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Undergraduate Perceptions of the Need for an Agricultural Entrepreneurship Curriculum

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Abstract

Interest in agri-entrepreneurship is increasingly rapidly. While rural communities believe economic growth can come for entrepreneurship, little is being done within colleges of agriculture to prepare students to become entrepreneurs. We report the results of an undergraduate student survey of University of Missouri College of Agriculture students. We find that students are interested in this topic, and we find students lack knowledge in several key areas typically needed to develop an entrepreneurship mentality.

Undergraduate Perceptions of the Need for an Agricultural Entrepreneurship Curriculum

Entrepreneurship, and an agri-entrepreneur, is defined as one who organizes, manages, and assumes the risks of an agri-business or agri-enterprise. According to a 2000 Kauffman foundation report on global entrepreneurship, 9.8% of the 2000 U.S. adult population is attempted to start a new business at any one time. An assessment of entrepreneurial activities indicates that 80% of business start-ups fail. However, research analyzing higher education entrepreneurship curriculums indicate that graduates of such programs are more likely to start new businesses, more likely to be self-employed, have higher annual incomes and greater level of assets, and they tend to be more satisfied with their jobs (Charney and Libecap).

The agricultural industry and rural communities are undergoing significant change as consolidation in the agri-food system occurs and rural communities search for their niche. Much of the economic activity in rural communities has historically been agricultural based. As value added agriculture, life sciences, and technical sciences increase in demand in rural communities, entrepreneurs may play a critical role in sustaining the economic viability of rural communities. Entrepreneurship has been cited as a critical component for the economic development in communities (Sexton and Kasarda, 1992). The question is, can colleges of agriculture implement a curriculum, specifically agri-entrepreneurship, to improve the success rate of new agricultural business start-ups? And, what is the demand for this type of curriculum? The objective of this research is to assess undergraduate student perceptions of the need for agri-entrepreneur curriculum in the College of Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources (CAFNR) at the University of Missouri-Columbia. This was accomplished through surveying all CAFNR undergraduate students.

Since World War II there has been a strong tendency for students to perceive that large corporations should be the primary source of employment opportunity (Kirchoff, 1994). Now, students are expressing an interest in entrepreneurship, but many universities and colleges are not set up to teach such courses. Significant information exists on the level of entrepreneurship training in education. Charney and Libecap found over 1,500 colleges and universities offered an entrepreneurship curriculum in 2000 compared to 400 in 1995 (Vesper). Today, nearly 50 schools offer an entrepreneurship degree (Solomon et al.). For agri-entrepreneurship, however, no empirical evidence exists to determine the level of need for an entrepreneurship curriculum focused on agriculture. While some agri-entrepreneurship programs exist, e.g. Cornell, we seek to analyze the demand side of curriculum need, i.e., student interest.

As rural communities undergo economic, sociological, and geo-political changes and the agriculture industry becomes more technologically and business focused, agri-entrepreneurship may play a key role in re-shaping rural America. Macke and Kayne point out that rural-based entrepreneurs face challenges beyond those of traditional entrepreneurs. These challenges include; an older, poorer, conservation population; further from substantial markets; depopulation; increased subsidies to maintain sources; and fueled by less dynamic economies. To adequately prepare students for entrepreneurial careers, changes in curriculum may be needed. It is, however, necessary to first assess student understanding of agri-entrepreneurship curriculum topics. We report feedback from a student survey to assess need and curriculum of an agri-entrepreneurship curriculum.

Entrepreneurship in the Classroom

Agribusiness programs are well suited to provide agri-entrepreneurial curriculum content. Much of such curriculum content would be similar to conventional business school entrepreneurship

curriculums. Two factors, however, give need to stand-alone agricultural entrepreneurship curriculum, knowledge of the agricultural industry and access to capital. For instance, agriculture has a biological lag in the production process. This is in stark contrast to a business school widget example where inputs can always be acquired with a known level of certainty. Second, special grants, cost-share, guaranteed loans, low interest loans, and technical assistance are available through the United States Department of Agriculture and State Departments of Agriculture. Yet, much information on curriculum content can be garnered from business school entrepreneurship programs.

