IDENTIFYING BENEFITS OF ENTREPRENEURIAL THINKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Entrepreneurial thinking is not just for students who want to start a business. It is a practical language for navigating the real world, no matter the discipline. When students learn through hands-on experience, test whether ideas actually work, set clear goals, and learn how to communicate value, they engage more deeply and prepare more realistically for life after graduation. Both research and classroom experience show that the incorporation of entrepreneurial elements in a curriculum closes the gap between theory and practice, helping students see how what they learn connects to real problems, real people, and real opportunities they will face beyond the classroom.

College provides students with incredible resources, but access alone does not turn ideas into action. What makes the difference is experience. Rodrigues et al. (2023) indicated that when students are immersed in hands-on, real-world learning, they develop the kind of entrepreneurial skills that truly matter: creativity, adaptability, and confident decision-making. These are the skills that keep students engaged, make them employable, and help them think beyond a single major or career path. When curricula fail to connect theory to practice, students often leave knowing the content but still doubting their ability to apply it. Higher education can start to feel abstract, disconnected, and increasingly difficult to justify, especially when students begin to question the return on their investment (Colombelli et al., 2022).

Despite this, many institutions remain locked into lecture-heavy models that reward memorization over application (Martins van Jaarsveld et al., 2025). Ironically, real-world learning already exists across campus. Nursing students complete clinical rotations. Artists work in studios. Engineers build capstones and compete in student competitions. Social science students engage in community projects. The problem is not the absence of practice. It is the absence of an entrepreneurial framework in every discipline.

Too often, students are not taught how to identify genuine needs, test whether their ideas are effective, or assess whether their efforts are viable beyond the classroom. Without that lens, students may graduate feeling like they have done a lot of work without clearly understanding how any of it translates to the workplace. Limited, inconsistent collaboration with industry and community partners only deepens this gap, leaving graduates unsure how their skills align with real labor market demands (Leiva Lugo et al., 2024).

College programs still lean heavily on theory, often at the expense of what it takes to make hands-on learning actually matter in the real world. The outcome is no surprise: students graduate knowing the material but remain unsure how to apply it meaningfully (Mngwengwe et al., 2025). Even when labs, practica, or fieldwork are incorporated, students are rarely challenged to ask the question that drives real progress: How could this work be improved, rethought, or scaled to address a current problem? A

nursing student may log clinical hours without ever being invited to streamline a process that eases staff workload or improves patient communication. A media arts student may mount a live production without learning how to draw an audience or sell tickets in large numbers. When that question is missing, experiential learning becomes an exercise rather than a catalyst. Closing this gap means designing curricula around action, experimentation, and entrepreneurial tools that teach students across disciplines to spot inefficiencies, uncover unmet needs, and test ideas where learning actually happens.

An entrepreneurial approach is the practice of disciplined problem-solving applied to real world challenges. It starts with identifying problems that matter, listening to the people affected, and refining solutions within real constraints. This approach strengthens experiential learning in any field. A nursing student improving patient discharge instructions, a computer science major designing an accessible app, or a sociology student building a community-based research project all rely on the same entrepreneurial habits: spotting opportunities, engaging stakeholders, and testing feasibility. These skills do not replace disciplinary expertise. They sharpen it. They make learning purposeful, responsive, and connected to outcomes that extend beyond grades.

Non-business programs often miss a powerful opportunity when they overlook customer-centered thinking. Real-world success, in any field, depends on whether something actually meets a need and can be sustained over time. Embedding an entrepreneurial mindset across the higher education curriculum helps students move from ideas to impact. A media arts major learns not just how to produce art, but how to attract an audience and manage financial realities. An engineering student learns to balance user needs, cost, and technical limits. These are not “business skills;” but rather skills that any discipline could leverage to improve student experiences.

The Importance of Emphasizing Business Viability

College programs should ideally move students closer to the people who matter most: customers, clients, patients, audiences, and community partners (Henderson et al., 2025). When students engage directly with real stakeholders, learning becomes more than hypothetical. They begin to understand real problems, real constraints, and real trade-offs. This is where entrepreneurial thinking takes root, when learning is anchored in the priorities and lived experiences of others. The business viability questionnaire below can push students in this direction and works just as well for business ideas as it does for community-based solutions (Kander, 2014):

My customers are _____.

Their problem is _____.

They are currently solving their problem by _____.

On a scale of 1 to 10, the seriousness of the problem is ___ out of 10.

They would spend $____ to fix this problem.

Business Viability Questionnaire

1) My customers are _____.

2) Their problem is _____.

3) They are currently solving their problem by

_____.

4) On a scale of 1-10, the seriousness of the problem is ___ out of 10.

