

The Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities (CEO) Program: A Mixed-Methods Case Study

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Executive Summary:

This study explores how real-world learning influences the development of entrepreneurial mindset and social capital of high school students in the rural Midwest. A mixed methods design was used to document the overall case of the Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities (CEO) program. CEO is an experiential high-school entrepreneurship program that originated in Effingham, Illinois, in 2008, and has now been replicated in over 70 communities in 10 states. The case study applies conceptual frameworks of positive youth development, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and rural wealth creation for an integrated in-depth description and interpretation of the program case. Qualitative fieldwork with program leaders and community stakeholders combines with a quantitative survey of CEO alums from every year of the program’s 15-year history. Findings affirm the importance of the experiential and community-driven nature of CEO, and community and institutional contexts supporting implementation. Qualitative themes and quantitative results attest to how real-world learning experiences facilitate entrepreneurial mindset and social capital of students, with entrepreneurial activities and community involvement continuing into adulthood. The case study also found evidence for the co-formation of outcomes. This inquiry aims to narrow gaps in research on community-based experiential learning and engagement of younger generations in entrepreneurial development. Findings provide insights for researchers interested in entrepreneurship, youth engagement, and community vibrancy, as well as practitioners working to build more equitable entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Keywords:

Real-world learning: education in formal or non-formal settings in which students do real work and have interactions in the community (Kauffman Foundation, 2021).

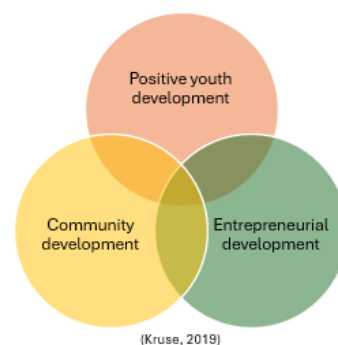
Entrepreneurial mindset: attributes which collectively facilitate entrepreneurial action of young people both currently and in any future field of study or career (Glangchai, 2016).

Social capital: actual and potential resources young people can access through a durable network of connections (Bourdieu, 1986).

Co-formation: process by which two or more outcomes form together out of the same “materials” at approximately same time and place (Canup, 2012).

Rural: non-metro counties with population under 50,000 (USDA Economic Research Service, 2019).

Ecosystems: interconnected webs of people and resources in a community or region that cultivate entrepreneurs of all ages, stages, and types (Cavallo et al, 2019).



Research Questions:

1. How does real-world learning influence entrepreneurial mindset and social capital of rural high school students in the midwestern U.S.? (descriptive)
2. Does real-world learning contribute to the co-formation of entrepreneurial mindset and social capital of rural high school students? (exploratory)

Research Methods:

- Document analysis of CEO program and community materials, websites, and media
- Key informant interviews with 5 Midland Institute for Entrepreneurship staff members
- Community site visits to 3 CEO programs in 3 Midwestern states
 - Key informant interviews with 16 local CEO program stakeholders
 - Participant observation of 6 CEO program events and activities
- Online survey of nearly 4,300 CEO alums from the program’s 15-year history

Major Topics and Themes:

Topics	Themes
Real-world learning (RWL)	1. Experiential nature of program different than classrooms
	2. Community-driven nature of program based on a blueprint
Entrepreneurial mindset (EM)	1. Beyond entrepreneurship to employability and life skills
	2. Continuing entrepreneurship beyond program
Social capital (SC)	1. Purposeful building of a professional network
	2. Intergenerational connections that close the gap
	3. Community mindedness and contribution
Co-formation of outcomes (CO)	1. Student motivation and self-determination
	2. Student exposure to inner workings and local opportunities
	3. Bi-directional influence between students and communities

CEO is an experiential high school entrepreneurship program that is markedly different than traditional high school classroom learning environments. It is a community-driven program communities uniquely implement with their own resources but following a proven CEO program model.

Entrepreneurship is not necessarily the end goal of CEO but a tool or vehicle for broader outcomes and student success in any career path. Program goals for students extend beyond entrepreneurship to instilling life skills that encompass leadership, employability, business etiquette, responsibility, and good character. Much of what students take away from CEO hinges on the individual motivation students bring to the experience. Student outcomes are largely self-determined as students “get out what they put in” to CEO.

