



Intellectual Entrepreneurship Asks, ‘What is Possible?’

The IE philosophy calls for reframing problems in terms of possibilities.

By: [Richard Cherwitz](#) | Issue: January/February, 2019



Fourteen years ago, Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) directors Tommy Darwin and I published a chapter entitled, “Crisis as Opportunity: An Entrepreneurial Approach to Productivity in Higher Education.” My argument here is that our thesis then may be more valid, important and relevant in 2019.

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 draw upon the principles embodied in the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) Program begun in the Graduate School at the University

of Texas at Austin (UT) in 1997.

Since then, over 8,000 students from 90 academic disciplines have participated in IE initiatives. In addition, IE has reverberated nationally. Several universities have modeled programs after UT’s and explicitly incorporated 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.

Core values

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. This is a discovery process in which individuals continually and regularly learn more about themselves and their areas of expertise. To accomplish this, intellectual entrepreneurship requires individuals to contemplate who they are, what matters most to them, and what possibilities are available to them.
- Second, after discovering 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. Instead, jobs are opportunities for intellectual entrepreneurs to realize their vision.
- Third, 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.
- Finally, 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 education, intellectual entrepreneurs understand that creativity and ideas are generated when people and networks are viewed as the primary resource.

What we have learned is that IE is a unique way of thinking and method for solving complex problems. 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.

This philosophy might prove useful for 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., job placement, time to degree formulas) that may not be the best indicators of quality. Just as IE students have been 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.

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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.

Incorporating IE's unique philosophy to address the issues facing higher education, universities could 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.

Collaborative conversations

IE is far more than a curriculum for students. IE is a vision and platform potentially informing all areas of education and organizations committed to the discovery of 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 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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