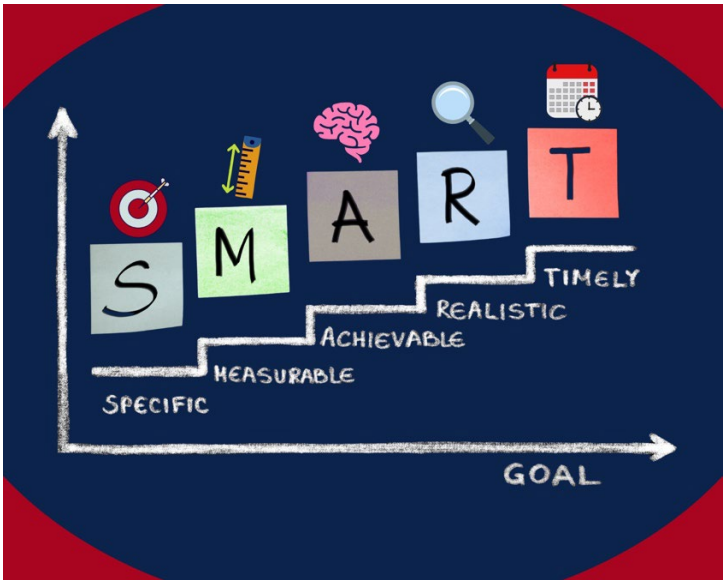
5) They would spend $_____ to fix this problem.

These five questions force clarity. Students should define who they are serving, assess the urgency of the problem, and determine whether anyone is willing to commit resources to a solution. A nursing student might focus on patients struggling to understand discharge instructions. A media arts student might treat local audiences or community partners as stakeholders and confront what it truly takes to sustain a production. In every case, students move beyond good intentions to honest viability checks.

This kind of reflection builds customer-centered thinking, a skill set that matters far beyond startups and business. It shapes better clinicians, stronger nonprofit leaders, more effective engineers, and more grounded public servants. Educators should feel empowered to adapt tools like this across disciplines, not as add-ons, but as core practices for developing entrepreneurial mindsets that translate into real-world impact.

Emphasizing SMART Goals to Promote Individualized Support

Goal setting is widely used in higher education as a measure to understand student perspectives and motivations. SMART goals, which are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound, may provide a particularly effective framework for revealing students' intrinsic interests and fostering entrepreneurial traits such as persistence and adaptive problem solving (Martins van Jaarsveld et al., 2025). When framed entrepreneurially, SMART goals help students in any program treat their ambitions as hypotheses to test through structured action in the real world.



In my GEN 101 course, I work closely with students to connect their professional SMART goals to real opportunities outside the classroom. That process sparks deeper engagement and more honest conversations about risk, effort, and feasibility. When students set goals that are specific and values-driven, they stop feeling overwhelmed and start moving strategically. This is the same approach entrepreneurs and working professionals use to break down big ideas into executable steps. For example, my former student, Samantha, wanted to open an automotive repair business with her father. She wasn't just dreaming. She was thinking through logistics, scheduling, location, and legal requirements. Together, we shaped that ambition into a SMART goal:

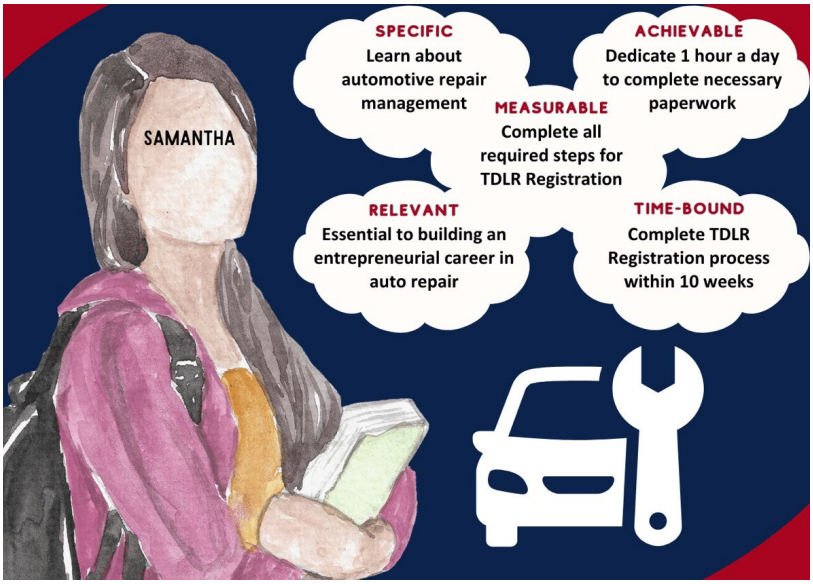
Specific: Learn automotive repair management.

Measurable: Obtain the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation (TDLR) Registration, necessary for becoming a vehicle inspection station.

Achievable: Dedicate one hour each weekday (five hours weekly) to completing the required paperwork.

Relevant: This aligns directly with her entrepreneurial objective to operate an auto repair shop with her father.

Time-bound: Set a deadline of 10 weeks for completing all necessary paperwork, with the goal of finishing earlier if possible.



Once the goal was clear, I pointed Samantha to Open Educational Resources (OER) that actually moved the needle: step-by-step YouTube guides for securing a general business license and case studies of successful auto repair shops. This kind of individualized support is now standard in my course. We focus less on abstract planning and more on building skills that students can use immediately, regardless of their major.

