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Abstract

Successful distance learners and entrepreneurs may be similar in that they seek out and capitalize on opportunities and marshal resources to achieve their goals. Further, entrepreneurial behavior is a vital asset in the rapidly changing global knowledge economy of the 21 st Century. This paper presents a theoretical framework for examining the characteristics of successful distance learners through the lens of entrepreneurship. The proposed theoretical framework suggests a relationship between the entrepreneurial personality, which is the combined score of locus of control, need for achievement and risk taking propensity, with success and persistence in the academic environment. We believe that the proposed framework of the entrepreneurial learner will add to our understanding of distance students. This framework also has the potential to impact instructors and administrators working in the area of distance education.

Introduction

Successful entrepreneurs are described as innovative individuals who recognize opportunities and marshal resources to achieve their goals (Stevenson & Gumpert, 1983). Successful distance learners may be similar to entrepreneurs in that they seek out educational opportunities and marshal their resources, such as time, money, technology and personal support, to achieve their educational goals. Many learners encounter either real or perceived barriers (Evans, 1995; Kramarae, 2001; Pym 1992; Sullivan, 2001) when pursuing their educational endeavors, so learners must find creative and innovative ways to pursue the desire to invest in their human capital. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the theoretical framework of the entrepreneurial personality and its relevance to distance education administrators. This framework explores the relationship between three research-based personality traits associated with entrepreneurial behavior (locus of control, need for achievement and risk-taking propensity) with the academic success factor of grade point average, as well as an attribute associated with persistence in the academic environment, number of credit hours completed via distance.

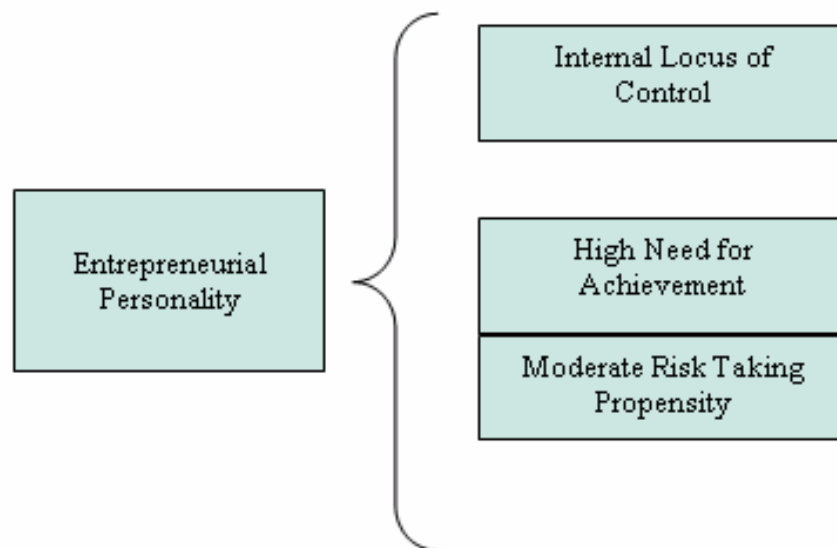
The Entrepreneurial Personality

The word “entrepreneurial” has become a common term used to describe people who are innovative, creative and open to change. Entrepreneurial individuals also have the ability to identify opportunities and marshal resources to achieve their goals (O'Connor & Fiol, 2002; Stevenson & Gumpert, 1983). Researchers argue that entrepreneurial strategies are important to the success of both new ventures and existing businesses (McGrath & MacMillan, 2000). Therefore, employers are looking for people who are opportunity obsessed, innovative and driven. They want employees who possess “entrepreneurial values and attitudes that emphasize initiative and rapid response” (Yergin & Stanislaw, 2002, p. 407).

Entrepreneurial individuals are even more important in the knowledge economy characterized by continuously evolving technologies and change (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998). Individuals must be able to adapt to rapid changes in order to advance themselves, their places of employment and the societies in which they live. Globalization and rapid change are contributing factors leading to increased competition and uncertainty in the 21 st Century (Bettis & Hitt, 1995; Ireland & Hitt, 1999). These same factors also increase the importance of studying entrepreneurial behavior outside of new venture creation (Gibb, 2002; Huefner & Hunt, 1994; Shepard & Krueger, 2002).

Personality research plays a critical role in the investigation of the entrepreneurial personality and has reemerged as an important area of interest (Rauch & Frese, 2000) with the individual as the unit of analysis (Korunka, Frank, Lueger & Mugler, 2003). Researchers have examined several characteristics typically associated with entrepreneurial inclinations (Koh, 1996), and three personality constructs have emerged as “classic” characteristics associated with the entrepreneurial personality: internal locus of control, high need for achievement and a moderate risk-taking propensity (Korunka et al., 2003). These “classic” entrepreneurial personality characteristics (Figure 1) form a framework that can be used to identify and describe successful distance learners. This framework has the potential to assist distance education administrators in the areas of program planning and management, recruitment, teaching and advising.

