

On Becoming a Productive University

*Strategies for Reducing Costs and Increasing Quality
in Higher Education*

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Crisis as Opportunity: An Entrepreneurial Approach to Higher Education Productivity

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The Intellectual Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Texas at Austin exemplifies an innovative approach to the current crisis of productivity in higher education. It documents how framing this crisis entrepreneurially offers an opportunity to redefine the relationship between higher education and its many stakeholders as one of mutual investment rather than entitlement.

The premise of this chapter is that, rather than thinking of higher education's problems only in terms of crisis, it would be more productive to ask: "What is possible?" The challenge is to innovate from what we do well and to think entrepreneurially—to view crises as opportunities. A successful example is the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) Program that began in the Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) in 1997. The IE program seeks to cultivate an attitude of possibility and vision and to marshal resources to realize that vision (Devine, 2001; Weisbuch, 2001). Although IE initially focused on graduate education (Cherwitz & Daniel, 2002), the insights gained are relevant to higher education in general and are now being infused into the undergraduate experience (Cherwitz, 2004; Cherwitz & Alvarado Boyd, 2003, 2004). A grounding tenet of IE is that each individual organization must develop a specific answer in its own context. Thus, we are not offering a detailed map of how to address the issues. Rather, we speculate about how an entrepreneurial philosophy offers a potentially useful mindset for tackling the crisis of productivity in higher education.

An Entrepreneurial Academy: The IE Model

IE's goal is to leverage the intellectual assets of the university in ways that are responsive to the needs of the community. IE is premised on the belief that intellect is not limited to the academy and entrepreneurship is not limited to business. While business and the creation of material wealth are one expression of entrepreneurship, at a more profound level entrepreneurship is an attitude for engaging the world. Entrepreneurs have a hopeful, optimistic sense of what is possible. They view problems and challenges as opportunities to innovate and create new value for their community. They are motivated by values of collaboration and social good and, as realists in their approach to problems, are prepared to take risks.

Embodying this spirit, the IE initiative at UT has evolved into a distinctive university-wide curriculum that invites graduate students to be “citizen scholars”—to become greater than the sum of their degree-earned parts, by uniting expertise and passion to make meaningful and lasting differences in academic disciplines and the community (Cherwitz, Darwin, & Grund, 2001). IE extends and enhances the quality of graduate education in the breadth of attitudes and skills learned, thereby adding value to the graduate student experience. IE is also a method for developing partnerships between the university and community—collaborations with the potential to solve complex problems (University of Texas, 2003). IE supports this effort by researching how innovative partnerships between universities and communities can be created and sustained (Cherwitz, Sullivan, & Stewart, 2002), and by developing curriculum and toolkits empowering and supporting people to change themselves, their organizations, and their communities.

Since 2000, over 3,000 students, including postdocs, from ninety academic disciplines have participated in IE initiatives (Cherwitz & Sullivan, 2002). IE has reverberated nationally. Several universities have modeled programs after UT's, and have explicitly incorporated IE language and philosophy (Rice University, 2004; Binghamton University Foundation, 2004).

The IE Method

The IE Method is delivered through a variety of formally structured activities and experiences available to students in all disciplines. These include 18 for-credit courses and internships, an ethics initiative, nine cross-disciplinary master's and doctoral portfolio programs, community-based synergy groups, a preparing future faculty initiative, a graduate writing project, collaborations

with academic units and scientific laboratories, a citizen-scholars project, an ad hoc interdisciplinary doctoral option, a pregraduate school internship, and several professional development workshops. IE activities, while frequently undertaken in addition to departmental requirements, are integrated into students' disciplinary work; many programs now count IE courses toward degree requirements. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, rather than increasing time to degree, IE enables students to own their research and appreciate its larger value, removes obstacles inhibiting satisfactory progress, and demystifies the process of "doing" a dissertation—all of which may actually motivate students, thus reducing the time it takes to earn a degree. Three features comprise the "IE Method."

Individualized Opportunities for Students

IE structures formal opportunities for individual students to utilize their expertise to work on social issues. Whether participating in an IE internship, organized course, or portfolio program, students are required to reflect systematically on the relevance and value of their discipline (both as subject matter and as a way of thinking) to a particular social problem; practical experience, in other words, becomes a necessary part of, rather than an addition to, student scholarship. A recent essay by two UT doctoral candidates describes how IE provides opportunities to put one's research to work, whether one is a theatre historian who develops an entrepreneurial plan for a local arts incubator or a mechanical engineer who partners with an historian to develop storytelling techniques enhancing the scientific literacy of students (Chu & Evans, 2002).

