TEACHING ENTREPRENEURS WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE LAW

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ACADEMIC ABSTRACT

The workshop will address the importance of business law in the entrepreneurship curriculum. The discussion will include both the stand alone entrepreneurship law course and how to integrate law topics in other entrepreneurship courses. It will include how entrepreneurs can prevent legal problems, manage legal issues as they arise, and employ law for competitive advantage. Specific law topics will be addressed. Panelists will provide sample syllabi for separate entrepreneurship law courses. The panelists encourage “learn by doing.” They will share exercises and activities with the audience. Many of these activities can be incorporated in other entrepreneurship courses with a legal component.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The panelists teach law to entrepreneurship students in a variety of contexts and universities. They will share with the audience their methods for structuring stand alone “law for entrepreneurs” courses and incorporating legal material in other entrepreneurship courses. Some legal issues are common to all businesses, e.g., choice of business organization, employment matters, and contracts. Others are specific to certain types of ventures, e.g., serving alcohol, hosting web sites, and producing films. The panelists will lead the audience in a dialog about teaching current legal issues affecting entrepreneurs.

Why is the law important to successful entrepreneurial ventures? How can an entrepreneur best protect himself or herself? Sometimes the best defense is an offense. However, many times the “best defense” is avoiding the problem in the first place. Preventative law can help the entrepreneur avoid legal difficulties and negative publicity. Entrepreneurs need to know the law in order to prevent legal problems and minimize unnecessary risk. Furthermore, entrepreneurs can use the law for competitive advantage and need to be aware of these opportunities.

Entrepreneurs who become entangled in legal problems generally lose, even if they “win” the lawsuit. Lawsuits consume money, time, and energy that could be better spent growing the enterprise. The publicity that results from the dispute and resulting lawsuit generally paints the venture in a negative light. For example, a restaurant’s reputation can be harmed if it is sued for food poisoning even if the restaurant subsequently wins the lawsuit.
How can legal material be incorporated in the entrepreneurship curriculum? The panelists will discuss approaches to teaching, selection of topics, projects, and materials. They will distribute exercises that will interest and engage entrepreneurship students. These exercises have been used successfully with entrepreneurship students. These activities will promote experiential learning. For example, students can “practice” managing legal issues in a business case. Also, students can “practice” resolving a legal dispute prior to trial by negotiating with the opponent.

WORKSHOP

Law is a critical topic for entrepreneurship students. How can legal information be incorporated into the entrepreneurship curriculum? It can be taught as an independent course and it can be taught across the entrepreneurship program. As an independent course, it may reinforce a required law course or it may be the sole required law course. It may be an elective in the major. What are the differences between graduate and undergraduate law for entrepreneurs courses? How can materials be modified to suit different audiences and different program foci?

One way to capture students’ attention is to illustrate the significance of law to their ventures. Panelists will discuss examples of entrepreneurships that have struggled financially because the owners were not familiar with relevant laws and how the laws applied to their ventures. The panelists will engage the audience in a discussion of what topics are most important for entrepreneurs.

Programs that do not currently offer a law for entrepreneurs course can use the workshop materials to design a course and recruit an instructor to teach law for entrepreneurs. The workshop will provide an informative exchange between professors teaching law for entrepreneurs and those interested in adding such a course. The focus will be on how to create such a course and why it is important.

When using a law across the curriculum approach, faculty members and practicing lawyers can guest lecture in entrepreneurship classes. Exercises can be used that include legal issues. For example, legal issues can be included in a capstone project. Members of the panel and the audience will share their most successful exercises.

Members of the audience will receive sample syllabi for stand alone entrepreneurship law courses. These syllabi illustrate a range of approaches. The samples can be modified and incorporated in various programs, easing the course proposal process. Attendees will also receive effective classroom exercises for specific legal topics and helpful advice on using these exercises with their own entrepreneurship students.