

**Interview: Carter Crockett**

Dr. Carter Crockett, the Director of the new Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership at Gordon College, is a practitioner at heart who prefers to lead by example. As a marketer among technology companies in Seattle, he worked with some of the most innovative organizations and products in the world. Crockett left Microsoft to serve as co-founder of Dealer Trade Group, a wholesale (B2B) online marketplace for trading vehicles. More recently, he was co-founder of Karisimbi Business Partners, working to build up promising businesses in the African nation of Rwanda, while establishing a new, high-impact model for socially motivated consulting.

Crockett was drawn to scholarly pursuits by growing concerns for the social and moral impact of entrepreneurial endeavours. He earned a Ph.D. in Entrepreneurial Ethics in 2005 and has taught entrepreneurs on three continents: at Robert Gordon University (Scotland), Westmont College (USA), and Carnegie Mellon University (Rwanda). His practical experience has informed his teaching and publications in the areas of social entrepreneurship and business ethics.

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David W. Gill: Tell us about Gordon College's new Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership: why was it started and what made you decide to come here as its first director?

Carter Crockett: Gordon College decided to start a new center for entrepreneurial leadership about a year and a half ago. That was a remarkable step because liberal arts colleges generally haven't engaged in or embraced entrepreneurship --- or business in general for that matter. Liberal arts folk are skeptical that too much greed and competition will be involved and so we shouldn't do that in a place like Gordon. But our president Michael Lindsay saw this as an important way to bring innovation to the entire campus including refreshing the way Christian liberal arts are pursued. And he's not the only college president that's seen this. Nathan Hatch of Wake Forest University has created a twenty-five member faculty to teach innovation and entrepreneurship across every academic major.

Gill: So do you teach courses? Put on workshops? What do you do?

Crockett: Our center's been known initially for co-curricular initiatives. Many folks on our campus didn't know what the word "entrepreneurship" really meant even a year ago. Faculty didn't quite know what it was going to look like in practice. Last week we had a social venture challenge that made our work more

visible. Students didn't get credit for participating in the social venture challenge. They had an idea for a non-profit or business they wanted to launch. Then they put in about five months of work to prepare it, do the research, and then pitch the idea in front of outside judges in order to earn the grant or investment money to actually get started.

Gill: Do you teach the nuts and bolts of creating a business plan? Marketing, finance, social media, all that sort of stuff?

Crockett: I have but not in a formal curricular sense. We've been doing a series of workshops bringing in experts in various fields like financial planning, presentation skills, branding and positioning products and services. We've done Saturday workshops, we've had one-on-one meetings with the teams, and we've found mentors to support each of the teams. There were 32 teams initially in the program, representing some twenty different academic majors. In the end, we had eight finalists, three of whom became award winners.

Gill: Will those who didn't get picked pursue their ideas even though they didn't get the funding?

Crockett: Some will, for sure. One of them created a skateboard wheel that they believe will help skateboarders expand off the concrete into the some of the environments that we have around here in New England. They've got a wheel they think works for the way skateboarding culture could develop in this part of the world. They're not going to give up on their idea just because they didn't win our prize. They actually won a competition at Salem State so now they have some start-up money.

Gill: What is your own story? How did you become an entrepreneur and develop this passion?

Crockett: I'm from California. I went to Westmont College – a very similar school to Gordon – and majored in business and economics. About six years after I graduated from Westmont I realized that I had this entrepreneurial bug. Marketing was the part of business that I gravitated towards most. After working in a large corporate environment at Microsoft for four years I realized that I really liked the new and the small, the risky, innovative side of business. So I left Microsoft and started an E-Bay-type auction for car dealers to trade inventory. I did that for two years and found it to be a lot more exciting than any of the things my business professors suggested were possible in business. So I decided I should go back and become a professor. I did a PhD in entrepreneurial ethics in Aberdeen, Scotland, and then went back to teach at my alma mater Westmont College. But then I got the itch to start something again. And that's what took me to Rwanda with two of my best friends to start a management consulting firm to help develop companies on which an entire country was depending. I spent four years in Rwanda with our firm called Karasimbi Business Partners. And then I came here to Gordon.

Gill: In the Rwandan context, what kinds of businesses were you working with? Were there a lot of startups? Or was it more nurturing existing firms?

Crockett: Consulting in the USA often requires specialization by function or industry. But in Rwanda we provided management advice in every sector and every type of management. It was more nurturing existing businesses. Initially we worked only with those who had at least thirty employees and had been around a couple years. But we realized after a couple years that it might be less risky to start from scratch than to try to turn around these organizations that had some critical flaws, so we also created a few of our own operating companies.

Gill: Much can be learned from the best practices of American and European business but did you learn anything in the other direction? Is there a contribution from Rwanda or Africa that could help companies in the West?