The CEO program intervention engages a cohort of students in daily interactions with adults outside the classroom and in the community over an entire academic year. The purpose of these interactions is to not only prepare students for futures beyond high school, but to positively shape how

students perceive their own communities. Intergenerational connections between CEO students and adult facilitators, mentors, guest speakers, and other local adults create avenues for imparting career and life wisdom to students, and narrow the generational gaps within communities.

The CEO course experience involves students in the purposeful development of a professional network of successful adults from the community who they can call upon for guidance and support for class challenges and beyond. As CEO classes meet in a different business location every weekday for an academic year, students are exposed to the inner workings of area communities as well as local career and entrepreneurial opportunities that otherwise would remain latent or undiscovered.

Program leaders emphasize “CEO is for everyone” and not just high-achieving students or those with prior entrepreneurial experience. Diversity among students is sought and valued by the program, as it better reflects the realities of the workforce students will enter.

CEO programs require extensive community building prior to the launch of a program. Leaders from the school community and business community as well as other dedicated individuals work together to lay a foundation of support for the CEO program. This level of support would not be possible without community mindedness on the part of many local actors and organizations who are passionate about giving back to their community and engaging the next generation.

CEO Program Alum Survey:

Survey respondents:

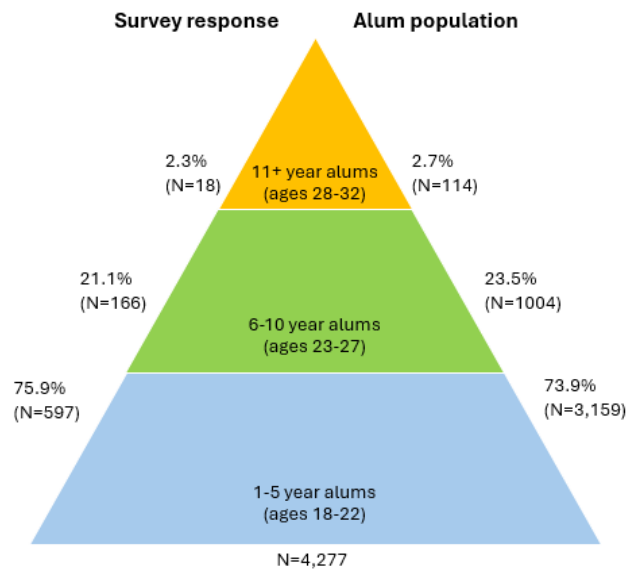
- Overall response rate, 13.2% (N=787)
- Response from alums 1-5 years, 6-10 years, and 11+ years representative of population
- Alums from every year of program, 2009 to 2023
- 313 zip code communities
- 67 out of 75 CEO programs in 8 states (AL, CO, IL, IN, KS, MN, OH, UT)

CEO participation by groups under-represented in entrepreneurship in U.S.:

- 63% female
- 76% rural
- 7% students of color

CEO program experience:

- 84% applied to CEO to gain skills for employment and life (employability skills).
- 73% applied to CEO to do something real beyond the classroom (real world-learning).
- 76% expressed some change or benefit to their post-high school plans due to CEO.
- 35% continued their CEO business part-time, full-time, or converted to new or expanded venture after graduation.
- 83% saw CEO as more relevant than their other K-12 entrepreneurship experiences.
- 76% saw CEO as more relevant than their other K-12 real-world learning experiences.
- 97% recommend CEO to other high school students.



CEO alum demographics: **Higher than U.S. adult population average (various sources)*

As a whole CEO alums are a formally educated, skilled, achieving, and contributing population. By comparison, adult graduates are more likely to be college-going, college graduated, employed, self-employed, and career satisfied than the average U.S. adult population.

- *86% college-going (went to college immediately after high school)
- *76% college graduates (alums of 6+ years with four-year college degree)
- *97% employment (part-time or full-time)
- *19% self-employment (part-time or full-time)
- *85% career path satisfaction



How does CEO influence entrepreneurial mindset of students?

