

Building Community Partnerships and Strengthening Business Education



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The hallways were full of excited kids running around on this balmy April evening. It was school concert night. The orchestra and the jazz band consisting of fifth- and sixth-grade musicians were performing. Proud parents had gathered early to get prime seats in the auditorium. I ran into a mom who worked at UConn Health Center but whom I hadn't seen for a while. After some chitchat to catch up, she asked:

“Who is the right person to contact in the business school? I run this summer intern program at UConn’s TIP (Technology Incubation Program) and would like to partner with the business school. But my emails to multiple people there have gone unanswered.”

“Oh? Tell me more about this.”

“Well, as you know, TIP hosts startups pursuing R&D in STEM areas including biotechnology, engineering, chemistry, and computer sciences. Over the summer, we partner with various UConn schools/colleges to place student interns at these startup companies to learn firsthand entrepreneurial skills for a career in biosciences and STEM. The startups and the schools/colleges jointly fund these internships. I would like to attract more business students to the program as they offer unique perspectives students from a STEM background might not have. Who do I need to talk to in the business school to get some traction for this?”

“Well, I think you are talking to the right person right now!” A month earlier, I had become the first Associate Dean of Academic and Research Support at the University of Connecticut School of Business. In addition to faculty and research-related issues, my portfolio of responsibilities also included external partnerships and collaborations. In the short amount of time since I assumed the role, I had heard from multiple sources that the business school liked to “go it alone,” was not a

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“team player,” was not interested in collaborating with others, etc. To be honest, I had been quite surprised by these “complaints” and the external reputation of our school, and I wanted to change that because I believed strongly in collaboration and partnerships. This TIP summer intern program sounded like such an opportunity with an obvious and a strong value proposition: It would help our business students learn valuable entrepreneurial skills and develop an entrepreneurial mindset that would benefit them long term, whether they wanted to be a business founder or not; it would enhance collaborations between industry and academia at UConn, and it would help grow Connecticut’s skilled technology workforce.

Externally, similar “complaints” were also voiced by companies I met with. On a tour of the downtown Hartford neighborhood with business executives and community leaders to understand innovation development opportunities, I chatted with a senior vice president of a big insurance company. When I mentioned I was from UConn, she let out a sigh that was mixed with exasperation and urgency: “Which door do I need to knock on to make some headways for collaboration opportunities with UConn?!”

Having had earlier experiences with people feeling frustrated about the business school, I was no longer surprised. Instead, I calmly offered assurance that with the new leadership at UConn, both at the university level and at the school level, collaboration was a key focus going forward, and I could facilitate a conversation to explore opportunities. Subsequently, I brought together university leaders from the research side, experiential learning side, and other schools within UConn to discuss a broad range of possible collaboration areas. As a result of those discussions, a master partnership agreement was signed between UConn and this insurance company, encompassing multiple areas of collaboration.

These were some of the early experiences in my role as the Associate Dean, experiences that were personally satisfying and professionally rewarding. It was also a leap of faith. I had no prior administrative experience. However, as I progressed in my professional career, I started looking beyond my own classroom and my research area, wanting to do more and make a bigger impact. When the school sent out a call for nominations for the newly created role of Associate Dean of Academic and Research Support, with responsibilities covering a wide range of areas such as faculty and research, centers and institutes, international partnerships, experiential learning, career services, and external collaborations, I was excited about the opportunity to expand my horizons. The two terms I served as an associate dean reaffirmed my desire to make a difference as an academic leader. Today, I am the dean of the Driehaus College of Business at DePaul University, leading a business school with over 5200 students and 200 full-time faculty and staff. What a ride it has been!

1 Changing Educational Landscape

When I took on the associate dean role in 2013, the UConn School of Business had just gone through some turmoil. I joined UConn in 2002. In those 11 years, the school had seven deans/interim deans. The constant turnover not only damaged faculty/staff morale at the school but also led to many missed opportunities, such as those collaboration opportunities I mentioned earlier. It felt like the school lacked direction and focus and was barely keeping the ship from sinking (in fact, this was what one of the interim deans said about his job). A new leadership team, with a new dean who joined UConn a year before, set out to change that rudderless drifting.

