

College: Finlandia University (formerly Suomi College)

Location: Hancock, Michigan

Practice: Business-Based Finnish Design

Equipping design students with the business knowledge necessary to become entrepreneurs or help local businesses prosper

Year Started 1997

Budget \$60,000 initial start-up ; \$338,000 for subsequent 3 years

Program Participants 50

College FTE 370

Target Sector Mostly wood products

Staff Size N/A

Structure Program incorporated into college curriculum

Key Outcomes Forged international partnership
Supports regional economic development

Introduction

Many rural areas find that the best way to create higher-wage jobs is to cultivate entrepreneurs. Having people with the knowledge and ambition to start their own companies in their own hometowns is often more effective than recruiting outside firms.

Finlandia University, located on the northern tip of Michigan's Upper Peninsula (UP), is engaging in such an approach by infusing business and entrepreneurial education into its art and design curriculum. The college turned to Finland, a country with which the region has strong cultural ties, for inspiration and assistance in adapting contemporary Finnish business and educational practices. The resulting program, Business-Based Finnish Design, provides students with an education in both design and business.

Community Background

Michigan's UP is remote. Indeed, Finlandia University, located in the town of Hancock, is 150 miles from the nearest interstate highway and a day's drive from the closest large metropolitan area. This remoteness makes it difficult to recruit outside firms. Therefore, the region must look for other ways to generate good-paying and sustainable jobs.

Historically dependent on its vast natural resources, the UP's economy has been hit hard by downturns in resource-based industries. Of the region's three main traditional industries—logging, mining (copper and iron ore), and fishing—only logging continues to grow. In addition, two air force bases in the region have closed due to military downsizing. As a result, many of the region's youth leave in search of greater opportunities elsewhere.

Program focus	Sector specific	Economic condition	Economic base			Target populations
			Mfg	Agr	Svc	
Technical education	Yes	Distressed	10	0.4	35	Dislocated workers, general

<i>Service Area</i>	<i>Houghton County</i>
<i>Total Population</i>	36,000
<i>Median Household Income</i>	\$24,000
<i>% Below Poverty Level</i>	18.9
<i>% Unemployment Rate</i>	6.8
<i>% Minority Population</i>	1.0
<i>% Rural Population</i>	66
<i>% High School Graduates</i>	73.9
<i>% College Graduates</i>	18

The bright spots in the UP's economy are tourism and technology. Tourism is the region's growth industry, albeit one that pays relatively low wages. Investments in technology by the region's manufacturing and service firms have prompted the firms to begin seeking technically skilled and performance-driven workers.

Program Description

Originally Suomi College, a two-year institution offering certificates and associates degrees, Finlandia University has recently expanded its facilities and become a four-year university. The only private, higher educational institution in the UP, Finlandia is a small school that draws most of its students from the area and maintains close ties with the region's leaders and businesses. Atypical of small, private schools, Finlandia sees a strong role for itself in regional economic development and knows the importance of working with employers. Comparing the school to larger public universities, one businessman said Finlandia is "more willing to work with local industry on product applications." The college offers two and four year degree programs.

In the mid-1990s, the college's administration, searching for ways to promote entrepreneurship among its students and thus in the region's economy, asked its departments of art and design and business administration to explore ways to link their curricula. For assistance, administrators turned to Finnish design schools and eventually partnered with the Kuopio Academy of Crafts and Design in Finland. The resulting program, Business-Based Finnish Design, provides students with an

education both in design and in business/entrepreneurial practices, giving them the business acumen and design skills to succeed as employees and as independent businesspeople.

In addition to their design and business classes, students work on projects for private firms in the region. This work is more than a simple internship; it is integrated into the curriculum, and the students get direction and advice from both their private industry mentors and their teachers. More connected to the real world than simply working on a class assignment, students gain work experience at the same time as getting a practical education. Examples of these student projects span the spectrum of industrial design. Students worked with Strandwood Molding, Inc. to develop prototypes for products and tooling and a promotional video. Horner Flooring used Finlandia students to design a transport dolly, and the Nitrate Elimination Company is using them to design product packaging.

In addition to providing experience to students, this aspect of the program effectively provides technical assistance to companies by giving them access to design expertise (students and faculty). This sort of product design/development is rare in rural economies.

While most U.S. design schools educate students with the expectation that they will join large companies, Finlandia's program prepares students for work in a rural environment where they are more likely to be hired by a small company that requires more from employees than simply executing their design abilities.

Funding to develop the curriculum came from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education and from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. Start-up funding of \$60,000 and a subsequent three-year grant for \$338,000 was provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Outcomes

The program graduated its first students in April 2000. With the majority of students coming from the region, it is hoped that they will help develop the region's economy by remaining and working for local companies or beginning their own. The full impact on long-term business creation and development, however, will take years to materialize. Still,

judging by the number and quality of student projects of the class of 2000, the program is off to a propitious start.

Strengths, Challenges, and Replicability

Linking design and business education is rare in the United States. The innovation of this program lies in the adoption of this focus and the international partnership the college has formed with an art and design college in Finland.

A key to the program's long term effectiveness will be retaining qualified students in the region so that their expertise in local industries can contribute to economic success.

The homegrown nature of the program and the focus on cultivating local talent lends itself to adoption by other rural areas seeking to promote entrepreneurship as a path to greater economic development.

For more information, contact:

Timothy Wuchter,
Executive Director of External Relations
Finlandia University
906-487-7298 – phone
906-487-7366 – fax
comm.@suomi.edu