

# Integrating Entrepreneurship with the Liberal Arts: Theology for Entrepreneurship Students

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## Abstract

*This paper examines an upper division theology course targeted to entrepreneurship majors and having as its fundamental goal the integration of professional education with the liberal arts. This paper will detail the process of creating this course, a detailed description of the course content, and discussion of lessons learned by the team.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The on-going debate over the causes of corporate scandals, including Global Crossing, Tyco, WorldCom, and Enron, just to name a few, includes some rather scathing criticism of business education. Etzioni (2002) traces the crisis in business ethics directly back to the business schools that educated the CEO's who ran these corporations. What little ethics has been taught in business schools is made impotent by a concern for moral relativism and segmentation from the rest of the business curriculum. Much of the argument for this approach is linked to the fundamental responsibility to maximize shareholders' wealth, which has its roots in the very economic theories that underpin much of business school's curriculum.

But in all of the fray over corporate misconduct, very little is being said about the largest employer group in the U.S. economy—privately held entrepreneurial businesses. In the case of the entrepreneur in a privately held enterprise, the assumed social contract between management and shareholders becomes moot, since the entrepreneur is both management and shareholder. This creates both a challenge and an opportunity for these entrepreneurs. While they have no implied social contract between a separated management and ownership to guide their actions, they at the same time can define what success means to them in their own enterprises with a much broader set of criteria (Naughton & Cornwall, 2003). They are free to bring their own values and morals into their businesses to shape the culture, guide decision-making, and set objectives. If Etzioni is correct in his assertion that business schools can make a difference in the ethical practices of business leaders, how do we help inform future entrepreneurs on the moral and ethical challenges that they will face in their business ventures? One approach may be to consciously integrate the technical aspects of managing entrepreneurial ventures within a moral context and framework.

And yet, while business ethics can move us forward toward more responsible businesses, what is taking place in businesses today is not just the loss of will to do good, but the loss of meaning, which ultimately demands more than what traditional business ethics can offer. If universities are to be effective institutions in engaging future business leaders in the moral responsibility of running organizations, they cannot reduce ethics to either mere legal compliance or to a case method that fosters situational ethics. Universities, as cultural institutions, must provide leadership in engaging their students in a profound quest for meaning

that examines the modern problems of the divided life and the search for moral and spiritual integration, and that encounters the first principles on which a firm is built, such as the nature of the person, the role of work, the function of property, and so forth. These are of course demanding requests for a university, but anything less, especially for a Catholic university, is a shirking of their institutional mission. The course we describe below then is not in business ethics, but a course in theology that examines with students the meaning of their work and how that work, and in particular entrepreneurial work, is situated within the larger meaning of their lives.

Having such a course offered within the university is challenging. Within a highly departmentalized structure, it is difficult to organize and sustain interdisciplinary courses. The course we are about to explain, *Christian Faith and the Management Professions: An Entrepreneurial Perspective*, while originally arising out of the theology department, has developed and grown due to the support of a non-departmental entity at St. Thomas called the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought and a new interdisciplinary concentration called Catholic Studies.

However, such champions are not enough. The university had to consider major resource issues in approving the plan to team-teach the course. The entrepreneurship program was growing rapidly and concern was raised about taking a lead professor out of courses within the entrepreneurship major itself. Budget constraints made funding of team-teaching a challenge. However, given the goal of integration of curricula between professional programs and the liberal arts core, the commitment was made to support the course by giving both faculty full course-credit. In other words, such a course needs multiple commitments to make it happen.

## II. COURSE OVERVIEW

The course description as stated on the syllabus reads as follows:

What is a good entrepreneur and how does he or she contribute to the common good? This course pursues these questions within the Christian social tradition through an exploration of the theological relationship between work as a vocation and leisure as contemplation. Within this theological context, the course examines issues that arise during the start-up and growth of an entrepreneurial venture.

The course objectives as stated on the syllabus are:

1. To understand the theological reasoning behind the Christian tradition's understanding of work and leisure as the basis to faith-filled response to entrepreneurial and organizational life.
2. To apply philosophical and theological knowledge to entrepreneurial and organizational issues and problems.
3. To engage in dialogue with those of differing opinions in an open, critical, and creative way. "Our purpose in life is indeed 'not to win arguments,' but to be wise. For this latter, we cannot neglect study or prayer, or especially that openness to existence about which we must learn even if we learn nothing else, or even if we learn all else. We

must seek out where the important things are taught if the ‘seriousness of action’ is to be intelligible, however long we may live” (Schall).

