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Reflections on 25 years of building social enterprise education

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# Reflections on 25 years of building social enterprise education

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to reflect on 25 years of the social enterprise initiative at the Harvard Business School, examining the processes and thinking involved at key stages of this pioneering Initiative's implementation and institutionalization.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors adopt an auto-ethnographical approach, reflexively considering the impact of our actions at key stages.

**Findings** – Reflecting on the experiences, the authors offer their thoughts on the challenges involved in establishing an educational program. They consider that there were give stages in the development of the program, which ensured its longevity, institutionalization and success: giving birth; starting an experiment; gaining acceptability; being embraced and achieving irreversibility.

**Practical implications** – The multiple challenges faced, as well as the successes that the authors had over the years, are set out. Awareness of the challenges that the authors faced will support educators to be prepared to overcome the same or similar challenges to implementing and embedding a social enterprise program.

**Originality/value** – This is the first time that the authors' reflections on the history of the Social Enterprise Initiative have been brought together. As well as distinctive in their own right, the authors consider that the lessons learned from the work over such a long period could provide valuable insights to those who wish to integrate social enterprise teaching into their settings.

**Keywords** Social enterprise, Social enterprise initiative, Harvard business school, Education

**Paper type** Viewpoint

In 1993, the Social Enterprise Initiative (SEI) at the Harvard Business School began. Its quarter of a century longevity and growth provides a longitudinal view of the development of social enterprise education. As the founding co-chairs of the SEI, the authors were invited to provide an essay with their reflections on this experience. While every educational institution is unique, we all share commonalities. In contributing an historical account of a pioneering program, it is our hope that some of our observations prove useful to the on-going field-building efforts of our social enterprise education colleagues.

We begin with the factors and actions that led to the birthing of SEI. Then we discuss strategy formulation and evolution. Program implementation and its adaptation over the years describe our efforts and approaches to social enterprise course development, teaching and research. We also reflect on the engagement of key actors: faculty and administration, students, alumni, practitioners, other collaborating educational institutions and colleagues. We examine the process of institutionalizing Social Enterprise into the Harvard Business School and offer our thoughts on the challenges of such educational program development.

## The birthing of the initiative: “social enterprise”

### Context

There were some modestly positive internal and external contextual precursors. Within the HBS curriculum in the 1980s, there were a few faculty members who taught elective



courses dealing with nonprofits (marketing, control and finance, food and nutrition management). A faculty subcommittee was asked to review interest and efforts, and it recommended greater attention be paid to the management of nonprofits. Since 1982, HBS had been providing summer fellowships to those students (around 20 annually) who wished to intern with nonprofit or public service organizations between their first and second years of the MBA program. Thus, there was some faculty and student interests in nonprofits, but this was not seen by most of the faculty as a significant area. Externally, universities were increasingly offering graduate courses on nonprofits, with 17 identified in 1988 and 32 by 1992 (Wish and Mirabella, 1998). There were only a few business schools with any form of engagement, including Case Western Reserve, Yale, Northwestern, and Stanford. Thus, while there was some inside and outside interest, there was no imperative for action.

### *Catalysts*

The initiating catalyst came from HBS alumnus (MBA '47) John Whitehead, who had a distinguished career in the private, public and nonprofit sectors as former co-chair of Goldman Sachs, Deputy Secretary of State and many nonprofit board leadership positions. He believed that HBS could add significant value by applying its management development capabilities to the nonprofit sector, and he offered to the then HBS Dean John McArthur to provide an enabling gift. Importantly, Dean McArthur did not immediately accept the offer, explaining (Austin *et al.*, 2003):

Supporters like Whitehead have always been generous in giving us money to do things, but matching these gifts with the people who have the passion, ideas, and capabilities to build something sustainable with the investment is the hard part. Because of the size of the School and the importance of the issues that such an effort could address, we needed always to engage a significant number of faculty and related support personnel in order to assure sufficient scale so that the new knowledge and ideas being developed could be quickly brought into all of our teaching programs. It was important to me to bet on talented faculty members who wanted to create something new, and then support and protect them.

