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The Best Places for Entrepreneurs to Learn

Business schools still hold the top spot, but there are other places for you to learn.

By David Port | [Entrepreneur Magazine - April 2009](#)

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Entrepreneurs are known for gaining inspiration from unexpected sources. Some even get it from a lump of Play-Doh.

The Entrepreneur for a Day program that Springfield Technical Community College in Massachusetts brings to local elementary schools is about hands-on experience at its most tactile--and juvenile. As part of the program, kids team up to build a business based on items they design with molding clay. It's the kind of experiential learning that so many entrepreneurship education programs are emphasizing to foster big ideas and big results.

From two- and four-year undergraduate programs, to post-grad and executive education courses, to one-off workshops and strongly pedigreed, high-end curricula, the common denominator for top-notch entrepreneurship education programs is firsthand experience--putting participants in the trenches to nurture an entrepreneurial idea from start to finish. There's still room for conventional classroom lectures and textbooks, but today, the focus is on getting out and doing it with guidance from peers and experienced mentors.

"Ultimately, it's not so much about information but finding like-minded people who can support you in this quest," says Dave Galbenski, chairman of the global board of the Entrepreneurs' Organization, a networking group active in executive-level entrepreneurship education.

An entrepreneurial education starts young these days. But whether the next step for you is college, grad school, launching a venture or strengthening an existing business, you're never too old to learn more. "Entrepreneurship is a lifelong learning process," says Cathy Ashmore, executive director of the Consortium for Entrepreneurship Education, which advocates and supports the design of entrepreneurship curricula made by all their member organizations for students in kindergarten through college.

What's more, the quality, variety and depth of entrepreneurship programs have increased markedly in recent years, making it easier to find a program tailored specifically to your educational, financial and time-commitment priorities.

William Green, dean of undergraduate education at the University of Miami, where he spearheads the school's noted entrepreneurship programs, says, "This isn't a 'one size fits all' endeavor."

Four-Year Undergrad Programs

In 1975, about 100 four-year colleges and universities offered entrepreneurship programs. Now, more than 500 have them, Green says. "There's been a change in the norms of higher education. Entrepreneurship has become a mainstream activity."

The best undergrad entrepreneurship programs are typically found on campuses "where the climate is conducive to entrepreneurship," with student entrepreneur organizations, opportunities for undergrads to start their own businesses, dedicated work spaces and faculty members with strong entrepreneurial backgrounds, Green says.

Standout programs also tend to have strong ties to the local business community that they can leverage to provide students with mentors, networking opportunities and co-curricular (outside the classroom) activities, says Lesa Mitchell, a vice president at the Kauffman Foundation. Here's a look at several schools that put those ingredients together:

- **[University of Miami](#)**: The provost office, in conjunction with the Toppel Career Center, rolled out its Launch Pad initiative in 2008. Students who participate get venture coaching, participate in workshops and network. And as Green explains, it all happens outside the normal class curriculum, so "they don't have to take specific courses to consider entrepreneurship as a way of making a living."
- **[University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#)**: Green ranks UNC's "Launching the Venture" course among the finest of its kind at the undergrad level. Each year, teams of faculty, staff and students participate in a two-semester program to turn their ideas into businesses. And that's only part of the highly acclaimed entrepreneurship program at UNC and its Center for Entrepreneurial Studies.
- **[University of Rochester](#)**: The unique Kauffman Entrepreneurial Year program offers select students a tuition-free year of college to pursue their entrepreneurial endeavors. Says Green, "You get five years for the price of four."
- **[Washington University in St. Louis](#)**: Particularly noteworthy, says Green, is the school's student-owned business program in which undergrads start or acquire an existing student-owned venture and operate it. Then, upon graduation, they sell their stake to another student.
- **Other schools on the entrepreneurship vanguard**: Arizona State University; University of Wisconsin-Madison; Oberlin College; University of Iowa; California State

University, Fresno; Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Stanford University; University of Maryland-Baltimore County.

Two-Year Colleges

Sure, there's merit to holding a degree from a big-name undergrad or MBA program. But in the business world, practical know-how often trumps prestige. These days, community colleges are producing high-powered entrepreneurs for a fraction of the cost and in a fraction of the time.

A two-year associate degree provides a solid foundation for launching a venture or furthering studies at a four-year institution, says Thomas A. Goodrow, vice president of economic and business development at Springfield Technical Community College (stcc.edu) and a recognized entrepreneurship pioneer at the community college level. One advantage to pursuing an entrepreneurship education at a community college, he says, is affordability: A semester with a full course load at STCC costs about \$3,400. Another advantage is accessibility: Most community colleges have open enrollment.

