

BREAKING TRADITIONAL FACULTY-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS TO ENCOURAGE ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION ACROSS CAMPUS

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Abstract

As confirmed through La Salle's support and subscription to the VentureWell University Innovation Fellows program, we have learned that students embrace creative freedom and have a deep desire to be entrepreneurial thinkers, and that this process doesn't necessarily require direct involvement of faculty. Prior to and during the opening of our new makerspace (a.k.a. "Innovation Factory") on campus, students were encouraged to self-organize a grassroots movement to awaken the entrepreneurial spirit across the university. This, after years of faculty-led workshops, promotional activity, solicitations, and encouragements, has had significant traction, with students arriving daily to explore new ideas and opportunities and working together with other students. Certainly, faculty retains an important role—to ensure safety, educational direction and mentoring support—but releasing control over programming and even minor budgetary decision-making to students has yielded unexpectedly high levels of activity and interest in our Innovation Factory.

Introduction

For all of the national attention around innovation and entrepreneurial activity on college campuses, one would expect the availability of equipment and learning support resources to require only a modest awareness campaign. But our experience and journey to foster a culture of entrepreneurial thinking at La Salle University has taken a much different route. When the concept of inspiring and fostering entrepreneurship hit campus, our Center for Entrepreneurship got to work building promotional campaigns, offering lectures, hosting workshops, and preparing to respond to an abundance of student interest (La Salle University 2015c). The model was simple: teach it and students will follow.

What followed was not an abundance of interest. What we found was that those (few) students who came to events were encouraged to do so by their professors and were often rewarded for doing so through academic credit or other assignments. A grassroots approach to building a culture of innovation and entrepreneurial thinking was needed.

Entrepreneurship at La Salle University

La Salle University is a liberal arts Catholic institution that is proud to host a high population of both minority as well as first-generation college students (La Salle University 2015b; La Salle University n.d.). This population is appreciative and eager to complete their academic studies with the goal of obtaining professional employment. This population is also recognized as one that has something to prove to themselves and to their communities. Our Center for Entrepreneurship recognizes the need for a "culture" of innovation and



entrepreneurial thinking across campus. This culture is intended to inspire new student attitudes in two primary areas:

1. To become self-reliant and continuous learners, eager to find new challenges.
2. To be confident to explore, experiment, to think differently, and to challenge norms.

When the Center was launched, students displayed at least passive interest in entrepreneurship. They genuinely understood the values of being entrepreneurial. Non-credit educational programs offered on entrepreneurship topics fell far short of expectations, often with only three to ten students at any given event, with some events attracting no students. The Center also struggled to attract a diverse array of students from the three schools on campus (Business, Arts and Sciences, and Nursing and Health Sciences).

A new Minor in Entrepreneurship was enjoying steady enrollment and academic classes were fully subscribed. There was, however, very little innovative or entrepreneurial co-curricular or extracurricular activity on campus. A committee of faculty who supported the mission of the Center for Entrepreneurship was created to discuss what could be done to stimulate more interest and activity. The resulting theory was that, much like the process of entrepreneurship itself, creating a culture of entrepreneurial thinking and innovation is something you can only foster, not instruct. If this culture were to take root on campus it must be driven by students, meeting their needs on terms they defined.

Pivotal Events

Lean LaunchPad® for Educators

There were four events and programs offered through the Center for Entrepreneurship that confirmed this theory. First was the participation of two representatives of the Center (our executive director and one faculty

member) in the VentureWell Lean LaunchPad for Educators training course (VentureWell 2016a). This course provided instruction on teaching methods and tools for faculty to instruct students on the Business Model Canvas (BMC) (Osterwalder and Pigneur 2010). The BMC was already understood to be a valuable innovation platform to teach to students, but an unintended benefit of this course was the appreciation for market research during planning phases to confirm or refute the envisioned solutions of the project. Looking at this in context of our own challenges and vision, our team realized our “customer segment” was our student body and the “problem” was a lack of participation and mismatched perspectives about the program between those students and faculty, and therefore one or more programs might offer a compelling “value proposition” to students’ collegiate experience. If we truly believed in the Lean LaunchPad methodology for instruction, we must also be prepared to use it to validate our own innovations on campus.

OPEN MINDS Innovation Competition

The second event was an OPEN MINDS Innovation Competition hosted on campus in February 2015, available to all students (Mullarkey and Queen Muse 2015). This competition offered students an opportunity to explore without risk, seek and expose their innate creative talents, and gain new confidence in their abilities to deeply understand complex problems and offer innovative solutions. The format of this event was to challenge students to research different problems and market opportunities, then have them work collaboratively as teams to design new products. Faculty was on hand to assist, but the intent was for students to drive the process. The first annual OPEN MINDS Innovation Competition drew forty-four registered students (we had maximum capacity for fifty) and all but two completed the weekend-long format. A

direct outcome of this event was to reposition our Center as a resource and learning center for students to feel comfortable exploring innovative ideas in a very “green field” way without prompting by faculty.

