

How Educators Can Recognize and Support Entrepreneurial Personas

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Entrepreneurs come in all shapes and sizes.

Acknowledging this statement is essential, as university-based entrepreneurship often focuses primarily on what I'll call "unicorn entrepreneurship" – entrepreneurship mainly about building scalable technology companies. There's nothing inherently wrong about that, but educators may miss out on a wider range of student entrepreneurs approaching entrepreneurship from other perspectives.

One way for educators to be more inclusive and better support student entrepreneurs is to acknowledge that there are different "types" of entrepreneurship. I believe we can identify and recognize these different types through the concept of "*entrepreneurial personas*."

The notion of the personality aspects of entrepreneurs is not new, and there is some available research on the subject¹. Also, the use of personas is common in some areas of business, such as market research, where the term refers to fictional characters who personify the characteristics, preferences, and needs of various subsets of customers.

However, for this article, I am using the concept of entrepreneurial personas by focusing primarily on *what* an entrepreneur may do instead of a set of personality characteristics or preferences.

The "what an entrepreneur does" aspect of this approach also aligns well with the "jobs to be done" approach in value proposition development². This identification methodology is student-centric. It helps us better understand student needs and how we can best support their entrepreneurial endeavors. It gives us a helpful shorthand tool to ensure we are considering the needs of different types of entrepreneurs and approaches to entrepreneurship. It also helps ensure we, as educators, build appropriate coursework, co-curricular programs, and mentorship programs that support different types of entrepreneurs.

This article describes five entrepreneurial personas, discusses how to help support students inside the classroom based on personas, describes several helpful co-curricular and experiential programs, and considers approaches to effective mentorship tied to the personas.

Finally, an important note about these personas. They are not mutually exclusive, can change over time, and don't fully represent all possible personas. But it's a good starting point, and we hope our colleagues across universities find them useful.

I have identified the following five entrepreneurial personas through observation, mentoring, and teaching. Note there is a summary table towards the end of the article that may be a helpful reference guide for this content.

The Seeker

The Seeker is naturally curious and desires to explore and experiment with various opportunities, industries, and ventures. This persona is commonly observed among college students as they discover their passions and determine their entrepreneurial path. The Seeker is driven by a curiosity and an eagerness to learn from diverse experiences.

Helpful entrepreneurship courses include those that provide opportunities to learn entrepreneurial mindsets and skill sets by interacting with successful founders across various industries and participating in workshops to ideate and test new ventures. Other helpful courses focus on recognizing and evaluating opportunities and testing and validating new ideas.

Outside of the classroom, Seekers can be supported by creating a club that offers a variety of workshops, speaker events, and site visits. Clubs enable students to engage with entrepreneurs from different industries, experiment with startup ideas, and gain exposure to the

entrepreneurial ecosystem. By facilitating these experiences, educators can guide Seekers toward self-discovery and developing a clear entrepreneurial direction. It can also be helpful to support Seekers by encouraging them to participate in internships, entrepreneurial competitions, workshops, and networking events. This exposure helps Seekers gain valuable insights and build a robust entrepreneurial mindset.

Mentors can help students identify patterns, discover their strengths and weaknesses, and ultimately find their passion. It is also important to emphasize that the Seeker phase is essential to their entrepreneurial journey, as it allows them to gather knowledge, skills, and experiences that will shape their future endeavors, maybe identifying with other entrepreneurial personas.

The Impacter

This entrepreneurial persona represents individuals driven by a strong desire to impact society and address social issues through entrepreneurial endeavors. This persona is often found among college students passionate about social justice, environmental sustainability, or other causes that aim to improve the world around them. As an educator, it is crucial to help Impacters identify the issues they are most passionate about. It can also be helpful for them to reflect on their values, personal experiences, and the challenges they observe in their communities or the world.

Courses include those that help them understand different social entrepreneurship models and allow them to identify and select a social challenge to address. Other courses can focus on assisting them in learning about and creating viable business models and measuring social impact.

Universities can support these students outside the classroom by providing opportunities like social innovation challenges. Student service trips focused on causes like environmental conservation, poverty alleviation, etc., can also be great opportunities for students to learn outside of the classroom. Specialized entrepreneurial support programs that provide funding, mentorship, and practical experience can be excellent vehicles for Impacters to build on their vision for tackling some of society's most pressing challenges.

Mentors can help Impacters develop entrepreneurial solutions that have a real-world impact. This involves

helping them to understand the root causes of the problems, researching existing initiatives or organizations working in the field, and brainstorming innovative approaches that align with the Impacter's vision. Mentors can also support Impacters in building partnerships and collaborations with like-minded individuals, organizations, and community stakeholders. These partnerships can amplify the impact of their initiatives and provide access to resources, networks, and expertise.



The Creator

The Creator persona represents individuals who possess a strong passion for the arts, music, or other creative fields and are driven to build their brand and bring their unique creations to life. This persona is frequently found among college students who deeply love artistic expression and aspire to carve their paths as solo entrepreneurs.

A wide variety of courses can help this type of entrepreneur succeed. These might include courses around identifying a creative niche and target audience, crafting an image, and developing storytelling, portfolio development, and content creation strategies. Even courses around pricing, selling, and licensing work, and legal issues like copyrights and contracts can be helpful.

Outside the classroom, providing opportunities to display creative work and practice selling pieces is essential. Hands-on programs focused on developing skills like photography, creative writing, and music production are helpful. Also, design thinking workshops focusing on frameworks to ideate artistic solutions and innovations can be eye-opening experiences for Creators.

A critical aspect of mentor support for Creators is

guiding them in building their personal brand. This includes helping them define their unique artistic identity, identify their target audience, and develop a cohesive and authentic brand image. Mentors can also guide the business aspects of being a solo entrepreneur. This includes teaching Creators about marketing and promotion strategies tailored to their specific industry, guiding them in creating an online presence through websites or social media platforms, and assisting them in establishing networks within the artistic community.

