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New York exports its entrepreneurial expertise

Universities find that business professors' knowledge is invaluable to international colleagues seeking routes to economic development.

By Eilene Zimmerman
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Bruce Bachenheimer is director of entrepreneurship at Pace University's Lubin School of Business. Photo: Buck Ennis

Although the new semester had barely begun this year at Pace University's Lubin School of Business, Director of Entrepreneurship Bruce Bachenheimer already had teaching requests from groups and institutions in India, China, Norway and Israel.

Mr. Bachenheimer returned from India in early September, spoke to a Chinese delegation at Pace immediately afterward and then taught a course on writing a business plan for students visiting from the BI Norwegian Business School. He will travel to Israel in early January.

Colleges and universities abroad, especially those located in developing nations, are increasingly trying to establish the kinds of entrepreneurship programs that exist here in the U.S.

Generations of immigrants may have fueled American entrepreneurialism, but, according to Mr. Bachenheimer, entrepreneurship education on the college level is primarily an American export. And local professors are seeing the demand for their expertise grow beyond the occasional request to teach overseas while they're on a school break or a sabbatical. Foreign universities are more and more willing to pay a premium for the know-how of professors from entrepreneurship centers such as Silicon Valley, New York City and Cambridge, Mass., the Lubin professor says.

Rising global interest in entrepreneurship education may be connected to the economic crisis, but it's also part of a long-term trend, says Murray Low, director of The Eugene Lang Entrepreneurship Center at Columbia Business School.

“It's the recognition that the route to successful economic development is through private-sector activity, and the driver of that activity is entrepreneurship,” Mr. Low said.

Mr. Low, who has taught in Africa, India and South America, says that a decade ago, teaching entrepreneurship internationally was “almost unheard-of, but now it's seen as one of the best ways to spur economic development.”

Some New York City business school professors are finding that foreign demand for their expertise in teaching and helping to launch entrepreneurship programs is increasing. Jeffrey Carr, executive director of the Berkley Center for Entrepreneurship & Innovation at NYU's Stern School of Business, is teaching in Colombia in September and in India in January, and says he has had “a lot of requests from Chinese universities about setting up entrepreneurship programs there.”

Reflecting the growing international interest in entrepreneurship education, the Bloomington, Ind.-based Global Consortium of Entrepreneurship Centers, whose members are university-based, switched to its current name three years ago, notes Mr. Bachenheimer. Founded in 1996 as a national consortium, the organization made the change in response to interest from international institutions.

Although students obviously can't absorb everything about running a business while in a classroom setting, the fastest way to get started and learn to manage risk is often with the guidance and assistance available through universities and colleges. (Other kinds of structured support can be invaluable as well: Research from the National Business Incubation Association and the U.S. Small Business Administration show that businesses coming out of incubators have a much lower failure rate than that for startups overall, says Mr. Bachenheimer.)

Wendy Torrance, director of the Global Scholars Program at the Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City, Mo., which works to advance entrepreneurship, is witnessing strong interest from foreign schools that want to master the U.S. approach to teaching entrepreneurship. For the past three years, the Kauffman program has trained faculty from Singapore and Indonesia. American faculty members working with Kauffman have been asked to consult with universities in Russia and in other Asian and European countries.

Some foreign universities want to learn teaching methods that will provide aspiring business owners with opportunities to test their ideas with peers and mentors, says Ms. Torrance—like the in-class simulations popular in American classrooms.

Edward Rogoff, a professor of entrepreneurship and the former academic director of the Field Center for Entrepreneurship at Baruch College's Zicklin School of Business, says that entrepreneurship professors at New York City business schools also are being asked to train their counterparts abroad. After meeting with faculty from schools in the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico to share the process of building a program, Baruch team members are in discussions with officials from China, Italy and Kenya about plans to do the same.

U.S. institutions that are assisting students and professors abroad are reaping advantages themselves. International teaching experience not only has benefited Baruch's faculty, but also has created opportunities for its students to learn about entrepreneurship in other countries, according to Mr. Rogoff.

“That's vital in the business world today,” he said, “because if our students want to start companies that do business in China, they can't just dial 1-800-China and arrange to have a product manufactured. They have to meet people and establish relationships. Now we can create opportunities for them to do that.”