Joyce McConnell: Entrepreneurship changes the way we think, work, live

May 12, 2016

The last few weeks have seen two West Virginia natives, now prominent CEOs, challenge us to transform our state’s economy through entrepreneurship and innovation.

Brad Smith of Intuit sees “nothing but opportunity” here, while Wes Bush of Northrup Gruman sees “potential in great magnitude.”

At West Virginia University, we also see that potential — on our campus and across this great state.

Moreover, we are prepared to lead the way as West Virginia commits to building a strong foundation of entrepreneurship in all 55 counties. We know how to build a strong foundation because we have already done it: as an institution, in our engagement with students and across the state.

The key to understanding what entrepreneurship means to WVU is in how we define the term. Most entrepreneurs are pursuing profit in the face of risk. We’re pursuing transformation in the face of risk.

As an institution, WVU is committing to and executing big, positive changes. We will soon open a beautiful, new campus in Beckley this fall. Buying a new campus — and moving an established one — is an enormous risk. But we believe the opportunities for positive impact in this region are so valuable to our students and the surrounding communities, we were willing to take that risk.

Today, as the campus prepares for the arrival of students and faculty, we can already see that risk paying off. We receive dozens of calls daily from students interested in the programs we will offer at Beckley.

We will be offering them what they need to strengthen their talents and their communities — whether that’s training in health professions, engineering or adventure sports management.

On the Morgantown campus, we are making sure our students engage with entrepreneurship, no matter what their major. Students in the College of Business & Economics can major or minor in entrepreneurship, while in the College of Creative Arts they can pursue a master’s degree in music industry. Through our IDEA Faculty Fellows program, we have also recently committed to supporting faculty in developing new courses and programs with an entrepreneurship or innovation focus.
As I said earlier, at WVU, we define entrepreneurship as pursuing transformation. When it comes to our students, we give them the tools to transform themselves. We want them to become masters of innovation, infusing an entrepreneurial mindset across all academic disciplines.

Our three interconnected labs — the LaunchLab, the MakerLab and the CodeLab — provide invaluable resources to students, faculty, staff and members of the community. These Labs extend to the WVU Tech Beckley Campus. There, we are partnering with the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority’s Hive to support student and community entrepreneurship.

These new spaces are exciting, but they shouldn’t be surprising. We have been offering entrepreneurial opportunities to children and teenagers for a very long time. Through the 4-H Youth Development program managed out of our Extension Service, we foster the next generation of leaders in fields ranging from computer engineering and robotics to farm management.

The WVU Extension Service is perhaps the perfect example of our approach to our many partnerships and collaborations. Extension faculty statewide offer free or low-fee training in the areas of agri-business, tourism and community leadership development.

True to our commitment to transforming our state, we’ve opened many of our innovation labs to the community and created collaborative entities like our new Health Sciences Center Innovation Center.

We’ve also launched the WVU Innovation Corporation, through which we can bolster the state economy by performing more contract-based testing and evaluation for industry and government agencies.

Perhaps even more importantly, we are also working on initiatives designed to identify key economic and entrepreneurial drivers for our state and policy considerations that will allow our state government to reinvent, modernize and refresh our its existing structures.

Are many of these projects risky? You bet. But that’s okay.

Like Wes Bush, Brad Smith and many other concerned leaders and citizens, we see tremendous opportunity for economic growth in our state.

We also understand WVU’s role in leading the way — and we consider that both a privilege and a responsibility. We believe that entrepreneurship is about far more than profit. We believe that it is about transformation for West Virginia.

And that is worth any risk.

Joyce McConnell is provost of West Virginia University.

- See more at: http://www.wvgazettemail.com/daily-mail-opinion/20160512/joyce-mcconnell-entrepreneurship-changes-the-way-we-think-work-live#sthash.6RNqPlVo.dpuf