

**Developing More Effective Academic Leaders:
Lessons Learned from the Case-study of an Entrepreneurial Dean**

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Abstract

Little research is available on what makes academic leaders effective and how they can develop effective practices and skills. To address this gap, we report on selected findings from the in-depth case-study of a dean who transformed her professional school by promoting radical innovations that added value to the students' education as well as financial security for the school. This study identified several "entrepreneurial" skills, attitudes and behaviors used by this dean that could benefit academic leaders in a variety of roles. We also draw some preliminary implications about how aspiring and current academic leaders could develop the entrepreneurial skills and practices identified.

Introduction

Academic leaders in post-secondary institutions – whether they are department chairs, deans, directors of centers/institutes, or serving in other leadership roles – rarely receive training to prepare for their demanding role and there is little research about what may enhance their effectiveness. This paper explores what the field of entrepreneurship can offer to address this gap. More specifically, the main objective of this paper is to demonstrate how entrepreneurial skills, attitudes, and processes can help empower academic leaders to respond more effectively and innovatively to the increasingly complex context of higher education.

Recent educational reforms, changes in student demographics and technology have contributed to increase the uncertainty in which post-secondary institutions operate. As a result, recognizing opportunities and implementing well-thought out plans of action – which are often identified as key activities of entrepreneurs – are becoming basic prerequisites for academic leaders to be effective. However, few studies have been conducted to understand how knowledge from the field of entrepreneurship can be

applied to the field of education (e.g., Brown & Cornwall, 2000; Saboe, Kantor & Walsh, 2002; Gouws, 2002; Hentschke & Jantzi, 2005), and fewer still (e.g., Rankin, 2002; Fisher & Koch, 2004) have addressed specifically how educational leaders in higher education settings are currently using entrepreneurial skills, attitudes, and processes to improve their organizations and the education provided to their students.

To address this gap, we decided to conduct the in-depth case-study of the dean of a School of Nursing that has been radically transformed over the last eight years. This study uses concepts from entrepreneurship as analytical lenses and case-study methodology as the research approach to capture the complexity and interrelatedness of the issues under study. In this paper, we will report on the entrepreneurial skills, attitudes and behaviors that this dean employed as she initiated her major innovations, and begin to derive implications from these findings about how aspiring and current academic leaders could be supported in developing the relevant entrepreneurial practices and skills thus identified.

These findings will contribute to a better understanding of what it means to be an effective academic leader, what it takes to do so, and what benefits higher education institutions can derive from having such leaders. These findings are also intended to inform those in charge of designing and implementing programs aimed at preparing, training, and developing beginning academic leaders as well as current faculty aspiring to leadership roles in higher education. Finally, this paper will indirectly demonstrate the value of using case-studies in post-secondary education.

This presentation will contribute to the overall theme of the conference, “The World of Educational Quality,” in two main ways. First, it focuses on improving the quality of academic leaders as a key strategy for improving the quality of the education enterprise at the post-secondary level. Second, it reaches beyond the traditional boundaries of education to the emerging field of entrepreneurship for novel contributions to improve the preparation of professionals.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework informing this paper comes from a synthesis of a variety of different disciplines that have studied entrepreneurship, including: economics (e.g., Schumpeter, 1934; Casson, 1982), business (e.g., Bygrave & Zacharakis, 2004), psychology (e.g., Blockhaus, 1982), sociology (e.g., Thornton, 1999), and more recently education (e.g., Boyette & Finlay, 1993; Brown & Cornwall, 2000; Leisey & Lavaroni, 2000; Hill, 2003; Hentschke & Caldwell, 2005). While there is no agreed-upon definition of entrepreneurship (Bygrave & Hofer, 1991), there is considerable support in the current literature for conceiving of entrepreneurship not just as “starting a new business” but rather more broadly as the process of “*transforming ideas into enterprises (i.e., sustainable initiatives) that generate economic, intellectual and/or social value*” (Green, 2005). This broader interpretation of entrepreneurship is of particular interest to the field of post-secondary education, especially as we strive to develop academic leaders who can be “agents of change” within their institutions by initiating sustainable innovations that can benefit the institution and the students they serve.

While early research on entrepreneurship studied either the traits/characteristics of entrepreneurs (McClelland & Winter, 1969; Brockhaus, 1982) or the context in which entrepreneurship took place (Schumpeter, 1934; Kirzner, 1979; Casson, 1982), more recent studies on entrepreneurship challenge this artificial dichotomy to offer a more comprehensive approach to studying entrepreneurship, one that looks at entrepreneurship as a *process* (Timmons, 2004; Baron & Shane, 2005). At the core of the activity of all entrepreneurs is the “entrepreneurial process” of developing a new enterprise or innovation; regardless of the “content” of the chosen enterprise or innovation, this process involves some specific components; a number of attitudes, behaviors and skills have also been identified as supporting these various stages – such as being alert to opportunities, carefully evaluating and choosing among ideas and opportunities which ones to pursue and when, taking calculated risks, being very attentive to the “market,” thinking creatively about resources, building coalitions, and developing and implementing detailed plans (Bygrave & Zacharakis, 2004).

