

Angus Talk

Outtakes and interviews from Angus Talk radio



Fostering the entrepreneurial spirit

Angus Talk host Doug Medlock recently visited with Tom Field, director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program and the Paul Engler Chair of Agribusiness Entrepreneurship at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln's Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Here are some outtakes from their conversation.

Q: Tell us a little bit about the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program.

A: We're a program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln designed to empower enterprise builders. Our sole goal is to help the next generation of business people create, develop, sustain and grow businesses. By and large we're focused in the agricultural and natural resources space, but our vision and our hope is that we can be part of invigorating the spirit of free enterprise that, of course, is the backbone of our entire economy. Our vision and our purpose is to find the right people to take that standard up and to help them prepare for a life of leadership in the business world.

Q: How long have you been in charge of the program, and how much has it grown in the last few years?

A: It's hard to believe that four years have gone by. We're just starting into my fifth year here. It's been an absolute whirlwind and one of the greatest experiences of my career to work with these unbelievably inspirational and high-capacity young people from, really, coast to coast. We're starting to attract a national group of students, and we have grown faster than maybe we even expected.

We'll produce our biggest class this year — close to 30 really high-capacity seniors will be leaving our program. We are now working with about 110 what we call Engler Entrepreneurs — those students who are fully committed to trying to build a business, whether it's for profit or the nonprofit sector. We also service about another 100 students on top of that from a classroom and academic experience perspective.

So, we're growing. We're going to have to be careful of that because too big is not necessarily the path to greatness. But, it's been very exciting to see the kind of response we've gotten around the country.

Q: What types of projects are you working on now?

A: Well, we're an interesting program because we attract the full scope. We have everything from students working on engineering-based projects to improve irrigation systems to small manufacturing companies to food-based concepts to international development programs, nonprofits that are focused in the charitable space, students working in the education and leadership realm.

We're really a program that rather than tell students what they should be working on, we help them discover their purpose and passion. Then we work really hard to help them vet the idea, to determine whether or not there is a market pull to keep that idea alive.

So, from the minute a student comes to our program, they're going to be interacting with potential customers, which has been a lot of fun because most freshmen are not quite ready to get out of the world of just being in the testing mode. We get them out of that really quickly and right out into the heart and soul of the ecosystem of entrepreneurship.

Q: How do you think the Engler program helps to build, or rebuild in some cases, rural America?

A: From our perspective, we have the great privilege of working with the Rural Futures Institute at the University of Nebraska — a system-wide program that's multi-institutional, that's designed to reinvigorate life in rural America. We believe deeply that entrepreneurship is one of the key pillars of making that happen.

Communities are going to survive and thrive when they can produce jobs, and produce jobs in and around a lifestyle that people want and expect. Rural communities are going to have to figure out ways to attract entrepreneurs to grow business, to develop new concepts, but it doesn't mean necessarily smokestacks. As a matter of fact,

it doesn't mean that in most cases.

It really means finding those startup ventures to come in and become — heart and soul — a part of the community. To come in and change the community dramatically — with a large manufacturing plant, for example — oftentimes creates more damage than it does good. We think we're in a place to help actually build the community while we're building the business.

Q: To sum it up: The students have an idea, they want to be an entrepreneur, and this is a testing ground, a place for them to try out those ideas before they're subjected to the cold cruel world?

A: We're actually a place to let them vet those ideas. We also work very hard to help students find the idea.

We believe deeply that there's a group of students who are underserved in our educational system, and those are the students who just don't buy the status quo. They absolutely reject the entitlement mentality. They have absolutely no desire whatsoever to live by somebody else's rules for their career and be told what to do each and every day.

If I could phrase it this way: They're the creative craftsmen, that new class of almost renaissance thinkers who really believe they can make a difference in the world. We're trying to provide an environment and a culture and an organization that supports them and sustains them while they try to work their way into building something that they can call their own.

Q: At one point in history, it seems as if everybody worked for themselves, and slowly everybody came to work for one conglomerate. Will it swing back that other way?

A: I absolutely believe it will, because people are going to recognize, very quickly I think in the next few years, that the cavalry is not coming. No one's coming to rescue us, to save us. When we look in the mirror, that's the person who we're going to count on.

We love Mike Rowe's approach with the sweat pledge — look, you're going to have to get dirty, you're going to have to work hard, you're going to have to sweat, but when it's yours, the sweat and the pain

and the tough times are worth it because you're working on something you believe so deeply in. I'm just so sure that's the path forward for this country. We are just absolutely steadfast on that approach.

Q: Are you seeing contributions from students to rural economies after they complete the program?

A: What we're finding, of course, is that we're still fairly new, but we have a number of our alums who have actually gone out and are actually running companies today — small businesses of their own. We also have students who have gone out to work for existing organizations who are really value-added staff members for those organizations because they come in with a little different mind-set. They're not looking for, you know, I'm going to put in my 8-5 time, and I'm out the door. They're coming to the table, "Okay there's a problem, let's solve it. Let's solve it creatively. Let's move to the next problem and get that solved." I think they bring more of a sense of ownership to the table.

In many cases, when students first come out of school they are not yet capitalized to start a business, but they get the opportunity to go to work for existing organizations in some cases and gain some additional experience, get their feet on the ground. What we're finding is that companies are really seeking students with that different mind-set, knowing full well that that student's long-term goal is to build their own business.

Q: How do students get involved in the program?

A: We have an open-door policy to students in our minor so that students, regardless of their major that they're choosing at the university, can come participate with us. If the student wants to really dive into the pool, not just dip their toe, but get wet up to the top of their head, they can become an Engler Entrepreneur. At that point in time, we begin to invest a lot more time and energy with those students.

The best thing for students to do if they're interested in coming to see our program or getting involved with us is to go to our website, engler.unl.edu, and we would love to have the opportunity to engage with students. We've got students from Maryland to California, Texas to North Dakota, who are involved with us today.

Q: How can people apply the same entrepreneurial principles to their own communities?

A: First and foremost, it's important to



► Host Crystal Albers interviewed the University of Nebraska's Tom Field and students Lukas Fricke and Amber Burenheide for a special episode of *The Angus Report*, which featured the topic of entrepreneurship and its importance to rural communities. Digital readers can click the photo at left to access Part 1. Others can visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPAyuTF5jJw>.

have a conversation in your community with other people who are saying to themselves, "Look, I'm not satisfied with the way things are." We need to build a better mousetrap. We need to build a better system, a better product, a better service, and then to literally get into the literature.

On our website we have a great set of resources for people to use. There's all kinds of great incubators across the country who are trying to help folks. Quite frankly, don't look past Extension. Extension is working very hard nationally to help build entrepreneurial capacity inside of individual communities.

Q: What does it take to revive a small community or to even start a company in your own area?

A: I think two things. No. 1, you have to, as an individual and as a group, say, "We're

not satisfied with the way things are." We're seeing rural communities that really have been in maybe deep trouble, where a group of people got together and said, "This is not acceptable to us. We are going to change things." It's having that deep commitment to change that I think is critical.

Then it's having the grit and resilience to deal with the setbacks, because nothing's easy. If it's easy it wouldn't be worth doing and everybody would want to do it. I think grit and resilience are really the key, but when you've got a team with you, then resilience is a lot easier to pull off.



Editor's Note: Hosted by Doug Medlock, the American Angus Association's Angus Talk radio show features conversations with industry personalities from across the country. The program is broadcast each Saturday at 10 a.m. CT on Sirius XM's Rural Radio, Channel 147. Outtakes featured here are edited.