



Training Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurship program, the first of its kind, trains youth to create their own opportunities.

Story & photo by Kasey Brown, associate editor

We're a nation built almost entirely, from an economic perspective, on entrepreneurial spirit. The United States is based on an idea that people left to their own opportunities and given the chance to take the bull by the horns, if you will, and take the reins, will, in fact, create really great organizations, businesses, communities and opportunities," says Tom Field, director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln (UNL).

"We are about reconnecting a generation of people to that really sacred concept of what it means to be an American citizen. Grab your own future, define it, work for it, sacrifice for it and build something that lasts. We're unabashedly a free-enterprise, self-accountability program," he elaborates.

The program

The Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program is one of very few programs focused on entrepreneurship in agriculture. It is unique in its sole focus on undergraduate students. The program started four years ago and has been managed as a start-up organization, just like what it teaches students.

The program offers three options to engage, Field says, with three options for minors. One is an 18-credit-hour minor for those who join the program early in their college career; the second is a 12-credit-hour minor for students who join the program later or have less flexibility in their major field of study; and there is also a joint minor in leadership and entrepreneurship — the only program of its kind in the United States.

Field says the value in the program is that

students gain a strong domain expertise through their major, but they also gain practical application through the entrepreneurship minor. The minor exposes them to the realm of business start-ups, innovation and creating new opportunities by blending the skills, knowledge and perspectives from multiple areas of expertise and technical specialization.

"Much of academic training is about standing on the sidelines and commentating on games that have already happened. In the study of history and much of basic science, you're studying facts somewhat dispassionately from the stands, rather removed from the action," he says. "Our program is designed to let students step across that line and get onto the field and actually play. It's risky to take that step, but it's also where all of the opportunity lies, in our opinion. We're about getting off the sidelines and getting into the game."

Helping a business

The program helps students learn the skills to start their own business. Amber Burenheide, Howells, Neb., a sophomore agribusiness major, exhibited entrepreneurial spirit at an early age. She started her own

business in eighth grade for an FFA project because, at 14, her employment options were limited. She was already involved in 4-H, so she turned her chores into a flexible business venture.

When she started ABCChickens, she had about 400 chickens. The business has grown to 1,500 birds. She sells her chickens directly to her customers' freezers. Additionally, when the processing plant closest to her closed, she and her parents decided to start their own processing facility.

"This is great for our customers because they know the whole process — start to finish — is done by me. I also have a state license, so I can do the processing for other small producers nearby," she says.

While she's at school, she says her business still operates like normal because she pays her parents to do the feeding Monday through Friday, and she goes home to work on the weekends.

She is taking the 18-credit-hour leadership and entrepreneurship combined minor at UNL, and says her classes have already helped her business. She was able to turn her variable costs into fixed costs by prepurchasing feed and gas so she knows her exact costs.

"What I'm learning in class helps me be more efficient with full use of the chickens," she notes.

Networking

Being a part of the Engler Entrepreneurship Program has helped her gain valuable connections. Field says the program is built to let students interact with a phenomenal set of people, including many successful entrepreneurs and business people.



Field adds that in the world of business, most people have part of a great idea. To develop the idea fully, you need to be connected to people who can help come up with the rest of the idea. Burenheide notes this has helped her realize that it is okay to play to her strengths and ask for help in weaker areas.

Nick Greene, freshman in animal science with an emphasis in production and business plus a minor in entrepreneurship and leadership from Naperville, Ill., agrees. "It all revolves around networking. It's done more than just set me up for a successful future; I've learned to build networks and sustain relationships that I have already. I contribute more to my family from what I've learned. It's been a very impactful experience."

Greene is a member of the Engler Leadership Learning Community. This learning community consists of a group of freshmen taking leadership courses who are placed in the same dorm. He says that learning-community members are not required to enroll in the entrepreneurship minor, but they are exposed to the advantages of the minor and many do enroll.

He joined the program because of a passion for working hard and a recent exposure to the beef industry before starting college. He says he came into the program a bit differently than most; he had more experience with business and little experience with agriculture. His father has owned his own company for 17 years and is very passionate about entrepreneurship.

"By being a part of the Engler program, my dad and I have a lot more in common now. We're able to sit and talk for hours. I think that it's not only changed my life for the future, but it's helped relationships that I've built with people and with my family," says Greene.

Greene says a key aspect of the program is that opportunity is everywhere. He says one of Field's philosophies is that you never know from where the answer can come, so don't underestimate people, even if they are young. You are never too young to plan for the future, Greene says. This program sets students up for success with resources and steps to get there.

"You kind of have to be a mature person to be successful in this environment, because they hold you to a higher level of thinking. There are plenty of freshman mature enough to do it, though," emphasizes Greene.

Burenheide elaborates, "A lot of students don't realize what their expenses are or how hard it is to run their own business. They take a lot of things for granted. Coming from taking entrepreneurship classes, these classes tell you exactly what it is going to take to start something up or to excel at something. I

think if students realize how hard it actually is to get something started, they will be much better prepared and much more successful, even if they don't run their own business."

There are opportunities for feedback on ideas once they learn the components of starting a business. Outside of classes, Field explains that there are several business competitions in which students can compete, like the Quick Pitch Competition and the Business Plan Competition.

"The contests are a chance to practice in a safe, positive, but straightforward environment. All students in the competitions develop a business plan to take to a banker or

investors that can have legs to stand on. Their ideas may change, but they have the tools to move forward."

Burenheide agrees, "Coming in to this program, you don't need a business idea right away. A lot of students, myself included, are worried that if their business idea doesn't work or if they fail, then they shouldn't be a part of this program. That's not what the Engler program is about at all. The program teaches you to take failure, turn it upside down, inside out and then really attack it. Throughout, we learn to analyze and fix the mistakes, so we can be successful."