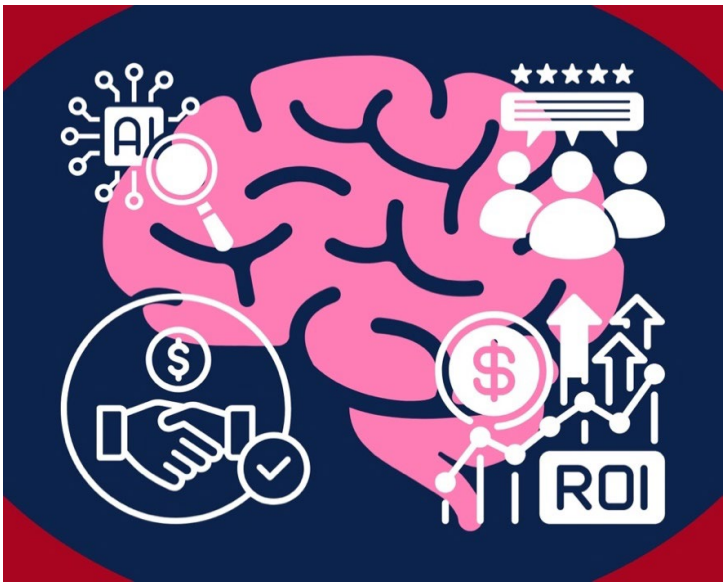
The same framework works far beyond business. A nursing student might set a SMART goal to shadow two nurses, document workflow bottlenecks, and propose a testable improvement within a four-week period. A computer science student might interview five users and revise an app interface by a fixed deadline. A media arts student might meet with local venue managers, gather audience feedback, and revise a production plan before opening night. In every case, professional SMART goals turn disciplinary work into entrepreneurial practice. They push students to act, measure, adjust, and learn. That is how entrepreneurial thinking becomes accessible, practical, and relevant across every field.

Encouraging Sales Enablement Principles and the Ethical Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Sales enablement is essentially what sales organizations use to train employees and ensure they are adding value at every customer touchpoint. In practice, sales enablement aligns teams, resources, and data so sellers can work more efficiently and consistently advance opportunities through the sales process to hit measurable revenue goals (Bookstaber, 2023). When sales enablement is integrated into coursework, learning shifts from abstract theory to applicable skills. Students stop thinking in terms of ideas and start thinking in terms of problems real people are willing to pay to solve (Peterson et al., 2020). That customer-first mindset is foundational to entrepreneurial thinking and relevant across disciplines.

AI tools can support the sales enablement process, but only when they are treated as starting points, not answers. The goal is not to outsource thinking, but to pressure-test it. Used ethically, even basic AI tools help students generate hypotheses, explore patterns, and simulate scenarios that would otherwise

be hard to access. The discipline comes in verification. Students learn quickly that AI can suggest possibilities, but real insight comes from confirming those ideas in the field.



Returning to Samantha's example, AI tools could help her scan the local auto repair landscape to identify competitors, pricing trends, and potential service gaps. That information gives her direction, not certainty. It becomes something to validate through conversations, site visits, and local research, rather than something to accept at face value.

Sales enablement principles in higher education also involves teaching students how to identify and engage with real customers. I encouraged Samantha to call her auto insurance agent and ask direct, practical questions: Where are you struggling to place repair work? Which zip codes or towns lack reliable shops? Those conversations reveal truths no algorithm can. Based on that insight, her family could choose a location where demand already exists. Once the shop opens, Samantha can follow up with the agent, clearly positioning the business as a solution to a known gap and building a natural referral channel.

This is what "trust, but verify" looks like in practice. Data informs decisions, but people confirm them (Huber, 2025). Teaching students to combine sales enablement strategies with a cautious and critical use of AI prepares them to make smarter, lower-risk decisions when the stakes are high. That balance, not blind reliance on technology, is what makes experiential learning meaningful in the college classroom.

Conclusion

Embedding entrepreneurial thinking across higher education is not a trend. It is a response to what students actually need. When programs integrate experiential learning, SMART goals, sales enablement, and practical tools like the Business Viability Questionnaire, students stay engaged, persist longer, and graduate better prepared to work and adapt. These practices develop skills that are relevant today:

creativity under constraint, comfort with uncertainty, stakeholder awareness, and the ability to make decisions when the answer is not immediately apparent.

More importantly, entrepreneurial thinking provides students with a way to apply their discipline in the real world. A nursing student improving patient education materials, an engineering team designing a prototype for a community partner, or a media arts ensemble learning how to build and sustain an audience are all doing entrepreneurial work, whether they call it that or not. When students are taught to view their projects through this lens, learning becomes more concrete. They begin to connect coursework to real needs, understand what it takes to secure support and resources, and adjust when conditions change.

This kind of integration does not require rebuilding programs from scratch. It strengthens what already exists. And when students can clearly see how their education translates into action and impact, the value of their degree becomes easier to trust. That is how higher education prepares graduates who are not just credentialed but also proactive, resilient, and ready to make a positive impact in whatever field they enter.

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