

# Unlocking Potential: Turning Dreamers Into Entrepreneurs

In under-resourced communities, students often face an absence of opportunity. Education can help close this gap by providing the bridge for students to cross. But it is the educator, the teacher, the mentor, who helps students cross the bridge and embrace the world of possibility that exists on the other side.

These savvy teachers know that curriculum, coupled with a relational approach to teaching, gives students the confidence and tools they need to turn their passions into thriving business opportunities.

## Building empathy for the student experience

At the Hillsborough Community College (HCC) InLab, students enrolled in the entrepreneurship curriculum not only learn the fundamentals of good business, but also put them into practice by dreaming up and launching their own enterprises. From ideation to initial funding, students at HCC are mentored by successful entrepreneurs and community leaders to prepare them for real-world success.

Dr. Andy Gold found himself as an entrepreneur-turned-educator at HCC after successfully building six businesses, capitalizing on the life experiences he had been granted. He grew up in the middle-class in Manhattan and recalled understanding his privilege from a young age. "I never had to go home at night and worry about meals at dinner time or getting evicted from our apartment, but I had several friends that experienced that," said Dr. Gold. Looking back, he realized that much of the opportunities he'd had were afforded to him simply because of the family he was born into and, today, he uses his role as educator and mentor to open those doors for others.

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Through his personal experiences building businesses, Dr. Gold came into education energized by the possibilities available to his students and certain that diversity is the key to a successful program. From the beginning, he was adamant not to include the word "entrepreneurship" in the title of his program so as not to limit the kinds of students interested in the coursework. "We knew that to truly have an innovative culture, we had to be able to attract students, faculty, and community members across different areas of interest," he said. He understood entrepreneurship to be broad and wanted to ensure his students were invited in for their ideas and their passion, not an interest in building the next big business.

For Jason Hendricks, one of Dr. Gold's students-turned-mentees, the HCC entrepreneurial program, tools, and mentorship helped him become the successful business person he is today. When he first met Dr. Gold, his entrepreneurial endeavors were big ideas to solve the challenges of those around him with no clear pathway to a full time career. Yet, after spending time in the program and building a long-term relationship with Dr. Gold, Hendricks was able to advance his ideas and build a thriving business today.

It's through relationships like those with Hendricks and his other students that Dr. Gold witnessed the power of empathy. While he relayed countless stories of success, it was in his recollection of his failures that he grew closest to his students. By reminding them he was once, if not many times, in their shoes, working tirelessly to turn an idea into action, he was able to close any gap between them. In closing that gap, he's built a sturdy foundation to introduce the tools and resources he provides throughout the program.

## Integrating the real world into the classroom

Dr. Gold tested Hendricks' aptitude for entrepreneurship during their first meeting. Hendricks was handed a box of bow ties and told to go sell them on the street, right then and there. He returned to Dr. Gold with eight bow ties missing, and was promptly encouraged to join the entrepreneurship program at HCC.

Dr. Gold's approach to teaching is relational, hands-on and accelerated. He builds one-on-one relationships and holds each student accountable to their own success. Hendricks recalled Dr. Gold's push to "get things done, don't procrastinate," and his commitment to introducing all the tools students would need to begin achieving their goals.

Intuit QuickBooks was one of the tools Dr. Gold introduced to Hendricks as he worked to get his enterprise off the ground. Dr. Gold "sat me down and he said, 'let me show you about QuickBooks because you're going to need it.' He showed me the fundamentals of it, and I started using QuickBooks. I could go to Andy and ask him questions about the things that I didn't understand." He showed Hendricks how a financial accounting tool like QuickBooks could help track customers, dollars and materials, better enabling entrepreneurs to understand the long-term sustainability of their business model. Yet, Dr. Gold would caution that it's how and when he introduces a tool like QuickBooks that makes a difference:

"I integrated into this small business accounting and finance course that we offer in entrepreneurship a whole bunch of simulations, simulated datasets so they can learn how to apply [the concepts]. Just using Excel, even before QuickBooks is introduced, [students learn how to] take random pieces of information and populate an income statement, a balance sheet, a cash flow statement, and so forth [...] QuickBooks will generate a lot of information for you, a lot of data, a lot of reports. But, if you don't know how to interpret that information, if you don't really know what it's telling you, it's of very little value."

From there, it became up to Hendricks to understand the power of the tool and leverage it to open doors for his business.

Today, for example, through HCC's InLab, students can apply for initial funding to help scale their enterprises – if they use QuickBooks. "Just to apply for funding, you've got to have your company set up in QuickBooks. We make that a requirement because we don't want them to get funded and then delay integrating the technology that can

really make their ability to make decisions more effective," said Gold. With these small incentives, Dr. Gold and the teaching staff at HCC are nudging students to move their businesses forward with the most effective tools that will help them succeed outside of the academic environment.

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In Hendricks' case, this carefully executed educational model helped him achieve his dream of helping others. As the Founder and CEO of Forgot or Knot, Hendricks and his team aim to deliver memorable gift experiences for their clients. The company leverages technology to send customized videos and personalized messages with accompanying gifts that are hand delivered to the recipient. Hendricks said, "When I'm having a bad day, I can literally go out and give a gift experience to someone and brighten their day." And, his impact doesn't stop with his clients: "I've got all these employees and I'm making an impact on their families," creating a positive ripple effect on those around him.

## The importance of mentorship

Many of us have individuals we look to for guidance and expertise, yet formal mentorship has become overlooked in recent years. Despite 71% of Fortune 500 companies offering mentoring programs, and 97% of mentees saying they are valuable relationships, it is surprising to see only 37% of professionals have a mentor. In the cases where mentorship is prioritized, we see valuable results, particularly between educators and their students.

To this day, Dr. Gold continues to have bi-weekly mentoring meetings with Hendricks to discuss his business, analyze figures on QuickBooks, and brainstorm future opportunities. This ongoing mentor relationship developed organically from their student-teacher dynamic and both Hendricks and Dr. Gold reflect on the start of their relationship with fondness. Prior to HCC, "I never had a direct relationship with the professor. I just bounced around different colleges. But when I went to HCC and I met Dr. Gold, it was more of a personal approach. I just fell in love. I really fell in love with my passion to help other people," said Hendricks.

And, the importance of the relationship goes both ways. According to Dr. Gold, “Jason [Hendricks] is like an adopted son to me. He came through our college credit program, and he’s just a dynamo – a really great young man. He’s just one of those students you meet and you connect with and he’s really leaned on our entire team at our college in different ways.”

Hendricks is just one of many entrepreneurs that Dr. Gold is proud to influence today:

“In the past eight or nine years, with the help of national partners like Intuit, we have built a nationally recognized entrepreneurship program at the community college level that I take enormous pride in. It’s allowed me to revisit my childhood and provide a bridge of opportunity for people who grow up in these [under-resourced] communities. This opportunity at Hillsborough Community College has given me a chance to build that bridge. Jason [Hendricks] is just one of many students that we’ve been able to throw across the bridge to the other side safely and get them to pursue something that’s meant so much to them. I will be forever indebted to this opportunity because it’s been really profound for me.”

Through relational learning models, and real-life application, students have the potential to thrive. While Hendricks brought the ingenuity and grit often found in successful entrepreneurs, it was under the mentorship of Dr. Gold that he was able to unlock his full potential and turn his passion for solving people’s problems into a viable business opportunity.

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