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6381 907 438



ijirset@gmail.com



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From Classroom to Boardroom: Cultivating Entrepreneurial Leadership in Students through Experiential and Community-Based Learning

J. Kiranmayee

Research Scholar, CMR University, Bangalore, India

ABSTRACT: The demands of the 21st-century economy and society are transforming expectations placed on higher education. Beyond equipping students with technical expertise, institutions must now prepare graduates who can think innovatively, lead responsibly, and act decisively in uncertain contexts. Entrepreneurial leadership has emerged as a critical competency for students—not only for business creation but also for addressing societal challenges, innovating within organizations, and generating sustainable value. This paper develops a pedagogical framework that integrates experiential learning, community-based engagement, and mentorship as pathways for cultivating entrepreneurial leadership. Global and Indian best practices are analyzed to highlight the strengths and challenges of this approach. The study contributes to ongoing discourse by distinguishing itself from existing scholarship through its focus on integrating community-based innovation into entrepreneurial leadership education, an area underexplored in prior literature. The paper concludes by emphasizing the implications for educators, institutions, and policymakers in re-imagining higher education to produce leaders capable of navigating complexity, fostering innovation, and driving inclusive societal transformation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is marked by rapid technological disruption, globalization, and socio-political uncertainties. Employers, industries, and communities expect graduates to not only demonstrate technical skills but also adaptability, creativity, and leadership. Entrepreneurial leadership bridges this demand by integrating opportunity-seeking and risk-taking with ethical responsibility and collaboration.

Unlike traditional leadership models that are hierarchical, entrepreneurial leadership thrives in environments of uncertainty. For students, cultivating such leadership involves preparing them to:

- Innovate within established organizations,
- Launch entrepreneurial ventures, and
- Design socially impactful solutions to global and local challenges.

This study diverges from traditional scholarship, which often focuses on entrepreneurship education narrowly or on leadership theory without entrepreneurial orientation. Instead, it positions community-based innovation and experiential pedagogy as central pathways to cultivate entrepreneurial leadership.

II. OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is fourfold:

1. To explore the role of entrepreneurial leadership in preparing students for a rapidly changing world of work.
2. To propose an educational approach rooted in experiential and community-based learning for leadership development.
3. To highlight global and Indian best practices demonstrating the effectiveness of this model.
4. To discuss implications for students, educators, institutions, and society.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

Entrepreneurial leadership as a construct has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie (2004) defined it as the capacity to envision and realize entrepreneurial opportunities while mobilizing teams.

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Fayolle & Gailly (2015) emphasized the role of entrepreneurship education in shaping entrepreneurial attitudes and intentions, though their focus remained largely on venture creation. Neck & Greene (2011) advanced experiential pedagogy but situated it primarily within business school settings.

Where this paper differs:

- It integrates community-based innovation into entrepreneurial leadership education, a dimension rarely foregrounded in prior literature.
- It frames entrepreneurial leadership as a universal competency across disciplines, not limited to business or management education.
- It situates the framework explicitly within Indian higher education while also drawing from global exemplars, addressing a gap in localized scholarship.

IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework for cultivating entrepreneurial leadership combines three interdependent components:

1. Experiential Learning – Immersive opportunities such as hackathons, innovation labs, and internships connect theory to practice. These experiences build resilience, creativity, and adaptability.
2. Community-Based Innovation – Engagement with grassroots challenges like sustainability, education, and digital inclusion builds empathy and a sense of ethical responsibility in leadership.
3. Mentorship and Peer Learning – Access to industry mentors, alumni entrepreneurs, and diverse peer networks enhances applied learning and collaborative problem-solving.

V. GLOBAL AND INDIAN PRACTICES

Global Practices:

- Babson College (USA): Entrepreneurial Thought & Action pedagogy spans across disciplines.
- Stanford University (USA): Social innovation programs applying entrepreneurial leadership to global challenges.
- Aalto University (Finland): Student-driven ecosystems supported by incubators and industry partnerships.

Indian Practices:

- IITs & IIMs: Entrepreneurial cells, startup accelerators, and hackathons.
- Bengaluru Innovation Hubs: Collaborations among startups, IT firms, and universities.
- Azim Premji University, TISS: Service-learning projects fostering socially responsible leadership.

This paper adds to existing scholarship by systematically comparing global models with Indian practices and distilling insights relevant to the Indian higher education ecosystem.

VI. METHODOLOGICAL POSITIONING

This is a conceptual and analytical paper grounded in secondary research and case-based synthesis. Unlike empirical surveys or purely quantitative studies, it contributes by proposing a pedagogical framework and positioning it in both global and Indian contexts. This methodological approach allows the paper to highlight unexplored dimensions—particularly the role of community-based innovation—in entrepreneurial leadership development.

VII. DISCUSSION

The analysis identifies four critical enablers:

1. Educators as Facilitators – Faculty roles must evolve from information providers to mentors and enablers.
2. Institutional Ecosystems – Universities must provide incubators, innovation labs, and industry linkages.
3. Student Agency – Students must take ownership of their learning via clubs, projects, and competitions.
4. Industry Partnerships – Collaboration with startups and corporations provides mentorship and market exposure.

Unlike previous research that emphasizes skill-building alone, this paper stresses the integration of community engagement to ground leadership development in social responsibility.

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Academia: Curriculum redesign towards practice-oriented pedagogy and community engagement.
Industry: Development of innovation-ready graduates who can contribute beyond technical expertise.
Policy: Support mechanisms for university–industry collaboration, funding incubation centers, and embedding entrepreneurship within national skill development initiatives.

IX. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research could:

- Track longitudinal outcomes of students trained under this model.
- Compare cross-disciplinary outcomes in arts, sciences, and engineering.
- Explore how digital technologies, AI, and virtual collaboration platforms can support entrepreneurial leadership pedagogy.

X. CONCLUSION

Entrepreneurial leadership is essential for preparing students to thrive in uncertainty and complexity. By embedding experiential and community-based learning into higher education, institutions can enable students to transition from classrooms to boardrooms, from learners to leaders, and from job seekers to job creators. This paper contributes uniquely by foregrounding community-based innovation as a cornerstone of entrepreneurial leadership development—an underexplored yet critical dimension in both global and Indian contexts.

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