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Reimagining Business Education Through University-Community Microenterprise Collaborations

Kevin G. Guerrieri,[1] Aarti S. Ivanic, [2] Diana Hannasch-Haag, [3] and Julieta Gonzalez[4]

[1] Professor of Spanish, Department of Languages, Cultures, and Literature, University of San Diego, [2] Dean and Associate Professor of Marketing, Nicolais School of Business, Wagner College, [3] Director of Retention, Online Programs, Professional and Continuing Education, University of San Diego, [4] Small Business Project Manager, Access Inc.

Abstract

Business education must evolve. Traditionally, it has been narrowly focused, siloed, and often reflective of the transactional nature of business through the lens of maximizing shareholder wealth. The triumph of market fundamentalism over the last five decades has coincided with increasing social inequality, the concentration of corporate power, and a weakening of many forms of social solidarity. There are calls for higher education institutions to reaffirm their commitment to their public purposes and the common good and to leverage their economic resources as anchor institutions. Schools of business have enormous potential to contribute to these efforts by integrating into the curriculum a broader and deeper focus on university-community collaboration, civic engagement, and solidarity with community partners to address social and economic inequities. This review of a partnership between an MBA program and a community center's microenterprise program highlights the key role that community engagement can play in graduate business education. The study includes a conceptual model incorporating four overlapping areas: critical reflection, relational paradigms, intersectionality, multilingual communication, and intercultural praxis. Structural barriers and challenges are discussed in the study, but also opportunities for building upon program strengths and a flexible framework for implementation at other institutions.

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Resumen

La educación empresarial debe evolucionar, puesto que, tradicionalmente, ha tenido un acercamiento estrecho y aislado que refleja la naturaleza transaccional de los negocios con un objetivo de maximizar la riqueza de los accionistas. El triunfo del fundamentalismo del mercado a lo largo de las últimas cinco décadas ha coincidido con un aumento de desigualdad social, la concentración del poder corporativo y un debilitamiento de muchas formas de solidaridad social. Hay llamamientos a instituciones de educación superior para reafirmar el compromiso a sus propósitos públicos y el bien común y para hacer uso de sus recursos económicos como "instituciones ancla". En su plan de estudios, las facultades de administración empresarial tienen un gran potencial para contribuir a estos esfuerzos integando un enfoque más amplio y profundo en la colaboración con la comunidad, el compromiso cívico y la solidaridad con asociaciones comunitarias con el fin de afrontar las inequidades sociales y económicas. Este análisis de una colaboración entre un programa de Maestría en Administración (MBA) y el programa de microempresas de un centro comunitario resalta el papel fundamental que la colaboración comunitaria puede desempeñar en la educación empresarial superior. El estudio incluye un modelo conceptual que incorpora cuatro áreas interrelacionadas: la reflexión crítica, los paradigmas relacionales, la interseccionalidad y la comunicación multilingüe y la praxis intercultural. En el estudio se examinan barreras estructurales y desafíos, pero también oportunidades para construir a partir de los puntos fuertes del programa, así como un marco flexible para su implementación en otras instituciones.

Palabras clave: educación empresial, asociaciones comunitarias, microempresas, Maestría en Administración (MBA), microemprendedores, colaboración comunitaria, reflexión crítica, interseccionalidad, multilinguismo

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Introduction

Colleges and universities provide students with experiential learning opportunities through many different modalities. Within business education, these experiences often entail placing students in businesses or nonprofit organizations through internships, externships, or practicums, for example, so that they can apply knowledge and concepts in a real-world setting. Experiential learning also occurs through community service, service-learning, community engagement, pro bono clinics, and other frameworks that explicitly aim to contribute to the public good, foster community development, and address disparities and inequities. The present article focuses on a program framed as community engagement in which graduate business students in the university's full-time and part-time MBA programs work directly with microentrepreneurs who participate in a microenterprise program managed at a local community center.

During the first few semesters following the program's inception in 2017, some issues arose as the students began collaborating with the microentrepreneurs. Some students had difficulties determining how to help guide their assigned microentrepreneurs or explaining the concepts and ideas they had learned in their MBA courses, while others felt that they did not possess the skillset and knowledge that the microentrepreneurs needed. In some cases, the program participants were frustrated due to a perceived lack of progress in the development of the business over the course of the academic term. On one occasion, a student suggested that the person they were working with simply did not have what it took to be an entrepreneur. Overall, some students viewed the program through a transactional lens in that they put in the mandatory service hours solely to fulfill the degree requirement. In light of these concerning issues and other apparent disconnects, the leadership team articulated a series of guiding questions for program review and improvement:

     1. How does the specialized business knowledge in accounting, management, finance, marketing, and other areas, gained in the classroom align with the needs and challenges faced by low-income microentrepreneurs?