Figure 1: Framework of the Entrepreneurial Personality



Locus of Control

People with a higher internal locus of control (LOC) believe that they influence the outcomes of their lives. They believe that they have more control over life events, including their own success or failure. Conversely, individuals with a more external LOC feel that their lives are heavily influenced by forces which they cannot control such as luck, fate or powerful others (Rotter, 1966). Research (Brockhaus, 1975, 1980; Korunka et al., 2003) has shown a relationship between entrepreneurs and internal locus of control.

Several studies show that learner persistence in distance-delivered courses and programs is related to internal LOC (Dille & Mezack 1991; Liu, Lavelle & Andris, 2002; Parker, 1995, 1999, 2003). Parker (1999) concluded that LOC was the only significant variable when studying attrition of distance students. This is incredibly important considering that Parker also studied gender, age, number of distance courses completed, source of financial assistance and number of hours employed per week. Liu et al. (2002) investigated the effects of online instruction on learners' LOC. They demonstrated that graduate students were more external at the start of an online course. Further, their research indicated that online instruction actually changed learners' LOC from external to internal. Liu et al. (2002) stated, "Specifically, our study suggests that instructional intervention is a powerful variable in promoting personal change" (p.8).

Research (Dille & Mezack 1991; Liu, et al., 2002; Parker, 1995, 1999, 2003) indicates that learner persistence and success in the distance environment may be related to internal LOC. Other studies (Brockhaus, 1975, 1980; Korunka et al., 2003) show a relationship between entrepreneurial behavior and internal LOC. Therefore, locus of control is one of the key variables included in the framework of the entrepreneurial learner.

Need for Achievement

High need for achievement (*n* Ach) is a key entrepreneurial trait (McClelland, 1961; Osborne, 2003) and a recognized leadership characteristic of entrepreneurs (Czarniawska-Joerges & Wolff, 1991; Lupkin, & Dess, 1996). High *n* Ach is also associated with entrepreneurial leadership (Gupta, MacMillan & Surie, 2004) and entrepreneurial behavior (McClelland, 1961). High achieving individuals are characterized by self-confidence, the ability to take calculated risks, the need to research their environment and the desire for feedback about their performance (McClelland, 1965).

Need for achievement has been identified as an important factor contributing to the persistence of adult students at the graduate level (Cooke, Sims & Peyrefitte, 1995) and as a link between achievement motivation and college satisfaction in a population of nontraditional learners (Donohue & Wong, 1997). However, *n* Ach was not

significantly correlated with grade point average in a study of undergraduate students (Geiger & Cooper, 1995).

Need for achievement appears to be an important characteristic of both the entrepreneurial personality and a trait distance students need in order to be successful. Further, *n* Ach and internal locus of control have both been identified as factors that work together to increase student success and persistence in the distance environment (Cooke et al., 1995). Need for achievement and locus of control are two of the three key factors associated with our framework of the entrepreneurial learner.

Risk Taking Propensity

Risk taking propensity (RTP) has been identified as a third characteristic of entrepreneurs (Ahmed, 1985; Koh, 1996; Korunka et al., 2003; Pearson & Chatterjee, 2001) and a key entrepreneurial behavior (Atherton, 2004). Risk taking propensity is also associated with the process of learning (Clifford, 1990; Robinson, 2002) and may be a characteristic of successful distance learners (Latanich, Nonis & Hudson, 2001). By encouraging risk taking in the academic environment, instructors ultimately help increase students' chances for success (Clifford, 1990). Some researchers (Burge, 1988; Clifford, 1990) believe that instructors should encourage adult learners to take risks in distance courses in order to encourage students to shape their educational experiences.

Risk has also been identified as an issue related to students' decisions to enroll in higher education. Davies and Williams (2001) identified five areas of risk learners encounter and consider when making a decision to participate in higher education: 1) concerns over future rewards related to career options after degree completion and debt associated with participating in higher education, 2) concerns related to personal achievement of the individual student related to a fear of failure, 3) concerns over financing educational endeavors in addition to the monetary impact higher education has on other important areas of life, 4) concerns about time commitments needed in order to meet life obligations in addition to going to school and 5) concerns over the institutions ability to provide them with the resources and services they need in order to be successful. These five areas of risk were especially important for students over the age of 25.