Goodrow estimates that 300 community colleges offer some kind of entrepreneurship degree. The entrepreneurship program at [Johnson County Community College](#) in Overland Park, Kansas, is among the standouts. It's largely a vertical program that offers entrepreneurial certificates in 25 specialty areas, from tax preparation to pastry/baking. And many community colleges are modeling their entrepreneurship programs on Springfield Tech's, whose Entrepreneurial Institute has on-site student and professional business incubators.

Executive Education, Master's Programs and More

Entrepreneurs can be an impatient lot, says Ashmore. "It all goes back to how much time a person wants to spend in a classroom. But it's not only time--it's money."

"If you don't want to be a full-time student," adds Mitchell, "there are many excellent, hands-on, immersive programs that provide a vertically focused education in a matter of months."

An entrepreneur with an existing business who has plenty of money but not a lot of time might consider programs offered by the EO (eonetwerk.org), which Galbenski says target entrepreneurs who prefer the "drinking from the fire hose," concentrated-learning approach. EO's motto, "By entrepreneurs, for entrepreneurs," speaks to its heavy emphasis on peer-to-peer learning and idea sharing, he explains.

[The EO/Babson Executive Education Seminar Series](#) is open only to EO members--entrepreneurs whose companies have annual sales of at least \$1 million. Its content focuses on

managing a growing business and positioning an enterprise for sustained growth. The two-and-a-half-day course at Babson College costs less than \$3,500 for 2009.

Coordinated through the MIT Enterprise Forum, the more in-depth (as well as lengthier and pricier) [EO/MIT Entrepreneurial Masters Program](#) brings together 60 entrepreneurs for four days of intensive workshops each year for three years. Tuition for the program runs about \$11,000 for EO members and slightly more for nonmembers.

Another Program, [EO Accelerator](#), is open to entrepreneurs whose ventures have sales in the \$250,000 to \$1 million range. The quarterly workshops address four key issues faced by first-stage entrepreneurs in growing their enterprises: strategic planning, sales and marketing, human resources, and finance.

There are, of course, less selective, cheaper experiential options for executives seeking to bolster their entrepreneurship IQs and their businesses. Kauffman Laboratories for Enterprise Creation, a program of the Kauffman Foundation, just launched a multimillion-dollar initiative to generate new high-growth ventures, starting with an Entrepreneur Fellows program that will pair prospective entrepreneurs with select venture creation companies to take ideas to market.

[The MIT Enterprise Forum](#) is an especially valuable resource for technology entrepreneurs, offering entrepreneurship education programs (podcasts, workshops, and so on) via a volunteer-driven network of 25 global chapters. Anyone interested in or involved with technology entrepreneurship can participate--MIT grads and otherwise.

Learn for Less

In lean economic times, it's heartening to know that an entrepreneurship education need not be a major business expense. There are plenty of ways to start or continue down the entrepreneurship education path without pawning your valuables. Here are several alternatives:

Credit-free community college courses: People who want to dip a toe in the entrepreneurship education waters or want to know more about a targeted subject (how to build a strong web presence, for example) without a major investment of time or money might be best served by taking a course or two at a community college. Thomas A. Goodrow, vice president of the division of economic and business development at Springfield Technical Community College, says, "You can jump in and spend \$500 to learn how to do a business plan instead of spending that money on business cards and letterhead."

[FastTrac](#): A Kauffman Foundation program, FastTrac uses an experiential approach to help entrepreneurs create, manage and grow a successful business. It's ideal for the bargain- and time-

conscious, with half-day workshops to 10-week courses that range in cost from free to about \$1,000. Offered through public and private partner organizations in each of the 50 states, courses are concentrated in three areas: starting a business, growing a business and specialized business. FastTrac programs are largely shaped and taught by entrepreneurs. They combine facilitator-led sessions, small-group exercises, guest subject-matter experts, peer-to-peer idea sharing, and business coaching and mentoring. For those in the earliest stages of starting a business, there are workshops such as "Planning the Entrepreneurial Venture." Courses in the "Growing Your Business" category include "Listening to Your Business" and "Accelerating Your Specialized Business."

SCORE: The specialty at SCORE is mentoring via a national network of working and retired business owners and executives. Visit a local SCORE chapter to get matched with a mentor, attend workshops and tap the resource library. Most services are free.

Association of Small Business Development Centers: There are about 1,000 centers around the U.S. all geared for educating and supporting nascent entrepreneurs. Visit your local branch for a workshop or training session on some aspect of starting a venture or to delve into the resource library. Most services are free.

David Port is a Denver-based freelance writer and the author of two books, The Caveman's Pregnancy Companion and Caveman's Guide to Baby's First Year. He also writes extensively on small-business, financial, energy and environmental issues.