     2. What is the nature of the interaction between the students and the business owners, how is it framed, and how are students and community members prepared for the interaction?

     3. How does the collaboration address social and racial justice issues, inequalities and inequities, and power differentials?

     4. What type of relationship is established between the university and the community partner, and to what degree are principles of reciprocity, mutual benefit, and equity truly enacted?

5. How can this collaboration with the community center form part of the university's broader anchor institution mission that strives to achieve collective impact through place-based initiatives aimed at economic development and capacity building?

Upon reflection, it became apparent that some challenges were symptomatic of systemic and epistemological issues requiring a broader paradigm shift. As researchers directly involved in the program, we examined the practices and protocols involved in the collaboration as well as the related literature in multiple disciplines. The questions posed are far-reaching and call for exploration from the individual and interpersonal to the institutional and societal levels, with the ultimate objective of deepening the commitment to the public purposes of the university, fostering economic growth in communities of urban and metropolitan settings while simultaneously strengthening partnerships through antiracist, reciprocal, and equitable practices. The present article constitutes a scholar-practitioner theoretical reflection organized into five sections. The first consists of a brief overview of university-community collaboration in business education for the public good. The second is a description of the micro-enterprise collaboration and the authors' positionality. The third presents the Business Education-Community Collaboration Conceptual Model developed by the leadership team. The fourth summarizes the program implementation of the model. Finally, the fifth section focuses on the aspirational engaged school of business, with a discussion of benefits and challenges as well as areas of future exploration and research.

University-Community Collaboration in Business Education for the Public Good

Recent phenomena found in the corporate world and business education curricula have a stated focus—partially or completely—on the public good or the creation of social value, some as mainstream practices and others as growing alternative approaches. The United Nations-supported initiative on the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME, n.d.), for example, "engages business and management schools to ensure they provide future leaders with the skills needed to balance economic and sustainability goals while drawing attention to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and aligning academic institutions with the work of the UN Global Compact" (para. 2). Since the founding of PRME in 2007, more business schools worldwide have been incorporating the SDGs into their programs. Similarly, other topics such as Environment, social governance (ESG) (Henisz et al., 2019), social entrepreneurship (Brooks, 2009; Bornstein & Davis, 2010), "bottom of the pyramid" (BOP) (Prahalad & Hammond, 2002), the B-Corp movement (Marquis, 2020), the "Triple Bottom Line" (Elkington 1994), fair trade (Cichos, 2019), and small business accelerator initiatives (Palazzolo & Devagayam, 2023), among others, are also incorporated into MBA curricula.

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A cursory examination of the literature reveals a number of initiatives over the last two decades aimed at enhancing the integration of community service-learning and community engagement projects into the MBA curriculum (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). For example, Johnson (2013) described a project in a graduate research methods course where graduate students worked with a nonprofit performing arts center that needed assistance increasing attendance. Students worked in teams and the client, and at the end of the project, they had the opportunity to reflect on their experience. Godfrey, Illes, and Berry (2005) described a group of MBA students in an ethics course who worked with a local chapter of an international NGO to develop an internal accounting system. While they faced challenges during the project, the students learned hands-on, powerful lessons on real-world organizational ethics. Davis and Michel (2000) had a group of MBA strategy students help a religious association develop a plan to increase membership. Friedman (1996) had MBA leadership students design, organize, and implement service experience to apply leadership skills in an ambiguous and complex environment.

Community-based experiences are also incorporated into graduate-level business education through a direct-service paradigm, but these are less common. A cursory examination of MBA program websites from the top five benchmark institutions identified by the current institution showed that while many had an office for community engagement and social awareness, none of the MBA programs formally required any volunteer hours to be completed as part of a graduation requirement. At one aspirational school, MBA students complete 20 hours of community service, while at another, the full-time and flex- MBA students participate in a friendly competition during the month of volunteerism, and those who complete 100 hours receive a special designation.

This brief overview—from national and international efforts to the handful of examples of community service-learning, community engagement, and direct service projects—serves as a snapshot of the wide range of initiatives to create social value and address economic disparities that have been integrated into business education. However, as studies have indicated over the years, the MBA curriculum remains predominantly focused on maximizing shareholder wealth through hard skills embedded into the core function-based MBA courses and discussion of mainstream case studies of for-profit businesses. For example, Godfrey et al. (2005) criticized four aspects of business education: being too narrowly focused; not incorporating cross-functional and holistic knowledge; the transactionality of human interactions; and the supremacy of shareholder wealth. Several authors (e.g., Mintzberg & Gosling, 2000; Syed et al., 2009) have argued that business schools focus more on the functions of business rather than the process of managing people or processes. MBA education heavily emphasizes analytical tools, which has hindered developing managers to face ambiguous situations (Thomas et al., 2013). Pfeffer and Fong (2002) stated that while a narrow focus can help students find a job, it may not help them

succeed. Across two studies, Shantz et al. (2021) found that MBA curricula are siloed, focused on financial gain and maximizing shareholder value, and fail to prepare students to lead through global crises.

