

College Entrepreneurs Part 1: Looking for A's in making money

LeeAnn Maton

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Who might be the [Mark Zuckerberg](#) of tomorrow? Money College blogger LeeAnn Maton looks at five entrepreneurs in this two-part series on college students and their start-ups.

For college-aged entrepreneurs -- those brave students who balance boardrooms with backpacks and venture-planning with exam cramming -- the "real world" starts long before graduation day.

"Ten years ago, you didn't hear people talk about having a career as an entrepreneur," said Janet Srimaitis, managing director of the Arthur M. Blank Center for Entrepreneurship at [Babson College](#), a Massachusetts business school that's [top-ranked](#) for entrepreneurship. The first academic entrepreneurship programs began to appear in the '70s, she said, but "now it's all over the news, and particularly with the recent economic downturn, people are looking to entrepreneurs to help with the recovery."

In that spirit, Money College presents its "fearless five," a group of college start-ups (and the brains behind them) in areas ranging from fashion to environmental science to better dorm room living who are making the business world take notice. Diploma not required.



riel Bouys, AFP/Getty Images)

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Four startups, despite dyslexia



Cynthia Geraghty

If you call up 22-year-old Babson grad Chris Jacobs (left) mid-afternoon on the cell phone that he admits is "glued to his hand," he'll likely be waist-deep in business -- for his fourth entrepreneurial startup since age nine.

It all started while he was swimming at a friend's house and spotted some landscapers doing yard work nearby. He offered to undercut their price -- all he needed was a tractor. "I ran over in my bathing suit, and was like, 'Dad, I need a tractor.'" Thankfully, Jacobs said, his dad had the sense not to let a 9 year old operate heavy machinery. So, after some negotiation the two settled on leaf-blowing, a business that had become a full-blown lawn care company by the time Jacobs and his brother Sean were in high school.

As kids, "we'd start leaf-blowing for free, and then say, 'Okay, now pay us,'" We didn't really understand business ethics or marketing at the time," Jacobs said, laughing. In college, he started a direct-mail advertising business -- similar to the family business his parents owned -- and employed an "army of kids" to pass out ads for grocery stores and pizza joints on campus mailboxes. He said that when [Valpak](#), one of the nation's largest direct-mail companies, tried to woo him, he turned them down because he was making more money on his own. Still, he wanted an even bigger challenge.

Partnering with Tufts University engineering grads, Jacobs helped launch [Emergent Energy Group](#), a profitable renewable energy consulting and development company that earned the team a nod from *Businessweek* as the [top young entrepreneurs of 2009](#). But shortly before graduating this May, Jacobs got an offer he couldn't refuse -- he was offered one-third ownership of Honest Discounts, a group specializing in prescription drug savings cards that relocated from Texas to Boston just for him. Jacobs left Emergent and is enjoying his new line of work in healthcare.

But success in school didn't always come as easily, Jacobs admits. Diagnosed with severe dyslexia after he still couldn't read in third grade, "I really struggled through school," he says. "In fact, I struggled through college." It's a condition he has in common with his role model, Virgin CEO [Richard Branson](#), but Jacobs' glass-half-full attitude refuses to let his dyslexia hold him back.

"A lot of entrepreneurs who are dyslexic are really good at figuring out ways to get around problems and recruit the proper resources," he said. "We look for help all the time. And in return, we help other people because we've been helped. I think it's a huge, huge part of why I'm an entrepreneur," Jacobs said. One day, he hopes to give back by starting educational ventures to help other dyslexic students and young entrepreneurs.

And don't try to tell him his relatively young age is a negative. "For the most part," he says, "the people who consider my age as a setback or a drawback, I wouldn't want to work with them anyway. I want the people who are looking for the next best thing."

Moving in and moving up

When Jon Gaulding moved into his [Yale University](#) dorm room freshman year, he found a little more than he expected -- an extra bedroom, for starters. But Gaulding and his roommate also quickly realized they weren't prepared to furnish a shared common room they had never seen before.

"At Yale, there's really no information available about what your dorm is going to look like," Gaulding said. "You really have no idea how many couches or chairs, or what size tables, TV or rugs you can actually fit until you get there."



The result? Move-in day morphed into "mad scramble" to outfit their new digs, he said. Inspired by his own experience, Gaulding and a team of friends are creating [Moves by Design](#), an interactive website that would allow students to drag and drop standard-sized furniture into precise dorm room floor plans.

"It's very exciting to be moving to college, but at the same time it's a drastic life change," Gaulding said. "Part of the stress is not knowing where you're going to be living and what it's going to be like until you get there."

A recent graduate with a political science degree, Gaulding represents proof positive that entrepreneurship isn't limited to just the business school, and credits his liberal arts curriculum with teaching him how to "figure out what I don't know and know how to learn it." A side project for now, Gaulding hopes to launch a beta version of Moves by Design at Yale and local apartment buildings,

and grow the website into a full-fledged business complete with targeted advertising.

"It's one of those things that doesn't seem like work to me because it's very thrilling to build something I can call my own, and create something from scratch," he said. "There's a great creative element to it."

College Entrepreneurs Part 2: Looking for A's in making money

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Money College presents part two of a series on college entrepreneurs -- those brave students who balance backpacks with boardrooms (even if the boardroom is in a dorm room) while planning their first business ventures, all before flipping that graduation day tassel.

