

Developing an Undergraduate Social Entrepreneurship Program at WPI

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Abstract

This study assessed the feasibility of initiating an undergraduate social entrepreneurship program at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI). The feasibility was measured by gathering data from two different environments: WPI's campus, and universities in the United States offering social entrepreneurship programs. WPI student survey results, focus group results, and faculty interviews demonstrated a general lack of understanding of social entrepreneurship on campus. A deeper analysis, however, demonstrated that students and faculty members are interested in social entrepreneurship, especially in the form of sustainability and related fields. Surveys of other universities provided insight into established social entrepreneurship curricula and program structures. The findings of this study have shown that WPI would benefit greatly from a comprehensive and unified social entrepreneurship program. This study recommends the gradual implementation of a program through extracurricular and academic avenues.

Introduction

Whether conducted by nonprofit organizations or through a for-profit venture, social entrepreneurship (SE) currently has vast potential for both positive social change as well as potential profitability for a sponsoring organization. This makes SE an attractive topic for interdisciplinary projects for its merits as both a business venture and its applications toward social change. The foundation for the current project is the belief that some form of a social entrepreneurship program would be beneficial to the university and its students. We researched the current state of social entrepreneurship at WPI, as well as at other universities, in order to assess the value that a structured program could bring to the university. The goal was to compare and examine the merits of different potential structures for a social entrepreneurship program, including examining interest in a more defined program as well as the feasibility of initiating such a program. In order to determine a potential place for social entrepreneurship in the WPI curriculum or community in general, the following goals were set:

- Contact other major universities in order to gather information about existing academic programs and create a database of relevant information.
- Gauge faculty and student interest in the subject and its possible applications in the community

by conducting interviews, focus groups, and surveys, and making appropriate analysis where necessary.

- Identify and evaluate the possible applications of social entrepreneurship at WPI and make a proposal based on this analysis.

University Database

When examining potential programs at WPI, it is important to see what is already being done in the academic field by looking at the ways social entrepreneurship has been implemented at other universities across the country. Schools with social entrepreneurship programs were chosen based on various sources, including Ashoka rankings, AACSB information, national university program rankings, and articles on the subject (AACSB n.d.). There were thirty-two universities selected to be contacted about their respective programs. The goal of contacting these schools was to create an easy to view and comprehensive database for each school, listing key information about their social entrepreneurship program. In order to determine the information that needed to be collected from the pre-selected universities, it first had to be determined what data would be useful in creating a program at WPI. Another factor in the determination was the structure of a program – what is offered, what works and does not work, and what is common. Important data used for comparisons and benchmarking included faculty and student involvement, along with the respective university's unique definition of SE. Questions were also created to gauge how campus activities and the organizational structure (center or department) of the program affected involvement.

University Database Results

Data gathered from the thirty-two universities were used to draw conclusions about what works best in a program and what is most popular among the students. Following are the results of the survey.

Of the institutions from which we collected data, only the University of the Pacific, Stanford University, and Seattle University offer a social entrepreneurship major and all restricted it graduate students. Universities offering a minor or concentration in social entrepreneurship were more common. Four universities have a minor available (Samford University, Seattle University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Wake Forest University) and four also have a concentration (Duke University, Samford University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and University of Oregon). These make up a total of six universities because the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Samford University offer both a minor and a concentration. UNC's concentration is really in entrepreneurship, but contains social entrepreneurship elements. At Samford University, the minor is available only to students enrolled outside of the business school, while the concentration is available to any student in the business school. Seattle University offers the major for graduate students and the minor for undergraduates.

Indiana University (IU) created a SE certificate in response to increased interest in the not-for-profit sector from the graduate students in the Public Policy school. The university said that the Public Policy school needed to partner with the business school in order to bring management knowledge to the courses offered for the certificate; the certificate is offered by both the Public Policy and Business schools. Previous to the certificate being offered, there had been no MBA interest, but it has been growing in the last two years. At IU, the challenge is the split between the policy students and the MBA students. IU believes there has been difficulty in getting MBAs involved because of their preconceived notions of no compensation.

The database shows that the most common non-credit earning activities on campuses are competitions, typically for business plans. There are nineteen universities that participate in these competitions. The

majority of the competitions include both entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship business plans, however, it is not uncommon for social ventures to win.