It is imperative to examine business education, in general, in relation to the current hegemonic economic paradigm constituted by neoliberalism, which enshrines individual freedoms based on the "interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital" (Harvey, 2005, p. 7). These individual freedoms are subject to the logic of the market, and "the sovereign market requires individuals to adjust themselves to its imperatives, which means sacrificing egalitarianism and eschewing the project of collective freedom" (Whyte, 2019, p. 23). As Harvey (2005) indicates in the history of neoliberalism, since its emergence in the 1970s, there has been a shift towards increasing social inequality, the restoration of economic power to the upper class, the concentration of corporate power, and a weakening of many different forms of social solidarity.

Within this overall climate, there have been powerful calls for institutions of higher education to reaffirm their commitment to their public purposes and the common good (Campus Compact, 2016; CUMU, 2010) and to leverage their economic resources as anchor institutions in their communities (Birch et al., 2013; CUMU, 2018; Hodges & Dubb, 2012). These calls for integrating a broader and deeper focus on collaboration, civic engagement, and solidarity with communities to address social and economic inequities into the curriculum can be seen as both key responsibilities and transformative opportunities. The present article constitutes a call for such curricular transformation in business education involving deeper and wider integration of university-community collaborations based on a community-engagement relational paradigm, multilingual communication, intercultural praxis, intersectionality, and critical reflection that interrogates the hegemonic assumptions undergirding neoliberalism. The following sections illustrate a praxis of action and reflection with the program description and conceptual model.

Program Description and Scholar-Practitioner Positionality

The present article focuses on a collaboration designed in partnership between the University of San Diego—with faculty from the Knauss School of Business and a faculty liaison from the Mulvaney Center for Community, Awareness, and Social Action—and the microenterprise program at Access Inc., a local community center. Hereafter, the acronym AUMEC will be used to designate the Access-USD Microenterprise Collaboration, which was inaugurated in the spring semester of 2017. At this university, students in both the full-time MBA and part-time MBA programs must complete 12-15 hours of community service as a graduation requirement in the business school. The students volunteer with a nonprofit organization and utilize their

business knowledge acumen to help the nonprofit. This requirement is formally framed within a direct-service paradigm as giving back to the community. It can be seen as mission-aligned, given that fostering a dedication to compassionate service is part of the university's formal mission statement. Students are offered the AUMEC collaboration as an option to fulfill this degree requirement.

Since AUMEC's inception in 2017, some 138 MBA students have participated and worked with over 60 microentrepreneurs. The requirements for participation in the microenterprise program at the community center include being low to moderate-income and county residents. Many of the participants are new to the United States and/or members of underrepresented populations and have a wide range of microenterprises such as cleaning services, food, retail, construction, and personal care, among many others. Through AUMEC, the MBA students work individually or in teams of two to help microentrepreneurs with their business-related needs, such as business plans, accounting/bookkeeping, marketing, legal questions, and employee-related issues. This collaboration provides a structured option for the MBA students to fulfill their community-service requirement while the microentrepreneurs simultaneously obtain assistance to start or expand a small business. The AUMEC collaboration continues with a new cohort every semester of the academic year.

The AUMEC leadership team comprises a diverse group of individuals, all co-authors on this paper. Two of the authors are faculty members, one in the school of business—and who has moved to another anchor-institution college—and one in the humanities at USD. One author is a microenterprise developer supervisor at the local community center, Access Inc. Finally, the fourth author was in an administrative position as a student professional development manager at USD. We are mindful of our positionality as participants in and leaders of collaboration and, simultaneously, as scholar-practitioners who are examining the same collaboration both for program improvement and to make contributions to the broader field. Our approach has been guided by an "imperative of reflexivity," as described by Morrison (2015)—in relation to global service-learning but very relevant in other scholarship of engagement contexts—and the following questions: "Which values and beliefs are we consciously or unconsciously bringing to our [...] research? How might these values (axiology) and beliefs (ontology, epistemology) shape the process (method) and the language (rhetoric) that we will use in our research?" (p. 64). These questions inform the present theoretical reflection and guide our work with the students and business owners. We are aware of our different positionalities and the power dynamics in which we are all immersed.