Thus, a second catalytic element was the Dean's recognition of the potential value of the opportunity and the criticality of leadership to its realization. If it could not be done right, it should not be done at all. In 1993 McArthur tapped senior professor Austin and freshly tenured Rangan. Even though Austin was in the BGIE unit (Business Government and the International Economy) and Rangan in Marketing, both had through their research and teaching shown commitment to the topic, and they gladly accepted the opportunity to stake out a space for the business school on an area of great importance. Concomitantly, McArthur also picked out senior administrator, Bob Burakoff, another committed individual, as Executive Director (E.D.) to provide organizational support to the effort.

### *Collaboration*

From this initial conception onward, collaboration was the SEI's organizational modality of choice, starting with the shared leadership of the co-chairs and the E.D. Our first steps were eliciting the collaboration of tenured and non-tenured colleagues who had an interest in this new area of engagement for the school. They came from different HBS departments, functional expertise and academic disciplines. This group of about ten constituted the founding interest group and served as the advisory committee providing collective guidance. It expanded as the program grew. Faculty were not

assigned to this area; they continued to be housed in their functional units but chose to engage out of interest in the new opportunity and a belief in the undertaking's potential importance for the School.

Rather than immediately move into a programming mode, in the first year, we decided to engage in a process of deepening our understanding of the social sector field by holding consultations with nonprofit leaders, business executives, educators and alumni. This was done by inviting groups of some 25 individuals to the campus for half-day deliberations and discussions. This mechanism of consultative conferences proved highly productive and became a key vehicle for deepening knowledge and triggering programmatic development throughout SEI's evolution.

### *Conceptualization*

This early consultative immersion into multiple practitioner perspectives deepened our understanding and enabled us to conceptualize our undertaking more creatively. In spring 1994, during a 7:00 a.m. brainstorming session of Austin, Rangan and Burakoff, the term "social enterprise"[1] crystallized to describe the broad set of issues and scope of enquiry that best seemed to capture our vision. The larger advisory committee adopted and elaborated the concept and became the Social Enterprise Interest Group. What became clear to the group was that the focal point needed to be first on the societal problem being addressed, rather than on a particular organizational form, which should be a derivative issue. It seemed logical that one should choose the organizational form that can be most effective in mobilizing the resources and efforts required to best address the targeted social problem. It could be a nonprofit, a for-profit, a public entity, a hybrid or some collaborative constellation. That conceptualization unleashed us from organizational myopia and led us to choose "Social Enterprise" to define our distinctive approach. We chose a broad conceptual umbrella and the social enterprise initiative (SEI) was born.

### **Initiating course of action: the first intellectual pillar (1993 to 2005)**

Having spent close to a year on deliberations aimed at constructing the core value proposition of the SEI, we decided that the best course of action would be to do what educational institutions do best – offer educational courses. Our first two course offerings were focused on social entrepreneurship and nonprofit management. The first in 1994 was a second year MBA course titled "Entrepreneurship in the Social Sector," developed and taught by the late Greg Dees. It defined social entrepreneurship as an innovative, social value creating activity that could occur within or across the nonprofit, business or government sectors. The entrepreneurship focus was of great interest to students, with many seeking to take the plunge themselves. The second course offered in the spring of 1995 was aimed at the leaders of nonprofits, "Strategic Perspectives in Nonprofit Management" (SPNM). One of us undertook responsibility for chairing the course, with the teaching faculty members drawn from the ten-person Social Enterprise Interest Group. The focus of this course was on formulating and implementing strategy to achieve mission performance. What the first cohort of senior executives found most impressive was the commitment of the teaching faculty members, all either tenured or on a tenure track, who committed so much of their professional time to understanding, researching and writing about the strategic, organizational, and leadership issues that nonprofits faced. As a result of the initial admiration and trust, many stepped forward to offer their organizations as a research/case site for further course development and the

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virtuous cycle of grounded knowledge-building had begun. Moreover, as the SPNM program steadily grew in enrollment, it was a clear validation of the learning value that the market placed on its content and execution.