Team-Based Opportunities for Students

IE creates and organizes formal opportunities for graduate students to work on cross-disciplinary teams (synergy groups) with other graduate students, faculty, and members of the community on issues of common concern. Synergy group participants collaborate to break social problems into manageable pieces that can be addressed. They brainstorm ways to approach problems, devise concrete plans for solving them, and participate in the implementation and evaluation of developed plans. Synergy groups harness creative and intellectual talent to produce tangible outcomes. Hence, synergy groups afford both the potential to produce immediate social change, as well as a rigorous understanding of how and why such effects occur.

A recent IE synergy group brought together students and faculty from kinesiology, communication, nursing, advertising, and health education to

work with a major health care network. The team devised effective ways to prevent overuse of emergency rooms, in part by developing methods to promote “self-care” on the part of patients (University of Texas, 2004b). By supplying members with the team-building, problem solving, communication, and entrepreneurial tools offered in IE courses, IE provided a structure and methodology for the collaboration.

Toolkits

Whether students participate in individualized internships or collaborative synergy groups, a rich and diverse IE curriculum is available to maximize their effectiveness. Through IE courses and workshops students receive instruction, templates, models, and resource materials pertaining to effective written and spoken communication, teamwork, innovation, technology, entrepreneurship, project management and design, pedagogy, and ethics. Students don't simply acquire a set of predetermined skills in a sterile academic setting; they develop their own toolkits in response to specific challenges they face in a given project. The IE curriculum is flexible enough to be configured to meet the specific needs of students and projects.

IE's Core Values

The IE program's success derives from four core values: vision and discovery, ownership and accountability, integrative thinking and action, and collaboration and teamwork (Cherwitz & Sullivan, 2002).

Vision and Discovery

Intellectual entrepreneurs develop visions for their academic and professional work by imagining the realm of possibilities. This is a discovery process in which individuals continually and regularly learn more about themselves and their areas of expertise. It is also a rediscovery process in which professionals not only invent, but also reinvent, themselves. To accomplish this, intellectual entrepreneurship requires individuals to contemplate who they are, what matters most to them, and what possibilities are available to them.

Ownership and Accountability

Having discovered more about themselves and their disciplines, intellectual entrepreneurs take responsibility for acquiring the knowledge and tools required to bring their vision to fruition. Jobs are not predetermined outcomes or entitlements acquired after completing an education or attaining a

certain level of proficiency. Instead, jobs are opportunities for intellectual entrepreneurs to realize their vision.

Integrative Thinking and Action

Intellectual entrepreneurs know the limitations of partial knowledge and working in a vacuum. For intellectual entrepreneurs, synergy is more than a buzzword; something greater than the sum of the parts can indeed be produced when people engage in integrative thinking. This requires individuals to abandon a “silo” mentality, moving away from conventional notions of discrete academic disciplines and lone scholars in search of the truth.

Collaboration and Teamwork

People in collaborative relationships make integrative thinking and synergy possible. Although ideas are the commodity of academic institutions and therefore have been the traditional focus of the delivery of graduate education, intellectual entrepreneurs understand that creativity and ideas are generated when people and networks are viewed as the primary resource.

The Lessons of IE: Rethinking the Crisis in Higher Education

In this section we make operational the principles—issuing from the “IE Method” and its core values—that might guide responses to the challenges faced by higher education. Specifically, we advance a set of heuristics for applying these principles; as heuristics they are intended to suggest a goal to pursue and guidelines for ensuring movement toward that goal. Thus IE is revealed as more than a method for delivering graduate education; it is a unique way of thinking and a method for solving complex problems.

Thinking in Terms of What Is Possible

Rather than being reactive, the IE philosophy calls for reframing problems in terms of 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.

A good illustration of such thinking is the IE Program’s response to the issue of insufficient jobs for newly-minted doctorates. Instead of accepting this as a “problem” and then developing reactive measures to help future graduates obtain jobs (or, worse, find “alternative careers”), IE views the job market issue as a positive opportunity to discover the enormous value of academic

disciplines. From the time they enter graduate school, students are challenged to imagine what is possible and to begin constructing resources to bring their vision to fruition.

This same philosophy might prove useful in responding to calls for greater accountability in higher education. Ironically, the more academics protest attempts to measure quality, the greater the likelihood that outside entities will impose specific metrics (e.g., student achievement tests, time to degree formulas) 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 ways to assess quality. By approaching external pressure for accountability as an opportunity 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 would arm 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.

Configuring and Organizing People

IE views people and relationships as the intellectual capital for innovation. An entrepreneurial approach to a crisis does not commence with an institution's organization chart. It begins by asking who has the relevant expertise, experiences, and commitment and what the most effective means are for configuring them. IE moves beyond the question of "whose job this is" to a consideration of who are the best people, wherever they reside, to address an issue thoughtfully and creatively.