Conceptual Model

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Following the inception of the AUMEC collaboration, the leadership team began a reflection cycle wherein we drew from our own experiences and those of the microentrepreneurs and MBA students and the literature and theory included in the present work. Our open and evolving conceptual model for this collaboration, emerging from reflection and action in a Freirean (1970) sense of praxis, comprises four overlapping areas, as illustrated in Figure 1: community engagement and relational paradigms, critical reflection, intersectionality, and multilingual communication and intercultural praxis.
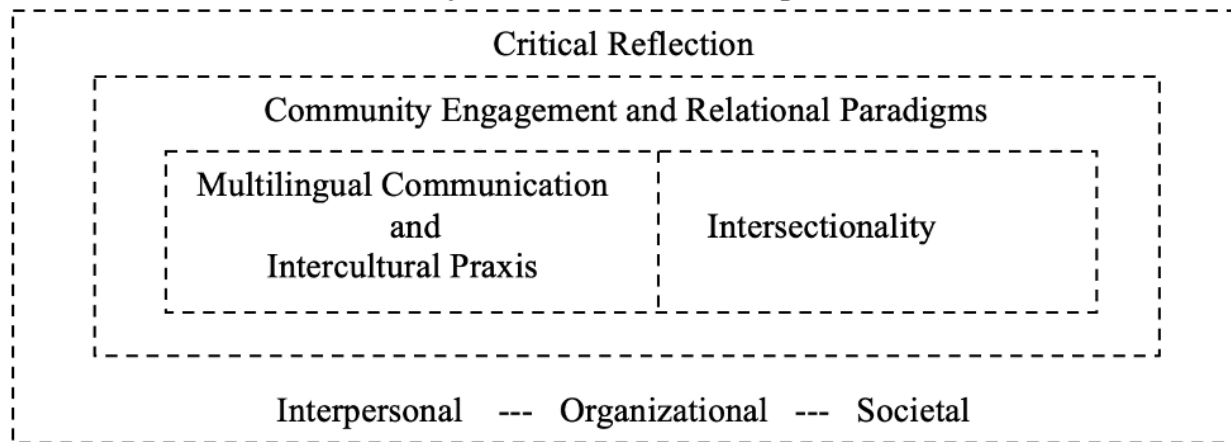

FIGURE 1. Business education-community collaboration conceptual model.

Community Engagement and Relational Paradigms

A range of relational paradigms can manifest themselves in university-community collaborations in business education framed as community service-learning, volunteerism, and direct service, among others, as well as other experiential learning modalities such as field projects and internships. Participation in the AUMEC program fulfills a "community service" degree requirement for MBA students at USD, but this label is a misnomer with important implications. The discourse and related actions, together, create the relationship and inform the implicit and explicit values that become attached to it. Students who enter a community-service or direct-service program often begin to conceptualize the relationship as unilineal in which they are "giving back to the community" as they share university-centered knowledge and skills with the "(under)served." Accordingly, there is an ongoing imperative for universities to develop a clear definition and understanding of community engagement at the institutional level and how it is distinct from other community collaborations.

The AUMEC collaboration is framed as community engagement (CE) based on the Carnegie Foundation definition (as cited in Noel & Earwicker, 2015, p. 35) and understood through the lens of the Community Engagement Institutional Assessment (CEIA) Rubric (Sgoutas-Emch et

al., 2021). The CEIA rubric aims at engaging faculty in a critical evaluation of their collaborations in the community and forging a collective understanding of CE, organized into four primary areas: (a) democratic, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial partnerships; (b) societal issues and the common good; (c) critical reflection; and (d) civic learning, citizenship, and democratic values (p. 8). This approach is informed by a broader, long-term social justice turn in CE, as described by Grain and Lund (2016), as well as earlier frameworks, such as the "Democratic Civic Engagement" framework proposed by Saltmarsh et al. (2009), and more recent ones, such as Quan's (2023), which argues for the reframing of "plug-and-play" relationships in a bridge to "justice-centering relationships." Collectively, these studies provide key guiding principles in relation to partnerships, knowledge production, power and decision-making, outcomes and impacts, and other vital areas.

The AUMEC collaboration is built upon these relational paradigms. The semester-long work of each team contributes to the long-term multi-year collaboration between the business school and the community center, which the leadership team continually strives to deepen as an equitable, democratic, and mutually beneficial partnership (Bringle et al., 2013; Clayton et al., 2009; Davis & Nicolaides, 2017; Hidayat et al., 2009; Martin & Crossland, 2017; Sgoutas-Emch & Guerrieri, 2020). In the present conceptual model, we underscore the multiple levels on which relational paradigms should be examined and the principles of critical, justice-focused CE enacted. For example, the students' work with the small business owners is explicitly framed as a partnership—as opposed to a mentor-mentee or consultant-client relationship—in which they are co-educators and co-creators of the microenterprise. Similarly, students are asked to interrogate the different relational paradigms found in the business world outside this particular collaboration such that they explore how the paradigms entail sets of common-sense assumptions, epistemologies, and power dynamics that inform the relations among the participants that may led to greater equity and social justice or the opposite.