Crockett: Oh definitely. I feel like I learned a tremendous amount from the Rwandans. Resiliency for one: their ability to survive and get back up after having a setback just amazed me. Also flexibility: the average day in Rwanda required lots of meetings. Nothing happened by email and phone, it was all over coffee and tea, cafes and hotels. In fact, we didn't have an office the first three years. Of the eight meetings I'd schedule in a day, only about four would happen, and then about five additional ones would be impromptu added to the calendar and sometimes those were the most valuable of them all. So it just changes this dynamic that my plan is my own and that my schedule is my own. Those of us with Type A inclinations were just amazed at how the ability to be extremely flexible and roll with things really gets you a long way. A third lesson is the thirst of knowledge and learning. The clients we were working with were so hungry for new ideas. It was rewarding to work with them every day.

Gill: The Christian church has a missionary mandate to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ around the world. If there has been one associated activity really highlighted it has been health care. Almost all the great missionaries, Hudson Taylor, David Livingstone, William Carey, and others, either got medical training or took doctors and nurses with them. But today maybe the best thing to do is to go out and help people start businesses and find jobs. Is that part of the front-edge of how the church can be present, especially in a religiously conflicted world? Isn't the kind of thing you were doing in Rwanda the front-edge of the Christian mission rather than the tail-end?

Crockett: I can't speak for all of Africa but in Rwanda they rolled out a red carpet for us because we were business-minded people in a way that no NGO or no traditional missionary could be. Part of that is because the Rwandan leaders see a "donor mentality" set in among their people --- waiting for the next handout. So the Rwandan leaders are actually trying to get all the non-profits, NGOs, and missionaries who are not from Rwanda to gradually leave the country. At the same time, the government is actively recruiting folks that can build the management capacity of the business people there. So it's an interesting time to be there. This is a country that is predominantly Christian: 90% profess some Christian faith. They'll tell the church-planters, you're not welcome here unless you are creating jobs or doing something that adds to the progress of our vision for growth in the country. A missionary friend of mine came as a church-planter to Rwanda and yet because of the pressure he was getting to produce something, he created cook stoves. He also had a black-belt in tae kwon do so he started mentoring ten men in his tae kwon do class in what it was to follow Christ. He then became the coach of the tae kwon do Olympic team in Rwanda and a member of the Rwandan Olympic committee --- all because he left the title of "church planter" behind and took whatever he had to offer and started to invest individually in people. So he still feels like he's living out his calling, his mission. His supporters back in the States are happy with what's going on even though it doesn't look like traditional church planting.

Gill: Can anyone and everyone be an entrepreneur? Does everybody have to be prepared to entrepreneur in some sense or is that overstating it? Are there some people who just want a good job as a member of a team and they don't actually want to launch or lead?

Crockett: Thinking and seeing things differently, and having the boldness to chase new visions, that's definitely something I feel like everybody could have. But I don't think everybody is meant to be the founder of a new organization. Thank God for the accountant and for other colleagues who are better at maintaining than starting; otherwise, the entrepreneurs would start a lot of things that would fail.

Gill: God is not just the Creator but the Sustainer. So some of us may have more of a calling to be creators and others sustainers. On another topic: you did your PhD on ethics and entrepreneurship. What are the ethical aspects or challenges in entrepreneurship?

Crockett: An entrepreneur has an unmatched opportunity to set the values and purpose of your organization. The moral mandate you have as a founder is greater than any other leader that organization will ever have. Well begun is half done! The foundation that you build in the earliest days of any organization is critical to what will follow. The best habits are started from the very beginning and so to invite Christian values into that discussion at that initial stage is profound.

Gill: Are there some entrepreneurial business opportunities Christians should avoid and others they should gravitate toward?

Crockett: Some industries and sectors run contrary to the core beliefs that we hold. Christians might be tempted to get into some things that are lucrative but should be avoided. And some opportunities Christians should be thrilled to pursue even if someone without a faith lens might not see it.

Gill: As a long-time business ethics guy, I'm not so sure there's a whole lot of difference between for-profit and non-profit (or social) enterprise. In the non-profit sector, you still have to be concerned about funding and ROI. You're not getting people to invest for financial return but they're investing in "meaning" with their donations. And on the other side a "built-to-last" for-profit must have a product or service mission, not just a "take your money" one. Obviously there is some difference but I tend to see it as less than is often thought. How do you look at this distinction?

Crockett: I find that traditional distinction to be increasingly outdated thinking. When I was in school, those involved in social work didn't interact with those involved in business. That's not the case anymore. There's a blending going on that I think is quite healthy. I would predict that ten years from now we're going to care a whole lot less about the institutional structure somebody chooses at the outset of their venture (non-profit or for-profit); there are already a lot of hybrids that exist. Ten years from now, the word "social entrepreneurship" could be obsolete because every entrepreneurial venture has a social component to it and, at that point, you don't need the label anymore. If there's really this blending going on, then social entrepreneurship is only a necessary term when there's an important subset you're trying to separate from the rest. In places like Rwanda, I can't find a single entrepreneur that is not actually trying to do something for the social good of their country, of their village, of their family.

Gill: Is there a role for the local parish church in promoting entrepreneurship?

Crockett: There are some churches even in this area who commission entrepreneurs the same way they would commission a pastor to go into the mission field. I think that when a church does that type of thing, it makes it easier for others in the congregation to see that every member's a minister. That helps break down the false dichotomies that exist between the secular and sacred.