Even though both our initial offerings focused on the nonprofit sector, the underlying curricula took a broadened view to embrace all modalities of sustaining the organization's mission, including earned income activities and cross-sector collaborations. Rather than fitting into an increasingly homogeneous curriculum in the nonprofit management field, we expanded educational paths of intellectual enquiry. We also signaled the relevance and importance of the area for our own business school colleagues. Acknowledging that many mainstream businesses have the potential to create good for society but mainly as a second-order effect, our focus was on those organizations that intentionally and deliberately attempted to create social value as its first-order of business. Such a positioning allowed SEI to work its way steadily from the periphery to the core of the business school.

### **Building an operating model**

#### *Mission centrality*

Early on, the Interest Group members unanimously agreed that the undertaking must be central to the School's mission, or it should not be undertaken. The School's MBA mission statement had recently been reformulated as: *Develop outstanding leaders who will make a positive difference in the world.* Our observation of some other schools was that their nonprofit or public service efforts were sometimes relegated to the side as adjunct interest areas, nice but not necessary. This is a risk for any new undertaking, so an integral part of the SEI strategy was demonstrating relevancy and earning credibility. If we could not achieve that, then we did not deserve a place at the table.

#### *Developing and disseminating knowledge*

The *modus operandi* of HBS is to create knowledge and disseminate it through teaching to our graduate students and executives, who then adapt and implement it in practice. Being steeped in the inductive knowledge creation methodology, often our faculty members create knowledge by studying the management challenges faced by organizations and the solution paths they undertake, through field case writing, which then becomes stimuli for class discussions. Through case studies and other empirical methods, our faculty members then engage in research which sheds light on the problem and its solutions, highlighting best practices and pointing out pitfalls. SEI had started with the two-pronged educational mission, a course offering each at the MBA level and the executive level, so it was only logical that we focused on a deliberate knowledge-creation phase to complete our third leg. The three legs support each other strengthening teaching, research and its dissemination. Thus, we started a process in 1996 to create a research forum to focus on what is unique about strategy formulation and implementation in the social sector. The process led to the publication of over a dozen high-quality papers in two special issues of two leading academic journals, *Nonprofit and Volunteer Sector Quarterly* (NVSQ) and *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* (NML). The process connected HBS faculty members to other scholars in the non-profit academy, and in turn the non-profit academy took notice of HBS's scholarly and distinctive contributions to the social sector.

The same three-pronged approach which had become the core operating principle of SEI's intellectual thrust launched our second major initiative in the first decade. In 2003, we added a focus on public education (K through 12) in the USA. We developed jointly with

colleagues from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the “Public Education Leadership Program (PELP)” serving selected leadership teams from major school systems around the USA. Simultaneously, we launched an MBA course, “Entrepreneurship in Educational Reform.” Both these courses were backed by intense field research, and case writing leading up to two conferences and two books.

It is not our suggestion that every academic institution undertake the same three-pronged knowledge creation and dissemination model, just that by adopting HBS’s central model, we gained the acceptance of the majority of the rest of our colleagues in the disciplinary units. We were not viewed as a one-off program, but as something central to HBS’s mission to educate leaders who would make a positive difference. The implication for other academic social enterprise undertakings, therefore, is that they should attempt to craft the same central operating model that characterizes their larger institution’s core mission.

*Faculty engagement: “the magnet model”*

We needed to inform our business school colleagues about a sector with which most were unfamiliar, starting with its economic significance. The initial emphasis was on the established nonprofit sector rather than the newer and broader social enterprise concept. The nonprofit field was undergoing significant growth and the 1.2 million organizations constituted about 8 per cent of the US workforce (11 million people), larger than many other sectors, such as agriculture, transport, commerce, finance, real estate (Salamon, 2000). These were economic actors that merited attention on that dimension, not just their social contributions.