Critical Reflection

Brookfield (2009) affirms that—from a critical theory perspective—for "reflection to be considered critical it must have as its explicit focus uncovering, and challenging, the power dynamics that frame practice and uncovering and challenging hegemonic assumptions" (p. 298). From this perspective, Brookfield (2009) argues that critical reflection does not focus on "how to work more effectively or productively within an existing system, but on calling the foundations and imperatives of the system itself into question, assessing their morality, and considering alternatives" (297), as well as analyzing "commonly held ideas and practices for the extent to which they perpetuate economic inequity, deny compassion, foster a culture of silence and prevent people from realising a sense of common connectedness" (p. 298). This notion of critical

reflection builds upon previous work (e.g., Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1990) and appears in later studies (e.g., Kiely, 2015; Norris et al., 2017), conceptualized more specifically in the context of community engagement and civic-mindedness. Reflection is an essential component of service learning and community engagement, and ample approaches, frameworks, and models have been developed over the years to implement effective and deep reflection in ways that can be linked to disciplinary notions of critical thinking (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Eyler, 2002; Hatcher et al., 2004; Welch, 1999). However, the present conceptual model emphasizes the transformative potential of critical reflection, following Brookfield (2009), "when it fosters challenges to hegemony, when it prompts counter-hegemonic practices" (p. 301), specifically focused here on business education and the business world.

As Baillie et al. (2012) affirm, "professions each have their own hegemonic values, which need to be exposed, articulated, owned and even transformed, if professionals are to act in a socially just manner" (p. 74), and their study poses a key question: what does a socially just profession look like? While their study is focused on engineering, it applies to any profession or field. Based on Young's (1990) five categories of oppression, the approach seeks to create an engineering heterotopia—a counter-hegemonic, alternative space—that "1) Avoids any form of exploitation (benefiting at the expense of others)"; "2) Avoids or reduces marginalisation (being pushed away from participation in social life)"; "3) Reduces powerlessness (being unable to make one's voice heard due to lack of status or respect)"; "4) Eliminates cultural imperialism (the dominant culture becomes the way of interpreting social life)"; and "5) Reduces violence (the risk and reality of being targeted with acts of violence)" (Baillie et al., 2012, pp. 86–89). Finally, we would integrate an essential sixth category here in which the profession avoids or reduces any harm to the environment and natural world, given that social justice issues are inextricably intertwined with climate, environmental, and ecological justice questions.

Figure 1's use of dashed lines throughout and "critical reflection" as the largest conceptual field represent the expansive nature of this component that seeks to develop a reflexive habit in participants that goes beyond the direct circumstances of the AUMEC collaboration, questioning everyday situations and practices, deconstructing professional practices, and examining ideologies embedded in systems.

Intersectionality

Over the last three decades, since the publication of two key essays by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), the notion of intersectionality has become widely employed and debated. Intersectionality is "an integrated approach to analyzing the complex, matrix-like interconnections among patterns of discrimination based on race, gender, and other social identities, with the goal of highlighting

how resulting inequalities are experienced" (Butler, 2017, p. 38). As Goodman (2014) indicates, people's social locations "within hierarchical oppressive structures affect their access to power, resources, and opportunities, which shapes how they see and experience themselves and the world" (p. 100). Intersectionality explores "the ways in which social identities and the experiences of domination and subordination interweave and interplay" at different times and in different contexts (Goodman, 2014, p. 101). However, it is essential not to freeze intersectionality within overly static definitions, to not view identity merely as an additive, nor to reduce this concept to questions of identity. In this sense, Jones underscores that "intersectionality is only about identity when structures of inequality are foregrounded and identities considered in light of social issues and power dynamics" (p.xii).

