

# Student entrepreneurship is in

Colleges across the region are racing to meet the needs of a growing group of student entrepreneurs. Though starting a business is the goal, for all but a few success will be defined in the experience rather than the result.



HUMBLE BEGINNINGS: From left: Do Your Dance founder Lindsey Lerner, Premama founder Dan Aziz and Eric Weiner, who created All Occasion Transportation in 1990 and is currently launching [www.foodtrucksin.com](http://www.foodtrucksin.com) PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

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Eric Weiner launched a corporate limo service the summer after his freshman year in college, sold it 20 years later and now is onto his next startup: connecting food trucks to local markets.

The launch of the first startup, All Occasion Transportation, was in the summer of 1990, seven years before his alma mater, Johnson & Wales University, opened what today is called the Larry Friedman International Center for Entrepreneurship, an experiential space to try out new ventures. The new online startup is called [FoodTrucksIn.com](http://FoodTrucksIn.com).

"Faculty and staff were very helpful," recalled Weiner, 44, of Cranston, "but when I look back now and see how much support students get through the E-Center, it's really amazing. I had to learn as I went and figure things out on my own. Now, the E-Center provides support in one place that I had to do by trial and error."

Colleges in Rhode Island, southeastern Massachusetts and across the country are increasingly working to attract budding entrepreneurs by expanding academic offerings, as well as adding and promoting experiential programming, student groups, competitions and events.

An ecosystem of Providence-based startup support that includes Betaspring, the Founders League and Social Enterprise Greenhouse also supports student interest in startups.

"There are lots more support structures, resources, mentorship, funding than ever before," said Danny Warshay, an entrepreneurship lecturer at Brown University when he isn't starting companies.

Pushing the growth nationally is a "faster-moving, innovation-driven economy and an economy that rewards creativity and problem-solving," according to Debra Humphreys, vice president of the office of communications, policy and public engagement at the Washington, D.C.-based Association of American Colleges & Universities.

"Colleges are responding," she said.

But while high-profile student successes capture campus attention – whether it's Weiner or Rhode Island School of Design's Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia, who with Harvard alum Nathan Blecharczyk co-founded Airbnb, the vast majority of startups never get off the ground.

Few students are truly cut out to be entrepreneurs, despite the growing enthusiasm for it, some educators say.

At the University of Rhode Island, for example, business administration majors may choose the entrepreneurial management major in their junior year, said Bob Comerford, who teaches and coordinates the Entrepreneurial Management program.

So far, however, few of those in the program have taken the next step to start a business, he said.

"A lot of students are interested in pursuing their own business rather than pursuing this resume and rejection game," Comerford said. "But it's difficult for them to get the resources they need, and many put it off and try to find a job."

Humphreys and John Robitaille, who heads JWU's E-Center, say tracking successful college-launched startups is in its infancy, though he said that a recent report for JWU showed 37.7 percent of JWU's surveyed 3,700 alumni who graduated between 1982 and 2012 were either part of a startup or started one on their own.

"How many make it?" Robitaille said. "I don't know. If you look across the universe of startups maybe 1 percent to 5 percent make it. There's luck involved, timing and the biggest obstacle ... paying down student debt."

Comerford says URI does track what happens to Entrepreneurial Management academic majors after graduation.

"Most EM majors take jobs and continue to develop their business ideas," he said.

Some schools, including Salve Regina University, Bryant University and Brown, say they plan to track startups. That's because more, not less, academic, extracurricular and experiential programming is likely, they say.

'Good, Bad and Ugly'

Colleges are obligated to offer more than academics, Robitaille said.

"We would be doing a disservice to our students if we didn't show them the good, bad and ugly of being an entrepreneur," he said.

"Entrepreneurs make up a small number of the population in general, and the failure rate is high in the first five years," he said. "I look at how many kids we've been able to give a toe in the water. If, because of what we offer, the student becomes convinced the rigor and probability of success isn't for them, I would rather them find that out here and now rather than a year after graduation."

Local educators see a market for recruiting would-be entrepreneurs that may have not been there a decade ago.

Melissa Withers, director of the Founders League, articulates what educators also realize: Many students want the chance to try it.

"Students are an incredibly important resource for any startup ecosystem," she said. "They can tolerate the risk, [and] can be a little more flexible and adventurous."

Beth McMurtrie, a senior writer on campus culture at the Chronicle of Higher Education, noted, "Students now see themselves as a brand that they need to sell, knowing lifelong jobs are a thing of the past."

At the same time, universities are including entrepreneurship in their marketing materials, "and that says to me that they understand that this is something that appeals to a lot of students," she said.

But Bryant's Sandra Potter, adviser to the extracurricular experiential student group Bryant Ventures, insists local schools don't actively compete for these students.

"We have been talking to each other for years about how schools cannot be insular about their entrepreneurship programs," Potter said. "We have to be a village" through collaboration.

Withers, however, maintains collaboration is not widespread because most students are "extremely campus-oriented.

"There's no downside to [collaboration across campuses]," she said, "and when it works it produces some interesting stuff, but it's not the first, second or third steps we take to help student entrepreneurs become engaged. It's not easy to get students into the real world. It sounds nice on paper but it's actually quite a challenge."

Vicki Colvin, provost and professor of chemistry and engineering at Brown, pointed to a new immersive experiential program, the "B-Lab," launching at Brown in June and three more entrepreneurial programs coming within the next two years to supplement courses like Warshay's "The Entrepreneurial Process," as evidence of the school's commitment to student entrepreneurs.