Read on to learn about two grads whose aching feet inspired a line of clever footwear, a sophomore who's lighting up high-rises with an eco-friendly business plan, and one student poised to launch a revolutionary tree-counting computer program following a chance encounter in a forestry lab. You can read part one [here](#).

Heart and sole

When Katie Shea and Susie Levitt met through a mutual friend as undergrads at New York University, they had a lot in common: They lived in the same dorm, came from entrepreneurial families and bonded over the shared dream of one day owning a business. Each standing 5-foot-2, Shea and Levitt also loved sporting stilettos to their Wall Street internships, but found that after a full day of working and socializing, their "killer heels" really killed their heels.

Their solution -- to create a foldable flat shoe paired with a collapsible tote bag -- didn't just solve their own footwear dilemma, but sparked a business that has become a full-time job for both grads, now 23. They launched CitySlips less than a month after graduating in 2009 into one of the worst job markets in decades, and say the tough economy actually gave them a boost.



Corbis

"I think it was a great time to launch a business," said Shea. "Because things were slower, we were able to negotiate really good deals [for] our website and manufacturing," and attracted customers with a reasonable price point for a two-in-one product.

One year later, more than 150 boutiques and the Home Shopping Channel carry their innovative shoes, which will expand into national retailers this fall. Even though people warned them that their age would pose a setback, Shea and Levitt say their youth has worked to their advantage, and they encourage other would-be college entrepreneurs to start early. Both agreed that low opportunity costs and university resources helped in launching CitySlips.

"Katie's mom has a great saying that naivety is directly correlated to courage," Levitt said. "When we first started we didn't know exactly what we were getting into, but I think it was a great thing because it helps us get our foot in the door. No pun intended."



photo: Dinesh Wadhvani

A light-bulb moment

For a swirly, white, energy-saving light bulb, it's actually easy being green. But what's easy may not be attractive, according to 20-year-old Babson junior Dinesh Wadhvani.

"It doesn't give you the right aesthetics. It makes it look like cheap light," said Wadhvani, who started ThinkLite with fellow Babson student Enrico Palmerino

(left). The duo's own light-bulb moment happened when they ran across an ad touting a new technology that can make custom-colored or styled, energy-efficient bulbs -- ideal for residences, restaurants, retail stores and other locations that want to be eco-friendly but don't like the generic swirly bulb's look.

The catch? Custom bulbs run up to \$25 a pop, more than most people are willing to shell out, even if the bulbs can reduce electricity costs by 80%, Wadhvani said. But the students behind ThinkLite came up with a bright idea: relying on sweet deals they cut with GE and other bulb-makers to buy in bulk for cheap, ThinkLite buys and installs custom bulbs free of charge to customers, who then repay them a fixed percentage of the money they later save on electricity.

Since landing their first customer in April, the student duo has illuminated a slew of AT&T retail stores, brightened up a factory for Kodak and is slated to do a complete lighting overhaul for a Herald Towers, a three-building high-rise residence in the heart of New York City. Thankfully, Wadhvani (right) says that their business professors are willing to work with their busy schedules.



courtesy of Dinesh Wadhvani

"Having a venture in college is the best time because all the money that we make, I have no use for it so I put it back into the business and we grow it, and it gives us the liquidity to finance more projects," he said, calling his sophomore start-up experience "priceless." "I have nothing to lose at this point."

With ThinkLite now up to nine employees, Wadhvani's plan is to grow the company until graduation, then hopefully take it on full time. "It's a great feeling of achievement," he said, and even customers feel proud when they make the eco-friendly choice. "We not only feel great that we're actually helping the environment and helping people to commit, but that we're doing it in a very easy and accessible way."

Who says money doesn't grow on trees?

At an age when most students are learning to file a financial aid application, 20-year-old Yale junior Max Uhlenhuth and his partner are filing for a provisional patent. For software that counts trees.

The idea was born when Uhlenhuth had a chance encounter with a Yale forestry grad student working to develop a computer program that uses satellite images to inventory forests. Uhlenhuth spotted the business potential and convinced him to launch a company together based on the software.

"In the U.S. alone, people are paying \$200 million dollars every year just to count trees," Uhlenhuth said, explaining that forest owners need accurate data about how many trees they have in order to value, buy and sell land, and to properly manage forests.

But counting trees has already paid off for Uhlenhuth's new venture, which recently nabbed the top prize -- and \$25,000 -- at a Yale environmental business competition. "That means we'll get to eat this summer," he joked. The company will soon launch under the name Silvia Terra, from the Latin words for "forest" and "earth," and is seeking clients among timber investors and others involved in conservation and natural resource management.

However, it isn't Uhlenhuth's first business venture. Four high schools in his hometown of Louisville, KY are still using school administration software that Uhlenhuth and some friends created while they were high-schoolers themselves. During college, he also developed an iPhone app using augmented reality to enhance college tours. And his description of his work ethic mirrors the spirit of ambition so many college entrepreneurs possess:

"I'm just running as fast as I can in whatever direction I'm going," he said. "Friday nights are not always raging fiestas, but I have a lot of fun doing what I'm doing."