The Kauffman Center for Entrepreneurship Leadership reported in winter 2000, the innovative concepts being undertaken for student learning, faculty, administrative, and entrepreneurs challenges for entrepreneurship in higher education. For student learning, they point to experiential learning (in internships and business plan competitions) as the fundamental change in curriculum that differentiates entrepreneurial programs, i.e., hands-on learning. Developing student leadership through entrepreneurial clubs/associations has shown to have tremendous impact on clustering entrepreneurs. Prior to the slow down in the economy, many schools were providing assistance in helping students start-up businesses.

They have found faculty to be rapidly developing skill sets in the area of entrepreneurship. For instance, many more associations with an entrepreneurial focus have started up, and many new journals have risen to fill the void of research on entrepreneurial activities. Innovations in the area of faculty involvement include the establishment of entrepreneurship centers – some staffed by entrepreneurs as opposed to faculty – for learning, use of more guest-speakers, a greater focus on business plan development, and the re-vamping of facilities to allow for better means by which to provide entrepreneurship learning. The one

lacking area of faculty involvement is professional development experiences.

Kourilskly points out that those attending institutions of higher education need to change their mentality from “take-a-job” to “make-a-job” for entrepreneurship curriculums to thrive. Kourilskly points to three stages in the development of an entrepreneur: 1) the identification or recognition of opportunities; 2) commitment of resources in the presence of risk; and 3) creation of operating an organization. She argues that while higher education curriculums play a limited role in putting into place concepts for the second and third stages, higher education can play a critical role in opportunity recognition and exploration.

Opportunity recognition and exploration curriculum is the process of creating an environment to allow students to be independent thinkers, become imaginative, and understanding of assessment of need of the concept within the market place. The overall components of the first-stage are referred to as the “Initiator” stage (Kourilskly). Thus, a successful entrepreneurship curriculum would focus on allowing students to be free thinking, analytical, risk taking, and have the tools in place to maneuver through the business start-up highway.

Survey Instrument

A survey instrument was constructed in order to ascertain student interest in agri-entrepreneurship, understanding of business related concepts, and demographic information. An initial survey instrument was constructed and administered to five students. Feedback from these students was used to alter the questionnaire to its current format.

Demographic type questions asked of students were age, year in school, sex, major, background (farm, rural (non-farm), suburb, urban), family involvement in entrepreneurship, and knowledge of friends or friends of family involved in entrepreneurship. The student agri-

entrepreneurship question posed was whether the student had ever considered wanting to own their own business. This information is used in multivariate analysis to determine whether students can be targeted for recruitment into such a curriculum.

The majority of questions posed to students dealt with knowledge of topics related to entrepreneurship. Questions asked were in regard to knowledge of: business plans, market analysis, marketing, grant opportunities, legal issues, access to capital, information resource providers, and access to entrepreneurial clubs. Results, by class in school, are presented in graphical form based on a likard scale with a highest ranking of “strongly agree” to a lowest ranking of “strongly disagree.”

CAFR students were sent an e-mail at the end of November 2002. They were asked to take part in a web-based survey that the results from would be used in the assessment and potential development of agri-entrepreneurial curriculum. Students responded to the electronic survey. No follow-up e-mail was sent due to sensitivity of overwhelming students with additional e-mail. Of the slightly over 2000 CAFNR undergraduate students, 172 replied

Respondent summary statistics, by class, are presented in table 1. Compared to the University of Missouri College of Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources student enrollment a higher proportion of survey respondents tended to be male, a higher percentage of respondents tended to have a farm background, and a higher percentage of respondents tended to be pursuing a degree in agricultural economics or agribusiness.

