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Introduction

Universities are in a battle for their survival. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, many factors put universities in jeopardy, including the failure to bridge the skills gap between students and the unique requirements of the 4th Industrial Revolution. For many students, there are concerns about affordability and completion; the concerns and obstacles are greater for low-income students and students of color, including college and universities' inabilities to meet their needs for academic, financial, and practical support (Santos & Haycock, 2016). Moreover, for those students who do enter college, there is an increasing demand for learning by hands-on doing and creating (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). In short, students are insisting on new approaches to learning.

> **"Collectively, we value the experience and knowledge that both faculty and students bring to the cohort; thus, the professors act as facilitators and learning partners rather than instructors."**

Complications from the COVID-19 global crisis have exacerbated the situation. Increasing numbers of students are suing their universities because they paid for services and opportunities, such as in-person learning, that they were not able to access as a result of the pandemic (Herron, 2020). While institutions nervously debate reopening, the American College Health Association (ACHA, 2020) has issued reopening guidelines that emphasize the ethical obligation to keep students, staff, and faculty safe. The need for a modified reopening, including containment measures, will likely entail the need for a hybrid model of course instruction. Because this approach may be at odds with students' expectations and will likely negatively impact universities' financial health, this is a critical moment that demands innovation in higher

education. Mohr (2017) suggested that to effectively engage students, it is critical for course instructors to continuously refine content and their teaching strategies, so they are perceived as fresh and relevant; post COVID, refinement of teaching strategies is paramount to survival. We are at a critical tipping point that requires us to discover and design new ways to prepare our students so that they are not only well prepared to work throughout the 21st century but are also inspired to help solve the many societal problems we face. We argue that experiential learning generates requisite experience for personal growth and may be key to enhancing students' job readiness skills while keeping higher education relevant in the marketplace. Combined, these factors could contribute to counteracting the financial stress besetting higher education institutions.

Pre-COVID-19 Program Description

The Entrepreneurship Lab. During the 2019 Fall semester, we, two assistant professors from the business and social work schools, were leaders in the launch of an entrepreneurship lab. The interdisciplinary lab was opened to provide all students, no matter their major, with a space where they could design, launch, and develop enterprises. While the lab hosts a variety of programs, our collaboration centers on supporting a social action learning cohort.

The Social Action Entrepreneurship Cohort. The cohort is made up of twelve students at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels and one alumnus. Currently, the cohort members are developing organizations in the areas of behavioral and mental health,

mobile mental health counseling for underserved populations, programming for under-resourced and underserved youth, drone solutions in policing to improve safety for officers and citizens, and tutoring services for specially gifted students. Each member has either an existing organization that they are developing and growing, or an organization in the making–that is, in the design, planning, or pre-launch stage. In the spirit of experiential learning and action research, students are encouraged to develop 90-day action plans they execute and refine based on the outcomes of the implementation. The cohort met every week in a mixed model format, with some physically in the lab and others joining face-to-face virtually (F2Fv) via WebEx. In addition to the weekly meetings, the group interacts and communicates regularly using the students' preferred communication channel, WhatsApp. To engage the students at a different level and create a culture that feels different from a typical classroom, we work to reduce the "power distance" by encouraging students to use our first names. Collectively, we value the experience and knowledge that both faculty and students bring to the cohort; thus, the professors act as facilitators and learning partners rather than instructors.

COVID-19 Program Changes

In mid-March, as a result of the pandemic, we transitioned to 100% online facilitation. The professors felt it was critical to not only provide a sense of "normalcy" for the students during the crisis, but additionally work to increase the value they received from the entrepreneurship lab experience. Our driving belief is, "just because we are physically distant doesn't mean we can't be close."

