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How to Build Interdisciplinary Entrepreneurship Teams on a Commuter Campus

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Farmingdale State College used an Innovation Challenge to help busy commuting students meet across disciplines, collaborate and develop business ideas.

Entrepreneurship and innovation contribute to regional and national economic growth, and preparing future entrepreneurs is an important part of the business curriculum at many colleges and universities. A key part of this education is teaching future entrepreneurs to collaborate with other students who may someday be part of a startup team – in engineering, life sciences, art, communications and other disciplines. This is a challenge at schools where most of the students commute or have fulltime jobs. Farmingdale State College (FSC), where I teach, is one of those schools.

FSC has been striving to engage students in entrepreneurial education through participating in various business plan competitions as an effective applied learning approach. Through participating in EIX's e-Fest(https://eiexchange.com/e-fest) in April 2018, we gained a tool that today is helping us overcome our student body's barriers to engaging with one another: the Innovation Challenge. Inspired by our e-Fest experience, we brought our own version of the Innovation Challenge to our school six months later.

The results have been tremendous. After FSC's October 2018 Innovation Challenge, the 1st prize winner, Scrap-It!, continued their entrepreneurship journey to further develop the concept into a business plan. Scrap-It! resolves the challenge in our recycling chain by developing a mobile app to make recycling easier and more transparent. It seeks to keep 60-70% of waste out of landfills by properly directing it to recycle centers and tracking the whereabouts.

In April 11, 2019, Scrap-It! was invited as one of top 25 finalists(https://eiexchange.com/content/402-georgia-state-team-is-efest-2019-grand-prize-win) to compete at the 2019 e-Fest in Minneapolis. Two weeks after e-Fest, the team won first place at the New York Student Business Plan Competition for the Energy/Environment track. Currently, the team is taking the next steps to launch the business. Orville Davis, an undergraduate of Global Business Management and Computer Science at Farmingdale State College, the founder of Scrap-It! Technology, stated: "Innovation challenge inspired me to solve the real-world problem through entrepreneurship. It literally changed my life and my career path."

The Challenges We Overcame

Every year, about 10 FSC students participate in competitions that let them apply their knowledge in a real-world context, such as marketing, finance, design and engineering. In past several years, a few highly motivated students achieved great results, winning in regional competitions or even entering the national level competition of e-Fest.

However, most of our students find it difficult to take advantage of the extracurricular activities that develop the thinking skills that help them apply their learned skills and become better entrepreneurs and innovators. We face two major barriers:

Low interest in activities outside classes

Most FSC students work fulltime jobs and about 90% of them commute to the college. They are also enrolled in demanding, highly technical programs such as Engineering Technology, Bioscience, Visual Communications: Art & Graphic Design, and Computer Systems. As a result, they have little time to engage in

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educational experiences outside of their required courses. While the college provides various workshops and one-to-one advising to support student entrepreneurship, students feel that extracurricular activities provide marginal benefits and would rather spend time working.

Lack of interdisciplinary collaboration

Because most of them commute to school, students spend very little time on campus after their classes, so they have very few social networks outside of their own majors. None of our student teams who've participated in contests have been multidisciplinary, which limits the creativity of their business plans and increases the workload for participating students. Students also report that they have little time or few opportunities to meet or socialize with their peers from different majors. âÂ¨

Innovation Challenge as an Education Tool

In April 2018, when I brought a team to participate in the e-Fest finals in Minneapolis, I experienced the Innovation Challenge activity and was amazed by the creativity produced by the temporarily formed teams from different universities. I decided to apply the same activity on my campus to address above two challenges.

I expected that bringing an Innovation Challenge to our school would serve as a platform for motivated students from different majors to interact and contribute their individual knowledge in the entrepreneurship process. I could use such events to provide an opportunity for multidisciplinary collaboration on our campus and to train Farmingdale students in the innovation process through engaging in real-life entrepreneurship activity.

When I prepared for our own half-day workshop and competition, I integrated the learning of the "ideation" process, a fast-paced, hands-on, and minds-on idea generation process1. Ideation provides powerful and practical tools for thinking creatively and critically; solving complex, open-ended challenges and problems; and managing the changes that will become a way of life for real-world entrepreneurs. In particular, the ideation process can drive multidisciplinary collaboration for innovative solutions. We promoted the event to all majors and especially encouraged freshmen and sophomores to participate. In particular, we emphasized that no prior experience was required to motivate students.

After months of preparation, our school's Innovation Challenge was held on Oct 26, 2018. Twenty- two students from various majors enrolled and formed six multidisciplinary teams. The students received the challenge task -- waste management2 -- a week before the workshop, so they could conduct their individual research. However, they didn't meet their teammates for the first time until the workshop. During the workshop, the ideation process guided the students through brainstorming, challenge alignment, tech & trends ideation, idea filtering and concept finalization. After three hours of intensive preparation, the teams used poster boards to pitch their ideas to the judges from a local major business.

ResultsâÂ¨

At the end of the Innovation Challenge, a student emailed me:

"I would like to thank you for allowing me to participate in the workshop. It was a fun and great learning experience. Having gone through this experience I know that I am a lot more capable than I give myself credit for. Being a participant allowed me to network and most importantly challenge myself. I look forward to working with you on future projects, as I am always looking for new ways to learn and elevate my growth."

The Innovation Challenge helped me achieve my goal to enhance learning and collaboration on campus. It provided an opportunity for our students to apply innovation thinking in their entrepreneurial venture with the advantages of interdisciplinary knowledge sharing. Not every student from the Innovation Challenge is going to participate in future business plan competitions, but the event could serve as a starting point to enhance collaboration among students from different disciplines. It could also enrich student life by exposing them to different bodies of knowledge and expanding their on-campus social networks. Those students who are going to bring their ideas generated through the Innovation Challenge to the next level will likely achieve a better performance at business plan competitions built on diverse team and innovation solutions. In particular, the Innovation Challenge, as one part of our overall entrepreneurial education, will likely mitigate the challenges facing our students, and drive more entrepreneurial mindsets and activities on our campus.

1 Material offered by Board of Innovation

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2 Challenge topic provided by e-Fest

Additional Search Terms: entrepreneurship courses, teaching ideas, teaching resources, classroom ideas, entrepreneurship classes, business schools, business school classes, entrepreneurship students, professors

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