Empirical Model

While non-parametric analysis is used to develop most of the results of this research, one empirical model is specified in order to better assess whether students can be targeted for recruitment into an agri-entrepreneurship curriculum-

The empirical model used to assess student interest in owning their own business is as follows:

$$(1) \quad \text{I have considered wanting to own my own business} = f(\sum_i \text{background}_i, \text{Gender}, \text{Age}, \sum_j \text{Major}_j, \text{know of someone that is an entrepreneur})$$

The dependent variable is set as a 0 or 1 binary variable where a 1 is equal to “yes, I have considered owning my own business.” The *Background_i* variable is a series of dummy variables for $i = \text{farm, rural (non-farm), suburban, urban}$; farm is the default = farm. *Gender* is specified as 0 or 1 binary with, female, *default* = 1. The *Age* variable is the respondent’s age, and is used in place of year in school to remove any collinearity. A series of variable *Major_j* are specified where $j = \text{ag econ/ag business, plant sciences, animal sciences, agricultural education, and other}$, *default* = ag econ/ag business. The variable “know of someone that runs their own business” is specified as a 0 or 1 binary choice variable with 1 = “yes”.

Variables chosen for inclusion were based the results from a comprehensive study of entrepreneur characteristics by Reynolds et al. Reynolds et. al. found that the level of entrepreneurial spirit varied by degree of urbaneness from where the entrepreneur is located. There is a tendency for the level of both male and female entrepreneurship to increase with the level of urbaneness. Thus, we included the *Background* variable to capture this difference in the level of entrepreneurship interest. Students with an urban background are expected to have a higher probability of considering wanting to own one’s own business.

Reynolds et. al. found that males are twice as likely to start a new business as are women. The *Gender* variable is included to assess whether student interest in starting one's own business has a similar stratification across gender.

The *Age* variable was included based on Reynolds et al. finding that those between 25 and 44 years of age are more likely to start a new business. Furthermore, they found more educated persons have a more likely probability of starting their own business. Because the age range for the current study is a better measure of education level, then stage in life – the age range is very narrow due to our selected sample – we expect this value to be positively correlated with the dependent variable.

The variable *Major* was included to assess whether interest areas more stimulate one's interest in entrepreneurship thinking. As the default is ag-econ/ag-business, we expect those in other majors to have a lower probability of thinking about wanting to start their own business.

The final variable “know of someone who owns their own business” is included to assess whether real-life interaction evaluates interest in entrepreneurship. The expected sign on this variable is positive. Finding a positive relationship may suggest the need for development of internships focused on working with entrepreneurs or development of an agri-entrepreneurs club.

Because the dependant variable is a binary choice variable, a logit model is estimated. Parameter estimates were converted to probabilities at the mean.

Results

Histograms and regression analysis are used to garner information from the survey responses. Histograms are used to assess knowledge level, by class in school, in order to assess deficiencies in curriculum areas. Responses, by class in school, are reported as percentage of respondents ranking the question in one of five categories from “1 = Strongly Disagree” to “3 = Indifferent”

to “5 = Strongly Agree.” Furthermore, the number of respondents by class and the average response score is reported. The regression analysis was used to quantitatively assess whether students can be targeted for recruitment into an agri-entrepreneurship curriculum or activity.

Understanding of Entrepreneurial Tool Box

Figures 1 and 2 graphically depict the breakdown, by class, of students’ understanding of business plans and feasibility studies, respectively. A majority of respondents indicate they feel comfortable with their understanding of business plans and feasibility studies. This result differed little across class. Overall, the finding that students are fairly comfortable with these topics is not surprising because many CAFNR students enroll in a new products marketing course that discusses these topics. This does not suggest that students know how to write a business plan or conduct a feasibility study. However, knowing the basic concepts of business plans and feasibility studies are important as strategic planning is provided from the feasibility study in order to meet business objectives highlighted with a business plan.

Students generally feel uncomfortable with the legal issues associated with building a business (figure 3). This result is not surprising given the need to understand organizational structure issues, articles of incorporation, and tax issues. It appears that one area for curriculum development lies in the area of developing a better understanding of legal issues related to business development.