Prior to COVID, most of our students were in a constant state of being time-strapped and thus were very selective on how they spent their time: "I cannot afford to invest my time in any effort that does not contribute to my goals" (Student R.). The COVID-19 crisis created chaos and confusion, and for those students who are also parents of school-aged children, the time crunch worsened. Fortunately for faculty and students alike, during the crisis, we were able to create a little oasis. "Despite being a fulltime student joining this group is a little oasis of creativity during my challenging coursework. I believe the entrepreneurship lab is my outlet to learn and create a program that will benefit a plethora of people" (Student M.). During COVID-19, we implemented four new strategies to increase the value of our virtual lab:

1. Pitching to Deans

The professors wanted to provide an opportunity for cohort members to practice their pitches to our deans who are experts in the fields of business and social work and receive feedback for advancing their enterprise plans. Additionally, all of us felt honored to have very busy professionals spend time with us and acknowledge the work all of us are doing. In the words of Student R, who pitched, "I truly felt honored to have this very unique opportunity to share such a personal project with them. Their input gave my project new wings for if they could see the possibility in my project, then I must be on to something. Their support has served as a reinforcement for me to keep working towards making my vision a reality."

2. Building External Relationships

Building new relationships is difficult enough during "normal" periods, but during a crisis it is even more complicated. The complexity did not stop us. In order to reach out to community members for new connections and to promote the nonprofit organizations that our students had launched, we started an Instagram account for the lab. We then started inviting guest speakers for our WebEx sessions. These two initiatives led us to work with the university's marketing team to design and launch a weekly Instagram Live show featuring entrepreneurs and enterprise leaders who are interested in sharing their knowledge and supporting our students with coaching and mentorship opportunities.

3. Helping Others

As social entrepreneurs, both the faculty and students are intently focused on helping others. While the cohort regularly helps cohort members, the professors thought some of the students would appreciate the opportunity to go through a group reflection process and co-author papers that have the potential to inform others about innovative teaching methods and about social entrepreneurship. It is our hope that we can inspire other universities to offer similar programming to their students.

4. We Never Stop

The final change we made occurred during the last week of the semester. Most extracurricular programs typically shut down for the summer, which was the professors' original plan; however, given the fact that entrepreneurs never stop, it felt wrong to stop supporting our social entrepreneurs who made significant progress over the semester. Thus, if there was interest within the cohort to

continue working together over the summer, we decided we wouldn't stop. The consensus among the students was to not stop and continue advancing our work.

Overcoming Challenges

The lab was designed and launched in just nine months. We launched it in an entrepreneurial way; it's what we call "design on the run." Because there was not enough time to fully plan prior to the launch, we knew we needed to be agile and adjust as needed. Little did we know how well our "design on the run" strategy prepared us for the COVID-19 crisis. In our "VUCA" world characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, it is impossible to prepare for all potential outcomes. However, it is possible to be agile and adaptable to changing conditions, thus enabling us to break down barriers to our growth and development, which is what we continue to do.

Being online together provides students with a focused time to work on clarifying their visions for their emerging organizations. As one student noted: ". . . the entrepreneurship lab helps me stay focused despite the uncertainties we might face in the future" (Student M.). And another student noted:

> During this complicated time of coronavirus, [this] has served as a grounding source for me and as a vehicle to push me along on my project and not get complacent. I must admit that if I had not been participating in the lab, I would not have the clarity on what I need to do to move my project forward for I would have put it in the back burner to do it when I have time, which is never. (Student R.)

Looking Ahead

As learning partners, we are all committed to advancing our learning through doing. There are three new areas on which we are now focusing.

Special Events

To further spur students' inspiration and increase visibility of their work, we will host an enterprise showcase during the fall semester and a pitch competition in the spring, both being designed so they can be held on campus or virtually. Scholarship prize money will be awarded to winners of the pitch competition.

Onboarding

After analyzing the students' reflection journals, it was clear that having an effective onboarding process that is welcoming and provides psychological safety is vital to students' success in the lab. As one student noted: "During that first meeting with the advisor, I was able to air out my insecurities, vulnerabilities and fears. He was instrumental in providing me with the security that I have the ability to overcome those challenges and build the future that I want." (Student R)

Check-ins

There were a few students whose participation waxed and waned over the course of the transition to a fully online weekly meeting. We learned that it is critical to connect with missing students and the importance of maintaining individual consultations so that students do not feel isolated as we move forward together into an uncertain future.

Conclusion

We are proud to say that we didn't miss a beat. While the uncertainty of the times was unnerving, we were able

to build a virtual, experiential learning environment that remains comforting, inspirational, and productive. As one of the students stated, "I leave our meetings with a sense of accomplishment and comradery. I feel blessed to be part of this" (Student R.); as do all of us! ■

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