Students Don't Have To Drop Out To Thrive As Social Entrepreneurs


For young social entrepreneurs, fellowships such as Thiel, Ashoka, and Echoing Green provide guidance and resources that can be essential for launching their projects without having a college affiliation. But what about those students who wish to pursue degrees and entrepreneurial ventures simultaneously?

Some schools have their own incubators and programs, such as Harvard’s Innovation Lab and MIT’s $100K Entrepreneurship Competition, while others have aligned themselves with a larger network. Enter Enactus, formerly known as Students In Free Enterprise or SIFE. Founded in 1975, the international nonprofit supports social entrepreneurs at over 1,600 colleges across 36 countries. Out of the 50 universities FORBES recently named the most entrepreneurial, 13 of them have Enactus chapters.

Enactus does not provide direct funding — that’s left up to the entrepreneurial efforts of the students or their universities — but rather it places students within a network of companies. Throughout the academic year, student groups work on projects addressing social issues within their community or beyond and present their efforts at regional and national competitions to be judged by hundreds of executives from top corporations, such as Walmart, The Coca-Cola Company, and Hershey.
The annual Enactus World Cup competition took place in Cancun, Mexico in 2013, where 32 colleges shared their projects in front of more than 300 business executives. (Photo courtesy of Enactus)

Winners of these national competitions are invited to the annual Enactus World Cup to be held this year in Beijing, where students are once again connected to and have the opportunity to impress business leaders. So not only are Enactus participants kept busy with entrepreneurial action and gain business skills during the school year, they also make valuable networking connections, essential to students whether they require funding to launch their own enterprises or want to work for companies with ties to social good after graduation.

A Push For Business Careers

What was to become Enactus was founded in 1975 by Texas attorney Robert T. Davis, who identified a disinterest by students of that generation on pursuing careers in business. Davis sought to create an initiative to encourage student involvement in business during college. Originally, it was a leadership training program centered on teaching the market economy and young enterprise, and it later evolved into a regional competition. Excitement ensued, and the program spread to 100 universities by 1980. Yet by 1982, it had collapsed to only 18 schools.

“The recession of 1981 didn’t help the industry and the program,” explained Alvin Rohrs, who took over as president and CEO after that hit in 1982. At the age of 25, Rohrs, a former Enactus participant at Southwest Baptist University and law school graduate with minimal work experience, took the challenge to renew Enactus.

With his own youthful passion and showing off the past projects of participating schools, Rohrs recruited several corporations to serve on the board and as judges at the competitions. By the 1990s, the growth had resparked, and Enactus spread nationally and globally. Now, Enactus, still under the leadership of Rohrs, boasts a network of around 400 corporate partners. About 60 staff are based in the Missouri headquarters and more than 100 others to manage the day-to-day operations of each Enactus country. The program has since grown to be more application-driven with student-design outreach projects.

“As we grew as an organization we came to understand that promoting business wasn’t as important as teaching business, and teaching business wasn’t as important as applying business skills to improve lives,” Rohrs said.

Enactus goes beyond the traditional high school or college volunteering programs in that instead of logging hours within established programs it encourages students to start their own. There are no constraints for topic, budget, or reach. Participants are simply encouraged to create economic opportunities for their local communities or look at issues much further from home. That process involves creating a business plan, if necessary securing funding, execution, and evaluation.

Enactus is an extracurricular activity for students, so it isn’t just for those who study business or entrepreneurship. What the program provides depends on the school, some having competitive enrollment and others large recruitment efforts with assigned projects. Some campuses have had
a long history with Enactus that they can boast in college admission processes. For Donte McCrary-McClain, a 2013 graduate, that was one of the reasons when he chose to attend Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania as opposed to the other 12 schools on his list.

“The passion that the students have there. It will catch you in just a couple minutes,” McCrary-McClain said.

As a student heavily involved in high school volunteer groups like Key Club, McCrary-McClain wanted to continue those efforts while also challenging himself. One such challenging projects was an identity theft campaign.

Laura Gonzalez, a 2011 graduate of the University of New Hampshire, was one of the founding members of her school’s chapter. In their second year, they were invited to the U.S. national competition where they presented a program on tax training and certifications. The project helped about 4,000 families to accurately file their taxes and amend incorrect submissions. The numbers aren’t necessarily what matters for the competition, however.

Judges for the national and world competition are chosen from the company’s corporate partners and other top business executives. (Photo courtesy of Enactus)

At each level, the judging boils down to using entrepreneurial action to empower people in a sustainable way. The handbook breaks it down into five main points:
• Consider relevant economic, social, and environmental factors
• Effectively empower its target audience
• Target people in need
• Apply business and economic concepts and an entrepreneurial approach
• Improve quality of life and standard of living for its project beneficiaries

While not all projects can be judged for sustainability, Gonzalez shared that her tax training program and several others at her alma mater have continued even as their founders graduate.

And It All Leads To Networking

As these students make differences in their communities and share their successes at these competitions, another main component is the networking. To go along with their presentations, participants also get to include a brief bio of themselves in a packet to each judge. The competitions also leave time for organized career fairs, where students can drop resume and even be interviewed.

At his first Enactus competition, McCrary-McClain was fascinated by Unilever, a consumer goods company and one of the competition’s corporate partners. While he couldn’t secure an internship that year as a freshman, he kept in close communication which led to a future internship and an after-graduation job. Gonzalez also secured a position with Unilever.

“Enactus opened a huge world of opportunities, one of them being Unilever. When we graduated, it seemed like the Enactus involvement is in the past, but I’ve been able to bring a lot of it to this job,” Gonzalez said.

Those skills, Gonzalez said, include taking ownership of jobs and challenging methodology while being intellectually humbled, always seeing and welcoming feedback. For McCrary-McClain, Enactus honed his skills on collaboration.

While some schools may support and fund their Enactus chapters, the stability of the programs and its future growth depend on student interest and efforts. That’s why Enactus recently launched a new campaign, called “See Opportunity.” The video series seeks to highlight the ability of youth to see potential and act on it. Where Enactus sees themselves growing is further expanding the alumni network, Rohrs said.

There are some easy ways for alumni to get involved. For example, Gonzalez is now becoming a part of the business advisory board for her school’s chapter. And perhaps her corporate connection can continue to support Enactus’s original mission of luring more students to business.

“For the students who get engaged they do it because they’re changing lives right now, not a lot of university students can say that,” Rohrs said. “On top of that is the idea that, ‘I’ve made myself more employable. I learned practical skills and made a lot of connections within the network.’”
As to social entrepreneurship, perhaps those efforts can be renewed for alums after they have some change in their pockets.