

An Interview of SAGE Founder, Dr. Curt DeBerg



1. Why did you decide to start SAGE?

When I was the faculty adviser for a collegiate student group known as Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) from 1993-2005, I saw that students became extraordinarily motivated and enthused when they were empowered to identify, lead, operate, and assess real-life outreach projects that they chose. By giving university students the chance to create their own learning opportunities, I saw how we could accomplish similar results at the high school level.

SAGE targets high school students, rather than university students, for several reasons:

1. If we truly want inspire the next generation to be committed to community causes as well as activities for their personal gain only, then we need an education model that integrates social enterprise, environmental awareness and civic engagement with "regular" education.
2. By targeting high school students, we focus on students who haven't yet been given a "ticket to success" by having the good fortune to be enrolled at a university.
3. Most high school students are not yet set in their ways politically, socially, culturally and religiously; in other words, they are still idealistic enough to believe that they can make an impact at an individual level.
4. High school students represent a much larger "unserved market" than university students.
5. Corporate sponsors and private foundations are much more likely to support K-12 education than they are universities.

My decision to start SAGE has been the most rewarding thing I've ever done as a professional educator.

2. What were your costs when starting up SAGE? Any opportunity costs?

Initially, back in 2002 and 2003, I personally funded many of our costs, including making up for any deficits by hosting SAGE tournaments and sending university students to the high schools to mentor their younger peers. Opportunity costs include the money I could earn by doing consulting projects rather than SAGE.

There were also some political costs, because some administrators at our university do not believe in service-learning or civic engagement. Instead, they believe faculty should spend their spare time conducting empirical research for publication in academic journals.

But now that we have proven that SAGE is a winner, we have support from many private foundations, businesses and individuals. Some of our most supportive partners are Umpqua Bank, Wells Fargo Bank Foundation, the Grossman family from Chico (founders of Sierra Nevada Brewing Company), the Louis and Harold Price Foundation, the Elkes Foundation, Mr. Ed Byers of Deloitte, Enterprise Rent a Car, and the Earl Foor Foundation.

3. Who are your "customers" and how do they benefit from your "product"?

Our main two customers are teenagers and university students.

High school students (and middle school students) learn where they fit in the bigger picture by actually creating and leading real projects. And then, by competing against other high school students, they learn the joy of victory and also the “agony” of defeat. Once they've been through SAGE, high school students believe they can do anything! As for university students they learn how to become consultants and coaches for high school students. They learn a valuable set of concepts and skills at the university, and through SAGE they can reinforce this knowledge, and help younger students at the same time.

Furthermore, by planning the logistics of SAGE Tournaments, they also learn how to plan and deliver premiere events on a local, national and global scale. In doing this, they are applying teamwork, project management and communication skills.

4. How do you "sell" SAGE to others? How do you get them to believe in your product?

I let them know what our mission is: to help high school students learn about business and social entrepreneurship by doing real projects under the direction of university mentors. They also learn about the environment, civic engagement and global matters. And if they do really well at the SAGE tournaments, we offer them travel opportunities to exciting destinations, like China, Ukraine, Nigeria, Brazil, South Africa, Russia, Korea, and the Philippines! Who wouldn't want to be a part of SAGE? SAGE is worldwide network of teenage entrepreneurs (and their advocates) sharing a common purpose: to make the world a better place.

5. What were your biggest challenges when founding SAGE? How did you overcome them?

The biggest challenge was to find the “right” teacher at a high school, and to pair them with the “right” team of university mentors. I overcame this challenge by pushing the concept of “service-learning” at the university level and “social enterprise” at the high school level.

The second biggest challenge was to find partners who would finance our growth. These partners have been vital in helping us defray our operating costs. Once someone joins the SAGE network, they rarely leave. In fact, many organizations have increased their support over time.

A third challenge has been to create the right infrastructure to accommodate growth in California, the USA, and internationally. We are now in 20 high schools in CA, in seven more states and active in a total of 22 countries.

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Fortunately, former Chico State SAGE alums, like Rob Best, Carol Furtado, Liz Wendorf and Sarah McComish and others, have stepped up to help take SAGE to the next level. We are now an official charitable corporation in the state of CA, and we have 501 c 3 tax exempt status. This should help us get the funding to take SAGE to the level that I dream it to be, which is to be in all 193 member-states of the United Nations by 2025.

6. What have been your greatest triumphs?

The highlight each year is the SAGE World Cup, where I see a rainbow of young faces coming together for a shared purpose: to make the world better.

Also, many university students, after graduating, have told me how much SAGE has impacted their lives. In fact, in the last month, I have attended two weddings of former SAGE students from Chico State. So, I guess my greatest triumph is to see the “output” of SAGE in the faces of those who participate, and in the continuing, life-long relationships that I have developed as a result.

7. How do you evaluate the people that your work with? How do you know who will be dependable?

Not everyone is a born leader, but everyone in SAGE is given a chance to lead. When they accept a leadership challenge and deliver, then I know that this student is EXECUTIVE material. I evaluate students by their commitment to the cause. This commitment is shown by their regular attendance at weekly meetings, their visits to high schools, and their contributions to organizing and delivering successful SAGE tournaments. If a student never accepts a leadership opportunity, or if they accept and fail to deliver, then I know how much I can challenge them in the future! And while I depend on the leaders to lead, I am grateful to others who contribute what they can, but not in a leadership capacity.



Above: Curt DeBerg with future SAGE students from Ushafa Village, Nigeria.

8. What advice would you give someone who wants to start their own business?

1. Research the competition thoroughly;
2. Don't fall TOO much in love with your idea—there's a good chance someone else has already done it better;
3. Recognize that your original idea may not turn out to be the successful one, but without the original idea, you would never have found the one that hits!
4. Harness the Internet and social networking sites to your advantage (with the right technology tools, the work of 10 people can now be done by one innovative thinker!);
5. Recognize when “good enough” is better than “perfect.”

6. Peter Drucker, one of the 20th century's leading management thinkers, said "that every social and global issue of our time is a business opportunity in disguise." Opportunities abound in virtually every area of industry!

9. What are your goals for SAGE in the next five or six years?

I would like SAGE to be up and running in 40 countries by 2018 and 80 countries by 2020. The chairman of SAGEGLOBAL's board, Mr. Ed Byers, will tell me that this is probably too ambitious. He may be right, but I look at it like this. We started with four countries in 2003, and now we're up to 22. If we double two more times, that puts us at 44 and then to 88! In 2020 I would also like to see our World Cup event take place in New York City, at the United Nations. There are 193 nation-states belonging to the UN, and a reasonable goal is to get half of these countries on board. For us to do this, though, we will need a major supporter, like the Gates Foundation or the Soros Foundation, to share our vision. Or maybe even someone like Sir Richard Branson.

10. Give three words that best represent SAGE to you.

Power to Youth (It's their future!). Sorry, that's six words.