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Unlocking Student Potential Through Volunteerism: The Role of Mentorship in Strengthening Outcomes in Entrepreneurship Education

In a world where career pathways are rapidly evolving, students need more than textbooks and tests: they need mentors. Studies show that students with access to professional mentors are 55 percent more likely to enroll in college and 81 percent more likely to participate in extracurricular activities,¹ both key indicators of long-term academic and career success. In classrooms across the U.S., volunteers from the professional world are filling a critical gap by bringing real-world experience, industry insight, and career inspiration to young learners. As we celebrate National Volunteer Month this April, it's a timely reminder of the crucial role volunteers play in education and how much more we can achieve by investing in structured, skill-based volunteer opportunities that connect young people with professionals from a wide range of backgrounds.

Volunteerism and entrepreneurship are both powerful engines for economic and social progress. When brought together through service-learning programs, they become even more impactful—fostering entrepreneurial mindsets in students while reinforcing a commitment to community engagement. Importantly, these experiences don't just benefit students; they also shape volunteers, deepening their empathy, expanding their leadership skills, and renewing their sense of purpose by connecting them to the next generation in meaningful, hands-on ways.

For nearly 40 years, the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) has championed the transformative power of volunteerism in education. Often described as our “secret sauce,” volunteers serve as mentors, business plan coaches, and competition judges, contributing to the entrepreneurial journeys of students from



EY volunteers work with students during an EY Connect Day event in NFTE New England.

¹ MENTOR (n.d.). Mentoring Impact, Helping To Unlock Potential. Retrieved April 17 2025, from <https://www.mentoring.org/mentoring-impact/>

About NFTE

The Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) is a global education nonprofit that empowers partners to integrate entrepreneurial education across curricula and equips youth in under-resourced communities with the skills, connections, credentials, and real-world experiences needed to lead change and own their futures. Since 1987, NFTE has reached more than a million learners worldwide.

under-resourced communities. During the 2023–2024 school year alone, nearly 6,000 volunteers engaged with NFTE students, offering guidance and inspiration that bridges the classroom with the real world.

But it's not just about the numbers. When students see professionals who share their background, culture, or lived experiences, the impact is profound. Representation in volunteerism matters. It boosts student confidence, expands social capital, and deepens engagement.² NFTE believes that expanding access to diverse, skill-based volunteer opportunities is essential to fostering equitable and effective entrepreneurship education. To ensure every young person can benefit from these meaningful connections, we must strengthen policies that support and scale high-quality volunteer engagement at the local, state, and federal levels.

Volunteerism as a Catalyst for Impact, for Students and Professionals Alike



Christiaan van Driel

Christiaan van Driel, a UBS executive and NFTE Mid-Atlantic Regional Advisory Board member, is one of many professionals who exemplify the power of meaningful volunteerism. “I’ve always believed in giving back,” Van Driel shared. “But something about NFTE felt different. It felt personal.” Since joining as a volunteer in 2022, he has mentored more than 250 student entrepreneurs through BizCamps, Youth Entrepreneurship Summits, global pitch competitions, and classroom coaching opportunities. Many of those connections have extended beyond the program. “I’m still in touch with students from Korea and Ukraine who message me on LinkedIn to update me on their progress,” he said. “That’s the kind of long-term connection this work can create.”

Van Driel has also helped deepen UBS’s partnership with NFTE. He has mobilized more than 30 UBS employees to volunteer, hosted student visits at UBS offices, and supported board-led fundraising efforts. He describes his experience with

NFTE not just as service, but as professional growth. “You don’t just give. You grow,” he explained. The leadership, communication, and strategic planning skills he has developed through volunteering have strengthened his own career, while allowing him to contribute to the development of others.

“
You don’t just give.
You grow.”

This kind of mutual benefit is core to NFTE’s volunteer model. According to NFTE’s 2023 Volunteer Study, more than 90 percent of corporate volunteers report that their involvement has strengthened their organization’s community impact and supported students in building essential entrepreneurial skills.³ These include communication, critical thinking, creative problem solving, and financial literacy. Through project-based learning and direct mentorship, students gain real-world experience while professionals deepen their own leadership practice.

