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## An Opportunity for Higher Education: Using Social Entrepreneurship Instruction to Mitigate Social Problems

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**Sempos, P.T. (2003). Patterns of alcohol consumption among African Americans are more deadly. Accessed September 27, 2010 from [http://www.eurekalert.org/pub\\_releases/2001/ace-poa010603.php](http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2001/ace-poa010603.php)**

## **[An Opportunity for Higher Education: Using Social Entrepreneurship Instruction to Mitigate Social Problems](#)**

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### **Introduction**

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2010) there is a significant disparity in life expectancy rates between Caucasian males and ethnic minority males in the United States, resulting from factors that include nutrition. While the employment outlook for dietitians and nutritionists is expected to grow by 9.24% through 2018, to approximately 65,000, the percentage of self-employed professionals within the sector is expected to decrease slightly from 8.81% to 8.49% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) anticipates only 5,600 dietitians and nutritionists will be self-employed in 2018. The entrepreneurship literature is replete with the role entrepreneurs play in solving societal problems, and there is growing evidence that government and social entrepreneurs need to collaborate more to combat societal problems (Wolk, 2007). Yet, in a crisis where there is a clear need for innovation and entrepreneurial problem solving we can anticipate fewer qualified social entrepreneurs, when measured as a percentage of the qualified labor pool, combating the problem in the future.

The instruction of nutritionists in the area of social entrepreneurship could have a positive effect towards improving the health of minority men via targeted social ventures. For example, through instruction nutritionists could learn to identify marketing techniques used by purveyors of unhealthy foods, alcohol, and tobacco products to demographic segments. To illustrate: the major U.S. brewers (Miller, Anheuser Busch et al.) actively market malt liquor within urban communities with high populations of African American men (Corporations and Health Watch, 2010). Malt liquor beverages are sold in 40 ounce containers and often have an alcohol content of 6%-11%, far higher than the alcohol content of mass-produced beers. Hypothetically, nutritionists trained in social entrepreneurship could identify the underlying business and social factors that lead to these types of marketing decisions, and demonstrate knowledge of tactical entrepreneurial responses that would mitigate the negative impact on public health.

The negative impact is substantial. It has been established that drinking patterns of African American men are more deadly. According to Sempos (2003) “researchers have found evidence that because of larger containers and higher alcohol content products marketed to African Americans, these surveys may even underestimate the heavy quantities consumed by ethnic minorities. These factors are just some of those that help explain the higher risks of liver cirrhosis, for example, among African American and Hispanic populations compared to whites”.

## **Literature Review**

Dietitians and nutritionists are generally required to have bachelor’s degrees within their respective scientific disciplines (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010) to practice in their field. However, as scientists they are at an inherent disadvantage when launching entrepreneurial ventures (Johnson, Craig & Hildebrand, 2006). In fact, skills developed in dietetics and nutrition programs may actually be contrary to those needed in entrepreneurship. Scientists in general are highly structured; analyze correlations and causal relationships, and avoid risk. Entrepreneurship requires improvisation; comfort with ambiguity and risk taking (Huang, 2009). Health professionals interested in combating social issues need to begin viewing and tackling the issue from a new paradigm: Social Entrepreneurship. This can be challenging as most are employed in academic and health-care cultures, which are historically reticent to embrace entrepreneurial initiatives.

### **Social Entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurship, for the purpose of this article, is the process of recognizing internal and/or external opportunities and assembling the resources to seize those opportunities (Schumpeter, 1961). Entrepreneurship is one of the most complex, yet least studied of the social sciences...perhaps because in practice it is an amalgamation of multiple sciences, including management, marketing and finance. The process of being entrepreneurial involves being creative, innovative and approaching current problems in new ways (Schumpeter, 1961).

The U.S. Small Business Administration’s Office of Advocacy dedicated a chapter in its 2007 annual report to the President of the United States on the issue of Social Entrepreneurship. The chapter entitled: *Social Entrepreneurship and Government: A New Breed of Entrepreneurs Developing Solutions to Social Problems*, demonstrated via numerous case studies the importance of social entrepreneurship in solving societal problems. The author states that “just as government support of private markets and entrepreneurship has fueled growth in the U.S. economy, so too can government’s support of social entrepreneurship accelerate the solving of social problems” (Wolk, 2007, p.6).

While the idea of entrepreneurs using their wealth to benefit society (e.g. John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie et al.) is not new, the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship has not been studied by scholars until relatively recently, with the first (and leading) dedicated journal, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, founded in 2003. Martin and Osberg (2007) put forth a leading definition of social entrepreneurship suggesting it is a three phase process whereby an entrepreneur(s) identifies an unjust situation where a segment of society is harmed; uses his/her creativity, courage and determination to change the state of the situation; and creates a better ecosystem that benefits the affected group and society as a whole.

Social entrepreneurship may also be seen as simply “combining commercial enterprises with social

impacts” (Alvord, Brown & Letts, 2008, p. 138). According to Pozen (2008) a social entrepreneur is “a pragmatic visionary who achieves large scale, systemic and sustainable social change through unwavering belief, driving passion, and dogged determination”. The power of social entrepreneurship to alleviate social problems has been generally accepted by policy makers and political leaders as an important mechanism in addressing needs for societal change. President Obama has supported the idea of a National Office of Social Entrepreneurship (Whittemore, 2008) and Nobel Peace Prize winner Kofi Annan (2010) stated: “founded on the principles of private initiative, entrepreneurship and self-employment, underpinned by the values of democracy, equality and solidarity, the co-operative movement can help pave the way to a more just and inclusive economic order.”

