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LINKING THE UNIVERSITY WITH THE COMMUNITY: AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROJECT TO PROMOTE ARTS ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Teaching students entrepreneurial skills and the utility of cross-disciplinary teams is difficult if only classroom exercises are employed. In this program, university students worked together with commercial artists and business-persons residing in our declining downtown region to assist in the organization, planning and management of an established regional arts festival and to launch a new feature of the festival based on digital animation. Through experiential learning, students gained an appreciation for “real-life” budgets, deadlines, responsibilities and an appreciation of working on cross-disciplinary teams while the community observed first-hand the benefits of students trained in digital media, entrepreneurship and project management.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent research suggests that attracting entrepreneurs to a region to establish their business ventures is closely correlated to the region’s apparent creativity and innovation. Regions that support free thinking and creativity in the arts tend to also support the creative and nontraditional mindset of entrepreneurs and the infrastructure needed for the establishment of high-technology businesses. A recent economic summit in our community established goals of supporting entrepreneurship and the creation of a livable community, which included the promotion of art in the declining “downtown” area.

An established music and arts festival has been operating on an annual basis for the past decade. University faculty met with downtown community artists and business leaders to propose the inclusion of a university led animation festival as a new component of the established event. The animation festival would consist of a juried art competition with submissions solicited from around the world. A student led team interfaced with the established festival committee providing digital media proficiency, project management skills and human capital for needed operations. Students learned to plan, market, and manage an event, and to deal with operational issues such as meeting project deadlines, budgeting, meeting dynamics and project implementation.

Students involved in the project gained valuable experience that should translate to saleable skills when beginning the job interviewing process. However, maintaining enthusiasm for the project over a six-month period of time was difficult without appropriate incentives (grade, course credit, recognition) for both students and faculty mentors. As the project moves into its second year, objectives include incorporation of students from diverse academic disciplines (business, technology, fine arts) to create synergistic energy and to provide a more diverse interface between university core competencies and the community’s need for these skill sets. Participation in the project provided students with an introduction to social entrepreneurship.

INTRODUCTION

In October of 2003, Johnson City, TN held its first “Economic Summit”. The summit brought together members of the business community, city government and the university to identify broad areas where specific initiatives could be formulated for advancing the economic development of the city and surrounding region. Two of the broad areas identified were entrepreneurship and the creation of a livable community. A specific initiative for creating a livable community was the promotion of the arts in the city’s declining “downtown” area. This approach parallels a recommendation contained in “Third-Tier Cities: Adjusting to the New Economy (Siegel and Waxman, 2001). This observation was further validated by a recent paper published by Lee, Florida and Acs (Lee et al, 2004) where they reported that entrepreneurship was closely correlated to a regions creative index. The creativity index was defined as a measure of the proportion of area artists and other artistically creative people residing in and attracted to the region. Florida and Gates (Florida and Gates, 2001) further reported a high positive correlation between a regions creative index and concentrations of high-technology industry. Attracting entrepreneurial firms specializing in high-technology industries has become important to the community and the university with the establishment of a university managed high-technology business incubator. Therefore, the desire to cultivate a creative and open community is of high interest in providing sustainable growth to the region and in promoting activities involving high creativity and risk taking. Lee, Florida and Acs (Lee et al, 2004) hypothesized that “more diverse regions tend to have lower entry-barriers which make it easier for human capital with various backgrounds to enter the region and stay within. . . . Hence a more diverse region could enjoy comparative advantage in attracting and retaining creative human capital”.

Our intent for this project was threefold. First, we wanted to develop a project that would link the university and downtown artistic communities such that the unique skill sets of each group would be recognized and enhanced and to create an environment where synergies could be realized. Secondly, we wanted the university students to experience hands-on social entrepreneurship, learning how to create, plan, organize, manage and communicate with a diverse group of individuals. For students in the arts, the opportunity to participate in the planning and management of a community arts event with critical deadlines and stringent budgets would provide a real life learning experience that should prove invaluable. Furthermore, we wanted a project that would foster successful cross-campus collaborations, bringing strength from diverse and varied programs in the Colleges of Arts and Sciences and Business and Technology. Finally, we were looking for a project that would be self-sustainable, contribute to the economic growth of the region, grow in reputation and provide a platform where future participants could learn from their predecessors and enhance the offering on a yearly basis.

