Service-Learning & Social Entrepreneurship: Finding the Common Ground
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Abstract
Service-learning and social entrepreneurship share a common goal of engaging students in work to achieve the public good, and a desire to link education to addressing social problems and needs. Yet an examination of the two initiatives reveals that they generally co-exist on college and university campuses with little or no collaboration or communication between the two programs. This paper examines the definitions and core identities of service-learning and social entrepreneurship, exploring the potential for how the two initiatives might complement and support one another’s work in higher education. This examination includes identifying the values, philosophies, and practices that might provide common ground as well as those that might present points of conflict and tension.

Introduction
In recent years there has been a surge of interest in social entrepreneurship education in colleges and universities nationally and internationally. Most of this growth has been within the past 10 years, following Bill Drayton’s receipt of the McArthur Award for his creation of Ashoka in the 1980’s. Ashoka, a thriving non-profit organization devoted to social entrepreneurship work, describes social entrepreneurs as “individuals creating innovative solutions to society’s most pressing social problems” (Ashoka). College and university campuses that have adopted social entrepreneurship education as part of their curricula have typically done so with long-standing service-learning programs already well established on campus. Most formal service-learning programs in higher education were initiated in the 1990’s. The term “service-learning” was coined, however, in the 1960’s and was defined at that
time as “the integration of the accomplishment of a needed task with educational growth” (Sigmon, 1994, p. 1).

Social entrepreneurship and service-learning have in common that they both engage students in work directed toward the public good, linking the education of students to addressing societal problems and needs. Despite their common values and aims, an examination of the two initiatives reveals that they generally co-exist on college and university campuses with little or no collaboration or communication between the two programs. We would like to begin a conversation of how these two initiatives may establish complimentary, if not synergistic, working relationships. This paper examines the definitions and core identities of social entrepreneurship and service-learning, exploring the potential for how the two initiatives might complement and support one another’s work in higher education. Fundamental to this examination is identifying the values, philosophies, and practices that might provide common ground as well as those that might present points of conflict and tension. We believe that students and communities would benefit from the potential synergies created by the two approaches working together. This article discusses each of these initiatives in historical sequence, starting first with service-learning which entered the academy in the 1960s.

The longstanding role of service-learning in the university curriculum

In contrast to social entrepreneurship, service-learning was conceived, initiated, and developed as a “service-based learning approach” (Sigmon, 1994, p.1). The partnership between educational institutions and community programs was clearly at work in the development of the first service-learning conference in Atlanta, Georgia in 1969, co-sponsored by the Southern Education Regional Board and the United States Department of Health Education and Welfare in conjunction with the City of Atlanta, the Atlanta Urban League, the Peace Corps, and Vista. By the 1990’s, service-learning initiatives and programs were becoming common in colleges and universities, and in 1995 the American Association of Higher Education adopted service-learning as the theme of its annual conference in Washington, DC. (Sigmon, 1996). As this history indicates, service-learning has been situated in higher education since its beginning.

Although definitions of service-learning were particularly diverse in the early years of the movement and educators debated its multiple definitions and purposes, there was consensus around the idea that service-learning was an appropriate activity for students and faculty from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds as well as from multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary programs. Work within the various academic disciplines was seen as valuable in service-learning experiences as “the disciplines illuminate and inform experience, and experience lends meaning and energy to the disciplines” (Eskow, 1980, p.21). Yet there was a great deal of attention on the broader learning outcomes that service-learning could produce, transcending those of any particular discipline; for example, service-learning was perceived as providing an opportunity for students to develop and practice the traditional cognitive skills of liberal arts education such as critical thinking, abstract conceptualization, experimentation, and problem-
solving, (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999). Faculty in a variety of disciplines and programs found service-learning to be a pedagogy rich with possibilities for illustrating and exploring issues and concepts within their own disciplines as well as broader ideas such as civic engagement, democracy, the common good, ethics, values, and social change. Thus, the central component of service-learning’s identity was the clear focus on learning outcomes, both discipline-specific learning outcomes and the broader learning outcomes of a liberal arts education.

