



Educator's Column

Actively Investing in Educational Professional Partnerships

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There's an interesting paradigm shift in the newly formed School of Media and Creative Arts at our college regarding public/private educational/professional partnerships that may be more semantics than anything else: 'Accelerator' vs. 'Incubator'.

While the words and certainly the style of approach themselves have connotations worlds apart (active, fast and furious opportunity development vs. more passive, old-school, deliberate nurturing of ideas), the evolving approach seeks the same ends; higher-education facilitating their student's working with fledgling business to advance that future professional's experiences while assisting that start-up in their quest to be a viable, job-producing and profitable venture in the quickly evolving and challenging arena of 'New Media'.

The shift of verbal focus in itself is neither unreasonable nor surprising, actually. After all, the earth does seem to be spinning faster, with all kinds of results demanded more rapidly, quicker and easier access to news and other public information expected at our fingertips, and major announcements once planned for hastily assembled, yet hours-later occurring news conferences now being delivered by Twitter to get whatever word needs to be gotten out simultaneously, or at the very least at the nano-second after, the news breaks or leaks.

It is, however, a challenge for educators throughout the many different types of academic institutions and instructional structures to balance the time-intensive goals of thorough learner preparation and prudent content research with the 'need 'em now' skill sets and immediate results expected in the 'real' world associated with the term acceleration. The instructional integrity of a college or university course of studies certainly cannot be compromised because of the rapid rise of what may actually constitute a fad versus a viable media technology or process. Rather, it is the responsibility of that institution to not only be ahead of the curve, but also be on the bleeding edge of research and technology in order to be best prepared for the changing landscape of media. In a fashion, incubate ideas and accelerate implementation of those ideas; a prime purpose of educators and institutions of higher learning in the aforementioned partnerships.

What's key in all of this, and a bit lost sometimes, is the role and responsibilities of that partner. Our approach at SMCA at the Milwaukee Area Technical College and Milwaukee Public Television is to not merely place interns into the industry, but bring the industry into our labs, workshops, studios and everyday learning environments. This method is much more active and in itself acts as a figurative gas pedal for our 'accelerators'. These fledgling media businesses not only benefit from the expertise of the professionals/instructors at the college, the enthusiasm of the students here and the hardware resources required for advanced skills at a technical college - but also from their investment in the process, not just their business.

For example, I met today with one of our 'clients' to discuss the next generation of programming that we're planning in our accelerator relationship with Active Across America, a local company thinking nationally about their message of health and fitness. Over coffee, what I enthusiastically heard first was not how business was going, but rather how proud this person was that they were recently able to help one of our animation students succeed in an interview and start their career; how excited they were that the first set of interstitial programs won a prestigious national Parents Choice Award for all of the students, not themselves; and how they were sponsoring the entry fees for those same students to submit their collaborative work, Shoehorn Shout Outs!, for regional Emmy consideration. Only after she was done boasting like a proud mother did we actually discuss what was going on in this public/private partnership.

Based on that account and many similar involving several different partners, it defines what these relationships are all about. 'Incubating' an affiliation between important new businesses, our students and the public service that we as educators are... and 'accelerating' the chances for success - not just for the company's sake of financial survival or the student's sake of promise of future work - but also for the ownership that those firms take in their new role of educational partner. It's an example of win-win that could as an invaluable lesson for those struggling understanding the important individual values of both private and public sector contributions to this industry and our state.