"Most of our university peers have very public and visible entrepreneurship and innovation programs," said Colvin. "There's recognition that other schools have it so we should do it. But there's a more compelling reason: Students at Brown are intellectual entrepreneurs from the

get-go, and they choose to come to Brown to chart their own course and take risks. This is a way to channel and support it."

And for some students, it's the college experience that helps set them on a path to entrepreneurship in the first place.

Dan Aziz, 26, of Providence, a Brown alum who has been running the startup Premama for more than four years, and Lindsey Lerner, 21, of Warwick, a Bryant senior launching a startup called Do Your Dance, didn't discover those opportunities until after they started college.

Premama sells nutritional powdered drink supplements to pregnant moms. DYD advocates for musicians getting gigs in entertainment venues.

"I had no idea that this is where I would end up," said Lerner, who transferred to Bryant after studying art and photography at Delaware College of Art and Design in Wilmington. "What really attracted me to Bryant over other colleges was their study-abroad program, because I knew I wanted to travel while photographing."

Studying in Chile in her junior year led Lerner to conceive of the startup as well as meet one of two partners, Lerner said.

JWU seniors Luis Rivera, 21, and Becky Giambarresi, 20, say launching the Hippothecary Food Pharmacy after winning this spring's "Sharkfest" People's Choice Award has its own strong pull. The startup is focused on heart-healthy ice creams and body butters.

"It's not every day you have the potential to start something you could be interested in for the rest of your life," added Rivera. "We could enter the workforce and get jobs [after graduation], but there's no guarantee we could get to the point we are now in terms of our drive and our passion."

#### Program Growth

While most academic leaders insist entrepreneurship has long been in their colleges' DNA, most concentrations, majors, competitions, student clubs and experiential programs evolved over the past decade.

"What's changed more recently is the institutional commitment to entrepreneurship in our curriculum and through co-curricular programs," said Brown's Alan Harlam, director of social entrepreneurship at the Swearer Center for Public Policy.

Brown began to show its commitment to entrepreneurship when it set up the Business Entrepreneurship and Organizations program in 2006. Today, BEO serves more than 100 students a year, Harlam said. A year earlier, Brown introduced the graduate Program in Innovation Management and Entrepreneurship, he added.

And while some colleges like RISD and Salve Regina still focus chiefly on academic coursework, others offer more.

JWU's E-Center was founded in 1997, 10 years after the launch of the academic entrepreneurship program that continues today as an undergraduate major in the College of Management. The school has modeled its "Sharkfest" competition on the popular TV series "Shark Tank," Robitaille said.

JWU recently partnered with the Kauffman Foundation to offer "1 Million Cups," a free, weekly national program designed to connect problem-solving entrepreneurs over cups of coffee, said Maureen Dumas, JWU's vice president of experiential education and career services.

Bryant's Global Entrepreneurship concentration started in 2009, said coordinator Mark R. Feinstein and Potter; Bryant Ventures launched in 2010.

But new developments are always in the offing. At URI, entrepreneurship courses previously open only to business majors are, as of this spring semester, open to everyone, said Comerford.

At the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, the school's advanced technology manufacturing center will be rebranded by September as a Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, said Toby Stapleton, center director.

"The idea behind it is to not only foster entrepreneurship amongst students, but faculty as well," Stapleton said. "There's a real appetite for entrepreneurship."

#### Defining Success

The college entrepreneurship experience gives students a chance to develop ideas, study or try them out. They can form teams, much like the partnerships needed for most businesses, and network, meeting alums and even angel investors or venture capitalists who might help them.

Julie Sygiel, 27, a 2009 Brown graduate now living in New York City, took one of Warshay's courses in entrepreneurship out of curiosity. Today she runs Dear Kate, selling the high-performance underwear for sports and everyday use that she first conceptualized in her junior year.

Sygiel teamed up with others to launch the startup in March of her senior year, raising \$1.7 million in angel investing, she said.

"Danny's class was the first time I ever learned anything about the fact angel investors existed," said Sygiel.

While successes like Sygiel are the clear exception, students have the advantage of time on their side in learning from failed projects.

Pivoting between abandoning a classroom entrepreneurial project and pursuing an actual startup is Brown senior Ben Chesler.

After graduation, he will be heading to California to promote the launch with a partner there of Imperfect. The venture aims to deter food waste by selling produce otherwise discarded because of other perceived imperfections. He has an Embark fellowship and has raised more than \$15,000, plus matching funds, through crowdfunding.

He's also trying to raise \$250,000 from investors, he said, and reports he's about one-quarter of the way there.

Yet, Chesler and five team members have decided not to pursue a startup conceived in Warshay's class for a promising dining-out app.

A pitch got rave reviews from classmates, Warshay, and angel investor Hambleton Lord, managing director of the Launchpad Venture Group in late April.

"It was a good exercise for us, [but] we all had full-time plans next year," Chesler explained.

Accepting when startup ideas cannot move forward is part of the process, says Warshay.

"We have nine teams this semester," he said. "Maybe one-third [of them] take a step forward to seriously engage and launch. Few of them actually make it. But it doesn't matter. ... My intention is for people to learn the process and apply it elsewhere."

Weiner says staying connected to his alma mater and fellow alums helped keep him motivated to pursue his second startup.

"At Johnson & Wales, they know I was the limo guy, and I'm the food-truck guy. The exposure they've given me throughout their community has been very much appreciated," he said.

"For a lot of people, it's the same reason they stick with a job – it's what they know," he said of his entrepreneurial bent. "It's ingrained in who I am.

"It's actually hard for me to imagine working for somebody else," he said. •