Business Task Force Report Discussion

Departments: Economics, Foreign Languages, Physics

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Present: Cliff Bekar (Economics), Jim Grant (Incoming Associate Dean), Marty Hart-Landsberg (Economics), Jane Hunter (Associate Dean), Tuajuanda Jordan (Dean), Harry Schleef (Economics), Art O’Sullivan (Economics), Gary Reiness (Incoming Associate Dean), Tamara Ko (recorder)

Dean Jordan: I invite you to talk about anything on your mind in respect to the task force report or the report I made to the board (they have essentially agreed not to request that we have a business program/major; are fine with us pursuing entrepreneurship on campus).

Professor Hart-Landsberg: I read the presentation, and it seems that the initial report from the task force went in many different directions while yours is more specific. Could you talk about the programs as you understand them? From my point of view, it is hard to get my hands around the task force report because there are so many different ideas.

Dean Jordan: My thoughts are that there cannot be a business program at the College just by the nature of where we are as an institution and looking at our faculty and students. What I put forward to the board is what I consider to be a compromise that can work in the context and background of a liberal arts education in general but specifically at the College. The idea is to introduce students to some basic business principles if they’re so interested and then give them opportunities to engage in entrepreneurial activities. The board wants something in the curriculum that is clearly accurate and defined, and in respect to internships and being engaged in entrepreneurial activities. Proposal introduces such activities in a gradual kind of way. In thinking about this, if we’re really going to go in that direction, there has to be a way in which faculty who are interested can be better trained in entrepreneurship. The idea is to have first set of basic core issues be on campus and clearly identifiable to students; also opportunities for faculty to learn about entrepreneurship and go for internships so they can get first-hand experience and better advisors to students. Get support to develop courses or whatever it is. If the College decides that it does want a minor, we’re well positioned to do such a minor. Gives departments/individuals flexibility as to what it is that should be offered to students. Hoped for a neutral plan. This proposal represents a hybrid of many different types of models out there; Jane really found most of these things for me. The board was fine with my cost estimates and indicated that if we get to the point of faculty buy-in, they would fully support that and provide the resources needed to make that happen.

Professor Hart-Landsberg: Entrepreneurship is a tricky concept for me as I’m not really sure what it means relative to business. When I think of internships and other opportunities, I don’t know if there is a way to say whether a person is a businessperson or an entrepreneur. Is there some distinction we’re going to make?

Dean Jordan: I don’t know if I can answer that question. I would say that anybody can be an entrepreneur and whatever we develop should not be discriminatory of someone who’s interested in business or social entrepreneurship. Most scientists are entrepreneurs because we have ideas that we are trying to sell. I don’t think it’s necessary to put such distinctions on entrepreneurships. Faculty discussions will really shape things in the way that fits their discipline best. I have no pre-defined areas/skills of people to be included.

Professor Reiness: In several of the other groups, they were interested in social entrepreneurship. Alumnus Isaac Holeman’s name came up as a social entrepreneur as he is currently building an organization to help with the delivery of medical services. There is fundraising needed for money; how do you find resources to make it viable?

Professor Hart-Landsberg: So maybe if there was an opportunity for a union to hire, that would be something for entrepreneurship?

Associate Dean Hunter: I would think so. The way I see it is that what we are trying to encourage here is students leveling their knowledge in ways that allow them to live in the world. Be effective, put bread on the table. Whole range of different ways we could think about this – from the music major to setting up a business teaching music and trying to figure out how s/he’s going to make money running lessons and ensembles.

Professor Schleef: I fail to see the connection between business and entrepreneurship; we’re only talking about entrepreneurship right now.

Dean Jordan: Because I put it in the context of liberal arts; trying to direct board towards an area that is not necessarily business.

Professor Schleef: So we shouldn’t use the word business to describe this but it always comes up.

Dean Jordan: That’s the historical context and we are currently in the transitioning stage; this process is supposed to help decouple it.

Professor Schleef: We are primarily an academic institution and we have different disciplines and that’s how it’s organized but I fail to see the connection between this and the disciplines. If you’re going to identify disciplines, then those should be identified. If you’re going to have an entrepreneurship program, then where’s the meat if it cannot be connected to all these other disciplines?