Out of the universities selected, seventeen have projects as a component of their program. These projects are all very similar in foundation. The topics are selected by the students, and the goal is to create a social venture idea that leads to either a business plan, or in some cases a functional business or organization. The structure of the universities' project component is very similar to the project structure at WPI, but on a smaller scale. There is a team of students that attempt to solve a problem (most commonly of their own choosing) using their educational backgrounds who are guided throughout the process by a faculty advisor, and in some instances a company sponsor.

From the thirty-two selected universities, only nine were found to have a specified definition of social entrepreneurship available either on their campus or on their website (Babson College, Duke University, Harvard University, Indiana University, Miami University, New York University, Pace University, University of Arizona, and University of the Pacific). These nine schools have the most robust programs offering the most diverse options to their students. Eight of these nine definitions specify that social entrepreneurship can include a hybrid organization model. Indiana University is the only one that defines it as being strictly non-profit.

The student involvement numbers recorded (many numbers were not obtained due to lack of response and availability of data) are low, yet consistent among the programs, with the exception of Duke University and Miami University. These two universities have a substantially higher number of students in their social entrepreneurship programs. Miami has approximately 100 students, while Duke has approximately 300. The remaining universities average twenty-five students in their programs.

The infancy of the social entrepreneurship field is quite evident from the data we gathered recording the years the various programs have been in existence. Data were available for nine of the thirty-two universities. Of those nine, eight of the programs were initiated in the last decade. The longest running program is that of Ball State University, which began in 1983.

The most common component of the programs studied is courses. A few of the universities offering courses actually have no formal program, and one or two courses complete their social entrepreneurship curriculum.

Five universities offer students the option to obtain a certificate in social entrepreneurship (Indiana University, Pace University, Stanford University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and University of the Pacific). These certificates are only offered to students enrolled in the graduate program, with the exception of the University of the Pacific (their certificate is in the process of being created and their website does not show whether it is offered only to graduate students). Indiana University stated that it would not offer anything more involved than a certificate because of limited interest. From phone interviews with Philip Powell of IU, we gathered that many MBA students complete a certificate to supplement their degree because of an interest in working for a non-profit company.

These results gave an expansive idea of what is offered at other universities. All of these data aided in creating recommendations that would be feasible and attractive for a social entrepreneurship program at WPI.

Student Interest

Two methods were used to gauge student knowledge of and interest in entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, and the various forms it could take in the WPI curriculum. The first method was to conduct a survey of the undergraduate student body. Students were contacted through the WPI undergraduate email list, and were provided a link to an electronic survey.

The WPI undergraduate body has 3009 students, of which 565 responded, for a response rate of 18.8 percent. The first questions were asked in order to determine students' familiarity and interest in both entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship. The next two sets of questions were posed in order to identify students' experiences with WPI's junior and senior project programs, and whether their experience had involved social entrepreneurship in any way. This was followed by questions to determine current participation and student interest in the other formal structures, classes, and activities that we identified earlier. The final questions of the survey were to gather demographic information about the student respondents.

Student Interest Results

The survey showed a significant disparity between students' familiarities with entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship. A majority of the respondents were either "somewhat" or "very" familiar with entrepreneurship (58.5% total), while a larger majority were either "not at all" or "not very" familiar with social entrepreneurship (85.8%). These results demonstrate a greater awareness on campus of entrepreneurship than social entrepreneurship. This seems understandable, as our research has demonstrated that as a field of study, social entrepreneurship is still in its infancy. Furthermore, WPI currently has an entrepreneurship program, consisting of five courses in its curriculum, as well as entrepreneurship workshops, competitions, and other events that spread awareness of the subject among its students. It is interesting to note that 55.9% of the respondents were either somewhat or very interested in entrepreneurship, while for social entrepreneurship, 43.5% of students responded as being somewhat or very interested. This demonstrates a sizable group of students with some form of interest in these two topics, though additional information was needed by the team in order to fully understand these results.

The second method used to gauge student interest was to conduct a focus group with six undergraduate students. Focus groups are also often conducted to help develop appropriate questions for a questionnaire (Alreck and Settle 1995), but the team decided to conduct it after the survey for the purpose of pursuing a deeper understanding of responses, as it was felt this would be more beneficial to the analysis of student interest.

The focus group was moderated by one team member, while the other two wrote individual transcripts of students' responses in order to create a comprehensive transcript. Notes were taken in a word document, and nothing was taped or recorded.

What was known and then confirmed or challenged by the focus group data?

- **Students were more familiar with the concept of entrepreneurship than social entrepreneurship**
 - The students' ideas and definitions of entrepreneurship were pretty accurate and they seemed to understand the concept. However, the students' knowledge of social entrepreneurship was minimal and their explanations did not accurately capture the concept. Most of the students (five out of six) had not heard of social entrepreneurship up until this point.

