The Entrepreneurship Movement

Abstract: Entrepreneurship is widely accepted and even celebrated today in the United States and Canada. Since the 1980s, several economic, political, and social trends have thrust entrepreneurship into the public agenda and into higher education. This chapter provides an overview of how this “entrepreneurship movement” has been able to advance in higher education. In so doing, it frames the greater support for entrepreneurial learning and practice as not driven by financial or market incentives, but rather by pervasive economic, sociocultural and political trends unified in their enthusiasm and support for entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurship movement entails the ideation of entrepreneurship as an intrinsically positive set of ideas and values that can—or should—permeate higher education.

Entrepreneurship is widely embraced today in several sectors of society. In policy circles, there is great hope that promoting entrepreneurship is a solution for increasing employment and generating economic growth. Political leaders celebrate entrepreneurs for their creativity, talent, work ethic, resourcefulness, and risk-taking spirit. Business writers, for their part, have spawned a whole genre of books on entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship, which is not confined to those interested in launching a new business; entrepreneurial ideas are applied to a range of issues, invariably framed as positive guidelines for thought and action. Within popular culture, entrepreneurs are framed as contemporary heroes. One of 2010’s most successful movies was The Social Network, a story of Mark Zuckerberg’s creation of Facebook. The film’s plot would be unconceivable a few decades ago: a college student who devises a social network website out of his dorm room goes on to build one of the largest internet companies in the world. The success of this movie illustrates not only the cultural cache of entrepreneurs, but also the now commonly expected role of universities as sources of entrepreneurial talent and valuable high technology companies.

Indeed, today universities are expected to impart entrepreneurial skills to students, to support the formation of start-up companies, and to work productively with entrepreneurs to commercialize technologies. Moreover, initiatives to create an entrepreneurial mindset among students who may not be interested in launching businesses find support inside and outside higher education. This represents a significant change in the overall sentiment about entrepreneurship. Notwithstanding a few exceptions, the presence of entrepreneurial behaviors within the academy has traditionally been perceived as an intrusion into the scholarly and educational mission of higher education. Scholars have generally had serious misgivings about commercial undertakings, and higher education observers routinely cautioned against market-oriented and entrepreneurial values within universities and colleges. However, the unease that prevailed in the past about the commingling of entrepreneurial and academic activities seems now slightly passé. University spin-offs are commonly portrayed as the prized outcomes of public investments in higher education, and many institutions publicize their efforts at teaching entrepreneurial skills to students. While these changes underscore broad support for entrepreneurial education, some academics remain uncertain about the place of entrepreneurship in the academy, and not all are convinced that entrepreneurship can even be