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## Teaching Entrepreneurial and Management Skills to Extension Audiences

Sarah Howe

*University of Idaho*, sarahs@uidaho.edu

Steven Hines

*University of Idaho*, shines@uidaho.edu

James Nelson

*University of Idaho*, jnelson@uidaho.edu



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## Teaching Entrepreneurial and Management Skills to Extension Audiences

### Abstract

Training programs for business manager-entrepreneurs can have important positive impacts on economic development. A 15-week course of this type has been taught seven times in the last 3 years in rural Idaho communities, largely by county Extension faculty. Interest in the course has been high. This article describes what we have found to be the important topics to cover in this course, some things we have learned about how best to teach the course, and some suggestions for using the course as the basis for synergistic partnerships and collaborations.

#### Sarah Howe

Boundary County Extension Chair  
[sarahs@uidaho.edu](mailto:sarahs@uidaho.edu)

#### Steven Hines

Valley County Extension Chair  
[shines@uidaho.edu](mailto:shines@uidaho.edu)

#### James Nelson

Extension Agricultural Economist  
[jnelson@uidaho.edu](mailto:jnelson@uidaho.edu)

University of Idaho

## Introduction

University of Idaho Cooperative Extension offers a training course for rural community business manager-entrepreneurs. The course generally meets for 45 hours over 15 weeks. Texts for the course are listed in the References section of this article.

In the last 3 years, University of Idaho campus and county faculty have taught the course twice on campus and at least seven times off campus. About 150 students have completed the course. These clientele numbers have been much greater than expected, suggesting that there may be significant demand for similar training in other states. Such programs can have positive impacts on rural economic development.

## What Do We Teach?

As mentioned above, our course is focused on training for manager-entrepreneurs.

A business entrepreneur is a person who sees business opportunity, sizes up its value, and finds the resources to make the most of it. A business manager is a person who identifies and implements strategies to make a business productive and profitable. Entrepreneurs start new businesses and bring about change in existing businesses. Managers run businesses, focusing on efficiency and profitability.

Conveniently, the special characteristics of good managers and successful entrepreneurs do not conflict. Good entrepreneurs will be better entrepreneurs if they have good management skills. Good managers will be better managers if they have good entrepreneurial skills. In today's dynamic, competitive world, business decision makers (especially those in small businesses) must be good at both management and entrepreneurship. They must be good manager-entrepreneurs.

We teach skills that are important for manager-entrepreneurs as they endeavor to successfully startup and run businesses. These skills include:

- Developing a clear sense of purpose for a business.
- Developing business goals based on realistic expectations.
- Identifying and understanding a firm's strengths and weaknesses.
- Targeting the "right" group of customers.
- Specializing in solving customer problems.
- Organizing a business for maximum flexibility.
- Creating customer loyalty by offering unique value.
- Building enduring business relationships based on quality, honesty, and responsiveness.
- Keeping close tabs on costs, pricing, and profits.

In other words, we teach a course in basic business management with a focus on planning new businesses.

## **How Do We Teach It?**

In order to help students grasp the relevance of what we are teaching and to try to keep them awake and mostly alert, we focus on each student developing a business plan. The curriculum addresses various topics, including planning and research, business organization, management, marketing, budgeting, financing and financial statements, cash flow, growth, and negotiations. Students focus on keys to success and formulate strategies to address them. Also, participants who successfully finish the course have completed thorough analyses of their business ideas. If they wish to pursue their ideas, they each have something to show to lenders and potential investors.

We have learned not to expect completed, presentation-ready business plans from each student. Some students choose not to complete business plans and in fact decide not to go into business. We consider such cases to be program successes. Success of an entrepreneurship program should not be measured only in terms of completed business plans, business start-ups, and expansions, but also by improvement in participants' abilities to make informed decisions (such as recognizing and avoiding risk that they judge to be unwarranted).

Often, the majority of course participants have not been in a classroom for quite some time. Consequently, it is a challenge to keep them engaged. Class format and classroom atmosphere can be used effectively to facilitate student engagement with subject matter.

A typical 3-hour class consists of lecture, guest speaker, networking, and a hands-on activity. Lectures must be relevant, well organized, and "to the point." Lectures should present concepts and issues, and then guest speakers should discuss examples. Course evaluations indicate that guest speakers are one of the most valuable components of a course.

Guest speakers provide reality checks for course material. Question-and-answer periods with guest speakers provide opportunities for small business owners and entrepreneurs to visit with bankers, attorneys, accountants, insurance agents, etc., in a setting where they are not directly seeking the services of such professionals. One Idaho participant said, "The most valuable part of the course was interacting with guest speakers, because it taught me how to talk to those professionals."

Networking and discussion are vital parts of any course--especially a multi-session adult education course. Networking provides opportunities for participants to make contacts. Often we assume that the people with whom we are working in a small community already know each other. In actuality, that is not necessarily the case.

Hands-on activities can be small special projects with timely connections to class subject matter, or they can be in-class opportunities for students to work on their business plans with input from the instructor and maybe from other students.

We in academia can sometimes forget that some of our adult learners may not have even graduated from high school. To them, the academic processes of research and writing are truly scary, and some will attempt to avoid them. It is imperative that the instructor develops an atmosphere where all students are comfortable and even those who did not enjoy school are willing to participate. The instructor must also be accessible prior to and after each class and between classes to answer questions for students who do not want to ask them in a public forum.

Final thoughts on the teaching process:

- One primary instructor should be at every class session and should provide continuity for the lessons. A facilitator will not suffice.

- The instructor must devote enough out-of-class time to planning to be prepared and ready for every class.
- The instructor must be ready every class with something to present in case a guest speaker does not show. This will happen, and when adults have paid money for a class they want their time used productively.

## Partnerships and Collaborations

In each community, region, and state there are various organizations that have vested interests in small business education. Creating partnerships and collaborations with these entities has synergistic effects on your program. Potential partners include local and regional economic development committees, small business development centers, business incubators, chambers of commerce, and local banks. Not only do these collaborations add depth to your program, they are also great sources for potential participants.

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