It is surprising that most respondents indicated a good understanding of marketing products (figure 4), as most respondents indicated a farm background where commodity agricultural marketing dominates. It is common for agricultural producers to misperceive the ease of product marketing after being involved in commodity marketing. It may be that students from a farm background carry over this misunderstanding of the differences between commodity

and product marketing. While there is a new products marketing course is offered in the Department of Agricultural Economics, not all CAFNR students take this course and exposing students to hands-on learning is difficult. Schroeder, in reporting on a commodity futures trading course, noted that experiential learning in agricultural economics related coursework is superior to traditional classroom based instruction. Possibly more experiential learning needs to occur for students interested in agri-entrepreneurship.

Because of the increased usage of the Internet for transacting business, students were asked to rank their understanding of e-commerce. Not surprisingly, student respondents are generally uncomfortable with e-commerce (figure 5). E-commerce has undergone considerable change over the past couple years following the late 1990s tech bubble. This likely has students confused about the benefits and use of e-commerce. Educating students on the usefulness of the Internet as a business support tool may have merit.

Establishing costs and pricing products are integrally linked. In order to properly price a product or concept one must first know the costs of production. Thus, students were asked to rank their understanding of pricing strategies and arriving at the cost of production (figure 6 and 7). In general, the responses were bi-modal with juniors and seniors indicating somewhat more comfort with pricing strategies. Again, one concern is that students apply commodity marketing – where marketing deals with market timing – concepts to product marketing. Mark-up pricing, cost plus pricing, and premium pricing are product related marketing strategies. These strategies are much different than the whether to store, at what time to sell, and how much to sell decisions of commodity marketing. An additional course, or part of a course, on product pricing, assessing cost of production, and inventory management may be prove helpful.

Figure 8 addresses students' understanding of state and federal government programs that regulate and assist in business. A majority of students feel they have a poor understanding of the programs. This result is as expected. Many possibilities exist for technical support, cost-share funding, and grant funding within state and federal agencies. It appears that aspiring entrepreneurs could utilize a course – seminar course – where they learn about government supported resources.

Quantitative Assessment

The results of the logit regression estimated for equation 1 are presented in table 2. Of the 173 persons responding to the survey 146 indicated they had an interest in becoming an agri-entrepreneur. The logit regression model estimated provides little insight into tactics for targeting potential entrepreneurs. None of the binary choice variables for *Background* were statistically significant. Thus, persons with a farm background are just as likely to pursue entrepreneurial activities as persons with a non-farm background. As expected, being a male increases the probability of starting ones own business. The *Age* variable was insignificant. This result is likely due to the tight age cluster associated with the sample – college students. There was no evidence that the probability of wanting to own ones own business was enhanced by *Major*. The variable that has the greatest impact on students having aspirations to own their own business is a personal connection to someone who is already an entrepreneur. It is likely that the students feel more comfortable with risk taking, and they have witnessed the independence of being self-employed through watching others. Thus, the connection to existing entrepreneurs may be critical in the development and progress of developing future agri-entrepreneurs.

Curriculum Implications

In the 2000 study by the Kauffman Foundation survey respondents rated the question “colleges and universities have enough courses and programs on entrepreneurship” as - 0.30 on a scale of -2 equals strongly disagree, 0 equals neutral, to +2 equals strongly agree. Furthermore, in a 1994 Kauffman Foundation survey of high school students it was found that 65% of those responding indicated an interest in starting a business of their own and only 12 % rated that their entrepreneurship knowledge as “good.” However, little is known of the demand drivers for higher education level entrepreneurship curriculums, and in particular agricultural entrepreneurship. Using college level survey data, we analyzed curriculum demand and interest in agricultural entrepreneurship.

We found that students have a diverse set of curriculum needs. Particular curriculum needs center on legal, e-commerce, and information about government resources. Some curriculum needs go beyond the scope of current educational offerings, while other needs indicate multi-divisional coursework. Also, there are apparent opportunities to begin entrepreneurship clubs that would allow potential entrepreneurs to interact about ideas, risk perceptions, and learning opportunities.