THE PROJECT

Selection of a pilot project was critical to the long-term success of this program. Our desire was to develop an event that would be unique to the community and region, promote university core competencies and receive national attention as the event matured beyond the pilot stage. A team consisting of faculty members from the university’s Colleges of Business and Technology and Arts and Sciences developed a concept to use interdisciplinary entrepreneurship teams to promote arts in the local community. University faculty representatives met with community

artists and leaders to determine if the university project could be linked with the annual arts event and what the university “could bring to the table” via unique skill sets, labor, technology, etc. that would enhance the current community event. After meeting with the local community artists and patrons of the arts, we were disturbed to find that the arts community regarded the university as a “sterile environment”, where the community did not feel welcome on campus because of parking problems, perception of invading the “student’s domain” and the ever present ivory tower syndrome. Although there have been some off campus art shows, many of university sponsored art events are held in campus galleries or theatres which make it difficult for community art patrons to attend. The community artists and leaders were excited about the university expanding its boundaries into the local community, and bringing forward an art platform based on technology for which the university was recognized regionally.

The university has gained a regional reputation and growing national recognition for their work in instructing students on the use of digital media and other multimedia formats for art. Creative works developed in the Digital Media program are not the traditionally recognized fine arts (i.e. watercolor, sculpture, lithography, etc.) but are expressed in the form of digital animation, digitally enhanced photography, digital video, web design and other multimedia. This particular program is domiciled in the College of Business and Technology which provides the opportunity for some unique interaction between disciplines. Traditional tools of technology (project planning and management) and business (marketing, market research, economics, and advertising) can be brought into an interdisciplinary team.

The festival would be an exciting event focused on promoting high quality, family-oriented short animations produced by independent animators, commercial studios and students. Entries would be solicited nationally and internationally. The festival would consist of a juried competition focused on promoting animations that exhibit a special relevance for young audiences. Winning entries would be selected by notable representatives of the animation industry and the local community would be engaged by having children participate as jurors for a special “Children’s Choice” award. Winners would receive cash prizes in specific categories. All of the submitted animations would be exhibited at the arts and music festival in various downtown galleries, and animations created specifically for children would be exhibited at the regional Hands-On Children’s Museum. To participate in the competition an entry fee would be solicited from each participant. As the festival grows, these fees would be used to fund the prizes for each category, pay jurors an honorarium for judging the competition, and to cover other expenses associated with the festival. The festival would initially be funded by grants with a goal of making the festival self-sustaining within five years.

GOALS AND HURDLES

The first goal for this project was to foster intra-university and intra-college collaboration between the Colleges of Business & Technology and Arts & Sciences by developing opportunities for introducing cross-disciplinary entrepreneurship skills to students who would not otherwise receive this type of education as part of their regular curriculum. The intent was to develop a team that is forced to collaborate beyond their “academic comfort zone” and charge it with creating, planning and coordinating a community event that recognizes and promotes arts in the region. Projects within each discipline are generally inwardly focused, and students are not

challenged to understand or work with individuals from other disciplines. As a result, graduates entering the workforce often lack the experience to work effectively in cross-disciplinary teams. Inter-disciplinary team projects of this type would demonstrate to students the utility of diverse educational perspectives in problem-solving and planning. Clark, Turner and Johnson (Clark et al, 2004) reported that interdisciplinary teams often develop unique solutions to problem sets that would not be possible with more homogenous teams. This project was specifically designed to give students a “real world perspective” through the planning and management of an event that must meet the diverse needs of the university, city and arts communities while working with a cross-disciplinary team to deliver the project. Unfortunately, we were not able to get a commitment from the College of Arts and Sciences to involve their students in this effort. We initially felt that involving artists working in mediums other than digital media would enhance the digital media offering, result in more artists being trained in social entrepreneurship, and provide a more diverse art offering from the university to the community. In addition to the interuniversity struggles, we were not able to recruit any marketing or business students to participate in the project. This proved to be a significant problem because we did not have the expertise on the team to create an effective business, marketing and advertising plan to help promote the digital animation and the community arts event or to create a successful plan to recruit artists to enter animations in the festival. Part of the problem of recruitment of the business and management students related to the volunteer status of the project with no university credit for coursework awarded as a reward for participation in the project.

A second goal of the project is to help create a bridge between the university and the community through the linking of a common desire to encourage artists from the university and community and visiting artists, to create art in public spaces in our downtown area. The objective is to create an atmosphere within the community that is supportive of the arts, helps to create a regional aura of innovation and creativity and an event that can be repeated annually. The decision to investigate piggy-backing the Animation Festival project with the existing Downtown Arts & Music Festival allowed us an opportunity to meet with a group of community artists and downtown business owners that were already organized. They were very interested in adding the university sponsored event to the festival, and the members of the team became a sub-group of the overall festival committee.