Assuming the broader definition of entrepreneurship identified above, in this study we will examine the practices employed by a very innovative dean as she initiated a number of major innovations. More specifically, we have tried to identify practices that she used at each the following “stages” of the process of initiating a specific innovation (adapted from Baron & Shane, 2005):

1. *Coming up with ideas for a new innovation/enterprise*
2. *Evaluating whether the idea generated is worth pursuing*
3. *Making detailed plans for the innovation/enterprise*
4. *Gathering the necessary resources (both human and financial) to launch the innovation/ enterprise*
5. *Implementing and monitoring the plan*
6. *Ensuring long-term sustainability (if and when appropriate)*

Methods and data sources

The case-study of an entrepreneurial dean reported in this presentation is part of a larger research project including the case-studies of other “entrepreneurial educators.” The subject of this case-study – Patricia Chiverton, the current Dean of the School of Nursing at the University of Rochester – was chosen because of her great success in turning her academic unit, which was experiencing serious financial difficulties, into a thriving organization as the result of many successful innovations she initiated.

An exploratory case-study approach was chosen because such a methodology is considered to be especially appropriate when context is important, multiple data sources are used, and theoretical propositions guide data collection and analysis (Yin, 2003). All these elements were present as we aimed at gaining a better understanding of how entrepreneurial educators in general, and academic leaders more specifically, could make use of entrepreneurial practices to be more effective at pursuing their mission.

A rich set of qualitative data was collected for this case-study to examine *how* this dean “transformed ideas into sustainable initiatives that add value” as part of her job. In order to do so, we designed the following sequence of interviews:

- 1) A preliminary interview with the subject, to gather background information and to identify particular innovations she initiated.
- 2) A second interview with the subject, focusing on examining how she went through the various stages of the “entrepreneurial process” in the case of a few specific initiatives.
- 3) A third interview with the subject, focusing on gathering information about the attitudes, behaviors and skills she perceived as most important to accomplish her mission, as well as characteristics of the environment that most affected her performance.
- 4) A set of interviews with a few of the subject’s close collaborators, to gather their impressions about the attitudes, behaviors and skills demonstrated by the subject as well as to triangulate information provided by the subject on specific events.
- 5) A fourth interview with the subject, to follow-up on specific issues raised by previous interviews and their preliminary analysis.

In addition to the verbatim transcripts of the interviews described above, we also collected and examined relevant artifacts – including the School of Nursing’s two most recent strategic plans, brochures advertising specific instructional programs and business lines initiated under Dean Chiverton’s leadership, the business plan prepared for a particular enterprise, and slides of presentations about the School of Nursing. One of the two authors also participated in presentations and events that could help us better understand the School of Nursing and its recent history.

All these data were coded through an iterative process using conceptual categories derived from the literature on entrepreneurship, yet also allowing for new codes to emerge as a result of the analysis. To minimize errors and biases and, thus, meet standards for validity and reliability, we systematically triangulated data obtained from multiple sources, used detailed protocols to guide each interview, employed a team of two researchers to code the data collected, and did a final “subject check” by asking the subject to review and provide feedback on a first write-up of the case-study.

Key findings

The key role of innovations

Dean Chiverton is a remarkable example of a transformational dean, from whom other academic leaders can learn a lot. As mentioned earlier, over the eight years of her deanship, her academic unit experienced a complete “turn around” as she was able to:

- o Resolve a financial deficit of about \$1 million.
- o Double the budget (from \$8 million to \$15 million).
- o Increase her faculty by almost 40% (from 112 to 155).
- o Increase matriculated students by over 30% (from about 300 to about 400).
- o Provide new and innovative learning opportunities for her students (in terms of programs, courses and internship opportunities).
- o Build a new state-of-the-art instructional wing.
- o Move the school from #28 to #13 in ranking with respect to NIH funding.
- o Receive the 2006 Empire State Gold Certification, an award that recognizes educational institutions showing outstanding leadership and highly effective programs and practices.