In general, survey respondents indicated that they do not feel comfortable setting up their own business (figure 9). However, the respondents indicated that five and years down the road they will feel more comfortable setting up their own business (figures 10 and 11). This finding is consistent with the findings of Reynolds et al. in that persons between the ages of 25 and 44 are more likely to be entrepreneurs. Our findings suggest that persons realize this a priori.

Lastly, student survey respondents were asked about the need for entrepreneurship focused internship opportunities (figure 12). Students clearly indicate that they would welcome

the opportunity to pursue internship opportunities related to agri-entrepreneurship. Furthermore, we found a strong linkage between a student knowing an entrepreneur and having aspirations of being self-employed (table 2). Thus, there is strong evidence to support that by building linkages between students and entrepreneurs that student interest and understanding entrepreneurship can be better understood. This is area of curriculum development that can easily be developed using linkages with existing alumni entrepreneurs.

This research is more of a case study, based on the background and resources of one institution, then actual population level statistical analysis. A limitation of this research is that even a small sample of students within the College responded. A high percentage of those responding to the survey indicated interest in owning one's own business. These persons alone account for 7.5% of the undergraduate class within the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources at the University of Missouri.

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Table 1. Summary statistics of undergraduate students responding to a survey on agricultural entrepreneurship.

	All	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
Number of respondents ¹	172	41	45	33	34
Female (% of respondents)	39%	34%	40%	32%	50%
Background (% of respondents)					
Farm	56.86%	43.90%	62.22%	57.58%	64.71%
Rural, non-farm	24.18%	24.39%	28.89%	24.24%	17.65%
Suburb	14.38%	21.95%	6.67%	12.12%	17.65%
Urban	4.58%	9.76%	2.22%	6.06%	0.00%
Undergraduate major (% of total)					
Agricultural economics or agribusiness	24.84%	14.63%	15.56%	30.30%	44.12%
Plant Sciences	4.58%	2.44%	6.67%	9.09%	0.00%
Animal Sciences	20.92%	19.51%	26.67%	15.15%	20.59%
Ag Education	13.73%	9.76%	20.00%	18.18%	5.88%
Other	35.95%	53.66%	31.11%	27.27%	29.41%

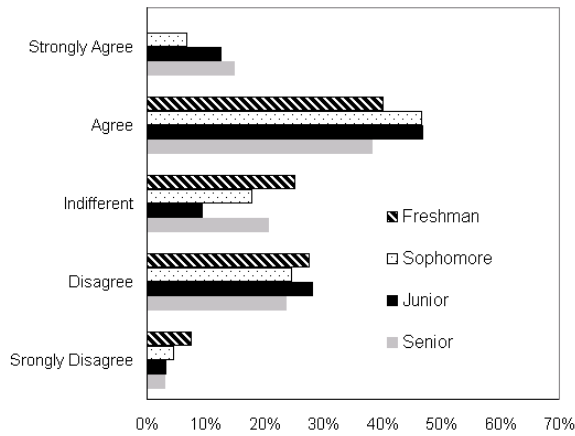
1. Nineteen respondents did not respond to this question

Table 2. Logit regression interpolated probabilities of considering owning own business

	Probability	t-stat
Background (default = farm)		
Rural, non-farm	0.003	0.184
Suburb	-0.014	1.216
Urban	0.003	0.454
Sex (default = female)	0.060*	2.112
Age	0.021	0.108
Major (default = Ag Econ/ Ag Business)		
Plant Sciences	0.001	0.066
Animal Sciences	0.027	1.377
Ag Education	0.002	0.202
Other	0.003	0.118
Know of someone who is an entrepreneur	0.289*	2.3817
Constant	-0.156	0.623
No. of observations	172	