Among the many areas of responsibility in my job portfolio was external collaboration, which I saw as an opportunity to strengthen the educational experience we provide to our students and to contribute to the economic development of the communities around us. Higher education is undergoing some dramatic changes. Not only are more and more parents and students questioning the value of a college education, but competition from nontraditional entities has also heated up significantly. New entrants into the education realm, such as ed-tech companies, have provided alternative educational models that offer a different set of value propositions, focusing on specific skillset development, instead of “educating the whole person” as most universities claim to do in their mission statements. These alternative models typically offer programs that are shorter and cheaper than a degree-oriented college education, making them attractive to parents and students alike.

Another shift that has been happening in the last decade is the role of higher education in our society. In the past, universities operated as “ivory towers,” relatively insulated from the communities around them and focused on intellectual pursuits instead of economic development. Fortunately, that has been changing. Many universities now aspire to be the engines of innovation for society, which requires close collaboration with the business community and civic community around us.

With that backdrop, I embarked on my leadership roles that so far have been extremely gratifying and rewarding. In the next few pages, I will focus on my effort of building community partnerships and how those partnerships have strengthened our students’ educational experiences.

2 Experiential Learning

“Hey! What’s up?” A couple of weeks into my first semester as an international graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, fresh off the boat (well, the plane actually) from China, I was finding it rather difficult to carry on a conversation with my American classmates. Even though I had been learning English for over 10 years and had top grades in my English classes throughout those years, it seemed what I learned was not helping me much, even for simple conversations like this

greeting from a classmate in the hallway. “Um, the ceiling?” I wasn’t sure what he meant and offered the only answer I could think of.

After an awkward semester like this and realizing my English was not improving (because I mostly kept to myself and focused on studying in the library for 10 h a day by myself), I decided that I needed to find occasions to immerse myself in an English-speaking environment by actually speaking English with native English speakers. The problem was there were hardly any English-speaking students to hang out with in my program. The overwhelming majority of the students in my graduate program were working professionals who came to class and left right after to return to work. After asking around, I discovered that a group of American students from the program would meet up on Friday afternoons for Happy Hour after work in a bar near campus. I decided to join them. I went every Friday afternoon. Over a can of Sprite, I sat there and first listened to their conversations about football, baseball, and Texas politics (Ann Richards was running for governor of Texas), things I knew nothing about, then initiated conversations with them about topics I did know a thing or two about, such as my hometown in China. After a whole semester of “Happy Hour,” my ability to speak English far exceeded more than 10 years of studious effort in learning English in a classroom! Even today, I would still often tell people I learned English in a bar!

That experience, aside from improving my English, also cemented a lesson from Confucius that I had heard ever since I was a child: “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.” I didn’t know it was called experiential learning, but it was through this experiential learning that I finally learned English. As a result, in my professorial career, the first time I had a chance to put experiential learning into practice, I took it. I was assigned to teach a capstone class for the Management Information Systems undergraduate major, whose purpose was to have the students apply all they had learned through their required and elective courses, such as programming languages, website design, database management, and network design, and analyze a business problem and design an information system that would address the problem. Instead of textbook business problems that were neat and clear, I went to companies to source real business problems that could be addressed by an information systems solution. Companies understood that by working with my class, they were engaged with students who were still in college and learning important skills, not consultants who had years of real-world experience. They may not always get a finished product that could be directly implemented. However, they would always get a different perspective and some kind of prototype that they could further develop. In addition, the experience also gave them a chance to observe our students in action through the course of a whole semester, which could be an effective talent acquisition channel for them.

After a couple of semesters, my capstone course developed a reputation in the Hartford business community. I no longer needed to call my former students to beg for projects. Companies were coming to us. We had repeat “clients” also, such as Sikorsky and GE Capital. When we worked on a Sikorsky project at the end of the semester, our Sikorsky project manager invited the whole class to their assembly

floor to see how the Black Hawk helicopters were assembled and how information systems were used to aid the planning and production process. (That definitely was the highlight of the semester, cooler than anything I could have taught the students!).

