



Entrepreneurship Group Creates Community, Shares Stories and Supports Female Students

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Within the United States, the average rate of entrepreneurial activity for men from 1996-2013 was 37%, while the average rate for women was 23% (Fairlie, 2014). Evidence has shown that this pattern extends to the enrollment of women in entrepreneurship programs in university settings (Duval-Couetil, Gotch, & Yi, 2014). However, a report by the Boston Consulting Group showed the return on investment dollars for female founded companies is twice as much as from male founders, despite females securing less than half the investment funding than males (Abouzahr, Taplett, Krentz & Harthorne, 2018). Fashion entrepreneurs, straddling the space between the creative ecosystem and the textile industrial complex, face their own set of challenges, including technical and business skills training, and supply chain management. Women are the majority in fashion programs across the country and in entry-level industry jobs, however, there is a lack of female leadership in fashion companies (Bain, 2018). Many reasons have been cited why women are less engaged in entrepreneurship, including fear of failure, occupational segregation, gender inequality (Elam, 2008; Klyver, Nielsen & Ewald, 2013; Hechavarría, Terjesen, Stenholm, Brannback & Lang, 2017) and lack of entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Wilson, Kickul & Marlino, 2007). This paper describes the development and growth of advocacy group “X”: an action-oriented, programmatic support group, which tackles these issues and provides building blocks towards an equitable startup experience. The mission is to support students wishing to explore entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial thinking in a safe, supportive and non-competitive atmosphere. “X” sits within a university-wide entrepreneurship alliance; a collaborative system that supports, promotes, and advances a culture of entrepreneurship throughout the university community. The alliance itself is part of an academic/community co-working space that fosters inclusive entrepreneurial experiences through shared makerspaces, creating sustainable social and economic impact.

The purpose of the paper is to provide insights into best practices that have emerged from the program for female student engagement, strong community creation and development of relevant programming topics. We will discuss the development and evaluation of our engaged multidisciplinary student ambassador professional development program; event creation based on student idea crowdsourcing; innovative social media activities and the establishment of an alternative event flow format. The paper will detail the steps taken to impact not only students in the program but also the local community.

While the program is administered by a Fashion faculty member with research assistants in Fashion-related fields, the goal is to engage students from across the university’s three campuses and 11 colleges. Each college submits names of both undergraduate and graduate students, from which two students are chosen to become ambassadors for the academic year. The objective of this group is provide an “advisory board” which bring students together from across the university from disparate disciplines (e.g. fashion, vet med, forestry) and enables them to have agency and ownership in the planning and execution of

events. This student-centered planning team hosts speakers, delivers feedback at events, volunteers at tabling events and expands their confidence speaking to others about their entrepreneurial ventures. The group provides funding for the ambassadors to attend professional development events in the local area. The events include topics such as local entrepreneurs sharing journeys and lessons learned along the way. Other students were able to participate in conferences that bring together the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem to discuss sustainable development, entrepreneurship, and technology, and participate in workshops designed to sharpen problem solving skills and creative thinking.

We make connections not just across the university, but also between “town and gown”. Our email list has over 622 subscribers, of whom 32% are from outside the direct university community. This enables the organization to have mixed groups at events. Students connecting with seasoned entrepreneurs and women entering the startup world/gig economy on a post-child raising career track is viewed as a valuable and unique experience. People connect to share stories and experiences, such as a landscape designer/nurse, who found a social media marketer and eventual business partner for a Juvenile Detention Center sensory garden. We purchase merchandise and goods almost exclusively from women-owned and local businesses including a nonprofit social enterprise restaurant that creates healthy employment for women overcoming crisis; a female owned bakery, which uses locally sourced products, and a locally owned branding and imprint company who produces our inclusive t-shirt line.

The main “product” put out by the group is our Speaker Series, which over two years has included: a kickoff introduction mixer; a speaker series with local and student entrepreneurs sharing their stories; an interactive presentation of various topics including intellectual property, understanding brands and unique selling points, and a monthly Podcast Club where various podcasts on topics such as Imposter Syndrome and Confidence in the Workplace are discussed. We host an end of year celebration, which brings students, entrepreneurs and professionals together in a low stress environment to connect local skills to local needs. The community built within our program has elevated the confidence, ability, and interactive skills of our students. We are addressing the disconnect felt by women of all ages as they embark on entrepreneurial journeys through thoughtful programming, connectivity and community building. Through the use of program evaluations and student feedback, the organization is adapting to community needs. Over two years the events received an average satisfaction and helpfulness rating of 4 or better (1-5 scale, with 1 being lowest; n=125). Participants provided valuable feedback on format, structure, content, event flow and time of day. One attendee appreciated a presenter’s *“honesty, and open discussion of business struggles”*, while others commented on appreciating the *“friendly atmosphere”* and how much they enjoyed the *“informal Q&A format”*. Another attendee commented that *“I’ve been really searching for a way to grow both personally and professionally and to push myself to be more engaged...This group really helped me today.”*

This year, our program piloted Instagram Stories in order to increase engagement. This was achieved through our “Instagram Takeover” in which different student ambassadors and leadership team members logged into the Instagram account to post stories throughout the week. Our email marketing is a cornerstone of our audience engagement efforts, delivering information directly to students, entrepreneurs, supporters, and other members of our community. The average open rate for all campaigns is 41.6%, which is almost double the average rate for nonprofits, which is 21.3% (Email Marketing Benchmarks, 2020).

The organization provides funding for our student ambassadors to attend professional development opportunities throughout the year. Their feedback has been enthusiastic, one student commented that “*It was fantastic to hear such inspiring stories from successful leaders*” and “*Overall, it was a very interesting and truly emotional experience for me and I do believe it has benefited me*”. One student obtained an internship and subsequently a permanent job with a local marketing startup. Overall, the lessons learned from the experience should be shared and scaled to other programs across higher education institutions so that equity in the startup environment can be addressed early in the entrepreneurial career path.

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