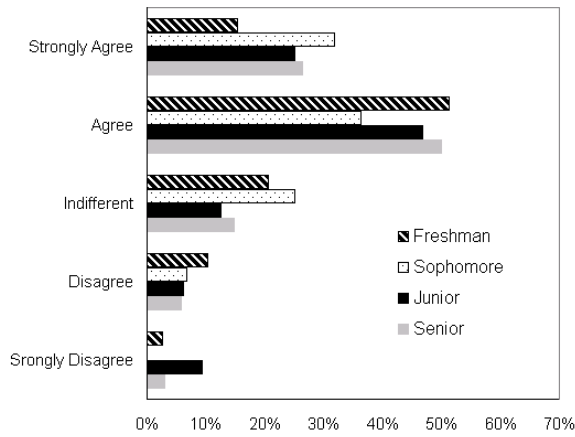
Note, one asterisk (*) indicates statistical significance at the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 1. I have a good understanding of business plans



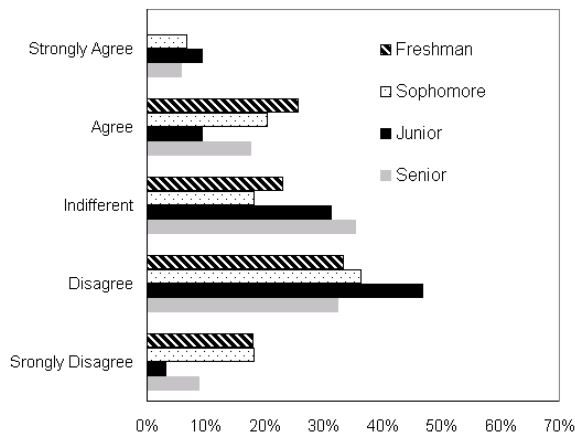
	No. of Respondents	Average Response
Freshman	40	2.98
Sophomore	45	3.27
Junior	32	3.38
Senior	34	3.38
Average across all classes	171	3.23

Figure 2. I have a good understanding of feasibility studies



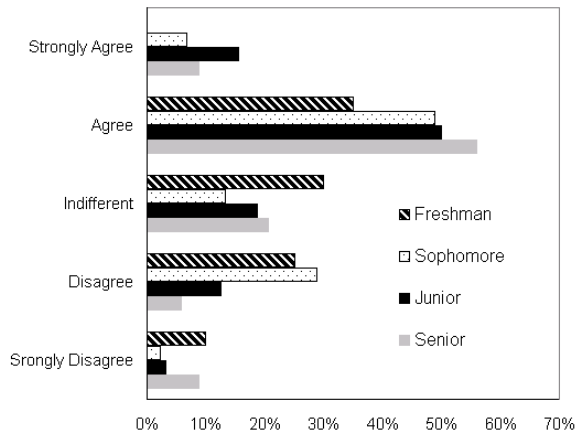
	No. of Respondents	Average Response
Freshman	39	2.38
Sophomore	45	2.49
Junior	32	2.72
Senior	34	2.94
Average across all classes	170	2.68

Figure 3. I have a good understanding of legal issues related to business



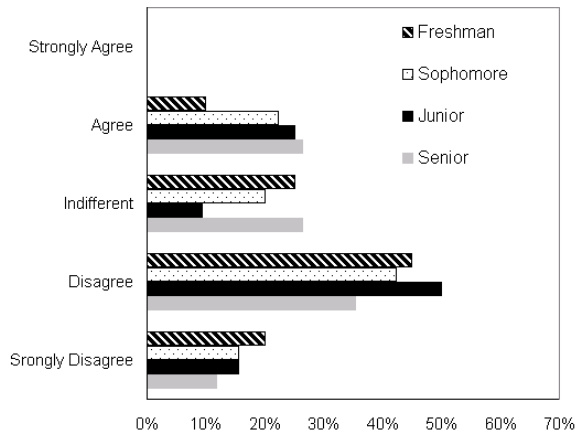
	No. of Respondents	Average Response
Freshman	39	2.56
Sophomore	44	2.61
Junior	32	2.75
Senior	34	2.79
Average across all classes	168	2.66

