



DREXEL UNIVERSITY
Office of the
Provost

LETTER FROM THE PROVOST

SPRING
2013

FACULTY FEATURE

Academic Entrepreneurship: DeCarolís's Vision for Making Big Ideas Happen

*by Rebecca Ingalls, Director of the First-Year Writing Program
Assistant Professor, Department of English & Philosophy*



In classical rhetoric, we call it “kairos,” that opportune moment when history, context, people, the right decisions, and maybe even the stars all come together to create something special. In many ways, Drexel is driven by it, populated by brilliant, creative folks who know a unique chance when they see one. Professor Donna DeCarolís, founding Dean of the Charles D. Close School of Entrepreneurship, and former Associate Vice Provost for Entrepreneurship, has that kind of savvy, and it has the potential to reap some very exciting rewards for both students and faculty across the disciplines.

Take a look at DeCarolís's background, and you'll see that she comes honestly by her appreciation for innovation across the

disciplines. Originally a history major, she taught high school for a year before deciding to turn a corner and pursue her MBA. There, she began to really cultivate her love for strategy: she began to do some strategy consulting with some of her colleagues, and a couple of professors suggested that she pursue a Ph.D.

“I always liked school,” she reflects, “being a new student and learning. I applied for programs, went to Temple, and got a Ph.D. in strategy specializing in innovation management.” Anchored in Philadelphia by her love for the city and her young family, a window of opportunity opened up for her at Drexel: an assistant professorship. “I was extremely happy about Drexel,” she says. “I thought it was THE place for technology and entrepreneurship.”

In many ways, it would seem, DeCarolís was right. Though courses and research in entrepreneurship were still to be developed, DeCarolís established herself as an innovative teacher and scholar at Drexel, and was the recipient of both the Lindback Distinguished Teaching Award and the LeBow Distinguished Teaching Award. From there, she continued to work hard as an administrator—department head, then Associate Dean for Strategic Initiatives, and then Associate Dean for Graduate Programs—to bring “the tech side and the business side” of academia together. She developed a curriculum in entrepreneurship, worked with the Laurence A. Baiada Institute for Entrepreneurship, and brought a new visibility to innovation in entrepreneurship to Drexel.

This vision for entrepreneurship at Drexel took the spotlight when President Fry came on board, and DeCarolís was there to drive more change. She describes how the Close School came into being: “The university strategic plan is focused on innovation, and that was the genesis of where I got the idea for this [Close] School of Entrepreneurship. I was on many task forces with many wonderful colleagues in the university: research, administration, the Provost’s Office. This became clear to me: while there were pockets of entrepreneurship, there was not really a path for students to follow if they were not a business student.” Committed to taking the notion of “entrepreneurship” into the many disciplines at Drexel, DeCarolís imagined a “unified” place where students from all programs of study could come together to cultivate their ideas for new business: History, Design, Engineering, Biology, English.

“I drafted an idea,” she says. And here’s where that window of opportunity began to open: “At the same time,” she explains, “President Fry was talking with the Close Foundation. They had originally funded Baiada anonymously, and they were looking for something bigger. I was at a reception with President Fry in June of 2012. I had this idea, and I just pitched it to him. He said, ‘Send me the proposal.’ He brought it to the Close Foundation, and they liked the idea.” Once the relationship between Drexel and the Close Foundation was sparked yet again, collaboration ensued. The 10 million dollars in funding came in October of 2012, and the wheels have been turning to get it underway ever since.

As it turns out, the timing is perfect. “The wonderful thing about this school,” says DeCarolís, “is that it’s really fulfilling a marketed need. We are graduating students into a workplace that is very different than it was 15 years ago. Students will have 10 jobs by the time they are 45. Not in the same industry or position. Many will be self-employed. Companies are downsizing, outsourcing, using freelancing workers. If this is the case, then we need to be educating these

students to have an entrepreneurial approach to their careers.” Part of this education, explains DeCarolis, is helping students to think strategically about their professional lives, encouraging them to ask big questions: How do you pursue innovations within a company? How do you start your own company? Armed with this sense of critical inquiry, she argues, students will be much more equipped to tackle the challenges of innovation in their workplaces.

Though the Close School aims to begin admitting students in fall of 2014, efforts are already in motion to lay the groundwork for a culture to welcome them. DeCarolis describes the “initial products” of the Close School initiative: an entrepreneurship living learning community for fall 2013 incoming first-year students that will provide for them activities and some classes focused on innovation and entrepreneurship; a spring field trip to Silicon Valley, where they will visit companies like Google, Facebook, Twitter, Ebay, and Apple; for existing students, an entrepreneurial co-op open to all Drexel students, funded by the Close School, where they can work for their own companies; and, a new fall 2013 class called “Launch it,” in which students can propose their own businesses, and the Close School will seed fund them to help them “de-risk their business models, do market research, and develop prototypes.” All of this, says DeCarolis with excitement in her voice, is to “encourage students’ big ideas and their passions.”

I ask DeCarolis what keeps her at Drexel, and her response echoes the sentiments of so many of our faculty: “I just love this university. I cannot think of another where there are so many ideas popping up and we’re allowed to pursue those ideas. I was given a lot of free reign to do things, to try things. It’s the spirit and culture here of innovation and entrepreneurship. Look at what Drexel’s doing right now: Innovation Neighborhood, Drexel Ventures, and the Close School. A triumvirate—three initiatives that are transforming the university, pushing our knowledge out there to better society. These three things in tandem facilitate that cause, that mission for ‘academic entrepreneurship.’” The work of DeCarolis adds immensely to other major developments in the university—like the Lindy Center for Civic Engagement—that aim to do just that: “better society.” Thanks to her remarkable vision for how Drexel can help its students across the disciplines see their big business ideas through, that notion of “academic entrepreneurship” is likely to make Drexel an even brighter star in the futures of our prospective students and faculty.