4. Through the interdisciplinary engagement of organizational thought and theological resources, to participate in a powerful integrating experience of liberal and professional education.

The course serves as a *signature* or *capstone course* for students’ whole university education by helping them integrate their liberal arts and entrepreneurship studies. By engaging in an interdisciplinary conversation between theology and entrepreneurship, the course takes on a mode of discourse that can be described as “middle level thinking”--examining the linkages between revelation and reason, theory and praxis, faith and work, and virtue and technique, forging a unique synthesis between philosophical and theological insights and entrepreneurial theory and practice.

This capstone experience is a unique function of the course. Often a particular major offers students a capstone course that attempts to integrate the variety of knowledge they have learned throughout their major degree. However, most colleges and universities do not offer a capstone or integrative experience of the student’s whole education. The question a Catholic university needs to consider is what kind of course offers the capacity to integrate the students’ whole university experience. While ethics and service learning are critically necessary to help students experience integration, they cannot, by themselves, carry the weight of an integrating experience. For example, courses in professional ethics, whether, business, legal, or medical, tend to relegate religious and spiritual traditions to the periphery in human decisions. Yet for many practitioners it is often from a faith perspective that human action makes sense, since what we think is ultimately good derives from what we think is ultimately true.

This integrating course is difficult to teach since it requires mastery in more than one discipline, and it is expensive to maintain because it requires team-teaching to be done well. Such courses are often prone to fall through the cracks of the university curriculum due to the pressures of maintaining a liberal arts core, increasing pressures of adding more courses to professional fields, and overall reducing operational costs. An integrating course such as this, however, can serve as a signature course for a Catholic university like St. Thomas. What makes the curriculum of any university distinctive should in part derive from the identity of the institution, and for a Catholic university such a course should be theologically grounded, morally based, institutionally embodied, and publicly argued. This course is designed with these characteristics in mind.

One of the most important marks of a course integrating disciplines as diverse as theology and entrepreneurship is the dimension of being team-taught. It is a powerful experience for a student to walk into a classroom and see a theology professor and an entrepreneurship professor (who ran his own company for many years) in front of the room discussing, debating and integrating components of Catholic social thought and entrepreneurship. This integrating experience is difficult to create since it requires mastery in more than one discipline, which makes the team-taught approach critically necessary for such a course. It is precisely this integration of disciplines pointing students to a “unity of knowledge” that allows them to see that they can choose to lead lives of integrity as entrepreneurs.

The course begins by reviewing the entrepreneurial process and the challenges facing the entrepreneur at each stage. Once a basic framework that captured key stages for the entrepreneur

is outlined, the team starts integrating readings and other media from the Christian intellectual tradition that speaks to each major topic. The major themes for the course are:

- Context: Who is the “good” entrepreneur
- Entrepreneurship and an integrated and balanced life
- Rethinking the virtues necessary for a good entrepreneur: courage, justice, prudence, and temperance
- The necessary practices to create an organization culture that provides good work
- Working with internal stakeholders
- Working with external stakeholders
- Striving for balance and integration in life
- Spirituality and the entrepreneur

Students at UST are free to choose from a wide variety of theology courses. Therefore, a promotion plan was developed at inception to inform all entrepreneurship students about the course. The “competition” for this course includes courses that also meet the Diversity core requirement each student must fulfill, courses offered as part of international experiences, and courses offered during the four week January term. Also, the population of potential students is limited to entrepreneurship majors and a limited number of Catholic Studies students. Recruitment has been successful, since the course always fills quickly and requires a waiting list.

### III. CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

Team teaching presents many challenges, but particularly so when the instructors are from such distinct disciplines. The team reflected on teaching styles and content when defining the role of each team member and decided that the theology team member would lead most of the content discussions from the readings, while the entrepreneurship team member would integrate the concepts and issues as they related to the day-to-day life of an entrepreneur. As the course progresses, the team gives voice to many of the dilemmas and debates surrounding issues raised in the class.