To achieve these highly desirable and remarkable outcomes, Dean Chiverton has undertaken a great number of radical innovations in her institution throughout her tenure as dean. These innovations spanned many different domains, but can be organized in three main categories:

- o *Instructional programs:* Innovations within this category involved the closure of some programs, the revitalization of others, as well as the creation of new programs. Among the most significant instructional innovations we would like to highlight:
 - o The closing of the traditional nursing undergraduate program.
 - o The institution of a new “accelerated” 1-year program to prepare students with a bachelor degree in other fields.

- The creation of a new Master's in Nursing Leadership.
 - Working towards offering a new Doctor of Nursing Practice program.
 - The creation of a rich selection of continuing education courses and workshops, serving alumni as well as other nurses in the community, and offered by a newly created "Center for Life-long Learning."
- *Business lines:* Chiverton transformed the "practice" branch of her school by reconceptualizing its role (i.e., from merely an outreach function, to piloting new models of health care AND generating revenues to support the school's teaching and research missions) and successfully starting a few successful for-profit enterprises, including:
- Passport Health – a successful travel health clinic.
 - Health Checkpoint – an innovative system that enables nurses to provide health promotion advice in very effective and unobtrusive ways by capitalizing on new technologies.
 - National Forensic Nursing Institute – now an independent company (of which the School of Nursing is a major stock-holder) that provides a variety of services to support forensic nurses across the nation.
- *Infrastructures:* Innovations within this category aimed at establishing new systems, sets of expectations and practices, and infrastructures more generally, to sustain a more "entrepreneurial" culture throughout the organization. While some of these infrastructural innovations were more subtle and implicit, others were more visible, such as:
- New processes to reach curriculum decisions in a more timely fashion to capitalize on opportunities.
 - The creation of a new Center for Nursing Entrepreneurship, as both an umbrella organization to run the various new business lines established and as a "Think Tank" where new ideas for nursing enterprises could be developed and "incubated."
 - The building of a new instructional wing, providing state-of-the-art instructional technology as well as the facilities needed to accommodate the recent growth.

To give a better sense of what these innovations entailed and how they were pursued, in what follows we will describe one of these initiatives in more detail.

A concrete example of initiating innovation: Developing a new program in Nursing Leadership

The idea for this new master-level program came from realizing a potential new need in the field for nurses to take on leadership roles in areas such as health promotion and disaster management. This need was recognized in part because of Chiverton and her colleagues' own innovative practice, and the difficulty they were encountering in finding nurses with the skills they needed in the new "business lines" they were starting. Chiverton identifies this as was one of her riskiest initiatives, because the new program would "prepare graduates for jobs that were not yet there." Yet she trusted her instincts – and in the end was proven right.

Since a new Master's program required state approval, a formal proposal for the new MS in Nursing Leadership was prepared and submitted to the state, including the description of key courses and predictions about potential number of students (and, therefore, tuition revenues) as well as costs. To minimize start-up costs for the new program (and, thus, financial risks), courses were initially taught by current faculty (including the Dean herself) and a few adjunct instructors hired on short-term contracts.

The greatest challenge in launching and implementing this new program came from having embarked in this initiative without the right "champion" to lead it. While a faculty member with expertise in one of the two initial focus areas wrote the proposal to the State, she was too busy with other projects to give her full attention to this program once launched. A new person had to be hired to take on the leadership, and that slowed down progress considerably. The new leader, however, had the necessary expertise and personality to carry out the next phase of program development. She came up with a solid theoretical framework for the program, worked with the faculty to refine and strengthen the curriculum, and did marketing to attract students not only from nursing but other related areas as well. Eventually, she was instrumental to the program's success.

Chiverton recalls learning a very important lesson from this experience: never again start an initiative without having first secured the right champion!

The new program encountered a number of challenges, as in the first two years the number of students were lower than expected. However, Chiverton decided to give it a try for a couple more years, realizing that it would take a while before such a novel program could take hold. She was careful to point out, though, that she was ready to close it if enrolment did not increase after that point – and commented on the fact that most higher education institutions seem unable to eliminate programs or initiatives once they have taken hold, and she considers that a considerable weakness.

Despite these initial uncertainties and challenges, the Nursing Leadership program has proved a success. The program has added an important dimension to the program offerings of the school, in line with its mission of promoting new models of health care. It has also provided the basis and impetus for the new Doctor of Nursing Practice program that the school is currently working towards, and will be one of the first of its kind in the field.

Key entrepreneurial practices this dean uses at specific stages of the process of initiating an innovation

As we reconstructed in detail how Dean Chiverton approached the implementation of this and a few other major innovations, we were able to identify a number of effective practices she used on a regular basis to facilitate specific stages of the entrepreneurial process – as reported below. As some of these practices are common to entrepreneurs starting a new business, while others seemed more unique to her context and background, we identified the latter by marking them with an asterisk.

