

YOU CAN'T FISH WITHOUT A RIVER

A college helps the poor help themselves through social entrepreneurship.

by Guy Larry Osborne

Just as entrepreneurs change the face of business, social entrepreneurs act as the change agents for society [by] improving systems, inventing new approaches, and creating solutions to change society for the better. While a business entrepreneur might create entirely new industries, a social entrepreneur comes up with new solutions to social problems.

—Ashoka, *Innovators for the Public*

Despite generally improving social and health conditions in many parts of the world, global poverty remains a serious challenge in many areas. The World Bank reports that 3 billion people live on less than \$2.50 a day, and 80% of humanity resides in countries in which the gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” is actually widening. More than 20,000 children die each day of poverty-related causes.¹

While charity has its place in meeting such human needs, as the Chinese proverb says, “give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.” But as James Shields, who directs the Bonner Center for Community Learning at Guilford College, has pointed out, it does little good to teach the poor to fish if they can’t afford the equipment or if they don’t have access to the river.

This is where social entrepreneurship (SE) comes in. According to the Ashoka Foundation, one of the major voices for SE today, “social entrepreneurs find what is not working and solve the problem by changing the system, spreading the solution, and persuading entire societies to take new leaps.”² SE is a way of unleashing human creativity, wisdom, spirit, and work ethos for the common good, a way of helping that goes beyond charity to justice.

In his 2006 address to the National Prayer Breakfast, Bono put it this way:

Preventing the poorest of the poor from selling their products while we sing the virtues of the free market, that’s not charity: That’s a justice issue. Holding children to ransom

for the debts of their grandparents, that’s not charity: That’s a justice issue. Withholding life-saving medicines out of deference to the Office of Patents, well that’s not charity. To me, that’s a justice issue.³

Social entrepreneurs may work in the business, nonprofit, or governmental sectors. They may start their own enterprises or reform the workings of existing systems or organizations. What they have in common, however, is a profound commitment to and understanding of social change.

Thus, social entrepreneurs help the poor not only by teaching them to help themselves but also by changing the conditions and systems that maintain the discrepancies in wealth and opportunity that stand in the way of the poor achieving a better life. Ingredients of SE may include improved access to education, health care, agriculture and communication technologies, organizational development and leadership expertise, and venture capital. It is an emerging field that combines knowledge and skills from many disciplines that go beyond theory to practical application. It takes advantage of the expertise of the professional expert and the organic wisdom of the community actually affected by the problem to design partnerships for social change and independence that are both effective and sustainable.

In east Tennessee where I live and work, you don’t have to travel far to find opportunities for SE. In a recent review of regional facts and stats, I found that Appalachia has a higher percentage of economically distressed counties, poor health rankings, poverty levels, and educational failure rates than other parts of the state and nation.⁴ Carson-Newman College is applying principles of SE through its Bonner Center for Service Learning & Civic Engagement and a new undergraduate curriculum in Social Entrepreneurship & Nonprofit Studies to find effective ways of serving the region as well as educating students for a life of servant leadership.

An example of SE at Carson-Newman is our BOOST program (Bonner Out of School Time).

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We describe BOOST as providing “homework help and academic enrichment programs, operated through a partnership with Carson-Newman College’s Bonner Center for Service Learning and Civic Engagement and the Jefferson City Housing Authority (JCHA). The mission of the BOOST Programs is to combat educational injustice by providing engaging, scholastic programming for the students of Jefferson County in order to increase academic performance, enhance character development, and promote college access. BOOST programs are offered free of charge and are for students in age from kindergarten through sixth grade.”

What makes BOOST a good example of SE is that it was developed by Carson-Newman students, faculty mentors, and an AmeriCorps staff volunteer assigned to the college in collaboration with the leader of the previous after-school program, who also happened to be a resident in one of the housing complexes and the caretaker of one of the children in the program. Rather than simply providing student volunteers or interns for an existing community program, the college made its students and staff available as social entrepreneurs who helped design the new program including finding sources of funding needed to make it work. By increasing the chances for academic success and building the aspirations of the children, the conditions contributing to the persistent pattern of educational underachievement and failure among children of families in the housing complexes are being challenged.

Carson-Newman introduced SE into the academic curriculum in 2008. Undergraduate students may now earn a major or minor in SE and typically combine it with another major or minor in an area of study such as business, sociology, religion, or psychology. Two new courses had to be developed (Social Entrepreneurship Seminar and Social Entrepreneurship Practicum), but most of the SE curriculum is being drawn from existing course offerings in business, economics, sociology, psychology, and political science. All SE students also take a course in ethics to reinforce the servant leadership mission of the college, which we see as an essential aspect of this newly emerging field.

Indications are that SE as an area of undergraduate study and career preparation is an idea whose time is rapidly coming. The Ashoka Foundation sponsored its first national conference in SE education at the Duke University Fuqua School

of Business in February 2011. More than 300 educators, practitioners, students, and funders gathered to share ideas and experiences and plan for the future. Ashoka is now in the process of building a consortium of partner campuses committed to excellence in social entrepreneurship education.⁵ Regionally, Berea College is leading the way, having established its Entrepreneurship for the Public Good program in 2007 and hosting the sixth annual Appalachian IDEAS Network social venture competition for undergraduates in 2011.⁶ At Carson-Newman, we hope to do our part by preparing students for a rewarding life of work and service that helps people help themselves in a way that spreads access to rivers of self-sufficiency, community empowerment, and long-term social change.

“We all want to change the world,” sang the Beatles. SE is the new tune that just might make it happen.

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Notes

1. Shah, A. (2010). Poverty Facts and Stats, *Global Issues*, <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>.
2. “What Is a Social Entrepreneur?” Ashoka: Innovators for the Public, http://www.ashoka.org/social_entrepreneur.
3. Bono (2006). “Keynote address at the 54th National Prayer Breakfast,” *American Rhetoric*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/bononationalprayerbreakfast.htm>
4. Osborne, G.L. (August 2010). “You Can’t Fish without a River: Helping Others Help Themselves through Social Entrepreneurship,” Tennessee Valley Institute for Nonprofit Excellence, University of Tennessee–Chattanooga, Chattanooga, TN.
5. For more information including educational resources and networking opportunities, see <http://ashokau.org/>.
6. For more information on the Appalachian IDEAS Network, see <http://www.berea.edu/epg/ideas/default.asp>.