- 86% said CEO helped them think about and see the world as an entrepreneur.
- 92% of CEO alums said they have a stronger entrepreneurial mindset today than before CEO (positive changes on 10 different attributes of mindset at a 99% significance level).
- Female alums and older alums (11+ years) have significantly greater changes in mindset than male alums and younger alums, respectively.
- Entrepreneurial mindset was not a significant predictor of continuing entrepreneurial activity. But social capital and hometown belonging were significant predictors. Combined predictors explained 5% variance in continuity activity.
- The most influential relationship for entrepreneurial mindset: CEO facilitator
- The most influential project for entrepreneurial mindset: individual business/tradeshow

How does CEO influence social capital of students?

- 75% said CEO helped them expand their personal and professional network (especially bridging and linking social capital with influential adults in the community).
- 91% of CEO alums have stronger networks today than before CEO (positive changes on 8 different attributes of network strength at a 99% significance level).
- Older alums (11+ years) had significantly greater changes in social capital than younger alums.
- 76% of CEO alums have greater sense of hometown belonging today than before CEO (positive changes on 5 attributes of hometown belonging at a 99% significance level). Younger alums (1-5 years) more sig. changes than older alums (ANOVA).
- Social capital and hometown belonging were both significant predictors of continuing CEO interactions and community civic involvement. Combined predictors explained 7% variance in continuity activity.
- The most influential relationship for social capital: CEO facilitator
- The most influential project for social capital: class business

Does CEO influence a co-formation of students' entrepreneurial mindset and social capital?

- 89% of alums saw community interaction as important to learning to think and act as an entrepreneur.
- 88% believed entrepreneurship enables students to expand a web of community support.
- 95% agreed learning to think as an entrepreneur and building a network go hand-in-hand.
- 95% agreed entrepreneurial mindset and a community support network are in reach of all students.
- Entrepreneurial mindset and social capital scores were moderately positively correlated.

Continuing entrepreneurial activity after CEO (alums ages 18 to 32) (EM_CONT):

- 43% engaged in entrepreneurship classes, programs, or activities
- 22% started at least one business
- 6% started more than one business
- 46% directly support local businesses
- 16% directly help area entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurship outlook – measures of entrepreneurial intention for the future (E_OUTLOOK):

**Higher than U.S. adult population average (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor)*

- 39% have a family member who started or owned a business
- *77% have capabilities to start a business
- *51% see opportunities to start a business
- *25% expect to start a business within the next 5 years
- 31% see entrepreneurship as a desirable career choice in their community

Innovation outlook – measures of likely intrapreneurship in the future (I_OUTLOOK):

**Higher than U.S. adult population average (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor)*

- *19% currently own or manage a business
- 20% work for a business expected to create 6 or more jobs in next 5 years
- *10% have developed a product, job, or business unit inside an existing company
- 21% offer a product or service which few or no other businesses offer
- 53% live in a community where entrepreneurs receive high status

Continuing CEO involvement – interactions by alums within the past 12 months (SC_CEO):

- 72% with former CEO classmates
- 48% with CEO facilitator
- 35% with community members met through CEO
- 31% with CEO mentor
- 22% participated in at least one CEO activity
- 18% made a material or non-material contribution to a CEO program

Continuing civic involvement – interactions by alums within the past 12 months (SC_COMM):

**Percentages are several points higher when college-age alums removed*

- 45% voted
- 20% attended public meetings
- 17% worked with others to address a community issue
- 10% served as an officer of a community organization
- 9% contacted a public official

Community residency and network of community support:

- 47% still live in or near CEO county/community (includes recent high school graduates)
- 44% report 10 years or more of residence in current community
- 32% report 1 year or less of residence in current community
- 25% reported CEO had an influence on where they live today (great or moderate extent)
- 47% reported CEO had no influence on where they live today
- 51% have network of support in community of residence today (great extent or moderate extent)

Ecosystem and Community Building:

- CEO provides a “bridge” between the education and business sectors of the community, fostering reliance and interdependence between two sectors which historically have found it difficult to align efforts toward workforce development.
- Informants provided evidence of CEO coming “in the wake” of local community economic recovery and revitalization, rather than at the forefront of it.
- The CEO program communities visited each had distinguishing characteristics which could categorize them as a developing program (less than 5 years), maturing program (6 to 10 years), and advanced program (11 or more years).
- CEO as a program case highlights an integration of frameworks for positive youth development, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and rural wealth creation.

