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Dreamers and Doers

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Peter Elias; Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

TOWER OF E-POWER Above, Prinya Kovitchindachai, who lives in Babson College's E-Tower ("e" as in entrepreneur), plans to market a hangover remedy from Thailand. Right, an entrepreneurship class.

By JOHN SCHWARTZ
Published: December 24, 2008

Nicolas Naranjo knocked on Evan Kimbrell's door at midnight.

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At other colleges, this might have been a prelude to a fraternity prank or an invitation to help float the keg at the end of a party. But Mr. Naranjo, who had just arrived in the United States from his native Colombia some weeks before, wanted to talk about starting a business. He had an idea about a hop-on, hop-off bus service for college tours around the Boston area. Mr. Kimbrell had tried to start a bus company the previous year and knew the pitfalls — and was happy for the break from his studies to talk business.

This is life in the E-Tower at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass. Babson focuses on business, and E-Tower focuses, even more tightly, on entrepreneurship. The residents of E-Tower hash out new business plans at Monday night meetings, and they talk shop throughout the day and night.

"We're really a dorm of dreamers and doers," says Prinya Kovitchindachai, who is hoping to market a vile-tasting pill, imported from Thailand, that he touts as a hangover

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treatment. "College students are the largest group of binge drinkers," he says, quietly gleeful at the prospect of such a large market so close at hand. Friends have helped him bone up on the basics of international shipping, of securing shelf space and — in a consultation with a neighbor who was wearing a towel and still dripping from the shower — of creating Web sites.

"Any school can teach entrepreneurship," he says, "but at Babson, we live entrepreneurship."

Now, let's not get carried away: as a reporter and as a parent, I find myself on plenty of college campuses these days, and many of the students I meet are indistinguishable from the dull-eyed slackers I went to college with (when dinosaurs roamed the Earth and Pluto was still a planet). But then there are those who have this . . . THING, this go-getting excitement to start something, make something. They want money, sure. But the overwhelming desire seems to be to carve out something of their own.

Today's students have grown up hearing more about Bill Gates than F.D.R., and they live in a world where startling innovations are commonplace. The current crop of 18-year-olds, after all, were 8 when Google was founded by two students at Stanford; Mark Zuckerberg founded Facebook in 2004 while he was at Harvard and they were entering high school. Having "grown up digital" (to borrow the title of Don Tapscott's recent book on the Net Generation), they are impatient to get on with life.

"They're great collaborators, with friends, online, at work," Mr. Tapscott wrote. "They thrive on speed. They love to innovate."

The easiest way to find kids like these is to check in on entrepreneurship education, in which colleges and universities try to prepare their students to recognize opportunities and seize them.

For those who haven't been paying attention, the idea of entrepreneurship might bring up the Memo Minder, the lame invention by the "Future Enterpriser" played by Bronson Pinchot in "Risky Business."

Reader, you date yourself: that was 1983. In the intervening decades, Tom Cruise has grown up and entrepreneurship programs have boomed.

A report issued last year by the Kauffman Foundation, which finances programs to promote innovation on campuses, noted that more than 5,000 entrepreneurship programs are offered on two- and four-year campuses — up from just 250 courses in 1985. Full-scale majors, minors or certificates in entrepreneurship have leaped from 104 in 1975 to more than 500 in 2006. Since 2003, the Kauffman Foundation has given nearly \$50 million to 19 colleges and universities to build campus programs.

Lesla Mitchell, a Kauffman vice president, says that the foundation is extending the reach of its academic gospel, which used to be found almost exclusively in business schools.

Now, the concept of entrepreneurship is blossoming in engineering programs and medical schools, and even in the liberal arts. "Our interest is in the whole curriculum," she says. "We need to spread out from the business school."

Either as class projects or on their own, students in an array of disciplines are coming up with ideas, writing business plans and seeing them through to prototype and, often, marketplace. In their spare time, students in agricultural economics at Purdue invent new uses for soy; industrial design majors at Syracuse, in a special collaborative laboratory, create wearable technologies; a psychology major, through the Yale

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Entrepreneurial Institute, starts a limited liability company offering neuromarketing services.

Richard Miller, the president of the Olin College of Engineering in Wellesley, recalls a time that academically packed programs like engineering believed that teaching business and entrepreneurship would require watering down curriculum. "We think differently now," he says. Dr. Miller says a personal turning point came back in his days at the University of Southern California, when visitors from McDonnell Douglas told a classroom of engineers that the project they were working on in class was actually the subject of a patent worth \$200 million. "What's a patent?" they asked.

Clark University, a liberal arts college in Worcester, Mass., offers a minor in entrepreneurship that can be fitted into just about any degree plan. "It's too important to be taught by business professionals to business students," says George Gendron, the founder and director of its innovation and entrepreneurship program. The program, he says, is intended to help students find "what they're passionate about," and to learn how to apply themselves to it practically, whether in business or in the growing area of social entrepreneurship, which focuses on societal change.

Even at Babson, entrepreneurship isn't all about business: in E-Tower, Austin Conti and Gerald Praysman are writing a screenplay about the Middle East that they hope to sell using the techniques for spotting business opportunities. And Gabriel Schillinger, a freshman, is engaged in social entrepreneurship. A nonprofit organization he helped start in high school, For Darfur Inc., put on a concert by Kanye West in Florida that raised \$300,000 for Doctors Without Borders, and he is trying to build on that early success.

The entrepreneurship movement has its critics, especially among those who see college as a time for broad academic exploration. Daniel S. Greenberg, author of "Science for Sale: The Perils, Rewards and Delusions of Campus Capitalism," finds the increasingly fervent campus embrace faddish and narrow. "I just don't think that entrepreneurship ranks so high in terms of national need, or in terms of what can effectively be taught in the limited time available" in the college years, he says. "What aren't you studying because you're studying entrepreneurship?"

Leonard A. Schlesinger, Babson's president, says that the question of whether innovation really can be taught is "an age-old debate." Mr. Schlesinger, who has served as chief operating officer of Limited Brands, says that if teaching entrepreneurship is an academic fad, it is one the school has pursued since 1978 — "a fad like wearing pants and underwear."

Schools do not teach the spark of creativity so much as provide the tools for students to capitalize on that spark, he says. "I'm going to teach you to find opportunity."

Especially in a bad economy, he adds, the curriculum "gets our people to be much better prepared for the structure and dynamics of the job market they're likely to face. The thought process and logic that we teach is at the core of stimulating innovation, stimulating innovation is at the core of any developed economy."

"I'm not trying to be arrogant," Dr. Schlesinger notes, "but the world needs what we do."

The urge is strong at E-Tower.

With word of a visitor on the premises spreading, some two dozen dorm residents crowded into the common room to talk about their projects. They were brimming with

excitement about their plans, and eager to share them with a reporter who, as more than one noted, might be able to help them make a connection in the business world or get them a little publicity. Prinya Kovitchindachai pressed one of his hangover pills into my hand. I tried it, and grimaced at the taste. "It's much better if you're drunk!" he insisted.

Another student grabbed me as I was leaving. He asked that I not use his name in the article. The people with whom he was dealing in his start-up trading business, he said nervously, "don't know how old I am." ■

John Schwartz is a reporter for The Times.

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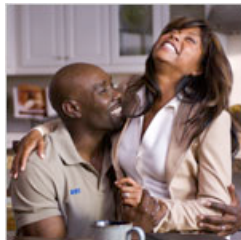
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