

Austin American - Statesman

UT's Intellectual Entrepreneurship program does it right

By Keith McDowell
Special to the American-Statesman
April 14, 2013



Keith McDowell, former vice chancellor for research and technology transfer for the University of Texas System.



Richard Cherwitz, creator of UT's Intellectual Entrepreneurship consortium.

Once upon a time, the Greek philosopher Socrates opined the aphorism “Know Thyself,” a credo that centuries later became the core principle of the so-called “liberal” education — a learning process founded on the notion that a well-chosen sampling of the great ideas, literature, art and history of humankind coupled with critical analysis would produce a well-educated citizen, capable of independent and reasoned thoughts.

Like many in my post-World War II generation — a generation that promoted civil rights and challenged the American war-making machine in Vietnam, I greatly benefited from the “liberal” education provided to me by my alma mater, Wake Forest University. Whether in the Honors Program or through the many campus and community activities of that era, we were a generation of college students engaged in understanding who we were as human beings and using that knowledge to create a better society. Personal and intellectual integrity as well as being true to one’s self were the hallmarks of the Wake Forest experience. It was never about the politics of the left or the right.

Half a century later, the educational process has in many ways been converted into a multiyear conveyor belt of data accumulation and training with the student posing as a customer expecting to receive appropriate credentials for a job — no matter their individual performance — and with industry expecting a “trained” work force. Many parents seem to want cloned automata of themselves with no room for individualism or independent thought. And we’ve overlaid the entire process with excessive external accountability and testing to ensure that predetermined metrics are being met, whether or not those metrics are driven by a political agenda or the musings of some powerbroker or even have any basis in a factual reality.

And on top of this stressed educational system, we have the slow recovery from an economic crisis leaving many of our youth living with their parents with no job, or in jobs far below their abilities.

The net result is predictable. We have produced a large cohort of apathetic students moving along the conveyor belt toward careers often chosen by others or picked for reasons having little to do with their individual skill set or desires. How large that cohort has become over the past half century is debatable, but they exist, and in large numbers. Is this the future of our educational system or can we do something about it? Is there no room for innovation focused on the student as a person?

Richard Cherwitz, a professor at the University of Texas in the Department of Communication Studies and Department of Rhetoric and Writing, has answered that question in the affirmative. Beginning in 1995, Cherwitz created the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) consortium as a “cross-disciplinary initiative designed to leverage knowledge for social good by educating citizen-scholars,” quoting from a recent article in the magazine *Ujima*. According to a paper by H. L. Goodall, “IE is not a program, nor a compartmentalized academic unit or institute; it is an intellectual platform and educational philosophy for instigating learning across disciplinary boundaries and generating collaborations between the academy and society.” At UT, IE is a part of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement.

In essence, IE serves as an incubator permitting students to engage as entrepreneurs to find their own intellectual sweet spot and what they are passionate about. As Cherwitz recently stated in an email of 21 February 2013, universities should produce scholars in a setting where “entrepreneurial thinking and principles are at the core of what transpires in classrooms, laboratories and studios, empowering us to learn and then leverage our knowledge for social good – whether in academic, business, political or social settings.” I couldn’t agree more. According to Cherwitz, IE replaces my conveyor-belt motif of “apprenticeship-certification-entitlement” with one of self “discovery-ownership-accountability” wherein students are encouraged to be responsible and accountable to themselves for constructing an educational and career pathway responsive to their own needs.

In the IE process, student participants negotiate a “contract” that can expose them to graduate work using graduate student mentors, expose them to work outside of their chosen area of study, or involve them in external internships as some of the options available. As Cherwitz stated in an email last month, IE students “use their knowledge and expertise to tackle real problems facing the community.” For example, IE participants have found solutions to overcrowded emergency rooms and have used the scholarly methodology of oral history to implement programs for increasing diversity and promoting culturally sensitive communication in local schools.

A surprising and non-targeted consequence of the IE initiative has been an increase in diversity as measured by the number of participants who are the first in their family to attend college, are economically disadvantaged or are an underrepresented minority. Of the over 1,500 students who have participated in IE, over 60 percent have been first generation or underrepresented minorities. This semester, IE added “economically disadvantaged” as a category and found that 72 percent of the current participants fell into one or more of the three categories.

Is such self-selection due to a native survival instinct from this group or to the fact that other students have been programmed onto the conveyor belt? Many people from my generation have speculated that our “intellectual entrepreneurial spirit” arose from being a member of the emergent “middle class” of the 1950s and often the first to attend college.

My hat is off to Professor Cherwitz and the IE initiative at UT. One only has to read the many testimonials from IE graduates and people who work with and hire them to understand how truly marvelous and innovative this initiative is and how necessary it is for universities to engage in the mindset of entrepreneurial thinking. Presidents and chancellors from such prestigious institutions as Ohio State University, the University of California, Syracuse, and the University of North Carolina have endorsed the IE concept.

The world is not filled with mythical dragons waiting to burn us should we take a step forward nor black holes to suck us in should we advance outside our comfort zones. Instead, the only thing stopping us from passionately pursuing our intellectual depths and our ability to contribute in a positive manner to society as “tomorrow’s leaders” is ourselves.

Keith McDowell is a retired professor of chemistry at the University of Texas at Arlington and was vice chancellor for research and technology transfer for the UT System from 2007 to 2010.