Academics and Executives in the Mountains: The Colorado Gold Rush of 2017

Vision: A team of CU professors wins a Nobel prize in the social sciences.

Mission: Make organizations more humane and effective through critical conversations and groundbreaking new research.

Values: Listening, questioning and winning

Strategy: Double CU annual revenue by adding executive education campuses on Pearl street (partner with Techstars) and in in the ski areas (partner with Vail, Aspen, Beaver Creek Resorts). This added revenue will enable us to increase our research faculty and thus triple our chances of winning a Nobel prize for CU.

The basic premise is that executives will pay a great deal for faculty to listen to them, respect them and ask them thoughtful questions. We aren’t Harvard or Wharton (yet) and so we should use our lower status school name to our advantage and focus on facilitating executives talking and connecting with other executives rather than rolling out a rigorous teaching curriculum. We provide the platform and the structure, and the executives provide the content. They would love it.

A board member of Vail Resorts is on the Leeds board I believe and so we start by asking him if he could provide space for our executive discussion forums from 4-6pm a few nights per week. Vail Resorts could also invite select guests to participate in our unique executive après ski experience. Not only would the leaders at Vail Resorts want to partner with us because they will be excited about helping us win a Nobel prize, but also our executive experience would help them attract customers away from their competitors (Aspen, Beaver Creek). Vail Resorts may end up providing financial resources to us because they will realize that there is a great deal of synergy between our respective businesses (i.e. the better we do, the better they do). This program would run through ski season, from December through May.

We could also attract participants organically through faculty listening to executives in the gondola and inviting them to the CU executive après ski experience. I have found that executives (i.e. owner of the Atlanta Falcons, retired billionaires) really enjoy having faculty listen to them in the gondola especially when they learn I’m a business professor. The network of participants would quickly snowball. This network would become the foundation of the CU executive après ski experience network, and we would institute a membership fee for joining the CU network and quickly raise tuition.

We would use the same strategy on Pearl street the other months of the year (June through November). Techstars has an empty building nine months of the year which we could use to host a series of executive after work experiences. Again we would play a facilitator role, and focus on the executives sharing their insights with other executives. Like our Vail executive experience, our Pearl Street executive experience would help executives break out of their silos and thereby provide some volume, diversity of thought, and a relational component to an otherwise two-dimensional, homogenous and highly task-focused entrepreneurial ecosystem.

For the first year, we would ask participants to pay what they thought was fair for the executive experience and seek to cover our costs while building up a network of returning customers. Once we got a list of loyal customers, we would then tailor the experience to be focused on a particular discussion topic (e.g. transitioning to the c-suite, how to lead leaders, diversity, humor in leadership, strategic leadership, global leadership, integrating art in the workplace, lessons from history, philosophy, the power of language, etc) or industry (e.g. entrepreneurship, healthcare, energy, utilities, entertainment). So for example, the first week of January could be global entrepreneur week, the second week of January could be gender issues in healthcare week, etc. We could tailor our topics around the vacation and work schedules of the executives.