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Arizona schools offer entrepreneurship programs

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Universities around the country are adding everything from single classes to entire majors in entrepreneurship to meet demand from students who would rather become the next Bill Gates than work for him.

In Arizona, the three four-year public universities and several community colleges offer courses, certificates or degrees in entrepreneurship.

"It's the fastest-rising field course offering in American higher education," said Paul Magelli, a scholar-in-residence at the Kauffman Foundation, a Kansas City, Mo.-based organization that conducts research on entrepreneurship education. "Nothing comes close to it in terms of the number of schools offering it and adopting it."

In 2006, more than 80 percent of two- and four-year universities offered at least one course in entrepreneurship, according to the foundation, even though some business leaders and educators question whether it can be taught in an academic setting.

Educators attribute the popularity of the courses to several factors:

- Media attention on successful entrepreneurs that has inspired students to want to go into business for themselves.
- Global outsourcing, shrinking pension funds and other trends that have diminished the job security corporate jobs once offered, causing people to seek employment elsewhere.
- The Internet, which made it easier for people to quickly open their own businesses and compete on an international playing field.

Students with entrepreneurial skills also are finding there are places for them in companies that want key people to help keep their products and services fresh and innovative.

Independence an allure

Kevin Pringles, who attends both Arizona State University and Grand Canyon University's new College of Entrepreneurship, said the allure of entrepreneurship for him and his classmates is being able to have control over their careers vs. working for a large corporation.

Pringles, 21, already has his own business, Hydro Headwear LLC, which sells hat and neck coolers that people wear to stay cool in the heat.

"I think a piece of it is people are defining this a little more broadly now than, 'I want to start my own high-tech business and be a millionaire,' " said Cynthia Kehoe, director of information and research services at the University of Illinois' Academy for Entrepreneurial Leadership. "They're defining it more as being entrepreneurial or being enterprising in whatever context fits me. So it might be, 'I'm going to pursue my career in an entrepreneurial way.' "

The entrepreneurship programs are not just housed within the walls of business schools.

Universities have started entrepreneurship programs open to everyone from engineering majors to liberal arts students.

The University of Arizona's McGuire Center for Entrepreneurship is open to students from all disciplines. ASU offers certificate programs in several of its schools and has an incubator open to all students.

Born or bred?

But there is debate over whether entrepreneurship can be taught in school.

In a 2006 study of more than 200 U.S. entrepreneurs, Northeastern University's School of Technology Entrepreneurship found that an "innate drive" motivated 62 percent of respondents to start their own businesses.

Some researchers have even tried to determine whether there is a psychological or physiological basis as to why people go into business for themselves.

Paul Portney, dean of the University of Arizona's Eller College of Management, wants to commission a study to look at cell cultures from entrepreneurs.

"To me it would be very interesting to know if people who have been over the course of their business careers involved in entrepreneurship share certain genetic characteristics," Portney said.

Although ASU offers certificates in entrepreneurship, it does not offer a full major.

W.P. Carey School of Business Dean Robert Mittelstaedt said it is more important to provide students with a well-rounded business education than to break entrepreneurship into a separate program.

"What I hear most from successful entrepreneurs is by the time they get into a business . . . they end up saying, "I wish I had more finance knowledge, I wish I knew more about marketing," " Mittelstaedt said.

Latest entry

Grand Canyon University is the latest Arizona school to get into the game with its College of Entrepreneurship, which started offering two- and four-year degrees in the field.

"The only thing we have left in America is our creativity and our innovation, and unless we recapture that spirit and we train our young people to provide for themselves . . . we're dead," said Peter Burns, founder of the Phoenix-based Institute for Entrepreneurship, which oversees GCU's College of Entrepreneurship.

While there are skills any entrepreneur needs to know to start a successful business, Rich Senopole notes that starting a new company also requires risk.

"I really think the most important thing you can do is help a person have insight into whether or not they can handle risk, that they have the propensity to not receive a paycheck every two weeks," said Senopole, director of Maricopa Community Colleges Small Business Development Center, which provides counseling to entrepreneurs.

Time tested

Despite increased attention in the media and elsewhere, entrepreneurship programs are not a new phenomenon in higher education.

The Kauffman Foundation attributes Harvard University as offering the first entrepreneurship course in 1947, according to Magelli. By 1975, 104 colleges and universities had courses. In 2006, the number was 2,136, not including for-profit universities.

Economic conditions have caused the popularity of such courses and programs to ebb and flow.

Portney and Mittelstaedt point to events such as the dot-com boom in the late 1990s as driving interest in the programs.

"I think that as much as anything got them thinking, 'Maybe I could do something myself rather than automatically going to work for someone else,' " Portney said.

Reach the reporter at (602) 444-8280.

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Your comments

my bro was in Peter Burn's class at ASU last year. This year Burn's is no longer with ASU, he's with Grand Canyon. Why did he leave ASU?...he had his attorney serve a student with papers threatening to sue this kid for essentially getting advice and ideas from Burns, and then when the kid's company was poised to make it big, Burns wanted in on the action. What a good guy.(**scott2595**, April 8, 2007 07:28AM)
