

Why universities need intellectual entrepreneurship



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IE's philosophy re-frames problems as possibilities. The question is not how to solve specific problems externally foisted upon universities; instead, the question is how faculty, students, and administrators can own their destinies, viewing crises as opportunities to think boldly and imaginatively about what could be.

Fifteen years ago, Intellectual Entrepreneurship directors Tommy Darwin and I published a chapter, "Crisis as Opportunity: An Entrepreneurial Approach to Productivity in Higher Education." Our thesis then may be more significant and relevant in 2019.

Rather than thinking of higher education's problems as crises, it is more productive to ask: "What is possible?" The challenge is to innovate from what we do well, thinking entrepreneurially – to view crises as opportunities.

A successful example is the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Program begun at the University of Texas at Austin in 1997.

More than 8,000 students from 90 academic disciplines have participated in IE initiatives.

IE has reverberated nationally. Several universities have modeled programs after UT's, explicitly incorporating IE's philosophy and language – including Arizona State University, the University of North Carolina, the University of Michigan, the University of Washington and Syracuse University.

IE's success derives from four core values: vision and discovery, ownership and accountability, integrative thinking and action, and collaboration and teamwork.

First, intellectual entrepreneurs develop visions for their academic and professional work by imagining the realm of possibilities.

Second, after discovering more about themselves and their expertise, intellectual entrepreneurs take responsibility for acquiring the knowledge and tools required to bring their vision to fruition.

Third, intellectual entrepreneurs know the limitations of partial knowledge and working in a vacuum. For intellectual entrepreneurs, synergy is more than a buzz-



word; something greater than the sum of the parts is produced when people engage in integrative thinking.

Finally, people in collaborative relationships make integrative thinking and synergy possible. Intellectual entrepreneurs understand that new ideas are generated when people and networks are viewed as the primary resource.

We have learned that IE is a unique way of thinking about solving complex problems. Rather than being reactive, IE's philosophy reframes problems as possibilities. The question is not how to solve specific problems externally foisted upon universities; instead, the question is how faculty, students, and administrators can own their destinies, viewing crises as opportunities to think boldly and imaginatively about what could be.

This might prove useful in responding to calls for accountability in education.

Ironically, the more academics protest attempts to measure quality, the greater the likelihood outside entities will impose specific metrics – such as time-to-degree formulas and job placement – that may not be the best indicators of quality.

Just as IE students are

empowered to own and be accountable for their education, institutions of higher learning should own their products, deciding for themselves the best assessments of quality.

By approaching pressure for accountability as opportunities to undertake self-evaluation, universities have the potential to improve their educational services based on sound academic principles and practices defined by those intimately familiar with education.

Local ownership of accountability arms universities with persuasive data on educational impact that might support requests for increased appropriations. Instead of asking for more money while simultaneously sidestepping or protesting demands for accountability, universities might offer a quid pro quo, building measurements of accountability directly into proposals for new revenue.

Each so-called crisis in higher education is, in the language of IE, an opportunity to redefine the relationship between universities and their many stakeholders – an opportunity for universities to characterize their connec-

tion to the community as one of mutual investment rather than entitlement.

IE is more than a student curriculum. IE is a framework potentially informing all areas of education and organizations committed to discovering knowledge and solving problems.

Higher education would be well served if those of us who seek innovation and reform viewed ourselves as intellectual entrepreneurs – a role that obligates the creation of genuine, collaborative conversations with ourselves and other stakeholders about the value of higher education and the best metrics for assessing that value.

Such collaboration expands ownership of educational issues to those who now can only "look in" and criticize, increasing the likelihood of recapturing and building trust in institutions of higher learning.

This might put universities – especially state-funded institutions – in a better position to acquire increased funding and greater autonomy, with resources viewed as an investment in a joint venture, rather than an entitlement to be doled out to special interest groups feeding at the public trough.

Universities do not have the horsepower to face the complex challenges of higher education alone. IE teaches us that the most effective way to address these challenges is to begin problem solving by teaming with partners both on and off campus, being open to fresh perspectives, and possessing the courage to change old habits.

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