What was suspected and then confirmed or challenged by the focus group data?

- Once students understood what social entrepreneurship was, they might be as interested in it as entrepreneurship – The survey results caused us to suspect that once students really understood what social entrepreneurship was about, they might be as interested in it as commercial entrepreneurship. When asked what aspect of social entrepreneurship appealed to them, the majority replied that it was the opportunity to get involved and help with a social cause. Only one participant replied that it was the double bottom line of social entrepreneurship – developing an organization that is profitable and also benefits society – that appealed to him.

What was new and not previously known or suspected?

- Time constraints and workloads might prevent students from getting involved with social entrepreneurship. This might also cause students to be more interested in less time-consuming activities like workshops and seminars than in several courses or a minor – The students stated that the main reason they would not want to get involved was time constraints. WPI has seven-week terms, with three courses per term. Each course has a very demanding schedule and is associated with rigorous project work and other assignments. Students said they had a hard time finishing their requirements on time, let alone getting involved with other activities. Even if they did have time for extracurricular activities, sororities, fraternities, and varsity games would probably take priority over a social entrepreneurship workshop that might be considered more academic in nature. The students said they would be more apt to consider an activity that was less time consuming (once every week or every two weeks), but where they could still learn a lot. From the survey, our team discovered that more students would be interested in taking a class on social entrepreneurship (43.6%) than an entire minor focused on the subject (22.1%). The focus group data corresponded with these findings as a number of students (five out of six) also said that they would take a single social entrepreneurship course as an elective, while the option to take a minor only interested one student.
- The manner in which the idea is marketed and explained is very important – Many of the focus group students said that one the reasons for their non-participation in entrepreneurship events on campus was lack of follow-up and proper marketing of these events. Most of these events are advertised too early, and when the actual date came around the students forgot about the event or had made some other appointments. The students also need to understand what they are getting out of their involvement. They expressed interest in big events like a speaker series with renowned speakers or a networking event with experienced professionals.

Faculty Interest

In order for a program to be successful, it needs the support of faculty and staff. Therefore, WPI's faculty and staff were important sources of information in the evaluation of SE program feasibility. The purposes of the professor interviews were 1) to learn about work already being done with social causes, sustainability, and SE, 2) to learn about the faculty's personal experiences with WPI's project structure, if they think it could be modified, and what they believe would be the best way to approach making changes, and 3) their personal opinions on SE, their perception of student interest, and what they believe would be the best place for SE in the school community and the curriculum. Ten faculty and staff members from a variety of disciplines (mechanical and electrical engineering, management, entrepreneurship) were interviewed. These interviews focused on program directors from off-campus project sites and general project advisors, as well as various management staff.

Faculty Interest Results

Although almost all of the professors interviewed have been involved with projects or research related to SE, only half of them had a thorough understanding of the concept behind it. The others were only vaguely

familiar with it or were not aware of the term “social entrepreneurship.” One professor was hesitant about accepting the use of entrepreneurship for a social cause, but was interested in a related field: sustainability.

A common theme that emerged was the need to have an organized collection of all WPI resources related to SE. This would include a comprehensive list of literature, previous interdisciplinary and senior year projects/ research, and organizations that might be interested in sponsoring projects. This resource would be available to both faculty and students who are interested in getting involved with SE and would like to learn more about the field. One professor recommended that a link to a listing of all events, projects, and research pertaining to SE or social causes be placed on WPI’s home page. A similar issue that became apparent during these interviews was the vast disconnect between efforts in similar fields across campus. It seems that professors might not be aware of research or projects being worked on by other professors outside of their departments, even if they were in the same or related fields. Many professors expressly stated the need for a center or collaborative to bring these efforts together, and they see SE as a way to do this. They also agreed that any SE program needs to be an interdisciplinary, campus wide initiative.

Out of the ten professors that were interviewed, eight agreed that there needed to be some form of SE program on campus. They agreed that it was an important movement in today’s world, and that WPI cannot ignore it. They also believe that funding for the program should be relatively easy to obtain, as support for these kinds of initiatives is increasing in today’s society. One professor said that a good SE program would provide students with a platform and the credentials to compete in this space and thereby also attract incoming students. Another stated that WPI was entrepreneurial and innovative, and SE was an innovative way of providing solutions to social problems, therefore, the two were a good fit. Further, the initiative supports the WPI plan of creating professionals who are critical thinkers who understand their role as citizens in society.

