Beyond the Classroom: Ole Miss Students Turn Side Hustles Into Real Businesses

By Avery Milward

While many college students spend weeknights studying or relaxing with friends, some University of Mississippi students are running businesses of their own. Between classes, deadlines and campus activities, student entrepreneurs across Ole Miss are editing videos, preparing DJ sets and fulfilling custom art orders, transforming creative passions into growing professional ventures before graduation.

At the University of Mississippi, entrepreneurship is no longer something students wait to pursue after graduation. Instead, many are building businesses while still enrolled full time, turning creative passions into growing professional ventures.

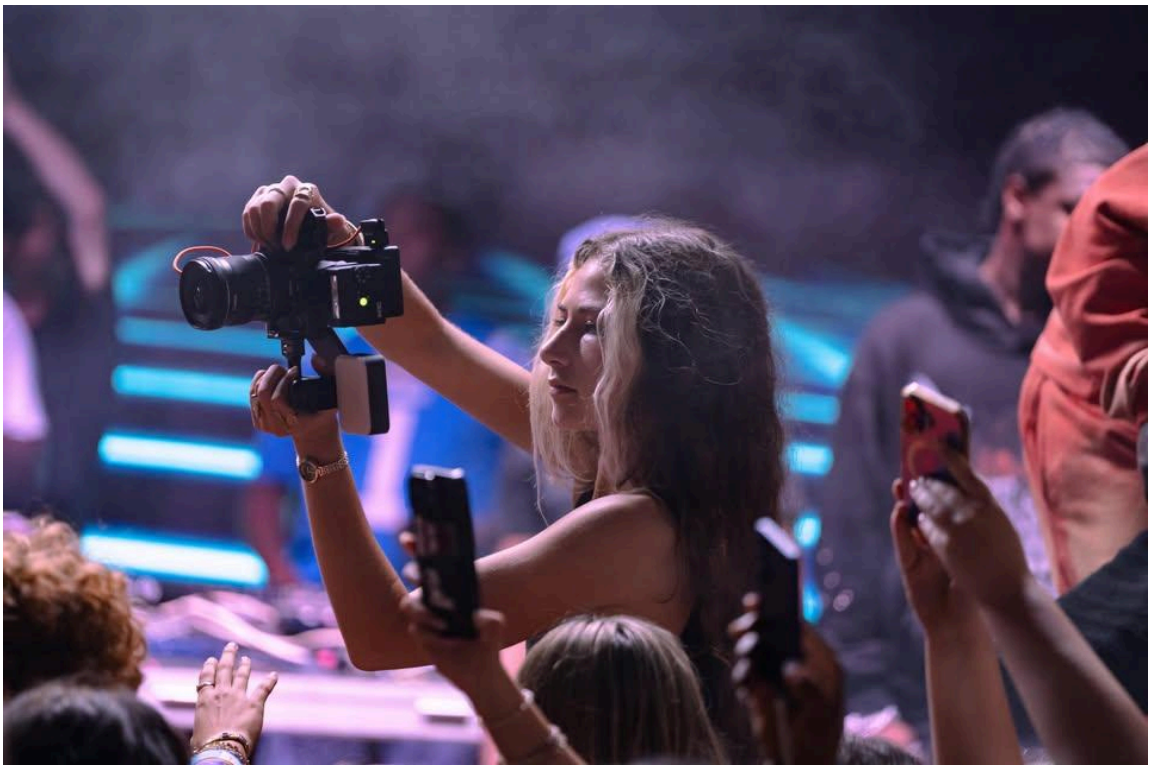
From videography and music production to commissioned artwork, student entrepreneurs are learning to navigate deadlines, clients and branding, all while managing exams and college life.

Turning hobbies into businesses

For Lilly Ross, a senior from Madison, Mississippi, the idea for her videography forward marketing agency, ParthenonPro, began years before college. After participating in a film academy during high school, people began asking her for headshots and eventually larger video projects.

“I initially started my business because there were brands without the knowledge or desire to handle videography in-house,” she said.

What began as small creative projects has since evolved into a structured business known for its three-day maximum turnaround time. Over the past year alone, Lilly said her company covered more than 140 events.



Courtesy of Lilly Ross

Similarly, Peyton Plumlee, a DJ and music producer who performs under the name PPLUM, discovered her business through a love of music rather than a formal plan.

“It honestly started from just loving music,” she said. “At first, I was just experimenting and learning for fun. But once I saw how people reacted when I played for them, I realized it might be something I could actually pursue.”

The turning point came when she received her first paid booking.

“It wasn’t even about the money — it was about someone seeing value in what I was doing,” she said. “That’s when it felt real.”