## **Instruction of Nutritionists in Business Social Sciences**

There is a gap in the literature as to the best methods of instructing nutritionists in the business social sciences. Andragogy theory suggests that the instruction of adults should be problem centered (Smith, 1999). Yet, traditional social entrepreneurship educators focus on generalized theory, and leave it to the student to apply it to his/her own venture. Faculty could explore ways of integrating dietetic and nutritional concepts and innovative instructional techniques into business coursework to enhance engagement; measure the effect of potential social venture commercialization on student motivation; and leverage student scientific knowledge into the development of social ventures. It could also make a significant contribution to the entrepreneurship literature, and directly achieve our national goal (Department of Health and Human Services, 2010) of generating knowledge from “*studies that include innovative approaches involving families, social networks or communities interventions designed to enhance health-promotion structures and behaviors.*”

Nutritionists, having received social entrepreneurship instruction, could apply their extant knowledge of nutrition in the business social sciences to evaluate opportunities and project feasibility. Thus, they would be better prepared to run complex organizations and work with clients, entrepreneurial stakeholders and community leaders.

The health care industry, in which nutritionists work, has a culture that is highly regulated and subject to external peer-review (Boan & Funderburk, 2003). Thus, a nutritionist employed in a hospital who is inspired to take a social venture initiative into his/her community may encounter internal roadblocks and stakeholders who emphasize the risk. However, the same nutritionist developing the idea in a supportive culture, such as a problem centered course with other nutritionists, may be more inclined to find a way to pursue the opportunity. It has been found that a supportive culture is an antecedent to both entrepreneurship and innovation (Dess & Lumpkin, 2005).

## **Instruction**

Academic administrators considering the development of social entrepreneurship courses tailored to clearly defined demographic segments may want to assure that faculty are andragogical in their approach. Andragogy advocates believe that adult instruction should differ from the instruction of children (i.e. pedagogy) for a multitude of reason. The theoretical foundation of andragogy, according to Conlan, Grabowski and Smith (2003), is that adult learners are:

- Independent and capable of self-directed learning;

- More experienced and draw from life lessons in their learning
- Have learning needs affected by changing social roles;
- Problem centered learners who prefer knowledge that is applicable;
- Motivated by internal not external factors.

It seems self-evident that adult students, such as nutritionists or registered dietitians interested in combating social issue such through entrepreneurial efforts, would meet the five aforementioned pillars of andragogy. A review of the academic literature in the area of andragogy should give administrators and faculty insight into effective approaches. Effective instructional techniques could include:

- Discussion based on student experiences;
- Development of case studies;
- Field visits and interviews;
- Multimedia and interactive exercises aimed at integrating diverse learning styles.

### **Proposed Methodology**

The development of social entrepreneurship courses targeted to narrowly defined segments interested in equally narrow social issues should be studied ethnographically. This research would benefit governmental leaders; social entrepreneurs, professors, researchers and academic administrators by providing insight into the effectiveness of focused, transdisciplinary entrepreneurship education. However, before more advances statistical studies are designed, it would be useful for academic leaders to collect as much qualitative data as possible from students and faculty.

The proposed qualitative methodology will allow for deep practical insights as ethnography is an excellent research tool when there is limited empirical support (Genzok, 1999; Gummesson, 2003). The findings will make significant theoretical and practical contributions in the field, and serve as a basis for hypothesis development for future statistical research.

### **Summary**

In 2011, the U.S. Federal Government will spend over \$365 billion in grants (U.S. Government, 2011) with a significant portion going towards medical research and education. Two percent of the federal budget is dedicated directly to scientific and medical research, while three percent is dedicated to education (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2011).

Academia continues to be a major recipient of federal grant dollars, but a review of the grants.gov database shows that federal administrators are not exploring the corollary or potential causal relationships between business practices and social issues (i.e. increased death rates among ethnic minority males). Analysis of peer reviewer qualifications for federal agencies shows that there is not an existing infrastructure of reviewers trained in the business sciences. Essentially, few if any grant-makers are looking at entrepreneurship as a cause and/or potential mitigating factor in social issues. When social entrepreneurs and researchers seek funds to explore these relationships their requests are being peer reviewed by individuals who, frankly, are not peers. They are experts in medical

sciences...but not the business sciences.

Thus, it falls upon academic leaders to prove there is a scientifically measurable relationship between social entrepreneurship instruction and the reduction of social problems. This process begins with the creation of focused courses and a qualitative methodology for capturing information. Of course, focused course offerings could create new revenue streams for universities.

This article began with the discussion of an RFP from the Department of Health and Human Services focused on developing research-based solutions to the problem of decreased life expectancy among ethnic minority males. Clearly, as illustrated in the example of brewers targeting African American men as consumers of high-alcohol content beverages, marketing may be a contributing factor in the consumption of alcohol and resulting health problems. Training nutritionists, registered dieticians, social workers, researchers etc, who are committed to solving this problem (and others) in the principles of social entrepreneurship should result in market-oriented and innovative solutions.

However, the bigger idea behind this paper is that there is a real opportunity for academic leaders to provide innovative solutions to social problems through social entrepreneurship education. Offering a course, certificate program, or even a degree in social entrepreneurship is a good start. It just is not enough. Society needs leaders in higher education to champion specific social causes, and recruit cohorts of talented professionals who are mission driven to solve problems.

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