

Local Roots, Global Minds: Student Entrepreneurship through Exploration and Community
Connections

Madison Stracke, Matt Kreifels, Becky Haddad

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Contact: Becky Haddad
143 Filley Hall
3720 E. Campus Loop
Lincoln, NE 68583

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Introduction

Civic-ready students take action and initiative in their community and its future (Nebraska Department of Education, 2022). “Local Roots” helped students develop a strong connection and dedication to their community. “Global Minds” enabled students to envision how they could be a part of their rural community's future by leveraging worldly ideas to propel their community forward in an economic capacity. High school students interacted with community members and stakeholders, explored careers that intrigued them, and honed both career and civic-ready skills. This project engaged the community, strengthening community and workforce partnerships and career exploration (Nebraska Department of Education, 2022).

Growing community partnerships presents unique challenges in rural schools due to geographical locations that can restrict outreach opportunities. Transportation is a significant obstacle due to the inherent travel requirements of being in an isolated area (Markeve et al., 1992). Additionally, students in these areas often have fewer chances to explore diverse career paths aligning with their interests. Limited economic diversity in rural communities leads to fewer opportunities for students to explore various career options (Johnson, 2022). Capitalizing on community partnerships requires tremendous effort and creativity to provide career experiences. Although my student teaching site provided upperclassmen the opportunity of Work-Based Learning (WBL) during the school day, not all students participated based on schedules and interests. Beyond this, students were only completing limited exploration outside of career counseling. Placing responsibility in the students' hands provided a collaborative drive for these efforts, and businesses were more responsive when they saw the impact and potential connection they could have with these future employees.

Methodology

Upon completing the Nebraska Comprehensive Needs Assessment (2022) I found these categories needing additional support at my student-teaching site: Career Exploration, Community and Workforce Partnerships, and Civic-Ready Students. The ACTE Quality Career and Technical Education (Imperatore & Hyslop, 2018) indicators of Student Career Development and Work-based Learning (WBL) drove “Global Minds.” This program amplifies students’ career-readiness skills and experiences through WBL and industry interaction.

During my 9-12 Plant Science class students developed a “notebook” of their interest, creativity, critical thinking, and outreach. Students began by exploring broad careers related to plant science and submitted a form sharing what interested them most. With the help of my cooperating teacher, we strategically provided students with feedback regarding their ideas. Then, students formulated a business to reflect their interests (e.g., Agronomy, Greenhouse, Seed Salesman). Throughout the semester, they further evolved and modified their enterprise in the realms of management, plant nutrient requirements, marketing, setting up interviews with industry professionals, describing the job and facilities, and defining their consumers/audience. The semester culminated in students presenting their final presentations to the administration, community members, and/or their classmates.

“Global Minds” showed the possibilities of integrating community engagement, entrepreneurship, student exploration, and career-readiness skills into any curriculum. Students had to go beyond the content to think like business owners and were also challenged to collaborate with their peers, community members, and professionals to consider how their business could be successful in the community. This helped students envision how they fit into the community’s future. While some parts of this project were curriculum-based (e.g., plant nutrients) students were also challenged to be young professionals when reaching out to business owners. They had to find realistic values for equipment, facilities, or investment costs, articulating their enterprise and findings to an audience, defending their work, and reflecting on the feasibility of their idea.

Findings and Results

“Global Minds” suggested students look at the greater picture. I asked students to assess the needs of their community and determine what business-related benefit they could provide. This not only served the students and their ability to analyze their community but also could serve rural communities needing the next generation to return. Students of various ages, backgrounds, and experiences were all able to take business connections, public speaking skills, and career realizations from this project. In a follow-up survey, 60% of students agreed they felt more confident in starting an enterprise in their hometown. Further, 80% believed they had a strong starting base for developing a business. Students agreed they gained skills in conducting industry research, budgeting, marketing, and writing professionally. This project consisted of many small impacts, providing each student an opportunity to explore careers feasible in their community.

Future Advice

Conversations regarding student projects encouraged entrepreneurship, engagement, and effort from students. I did not ask them to reinvent the wheel but rather seek input from experts around them. Answering the criteria assigned required research, critical thinking, and risk-taking. For students to feel supported, class time must be taken to brainstorm ideas and talk through professional interactions (e.g., sending emails, facilitating quality interviews, and communicating their discoveries). Implementing feedback was key to professional development, so I allowed students to make edits following the review of their projects for returned credit. Finally, although this project was relevant to Plant Science students, it would have thrived much better in an Agriculture Business class primarily targeting juniors and seniors. This would also allow students to develop any agriculture-related business.

Cost/Resources Needed

The implementation cost varies and is easily adapted to fit the needs of any classroom. However, cost grows with the extent of the implementation. I allotted two 45-minute class periods per component, equaling approximately three weeks of class. Students need access to computers and software (often free). Other additions like websites or subscriptions may add cost, but free versions are often available. In addition, local experts and volunteers are giving up their valuable time to work with students.

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