Because Social Enterprise is inherently multi-functional and interdisciplinary, it needed junior and senior faculty from throughout the business school. All were attracted by the social value of the undertaking, the perceived importance to HBS, the new intellectual challenges, and its distinctive practitioner group. The approach was to create three concentric circles of engagement with a core faculty whose primary teaching and research was in social enterprise. We started with a small faculty of three in the first year to a little over six in subsequent years. The next circle of about ten faculty members had primary assignments elsewhere but engaged consistently in substantive ways with SEI research and/or teaching. Most faculty in this inner second circle played significant roles over an extended period, before they naturally cycled off, and their numbers have stayed more or less consistent over the years. And, finally, a broad set of another 20 faculty members who participated periodically in specific teaching or research activities that emerged as the SEI portfolio evolved. The SEI approach was to create interesting opportunities for faculty involvement and make that administratively easy and time-efficient. Initial engagements often grew into deeper participation. We dubbed this faculty engagement model, the “*magnet model*,” to signify that a strong inner core with intellectual vitality was critical to attract talent from other units and departments to participate, nourish, and gain from our core intellectual effort.

As part of the core SEI faculty, the School recruited high-level executives who had excelled both as private sector business managers and social sector CEOs. They enriched our research insights into practice, brought great credibility to the classroom, and added program management capabilities to support SEI growth. SEI also recruited junior tenure track faculty in social enterprise, in addition to attracting junior faculty from other departments, many of whom subsequently have been promoted to full professors and remain engaged with SEI.

*Field building*

In addition to the internal collaboration discussed above within HBS departments and joint programs with other Harvard Graduate schools (Government, Education, Medical, Engineering), SEI from its inception has engaged with other institutions beyond HBS to collaboratively advance the social enterprise field. Every step of progress in one school is a help to all; we build the field together. When we collaborate, our potential for impact moves to the nth power.

In recognition of the growing global importance of social enterprise, in 2003, SEI initiated a major international partnering endeavor with seven leading management schools in Latin America (subsequently adding a Spanish school) to develop the Social Enterprise Knowledge Network (SEKN). The goal was to carry out significant field research and course development and build social enterprise programs in all the schools. The field research was the driver. We collectively identified a priority research topic, designed a common set of research questions and methodology and then selected a set of about five social enterprises in each country that fit the research focus. Each school carried out the research and produced an analytical paper encompassing their sample enterprises. Additionally, they developed teaching cases on these organizations. The SEKN “school” then held periodic research retreats to review the full set of papers and cases. SEKN’s first two research cycles from 2001 to 2005, undertaken with support from the AVINA foundation, produced two books and two dozen cases, and that productivity has continued. Perhaps the most significant aspect of SEKN is the reversal of the traditional knowledge flow of North to South. This is the South producing knowledge flow for the South and for the North.

By the end of the first decade much had been achieved. Seven MBA courses and nine executive education courses had been developed and offered. About 200 MBA students/year and 248 executive students/year participated in our educational offerings. Several conferences and research forums were hosted, 227 cases and 73 articles were written, as well as books. In addition to increasing our impact on practice through executive education programs, we also started to develop tailor-made programs to fit the special needs of different high-impact organizations. For example, in 1998, we created a program for the national board of the NAACP, the oldest racial justice organization in the USA, with whom we hosted annual retreats, starting on board development and then strategic planning. In 2003, then NAACP Chairman, Julian Bond described the relationship with HBS as having been transformational for the organization. [Appendix 1](#) presents an abridged description of the chronological development of our activities in the first decade.

