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Now Everyone's an Entrepreneur

Colleges are teaching undergraduates how to be self-starters. But what does that really mean?

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The University of Maryland at College Park is one of hundreds of colleges that have embraced entrepreneurship education. Wallace D. Loh, the president, has said he wants all 37,000 students exposed to the concepts of innovation and entrepreneurship. While those themes have been familiar ones for a couple of decades, the campus has accelerated program development during the last five years or so, branding itself as a driver of innovation, a place where the founders of Oculus, Under Armour,

Abdullah Alobunah (left) and Chase Brignac, students at the U. of Maryland at College Park, work on a new part for a 3-D printer at Startup Shell, a student-founded nonprofit incubator.

and Google got their start. Today Maryland is home to two residential communities for student entrepreneurs, an institute that supports technology startups, an entrepreneurship center in the business school, Startup Shell, a minor and a master's degree in technology entrepreneurship, and a growing number of undergraduate courses that aim to embed those concepts in various disciplines.

Working to tie many of these efforts together is Dean Chang, an associate vice president, who was appointed two years ago as head of the new Academy for Innovation and Entrepreneurship. Housed at the heart of the campus, the academy's brightly colored offices and meeting spaces like the Garage are designed to welcome students. Posters sporting the tag line "Fear the Turtle," once associated primarily with the Terrapins athletic teams, line the academy's hallways, profiling students and faculty across campus considered innovators.

Mr. Chang says he understands how difficult it can be to cultivate an entrepreneurial mind-set in students. A Maryland native and the son of two career bureaucrats, he envisioned a similar path for himself before enrolling in a robotics doctoral program at Stanford University in the early 1990s, a time when tech start-ups were just coming into their own. If not for being at a campus so focused on

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innovation, he says, he doubts he would have spent 15 years in Silicon Valley, where he helped turn a spinoff from the robotics lab into a major producer of haptics, or touch, technology, found in many mobile and gaming devices today.

A big part of his job at Maryland is persuading all students that the skills he's promoting are relevant to them. The principles embedded in entrepreneurship education, he says, encourage students to approach problems from many perspectives, step outside the classroom, and become comfortable with experimentation and failure. Yet in popular imagination the term often gets reduced to the idea of making something in your garage or being part of a Silicon Valley start-up.

"The problem is that if you ask who is interested in entrepreneurship, only engineering and business students will raise their hands," he says. "We have 10 other schools." To remedy that, Maryland began offering a slew of "Fearless Ideas" courses last fall, in which students are expected to design and test new ventures and products. One of the more popular ones, taught by a business professor, takes students through the process of creating outdoor camping gear. The courses are designed to fulfill general-education requirements and are open to all undergraduates.

The courses, though, can reach only a few hundred students. The academy is also working with campus living-learning communities, which about half of all new freshmen join, to include a two- to three-week course module that exposes students to two major trends in entrepreneurship education: design thinking and the lean start-up.

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