

THEory into ACTion

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At the Intersection of Community Psychology and Undergraduate Business Education

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Liberal arts colleges and universities tend to lead in encouraging intergroup relations and building diverse social opportunities for students – both values that are embraced in community psychology. These principles, however, are challenged in traditional business courses in which the application of theory is exemplified with entrepreneurial success of such celebrated figures as Mark Zuckerberg or Bill Gates.

The problem with this approach is that the triumphs of those iconic “gold standards” are much less common in reality than what is portrayed in those courses. And since in the U.S. the majority of small business owners are members of diverse cultural groups, including first-generation college students, these examples are even less relevant (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). The current report highlights the impact of this shortcoming

while offering a pedagogical solution to improving outcomes of students from diverse backgrounds.

Most entrepreneurial education programs fail to take into consideration cultural challenges encountered by students of diverse backgrounds (Kauffman Foundation, 2008). The future business owners of hair salons, fitness centers, and fast food restaurants have very little in common with the role models presented to them in class. The American spotlight on independence, encouragement of taking risks, and reliance on equal opportunity are all values that are much less salient to students of diverse backgrounds (Stephens et al., 2012). In their case, more value is placed on lengthier decision-making processes grounded in security of lower-risk decisions. They also tend to lack social capital and financial foundations that can offset perceived risks in their future business ventures.

Method

One way to overcome the cultural discrepancy in business courses in the U.S. is to employ an innovative two-fold teaching approach. The method relies on two steps: 1) personal SWOT analyses to determine individual students' strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Bartol & Martin, 1991), with the goal of increasing their self-efficacy and sense of empowerment, followed by 2) built-in opportunities to identify and associate with untraditional and unexpected role models, with the goal of increasing relevance to students of diverse cultural backgrounds and expanding the idea of entrepreneurial success. This two-fold method is unique as it utilizes theory and application in a single approach – a goal valued in community psychology. It was first pilot tested in Entrepreneurship 275 at Dominican University, Brennan School of Business, in River Forest, IL.

Step 1.

In the first step of the method, the students examine the traits of average successful entrepreneurs (cf. Scarborough, 2013). In the same step, they conduct a personal SWOT analysis to determine which of their own traits help them excel and which need to be improved. The results of the personal SWOT analysis are then used to develop a unique value proposition for each student, complete with ideas for tackling existing weaknesses, before the students attempt to engage in their own business ventures.

The SWOT analysis is a framework of evaluating strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Bartol & Martin, 1991). In community psychology, it is often utilized in social marketing initiatives to promote specific community-wide behavioral responses to local challenges. In the world of business, it is common to use SWOT to analyze the value proposition of current business ventures. But applying SWOT principles to analyze one's own traits as they relate to likelihood of future business success is an innovative way to promote self-efficacy and sense of empowerment. In business education, the insights that all students, but especially students of diverse backgrounds, can gather from their personal SWOT analyses can highlight their unique strengths and reveal any obstacles that may stifle their success.

Step 2.

The second step of the two-fold teaching method of business education requires creating structured opportunities for incorporating untraditional role models that students of diverse backgrounds have more in common with. The goal of this step is to present individuals who exemplify entrepreneurial success despite their less-than-favorable circumstances similar to those of students of diverse cultural backgrounds. In order to access these individuals, educators can rely on publicly available resources. One of those resources is the U.S. Small Business

Administration's website, which provides access to 348 chapters of small businesses in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Another resource to educators is the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO) and the World Presidents' Organization (WPO), featuring business owners who use their entrepreneurial success to make a difference in society.

The key in this step of the two-fold method of teaching business education is to handpick speakers who lacked formal education; had limited English language proficiency; experienced minimal professional guidance; and did not have a buffer of social networks. Introducing students in a classroom to these untraditional role models who have succeeded despite their unique obstacles offers a crucial element of reinforcement for students navigating the opportunities and limitations of their own circumstances. Moreover, this step of the two-fold method also promotes positive feelings associated with diversity and membership in a non-dominant group – principles valued in community psychology.

Results

Students who took part in the pilot test of this innovative two-fold teaching method of undergraduate business have reported increased self-awareness and sense of empowerment despite challenges specific to their diverse background. In the course evaluations, one student wrote: "My personal SWOT analysis helped me expand my perspective and outlook of life that facilitated my developmental growth in different aspects." Another student wrote: "I am a strong believer that dimensions of culture such as language barriers and ethnicity influence or limit me from pursuing my personal goals. Developing my personal SWOT analysis gave me the confidence and motivation to believe in my dreams and most importantly in myself." Finally, another account read: "This semester I heard the testimonials of individuals, some who did not

even attend college, and I was inspired.... Too many times we look at individuals like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates and think we could never be them.”

Implications

These examples of positive feedback on the two-fold teaching method of business courses described in this report suggest innovative ways to bridge American cultural values with the unique challenges faced by students of diverse backgrounds. They also provide support for increased theoretical applicability of the two-fold approach beyond college years, and into students’ future entrepreneurial ventures. Finally, the merits of the two-fold approach can be replicated to increase self-efficacy and sense of empowerment of specific cultural groups studied in community psychology, as well as training of professionals in other fields.

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