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## PEOPLE

# Fostering Entrepreneurial Spirit in a City of Immigrants

By Max Lewontin    DECEMBER 01, 2014



Siulan Chin, Miami Dade College

Leandro J. Finol

One day this past summer, **Leandro J. Finol** stood on a street corner in downtown Miami, handing out Idea Center T-shirts to students at Miami Dade College.

The founding executive director of the college's new Idea Center, (<http://www.theideacenter.co/>) which helps students become entrepreneurs, says he knew he had to make a quick impression. "How much can you say in three seconds?" He described to one passer-by after another how the Idea Center would help them start their own small businesses.

"A large percentage of them said things like 'That's what I wanna do,' or 'Wow, that's amazing,'" he recalls.

The center, which opened October 28, will encourage students to work on a variety of businesses. Technology start-ups may be in the mix, but the center will be "industry agnostic," Mr. Finol says.

He will draw on his own background, having worked (<http://miamiherald.typepad.com/the-starting-gate/2014/06/26/>) for more than 15 years as an investor, business owner, and sales and marketing executive. Center programs will include the Idea Factory, to help students develop their initial ideas, and the Create business accelerator, to provide advice and money to students so they can start testing their ideas in a lab-like environment. One recent student project was an effort to develop a phone app that would let people find and reserve (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5zPHtkibws&feature=youtu.be>) parking spaces in advance.

A third program, Phase II Ventures, is modeled on the college's 10,000 Small Businesses program (<http://www.mdc.edu/10ksb/>) supported by Goldman Sachs. It is aimed at students who want to help their families expand their small businesses, like clothing and grocery stores.

A \$2.2-million grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation helps support the center and its programs.

Part of those funds will go toward developing a partnership with Babson College, near Boston, which will help faculty members and campus leaders promote an entrepreneurial spirit across the curriculum on Miami Dade's eight campuses.

Mr. Finol says he is particularly excited to be working with faculty members at Babson to bring entrepreneurial education to Miami Dade's large, diverse student body. Babson, whose undergraduate program in entrepreneurship was ranked No. 1 (<http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/business-entrepreneurship>) by *U.S. News & World Report* this year, is conducting a needs assessment for the center, he says.

Miami, known for its tourism and finance industries, is a good place to foster such innovation, he says. "We're a multicultural city in which a lot of immigrants have to be entrepreneurs to have income, and so we're a very entrepreneurial community."

His own path to entrepreneurship started in his homeland, Venezuela. Mr. Finol, who is 45, moved to the United States in 1999 after receiving a Fulbright scholarship. He earned an M.B.A. from the Thunderbird School of Global Management, in Arizona, and founded a large DirecTV dealership, with locations in several states. But, he says, he had also been interested in becoming an educator since he was 18, and that stayed with him.

In his free time, Mr. Finol began working as an adjunct professor, most recently teaching business courses at Carlos Albizu University, which is also in Miami.

"Miami is a spread-out city, and when I had to drive 45 minutes in the middle of traffic to go to my weekly class, I would ask myself, 'Why am I doing this? I don't need this.' But then driving back home I know why I was doing it, and it's because of the energy of interacting with students," he says. "It's a very powerful experience."

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