



Social Entrepreneurship in the Liberal Arts

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This winter-term, twenty-one students and I have learned a lot about social entrepreneurship. First, the idea is not new. For three decades, leading champions of social change have promoted social entrepreneurship. Bill Drayton founded the Ashoka Foundation (1981) to support innovators worldwide; Jeff Skoll – Ebay’s first president – created his foundation (1999) to promote “a sustainable world of peace and prosperity.” Yet while social entrepreneurship is in some ways ‘old news,’ it seems to be everywhere these days. The White House already has an Office of Social Innovation; rumor has it that President Obama will commit more resources to promoting social entrepreneurship in his State of the Union address next week. Stay tuned!

The concept’s ubiquity right now is both good and bad. Good because it’s a sign that leaders who are taking on the toughest 21st-century challenges – poverty, climate change, and the lack of human rights – have found an approach that works. Bad because like many popular terms, it can mean too many things to too many people. (A critique that was also true of social capital when President Clinton embraced that concept in the 1990s.) In academic communities, we demand clarity and rigor. Is there a clear, rigorous way to define social entrepreneurship?

In our class, we’ve adopted Roger Martin and Sally Osberg’s definition from their 2007 article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Social entrepreneurship occurs when individuals identify an unjust equilibrium – say a poverty trap – and lead a creative pro-

cess whose goal is the establishment of a more just equilibrium. The definition echoes Joseph Schumpeter, the great economic historian: social entrepreneurs lead ‘creative gales of destruction’ designed to build a better world.

Yet admittedly, definitions of social entrepreneurship abound. Furthermore, too many are mushy. For some academics, this – and the term’s ubiquity – may cause alarm. It turns out, though, that social entrepreneurship has good company. Plenty of grand modern ideas – culture, governance, and markets come to mind – have scores of sloppy definitions. Needless to say, this hasn’t stopped academics from placing such ideas in the front-and-center of student inquiry.

But for those who suspect that social entrepreneurship is no more than a fad, another alarm may go off: is this really an idea that matters? In the last few years, leaders at top universities have concluded that it is. Oxford, Duke, Stanford and NYU (just to name a few) have recently established centers and programs for social entrepreneurship, which are helping scholars, students and staff to integrate social entrepreneurship into core curricular and co-curricular activities. The outcomes of such programs often inspire. For example, after engaging in Harvard’s Social Enterprise Initiative while earning her MBA, Abigail Falik started Global Citizen Year, a nonprofit which is building a movement of diverse high school graduates who spend a pre-college “bridge year” in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

But research-oriented universities with prom-

inent business schools are one thing. Academics in at liberal arts institutions may still argue that social entrepreneurship is an idea that doesn't belong. It's an argument that's not hard to make. The liberal arts are designed to stand slightly apart, to allow students to dig deep into ideas as ideas, with no regard for their practicality. Furthermore, a professor's argument might continue, the great goals of the liberal arts – to help students learn how to reflect, to write, and to analyze as they prepare to lead a life of meaning – may well produce social entrepreneurs in the long run; it's up to our colleagues in MA and MBA programs to teach our alums the necessary practical skills to get there. In a nutshell, let's keep social entrepreneurship out of the liberal arts.

I'd agree with this case – if the teaching of social entrepreneurship were viewed as nothing more than providing students with practical tools. This month, I've concluded that the most persuasive case for teaching social entrepreneurship in the liberal arts is quite different.

It begins with an observation about being a liberal-arts teacher in the 21st century. What we do when we are at our best is to give students the time and space to reflect on their own agency in a complex world. Every student on a liberal-arts campus, echoing Yale's Anthony Kronman, should confront, wrestle with, and ultimately celebrate that most fundamental question: "What is living for?" For example, when my own economics and environmental studies classes really succeed, it's because the course material and the learning process have allowed students to stumble, to sometimes really falter, but in the end to confidently stand up and say: "In this class, I've learned a little more about the world and my role in it." I'm guessing that that my colleagues in Physics, Philosophy, Portuguese – you name the department – feel the same way.

But the truth is, we don't always do this as well as we should. Here's where social entrepreneurship can come in. To carefully teach students about leading creative, even destructive processes whose goal is a better world, we must begin with the students themselves. To paraphrase the great organizer Marshall Ganz, we must help students to ask: "What is my story of self? What is the story of us? What is our story of now?" Put another way, we must ask students to first reflect – and only after to connect.

What I like most about this perspective is that it takes us back to Kronman's question: "What is living for?" And to begin to answer that question well (has anyone really figured it out?), a student needs to explore the breadth of the humanities – in many ways the core of the liberal arts. If it were up to me, the teaching of social entrepreneurship would start with the great lessons from philosophy, religion and theories of political science.

Social entrepreneurs are already all around us at Middlebury. Think of the Davis Peace Scholars, graduates of MiddCORE, and the many young leaders aided by the Project on Creativity and Innovation in the Liberal Arts. Like Moliere's Monsieur Jourdain, who was delighted to discover that he'd been speaking prose for years, we've been in the business of social entrepreneurship for some time now! If we decide to commit to do more, we must begin with the core ideals of the liberal arts. The final words of the college's mission statement are: "Students who come to Middlebury learn to engage the world." The key to achieving this mission is to help students to engage themselves in a reflective, guided process of inquiry. Only then can they go on to be world changers.

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