Five of the professors interviewed said that in order to create a successful SE program, integration needed to start out very slowly and eventually progress up to something larger, such as a minor. One professor made the comment that students need to be made more aware of what is happening in the world socially before there could be large student involvement on campus. This could be achieved through various speaker seminars and events on campus. Another professor said that it would be very beneficial to have faculty workshops on SE so that they may collaborate and learn more about it in order to integrate the concept into coursework.

Four out of the ten professors interviewed expressly stated that hosting a speaker series would be a great way to initiate a SE program on campus. These four professors were of the opinion that speakers could incite interest on campus, which would in turn encourage students to get involved with SE. In hosting these various events, the professors also suggested that it might be beneficial to collaborate with the other colleges of the Worcester Consortium, as well as with members of the Worcester community.

Seven professors identified that they would personally be interested in seeing SE interdisciplinary projects. When asked about how SE might be integrated into the projects, five professors stated a need for better quality on-campus projects for the local community. These professors also stated the possibility of working in conjunction with the Worcester Project Center, due to its focus on projects that could be categorized as SE.

One professor was interested in the idea of creating a minor. He commented that it would be a great fit with the environmental studies major. The combination of an environmental studies major with a SE minor would create a very skilled job candidate. The professor also stated that “to have someone who understands environmental science and also has business skills would have a great opportunity to develop

business ideas.” The ideal method of creating a well-rounded minor would be to have cross-disciplinary partnerships to shape the minor.

Perspective on various professors’ opinions of SE and their level of involvement with the field was gained through these interviews. The professors also expressed their ideas about the need for such a program and the feasibility of its implementation.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Social entrepreneurs are needed to create new avenues for social improvement. In order to capitalize on the momentum around social entrepreneurship and reap its true benefits, the sustainability of the efforts that are being made in this field needs to be ensured. This can be done through educating the next generation of social entrepreneurs. Only recently, however, has an academic approach to the study of social entrepreneurship started to develop. Students need a more complete, better-structured knowledge of what social entrepreneurship is and how its practice can be enhanced.

The recommendations for a social entrepreneurship program are divided into the following three categories.

Recommendation 1: Increase Awareness on Campus

After performing research on the undergraduate student body and faculty, it was clear that there was a lack of awareness on campus about the field of social entrepreneurship. However, the activities and projects being done on WPI’s campus clearly illustrate interest in sustainability and the application of innovation, especially to social causes. This is the essential drive of social entrepreneurship. However, there is hesitation in the community’s acceptance of the need for entrepreneurial principles to create sustainable social value. This has created a strong divide in the perception of social entrepreneurship in comparison to sustainability.

Data collected from the university surveys demonstrated a direct correlation between how clearly the concept of social entrepreneurship is explained and student involvement. This correlation is also supported by the responses obtained from our focus group. Therefore, it is recommended that the first step in starting a new program be the identification of a comprehensive definition of social entrepreneurship that can be used as a foundation for the program. Once a definition has been agreed upon, it can be permeated through various events that will be held to raise levels of awareness of social entrepreneurship.

One of the most common themes that arose from our data collection was that the program needs to be implemented gradually or in phases. The initial events should be non time-consuming activities that will generate interest among students and faculty alike.

The focus group results and faculty interviews demonstrated that students would be interested in attending workshops on social entrepreneurship topics. Hence, a recommendation is for WPI to incorporate workshops into the social entrepreneurship program. Furthermore, a social entrepreneur speaker series should be launched. These speakers would engage students’ interests by telling them about their experiences as social entrepreneurs and also discuss the many social problems in our world and how potential solutions are rooted in social entrepreneurship.

Often at WPI, groups have shown a movie on the quad to help them increase awareness about a certain cause, for example, films shown during Human Trafficking Awareness Week. At least one social entrepreneurship movie or documentary should be shown on the quad per year. *The New Heroes*, a four-hour series by PBS, would be a great movie to show at this type of activity. *The New Heroes* features

fourteen social entrepreneurs that have developed innovations to bring life-changing tools and resources to people in need of viable solutions (PBS 2005).

At this point, students might want to learn more about the dynamics of becoming a social entrepreneur. Networking is a great way to learn more about a field of interest. It is recommended that a networking series be established for social entrepreneurship. This will give students a great opportunity to speak with the social entrepreneurs and make connections. The series would also be beneficial for the campus because the social entrepreneurs will become familiar with WPI.