An example of this type of productive diversity is UT's Graduate Coordinator Network (GCN) (University of Texas, Office of Graduate Studies, 2003), a dynamic professional mentoring and collaborative problem-solving group for staff coordinators of graduate degree programs. Unlike top-down administrative entities, the GCN empowers those in the trenches to team with others to solve problems. Through formal and informal exchange of information, experiences, technology, and collaborative projects, the Network weaves together the strengths of each coordinator into a vibrant professional organization.

Similarly, universities can go beyond approaching problems by gathering the usual insular group of administrative decision makers. To tackle complex

issues such as access to education, lack of fiscal resources, and declining public trust, it makes sense to draw upon the vast and varied intellectual resources of the institution, including staff and students who, in addition to being stakeholders, possess critical knowledge and experience. It is also appropriate to call upon those outside academe—alumni, parents, legislators, and donors—with pertinent knowledge and interests. Imagine the potential effect of convening interdisciplinary, multi-institutional teams dedicated to jointly owning educational problems and devising creative solutions. It is hard to conceive of any challenge that could not be met.

Questioning Our Sacred Cows

When we view crises as opportunities and configure people synergistically, the result may be to question some of higher education's sacred cows, namely, our products and methods of delivery. An interesting example is how universities conceptualize "space." Typically, classes are spaces where institutions of higher learning deliver their academic services. They are physically located on campuses (even when courses are delivered via distance learning), populated exclusively by a university's students, and taught entirely by its faculty.

Incorporating the philosophy of IE, however, requires us to rethink the concept of space and the notion of classrooms. IE's pregraduate school internship, targeted at undergraduate students at UT and local colleges and universities (particularly first-generation and under-represented minorities), is an example of how to rethink and expand the traditional notion of classes (University of Texas, 2004a). While not enrolled in an "organized" class, these undergraduates discover their passions and learn about the culture of graduate study in disciplines through day-to-day, situation-based interactions with faculty mentors and graduate student "buddies" (Cherwitz, 2004; Cherwitz & Alvarado Boyd, 2003, 2004). Unlike formally structured classes, the composition and content of the class may constantly evolve to meet the changing knowledge needs of the students and the challenges that bring the class into existence.

In an entrepreneurial model, classes could be team-taught by faculty with the relevant expertise and experience from inside and outside the university. Depending on the topic or issue of instruction, spaces for learning, while owned or co-owned by the academy, could actually exist somewhere "between" universities and community institutions. So conceived, classes would be comprised of anyone wishing to learn and be able to benefit from or contribute to the discovery of knowledge. It seems logical that rethinking definitions of student population, space, and other sacred cows might help universities meet current challenges.

Rethinking the Relationship Between Universities and Communities

IE starts with a celebration of the fact that rigorous methods of scholarship and learning have unique value in addressing problems, whether those problems are purely academic or affect an entire community. IE educates citizen-scholars whose value as citizens lies precisely in the fact that they are scholars. Citizen-scholars ask and meticulously answer complex questions. They work collaboratively to discover and put knowledge to work. The value of the ivory tower inheres in the fact that it historically has been a place where ideas are incubated, shared, and tested—something that, ironically, is forgotten when universities try to solve problems in higher education and revert to proprietary and hierarchical modes of thinking.

IE leverages knowledge for the betterment of society by doing what academic institutions do best: teaching people to think critically and equipping them with the disciplinary knowledge and tools to keep discovering and learning. The key from an IE perspective is that, while providing society with necessary and unique services, universities are not separate from the community. Rather than being elitist institutions that provide a service *to* the community, universities harness and integrate intellectual talent and energy, working as an integral part *of* the community to address complex problems (Cherwitz, 2003).

Conclusion

What might be gained by incorporating IE's unique philosophy to address the issues facing higher education? While it has not been our purpose in this chapter to provide a detailed map, we have delineated some specific examples of how the IE method and core values can be extended beyond graduate education. What we offer is a productive mindset or heuristic for addressing such crises. Perhaps the most important recommendation that IE proffers is that universities should begin thinking about what is possible rather than what is problematic. 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 connection to the community as one of mutual investment rather than one of entitlement.

IE is far more than a curriculum and set of practices that add value to graduate education. IE is a vision and philosophy that potentially informs all areas of education and organizations committed to the discovery of knowledge and solution of 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 us to create genuine, collaborative conversations with ourselves and other stakeholders about the value of higher education and the best metrics for assessing that value. Such collaboration would expand 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. The IE philosophy 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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