Figure 4. I have a good understanding of marketing products



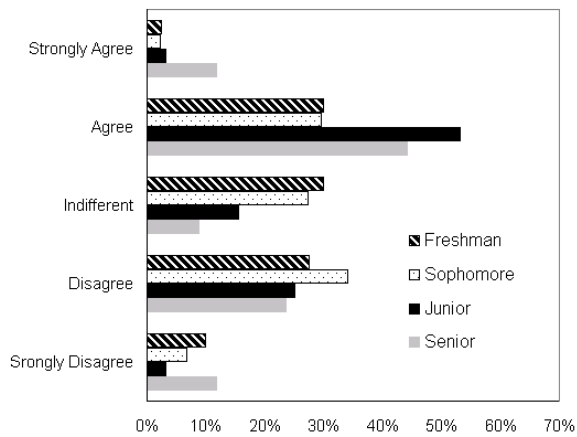
	No. of Respondents	Average Response
Freshman	40	2.90
Sophomore	45	3.29
Junior	32	3.63
Senior	34	3.50
Average across all classes	170	3.31

Figure 5. I have a good understanding of e-commerce



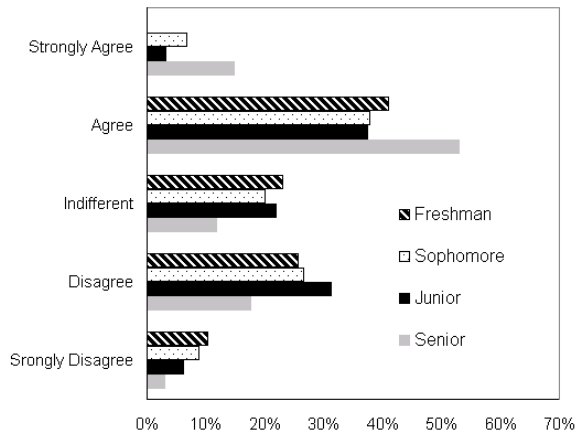
	No. of Respondents	Average Response
Freshman	40	2.25
Sophomore	45	2.49
Junior	32	2.44
Senior	34	2.68
Average across all classes	171	2.48

Figure 6. I have a good understanding of pricing strategies



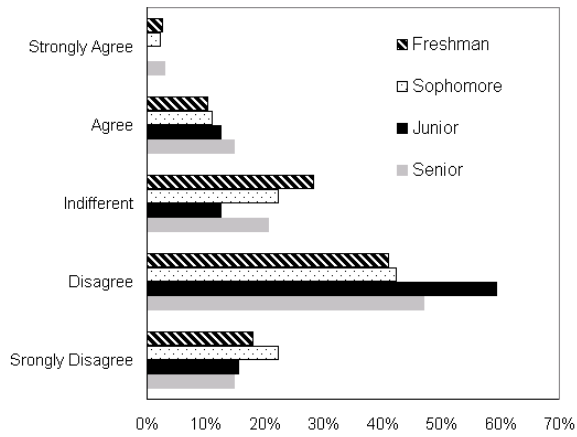
	No. of Respondents	Average Response
Freshman	40	2.88
Sophomore	44	2.86
Junior	32	3.28
Senior	34	3.21
Average across all classes	169	3.04

Figure 7. I have a good understanding of establishing cost of production



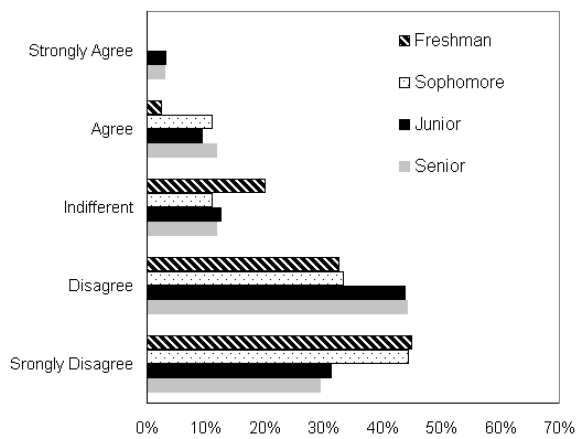
	No. of Respondents	Average Response
Freshman	39	2.95
Sophomore	45	3.07
Junior	32	3.00
Senior	34	3.59
Average across all classes	170	3.15