Without exception, every semester my students would tell me that capstone class was the one where they learned the most in their entire UConn career. That was why when I took the leadership role of associate dean, I charged ahead to establish an Experiential Learning Collaborative (ELC) so that we could scale up experiential learning and make the opportunities available to more students. Led by a faculty member who had years of academic experience and industrial experience, the Experiential Learning Collaborative (ELC) partnered with various types of clients such as fledgling startups, mid-market companies, and large multinational corporations. It served as a nexus of interests of UConn students and the business community, facilitating cross-disciplinary experiential learning, providing a qualified help to business clients, and introducing students to real-world business practices.

In many of the projects the ELC embarked on, our students essentially performed the role of an external R&D unit, helping our client partners with forward-looking projects that might include market research and analysis, product/service innovation, business planning, management of organizations, web design, analytics, and much more. Oftentimes, the partner companies asked our students to sign a nondisclosure agreement (NDA), so they could share sensitive and proprietary information with our students and faculty mentors. With the NDAs in place, each project resulted in a tight collaboration between the client partner and student teams guided by faculty or industry mentors with expertise in the project topic.

“We want fresh eyes, fresh minds,” said the CEO of one client partner, adding that he chose UConn for the project because of its strong reputation. Under the guidance of an experienced project mentor, students analyzed the competitive business environment, built financial models, identified profit centers, and devised marketing strategies. This multiphase year-long project culminated in the development of a comprehensive business plan that was presented to the whole leadership team of the client partner.

The breadth and depth of those projects exposed our students to a wide variety of industries, business issues, and possible solutions. For example, the student participants developed strategic marketing plans to launch eco-friendly consumer products, analyzed financial models to determine and increase the profitability of operations, and identified financial risks related to the hiring and job search process. Fresh vision demonstrated by the students, particularly by the graduate students with substantial industry experience and advanced knowledge of various business disciplines, immensely benefits product and service innovation planned by the ELC client partners. Competition of motivated student teams working on a project toward the same business objectives deepens the level of student engagement and increases the value of the project outcomes for a client partner. A win-win solution!

3 Social Mobility

I grew up in China as an ethnic minority. There are over 50 ethnic groups in China. Over 93% of the 1.3 billion Chinese belong to one majority group called Han. The rest is spread among 50 different minority groups, and I am from one of those. My father grew up in a rural village whose entire residents were from one ethnic minority. He was the first person to ever go to high school and college in his entire village. However, there was no high school in his village. He had to walk four and a half miles each way to school. (When I was growing up, he often told my sisters and me how he had to walk four and a half miles to school each way, in the rain and in the snow. We were so tired of hearing this, and we would respond by saying, “Yeah, we know, uphill both ways, right?”) However, he persisted and opened the door not only for himself but also for his children. When he went to college, his family couldn’t even afford to buy him a pillow (in the countryside, they just tied hay together and put a rag on top to make a pillow). He used a brick as a pillow.

With just the shirt on his back and one quilt that served as both the mattress and the comforter, he went to college on a government scholarship. At several points throughout his college career, he was on the brink of having to drop out because both of my grandparents got sick and passed away. With the help of some of his professors and classmates, he got through and graduated and became a teacher in the city. Because of my father’s persistence in getting an education, my sisters and I were able to live a better life, to come to America to pursue our American Dream. Today, my eldest sister is an international leader in the cancer research field. When Joe Biden was vice president and started the Cancer Moonshot initiative, my sister was on one of the scientific advisory committees. I am the dean of a major business school with over 5200 students. That is the power of education in just one generation. And that is why I am passionate about amplifying higher education as an engine for social mobility to broaden access and provide an opportunity for upward mobility to underprivileged and underserved students.

Research has shown that children from the poorest families are substantially less likely than their peers from richer backgrounds to reach the top of the income distribution (Chetty et al., 2017). However, comparing students at the same college, students from low- and high-income families have very similar earnings in adulthood, despite large differences in their backgrounds. What does this tell us? It tells us that education is a potent pathway to success, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Improving low-income students’ access to higher education could be a powerful way to expand opportunities. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to make that happen.

