

# Academic BRASS

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## **Social Entrepreneurship: An Extremely Brief Introduction**

Social entrepreneurship has quickly become a popular business model and media catch phrase. Perhaps due to recent corporate scandals or a new generation of entrepreneurs, addressing social issues has become as important as financial returns. Accordingly, with new trends come new research needs. This article will briefly explore the development of social entrepreneurship as a field, offer an example of social entrepreneurship education in Wartburg College's minor program, and conclude in sharing a couple useful background resources about today's social entrepreneurs.

In his article "The Meaning of 'Social Entrepreneurship'," J. Gregory Dees explains that the model of social entrepreneurship has always existed; it is just the vocabulary that is new (1). In defining the contemporary label, which has been debated for roughly a decade, Dees makes the case that the characteristics of the social entrepreneur are predominately the same as the more familiar private entrepreneur. However, the key distinction is that social entrepreneurs are driven by social mission and not guided by the market in determining success or failure (3). Profits are in terms of social welfare, not financial gains, while incorporating sustainable business practices.

The boundaries of social entrepreneurship as a model and area of research are still open. In fact, the precise vocabulary to label these ventures can be quite varied – social venture, venture philanthropy, social sustainable enterprise, corporate social responsibility, and social economy to name a few. All of these phrases are essentially describing the same thing, a model of business innovation that addresses the needs of a recognized social problem. Lee Swanson and David Zhang offer the phrase "social entrepreneurship zone" to attempt to move the discussion from what do we call it to how does it work (72). It is this question of how does it work that colleges and universities are concerned with as they develop curriculum to support the rising interest in social enterprises.

Following the successes of ventures like Grameen Bank, Kiva.org, and PlayPumps as evidence of a viable business model, colleges and business schools have started offering individual courses, undergraduate minors and majors, and MBA specializations to support research and

education in social enterprise. These programs are generally interdisciplinary; the Minor in Social Entrepreneurship at Wartburg College includes courses ranging from traditional business topics to courses in social work, political science, religion, and biology. The “capstone” to the minor is a Social Enterprise Plan – essentially a traditional business plan with the additional element of targeting a social issue that the business can positively affect.

In addition to interdisciplinary research needs, the body of research on social entrepreneurship is quickly growing, as evidenced by EBSCO’s launch of Nonprofit Organization Reference Center database in May 2009 (“EBSCO Publishing Releases”). However, much of the steam behind the social entrepreneurship movement has been the result of embracing social media and online networking. The following are two websites I found incredibly helpful in bringing me up to speed on this developing sector.

- Tactics of Hope ( <http://www.tacticsofhope.org>) This companion site to the book of the same name by Wilford Welch and David Hopkins features biographies of several social entrepreneurs in various sectors and geographic regions. The site has an excellent resources page with links to grant awarding organizations, schools focusing on social entrepreneurship, print resources, and online networks. There is even an interactive tool that can help discover the social entrepreneur in all of us.
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- Social Edge ( <http://www.socialedge.org>) This is an online social network “by social entrepreneurs, for social entrepreneurs.” The site is a collection of blogs, discussions, and resources designed to encourage sharing of best practices, failed practices, and support to new entrepreneurs. Social Edge is a program of the Skoll Foundation (<http://www.skollfoundation.org/>), a leading organization in investing in social ventures.

As librarians, the field of social entrepreneurship is especially relevant since universities and libraries could arguably be some of the oldest social benefit institutions. It is difficult to predict the future of the social enterprise movement and how the research will develop. However, existing social problems will always encourage the socially-minded entrepreneur to innovate and find solutions.

#### Works Cited

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