Recommendation 2: Organization of Resources

While resources do exist in various forms at the university, there is seemingly little to no communication between elements of social entrepreneurship across campus. Due to this lack of a unified structure on campus, the currently available resources are difficult to discover and access and appear much more limited than they actually are.

While performing the faculty interviews, it became very clear that professors were unaware of what other professors were doing and what was being taught on campus, unless they had a personal interest in the research or courses. To remedy this problem, it is recommend that a comprehensive online resource be made available that links all social entrepreneurship faculty research; past, present, and future interdisciplinary projects (possibly senior theses); and all events and activities on campus that involve social entrepreneurship. This online resource would enable faculty, company sponsors, social organizations, and current and prospective students to view what WPI has done and is currently doing in the field of social entrepreneurship.

Similar to the online resource, it is also recommend that a monthly newsletter be written and e-mailed to the campus community that details all of the work that occurred in that month in social entrepreneurship. It would also list upcoming social entrepreneurship events and reviews of events from the previous month. This newsletter would enhance the sense of community at WPI with regard to social entrepreneurship.

Recommendation 3: Sustaining a Thriving Social Entrepreneurship Program

After awareness of social entrepreneurship has been increased and a solid foundation for a program has been established, it will be important to engage in activities and actions that will ensure further growth and sustainability of the program.

It is recommended that research continues in order to grow and develop the program. For example, the creation of a social entrepreneurship graduate program would require further research and inquiry into the interests of graduate students. In other university programs, the undergraduate program is made up primarily of extracurricular activities, while the graduate program is based on academics.

There are more extracurricular activities that could be added to WPI's campus in order to further students' involvement with social entrepreneurship. It is also recommended that a student club be incorporated into the social entrepreneurship program. This club could then undertake the organization of events that will initially be handled by the CEI. Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) is a popular student club on many campuses, and some incorporate social entrepreneurship activities along with their conventional entrepreneurship activities (SIFE 2007). Another interesting student activity that a few campuses around the country currently take part in is EDUN LIVE on campus (EDUN 2008). EDUN LIVE is a business whose mission is to create sustainable job opportunities in Africa by employing otherwise unemployed Africans to make 100-percent organic cotton T-shirts. EDUN LIVE then sells these T-shirts to a college or university, who in turn sells them to campus organizations.

Further research needed to sustain a robust social entrepreneurship program could easily be achieved through another on-campus interdisciplinary project. Many applications for social entrepreneurship projects exist in the local Worcester community. The Worcester Project Center should be very active in recruiting students interested in social entrepreneurship for their projects.

Further research into the field of social entrepreneurship for the benefit of WPI would enable many students to submit their findings to various competitions and poster/project competitions. It is recommended that WPI hold a project presentation day dedicated to social entrepreneurship projects. Competitions on and off campus would enable WPI to get its name out into the public to raise the profile of the social entrepreneurship program. Further research into sources for grants and other forms of funding that can be used to further students' education in social entrepreneurship is also recommended. The availability of funding would encourage more students to get involved in the program. It is recommended that the initial support, financing, and organization of the social entrepreneurship program be integrated into the Collaborative for Entrepreneurship and Innovation's (CEI) existing structure. This center already has the resources and the know-how required to organize entrepreneurship events and find funding for these events, and is in the best position to do the same for social entrepreneurship. The CEI could collaborate with organizations, such as the Social Entrepreneurship and Education Consortium (SEEC 2007) and The Indus Entrepreneurs' Social Entrepreneurship Group (TIE Boston 2006), to name a few, that are interested in promoting the education of social entrepreneurship. It must be kept in mind, however, that students at WPI must first be made aware of SE and its importance through non time-consuming activities that will generate interest among them. Hence, the program needs to be implemented gradually or in phases. This is a great takeaway for other universities that also wish to implement a social entrepreneurship program.

Our findings have shown that WPI would benefit greatly from a cohesive vision of social entrepreneurship and a unified program to support that vision. The results of this study have demonstrated that social entrepreneurship already exists at WPI in various forms that are not explicitly labeled as SE. The innovative, entrepreneurial WPI mindset and the nature of the interdisciplinary project will make integration that much simpler. WPI's students are very interested in finding solutions to social problems. A social entrepreneurship program would provide these students with a platform to get involved and compete in this space. It would also improve WPI's rankings and thereby attract prospective students. The social entrepreneurship program being recommended through this paper would establish WPI as an innovator in the field: a thought center educating a new class of thinkers that understand their role as citizens in society.

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