

HCC focuses on increasing entrepreneur capabilities

Course, noncredit training to be part of wider initiative

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Going out on one's own may be a little less lonely for aspiring business owners now that **Howard Community College** is starting several initiatives to help people develop entrepreneurial skills.

Noncredit training opportunities should be available this summer, and a class in entrepreneurship for credit is to begin in the fall. A Web site pulling together resources from the college, county and region is expected before the end of the year and an associate's degree in entrepreneurship is in the works for 2005.

The programs represent "a whole mind shift ... from a waver-earner mentality to an entrepreneurial mentality," said Jeffrey Agnor, a Columbia attorney who co-chaired an HCC task force on developing entrepreneurs.

"Traditionally, the education system has failed the entrepreneurial type," he said. "[Schools] have not groomed these talents."

The task force -- part of the school's Commission on the Future -- said in its report that workers no longer expect safety and stability in their jobs. More young people are considering alternatives to traditional four-year college plans, and adults dissatisfied or displaced by traditional corporations are looking for different business opportunities.

The group laid out recommendations for the college last year. The school staff spent the next year developing a plan, which got a significant jump-start this month from a \$100,000 pledge by Brian McIntyre, founder and chief executive officer of WorkStrategy, a human resources technology management company.

Whether individuals want to start a dry cleaning business, an information technology firm or a home design service, "the biggest risk is they haven't had any experience," said McIntyre, who will provide grants and endowments over five years.

The college can teach people about business plans, marketing, human resources and other areas, he said, adding, "It is nice to be able to take somebody through the paces in a safe environment."

More than 11.3 percent of adults are engaged in entrepreneurial activity in the United States, according to a study last year funded by the Kauffman Foundation, which supports entrepreneurship and education through grants, training and events. And colleges have been responding.

The foundation estimates that about 1,500 colleges and universities offer entrepreneurial education opportunities today, up from about 450 in the mid-1990s.

Community colleges have started getting on board more recently, with HCC planning one of the more ambitious entrepreneur programs.

"Of more than 1,250 community colleges in the country, only about 9 or 10 percent have active entrepreneurship education," said Betty Kadis, executive director of the National Association for Community College Entrepreneurship. Most of those have one class.

In its report, the HCC task force pointed to research by the National Commission on Entrepreneurship indicating that community colleges are well-suited to reach potential business leaders. The schools serve students from different populations and a variety of age groups, the task force said. They exist in every community, and they serve a greater percentage of women and minorities than do four-year schools.

"MBA students are the least likely to start a business," said Erik Pages, president of EntreWorks consulting firm and a former policy director of the National Commission on Entrepreneurship. Those students have many career options and often go on to work in large organizations, he said. It is the students in other majors, such as the arts or engineering, who are more likely to try a new venture.

At the same time, many potential entrepreneurs already have jobs, Pages said. Those individuals are likely to need the flexibility of a community college schedule and an array of business-support services, he said.

HCC has about 600 business students each semester and offers classes in business management and administration, but the task force suggested a more comprehensive approach to helping people successfully run their own enterprises.

The first step likely will be a short-term boot camp, lasting 24 to 36 hours, which could be ready this summer. It will teach business skills to people who want practical advice and not the full coursework, said Ronald X. Roberson, vice president of academic affairs.

A for-credit course on entrepreneurship will be available to students from all areas of study this fall, Roberson said, calling that component one of the most exciting things about the plans.

"It has the potential for touching a whole lot of students in multiple programs," he said.

The school is exploring the use of virtual enterprise programs, in which students from different schools can interact over the Internet and run fictitious businesses.

"It is a very effective way of allowing students to engage in entrepreneurial activities and learn about how businesses work in a relatively safe environment," Roberson said. "When a virtual enterprise goes broke, nobody comes to take your house."

A showcase of student businesses for potential investors is also being planned. HCC leaders also hope to work with the public school system to encourage young people to think about heading their own businesses.

"I think we're casting the net pretty wide," Roberson said, "because we think that [entrepreneurs] can come from a lot of different places."