

Startup Corps: Solution Driven, Student Approved

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Summary

At a time when 40% of Philadelphia public high school students are struggling to find their way to graduation (Socolar 2012), an innovative approach to preparing these youth to face any obstacles they may encounter is not only appreciated, it's needed.

Local nonprofit Startup Corps encourages students to *start something real* by helping them identify an obstacle, problem or issue in their community and create an organization/business to serve as a means of bringing about a solution. Proudly 100%taught by local entrepreneurs like co-founders Christian Kunkel and Rich Sedmak, the Startup Corps process drives participants toward real-world, solution-oriented start-ups via problem-focused inquiry, strategic guidance, meaningful planning and effective execution.

Startup Corps as a Catalyst for Local Change

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It's not news that the United States is no longer leading the world in academic achievement. Philadelphia is not immune to this national trend, with the average on-time graduation rate of high school students only recently rising above 60% (Socolar 2012).

So how can communities in Philadelphia potentially re-engage students to the academic experience on an individual basis? School-related, project-driven entrepreneurship may provide a means of changing some students' attitudes toward learning.

Charles Ireland, the Assistant Principle at Jules E. Mastbaum AVTS, introduced the Startup Corps program to his school with the hope of enhancing students' basic skills and motivating students to continue their experiential, authentic learning experiences in and out of school. Ireland describes Startup Corps as "a successful program that can be used to motivate students and provide them with tangible skill sets that translate into financial and educational achievement" (Ireland 2012).

Although there is no magic pill that high school students in Philadelphia can take to guarantee the outcome of their high school experience, it is helpful to have been through a situation that required overcoming obstacles, strategic planning/execution, problem solving and assessment to measure the effectiveness of their efforts. These are some of the skills gained through identifying a problem and creating an organization/business to serve as a

means of bringing about a solution.

Program participants start the program as bright young individuals, eager to learn. But they finish as entrepreneurs who have conceptualized an outcome, planned their actions (including possibly failing and having to retool their approach) and eventually successfully navigated the project process, creating a useful tool for their communities. Again, no magic pill, but the participants that emerge from the Startup Corps program are armed with the capability to face the challenges and obstacles that may litter the path to academic and financial success.

Students Starting Businesses, Not Just Thinking About It

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Fast Company described Startup Corps as “an initiative to back youth enterprise” (2012). Startup Corps is not the only organization of its kind; there are a few other firms that have similar platforms, such as the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) and BUILD. However, the difference between other youth entrepreneurship-focused organizations and Startup Corps is that Startup Corps’ daily focus is on starting the business, not just learning about it. You may have heard of initiatives that teach children to channel their “street smarts” into

“business smarts” through business plan incubator projects. However, if those same children are not actually putting their business plans into practice, how will they be able to measure what they’ve really learned?

When asked about the difference between Startup Corps and other youth enterprise organizations, co-founder Christian Kunkel said, “Overall, I'd describe the difference in our program as follows.... We see business creation as a tool to develop life, learning and leadership skills. Through the creation of micro-enterprises that address real-world problems, students learn to learn rapidly, set and evaluate tangible goals, attract resources, network, take action, and gather real-world feedback. These skills are not uniquely valuable to entrepreneurs but are skills of personal efficacy regardless of what field you work in. They are skills that every person should consciously develop and if they do, they will be more effective in pursuing any goal they set for themselves. It is only through action that progress is made and it is only through action that lessons can be learned. When we teach students these skills, they are empowered to create the future instead of simply participating in it passively” (2011).

Startup Corps differs from other programs in another critical way: Instead of moving program participants through a network of academic modules and affixing various types of knowledge to them before administering standardized quality control tests, Startup Corps allows each student to drive his/her own learning experience,

review his/her actions for effectiveness and tweak his/her efforts where necessary

Startup Corps Success Story

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Janee Huff-Truesdale's *Pink Power* is a good example of a Startup Corps project that came about specifically to address community concerns in Philadelphia.

Pink Power, which provides electrician services within the Philadelphia area, recognizes the importance of customers' comfort level with and timely completion of the job at hand. Huff-Truesdale highlights how critical it is for women who are alone in their homes while electrical work is being done to feel comfortable with their electrician. Huff-Truesdale understands that some demographic and cultural circumstances can make a female electrician the service provider of choice within some niche markets in Philadelphia.

The business model is expandable and the aim for this and other successful Startup Corps endeavors is to eventually target similar concerns nationally and internationally.

The Effects of Startup Corps

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When asked what effects the Startup Corps program had on program participants, Charles Ireland said, "We fully expect our students to become more motivated and excited about learning as they progress in the Startup Corps program. Once our students realize they can profit from their ideas the experiential learning will become part of our blended educational model. By working with Startup Corps our students will reinforce their basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills along with strengthening their collaboration and communication skills. By working with others they will enhance their collaboration skills. By working on the business plan they will enhance their reading, writing and arithmetic skills. By critiquing their ideas they will also utilize their critical thinking skills in an environment where ideas, process and execution determine success" (Ireland 2012).

The motivation and excitement Ireland predicted are evident in Janee Huff-Truesdale, winner of Startup Corps' 2012 People's Choice award. Janee says she called her business Pink Power because of the power she felt through being capable of doing things on her own.

Looking Forward

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The eventual goal of Startup Corps is to provide every student in Philadelphia with the opportunity to start a business or nonprofit organization before graduating high

school. Startup Corps' future business model will allow the transformative effects of student entrepreneurship to permeate most if not all Philadelphia schools and communities.

According to Christian Kunkel, the contagious nature of identifying a problem and creating an organization/business to serve as a means of bringing about a solution is evident even today. Christian says Startup Corps' efforts "can have a transformative impact not just on the students involved but on the culture of a school" (2011). Kunkel goes on to say, "We've already seen this happen at schools where students outside our program see the actions our students are taking and respond with businesses of their own."

Startup Corp Founder Bios

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Christian Kunkel is a co-founder of Startup Corps. He has been involved in start-ups from a young age ranging from lawn care to event management to independent film to corporate education. Previously, he founded the ABAA, a mobile events company targeting the college demographic. Through his work at Corporate University Xchange, he developed research and evaluation systems to improve corporate universities at large multinationals around the world.

Rich Sedmak is a co-founder of Startup Corps and has been an entrepreneur since the age of 15. In 2004, he co-founded HBG Group, an affiliate-tracking technology company, and served as CEO until 2007. He is currently an adviser to several early-stage technology companies and an Entrepreneur in Residence (EIR) at The Wharton School at University of Pennsylvania.

References

References

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