Dean Jordan: My task is to start the conversation on the campus to get people to start thinking about entrepreneurship in any way they want so I purposely did not dictate which disciplines should be engaged. If we’re thinking about a certificate, what are the ideas/skills that students need in order to get such a certificate? I left it open to departments; there is purposely no meat so that people can be engaged in conversations. I envisioned this as starting as an interdisciplinary thing and then we’ll see where it goes from there.

Professor Schleef: How will we know that we’re successful 3 years, 5 years, 10 years out?

Dean Jordan: Depends on where we’re starting. If we have a bunch of students going out getting these certificates, then we may be faster with getting a minor. If we go 3 years and no one wants a certificate, then we know that that is something we shouldn’t be doing here. This process is to get faculty thinking about it and see who’s interested and then providing resources to build a program and then giving those resources to students so they can explore.

Professor Bekar: My response to Harry’s question is that casting open an idea and just getting people to contribute doesn’t seem like a good way to start. I don’t think there’s a coherent way to this plan. I see an unhappy compromise in a political negotiation as opposed to a grassroots academic negotiation. I’m worried whether in five years we’ll be embarrassed that we have this entrepreneurship program because it doesn’t have a standing. It may start with the best of intentions but the way it’s advertised is key. If we’re adverting what we currently are doing with pre-professional training, then this will definitely push us in that direction [of a business curriculum] much faster. We do not have that pre-professional training.

Associate Dean Hunter: We do have an undergraduate bachelor’s degree; I don’t think we are without anything. We have been telling the board that we teach accounting, etc. in our courses.

Professor Bekar: All those things are true but to call it pre-professional training […]. It’s an awkward situation for me because my name is listed on the website, and a student could have chosen the College specifically because of that website. If the goal is to look for someone who’s willing to put his/her name on that site, I’m personally very uncomfortable with my name on it.

Dean Jordan: I have no idea/information of this pre- training site and how your name got on it. With respect to grassroots, it’s my understanding that for the last couple of years, there has been some effort to get this going on and it has all failed. It could be that in five years, it will have failed at the College. But it could be that it will not fail. It could be that entrepreneurship will go the way of business or it may not be. If you look at trend of last couple of years, it seems to be not be failing just yet. From my perspective as new dean, I must do something. I have provided something in which we can move in some kind of direction. When we talk about what is required for success, in developing a student holistically, there has to be a curricular and a co-curricular piece. All I did was recognize that in the presentation. For example, the curricular piece could look like this. Has that been defined? No, because the faculty haven’t spoken yet. All I did was try to provide a framework so that those who are interested have something they can build on and those who are not interested don’t feel put upon to do something. If your colleagues are interested, then just let them go and do their thing with the belief that there might just be such varied interest. Need high standard of quality and nothing will be put forth that is not properly assessed. That’s the way we’re trying to start this and another reason we’re having these conversations is to listen to where people are and maybe something will surface that has not been considered before. We’re not trying to force anything but we are trying to give people options and those who want to do it should have a way of doing it just like those who don’t want to do it should have the choice of not doing anything.

Professor Grant: Two significant problems – we have a faculty of blind people trying to figure out what entrepreneurship is. Second problem is that there isn’t any faculty member on campus right now who is a champion for this and has the resident experience who could structure the academic program. I think if those two problems were solved, it would be a reasonable thing.

Associate Dean Hunter: It’s not like there’s nothing out there to read and that we’re making a move from nowhere. Number of programs with track records that look interesting and appealing. I do think there’s a core expertise needed that we don’t have but given the enthusiasm of some critical people on this and their willingness to endorse it and the conversations we’ve had so far, there have been a fairly good response from people willing to look at this. You guys are at the most proximate because of the potential to confuse business and economics but in other areas, there are sparks being ignited from thinking of their field in a different lighting.

Professor Hart-Landsberg: There is a sensitivity to this issue and we’re worried that students will come here for that attraction and expect such a curriculum. We’re nervous about times when we go to registration, and we have students who come expecting business. I can understand the sense of entrepreneurship; that’s a different thing to me from social change (being an effective person, making the world better, being an effective community organizer). If it has something like that, which has many strands to it, but I feel better about saying that LC has it. The entrepreneurship is trickier to me because it spills over; we’ve rejected internships that don’t have enough of an academic component to it. Not saying that these are unreasonable conversations but there’s room for a lot of slippage and hard to maintain the focus but if it was “social change” instead, then I’d be less nervous about it. I do worry about what we are setting up and how it fits in with the LC mission, who’s going to direct it and how it’s going to interact with other programs. We do want to tell parents that we’re not just teaching you this but we’re also teaching you how to be better people.