Keeping all the groups—students, faculty and members of the local art community—organized and communicating was a big challenge. To accomplish this task, bi-weekly meetings were set up to interface between the city’s art and music festival committee and students and faculty working with the animation festival. These meetings were intended to coordinate activities and keep all parties abreast of what was and wasn’t accomplished. The animation festival team met every week to discuss short and long range goals, identify and assign tasks, and review work in progress. The student organization “EDGE” (Engineering Design Graphics Enthusiasts) took this event on as a club project and was composed of students who volunteered their time as an extra-curricular activity. Additionally, an interactive web based forum was produced to help encourage communication between the students, faculty and the art community. The forum promoted deliberations between students and faculty that could not otherwise be accomplished through the weekly meetings.

Maintaining enthusiasm for the project with a volunteer student team over an extended time period was the biggest obstacle. Students were very involved early in the project, but because the planning and development of the festival lasted over six months, their enthusiasm and commitment to the project didn't last. Several students with key roles dropped out of the project as the work to be completed mounted. With this project being a purely volunteer effort, it was difficult for the students who remained committed to the project to accomplish many tasks in a timely fashion, resulting in missed deadlines. For many, course and work schedules took priority over the project, leaving them little time to devote to the animation festival. The same problem was also faced by the faculty mentors on the project, each of them having priorities of course load and university commitments that made keeping up with the efforts of all individuals difficult.

The third goal was to develop a program that would be self-sustainable. The pilot project was funded through a grant from the Appalachian Ideas Network (subgrant of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) Grant awarded to the University of Kentucky) with the specific aim to develop a student-run project in social entrepreneurship.

As a project that will be repeated annually, students participating each year would have an opportunity to learn entrepreneurship skills by planning, organizing, coordinating, managing, and implementing a community art event. For the first five years, the team's goals will be to improve upon the previous year and by year five have established the festival so that it has regional as well as national recognition, attracting enough entries to be self-supporting from entry fee income.

Obviously, our experience with a volunteer student team demonstrated that many students did not have the long-term vision to appreciate how participation in the project would augment their careers. As we move to the second year of this project we are exploring the use of "special topics" coursework to reward student's participation. It is also our desire to have students participate in the event for sequential years, gaining valuable experience with each year and accepting leadership positions with increasing responsibility.

LINKING THE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE TO THE FESTIVAL

Despite the hurdles that challenged the success of the Animation Festival this year, several initiatives did help to get the festival underway. Promotion of the festival and development of key literature, as well as the design and launch of an interactive website, were critical to the success of the festival. Faculty mentors who were involved in instructing students in the desktop publishing and web design felt that many of these needs could be met as part of student projects designed into the experiential learning process. One example of the festival promotion was a postcard announcement that was sent to over one hundred colleges and universities which offer a concentration in animation. Students were given information about the festival and asked to come up with a design to market the event and give information on how to enter animations into the festival. At the end of the two-week project the mounted designs were shown to members of the Animation Festival Committee as well as the Downtown Arts and Music Festival Committee for judging. Because of the competition and opportunity to promote themselves and their

graphic design abilities, the students worked harder than usual on this class project and produced some very nice pieces of work to add to their own portfolios.

Another positive initiative in the marketing of the festival was the design and development of the Animation Festival Website. Student volunteers were asked to take on this key promotional and informational piece with very minimal management by the faculty committee members. Faculty members served as mentors only on this part of the project, allowing the students to manage, design, and implement the website themselves. This encouraged the students to develop their entrepreneurship skills in time management, administration, self-motivation, and marketing.

The main student web designer/developer was offered an incentive of extra credit in one of his classes for his commitment to finishing the website and keeping the content updated. In the future, more effort needs to be put into developing strategies to keep the students more involved and interested in the project. The class project of the postcard worked very well; but for some parts of the project that were more long-term such as the website maintenance, there needs to be more incentives offered to students to keep them involved. Also, some parts of the project work were more administrative than creative or interesting so it was hard to get the students to volunteer for those tasks.

SO WHAT?

The Animation Festival helps to promote community awareness of animation as an art form. The festival entries present a variety of unique animation styles, subjects and ideas that are different from what most experience from cinema and television. The festival introduces animation as a potential career to prospective students and festival participants. By including the animation festival in conjunction with the larger music and arts festival, a large audience (more than 40,000 visitors each year) can be accessed.