Lawler Carpenter, a junior from Dallas, Texas, had a similar realization. Her commissioned art business, Designs by Lawler, began with drawing posters for classmates in high school.

“When one of my friend’s older siblings told me I could definitely make money off of it, that’s when I realized it could be more than just a hobby,” she said.

Today, her work includes custom painted banners and graphic design projects for clients across the country.

Balancing two lives

Running a business while enrolled full time presents challenges that extend beyond simple time management.

Lilly described the experience as living “two different lives.”

“Clients are expecting someone who is working full time, and professors expect someone who is a student full time,” she said. “You have to be careful how you blend those aspects.”

Her solution relies heavily on organization. With 18 class hours and extracurricular commitments, she keeps a strict workflow and schedule to maintain both speed and quality.

Peyton faces similar challenges, often performing late night shows before early morning classes.

“Classes during the day, homework in between, and then producing music or prepping sets at night,” she said. “If I have a show, it usually means a late night and then waking up early for class the next morning.”

Avoiding burnout, she said, has been one of the hardest parts.

“There are weeks where everything overlaps — exams, gigs, deadlines,” she said. “You have to stay organized and disciplined or it can get overwhelming fast.”

For Lawler, balancing responsibilities often means structuring her week around both academic and creative deadlines.

“Most of my weeks look like Monday painting, Tuesday school and graphic design projects, Wednesday paint and graphic design projects,” she said. “The hardest part is working around exam schedules.”

Their shared major, Integrated Marketing Communications, emphasizes branding, digital media and audience strategy, allowing them to test classroom concepts through real clients and creative work.

The Ole Miss advantage

All three students credit the Ole Miss community with helping their businesses grow.

Lilly said campus connections opened doors to mentorship opportunities and business competitions, allowing her to pitch her company in cities such as Atlanta and New Orleans. The university’s Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship helped connect her with mentors who guided her through business development.

“The Ole Miss community has connected me with so many amazing people and groups,” she said.

For Peyton, Ole Miss’ strong social culture directly fuels her work as a DJ.

“If you do a good job at one event, people talk, and that leads to more bookings,” she said. “Football weekends, formals and big party weekends directly impact bookings.”

Campus nightlife also shapes her creative decisions, influencing the type of music she prepares and performs.

Lawler has seen her customer base expand significantly since arriving in Oxford.

“It has expanded my customer base from just Texas customers to customers from so many different states,” she said. “It’s allowed me to play around with new ideas and develop more skills.”

Game days also influence her workflow, as demand often increases during the fall semester.

“I definitely plan my work around the football schedule,” she said.

Courtesy of Lawler Carpenter

Lessons learned outside the classroom

While each student is pursuing a college degree, many of the most valuable lessons have come through real-world experience rather than coursework.

Through trial and error, Lilly said she has developed an understanding of marketing strategies and social media performance, even training interns within her company.

“I know what works on socials as well as what doesn’t and why,” she said.

Peyton emphasized the importance of branding and networking skills she learned independently.

“I’ve learned branding, negotiation, content strategy and how to read an audience,” she said. “Social media especially has taught me how important consistency and authenticity are.”

Lawler said her business has strengthened her communication skills through working directly with clients.

“I’ve learned how to communicate well with real-life customers,” she said.

Mistakes, she added, often become learning opportunities. Misspelling a name on a banner once reminded her to slow down and triple-check every detail.

Looking toward the future

Although their businesses began as side projects, each student now sees entrepreneurship as shaping future career paths.

Lilly hopes to expand ParthenonPro into a larger operation with office space and interns learning alongside her.

“Seeing my interns with the same passion and hunger for knowledge that I had has recently been the highlight of my job,” she said.

Peyton aims to grow beyond the campus scene by playing larger shows and releasing original music.

“I want PPLUM to feel established and recognizable,” she said.

Lawler envisions a creative career, even if her business evolves over time.

“It has made me realize that I have a lot more potential than I think I do,” she said.

Courtesy of Peyton Plumlee

A growing entrepreneurial culture

As college students face rising costs and competitive job markets, side businesses are increasingly becoming pathways for both income and professional identity. At Ole Miss, a campus known for strong community connections and social culture, those opportunities can spread quickly through word of mouth and shared experiences.

For these student entrepreneurs, success is not defined solely by profit, but by growth, both personal and professional.

Lilly summarized the mindset that keeps her moving forward with simple advice: “Fail fast. Failure is a stepping stone to success.”

And for students considering starting something of their own, Peyton offered encouragement rooted in experience.

“Start before you feel ready,” she said. “You’ll figure it out along the way.”