

The art of entrepreneurship: Photo collection inspires student learning

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The donation of a celebrated local photographer's entire collection to SUNY Broome prompted an in-depth lesson in entrepreneurship across campus.

A commercial-industrial photographer since 1954, photographer Ed Aswad donated his entire collection – some 100,000 photographic negatives, 1,000 small photographic prints and 200 larger prints, as well as postcards, architectural drawings and photographic glass plates from the 19th century – to the Binghamton-area college in 2014.

When Ed Aswad chose to donate his life's work to the college, he intended to offer students a vehicle to involve themselves in their own learning, noted Executive Vice President and Chief Academic Officer Francis Battisti, a friend of the photographer who helped coordinate the donation.

"The vision for this collection was to carry his wishes forward by assisting students in developing an entrepreneurial mindset," Battisti said. "With the variety of academic departments that have already been involved with this project, we are moving toward fulfilling his request."

During the Fall 2014 semester, 26 students from Laura Knochen-Davis' Entrepreneurship class used the collection to learn how to create a viable photography business. They learned how to apply extensive market research and analysis theories and interviewed more than a dozen professional photographers throughout the Northeast. They also studied direct and indirect competition, compiled financial statements, and developed promotional and distribution strategies.

Their research concluded that the target market would purchase "nostalgia" and have a strong connection to the community. Selling matted digital prints and notecards at a 68% profit margin would allow for a price point affordable for the target market. Collectively, the students created a business plan that is now being used across campus as an example of the spirit and benefits of an entrepreneurial mindset.

As a final project for the semester, the students aided in the development of a formal exhibit where the work was sold and shared with the entire community

Entrepreneurship student Rebekah Moore said the experience gave her an appreciation for the many details behind the creation of a small business.

“Working on this project made this real,” she said, gesturing at the reception and the prints on sale behind her.

“I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing professional photographers and local business owners, who also helped me understand the financial aspect of running a business such as this, as well as the weaknesses, threats and risk,” she added. “It is one thing to research statistics and crunch numbers from a report, but it is a very rewarding experience to actually go through the process with a real person who is willing to have an educated conversation about the realities of owning a business and how to make it successful.”

The college’s Art and Design chairman, Professor Hall Groat, invited his ART 116-Painting I students to participate in the Ed Aswad exhibition project to teach them about the art of selling fine arts.

“Involving art students within this real-life Ed Aswad exhibition initiative was a wonderful opportunity for them to see firsthand how fine arts may be marketed in a variety of practical product forms, including reproductions for home and office wall decor and greeting cards,” he said. “Through this experience, the students were able to learn about effective merchandising and how important packaging and presentation are when developing one’s own personal brand identity.”

“This unique academic entrepreneurial opportunity was made possible through the generosity of Ed Aswad, the dedication of highly motivated students, and a community willing to take the time to open their books and share their personal experiences in entrepreneurship,” Knochen-Davis said.

**Members of Laura Knochen-Davis’
Entrepreneurship class work on
their class project.**

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