

## **Outcomes of a High School Entrepreneurship Curriculum**

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## **Abstract**

This study was a post-evaluation of graduates of Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), a national program in high schools to promote entrepreneurship knowledge and skills. The study focused on graduates of the NFTE curriculum in an inner-city high school in Los Angeles County, California. Although the NFTE curriculum contains an evaluation component before and after they participate in the course, the long-term effects of the program have not been evaluated. By focusing exclusively on graduates of the NFTE program, this study sought to determine to what extent the entrepreneurship program has had an impact on their lives. Impact included high school completion, college attendance, starting a business, acquiring personal skills and values, and self-assessment of behavior change.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was a post-evaluation of graduates of Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), a national program in high schools to promote entrepreneurship knowledge and skills. Entrepreneurship is defined according to Tovar and Query (2005) as the quality to assess business opportunities, develop a business plan and marshal the necessary resources to begin a business. This particular study focused on program graduates of the NFTE curriculum in an inner-city high school in Los Angeles County, California. Although the NFTE curriculum contains an evaluation component consisting of questionnaires administered to students immediately before and after they participate in the course, the long-term effects of the program have not been evaluated (Mariotti, 2008). By focusing exclusively on graduates of the NFTE program, this study attempts to determine to what extent, if any, the entrepreneurship program has had an impact on their lives.

## **Underlying Perspectives**

The power of any curriculum lies in sustained student learning (Hiatt-Michael, 2008). Thus, a post-evaluation study of curriculum will provide educators, students, parents, and policymakers with the knowledge of the long-term student learning of a curriculum (Stufflebeam, 2001; Tyler, 1949).

Entrepreneurs and small businesses are critical to the nation's prosperity (Bygrave, 2004; McDowell, 2007; U. S. Small Business Department, 2010). Research has demonstrated that education in entrepreneurship can benefit inner-city youth by increasing their interest in attending college, broadening their career aspirations, and enhancing their belief in their own ability to reach goals. (Fitzgerald, 1999; Hemmings,

2007; Kuratko, 2003). Despite these facts, young people are either not aware of or have been deprived of educational programs that teach entrepreneurship (Hwang & Murdock, 1998; National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth., 2008). Without such programs, most inner-city youth may be deprived of viable prospects for breaking the bonds of poverty. If the teaching of entrepreneurial skills were to be integrated in our nation's schools' curricula, especially in low-income areas, not only would the young adults in these neighborhoods benefit, but also the city, the state, and even the entire country. A post evaluation of a program such as NFTE's could provide insight to policymakers and curriculum developers, perhaps leading them to include such programs in their curricula (Hiatt-Michael, 2008; Marriotti, 2008; Stufflebeam, 2001).

Several theories were selected to analyze graduates' post-evaluation responses. The study utilized Bandura's (1997) modeling theory as noted by students' perceptions of their NFTE instructors; Markus and Nurius (1986) possible selves theory as shared by graduates' changes in themselves; Stajkovic, (2006) development of a core confidence—higher order construct as related to graduates' sense of self-confidence; and Kirkpatrick's (1996) levels of student assessment.

### **Methodology and Data Sources**

The study utilized mixed-methods, combining quantitative personal demographic data with qualitative interview data. The study utilized student demographic data from their high school files as well demographic survey information from all participants. A researcher obtained a list of contact information for all NFTE program graduates from the past 5 years since the program began. These potential participants were each emailed a letter inviting them to participate in the study and an informed consent form to read and

sign, if agreed to. The resultant sample population of 27 graduates from 18 to 20 years who have completed the NFTE program was interviewed either in two small group sessions or individually by telephone, using the same set of validated questions. All 27 participants attended LAUSD schools, had most of their high school education in inner-city schools, and are from culturally and ethnically diverse neighborhoods.

The two group sessions were held at Laser Bearings, Inc. conference room in Lakewood, California at the request of the owner, who was a NFTE graduate; and at the Citi San Francisco in San Francisco, California—a location chosen by the NFTE officials. The two 90-minute small group interviews were conducted with six to seven NFTE graduates. Each session was facilitated by the researcher acting as the moderator and another doctoral student as the recorder. In addition to graduates' written responses, the discussions were recorded and transcribed. Additional notes were taken and any special observations or surprises documented. The researcher conducted individual interviews with NFTE graduates who could not attend a group session but who agreed to participate by phone interview. The individual interviews were conducted one-on-one by phone between the researcher and the graduates. All interviews were taped and recorded with a digital audio device. The recordings from small group sessions and individual interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber, checked for accuracy by the researcher, and edited to remove any identifying information.

## **Findings**

*Research question 1.* What reasons did you enroll in the NFTE program? The greatest portion of NFTE graduates enrolled in the program by accident (30%). Other graduates (26%) initially enrolled because of influence of family members, counselors,

teachers, or friends. Fifteen percent cited interest in business, search for a career, and knowledge of business as their reason for enrolling; 11 % enrolled because of a merged curriculum; and 7% because the course was mandatory.