**-Christiaan van Driel, about his
volunteer experience at NFTE**

LaToya Rowell, Vice President and National Community Affairs Manager at Comerica Bank, sees this dual impact clearly in her role. As a member of NFTE’s National Board, she supports national programming and leads Comerica’s growing engagement with NFTE across several states. “Volunteering builds confidence, teaches business fundamentals, and exposes our people to the full complexity of community work,” Rowell said. “It’s a way to grow professionally while making a real difference.” She credits her own board service with expanding her

² Kekelis, Linda, & Drew, Teresa (2024). Mentoring Matters: Building Social Capital as the Bridge to Success. STEM Next Opportunity Fund. Retrieved April 17 2025, from <https://www.mentoring.org/mentoring-impact/>

³ NFTE Volunteer Study (2023). <https://nfte.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/NFTE-Volunteer-Study-2023.pdf>

understanding of organizational strategy and leadership, while also reinforcing Comerica's long-standing commitment to community engagement.

In 2024, Comerica employees contributed more than 84,000 hours of volunteer service, with NFTE programs representing a growing share of that time. Employees support pitch competitions, judge regional events hosted in Comerica offices, and participate in virtual volunteer opportunities throughout the year. "Our Credit Officer just signed on to judge a regional competition in our Frisco [Texas] office," Rowell said. "When senior leaders show up like that, it signals that this work truly matters."

Rowell also highlights the importance of representation. As a Black woman in leadership, she believes that students benefit most when they connect with mentors who reflect their lived experiences. "When students see someone who looks like them, someone who's been where they are, it changes everything," she said. "It builds trust, and it helps them imagine new possibilities for themselves."



LaToya Rowell

Volunteerism is one of the most powerful tools in NFTE's model, both for sparking student potential and developing future-minded professionals. Students gain exposure to new industries, grow their confidence, and begin to envision themselves as entrepreneurs, leaders, and changemakers. Volunteers, in turn, sharpen their own skills, build meaningful relationships, and leave with a deeper sense of purpose and connection. It is this cycle of shared growth that makes NFTE's approach to volunteerism not only impactful, but transformational.

How Patty Alper Built a Mentorship Model That Changed the Game for Volunteerism



Patty Alper

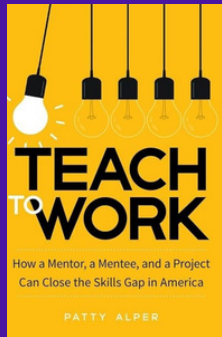
In 1998, Patty Alper began volunteering with NFTE and quickly realized that something was missing from most classroom volunteer experiences: continuity and depth. A successful entrepreneur herself, Alper had recently joined her family's foundation and was looking for a way to give back. She found that path in NFTE's mission to teach entrepreneurship to young people. But she didn't just want to support top performers—she wanted to see what was happening inside classrooms. That desire sparked a model that would go on to influence volunteer engagement across various industries and corporations. "I didn't want a one-time, show-and-tell guest speaker role," Alper explained. "I wanted to bring businesspeople into the classroom for long-term, meaningful engagement." A long-time NFTE National Board Member, Alper has channeled her passion into lasting impact within the organization and beyond.

That insight became the foundation for the Adopt-a-Class program, a mentorship initiative Alper designed to pair corporate teams with entire classrooms for a full school year. Through her model, business professionals returned multiple times to support student entrepreneurs—not just financially, but by offering concrete guidance on business plans, pitches, and strategy. It was the beginning of what Alper would eventually trademark as Project-Based Mentoring: a mentorship style centered around a tangible student project, where the mentor's expertise is directly applied to a student's entrepreneurial journey.



Patty Alper shares insights on Project-Based Mentoring during a discussion hosted by Ashoka, a global organization known for supporting social entrepreneurs and changemakers

Over the years, Alper has received thousands of letters from students describing how their mentors helped them overcome fear, gain confidence, and see new possibilities for their future. “Mentors help students move from Place A to Place B,” she said, referencing the research of Dr. Susan Harmeling, who studied the impact of entrepreneurship education on students’ mindsets. “They stop seeing success as something far away—like a celebrity—and start seeing it as something real and attainable.”



