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Fearless Experimentation: translating a liberal arts education to real world impact

by [Makaela Kingsley](#) • August 2, 2018



During the past five years as director of the [Patricelli Center for Social Entrepreneurship](#), I have repeatedly observed certain patterns in student learning and behavior. This post addresses two of those patterns — (1) the research-to-practice gap and (2) fear of failure — and offers concrete advice for student entrepreneurs.

Research-to-Practice gap

While the liberal arts education model has come into some question in recent years, most people argue that its emphasis on critical thinking and interdisciplinary learning has great value. Liberal arts graduates are poised to face new and evolving challenges, to devour and integrate knowledge, and act as problem-solvers. While I have found this to be largely true, I observe a weak link: the research-to-practice gap.

Liberal arts students consume extensive academic content — and in some cases create their own — but have little opportunity to apply that content in real-world situations. Sure, they are young and have plenty of “real-world”

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ahead of them, and some people argue that they are just not ready to apply the lessons of the classroom just yet. However, the research-to-practice gap prevents the deeper comprehension that comes along with applied learning. It means that students miss the chance to test and refine their own emerging ideas about the way the world works, and — even worse — it deprives the world of the impact they could have if they are unleashed to take action now.

Fear of Failure

Just as prevalent as the research-to-practice gap is fear of failure. Today's students came of age in a time when there was little room for risk. Their household finances may have been tight as a result of the Great Recession or the shrinking of the middle class. They were subjected to an onslaught of standardized testing, always feeling like the stakes were high and that one bad score could hurt their chances of success later in life. They got trophies for participation, so they never got accustomed to the character-building ego dents that come from "losing" — or the grit that develops as a result. Unlike my own children today, the framework of Carol Dweck's [Growth Mindset](#) was not embedded into their school curricula, so they missed the chance to develop the sense of optimism that breeds resilience and tenacity in the face of challenge.

All these factors and others have created a generation of college students who, by and large, are afraid to make mistakes. The vast majority of students I work with have extraordinary intelligence and empathy, but they are crippled by anxiety about doing projects with ambiguous instructions. The possibility of failure prevents them from pushing themselves outside their comfort zones, which is truly where the best learning happens.

Solution: "Fearless Experimentation"

At Wesleyan's Patricelli Center for Social Entrepreneurship, we work with student entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs, and changemakers. Our students are studying social and environmental problems, investigating root causes and competitive landscapes, and using design thinking to deeply understand these problems through the eyes of the people most affected by them. Many of these students are then innovating solutions that are aligned with their own passions, skills, and life experiences.

Two elements of our curriculum — design thinking and lean startup method — stress the importance of rapid prototyping, so Patricelli Center students

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are already aware of the “test, measure, learn, repeat” concept.

Nevertheless, when it comes time to actually do it, they can’t get out of their own way. Their lack of experience bridging research-to-practice combined with their fear of failure keep them in a holding pattern of planning and hesitation.

This year, we will roll out a new approach we’re calling “fearless experimentation.” Laced into all our programs — the fellowship, intro course, grants, advising, and more — will be assignments and prompts that get our students to test their hypotheses about social change in real world settings. These experiential learning exercises will be based on the scientific method, a concept our students have all learned previously but rarely used outside of traditional research settings. We predict that the exposure and repetition will lead them to build new mindsets and habits. Our hope is that through this approach, students will emerge with an ability to put theory into practice and the courage to do it over and over again.

Examples

We are building a number of programmatic elements that we will test during the 2018/2019 academic year. Practicing what we preach about the value of lean experimentation, we will be fearless experimenters ourselves. We’ll observe what works, what doesn’t, and why. And we’ll iterate the program elements based on what we learn.

In the Patricelli Center Fellowship course, students will run rapid, hypothetical experiments before being asked to create and test minimum viable products for their own Fellowship projects. We’ll embed these right into [the syllabus](#). For example: *Break into groups of 3. The goal for each group is to meet students you don’t already know and boost their sense of confidence. You have one hour. First, form a hypothesis about how to achieve your goal. Then, design an experiment to test your hypothesis. Think about how you will collect and analyze data. Run your experiment. Report back.*

Seed grant applicants will be asked not only what problem they seek to tackle and what their unique solution is, but what they have actually done to test their hypothesis. Applicants and teams who have engaged with real stakeholders and can show the results of this engagement will have an advantage. Patricelli Center advisors will coach them through the application process, thereby increasing the chances that all applicants reap benefits –

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not just those who ultimately receive the grants.

Mentors will call on their assigned mentees to fearlessly experiment. For each step in the students' entrepreneurial journeys, mentors will ask "what would success look like?" and students will show evidence to back their claims about what is working and what isn't. Mentors will help students celebrate and learn from the parts that don't work.

We will launch a new fearless experimentation microgrant fund. Students will be invited to apply for grants up to \$200 to run lean trials. They will report back with public blog posts that document their process, findings, and next steps.

Through these and other programmatic elements, we will attempt to build lasting skills and habits in our students. We will attempt to show them the value of fearless experimentation so they adopt it as a mindset in all of their work.

Caveats

While we work to empower our students with tools to apply their academic learning and to find value in failure, there are some liabilities to keep in mind.

Performing social impact work comes with significant responsibility. Like the a Hippocratic oath in medicine, changemakers should strive to do no harm. Social impact work has a complicated history of savior complexes and [heropreneurship](#). As amateur social entrepreneurs, our students will take heed of this when running small experiments, not just when launching big endeavors.

Likewise, we will use the academic [IRB process](#) when our lean and fearless experiments cross the line into research on human subjects. Asking a few fellow students if they feel less stressed after playing a game at the student center may not require a consent form, but considering this will be a matter of routine.

We'll also recognize that lean and fearless experimentation is inspired by the scientific method but lacks the rigor and controls of traditional academic research. Students should use it to make progress, not to draw hard conclusions.

And most importantly, we will not prioritize our own students' learning over

the needs and experiences of our communities. We will adhere to our guiding principles of reciprocity, mutual respect, and responsible partnership at every juncture.

Conclusion: the case for fearless experimentation

The tendency of academia to focus on knowledge creation without knowledge application has historically thwarted student learning and student impact. The growing culture of achievement metrics and pressure to succeed has left young people crippled when it comes to taking action.

I believe that embedding fearless experimentation into our coursework and co-curricular programs will unleash a new type of changemaker — one who can readily translate theory to practice, intelligently articulate their hypotheses about the way the world works, design lean experiments to test these theories, and be fueled rather than derailed when they are proven wrong.

This mindset and skill set will make them more effective entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs, and changemakers in their post-college lives. Moreover, it will address a gap in the liberal arts model that prevents academic institutions from living up to their full potential.

This post was inspired and influenced by a variety of books, articles, and conversations including:

- Toone, Eric. "[*The role of higher education in entrepreneurship*](#)," *TechCrunch*, Jul 21, 2016
- Fiennes, Caroline. "[*Why the Social Sector Needs the Scientific Method*](#)," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Jul. 22, 2015
- Joseph E. Aoun. *Robot-Proof: Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*. The MIT Press. 2017
- Roth, Michael S. *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*. Yale University Press, 2014
- [*Beyond 2020: Strategies for Wesleyan*](#), updated March 23, 2017

Additional posts in this series will follow, including how a fearless experimentation mindset will serve students personally and professionally, and how colleges and universities can provide better incentives to

encourage students to fearlessly experiment.

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