By the 1980’s, there was a clear call for research on service-learning. Practitioners recognized a need for more empirical data about service-learning outcomes for students, faculty, and communities. Additionally, questions regarding how to teach service-learning courses most effectively fueled a drive toward research to identify “best practices” (Honnet & Poulen, 1989; Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999). Since that time, service-learning research has become a prominent theme in many scholarly journals and some journals, such as the Michigan Journal of Community Service, focus exclusively on such research. Additionally, conferences in which service-learning researchers present their work and findings have also grown in prominence with the International Service-Learning and Civic Engagement Research Conference perhaps being the largest, best known, and most competitive among these.

As service-learning has been practiced, debated, and researched in the academy over the past few decades, a number of key principles have emerged as essential best practices. One of the most clearly documented principles is the importance of students’ reflection on their service-learning experiences. Research repeatedly showed that service-learning was a pedagogy that could contribute to the development of students in a variety of ways if conducted effectively. Critical reflection and analysis came to be seen as sine qua non in service-learning. Research has provided evidence that when service-learning is conducted within the context of such intellectual work, students can experience any number of benefits, such as a deeper understanding of the academic discipline, greater civic awareness, insights and skills related to cultural diversity, awareness of personal values and assumptions, leadership skills, and even career clarification (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Personal growth for students was a highly valued component of service-learning from its earliest years. Practitioners recognized that service-learning was not value-neutral and that students would inevitably process their experience through the lenses of their personal histories, values, and identities. As early as 1983 Morris Keeton, for example, eloquently asserts the importance of students’ critical reflection in experiential learning, citing the foundation of this idea in educational philosophy and arguing its centrality to the learning process when he says:

As Dewey states, this process results in a “reconstruction” of experience..., a recodifying of habits..., and ongoing questioning of old ideas.... Thus, experiential learning so pursued transforms the individual, revises and enlarges knowledge, and alters practice. It affects the aesthetic and ethical commitments of individuals and alters their perceptions and interpretations of the world (p.1).
A parallel focus on personal growth and transformation of faculty is also present in the service-learning literature. Many of the early “pioneers” in service-learning brought to their work “a critical, questioning stance toward life, society, and its institutions”, an intense concern about societal ills, and a commitment to link thought and action (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999, p. 50). Not surprisingly, research on service-learning faculty indicates that service-learning teaching is often transformative for faculty (Warner & Esposito, 2009). Service-learning faculty report changes in how they think about such issues as course design, interactions with students, student/teacher roles, and learning outcomes. Moreover, research on faculty who teach service-learning courses has identified that these faculty report shifts from a “teacher-centered” perspective to a more “learner-centered” approach in their teaching (Driscoll et al., 1996). This focus on reflective practice and the role of the faculty member as a “fellow-learner” is readily found in the accounts of founders of the field such as Robert Sigmon, Nadine Cruz, Jane Permaul, and Jane Kendall as these trailblazers have thoughtfully discussed their service-learning practice as it relates to their personal histories, values, and emerging insights about the meaning of service in their own lives as well as in the lives of their students over time (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999).

Starting in the 1970’s the service-learning literature reveals a strong commitment to the principle of respectful partnerships with the community and the value of collaborative work. In 1979, a key principle for service-learning was stated as “those being served control the service(s) provided” (Sigmon, 1979, p. 9). Service-learning leaders took care to avoid “the traditionally paternalistic, one-way approach to service in which one group or person has resources which they share ‘charitably’ or ‘voluntarily’ with a person or group that lacks resources” (Kendall, 1990, p. 22.). The idea that the community has “the needs” and the university has “the answers” came to be antithetical to service-learning philosophy and practice. Consistently over the decades of service-learning practice, the literature resounding emphasized the importance of reciprocal, mutually beneficial partnerships between community and university as a necessary condition of service-learning. Equality in these relationships is also emphasized as both partners are seen as teachers and learners, givers and takers. Now, following three decades of service-learning practice, deeply collaborative campus-community relationships in which the community’s resources and wisdom are recognized and valued, have become a defining feature of high quality service-learning.