Figure 8. I have a good understanding of state and federal government programs that regulate and assist in business



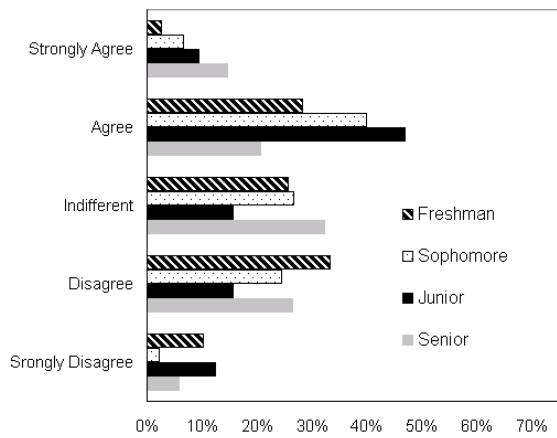
	No. of Respondents	Average Response
Freshman	39	2.38
Sophomore	45	2.29
Junior	32	2.22
Senior	34	2.44
Average across all classes	170	2.29

Figure 9. I am comfortable setting up my own business now



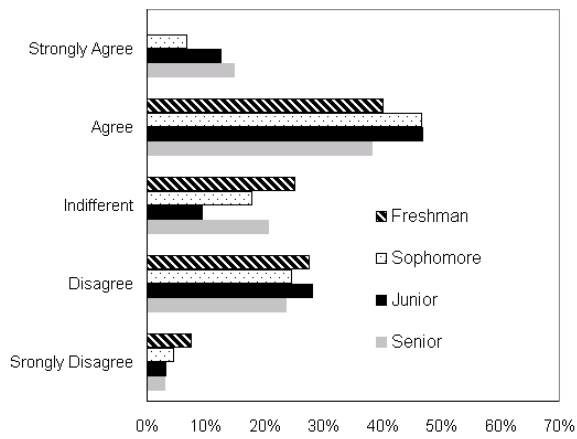
	No. of Respondents	Average Response
Freshman	40	1.80
Sophomore	45	1.89
Junior	32	2.09
Senior	34	2.15
Average across all classes	171	1.97

Figure 10. I will be comfortable setting up my own business in 5 years



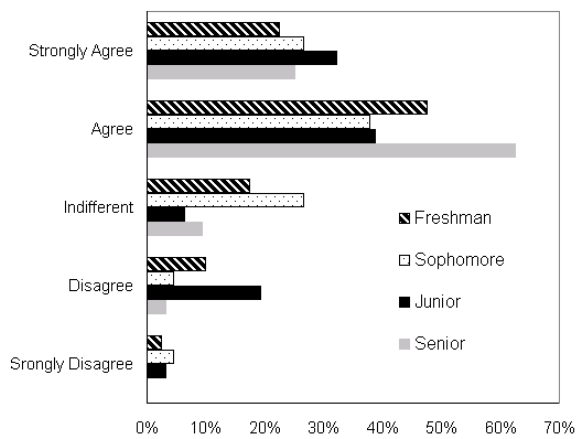
	No. of Respondents	Average Response
Freshman	39	2.79
Sophomore	45	3.24
Junior	32	3.25
Senior	34	3.12
Average across all classes	169	3.14

Figure 11. I will be comfortable setting up my own business in 10 years



	No. of Respondents	Average Response
Freshman	39	3.67
Sophomore	44	3.93
Junior	32	3.72
Senior	34	2.15
Average across all classes	168	3.84

Figure 12. I would be interested in an intenship opportunity with an entrepreneur



	No. of Respondents	Average Response
Freshman	40	3.78
Sophomore	45	3.78
Junior	31	3.77
Senior	34	3.12
Average across all classes	168	3.84