Entrants to the festival are solicited from all over the world and the festival promotes our region as a developing center for animation arts. The “Best of Show” animation this year was submitted from a student in Australia who learned of the festival through the website and on-line advertisements. This program also provides a local competitive venue for our university’s animation students.

Students involved in the project benefit from interaction with students in other academic disciplines. Appreciation of team diversity is commonplace in industry settings where team members from diverse functional responsibilities work together on developing solutions to problems. Many times these teams develop unique solutions that would not be realized if teams were more functionally homogenous. Students also learn and practice project planning and facilitation, goals projection, budget management, collaboration and coordination with members of the professional community. They work on the project from beginning to end over a 9-12 month period, and will be involved in project evaluation and planning for future sustainability of the event. Most classes do not include students from multiple disciplines, so even when projects such as this are simulated in a classroom, it is rare that students are able to work with the entire skill set that an interdisciplinary team can deliver. Industry recruiters have repeatedly stressed a desire for students to have team project development experiences before they graduate. This

project does this, and makes it “real world.” This is a definite advantage to participating students as they seek employment after graduation.

Finally, through this unique art event, the promotion of innovation in the arts in our community helps to demonstrate the region’s growing acceptance of new ideas and theories which research postulates can impact the attractiveness of the region for new entrepreneurial ventures.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of meaningful hands-on experiential learning projects for undergraduate students is difficult for most university professors and is further complicated when students are required to interface with non-university personnel. It is this interface with the “real world”, however, that creates some of the most meaningful learning experiences. In the case of this project, the pilot year created more questions and opportunities than definable outputs.

Our first goal was to facilitate inter-university and intra-college collaboration to provide students the opportunity to work on teams drawn from diverse academic disciplines. Our unsuccessful attempt to involve the College of Arts and Sciences in this project was initiated utilizing a top-down (Dean/Associate Dean) recruitment model. Future attempts will utilize both a top-down and bottom-up (individual Professor/champion) recruitment process. The animation festival project needs to move from a college to a university-driven process. Tenured faculty from business and management disciplines will be recruited to eliminate non-tenured faculty’s concern for time spent on projects with unknown publication potential.

Recognition of faculty and students participating in the animation festival is critical to the long-term success of project. Currently we are looking at rewarding students with “special topics” course credit for work on the student management team. Ultimately we want to move to a process where students from different academic disciplines apply for management positions (CEO, Creative Director, Director of Marketing, Community Interface Director, etc) needed to facilitate the planning, organization and implementation of the animation festival. The process of competing for an animation festival management positions teaches students the importance of building a resume based on relevant work experience and demonstrated completion of key deliverables.

The second goal was to build an effective bridge between the university and the community. Students came to understand the importance of organization skills, adherence to project timelines, budget driven spending, and the frustration and benefits of working on diverse teams. To facilitate communication, individual faculty mentors and student team members focused on either university led or community led teams. Students developed an on-line forum to discuss their frustrations and needs for the project with other student volunteers and this forum was open to community festival leaders as well. For year two, students from technology will develop a festival manual using project management philosophy and charting technology to provide a standardized management blueprint for future festival managers. Business management and strategy development students will development a five-year festival plan demonstrating the importance of long term vision and management to students from the arts who are not typically immersed in these processes. Finally, we plan to request more involvement from the university

administration and community government in the recognition of the festival successes and involvement of the university student teams.

The third goal was to move the animation festival from a grant-funded process to one that is self-sustaining in five years. A three-prong approach is being implemented to achieve this goal. First, the number of entries in the animation festival will be increased through more widespread marketing and advertising. Currently, entry fees and limited grant monies are used to cover expenses for equipment rental, promotional materials, and honorariums for judges and prizes for category winners. These expenses will be covered fully by entry fees in the future. Secondly, the animation festival will be expanded to include a new category of entries from high school students. Expansion into this area serves two purposes: first the number of entries is increased reducing the expense burden rate per entry, and secondly it provides an opportunity to recruit students interested in digital media. Finally, an educational component is going to be phased into the animation festival with nationally recognized digital artists holding workshops and lectures concurrent with the timing of the animation festival.

Training students in aspects of social entrepreneurship teaches them that, as citizens, they have a responsibility to the community and that they can use their skills to make a real difference. This experience should provide graduates with the understanding that being a community member is more than doing your job and paying your taxes. By actively involving students in contributing to the betterment of the community, they gain a sense of social responsibility that should extend beyond graduation. This connection to the community can be a catalyst for entrepreneurial opportunities that contribute to the economic development of the region.

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