Program and Community Mechanisms:

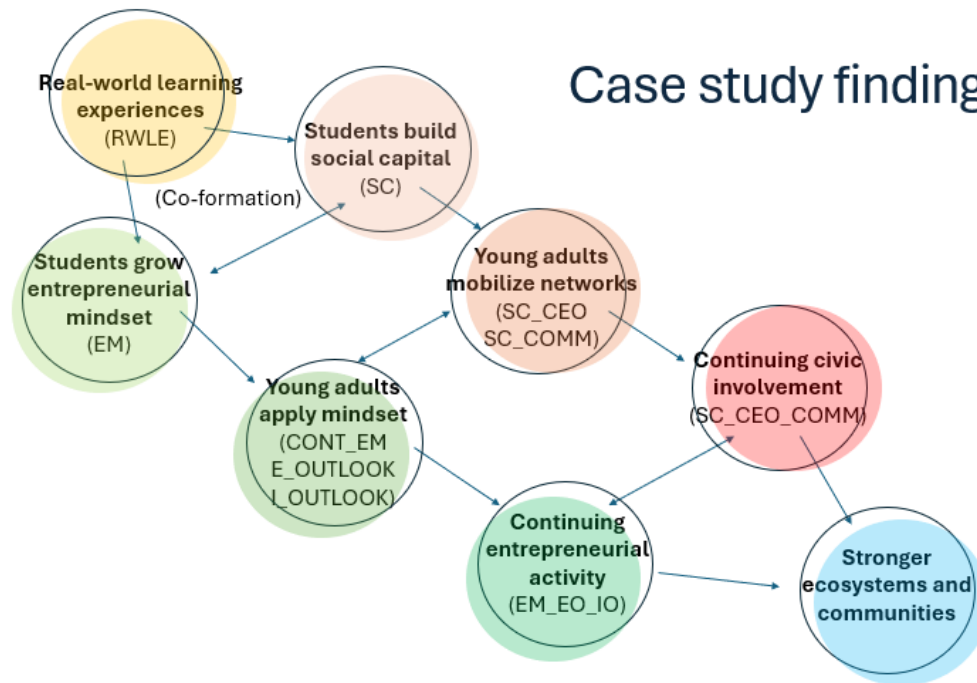
The case study discovered ten (10) program-level mechanisms and four (4) community-level mechanisms that help describe and interpret the influence of real-world learning. These are essential properties and underlying social processes which collectively distinguish the program case of CEO.

CEO: Mechanisms that Describe and Interpret the Program Case

Program-Level Mechanisms	Description
1. Selection	“Hard-working, motivated, and trustworthy” students are selected
2. Location	The class always meets in the community, never in a classroom
3. Vocation	Students are exposed to a wide range of career skills and paths
4. Interaction	Network-building and mentoring are high program priorities
5. Repetition	Students daily practice skills for success in career and life
6. Facilitation	The program is facilitated rather than taught as a formal classroom
7. Duration	The program extends over an entire academic school year
8. Demonstration	Students demonstrate learning at a culminating tradeshow event
9. Intergeneration	The program forges connections between multiple generations
10. Celebration	The program recognizes and celebrates student achievements

Community-Level Mechanisms	Description
1. Collaboration	The program is built upon broad-based community support
2. Professionalization	An experienced intermediary provides training, coaching, support
3. Institutionalization	A new organizational structure is formed to govern the program
4. Regionalization	The program provides a spark for regional economic development

Case study findings



Major Findings:

- CEO students grow entrepreneurial mindset.
- CEO students build social capital.
- CEO real-world learning facilitates a co-formation of these outcomes.
- CEO students continue to apply mindset and mobilize durable networks over time.
- CEO builds stronger ecosystems and communities.

Conclusion:

This case study highlighted a case of real-world entrepreneurial learning in the rural context. CEO program findings underscore the influence that experiential learning can have on students, adults, and communities. The case of CEO points to the primacy of place, belonging, and connection in the development of the next generation of entrepreneurs. The importance of individual action and supportive institutions are also highlighted in the community context. Findings shed light on best practices that can contribute to positive student outcomes, more equitable entrepreneurial ecosystems, and more vibrant rural communities. The author's hope for this research is to inform the work of communities toward more asset-based futures which account not only for the *know-what* and *know-how*, but also the *know-who* and *know-where*.

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