Entrepreneurship Education as a Third Pathway for Community Colleges: An Interview with Paul Magelli
by Janice Li North, OCCRL Graduate Research Assistant

Community colleges are typically known for their CTE and transfer offerings. Alongside these traditional pathways, however, courses, certificates and associate’s degrees in entrepreneurship point the way to a new and innovative kind of education, even a third pathway through community colleges. To explore entrepreneurship education, OCCRL’s Janice Li North interviewed Paul Magelli, Senior Director at the Academy for Entrepreneurship Leadership and Visiting Professor of Economics Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Magelli holds a Doctor of Law, honoris causa, from the University of Bristol, UK, where he helped to establish the Bristol Enterprise Centre. In May 2016, he will be awarded an honorary doctorate from Wichita State University for his lifetime achievement and visionary leadership. Paul has served as a Scholar-in-Residence at Kauffman Foundation, advising on the development and implementation of initiatives to advance entrepreneurship training and knowledge in American higher education. He continues to serve on numerous boards of technology-based firms. Magelli: We are reaching the conclusion our current implementation plan (2010–2015) so let me focus on initiatives and achievements?

Magelli: Historically, community colleges have benefitted from internal and external support, the latter especially from the Small Business Administration. Thus, a solid base of qualified instructors is in place to teach small business courses. With regard to entrepreneurship, community colleges face the same challenge the Academy has faced: a limited number of faculty who were prepared and available to teach the entrepreneurial aspects of new firm formation.

With that in mind, of 1,6315 community colleges surveyed, 1,132 (70%) offer at least one course in entrepreneurship and/or small business. We also determined that 613 colleges (38%) offer a degree or certificate program in entrepreneurship, which entails a range of courses. Importantly, it appears that community colleges make a clear distinction between small business management and entrepreneurship, which has enabled the research team to make clear distinctions about the state of entrepreneurship education and small business management.

As the former president of a community college, Parkland College, are there particular challenges that community colleges face in building an entrepreneurship program?

Turning to community colleges, do you see a similar level of activity and interest in entrepreneurship education?

Magelli:Together with Dr. Cindy Kehoe and a team of researchers, we are just completing an exhaustive inventory of entrepreneurship education in higher education around the country including community colleges — again with financial support from the Kauffman Foundation (Magelli & Kehoe 2016). Based on a review of over 1600 community colleges, the research team has determined that there has been an infusion of entrepreneurship into the curriculum, in addition to or alongside the traditional focus on small business management. You might ask, what’s the difference? Small business management entails the know-how to manage a small- or a medium-sized business. To this set of skills entrepreneurship adds the dimensions of business innovation, new firm creation, business scaling, partnerships, mergers and enterprise growth.

1. Degree-granting, accredited two-year colleges (which also included for-profit institutions) as designated by the Carnegie Classification served as the selection criteria for this study.

Dimensions of Entrepreneurship

- small-to-medium business management
- business innovation
- new firm creation
- partnerships
- mergers
- enterprise growth
- business scaling

The Academy for Entrepreneurship Leadership was established, through the support of the Kauffman Foundation, with the aim of infusing entrepreneurship across the curriculum at the University of Illinois. Could you highlight some of your main initiatives and achievements?

The Academy also participates in collaborations and activities such as the Venture Accelerator for student startups, the Enterprizeworks Incubator located in the University Research Park, Social Fuse networking events, and the Cozad Business Plan competition. And, as a new enterprise itself, the Academy received venture funding from the Kauffman Foundation with the expectation that the University would generate additional financial support to build and sustain these efforts. Groundwork is being laid for a capital campaign as part of the university’s upcoming 150th anniversary, which will define the next stage in the life of the Academy for Entrepreneurship Leadership.

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College Exemplars in Entrepreneurial Education Cited by Magelli

- Johnson County Community College (Overland Park, KS) offers a series of basic entrepreneur courses and specialization courses tailored to specific industries or business sectors.
- Montgomery County Community College (Blue Bell, PA) offers a 30 credit hour entrepreneurship management certificate that combines a range of course from business planning and business law to ethical decision making.
- Chabot College (Hayward, CA) offers a range of specialized entrepreneurship programs in music recording, real estate, and family childcare.
- Columbia College (Columbia, MI) takes concepts of entrepreneurship and relates them to specific industries such as culinary arts, automotive technology, or communication technology. Columbia College is also home to the Steven and Barbara Fishman Center for Entrepreneurship (Mr. Fishman is president and chairman of Big Lot; and the Fishman are both college alums), which offers mentorship, internships, networking, and seed capital for startups.
- Southern State Community College (Hillsboro, OH) offers an associate’s degree in entrepreneurship infused with courses in speech, ethics, law, leadership, and psychology.

Magelli: As researchers, we need to know more about outcomes: enterprises created, future academic paths, and the overall economic impact of entrepreneur education. Unfortunately, in the absence of significant longitudinal studies, we do not know the aggregate impact. This is a question and issue that begs for more study and research.

However, let me point to a different set of outcomes, or perhaps educational aims. A student who takes an entrepreneur course or who completes a program may or may not start a new business. What else do they gain from their studies? I would say they gain an understanding of law, of the economy, of public policy; they learn leadership and management skills; they acquire tools or ways of doing analysis; they learn how to develop and complete a successful project. This kind of awareness and ability can translate into a range of successful careers, not just new firm creation. Again, unfortunately, we do not have the type of longitudinal study that would document my assertion.

Do you have any final thoughts on entrepreneur education and community colleges?

Magelli: At the heart of a flourishing economy is business innovation, new firm creation, and successful ventures. These translate into a healthy mix of wealth creation, job creation, tax revenues, and a citizenry with a stake in the success of the economy and public policy. Community colleges serve as the grassroots educational foundation by meeting student demand and providing them with the kind of entrepreneurial education that will prepare them to play a vital role in these many important aspects of society. This of course calls for administrative leadership and financial investment. But I think the payoff for students and the broader economy are immense.

Alongside wealth creation, another important part of entrepreneur education is wealth distribution to meet the needs of a growing population. In this sense, the entrepreneur mindset is also one of civic responsibility. I would say that an important dimension to entrepreneur education, which we see in many corporations, is social responsibility: how to give back. This is more important than innovation or enterprise, it is the attention to the human condition.

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