The theme of collaborative work within service-learning extends beyond the campus-community partnerships to relationships within the academy as well. Jane Permaul, an early leader in service-learning, states that this value on collaboration was a key factor that drew her to service-learning work. She says she was “attracted to service-learning because its essence is team. It’s collaborative as opposed to egocentric and individual” (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999, p. 189). Although it has been over 30 years since Permaul began her own service-learning work, this philosophy of collaboration and teamwork continues to undergird service-learning work within the academy. While there have been debates as to whether service-learning should be the work of faculty or the work of student life staff, over the past decade a
“both/and” approach has emerged as the favored model for service-learning program leadership (Lewellyn Jones, Stein, & Kiser, 2008; Engstrom, 2003; Engstrom & Tinto, 1997, 2000; Jacoby, 1999; Robinson & Barnett, 1998). Current thinking about best practices in service-learning places a high value on collaborative organizational structures that draw upon “the unique jurisdiction, knowledge, and skills of faculty and student affairs professionals” (Engstrom and Tinto, 1997, p. 12). Exemplary programs in service-learning are therefore often considered to be those that involve faculty, staff, and administration as a team in designing and implementing programs, straddling the traditional divides between academic affairs and student life as well as between administrators and faculty/staff.

A number of the defining features of service-learning set it apart from social entrepreneurship and other community based educational approaches. As discussed above, they include such things as a strong focus on student learning outcomes, focus on personal growth and transformation in participating students and faculty, valuing reciprocal, mutually beneficial, egalitarian partnerships between campus and community, and collaborative organizational structures and program designs, which draw upon the expertise of faculty, staff, and administration. We propose that a similar examination of the origins of social entrepreneurship will shed light on its strengths, and reveal ways that these two approaches could converge in a beneficial manner within higher education.

**Social Entrepreneurship Enters the Academy**

The popularity of social entrepreneurship has spread across university and college campuses in the past decade. Practitioners from varied disciplines have adopted the terms, concepts and activities of social entrepreneurship, and adapted them to benefit student learning in their disciplines. Consequently, scholars have called for clarification, definition and limits to the boundaries of what may be called social entrepreneurship. Most writers suggest that there is not yet a clear definition and several have tried to clarify the concept to facilitate research and to establish its legitimacy and acceptance in academia (Certo & Miller, 2008; Mari & Marti, 2006; Martin & Osberg, 2007; Weerawardena & Mort, 2006).

British sociologist J.A. Banks who first used the term social entrepreneurship did not offer a formal definition but used the term to distinguish between those entrepreneurs “whose endeavors had social implications” (whom he referred to as “social engineers”) and “social entrepreneurs” who “saw the possibility of using managerial skills directly for socially constructive purposes” and creating “a new social order” (Banks, 1972, p. 53). According to Banks, this difference is the “distinction between tinkering with social systems and changing them utterly” (Banks, 1972, p. 53.)

Definitions of social entrepreneurship today range from those that emphasize imagination and innovation in social program design to those that emphasize addressing a social need through revenue producing programs, products, or activities. Much of the academic literature about
social entrepreneurship has been generated by faculty in schools of business in higher education (see for example: Dees, 2001; Mari & Marti, 2006; Martin & Osberg, 2007; Seelos & Mair, 2004; Weerawardena & Mort, 2006). Many of these writers, while emphasizing innovation in addressing social problems, also place considerable emphasis on management processes and revenue creation. Another source of information about and definitions of social entrepreneurship emerges from the many philanthropic organizations that support social entrepreneurship work. These include organizations such as Ashoka (www.ashoka.org), the Schwab Foundation (www.schwabfound.org), and the Kauffman Foundation (www.kauffman.org). These sources place greater emphasis on finding innovative solutions to social problems and reflect greater comfort with more traditional models of funding sustainability for non-profit programs such as grants and donations.

While much of the social entrepreneurship business school literature focuses on revenue generation as a central component, some of these sources do not perceive this component as a necessary defining feature. Kramer (2005), for example, defines a social entrepreneur as “one who has created and leads an organization, whether for-profit or not, that is aimed at creating large-scale, lasting, and systemic change through the introduction of new ideas, methodologies, and changes in attitude” (p. 6). Dees and Anderson (2003) wrote: “[o]n this understanding, social entrepreneurship is not about generating earned income or even about incremental innovations in the social sector. It is about innovations that have the potential for major societal impact by, for instance, addressing the root causes of a social problem, reducing particular social needs, and preventing undesirable outcomes” (p.46). Gregory Dees (2001), in an earlier publication acknowledged that traditional “market forces” in many cases will not be sufficient to sustain social-purpose organizations.

