



Trusteeship *is* Entrepreneurship

Creating a culture that encourages risk-taking and experimentation requires courageous leadership.

By J. Noah Brown

MOST PEOPLE KNOW ME AS THE president and CEO of ACCT, but I am also a board member. Since 2009, I have served on the board of directors of the National Association for Community College Entrepreneurship (NACCE). NACCE is a non-profit organization for educators, entrepreneurs, and distinguished business development professionals to provide quality programs and services in entrepreneurship education and serve as advocates for “entrepreneurship movement.”

At the NACCE Conference this past autumn, I was introduced to Sara D. Sarasvathy, an extraordinary thinker and researcher, who is leading the relatively new science of *effectuation*. As the Isidore Horween Research Associate Professor of Business Administration at the Darden School of Business, University of Virginia, Sarasvathy has studied the characteristics of entrepreneurship and has identified five principles that virtually every entrepreneur seems to follow almost instinctually.

As I reflected on the job of trustees — ensuring that the institutions they govern are both resourced and effective in helping students be successful — it struck me that these same principles apply directly to effective community college governance. A good community college trustee must have an entrepreneurial spirit and the instinct to work on behalf of the colleges they govern.

Examining the five principles of *effectuation*, it is easy to see how they relate to trusteeship. First, successful entrepreneurs start with the “bird in the hand” concept. They focus on current resources and assets without worrying about what they do not have. Is this not the history of community colleges — creating vast and robust institutions by exploiting available resources and opportunities? Should trustees re-examine their institutions’

current assets and core missions in order to redouble efforts around student success and completion?

The answer is a resounding “yes.”

The second principle is applying the concept of “affordable loss.” In other words, what resources and assets is one willing to invest as “risk capital” to create a new venture or opportunity to gain desired outcomes or measurable results? Many community colleges are using this principle in order to move assets and resources to achieve greater outcomes. Trustees need to lead and enforce this behavior by creating a mutually supportive and affirming culture of risk and experimentation.

Next, as lay citizens who represent their communities, trustees have a unique and inescapable obligation to identify and leverage resources and talent from within their communities — employers, businesses, government, foundations, community-based organizations to name just a few. These organizations can round out the “quilt of expertise and resources” necessary to pull off a new venture, program, support services, whatever is needed to strengthen the institution’s mission and outcomes.

The fourth principle again involves something that community college trustees are relative experts in achieving — “making lemonade” from whatever lemons are thrown at them. In other words, entrepreneurs, like trustees, find ways of leveraging contingencies to institutional advantage. By finding new ways of exploiting these contingencies, colleges make the lemonade that nurtures and sustains programs and student services. Trustees need to embrace this culture and incent their institutional leadership and faculty to also find ways of gaining whatever advantage they can from the existing resources and assets that already pervade the campus and community.

Lastly, trustees need to be the “pilot in the plane” — that human presence that helps guide the enterprise forward toward the horizon. Just as planes are sophisticated marvels of technology and superb aerodynamics, so too are today’s community colleges. But just as the passengers on planes cannot rely entirely on autopilot to assure they arrive safely at their destination, trustees must ensure that the colleges they govern are driven through shared vision and a focus on continuous improvement and success. Fundamentally, this is the challenge and opportunity embodied by the student success and completion agenda.

So trustees are entrepreneurs. They need to help move existing resources and assets by incenting a culture of risk and experimentation. They should continually reach into their communities to identify new sources of expertise and points of leverage to assist the college leadership and faculty in moving the needle on student success and completion. Trustees need to incent and honor efforts that maximize returns — that turn lemons to lemonade — and further cement institutional standing and reputation in the community. And most important, trustees must lead with vision and courage, ensuring that students arrive at their appropriate destination without mishap or preventable failure.

So let’s make 2014 the year when trusteeship is synonymous with entrepreneurship!



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