In sum, intersectionality provides an approach to exploring the complexity and tensions involved in community engagement, especially within a business-related context in which questions of identity, social (in)justice and (in)equity, and privilege and oppression are not necessarily in the curriculum—undergraduate or graduate—nor addressed in experiential learning settings. The intent here is not to resolve the tensions or reconcile opposing values but to engage participants in deconstructing values, attitudes, and common-sense assumptions. Following Carbado et al. (2013), the goal must not be "simply to understand social relations of power, nor to limit intersectionality's gaze to the relations that [are] interrogated therein, but to bring the often hidden dynamics forward in order to transform them" (p. 9). Intersectionality forms part of the present conceptual model, as "a powerful tool for understanding, constructing, and de-constructing: the experience of identity, the complex and mutually constituting nature of social identities, the relationships between identity and larger social systems, and the interwoven nature of manifestations of social oppression" (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014, p. 17). Jones (2014) emphasizes that "at the heart of intersectionality is the integration of theory, research, and praxis" (p. xiii). Ultimately, as Moradi and Grzanka (2017) affirm, upon outlining a set of guidelines for reflection and action, intersectionality's primary aim is to challenge and transform structures/systems of power, privilege, and oppression" (p. 510).

Multilingual Communication and Intercultural Praxis

Communication between the students and the microentrepreneurs in the AUMEC collaboration occurs across various languages. In some cases, the microentrepreneurs' primary language is Spanish, and they work with the MBA student through a translator, either a family member or a staff member from the community center. In addition, the first language of many MBA students—particularly international students—is not English, although the graduate program instruction is in English. However, even when a given student-microentrepreneur team shares a common language such as Spanish, for example, their communication is still mediated through

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regional differences—e.g., a student from Spain or Costa Rica with a microentrepreneur originally from Mexico or a student from Mexico City with a Latinx microentrepreneur—in addition to diverse educational backgrounds and worldviews; socio-economic and cultural differences; the axes and intersections of inequalities and power in their lives, and a myriad of other factors related to and beyond the actual language spoken.

The collaboration involves many other types of languages. Telecommunications technology, for instance, such as e-mail, text messaging, and videoconferencing, among others, constitute not only media through which to communicate but also practices and skills that must be aligned. Furthermore, the differences among in-person encounters, videoconferencing, voice communications, and written texts can be significant. Likewise, the participants may have varying degrees of computer skills to carry out functions such as spreadsheets, word processing, and presentation programs, among others. Additional skill development is required for specifically business-related technology, software, and applications. It must be noted that some participants have limited access to technology in general. Finally, the specialized terminology of accounting, finance, marketing, and other business areas represents another language that comes into play.

The notion of the proposed multilingual communication is informed here by concepts such as symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2011, 2014), multiliteracies (López-Sánchez, 2009, New London Group, 1996; Warner & Dupuy, 2018), intercultural communication (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010; Sekimoto & Sorrells, 2016), and intercultural education (Aman, 2013). Through an asset-based approach, all the participants in the collaboration utilize the languages and literacies they already possess, and the learning and skill development is bi-directional. There is an emphasis on the ability to move among different languages and continually negotiate meaning and nuances. This also entails recognizing that the interlocutors may not have the same assumptions and expectations for each communicative situation or collaboration.

This component also includes the notion of "intercultural praxis." As Aman (2013) indicates, the discourse on interculturality—and its implementation in "intercultural educational" practices—can lead to the construction of otherness and the reproduction of coloniality. Accordingly, it is vital to contextualize the notion as different from apolitical multiculturalism that can essentialize cultural identities or homogenize intragroup differences. That being said, as a tool for developing a critical perspective, Sekimoto and Sorrells (2016) proposed an "intercultural praxis" that explicitly seeks to integrate a social justice approach with intercultural communication through six dimensions: "(a) being willing to ask questions and suspend judgment (inquiry); (b) clarifying cultural frames of reference and shifting frames from micro to meso to macro levels (framing); (c) examining who/where you are in relation to others in terms of power relations

(positioning); (d) engaging in open exchange of ideas (dialogue); (e) looking back and accessing your thoughts and action (reflection); and (f) taking informed and ethical actions toward a more just and equitable society" (p. 4).

Program Implementation of the Conceptual Model

The implementation of the conceptual model is conceived of as a praxis of continual reflection and action, with seven phases organized into three groups: (1) application, selection, and orientations; (2) collaboration, check-in, final reflection; and (3) celebration and showcase. In this section, we provide examples of activities and characteristics of the phases, not as a detailed roadmap for implementation but rather as a path for guidance.

Application, Selection, and Orientations

Through the application process, key information is gathered from the MBA students: language skills; program concentration (Business Analytics, Finance, Organizational Leadership, Marketing, Real Estate, Supply Chain Management); other areas of knowledge and experience (accounting, bookkeeping, business plans, financial statements, human resources, social media marketing, website design, etc.); and proposed contributions to this collaboration, among other elements. Similarly, the microentrepreneurs provide information on their business: basic description (name, type of business, time in operation, current status); short and long-term goals for business; specific needs and objectives to be addressed; language skills; computer, telecommunications, and internet skills; among other data. Utilizing all this information collectively, the program leadership team collaborates, pairing each student with a microentrepreneur.