Many definitions focus on the characteristics of the individual social entrepreneur. Dees originated the most often cited definition of social entrepreneurship offering five characteristics he finds essential for a social entrepreneur: they are idealistic, forward-looking people who are innovative, opportunity-oriented, resourceful, value-creating, change agents (Dees, Emerson & Economy, 2002) Opportunity awareness and exploitation reflect an entrepreneur’s ability to recognize when demand for a value-creating product or service exists. Certo & Miller (2008) suggested that social entrepreneurs both understand social needs and have the ability to fulfill the needs through creative business principles. Martin & Osberg (2007) added that the ability to identify new opportunities and follow through with commitment and drive as well as to face the risks of failure is essential for the entrepreneur. Personal values motivate the individual entrepreneur who is inspired with creativity and courage to solve problems that cause the suffering of humanity (Martin & Osberg, 2007).

Social entrepreneurship is described as “outside the box” thinking, but the descriptions provided usually reflect the public versus private or for-profit versus non-profit thinking that one may expect when combining the theoretical paradigms of business and social sciences. Parkinson and Howorth (2008) assert that social entrepreneurship contains a conflictual ideology that attempts to combine efficient business principles with solving social problems.
Although some authors mention the use of “hybrid” models (Dees, 2007; Peredo & McLean, 2006) others are more reluctant to embrace the modus operandi of the social service sector as a productive strategy for pursuing social entrepreneurship. Some of their concerns relate to the perceived limited impact of non-profit efforts that are not revenue building and a lack of efficiency in this model (Certo & Miller, 2008; Dees, 2007; Martin & Osberg, 2007; Schramm, 2007; Seelos & Mair, 2004). Peter Drucker, well known author on both for-profit and non-profit management, explains that “the non-profit organization exists to bring about a change in individuals and in society” (Drucker, 2006, p. 3). While the bottom line in business always comes down to profit, Drucker explains that the bottom line for non-profits is achieving the desired results. The product in a non-profit “is a changed human being” and “non-profit institutions are human change agents” (Drucker, 2006, p. xiv). Understanding the non-profit organization’s mission, according to Drucker, is critical for non-profit leadership.

Still, much of the literature focuses on social entrepreneurship’s ability to create revenue to build financial sustainability into a traditionally non-profit organization. Social entrepreneurship seeks to help provide more money, investors, and earned income strategies to help non-profits operate more efficiently and to cover overhead costs that grantors and other funders often disallow in program funding (Seelos & Mair, 2004; Economist 2/25/06). With the creation of revenue, social entrepreneurs believe that the organization can become self-sufficient and sustainable (Seelos & Mair, 2004). However, bringing business principles to bear on social problems is extremely challenging. Problematic social circumstances are not easily changed and outcomes are not immediately apparent or measurable (Certo & Miller, 2008; Dees, 2007; Martin & Osberg, 2007). These working conditions may be frustrating to investors and others accustomed to working in a strictly business arena. Social entrepreneurs can achieve results that are significant when they understand the complexities of the social problem, are sensitive to the environment in which they work, commit to their cause, and meet challenges along the way with innovative solutions.

Although efforts are being made to further refine definitions of social entrepreneurship, it is noteworthy that the current range of definitions include innovative corporate, revenue producing models (e.g., Missouri Home Care), social innovation models (e.g., Teach for America), and hybrids of the two (e.g., the Grameen Bank) (see Peredo & McLean, 2006 for discussion of hybrid models). The scholarship exploring social entrepreneurship is indeed in its infancy (Mair, Robinson, & Hockerts, 2006) and the current ambiguity in definitions is widely recognized by scholars in the field (Marti, 2006). As Marti (2006) points out, this ambiguity can be seen as a positive stage in conceptual development that “invites richer and more interdisciplinary discussions” (p.18). As scholars and practitioners from various disciplines join this conversation, no doubt alternative conceptions of social entrepreneurship will emerge. This current range of thought about social entrepreneurship provides an ideal moment for service-learning leaders and scholars to join the discussion in order to explore ways to link productively with social entrepreneurship initiatives as well as to distinguish the unique contributions of each effort.
Potential for Unique Synergies in Higher Education

