

# Defining Social Entrepreneurship

by Dianne H.B. Welsh and Norris Krueger

While social entrepreneurship is growing more popular on college campuses, the field is so diverse and taught by such a wide mix of professors that it's difficult to determine what it is or how it's being taught. Although most people could agree on a definition of an "entrepreneurial mindset," it is much more difficult to define "a social entrepreneurial mindset." But if SE is going to grow and evolve, it's important for the field to develop a strong personality and an identifiable set of traits.

With that in mind, in 2007 the faculty team of Dianne Welsh, Norris Krueger, Debbie Brock, and Susan Steiner conducted a survey to discover how SE is being taught in schools right now. To provide some parameters to the programs we studied, we used J.G. Dees' definition of a social entrepreneur: a change agent in the social sector who adopts a mission to create and sustain social value, who engages in continuous innovation, and who exhibits a higher accountability both to constituents and outcomes.

After sending surveys to 269 faculty and receiving 145 responses, our team analyzed content in nearly 300 social entrepreneurship syllabi from around the world. We found that most courses are project-based—that is, instructors typically require students either to engage the community through real-world projects or design viable ventures of their own. In addition, most courses place very little emphasis on innovation or ethics, unless they include a heavy dose of sustainability.

What we found most compelling about the survey results is the wide range of approaches faculty are taking to teaching social entrepreneurship. In this evolving field, what is taught and how it is taught can be highly idiosyncratic. For instance, faculty with no entrepreneurship training are significantly less likely to use the experiential pedagogies that entrepreneurship-trained faculty take for granted. Instructors who view social entrepreneurs as social activists who happen to have business ventures will teach their courses much differently than instructors who see such individuals as social entrepreneurs.

## Still Evolving

That difference in perception may well be behind the identity crisis that seems to divide the field of social entrepreneurship.



A passionate 42 percent of our respondents believe that SE should, in fact, be its own field. They argue that it possesses a unique set of characteristics and research agendas that cut across sociology, public policy, social work, urban and community development, education, and business.

However, 58 percent believe SE should be taught as part of their schools' general entrepreneurship programs. Entrepreneurship is still trying to establish itself as a field, they point out, so separating the two disciplines would dilute both.

This difference of viewpoint is only one obstacle facing SE. According to the survey, the biggest barrier to social entrepreneurship being taken seriously as an academic field is the schism between SE faculty and professors in other fields.

Survey respondents noted other barriers, including lack of acceptance, lack of publication outlets, lack of common language as a discipline, lack of critical faculty, no clear academic home, and no clear-cut research focus. Respondents also believe that there's little demand for graduates except



from nonprofits, and that some students aren't interested in the field if there's no clear profit motive.

We believe this pessimism by faculty flies in the face of demonstrable student passion for sustainable business ventures. The diversity of instructor backgrounds means that many have little exposure to entrepreneurship—or even business. In these cases, they might not fully understand student dynamics. For instance, at a recent conference sponsored by the National Collegiate Inventors and Innovators Alliance, representatives from one prominent school claimed that few of their students had signed up for their SE class—yet three of the school's students were already working in the field at a national level. For those accustomed to the ivory tower, entrepreneurial students can be *terra incognita*.

We believe that two things will have to happen before SE matures into its own discipline. First, as the survey indicates, educators need to develop a set of common best practices and determine what content and methods are most productive. Second, because the survey hints that an instructor's mental models can influence

student attitudes, we need to develop a "social entrepreneurial mindset" for the business curriculum.

### A Case Study

We believe that cross-campus initiatives will shape the future of SE education, and we have seen such initiatives implemented at our own University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The university's Social Entrepreneurship Committee is composed of faculty, staff, and students from disciplines as diverse as political science, public health, and women's studies.

At UNC-Greensboro, SE classes are also interdisciplinary, offered through the Bryan School of Business and Economics, the College of Arts and Sciences, and other colleges. Courses include a seminar in Social Entrepreneurship and Leadership, a class on Social Entrepreneurship and the Feminist Praxis, and a class on Justice and a Green Environment. Courses are taught by professors in business administration, women and gender studies, communications, and social work.


Susan Andreatta, an associate professor in the department of anthropology, has been heavily involved in SE initiatives since 2001, when she began running a program called Project Green Leaf. With this project, she educates students about environmental stewardship and economic sustainability in North Carolina's farming and fishing cultures.

For instance, she has helped small-scale farmers establish Community Supported Agricultural arrangements (CSAs), which allow consumers to prepay farmers for shares of the harvest they will receive when produce is ready. By pre-selling their harvest, farmers earn an income during the winter, which allows them to pay for repairs and buy seeds without going into debt. Consumers share the risk and benefits of farming, while ensuring their preferred food supplier survives financially.

Because Andreatta has successfully obtained external support for this and other projects over the past eight years, she is able to fund students to assist her with data collection, entry, and analysis. Students not only get real-world experience working at farms and farmer's markets, but they get first-hand experience in conducting applied research. Several of Andreatta's students have gone on to accept positions in nonprofit organizations.

### A Growing Field

We have found that schools that want to become leaders in the field can bring coherence to the SE model they use on their campuses in two significant ways. First, they can focus on "sustainable entrepreneurship," which has broad appeal. Sustainability is the watchword that will "sell" across campus. And second, their faculty and staff can adopt entrepreneurial mindsets themselves, modeling that worldview for their students. Regardless of domain, SE instructors must teach students to think like entrepreneurs—to seek opportunities, to grow opportunities, and to act on them.

It's critical to understand how social entrepreneurs think. But we conducted our survey because, as teachers, we need to understand how social entrepreneurs *learn* and how we can best develop our pedagogy to turn our students into social entrepreneurs. The more SE makes sense for today's business environments, the more we as business faculty need to understand this steadily growing and evolving field. 

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