Two orientations are held, one each for microentrepreneurs and students, and all participants collectively gather. Each microentrepreneur-student pair meets for the first time, discusses the business, and establishes a meeting schedule for the remainder of the semester. In the student orientation, in addition to learning about the community center and details on the program, the students are introduced to some of the critical aspects of the conceptual model. They discuss a modified version of the democratic civic engagement framework (Saltmarsh et al., 2009, p. 11), comparing a "thin" paradigm and a "critical" paradigm of community engagement, and a brief article by Goodman (2014): "The Tapestry Model: Exploring Social Identities, Privilege, and Oppression from an Intersectional Perspective." Building upon previous scholarship by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and others, Goodman's (2014) Tapestry Model (TM) uses the metaphor of weaving a tapestry to explain some of the main tenets of an

intersectional framework—focused on understanding how different social categories simultaneously interact, shaping people's identities and lived experiences—within larger systems of structural inequality. As Goodman points out, "Privilege and oppression operate and interact simultaneously. The intersections of identities with different social statuses can increase or mitigate experiences of advantage and disadvantage" (p. 102). In this orientation, we seek to embark the students on reflection around these questions as they consider their social locations and explore their expectations and assumptions about microentrepreneurs.

Collaborations, Check-in, and Final Reflection

Prior to initiating their work with the microentrepreneurs, the leadership team asks the students to study a bilingual (Spanish-English) business plan template—distributed in the orientation— which they can use to guide the initial conversations about the microenterprise. In addition to being a practical tool for any business start-up, the business plan template serves an essential epistemological function: the hyper-specialization of knowledge that can take place in graduate programs, especially as students select concentrations or dissertation topics, is shifted to a more relational, localized, and contextual approach to knowledge production. The template provides a basic structure for deliberations while opening multiple directions for the microentrepreneur-student team to explore as they co-create. During the semester, two formal reflections are held with the students, check-in after 2-3 weeks of collaboration and a final reflection near the end of the term.

The participants in this program have a wide range of experiences due to the vast differences between the microenterprises and the participants. Some are established small businesses with years of operation and clearly defined needs and opportunities for growth, while others are nascent projects, sometimes barely more than an idea or a dream. Accordingly, identifying the projected outcomes for each team varies greatly. In addition, challenges frequently arise, some of which are logistical but very real: finding the time and place to meet; completing the determined tasks from one meeting to the next; dealing with unexpected emergencies and contingencies, among many other issues. The formal reflections—as well as the additional support provided to individuals by the leadership team—are vital and tend to involve guiding participants in adjusting their desired outcomes and managing expectations, given that collaboration is rarely linear, continually raising their awareness about different factors related to multilingual communication; and exercising teamwork and collectively sharing knowledge, experience, and ideas among the different enterprises.

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Celebration, Showcase, and Continuity

At the end of the semester, an event is held with all participants and guests in which each student-microentrepreneur team gives a brief presentation on their microenterprise and the completed work. It is important to point out that, unlike common business concept challenges, pitches for venture capitalists, and even social innovation and social entrepreneurship contests—see Auch and Meyskens (2014)—this event is not a competition with prizes or seed funding; on the contrary, the focus is on showcasing the small businesses and celebrating the collaboration, the learning, and the relationships formed. Importantly, the businesses are not only showcased on the screen in presentations; they are also embodied in the organization of the event through the food vendors and others who bring samples of their products and services to share with attendees.

Several continuity mechanisms are built into the program. The students submit summaries of the work carried out, the materials produced for the microenterprises, and the community center provides ongoing support to the microentrepreneurs after the collaboration ends. In some cases, the students continue to work with the business owners after completing their degree requirements. Likewise, the leadership team's end-of-semester holistic assessment of the program serves to identify necessary adjustments for program improvement.

The leadership team continually compiles resources to guide, support, and inform the students. Likewise, over the years, the students have also contributed to this knowledge base and bank of resources–along with the completed deliverables submitted–which are shared among cohorts from semester to semester. This captures the progress that is made and informs the next student who works with the microentrepreneur, as many microentrepreneurs participate in the program over the course of multiple terms. The continuity and relationality that characterizes this collaboration extends beyond this specific program as AUMEC constitutes one part of the overall work that the university seeks to carry out in alignment with its mission as an anchor institution (Birch et al., 2013; Hodges & Dubb, 2012), leveraging its economic capacity in addition to other resources for the common good of and alongside the broader community. The interplay and alignment among these multiple levels–interpersonal, programmatic, institutional, and societal–are sought through continual reflection, adjustments, and action.