In an effort to better understand the current relationship between service-learning and social entrepreneurship in academia, we explored web sites of institutions of higher learning that offered both service-learning and social entrepreneurship programs. The list of institutions examined included USNews.com: America’s Best Colleges 2008 list of schools with outstanding service-learning programs (n=38), CNN Money’s list of best schools in social entrepreneurship (n=11), and schools within the Association of New American Colleges (n=10). We found 20 campuses that house programs of both types. While we acknowledge that websites do not always reflect the complexities of organizational dynamics, we found little evidence on these websites that the two programs are working together closely or even communicating with one another. In only about 25% of these schools was there any evidence of a connection between the two programs. When present, these connections took such forms as the inclusion of social entrepreneurship courses as service-learning designated courses, social entrepreneurship faculty being recognized for their service-learning work, or references to social entrepreneurship as a form of service-learning. For example, a press release from the College of Wooster (Student Experience, 2008) refers to social entrepreneurship as a form of service-learning while a Purdue University administrator says in an announcement, “I believe service-learning and social entrepreneurship share many of the same ideals and aspirations” (Purdue, 2008). One university housed both the service-learning and social entrepreneurship programs within its Center for Public Service. References to connections between the programs were not only rare but also did not depict a deep, collaborative relationship between the two.

As social entrepreneurship has entered the academy and is increasingly practiced by faculty and students from various disciplines, there is evidence that broader definitions are holding sway in many settings and that these conceptions of social entrepreneurship offer more promise of finding common ground. The Phoenix Project at the College of William and Mary is described as one in which students act as social entrepreneurs. Students in one project there “delivered a database of potential funding sources to under-gird the building of a new $35 million facility” for the Petersburg Public Library (Phoenix Project, 2007). Similarly, at UNC-Chapel Hill students have received social entrepreneurship grants to create programs such as dental care instruction for children in Spanish and an after school program for low income children focusing on cultural arts and exposure to college campuses (Carolina Entrepreneurial Initiative, 2007). Such projects bear similarity to service-learning projects and in doing so begin to bridge the divide between social entrepreneurship and service-learning.

In 2008, Elon University launched a Social Entrepreneurship Scholars Program with the tag line “building a better community through scholarship and service-learning” (http://www.elon.edu/ses/). This program seeks to broaden students’ understanding and skills in civic engagement through exposure to the principles of both service-learning and social entrepreneurship. Additionally, the Elon program serves as an example of how universities may build connections between service-learning and social entrepreneurship programs that
are beneficial to the intellectual growth of their students and the social conditions of the community.

Though very distinctive in their own rights, these conceptual links suggest that service-learning and social entrepreneurship can not only work together, but could benefit from one another’s strengths. There are several qualities that they share in common, but they possess these qualities in differing degrees. There are also qualities unique to each approach. Key features of each approach are summarized in Table I below.

Table I: Key Features

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<td><strong>Key Components</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Philosophy:</strong></td>
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Based on the common ground and the potential for unique synergies between these two programs, we would call for open communication and the growth of partnerships between the two programs. We offer suggestions below for how this may take place.

Having reviewed the literature on service-learning and social entrepreneurship, we find ourselves defining both of these models as agents of change that may diverge regarding the
focus of the change they hope to implement. They face potential tensions when working together as a result of their varying historical perspectives. Most importantly they have a tremendous potential to have very powerful and beneficial impacts on the social community when operating as collaborators rather than as adversaries.