The Careerist

The Careerist entrepreneurial persona represents individuals drawn to the idea of a future working within organizations but seeking roles not traditionally associated with business career paths. These students are often interested in pursuing careers within companies but with a focus on roles that align with their unique interests and strengths. This usually means some form of "intrapreneurship."

Coursework can include those focused on corporate innovation, understanding workplace culture and expectations, and developing communication, collaboration, and leadership skills. Courses focused on change management and bringing effective change to organizations will also help students understand how to be effective change agents in their careers.

Co-curricular ideas include workshops featuring corporate innovation leaders (who can also be helpful program mentors.) Corporate innovation tours can be great experiences, providing students with opportunities to visit companies' R&D centers to see the latest innovations and connect with industry leaders/experts.

To support Careerists, mentors can help them understand the opportunities available within organizations beyond traditional business and finance roles. This involves introducing them to various departments and functions such as marketing, human resources, operations, and project management. By showcasing real-world examples and success stories of professionals who have built fulfilling careers in non-traditional areas, mentors can inspire and encourage Careerists to explore alternative paths within organizations.

Mentors can also assist Careerists in identifying the specific skills and competencies required for their

desired roles. This may involve assessing their strengths, interests, and values to determine the areas they are most suited for. Furthermore, mentors can facilitate networking opportunities for Careerists to connect with professionals in their desired fields. This can be done through alumni networks, industry events, or guest speaker sessions.

The Builder

This entrepreneurial persona represents individuals driven by a strong desire to create, innovate, and bring ideas to life through entrepreneurial ventures. They are often tech-oriented and naturally inclined towards problem-solving and capitalizing on new opportunities. Builders are frequently seen among college students who enter university with existing businesses or ambitious ideas, eager to develop their technical skills and build successful enterprises. They sometimes come from STEM disciplines.

Possible coursework could include evaluating and selecting technical business ideas, prototyping and MVP development (potentially using no-code and low-code solutions), and understanding startup financing and funding sources. It's also essential to build skills in assembling and managing technical teams, intellectual property, and legal foundations.

Outside the classroom, activities can include coding boot camps - intensive workshops focused on building technical skills like coding, data analytics, and design. Maker spaces provide access to cutting-edge equipment like 3D printers, CNC machines, and robotics to develop prototypes and innovative products. Student incubators help by supporting Builders (and other personas) through networking, mentoring, and funding opportunities to build their ventures.

Mentor support of Builders begins with fostering their technical skills. Mentors can provide resources, recommend relevant courses or workshops, and encourage participation in coding boot camps or hackathons to enhance their technical prowess. By focusing on areas such as programming, web development, app development, or emerging technologies, mentors help Builders gain the necessary expertise to transform their ideas into tangible products or services.

In addition to technical skills, mentorship should encompass business acumen and entrepreneurial

mindset development. Builders should be exposed to entrepreneurial frameworks, business models, market analysis, and customer validation techniques. This enables them to understand the feasibility and market potential of their ideas and refine their value propositions to meet customer needs. Mentors should also assist Builders in building a solid network within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Summary table

This table provides a very brief summary of the above for quick reference.

Persona	Orientation/focus	Coursework focus	Co-curricular offerings	Mentor focus
Seeker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Naturally curious Explore and learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entrepreneurial mindset Evaluating opportunities Testing new ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entrepreneurship competitions Networking events Entrepreneurship clubs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify interests, strengths, and weaknesses
Impacter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social issues Personal values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social entrepreneurship Market-based solutions Impact measurement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speaker series Site visits Volunteer opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turning passions and interests into real-world impact
Creator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Artistic expression Personal brand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content strategy Branding Copyright and contracts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design thinking workshops Showcase opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal brand development
Careerist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Career orientation Apply learned skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Corporate innovation Leadership Communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Career workshops R&D center visits Internships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitating networking opportunities
Builder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technical skills Problem-solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low-code tech Building teams Venture funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boot camps Maker spaces Incubators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combine technical and business acumen

Article Summary

Understanding entrepreneurial personas is essential when working with student entrepreneurs. Each persona brings a unique set of skills and strengths to the table, and it is vital to help students identify their own persona and guide them in developing a plan to achieve their entrepreneurial objectives.

As students work on new ideas, you may see them take on different roles during various phases of the development of a startup. A seeker might become a builder. A builder might become a

careerist. It will also be interesting to observe how different personas work together. For example, a seeker working with a builder might be an interesting combination of orientation and skills.

I also recognize that there are other personas that I've not identified. For example, the "investor" persona might

attract students interested in early-stage investing and venture capital. Different personas might include the "hustler," the "visionary," or the "inventor."

I look forward to following discussions of this concept.

References

1. Personality Traits of Entrepreneurs: A Review of Recent Literature, Harvard Business Review, Kerr et. al, Nov 2017, https://www.hbs.edu/ris/Publication%20File/s/18-047_b0074a64-5428-479b-8c83-16f2a0e97eb6.pdf
2. Know Your Customer's "Jobs To Be Done", Harvard Business Review, Christensen et. al., Sep 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/09/know-your-customers-jobs-to-be-done>

AI Tool Note

The author entirely originated the concept of entrepreneurial personas for this article. While the author already provides entrepreneurial program support for the personas mentioned above, it seemed that it would be interesting to see what AI would recommend. Therefore, ChatGPT and Claude were used in the initial draft to brainstorm ideas around co-curricular programming and mentorship for each persona. Those outputs were melded with the author's personal experiences to help build the initial draft, while the final draft is original work.

The author also used Grammarly for in-document editing and syntax suggestions.

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