

24. Developing business courses that make an impact: Rutgers Business School's Urban Entrepreneurship and Economic Development

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INTRODUCTION

By the year 2050, more than two thirds of the global population will be living in urban areas. As a result, urban areas are important hubs of commerce and human activity, and the economic development of these areas has become one of the most significant challenges of the 21st century (Boston & Ross, 1997; Gittel & Thompson, 1999; Robinson, 2007). In 2008, a vision was promulgated to create the Center for Urban Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (CUEED) to support a research, teaching and economic development project agenda that addresses modern urban challenges. Since Rutgers is a business school in a state university in the largest metropolitan area in the United States, we were uniquely positioned to also develop a course that addressed these challenges from a business school perspective.

In the Fall 2008 semester, a new course entitled Urban Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (UEED) was launched as an elective in the MBA program. The purpose of this course is to explore the many dimensions of urban entrepreneurship and economic development through an exploration of business and policy issues. We achieve this by combining elements of a traditional case based entrepreneurship course with seminar-styled discussions and a community consulting project. Since we offered the course on our Newark campus, we had a unique opportunity to have the city become a laboratory for students' education. Students in this course are directly involved in the economic development initiatives of Rutgers-Newark and CUEED. By engaging with urban issues in this course, they become better informed citizens and learn to use their business skills to impact communities and economic development.

During the first two years of running the course, students worked with a local philanthropist interested in funding local entrepreneurs. Students supported these efforts by performing due diligence analysis on applicants and making recommendations to the fund. Students also were involved in the development of marketing, business and growth plans for local entrepreneurs. In a few instances, the students proposed new programs or initiatives for CUEED. More specific details about the design of the assignments and projects are in the next section.

DESIGN AND STRUCTURE

The UEED course takes place over a standard 14-week semester. The first six weeks of the course are designed to introduce students to general concepts of urban entrepreneurship and economic development using various readings, guest speakers, and case studies. During the first three weeks of class, students read articles about urban areas and economic development and the relationships between the social problems commonly associated with urban areas. In their first written assignment, the ‘Urban Issues Memorandum’, students are challenged to identify entrepreneurial solutions to these social problems or to identify policies that have led to greater job creation and economic activity in urban areas. For this assignment, students can profile an existing approach or develop their own.

After these first three weeks, we have three weeks of case studies. The case studies are based on situations faced by real urban entrepreneurs: business planning, growth, and financing. The second written assignment is a 2000 word analysis of one of these case studies. For this analysis we ask students to draw on concepts from the UEED course and their MBA core courses to develop recommendations and implementation plans to the problems posed in the case studies.

Finally, during this first half of the course, we have several guest speakers visit the class. We then require students to discuss and dialogue about the speakers on the discussion board hosted by our course management software.

During week 6 or 7, student groups of four students are assigned (according to their preferences) to clients. The class work shifts from learning about urban areas to working on the consulting project in urban areas. The projects come from a variety of sources: the Entrepreneurship Pioneers Initiative (EPI), the NJ Social Innovation Institute (NJSII), the New Jersey Social Entrepreneurship Network (NJSE) or from requests that our Center receives from the local area. The projects generally fall

into one of three categories: business plan, marketing plan, or growth plan.

Students must complete a series of four assignments in order to get credit for completing the final project. One week after the projects have been assigned, each team is required to produce a project scope document that defines the project and presents their approach to completing it. The second assignment is a progress report which is sent to the professor after one month of working on the consulting project. The third assignment is the presentation to the client during the last week of the semester. The fourth assignment is the final report which is due to the professor during the final exam period. This report is based upon the scope of work completed earlier in the semester.

An individual assignment, the ‘policy/project memo’ is also due by the final exam week (although it could be submitted at any time during the last four weeks of class). Students are asked to reflect upon what they have learned in the course and write a two- to three-page memorandum that describes a change in public policy or a short-term project that would have an impact on urban entrepreneurship and economic development. We ask them to write this as a memo to our center.

IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES

Implementing a course such as UEED requires committed faculty and a source of clients. The faculty member should have a research and practical interest in urban entrepreneurship and economic development and be capable of both traditional and experiential teaching techniques. For our course, the clients were sourced from our own outreach programs or programs from our university partnerships. Without these sources of projects, the course does not have the experiential component.

To date more than 120 MBA students have taken the course and 30 clients have been serviced. We also have accomplished two additional objectives. Students have gained an awareness and appreciation of urban economic and entrepreneurship issues as evidenced by the two memoranda/essays that students write each term. Second, we have demonstrated the usefulness of the MBA education for business issues beyond the corporation. Students who have taken this course have also learned about social entrepreneurship and how policy issues impact entrepreneurship.

LESSONS LEARNED

There are three lessons we have learned from doing the UEED course. First, students are fully capable of doing high quality work in half of a semester (seven weeks). This counters the tradition of a ‘capstone’ or ‘integrated’ or ‘inter-functional’ team course that requires a full semester project. In the case of UEED, it was important to introduce the context and prepare students for the issues and challenges of urban entrepreneurs. Second, students value the chance to use their learning and to interact with classmates. For the UEED course, 50 percent of the students’ grade is determined by their individual effort, and 50 percent is determined by their teamwork. This seems to set the right expectations for effort and grading. Thirdly, the impact of this course goes well beyond the semester that students take it. This course requires a high degree of self-direction. Students are challenged to work individually and in teams on projects, reports, and research at the intersection of business, community development, new venture creation, urban policy and economic development. The MBA students who take this course often describe it as ‘life changing’ or ‘eye opening’ because the content, context, and commitment of the school and faculty to economic development truly transform the lives of others. In our opinion, that is what an MBA education is supposed to do.

REFERENCES

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