Agents of Change
As agents of change service-learning collaborators/providers and social entrepreneurs approach their work with disparate ideas about what method will work best. The decades of service-learning literature, as described above, outline the essential placement of collaborative relationships in the success of service-learning. The respectful collaboration of faculty members with community service partners in the development of the service-learning pedagogy, the teaching of the students, and the assessment of the project is what transforms a simple volunteer experience into a truly rich learning experience for the students and a beneficial investment for the community partner (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999). For social entrepreneurs, on the other hand, Green (2009) and many others emphasize the central role of discovery and innovation, neither of which require a collaborative structure, and consequently lend themselves toward the conception of entrepreneurs as experts bringing their knowledge to bear on the community’s needs. This, too, may be a useful model for the implementation of change, as long as the entrepreneur remembers that “entrepreneurship is a basic exercise in social responsibility” (Green, 2009, p. 1-2), and that the bottom line may be difficult to measure in terms of profits, if one is working to change the lives of human beings (Drucker, 2006).

Focus of change
When one examines the focus of change for service-learning collaborators and social entrepreneurs, one notices overlap as well as divergence in their intended targets. For service-learning change is clearly directed toward the community, perhaps with a stated directive implemented within the confines of a community partner’s reach (e.g., the Boys & Girls Clubs, or various Head Start Programs). More importantly for service-learning, the focus of change is also collaborative in nature; the change is to be mutually beneficial to both the community and to the students’ educational enrichment and personal growth (Sigmon, 1994). Social entrepreneurs also focus on change taking place at the community or societal level; however, the literature has thus far reflected very little emphasis on the learning outcomes for the students engaged in academic social entrepreneurship programs. Rather the focus of the change for the social entrepreneur is targeted at making large-scale, systemic, and financially sustainable change within a community (Seelos & Mair, 2004); thus the priorities of the two approaches diverge and one sees the possibility of tensions arising.

Possible tensions transformed into collaborative strengths
Since social entrepreneurship has rested so firmly on the roots of business entrepreneurship in its development, revenue generation and financial sustainability are logical priorities for this effort. While service-learning grew primarily out of the social sciences and humanities, thus
guiding its priorities toward a more humanistic perspective. We have come to realize that where social entrepreneurship and service-learning meet there is the potential to take the strong community partnerships and collaborative working relationships and combine them with the innovation, risk-taking, and opportunity-oriented qualities to make a significant impact that may not require entering the marketplace, per se.

The powerful benefits of a collaborative relationship between community partners, students, faculty, staff and administrators, can pull many more innovative thinkers into the process to share crucial information about the community itself and what the true needs are. Social entrepreneurs could easily slip into the role of “arm chair experts,” assuming they know best and can share their expertise with the community by single-handedly taking their innovative ideas out into the world without fully understanding the history of the issue in the community and the nature of the community’s needs. Likewise, service-learning scholars can become so invested with the work of the community partners and the issues and problems facing communities that thinking “out of the box” for unique solutions to community needs may become particularly challenging. If those from the service-learning side of higher education bring their appreciation for collaboration into a working relationship with those from the burgeoning social entrepreneurship side of higher education, the benefits for higher education could be great as well as those for our local and global communities. Cone (2009, p. 3) wrote: “We have barely scratched the surface in learning to teach entrepreneurship in fields other than business and engineering.” We argue that the way to dig deeper into this effort is to build collaborative relationships between service-learning and social entrepreneurship on the university campus. In fact, Winfield (2005:16) wrote “Community-based service learning provides the link between social science skills and knowledge and social entrepreneurship. Students can see meaningful applications of the curriculum while engaging in activities that improve skills such as critical observation, analysis, and application.”

Conclusion

A powerful connection can be made between service-learning and social entrepreneurship. The two strategies have unique and different strengths, yet they share the desire to make a positive impact on the larger social community by addressing the need for social change. With the proliferation of social entrepreneurship programs across university campuses where service-learning programs already reside, we would hope that those working in these areas would share their overlapping desires to contribute positively to the community, and would learn much from the respective strengths they possess. We assert that both communities and students would benefit from this approach. Future research following the work of service-learning, social entrepreneurship and their potential collaborations will shed light on whether or not these two branches of the higher education tree can work together for the mutual benefit of their communities and students. Specifically we recommend deeper research to track the working relationships that develop over time between these two initiatives. Finally, we call for ongoing scholarship and dialogue to continue the conversation started here.
References


