Active Entrepreneurship Learning: An Industry-Specific Consulting Experience
for Apparel and Hospitality Students

Caroline Schumm, Emily Schrimpf, and Linda S. Niehm, Iowa State University

Introduction: Entrepreneurship education has been a hot topic for several years within academia and across university campuses (Niehm et al., 2015; Solomon, 2007). Because of this interest, universities have started to add entrepreneurship courses outside of traditional business college offerings (Daly, 2001; Niehm et al., 2015). However, despite the interest in entrepreneurship among key stakeholders, there is a lack of research on how to teach entrepreneurship to non-business majors and a lack of established best teaching practices (Doe, 2017). Research regarding non-business majors, including apparel, merchandising, and design, has revealed lower entrepreneurial intentions (EI) of starting a business due to low entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) (Doe, 2017). ESE is a measure of one's perceived confidence in their ability to engage in an entrepreneurial venture (McGee et al., 2009). ESE is measured through one's perceived entrepreneurial skill levels, such as the ability to brainstorm a business idea or understand financials (McGee et al., 2009). EI examines one's intentions to start an entrepreneurial venture. EI is measured through constructs like future intentions to start a business and saving money to start the said business (Thompson, 2009).

Doe (2017), posits that entrepreneurship curricula for non-business students need to cater to their fields of study, with an emphasis on inspiring them to action. It should not merely be cut-and-pasted from the business school curriculum. Solomon (2007) suggests that a less rigid approach to teaching entrepreneurship is needed to mimic the realities of being an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship is best taught through active learning, where students are able to engage and apply learning from the classroom (Hoffman & Bechtold, 2018; Mwasalwiba, 2010; Solomon, 2007). One way in which non-business students are able to actively engage with entrepreneurial activities, and get a sense of what it is like to be an entrepreneur, is through consulting projects for companies within their field of study (Niehm et al., 2015). The current literature does not address the impact consulting projects with a small online retail start-up retail component may have on apparel, merchandising, and design students' perceived ESE and EI. The purpose of this exploratory study was to understand how consulting projects with a start-up retail company impacted students' perceived ESE and EI, constructs shown to predict a student's future entrepreneurial objectives (i.e., starting their own business) (Doe, 2017).

Methodology: A total of seven undergraduate students (all seniors) completed an eight-week entrepreneurship course focused on creating an online business. The course is an elective, and all students enrolled indicated an interest in entrepreneurship. Three of the students had previously taken another entrepreneurship course offered within the academic department. The majority (85.7%) of students were apparel, merchandising, and design students. Five out of the seven students were female. The course consisted of lectures, writing a truncated business plan, a two-week business start-up simulation, and a three-week consulting project with a local online

retail start-up business, managed by the program's department. This study focused on student learning outcomes, specifically overall perceived ESE and EI, from the consulting project. The consulting project was structured as follows: The students were put into groups of two and three based on their complementary skills as observed by the instructor. The class interviewed the management team of the start-up to understand the baseline functioning and needs of the business. Midway through the project, student groups had a one-on-one session with the instructor to work through questions, brainstorm ideas, and receive feedback. At the end of the three weeks, students presented their areas of improvement and recommendations to the management team. Each team received feedback from the management team on their consulting projects. This feedback included clarifying questions and viability of student recommendations.

A pre-test questionnaire was electronically administered prior to the start of the consulting project. Pre-established entrepreneurial self-efficacy (McGee et al., 2009) and entrepreneurial intention (Thompson, 2009) scales were used. Upon completion of the consulting project, a post-test questionnaire was electronically administered using the same scale questions, and interviews were conducted to better understand students' experiences. Five out of the seven students participated in the pre and post-surveys. Two members of the class participated in follow-up interviews to help triangulate the findings.

Results: While the students' average pre and post consulting project ESE and EI scores did not change notably, there were several specific areas of change. Students felt more confident in their ability to: design a product or service for a customer (+0.40), determine competitive pricing and start-up funds (+0.60), along with delegating tasks and responsibilities (+0.60). Students were less confident in their ability to: deal effectively with a business crisis (-0.80) and exchange information with others (-0.80). We believe this decline was partly due to a better realization of the many elements in running a business and personal perceptions of the management team's feedback. All other scale items had minimal change.

During the interviews, students expressed that they enjoyed the consulting project and appreciated being able to apply their knowledge gained in the classroom to a real-world business environment. At least one student is reevaluating their career path to more seriously consider entrepreneurship, based on this project experience. Students also noted that the consulting project gave them a better understanding of what it takes to run a small online retail business and all the elements that need to be considered when making business decisions. The students were split on if they felt the project gave them more confidence in their overall abilities surrounding ESE. While students liked the consulting project in general, they voiced that they would have appreciated more data from the company, such as sales information on overall best-selling products, social media, and website analytics, more time with the company to ask questions, an additional interview session to allow feedback on their ideas prior to the final presentation, and more in-class workdays. The start-up business management team conveyed that they were impressed with the ideas and recommendations the students provided, to them and will work to implement the ones that they perceive to be most beneficial to the company.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Study: By participating in a consulting project, students were able to gain an understanding and awareness of entrepreneurship and the elements that go

into running a small online retail business. Project participation also increased their perceived confidence in several entrepreneurial skill areas. Educators who add consulting projects to their retail and entrepreneurship curriculum should consider the length of the project, how frequently students are meeting with the business owners, holding in-class workdays, the ability to obtain data from the business, and the type of feedback given from the business owners. Due to the small sample size, future studies should expand upon the current study. Future studies should incorporate the suggested adjustments and reevaluate the impact of consulting projects on students' ESE and EI. However, even from this limited sample, the students indicated that the consulting project gave them hands-on experience while bolstering their confidence in entrepreneurial activities, and has impacted their future career intentions.

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