

Is Diversity Important When Designing Entrepreneurship Education Programs Using Successful Entrepreneurial Role Models?

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Is the profile of a successful entrepreneur the same to all university students or should the entrepreneurial role models be more diverse and representative for all walks of life, making them easier to be emulated? This research presents the five keys to running effective courses that promote entrepreneurial role models among university students.



Source: <https://michaeltasner.com/successful-young-entrepreneur/>

Entrepreneurs often report that their decision to go into business and the way they have developed their business were influenced by the examples of other people who served as entrepreneurial role models.

A role model, as it has been defined by the experts in the field, is a person whom an individual perceives as being, to a certain extent, similar to him or herself, and, due to this similarity, an individual may wish to imitate (or to specifically avoid) specific traits or behaviors of that person.

So, individuals are attracted to entrepreneurial role models they perceive as being similar in terms of their characteristics, behavior, or goals, and from whom they are able to learn specific skills or competencies needed in entrepreneurship. Several studies report that successful entrepreneurial models can have a positive impact on the attitudes of individuals towards entrepreneurship, and also on their entrepreneurial intentions.

Therefore, many initiatives developed within universities provide students with entrepreneurial role models in the classrooms, exposing them to entrepreneurial success stories in an attempt to set examples and stimulate students' confidence in their ability to start a business.

Do we all see a successful entrepreneur in the same way?

Our own study investigated how students define a successful entrepreneur. We found that the definitions given by students to a successful entrepreneur were quite diverse, such as '*a strong, persevering person who never gives up, always achieves a goal*', '*makes the most of his/her talent, succeeds in exploiting every opportunity*', '*innovates technology, wanting to do things differently*', '*successfully combines personal and professional life*', '*promotes humanity, family values*'. Also, when graduates had to choose a successful entrepreneurial role model, most of them picked up highly educated individuals, but very diverse in terms of their age, number of children, background, or business sector.

Our findings show that students have different images of entrepreneurial success and identify themselves with different profiles of entrepreneurial role models, underlining the importance of diversity when it comes to designing programs of entrepreneurship education. And the diversity should be also reflected in the range of role models promoted by such instruction (male/ female, young/old, services/ production, traditional/online businesses).

Finally, this research provided evidence that business and non-business students are impacted differently by exposure to successful entrepreneurial stories. In case of non-business students, positive influence of exposure to successful entrepreneurial models is more visible as, besides feeling more confident in their entrepreneurial capacities and feeling a greater self-efficacy, they also mentioned that exposure to successful entrepreneurial role models enhanced their understanding of entrepreneurship, stirring their interest for becoming an entrepreneur.

5 Keys to running effective courses promoting entrepreneurial role models among university students

1. Entrepreneurial role models need to be representative, comprising individuals from all backgrounds and covering a wide range of personal circumstances

In our own experiment, we discovered that business success stories impact business and non-business graduates differently. So, by including role models from a broader spectrum of society, we could inspire students of different gender, age groups, and educational backgrounds become entrepreneurs.

2. Entrepreneurial role models need to be easy to emulate

If entrepreneurs are presented as *Superwomen* and *Supermen*, then students might find their career paths hard to imitate. Students want to see examples of entrepreneurs in a context similar to theirs.

3. Entrepreneurial role models should include individuals running businesses of different size

Students aspiring to own and run a small-business need to see that other people succeeded in business by running a small business and not a big company. So, students should be made aware that to be successful, you do not necessarily need a big business.

4. Entrepreneurial role models should share with the audience real-life problems and the coping strategies

Students need to hear from their role models how and where they raised the money to start a business, how they developed their skills to run a business, what were the risks they had been exposed to and how they dealt with the risks. They may be also advised on how work-life balance could be achieved more efficiently.

5. Academics should consult students when selecting entrepreneurial role models

In our research, we considered students' own perceptions of entrepreneurial success and their preferences for specific role models (the ones they identify with, or whom they admire) in order to raise the level of their involvement and participation when we exposed them to stories of different entrepreneurial role models.

Take home message: Student Voice Matters!

“There were very interesting success stories, and our entrepreneurial intentions were influenced by the entrepreneur’s personality, his qualities and the way he acted. There have been cases of entrepreneurs who ... from being nobody became somebody. How can you not be influenced and motivated by such a situation?!”
(Female student, age 25, Psychology)

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