The Association That Taught America to Teach Entrepreneurship

by
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Long before universities competed to build innovation hubs, launch accelerators, or advertise entrepreneurship majors, the people teaching entrepreneurship faced a more basic problem: They had no established profession.

A professor proposing a course on starting a business could expect skepticism. Was this a serious academic subject or merely a collection of business anecdotes? Could entrepreneurship be taught? What scholarship supported it? And how should a university judge faculty members whose classrooms spilled into storefronts, family firms and community organizations?

The United States Association for Small Business and Entrepreneurship helped answer those questions—not through a grand national plan, but by building a community.

USASBE grew from the International Council for Small Business, whose predecessor was organized in 1955 as the National Council for Small Business Management Development. The American affiliate was organized in 1981 and soon adopted the USASBE name. Gerald Hills, then at the University of Tennessee, became its first president while also serving as president of the international council.

That genealogy matters. The association was born at a moment when "small business" and "entrepreneurship" were related but not interchangeable ideas. Small-business education emphasized competent management of an existing firm. Entrepreneurship pushed toward

opportunity, innovation, and creating something new. USASBE put both terms in its name and helped carry American business education across that intellectual bridge.

Its early strength was not bureaucracy. It was voluntary association. Faculty members who might be alone on their campuses met peers inventing courses, running Small Business Institute projects, advising ventures, and trying to turn practice into research. They exchanged syllabi and exercises, argued over definitions, reviewed one another's work, and created the relationships from which a field could grow.

The annual conference became USASBE's most visible institution. Unlike meetings organized mainly around finished research, USASBE made room for teaching experiments. Participants demonstrated exercises, cases, consulting projects and experiential methods. A classroom innovation developed at one university could be questioned, improved, and carried to dozens of others. This was knowledge diffusion before online repositories made sharing effortless.

The association also created what emerging fields require: recognition. The Justin G. Longenecker Fellows program, begun in 1986, honored people whose teaching, writing, research, training and public service advanced small business and entrepreneurship. Later awards carried the names of Max Wortman, John Hughes and Ray Smilor. Such honors did more than celebrate careers. They gave a young discipline a lineage and told new educators that institution building counted.

USASBE's own history was not a smooth growth curve. After more than 17 years at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, it moved to Florida Atlantic University in 2006 and pursued an ambitious expansion. The financial crisis then struck. State support for higher education fell, university travel budgets were cut, attendance at the 2009 Anaheim conference declined, and Coleman Foundation scholarships that had brought in many first-time participants ended.

An organization dependent on one annual meeting suddenly confronted the same question every vulnerable venture faces: What value does it create when its traditional revenue model fails? USASBE shifted attention toward year-round member benefits, moved through a stabilizing period at Belmont University, and established a new partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater in 2013. University co-hosting of conferences returned as part of the repair.

The more consequential reinvention came in 2016. Under a planning process led by Heidi Neck, members approved a mission that defined USASBE as an inclusive community advancing entrepreneurship education through bold teaching, scholarship, and practice. That formulation was strategically precise. By then, entrepreneurship research had powerful outlets and competitors. USASBE chose the territory where its history gave it unusual authority: how people learn to act entrepreneurially.

Today entrepreneurship courses appear across engineering, medicine, design, the arts and the social sciences. Students launch companies, but they also learn to recognize opportunities, assemble resources, test assumptions and create social value. The educational enterprise is far larger than any association. Yet fields do not become legitimate simply because demand rises.

They require communities that establish standards, transmit practices, develop faculty, remember their builders and survive institutional reversals.

That is USASBE's larger contribution. It did not invent entrepreneurship, nor did it single-handedly create entrepreneurship education. It helped transform scattered pioneers into a profession. It gave educators a place to meet before their universities fully understood what they were building.

In an era fascinated by entrepreneurs as heroic individuals, USASBE offers a useful correction. Entrepreneurship itself depends on institutions—networks of trust, shared knowledge, criticism, mentorship, and memory. The association's history is therefore more than an organizational anniversary. It helps explain how entrepreneurship moved from the margins of American higher education toward its center.

Source audit and citations

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