At the University of Connecticut, I worked closely with a UConn alumnus (Joe LaBrosse ’85) and the Office of Diversity Initiatives to establish a mentorship program for Hartford high school students. The public school district of Hartford, the state capital of Connecticut, has one of the highest percentages of minority students

(>80%)¹ and one of the lowest high school graduation rates in Connecticut (just over 70% in 2021).² 62.8% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Upward social mobility is extremely low for these kids. The mentorship program we launched aims to provide a pathway to college for these underprivileged and underserved kids in Hartford and the neighboring East Hartford. Since the program's inception in the fall of 2019, with a cohort of 30 tenth graders, the number of participants in the program has grown to about 50 students each year. There are three key components to the program. First, every participant takes a financial literacy class. Research after research has demonstrated the importance of financial literacy to the success of the high school and college students (e.g., Kezar & Yang, 2010; Potrich et al., 2016). The lack of financial literacy has often been cited as a major obstacle to student success in college. In this program, students travel by bus to UConn's Storrs campus on Saturdays to learn the basics of personal finance, including topics such as how to open a bank account and manage personal spending and ways to fund a college education. A second component of the program is mentorship. UConn's undergraduate business students serve as mentors and help them apply for college, including finding financial aid and applying for student loans. Many of the high school students in the program do not have a person who has graduated college in their life as a role model. Therefore, we built campus visits into the program as the third component to give the participants a chance to see the college up close and learn from a group of UConn students who reflect the diversity of their communities.

“One of the biggest problems holding back the United States is the disparities in the inner cities,” LaBrosse says. “To me, education is the best answer to solve this problem. Since UConn is the preeminent, public educational institution in Connecticut, I felt that the University had a responsibility to help address this issue. A UConn business education is one of the best ways to help solve the economic problems faced by many of these high school students.”³ Students who complete the program and are accepted to UConn are eligible for a scholarship designed to bridge any gap students face after applying for other financial aid. Besides helping to lift students out of poverty, LaBrosse hopes the program eventually will cultivate a more diverse workforce for businesses in Connecticut.

At DePaul, we host a program with similar purposes—the nonprofit The Greenwood Project. Envisioned and developed in 2015 at DePaul's Coleman Entrepreneurship Center by a DePaul alumnus Bevon Joseph and his partner Elois Joseph, through their participation in the Coleman Center's pitch competition program, the organization's mission is to create career pathways in the financial services industry for Black and Latinx students. The organization partners with companies to offer intensive, paid summer training and internship programs aimed

¹ <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/connecticut/districts/hartford-school-district-101334>

² <https://www.courant.com/community/hartford/hc-news-hartford-public-schools-town-hall-20220601-mfiwu2rnrh45pbfe2g6htfee-story.html>

³ <https://today.uconn.edu/2022/05/at-risk-high-schoolers-learning-personal-finance-basics-at-uconn/>

at underserved, diverse, high-achieving students. The financial services companies that partner with Greenwood are introduced to highly qualified young adults who power a diverse talent pipeline for them. DePaul hosts high schoolers and college students from around the country over the summer, with DePaul faculty delivering the educational components of the program. With a humble start of five students in the program in 2016, the Greenwood Project has served over 500 students today. More than 75% of the program's alumni now work in finance. They count major financial services companies such as Citadel, Charles Schwab, UBS, and Bloomberg as their partners among dozens of others. On August 3, 2022, the Greenwood Project students, alumni, and staff were invited to ring the closing bell of the New York Stock Exchange alongside employees of Citadel and Citadel Securities.

4 Economic Development and Innovation

A few years ago, the Connecticut legislature appropriated US\$30 million designed to stimulate entrepreneurial activities in the state, an initiative jointly funded by the State of Connecticut and other public and private sectors to catalyze technological innovation. The grant money for the initiative, dubbed "Innovation Places," was distributed through a competitive process in which different regions/cities in Connecticut submitted their program proposals. I represented UConn on a 30-plus member task force that successfully competed against other Connecticut cities/regions to bring an "Innovation Place" grant to the City of Hartford. I then served as the Presidential Designee from the University of Connecticut on the Board of Directors for Launc[H]artford, the "Innovation Places" program for Hartford. Therefore, I was involved with this effort from the very beginning and witnessed the tremendous progress of Launc[H]artford in particular and the enormous impact the Innovation Places initiative has made on the State of Connecticut in general.