The Aspirational Engaged School of Business

Benefits and Challenges

Original Research

The MBA students who participate have opportunities to deepen their learning and develop a broader range of crucial skills that align with industry and employer demand. At the same time, they also directly contribute to microenterprise growth through collaborative and reciprocal relationships with microentrepreneurs. The epistemological shift in which the teams interact and work as co-creators of knowledge around and for the development of the small businesses takes place within a democratic civic engagement framework that seeks to resist and reconfigure preconceived notions that separate "civic duty" and the "public good" from individuals' economic interests and enterprises, a separation promoted within the predominant neoliberal paradigm. Working with microentrepreneurs with minimal resources on ambiguous business problems helps move students from a purely functional and analytical-based learning style to one that prepares them for success in uncertain environments. This echoes the renewed calls for a reevaluation of the MBA curriculum whereby students are challenged to develop skills outside their functional siloes to solve broader problems. Additionally, through their interactions with microentrepreneurs who are low-income, underrepresented minorities, students are challenged to think about business problems and resources through a social justice lens.

Some microentrepreneurs have reported increased levels of self-esteem and confidence gained from participating in the collaboration, and others expressed satisfaction that they could share their knowledge with the students in addition to receiving information from them. This highlights the reciprocal nature of this collaboration and the co-creation of knowledge. This intended outcome goes beyond economic success metrics and speaks to key values held in the program.

The AUMEC collaboration also faces several interrelated challenges, which are common in community engagement work in general, the first of which is the time of interaction between participants, which is formally set for the students at a 12–15-hour service requirement over the course of the semester. The depth of engagement is limited, and the relationships formed risk becoming transactional: transformational engagement requires more time. Additionally, there are challenges to the long-term sustainability of AUMEC. Currently, the program is not formally integrated into the business school. The faculty members and administrators who help manage and lead the program do so without its formal recognition as part of their professional responsibilities. The sustainability is further stressed when there is turnover among the leadership team members. In short, the challenge here consists of institutional investment in creating long-term structures, such as resource allocation and program involvement as part of job descriptions, to strengthen continuity and program growth.

Program integration constitutes another multifaceted challenge for AUMEC. AUMEC is one option for MBA students to complete their community service requirements. The program is not a formal part of the curriculum, and participation is not mandatory, as students may choose to

find another nonprofit organization to serve. This can be problematic for meeting the needs of the microenterprise program at the community center. In addition to the question of curricular integration, there is a challenge to achieve deeper and more meaningful integration and alignment of AUMEC into the mission and vision of the school of business to expand these types of community engagement possibilities in teaching, learning, and research and to foster the university's mission as an anchor institution.

Areas to Explore

There are several areas for future research and avenues to explore to strengthen this collaboration model, one of which revolves around how best to integrate AUMEC and other similar programs into the MBA curriculum. Transforming the collaboration into a course-based component might make student participation more consistent and enhance how this program—and critical community engagement work in general—are valued as a part of business education. There are pros and cons to offering this type of unit-bearing course, either as a degree requirement or as an elective, and the nuances must be examined. This question could also be articulated compared to other experiential learning modalities and types of community-based projects.

There are several assessment-related areas to explore. It would be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study of student learning and positive impacts on community organizations and participants in a microenterprise collaboration such as AUMEC. The current program depends on a limited temporal model whereby the students and microentrepreneurs work together until the end of the semester, and most teams then cease collaboration shortly after that. A study could be designed to examine measurable outcomes: such as knowledge acquired and produced; different types of skills developed; self-efficacy; real-world problem-solving; intercultural and symbolic competence; and civic engagement learning, among others. Regarding small businesses, tangible metrics might include implementing a business plan; financial and economic inputs and outputs; securing grants or other funds for start-up; future growth, and stability; among others.

Universities have tremendous potential to stimulate growth and help confront economic inequities by creating or expanding local and minority-owned vendor initiatives through their procurement processes. Microenterprise collaborations can serve as pipelines for these initiatives explicitly designed to work with underrepresented populations and address economic, educational, and social disparities. Similarly, participatory action research projects focused on business-related issues can be co-created and carried out in collaboration with community residents and microentrepreneurs, leveraging their knowledge and community assets combined with university resources.

Conclusion

There is a call to reimagine business education, building upon existing resources, models, and tendencies already within our institutions that are based on striving to enact social justice, dismantle racist and oppressive systems and structures, and achieve equitable outcomes in active collaboration between universities and community partners. Business schools are called to challenge the existing lens of maximizing shareholder value and the narrow focus in the MBA curriculum and to consider a more holistic, interdisciplinary approach to reframe the purpose of business. More profound integration across the community engagement curriculum with a critical lens for challenging hegemonic assumptions can contribute to the transformation.

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