*Research question 2.* What were your reactions to the program? Start-up cost of getting the business off the ground was the biggest hurdle for the greatest number of NFTE graduates, with five of them (19%) citing this particular obstacle. Four respondents (15%) thought staying focused and applying the new concepts was the main obstacle they faced. Lack of motivation, feeling too young to begin business, and peer pressure dissuading them from their entrepreneurship goals were three obstacles, each of which was cited by three (12%) of the respondents, while two respondents (8%) considered maintaining persistence to be their main hurdle after they had completed the NFTE program. Each of the following five obstacles was cited by only one respondent (4% of the total number): (a) fear speaking in public, (b) failure to win the competition, (c) the business plan concept, (d) recognition of passion into business, and (e) bookkeeping. Finally, one respondent (4%) did not perceive encountering any obstacles whatsoever.

In interview question 2a, graduates noted some problems they faced starting their own business. Twenty-six respondents (35%) identified the feeling and fear of being on their own after the NFTE program as their most significant other problem they faced starting their own businesses.

*Research question 3.* “What were your perceived outcomes (learnings) from the NFTE program on (a) understanding business, (b) beginning a business, (c) sustaining a business, and (d) current income level?” NFTE Program cultivates responsibility among graduates? To some of these NFTE graduates, taking responsibility for their own

decisions was something they had struggled with while in high school; however, 18% thought the NFTE program taught them how to be more positive and mature. Another 16% responded that the program “created a new mindset.” Thirteen percent of the participants claimed that public speaking was the knowledge/skill that they gained from the NFTE program that helped them overcome some of the challenges they encountered in starting their own businesses. In 2 areas—(a) continue with schooling to earn a high school diploma and/or enrolling in college and becoming matured quickly, taking responsibility for their own decisions, They made particular note of the Economics of One Unit, putting together business plans and knowing what a business plan is all about, and improving cash flow as being useful in this area.

In interview question 3b, half of the graduates stated that all of the NFTE programs provided the knowledge and skills that helped them overcome challenges in starting their own businesses. In interview question 3c, 55% of the graduates stated that they did not use any knowledge or skills from the program to help them with legal issues. For interview question 3d, 35% claimed that none of the knowledge or skills acquired from the program helped them overcome challenges with partners/employees, while another 35% reported that what they learned in this area did help them with hiring/firing and correct documentation/contracts.

*Research question 4.* How did the NFTE program affect your interest in being an entrepreneur? In response to interview question 4a, a third of the respondents reported that they were inspired to pursue an entrepreneurship career in college. For interview question 4b, 70% stated they tried to set up their own business. Another 30% had not actually started their business. For interview question 4e, 58% of graduates stated that the

NFTE program did influence what type of business they wanted to start; however 42% stated it did not.

The NFTE program in general affected the respondents by providing motivation and confidence, with 64% reporting that the entire program gave them these attributes, and 36% citing the business plan presentation portion of the curriculum. For interview question 4h, 78% of respondents stated that learning to write concisely in business correspondence had proved to be particularly useful while 11% believed that learning to be open-minded, having a better philosophy, and being more positive were what helped them the most.

*Research question 5.* What knowledge, skills, gained from program helped overcome financial challenges? Regarding NFTE components that helped graduates to overcome financial challenges, 16% cited the division competitions in which they won scholarships and the Fortune 500 investor competition. Another 16% cited learning how to budget and save money. The same number of graduates, 16%, claimed that what the program taught them about lowering their start-up costs; identifying a good price for their product/service; recognizing business losses; and making smarter business choices, such as building business relationships with business owners, helped them to overcome financial challenges. Surprisingly, 5% of respondents thought that even though they gained knowledge or skills from the NFTE program, these did not directly help them overcome any financial challenges

*Research question 6.* How did the NFTE program affect the self-perception of its graduates? Of the 39 respondents, 69% reported that the NFTE program helped them rid themselves of the fear of public speaking and gave them a “can-do” mentality which



made them strong willed, showed them how to take initiative to be leaders, and how to balance their lives. Thirteen percent credited the program with instilling in them a sense of perseverance and alertness. Eight percent thought the NFTE program had helped turn them into people with a sense of purpose who believe they can make changes in the world, despite their young age.

### **Scholarly Significance of the Study**

These findings reveal the multiple layers of long-term benefits to students who participated in the NFTE. The program went well beyond the intended entrepreneurial knowledge and skill aspects of the program. These benefits should be highlighted to policymakers, academic-subject teachers and parents. Such student benefits include academic ones-the desire to complete high school and attend college-but more importantly work ethic values such as accepting responsibility for one's action and being self-confident on the job. The study's findings substantiate the claim that participating in a NFTE program can enhance self-confidence and self esteem as research has shown, higher self-esteem is likely to serve students well throughout their lives and careers (National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth, 2008). The project orientation of this curriculum stimulated personal motivation and encouraged students to take charge of their work and learning.

The NFTE graduates' perceived the teachers in the program as being central to the quality of the program. For example, NFTE graduates stated that their self-esteem increased because NFTE classes were purposeful, interactive and rewarded their efforts. They found the instructors not only focused and good at teaching and engaging students, but also encouraging and willing to assist students; guest speakers were deemed to be

inspiring. As one young graduate put it, “Because...teachers are so experienced in [business], that, kind of ...takes you along. And makes sure that you were not just out there like dangling in the middle of the ocean, not knowing what you were doing.”

*(Respondent I9, personal communication, June 3, 2009).*

The NFTE graduate suggested expansion from the basic NFTE program to include more guest speakers, a longer program, establishing NFTE in more inner cities and offering post-program courses on-line. Changes to the existing curriculum were offering legal help early in the program and providing internships and more emphasis on career paths, as alternates to starting a business.

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