that cannot be replicated by AI. This reorientation of higher education is not just an adaptation to technological change; it is an opportunity to address global challenges like sustainability, equity, and social justice.

The Contribution of Entrepreneurial Experiential Learning

Entrepreneurial education offers a framework for addressing these challenges. By emphasizing critical thinking, empathy, and innovation, entrepreneurial courses help students develop the skills necessary to tackle complex problems. Findings from this study highlight how entrepreneurial experiential learning uniquely addresses critical gaps in both theory and practice:

Bridging the Skills Gap

- The entrepreneurial experiential learning model explicitly targets the "skills gap" identified in the background of this article. Students gain hands-on experience in problem identifica-

tion, opportunity recognition, and social impact assessment, which directly align with the skills needed in today's workforce.
– In the Education Entrepreneurship course, students worked on a project to address recidivism among formerly incarcerated individuals. Through iterative problem-solving and customer research, they identified a need for digital literacy programs to support reintegration into the workforce. This process not only enhanced their critical thinking and adaptability but also demonstrated how entrepreneurial skills can lead to tangible solutions for urgent societal challenges.

Fostering Empathy and Human-Centered Design:

– Empathy and vulnerability, often overlooked in traditional education, are central to entrepreneurial learning. Students learn to listen, adapt, and respond to stakeholder needs. One student reflected on how approaching interviews with curiosity transformed their understanding of a client's challenges, emphasizing the importance of empathy in developing impactful solutions.
– These findings contribute to the growing recognition of human-centered problem-solving as a core competency in social entrepreneurship.

Social Capital and Career Development:

– Experiential entrepreneurial courses provide students with opportunities to develop social capital through interactions with clients, peers, and mentors. As one student noted, conducting interviews with educators was the first time they felt their academic work could drive real change. These experiences help students build networks and confidence, essential components of career development and societal impact.

Implications for Educators, Policymakers, and Practitioners

Educators:

– Entrepreneurial experiential learning should be integrated across disciplines to prepare students for interdisciplinary problem-solving. Courses should focus on teaching students how to identify problems, engage with stakeholders, and evaluate the social impact of their solutions.
– Reflective practices, such as memos or presentations, should be incorporated to help students internalize lessons and connect theory with practice.
– Instructors need support because PBL is not easy to implement in the classroom. It requires considerable organization and attention to detail that is not needed as much in traditional, lecture style courses. In addition, in terms of time on task, instructors for project-based learning classes need to spend considerable time working directly with students, monitoring their projects, and ensuring that their teams are collaborating effectively.

Policymakers:

– Policies should encourage universities to adopt entrepreneurial education models that balance traditional academic goals with practical, market-driven skills. Funding for experiential learning programs and partnerships with nonprofits or businesses can strengthen these initiatives.

– Policymakers should also prioritize curricula that emphasize ethical reasoning and innovation, preparing students to address global challenges such as climate change, equity, and technological disruption.

Industry leaders:

– Findings underscore the importance of partnering with universities to mentor and engage students in real-world projects. These collaborations not only support community organizations but also create opportunities for students to learn and innovate in meaningful contexts.

Recommendations for Future Research

– Longitudinal Studies on Impact. Future research could examine the long-term impact of entrepreneurial experiential learning on students' careers and contributions to society. Do these programs lead to higher rates of social entrepreneurship or other forms of civic engagement?
– Adapting to AI Disruption. Studies should explore how entrepreneurial education can evolve in response to AI, identifying new skills and frameworks that complement technological advancements.
– Expanding Across Disciplines. Research could explore how entrepreneurial experiential learning models can be adapted to a variety of disciplines, such as STEM or the humanities, to promote innovation across fields.

Bringing the Discussion Full Circle

Today's students demand more than a degree—they seek meaning, relevance, and the opportunity to make a difference. Entrepreneurial experiential learning provides a pathway to meet these demands, equipping students with the skills, mindset, and social capital to address future challenges. As one student reflected:

> This course has been extraordinarily meaningful to me. I have always preferred practical application over theoretical discussions, and I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to showcase our abilities.

In an era where traditional skills are rapidly evolving, the emphasis on empathy, innovation, and human-centered problem-solving makes entrepreneurial education more critical than ever. By embracing this model, universities can prepare graduates not only to thrive in their careers but also to tackle the world's most pressing issues with creativity and purpose.

7. Conclusion

Higher education must evolve to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world. This study demonstrates that entrepreneurial experiential learning offers a compelling model for addressing critical gaps in both theory and practice. By focusing on real-world problem-solving, stakeholder engagement, and social impact, entrepreneurial education equips students with the skills and mindsets needed to tackle pressing societal challenges.

The findings from the Education Entrepreneurship and Education Consulting courses reveal how this approach fosters essential skills such as critical thinking, empathy, and adaptability. Students not only gain practical experience but also learn to navigate the complexities of balancing financial sustainability with social impact – a vital competency for leaders in the social

economy. These results underscore the transformative potential of entrepreneurial experiential learning to bridge academic theory with tangible, measurable outcomes.

For educators, policymakers, and practitioners, the implications are clear. Universities should integrate experiential entrepreneurial models across disciplines to better align educational outcomes with workforce and societal needs. Reflective practices, stakeholder partnerships, and opportunities for students to measure social impact should be central to these efforts. Policymakers must support funding for experiential programs that prepare students to innovate in an era of rapid technological and social change.

Future research should explore the long-term impacts of entrepreneurial experiential learning on students' careers and contributions to society, as well as its adaptability across diverse educational contexts. As higher education continues to navigate declining trust and shifting priorities, embracing this model offers a path forward – one that reaffirms universities' role as catalysts for innovation and social progress.

By equipping students with the tools to drive meaningful change, entrepreneurial education addresses both the immediate and long-term needs of society. It fosters not just career-ready graduates but empathetic, innovative leaders poised to shape a better future in the social economy.

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