Professor Bekar: If we had an entrepreneurship program here five years from now that didn’t have personal finance, would the board be happy?

Dean Jordan: Yes. I talked about social entrepreneurship and social change, and they were fine with it as long as I put in certain elements in the certificate that students could access if they wanted it. One of the concerns was that we say we have certain things but it’s hard for people on the outside to see that we have.

Professor Hart-Landsberg: We used to have a business program and the decision to kill it was the board and president.

Professor Reiness: Different board and different president.

Dean Jordan: I know that. We have to educate people on this whatever it comes out to be. If it means putting a solid fortress around economics so that people understand this is not what we do, we will do that. But to not have the conversations would be an error.

Professor Schleef: The term keeps coming up – basic business principles – and I’m not sure we’re using the same labels. Seems like basic business principles are needed for entrepreneurships to come to fruition; there are certain things that need to be done – produce a product, establish a transition and how you get that product into the ultimate client/consumer, you need to have resources, three areas that describe exactly what I said (production, market, finance). Those are three core killers of business and so it strikes me that there are obvious positions that already address that.

Dean Jordan: Yes, depends on where this goes on the campus and then we’ll worry about putting people there.

Professor Schleef: Regardless of what you name, you still have those three areas to address. I don’t see how personal finance fits anywhere in entrepreneurship; I just don’t see how that connects.

Professor Hart-Landsberg: It’s not listed in the certificate program

Dean Jordan: Personal finance is listed to show the board that these skills are being developed on campus and made available to any student who is interested.

Associate Dean Hunter: Our students were graduating without any knowledge of finance skills. However we’re doing this, whether for credit or not, we really need to provide some way for students to understand finance skills. I recommend that you read the front page of the business task force report, which summarizes everything that people agreed on.

Professor Hart-Landsberg: The law school course was included; is there one being developed?

Dean Jordan: Yes

Professor O’Sullivan: You’re talking about grassroots; do you imagine people coming from different departments to start a business in say, violin lessons? What do you imagine are the other sparks from departments?

Dean Jordan: You are the ninth department that we have met with.

Professor O’Sullivan: And did these sparks say we want our students to have accounting and finance?

Associate Dean Hunter: Not specifically.

Professor O’Sullivan: Do you think what they really want is production, marketing, finance skills?

Professor Reiness: I was hearing more along the lines of what Marty said in being a more effective person, leading social change.

Professor O’Sullivan: Hard to imagine that it doesn’t involve those three things. Sounds like the sparkers don’t understand that.

Professor Bekar: I wonder if folks understand how poorly correlated academic is to entrepreneurship. I would feel ill prepared to teach that subject.

Professor Grant: That’s why I said there’s no champion here; it has to be an expertly recognized person who’s trained in such things.

Associate Dean Hunter: I think we need a group of people who know what they don’t know

Professor Schleef: If we have a program, what would I tell these students? How can you envision a way that I could direct these students to be more than a spark but a flame? That’s what we’re talking about, right? If we have students who have ideas, how do we bring those ideas to fruition?

Dean Jordan: I can say I don’t know but try to think beyond ways of where we are right now. You first have to educate faculty and as they become more comfortable, they will become a resource for students.

Associate Dean Hunter: We have eager alumni who would be interested in mentoring students and faculty on entrepreneurship.

Professor Schleef: My solution would be to tell them to go to PSU. They have a business school and an entrepreneurship and a structure in place. Are we developing these connections?

Professor Jordan: Yes, we will not reinvent the wheel. It has to be something that works here and we are working on partnerships with other schools. We have already been talking to people to see what has been working and thinking of partnerships with alumni. We do not have the expertise here but there are people who are interested and part of my job is to provide those interested people with resources.

Professor Bekar: Why isn’t this part of the president’s strategic vision?

Dean Jordan: That started before I did this presentation but after the board meetings, it is now being inserted into parts of the strategic process.

Associate Dean Hunter: The board is focused on this theme and that’s an opportunity, and to work with the folks who are invested in us. A lot of effort has been put into reframing and divert and that has not been terribly successful. Bit of tug of war past five years or so, and trying to find a way to move forward will be more productive.

Dean Jordan: Say more definitively that we must do something. Other things will follow in relatively short order. This is the priority.