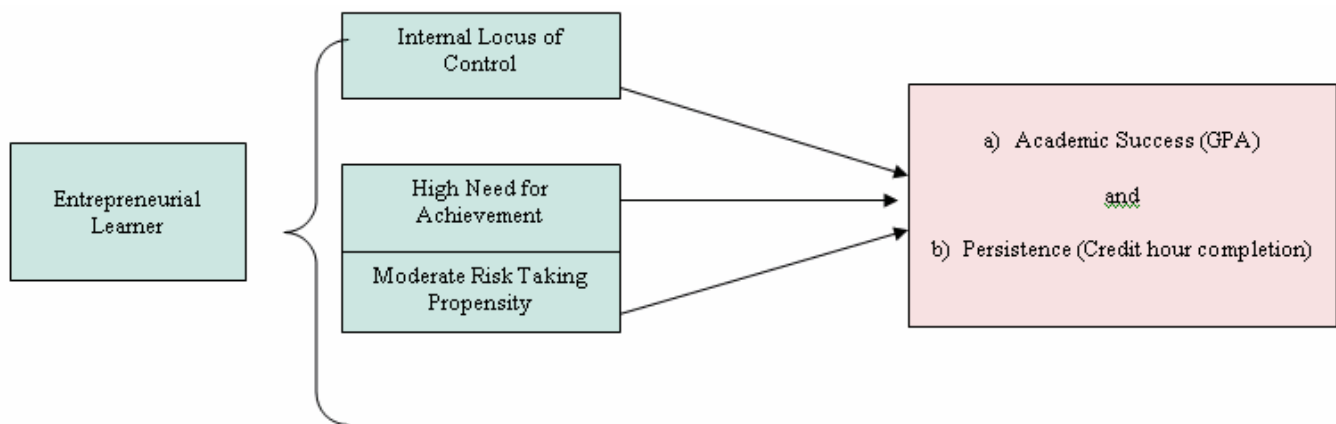
To summarize, RTP has been identified as a characteristic of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial behavior. It has also been identified as a characteristic of successful distance learners and a factor that influences students' decisions to enroll in higher education. Risk taking propensity is the third key variable for our framework of the entrepreneurial learner.

Conclusions

More students are pursuing part-time education, and a growing number of institutions are offering distance courses and programs. As the number of distance-delivered programs increase, for-profit and not-for-profit educational institutions are competing for students who choose to pursue their educational goals via distance (Meyen, Aust, Gauch, Hinton, Isaacson, Smith, & Tee, 2002). Further, the pressure to recruit and retain learners also increases. Institutions that provide learners with the goods and services they want and need in order to be successful may have a competitive advantage. Therefore, it is important for institutions, especially administrators, to realize the wants and needs of distance learners. We believe we can add to our understanding of distance students by proposing an empirical study designed to test the proposed framework of the entrepreneurial learner.

Researchers (Irizarry, 2002; Liu et al., 2002) suggest that there is a need to explore the relationship between the individual characteristics of distance learners with persistence and success in the distance environment. An empirical study based on the proposed framework of the distance learner will add to what is currently known about successful distance learners by exploring the relationships between locus of control, need for achievement and risk-taking propensity with variables typically associated with success (grade point average) and persistence (credit hour completion) in the academic environment (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Theoretical Framework of the Entrepreneurial Learner in the Context of an Academic Setting.



Entrepreneurial Learner

An empirical examination of the framework would enable administrators to identify and focus on the key variables that influence recruitment and retention in the distance environment. For example, entry orientation tests, based on the three key variables of locus of control, need for achievement and risk taking propensity, could be developed to help identify the characteristics of potential distance learners. Potential learners might then be better able to self select and thus persist in the distance environment if a more powerful and rigorous entry tool were developed based on empirical evidence and made available.

Administrators may also consider the framework to support recruitment efforts while minimizing perceived risks by providing thorough and accurate information on the assistance and services they provide for learners. If these services and support systems do not currently exist, institutions should consider the development of such mechanisms to help learners. These types of educational development strategies and services assist learners and have the potential to increase learner success. Further, they help institutions of higher education put their best foot forward by showing potential and current students that they care about the success of learners who choose their institution.

One example of a service created to support distance learners is a Distance Learning Center developed in a collaborative effort between the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and Office of Extended Education and Outreach at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (<http://casnrde.unl.edu/index.shtml>). The site was created by faculty who saw a need to address many of the issues distance learners face on a day-to-day basis. The mission of the center is to recruit learners, help them through each step of their educational programs, help increase their connectedness to the University and encourage them to be lifelong learners.

For teachers managing distance education courses, the framework of the entrepreneurial learner will provide a mechanism for audience analysis. Instructors and advisors can gather information about students and use the data to help increase their understanding of the individuals enrolled in their courses and programs. Research (Cooke et al., 1995; Nunn & Nunn, 1993) has shown that it may be possible to increase students' internal locus of control and need for achievement through various educational development strategies, such as confidence building exercises and goal setting. These exercises may be developed and delivered as either stand-alone distance courses or as activities within existing classes. Learners will also benefit by being able to examine their own strengths, which would help them better understand themselves and their ability to succeed in the distance environment.

Derived from and supported by the literature, this framework suggests that the entrepreneurial personality has a relationship with success and persistence in the academic environment. Findings from a test of the proposed framework may be used to increase our understanding of what it takes to be a successful learner, which ultimately

has the potential to impact the areas of program development and management, recruiting, retention, teaching and advising. Institutions of higher education, including administrators and instructors, may have the potential to impact the areas of recruitment, student success and learner retention by encouraging distance students to be more entrepreneurial. Further, encouraging and teaching students to become more entrepreneurial may help them in both the personal and professional lives because individuals must be increasingly “entrepreneurial” to be successful in the 21 st Century.

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