VentureWell University Innovation Fellows

The third event was an outgrowth of our attendance at the Lean LaunchPad for Educators training session. It was at that venue that the La Salle representatives were introduced to the VentureWell University Innovation Fellows (UIF) program (VentureWell 2016b). The basic tenet of the UIF program is that change on college campuses must be a grassroots effort that starts with students. Three La Salle students were selected to become Fellows. These students had showed passive or active interest in innovation and entrepreneurship and represented different constituencies across campus: one was enrolled in the School of Business as a Business Administration major, the other two were enrolled in the School of Arts & Sciences, a Communication major and an Integrated Science, Business and Technology major respectively.

The UIF students utilized the Lean LaunchPad methodology to conceive a new approach to evangelizing and engaging students on innovative topics and endeavors. Through a rigorous schedule, these student representatives conducted campus surveys, held peer discussions, offered and shared ideas with UIF students at other universities, and engaged UIF faculty to refine their ideas and hypotheses. The final result was a list of qualified recommendations for our Center for Entrepreneurship to consider implementing. The overwhelming favorite recommendation from the Fellows was the creation of a makerspace on campus (Learning Spaces Collaboratory n.d.a; Learning Spaces Collaboratory n.d.b). Enrolling students in UIF was the first step toward changing the model from faculty-led to student-led engagement and programming.

The Center for Entrepreneurship recognized the passion motivating the UIFs to create this makerspace. Creating the makerspace demonstrated to the students that their interests were respected and supported by the Center. The Center told the UIFs to put together a plan, including a budget that would make the makerspace a reality. This was the first test of a student-led innovation project, and it has been a phenomenal success.

La Salle Creators

The fourth event was the formation of a student network called the La Salle Creators (n.d.). This club was recommended by the UIFs to be the governing body of the new makerspace. This group was led by the UIF students but later broadened to include a larger audience of like-minded students. La Salle Creators were given no clear rules or goals. The informal nature of this organization encouraged trial and error and a dynamic agenda of interests and activities. The La Salle Creators collaborate on projects, hold informal peer-to-peer training, and drive the culture of innovation on campus using the makerspace as their focal point. The La Salle Creators leadership of the makerspace has been a great success (La Salle University 2015a). Daily traffic through the Makerspace is 15-20 students. There are many diverse, student-led projects ongoing. Specific examples of projects are discussed below:

- Music innovation project – an effort is underway to envision an inventory of tools and learning objectives that could be assembled and offered to students to facilitate research into music innovation beyond composition and production.
- Religions student project – students are meeting and thinking about the parallels and considerations regarding religious and philosophical beliefs alongside new inventions and innovations.
- 3D printing projects – several exploratory projects are underway to leverage 3D printing.



- Technologies to create new products, innovate existing products, and consider new applications.
- Bootstrapping out of Poverty project – students are engaging homeless and transitional housing agencies and their clients to support starting micro businesses as a sustainable pathway out of poverty.

The La Salle Creators have also reached out to other student organizations, challenging them to use the makerspace for creative and innovative projects. The ENACTUS team (<http://clubs.lasalle.edu/enactus/>) has been working with two social groups whose members include adults with autism. This year, these organizations asked the ENACTUS team for help with fundraising. The ENACTUS team had the idea that the group members could design and make personalized fundraising items using the makerspace 3D printers. The ENACTUS Team and the La Salle Creators are assisting the group members in brainstorming and designing the items to be sold, showing them how to print the items and then how to promote and sell them. This project was conceived, designed, directed, and executed by students from ENACTUS and the La Salle Creators collaborating together.

Conclusion

The decision to empower students to drive a culture of innovation and creativity has had a very significant positive impact on the La Salle campus. This effort has resulted in the creation of a makerspace, the formation of a student committee (La Salle Creators) to direct makerspace activities, and widespread use of the makerspace by students from all three schools on campus. The scope and direction of the Center for Entrepreneurship has changed in response to the student activity and ideas (Melick 2015). Innovation and creativity are growing on campus and plans to expand and increase programs to promote them are well underway. The students have built a sustainable model that will continue to generate change on the La

Salle campus. Empowering the students has led to increased possibility for future commercialization activity, more engaged students, and the unfolding of a culture of innovation, which was and remains our primary goal for La Salle University.

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