As a major business school with almost 2000 talented graduate students studying at UConn's Graduate Business Learning Center in downtown Hartford, making Hartford a vibrant and innovative place where students want to come and study and where graduates want to stay and work is extremely important. Over the last few years, Launc[H]artford has significantly contributed to that effort. UConn business students have attended many of the events organized through Launc[H]artford, getting a firsthand experience of what the city has to offer. These positive experiences motivate students to seek career opportunities in Hartford and the surrounding regions.

One particular program that has benefitted UConn students tremendously is the InsurTech Accelerator. UConn School of Business MBA and MS students were placed with the startups in the Accelerator as interns and worked alongside the entrepreneurs to learn how to navigate the challenges of starting a business, how to design a business model that responds to the market demand, and how to work with investors to raise funding. They also got mentored by senior executives from the major insurance companies that are partners of Launc[H]artford. These experiential

learning opportunities allow them to apply what they learn in the classroom to real-world business problems and extend their knowledge beyond what they learn from their classes. Responses from the participating students have been extremely positive. Many of them mention that the experience has inspired them to become entrepreneurs themselves. Undoubtedly, these students will be tomorrow's innovators in Hartford and beyond.

Another program funded by Launch Hartford that has had a big impact is a joint program among UConn, Trinity College, and Goodwin University. Led by UConn's Connecticut Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, the program (called "Ignite Hartford") aims to bring together entrepreneurs from UConn, Goodwin University, and Trinity College to learn more about and engage in entrepreneurship and innovation opportunities, to network and share ideas, and to pitch to receive seed funding, feedback, and next-step resources. With the scale of the program involving several universities, the program undoubtedly contributes to building a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem in Hartford. Both programs are embraced not only by the students at these universities but also by major insurance companies in Hartford.

At DePaul University where I am currently the dean of the Driehaus College of Business, entrepreneurship and innovation remain a key component of our strategic priorities. Among the many programs offered by the Coleman Entrepreneurship Center is the Social Impact Incubator, which challenges DePaul alumni, students, and community entrepreneurs to scale and grow business ventures that have a strong social impact mission. Through a generous donation by the late DePaul alumnus Errol Halperin, we recently launched the Halperin Emerging Company Fund to support ventures started by DePaul students, alumni, faculty, and staff. These ventures undoubtedly will stimulate the economic development of the broader Chicago communities around us.

5 Closing Thoughts

Having served in various leadership capacities in the last 10 years, I have come to deeply appreciate a quote from Warren Bennis, a pioneer of the contemporary field of leadership studies and a former colleague at the University of Southern California, "Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality." Visions are great. But to make those visions a reality, we must be willing to think outside of the box (e.g., go to Happy Hour in a bar to learn English!), get out of our comfort zone, and challenge the way things were always done in the past. The capacity to do so determines whether one is a leader or a follower.

Reflecting upon my professional journey and my leadership journey in the United States, I am incredibly grateful for the opportunities I have had. Two months after I arrived in the United States, as a graduate student in the master's program in Library and Information Science, I could not answer a question on a midterm because I did not know what Nebraska was (not just that I didn't know *where* it was, I simply had

never heard of Nebraska and didn't know it was one of the 50 states in the United States). Today, I am the leader of a major business school, having worked with many Fortune 500 companies and advocating for our students every single day. I consider myself incredibly lucky.

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During her tenure at UConn, she successfully championed multiple cross-campus collaborations, worked with state and local governments and the corporate community, and represented the University of Connecticut in statewide initiatives focusing on entrepreneurship and innovation. She was a founding member of the Board of Directors for Innovation Places Hartford, an initiative jointly funded by the State of Connecticut and other public and private sectors to catalyze technological innovation.

An award-winning researcher who publishes frequently in leading academic journals, Dr. Ba started her academic career at the University of Southern California. She is an honorary distinguished professor at the School of Management at Fudan University in Shanghai, China. She also has previously served as a distinguished visiting professor at the University of Mannheim in Germany. She served as a Senior Editor for *MIS Quarterly* from 2013 to 2017. She is currently a Senior Editor for Production and Operations Management and Decision Support Systems.

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