Navigating Entrepreneurship
FINDING AN INTERNAL CHAMPION
Q&A with the New Curriculum and Training Fellows

Christine Mollenkopf-Pigsley, of Dakota County Technical College in Rosemount, Minnesota, and Amy Valente, of Cayuga Community College in Auburn, New York, are already hard at work as NACCE’s first Curriculum and Training Fellows. Here they answer questions on teaching entrepreneurship.

Q: WHAT ARE THE KEYS TO SUCCESS IN TEACHING ENTREPRENEURSHIP?

Amy: To be successful in teaching entrepreneurship, educators need to connect with students in a meaningful way across all disciplines. It’s not just about providing students with information on how to start a business; it is about showing students how they can create a successful business based on their own ideas using an experiential approach. It is important to provide students with access to a variety of people, organizations and tools that can help them take their business ideas further. It is a mentoring approach that allows for brainstorming of their ideas with entrepreneurial experts. At the same time, the approach provides students with a proven toolkit that moves them further into implementation of their business ideas.

Christine: Entrepreneurship is unique in that it is more than just a technical skill; it is a mindset that aligns in some ways to the creative and critical thinking that is taught in the liberal arts. As such, we have to not only teach our students the technical skills, such as financial management or marketing themselves, but how to be innovative and add value in their sphere of influence. But how does this happen? I believe it comes from the real world experience and authenticity of those who instruct current and future entrepreneurs. As an educator I not only share with my students the methodology, but seek to deconstruct a problem or situation and generate a sufficient level of chaos to stimulate their ability to react and use the tools I have offered in the curriculum. I also seek to connect students to the reality of entrepreneurship and small business where mistakes happen and retooling is warranted. There is a fine line between no fear of risk and acceptable limits with realism at the core. In the end, we are preparing our students for uncertainty and the responsibility for their own future and that of those they will hire through their enterprise.

Q: WHAT CHALLENGES ARE INVOLVED WITH DEVELOPING CURRICULA FOR TEACHING ENTREPRENEURSHIP TO TRADITIONAL STUDENTS? HOW ABOUT FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS OR CLASSROOMS MIXED WITH TRADITIONAL AND NONTRADITIONAL?

Amy: Some of the challenges in developing entrepreneurship curricula for traditional students involve incorporation of knowledge and skills related to the newest generation’s strengths and weaknesses. Students coming out of high
school today grew up with technology and the Internet, yet often lack basic business and effective communication skills. Non-traditional students have more experience in the working world, yet may lack the technical abilities that are necessary to be productive and competitive as an entrepreneur. When classrooms are mixed, the curriculum needs to incorporate many opportunities for students to share what they know and bridge the various gaps in knowledge.

**Christine:** What is traditional today? At Dakota County Technical College we have many more mature students than 18 year olds. What I do note is that each population or demographic has talents, and I spend my time as an instructor mixing them up much like the Stone Soup story where everyone brings something that makes the soup rich in flavor. I have been most successful when I pair up my “spicy students” (those who are well seasoned) with the young students where the real world life experience meets the use of technology and a higher tolerance for risk.

A great example of this is in my 2012 Skills USA National Gold Medal winning Business Planning Team. The members of the team included a 50-something re-invention student, a young student in Horticulture, a young Nano Science major, and a student who faces physical disability with the heart of a lion. I credit the diversity of their talents, their experiences, and their ability to understand their strengths and weaknesses to their amazing success.

As an instructor, this kind of diversity means you have to be on top of your game. The mixed classroom requires more engagement and applied learning. I advise the use of formative assessments throughout the semester so you can identify if the student mixture is working for you or against. Don’t be afraid to ask the group to check in on what “speaks” to their needs and what is “falling flat.” I am far too impatient to wait for the end-of-semester evaluations to understand what they are thinking if they aren’t verbalizing it.

**Q: ARE THERE ANY MYTHS YOU’D LIKE TO KNOCK DOWN ABOUT ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION?**

**Amy:** One myth about entrepreneurship education is that you need to be an entrepreneur to develop entrepreneurship curriculum. I believe it is most important to have an advisory board that can help shape the curriculum. The advisory board should be comprised of entrepreneurs in a variety of industries, local SBA, chamber of commerce, and more.

Another myth about entrepreneurship education is that it should be part of the business school degree or certificate programs. I believe that entrepreneurs will come out of all programs and educators need to properly prepare students for how to be successful. Being entrepreneurial is a state of mind, so teaching entrepreneurship requires the educator to get students to think about the world around them differently—see problems as opportunities and be open-minded and aware that there isn’t only one right answer.

**Christine:** The biggest myth I fight in my college and community is that entrepreneurship and self-employment are synonymous. As an SBDC advisor and a former Chamber of Commerce executive, I can tell you there are many businesses out there that are not entrepreneurial. It is getting harder and harder to survive in a global economy if you are not willing to innovate and change with the market you serve. Likewise, I know many entrepreneurs who work for someone else and generate the same value whether their name is on the articles of incorporation or not. We need to celebrate the role of entrepreneurship in the economy and start infusing it as a critical workforce skill. With this mindset I can see every student in higher education needing entrepreneurship education just like they need to be able to read, write and communicate.

**Q: WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH DURING YOUR YEAR AS A NACCE FELLOW?**

**Amy:** I pursued the NACCE fellowship as an opportunity to become more involved in entrepreneurship education at the community college level as a whole. I am looking forward to the research and assisting NACCE in the development of their online training offerings. Through this fellowship, I am also planning to network with other educators and share ideas about entrepreneurship education that I will be able to bring back to our college for consideration.

**Christine:** I have been working on my dissertation for the past two years on the topic of community college mission change and academic capitalism. When NACCE announced that they were going to seek fellows to spread the message that entrepreneurship is needed both in the classroom and across the institution, I was hooked. There is nothing more exciting than to bring the theoretical from the page to practice. I hope that not only will I gain a national perspective of how entrepreneurship is being infused across the two-year colleges, but I hope I can provide training tools to colleges that are interested in exploring new directions in entrepreneurship education and leveraging the five commitments NACCE has identified as critical to success.