The instructors explore with the students both the personal and organizational components of the integration of theological concepts and principles and the realities of being an entrepreneur. They explain that the word “Integrity” comes from the Latin adjective *integer*: whole, complete, single (in the sense of “pure”). As an abstract noun, “integrity” signifies the condition of being--of whatever makes a thing--one or whole, whether the thing in question is a whole number, a whole person, or a whole institution. Integrity also means the state or quality of being unimpaired, or to be complete. Upon integrity depends the ability to integrate *personally* those things that make people wholly consistent in themselves, unified in persons and in actions. *Organizationally*, conditions or structures are needed that allow people, and those with whom they work, to become and to remain whole. These two aspects of integrity pose two questions which drive the class: 1) At the level of personal integrity: *What kind of person should I as an entrepreneur strive to become?* 2) At the level of the organizational integrity: *What kind of organizational community should I as an entrepreneur strive to build and maintain?* These two questions serve as conduits to explore the deeper notion of meaning work as a vocation (Alford and Naughton, 2001).

A variety of reading assignments are used in the course, including theological and entrepreneurship articles and books, as well as fiction. Required texts for the course include:

- C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*
- Josef Pieper, *Leisure as the Basis of Culture*
- Helen Alford and Michael Naughton *Managing as if Faith Mattered: Christian Social Principles in the Modern Organization*
- John Paul II, *Laborem Excercens*
- Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*

One of the major projects in the course involves an extensive self-assessment that includes a vocational autobiography, in which the students are asked to cite and trace the main influences and motives that have shaped their decisions for a career or a profession. Two drafts of the synthesis paper are assigned - the first is due early in the semester and the second near the end. The purpose of the two drafts is for the student to reflect on how materials in the course may have changed their perspective. It also is for the instructors to get clear and concrete feedback as to the effectiveness of the assigned materials and their presentation.

The second major project has the students interviewing entrepreneurs and writing a paper discussing how their chosen entrepreneur showed aspects of the “good entrepreneur,” and how the entrepreneur addressed or did not address issues such as vision, leadership, company culture and stakeholder relationships.

#### IV. COURSE OUTCOMES

Student response to the course has been excellent. Both offerings of the course have resulted in enrollments exceeding the stated course limit of fifteen. The course will be offered for the third consecutive year in 2002-2003. In January of 2002, the United States Association of Small Business and Entrepreneurship (USASBE), which has several hundred universities represented in its membership, recognized the course with its Outstanding Entrepreneurship Course of the Year Award.

Throughout the course students often expressed this desire for wholeness or integrity. As one student wrote in his or her evaluation:

The course taught us how to integrate both work and faith. It opened our eyes to the separation that one can make between spirituality and ‘reality.’ We have come to a better understanding of what the reality really is; we have been exposed to the Truth of who we are and we are to be fully-integrated humans.

The overall rating of the course was a 4.53 on a five-point scale the first time it was offered and 4.67 the second time. The instructors received an overall rating of 4.44 on a five-point scale in the first offering, and a 5.00 the second. The students reported that they averaged about six hours a week outside the classroom (three hours of preparation per class) and that the course was fairly rigorous.

A brief follow-up survey was sent five-months later to the twenty-one students from the first class. Students were asked to respond to items relating the impact that the course had on seven areas. Eleven surveys were returned (52.4% response rate). Table 1 displays the results of this follow-up. The highest impact from the course was reported on how the students define being a “successful” entrepreneur (4.27 on five-point scale), on their personal goal for wealth from their

business (4.18), and on their priorities in life (4.0). Although the survey did not ask the nature or directionality of the impact, the written responses on the survey indicated that the impact was in the desired direction of the course objectives. That is, success is measured more broadly than just by financial measures and wealth was more balanced against other outcomes from their business aspirations and other priorities in life (Naughton and Cornwall, 2001).

Table 1  
Results of Five-month Follow-up  
(n=11)

Impact on:	Mean	Standard deviation
Definition of success	4.2727	0.7862
Wealth goals	4.1818	1.0787
Income goals	3.8182	0.9816
Growth goals	3.8182	0.6030
Likelihood of being an entrepreneur	3.0909	1.0445
Priorities in life	4.0000	1.0000
Type of business preferred	3.0909	1.3003

Over the longer term, the entrepreneurship faculty hopes to use this course as a model for integration with other disciplines outside of business. The theology member of the team has developed similar courses with faculty from other disciplines within business, including Human Resource Management and Marketing.

## V. CONCLUSION

Universities and especially Catholic universities have a rich tradition in which to engage budding entrepreneurs in these life long questions. Entrepreneurial leaders have a unique opportunity to actively build their own morals and values into their businesses, which may not be as true with publicly traded corporations.

## VIII. References

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