Entrepreneurship in the Liberal Arts

There's a moment in Amherst class seminars and discussions where ideas feel urgent and alive. The light bulb turns on, and suddenly it's clear how a concept fits into the bigger picture and could impact the world. These moments are inspiring, but without structured pathways to act, student passions can stagnate. At Amherst, these moments of inspiration often stall—revealing a missed opportunity where the College might help students turn insight into meaningful action. Where can Amherst students apply their education, test their perceived limits, and refine their ideas through engagement with the world? One answer lies in developing Amherst's infrastructure for entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship is often mischaracterized as a purely profit-driven, industry-specific endeavor, disconnected from the ideals of a liberal arts education and contributing to the betterment of the world. At its core, entrepreneurship is about identifying problems and creating solutions. This mindset—curious, creative, and purpose-driven—is precisely what a liberal arts education is designed to foster.

Incorporating entrepreneurship (or problem-solving) more thoughtfully within Amherst's culture and curriculum can deepen the College's interpretation of a liberal arts education. The liberal arts equip students with the ability to think critically, ask meaningful questions, and explore complex ideas from multiple perspectives. Entrepreneurship enables students to use these skills to powerfully augment their world. It illuminates how abstract concepts can drive concrete change, and how individuals – not conglomerates or corporations – can impact communities.

Imagining and testing ideas is at the heart of the project of the liberal arts education. When students try to implement their ideas, they encounter friction—whether from human habits, logistical challenges, or institutional inertia. These moments are formative; they reveal gaps in understanding, sharpen problem-solving skills, and cultivate intellectual growth. Experiences like these cannot be fully created without engaging with external realities. Entrepreneurship thus adds a vital experiential layer to the liberal arts, where learning becomes active and iterative.

The College is already teeming with the tools and resources for effective problem-solving. Imagine a central hub (in the form of a Center, Director, or Initiative): a student, faculty, staff, and alumni ecosystem of education, advice, and support for local and global problem solving.

Ultimately, these entrepreneurial opportunities will ensure that Amherst students don't just leave the College with big questions and compelling ideas. They leave with the skills and experiences to test those ideas, adapt them to challenges, and turn them into effective solutions. This isn't a departure from the liberal arts—this is a response to an ever-changing world: a call already answered by our peer institutions. While universities everywhere face pressures to contract and scale back, entrepreneurship presents the opportunity for the College to expand – to double down our commitment to growth, exploration, and bold thinking to assure the education students receive continues to grow, evolve, and shape the world.

Lifelong learning doesn't stop when the book closes; this is where it begins. Incorporating the entrepreneurial process into the Amherst culture invites students to take the gifts of their education—critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and creative problem-solving—and apply them to the challenges of the real world. As a community of students, faculty, staff, and alumni, we have an opportunity to create pathways where ideas are not just explored but tested, refined, and transformed into solutions that serve the greater good. Let's embrace this as a next step forward for the liberal arts—a community where inquiry leads to action and ideas lead to impact.