1. Coming up with ideas for innovations:

- o Scanning the market for new technologies and other changes that may create new needs or new ways to meet existing needs – through on-going benchmarking, reading, and participating in conferences
- o Looking at other fields for possible new solutions
- o *Reflecting on her own innovative practice to identify future unmet needs

- o *‘‘Listening’’ to people’s ideas
2. ***Evaluating whether the idea thus generated is worth pursuing***
 - o Engaging in benchmarking and market research
 - o Doing some pilot testing (to both explore market reactions and refine the plan)
 - o Conducting a financial feasibility analysis
 - o *Determining whether there is the right champion to lead the initiative
 3. ***Making detailed plans for the innovation***
 - o *Using the format and level of detail appropriate for each specific innovation
 4. ***Gathering the necessary resources to launch the innovation***
 - o *Securing the right champion to lead the initiative, and having the champion select members of the team that will work well with him/her
 - o Whenever possible, paying the needed personnel through contracts rather than as employees (to minimize financial risk if the initiative fails)
 - o Whenever possible, having people already working for the organization devote some of their time to the new project (to minimize financial risk)
 - o *Develop seed funds (through either gifts, foundation grants, or revenues from successful spin-offs) to be able to draw from for start-up funds
 5. ***Implementing and monitoring the innovation***
 - o *Securing support ‘‘from the top’’
 - o *Doing good ‘‘marketing’’ to ensure support of the innovation from all stakeholders
 - o Moving quickly, as needed
 - o Systematically monitoring the initiative – both to adjust the plan as needed and to figure out whether it is going to work out or not
 - o Knowing when to ‘‘cut your losses’’ and exit if needed
 6. ***Ensuring long-term sustainability (if and when appropriate)***
 - o *Ensuring that the initiative continues to have the right champion (finding substitutes as needed)

This list represents a finding that is both conceptually interesting – as it confirms that several entrepreneurial practices identified in business entrepreneurs can be relevant for academic leaders – and practically useful – as it provides other academic leaders with concrete suggestions about strategies to use at specific steps of the process of implementing an innovation.

Implications for the preparation of academic leaders

The findings from this case study suggest that knowing which innovations to initiate and how to implement them successfully are valuable skills for academic leaders. As clearly demonstrated in the case of Dean Chiverton, an academic leader who wants to significantly improve the institution or unit assigned to him/her cannot achieve this goal without engaging in significant innovations. As the current context within which post-secondary education institutions operate is characterized by ever increasing uncertainty and change, as argued in the introduction, it will become even more important for colleges and universities to seek academic leaders who can be effective agents of change.

Can academic leaders learn to become more effective at initiating value-added innovations? Dean Chiverton's case-study suggests that this is indeed possible. While her unique professional experiences and personality certainly played a role in her successes, our case-study has identified a number of effective *practices* that, unlike personality traits, could be learned and used by other academic leaders.

How could the “entrepreneurial practices” identified in Chiverton's case-study (as well as others that could be uncovered through the case-study of other successful transformational academic leaders) be best learned? We believe that becoming aware of these practices, and their roles at specific stages of the process of initiating an innovation, is the first and perhaps most important step. A next step could consist in learning more about how other academic leaders have used specific practices in specific circumstances, to gain a better understanding of their potential benefits and drawbacks; reading the detailed report of case-studies like the one of Dean Chiverton (Borasi, 2006), and possibly discussing it with other academic leaders, could be very helpful in this regard. We also believe that academic leaders who have become aware of the value of

developing entrepreneurial practices, and have developed a common language to talk about them, can learn a lot from discussing their own understanding and uses of these practices with a group of peers.

As more and more institutions are beginning to recognize the importance of supporting aspiring and new academic leaders through targeted professional development, we recommend that the individuals in charge of organizing such professional development take into consideration the ideas identified above. We also encourage other researchers to conduct more case-studies of successful academic leaders that could help us uncover other useful practices besides those specific to the initiation of innovations.

Conclusions

This case-study confirmed that Patricia Chiverton, a very successful dean according to all measures, consistently used practices that could be considered “entrepreneurial” to the benefit of the institution she is leading. More specifically, her tenure as dean has been characterized by a series of radical innovations that have transformed the nature and operations of her school. In undertaking each of these major innovations, Dean Chiverton used a number of specific practices that enhanced her effectiveness at each of the key stages of the process and, thus, ultimately contributed to the success of the initiative.

We believe that the entrepreneurial practices identified in this case-study may empower other academic leaders to become more effective in pursuing their institutional mission, improving the unit they lead, and meeting the new challenges today’s post-secondary institutions are facing. Therefore, we encourage both current and aspiring academic leaders to become familiar with these practices and to experiment with their use in their everyday practice.

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