In her book *Teach to Work*, Alper outlines the methods and mindset behind this work. She argues that mentorship—when rooted in project-based learning—can help young people develop critical real-world skills, including planning, communication, problem-solving, and resilience. “The ability to plan is what sets us apart,” she emphasized. “If students can plan a business today, they can plan their future tomorrow.” Now more than 25 years into her relationship with NFTE, Alper continues to advocate for systemic change that better connects classrooms to the real world. “We need more collaboration between education and industry,” she added. “The world is moving fast, and we have to bring students along with it.”

Strengthening Volunteerism Through Policy and Practice

Volunteerism and entrepreneurship education are powerful on their own, but together, they unlock transformational experiences for students, educators, and professionals alike. To harness this potential, policymakers, school leaders, and corporate partners must take coordinated action to scale what works and remove barriers to access.

Increase access and exposure to entrepreneurship programs

Creating standardized training programs are key to helping educators and students successfully apply entrepreneurial thinking within service-learning experiences. These programs can provide a consistent framework that nurtures the skills and mindset needed to drive social impact. Through consistent and high-quality preparation, students are better equipped to identify community challenges, design innovative solutions, and develop critical skills such as adaptability, collaboration, and leadership. Many social entrepreneurs begin this journey through volunteer work, learning to combine purpose with action.

By embedding entrepreneurial education within volunteer experiences, communities can cultivate a new generation of changemakers who are equipped to tackle complex social problems with business-driven solutions. To build a robust ecosystem that supports both volunteerism and entrepreneurship, policymakers must prioritize initiatives that promote accessibility, innovation, and sustainability in these sectors.



Volunteer judges gather for a group photo at a NFTE regional competition

Incentivize Corporate and Skills-Based Volunteerism

If we want more companies to lean in and help cultivate the next generation of entrepreneurs, we need to make it easier and more rewarding for them to do so. One proven way to increase corporate engagement is by incentivizing skills-based volunteerism, where professionals use their expertise to coach, mentor, and guide students through real-world business challenges. Policymakers can support legislation that offers tax benefits to companies that implement skills-based volunteer programs aligned with entrepreneurship education. In

Tennessee, for example, a recent pilot allowed companies to receive a modest state tax credit for employees who completed 20 hours of youth mentorship. A similar model at the federal level could encourage more firms to invest time and talent in future entrepreneurs.

Recognition also matters. Establishing public awards or state-level “Entrepreneurship Champions” honors for businesses that engage deeply in mentorship and education could elevate volunteerism as a cultural norm. Patty Alper, NFTE board member and longtime advocate, suggests a “year of service” policy for corporate America—where companies commit to youth-focused volunteerism as part of their broader business strategy. “We need to create a framework where giving back is expected, celebrated, and incentivized,” she said.



Volunteer judges pose together at a NFTE regional competition

Foster Inclusive Volunteerism and Entrepreneurship

Just as important as expanding volunteerism is ensuring that every student—regardless of race, income, or background—has meaningful access to these opportunities. Volunteer engagement and entrepreneurship education shouldn’t be limited to those with built-in support systems. They are powerful tools for cultivating confidence, sparking ambition, and preparing young people to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Supporting broader participation means identifying and removing common barriers. This could include offering stipends for students, covering transportation costs, providing business startup funds, or creating flexible ways for young people to engage. Schools and nonprofits can lead the way by creating supportive environments and mentorship programs that empower first-generation students to envision and pursue new possibilities. When young people are paired with mentors who have navigated similar paths and found success, it sends a lasting message: you belong here, and you can succeed.

Conclusion

NFTE’s integrated model—rooted in supporting corporate and skills-based volunteerism, fostering inclusive engagement, and delivering standardized, high-impact programming—proves that volunteerism is not just an act of service, but a transformative engine for student achievement and entrepreneurial growth. When thoughtfully aligned with education policy and community investment, volunteer experiences become launchpads for innovation, leadership, and social change. Backed by robust data and lived outcomes, NFTE offers a clear and scalable model for policymakers, educators, and business leaders alike. NFTE offers a powerful blueprint for how schools, businesses, and policymakers can work together to build an ecosystem where young people gain the tools to tackle real challenges—and where volunteers leave just as inspired as the students they support.

4 Tennessee Department of Labor and Workplace Development (n.d.). Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC). Retrieved April 17 2025, from <https://www.mentoring.org/mentoring-impact/>

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