**Fulfilling our value proposition: the second intellectual pillar (2005-2018)**

Having felt reassured that we had gotten off to a robust start and having made important contributions in the social sector field, we turned our attention to the second pillar under the Social Enterprise umbrella which fulfilled the promise of our initial conceptualization. We turned our attention to for-profit models centered on intentionally and deliberately creating social value. The timing was ripe. Throughout the 1990s, business was booming and new business models spawned by the dot.com bubble made it appear as though prosperity would pervade all sections of the economy and society. But the meltdown towards the end of the decade brought a cold reality to the limits of business. Corporate social responsibility had come of age, and thought leaders were advocating a more integrated view of business and social responsibility. Even more importantly, the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York, forced all sections of society, business, government and the social sector to retreat and reflect on how and why the world had come to its current state. Yet, despite these set-backs,

globalization was proceeding at an increased pace, and the world was becoming even more of a connected network.

Of the nearly 7 billion people on the planet, nearly two-thirds were living on less than \$10/day. Most such low-income populations were not at the receiving end of hand-outs, rather they were working and eking out a living in terribly inefficient markets for everything from food to education to health care. In 2006, Professor Yunus, founder of the pioneering microfinance Grameen Bank, won the Noble prize, and in his acceptance speech offered the vision of what he termed, "social business." Given all of the above compelling circumstances regarding the role of business in economic and social development, we at SEI built on our work from the first decade and started a concerted set of research and course development activities to address the second wave.

### *Business for social impact*

Whereas social entrepreneurship and nonprofit and public education management were the key themes of our first pillar, our second pillar added the theme of Business for Social Impact. In the first decade, we did have initial course offerings in this space, but in the second decade, we gave it greater strategic thrust. For example, we had offered a course entitled Business Leadership in the Social Sector. The course underwent several changes, mirroring the interests of the faculty delivering the material, winding up with the straightforward, corporate social responsibility in the second decade. The SEI operating principle of the three mutually reinforcing legs (MBA course, Exec. Ed course and research) characterized all our offerings in the second decade as well. Our most important thrust was aimed at studying global business models aimed at citizens in low income brackets (roughly 4.75 billion people live on incomes of less than \$10/day). The defining question was whether for-profit business models could bring them their necessities, including jobs, to help them gain mobility through the income ladder. Interestingly, Business at the Base of the Pyramid (BBOP) started with a research phase. In 2005, we hosted a conference on Business Solutions for the Global Poor; the collection of papers presenting quality solutions to food, water, energy, education, microfinance and other such needs for the low-income populations was published as a book, which then became the foundation for a second year MBA BBOP course. Student interest and feedback led to its rapid scaling to over three sections and 200 students by its 4th year. In 2006, the executive education component of BBOP was developed and implemented with an external partner ACCION, a pioneering financial intermediary in the microfinance business. Together we designed and launched the Strategic Leadership in Microfinance course, which evolved into Strategic Leadership in Financial Inclusion (SELF) by 2016 as part of HBS's executive education portfolio. This course, like SPNM, has rapidly gained the reputation for being an industry leader in the field.

As a natural extension of our focus on Business for Social Impact, in 2016, we launched into course development and research on the topic of impact investing, an approach to intentionally seeking social (and environmental) impact alongside financial returns. New focused funds and asset managers have brought in roughly \$250bn to this asset class in the past decade. Questions regarding the inter-play between risk, returns and impact become important to explore. As with the BBOP knowledge stream, here, too, we started with an industry conference, convening the leading practitioners of the field for their insights. Subsequently, we went out to the field and wrote some two dozen case studies to launch an MBA elective course. We are now in the middle of our third leg of a deep dive research project.

We noticed a pleasantly surprising statistic in terms of student enrollments as we launched the second pillar. Roughly two-thirds of the students taking our various Business



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for Social Impact courses were not core “social enterprise” seekers. They were business-oriented and expected to work for commercial entities on graduation. Yet they were intrigued and inspired by the focus of the courses on business as a force for good and were taking the courses to gain general management knowledge on how to do it well. Their hope is that one day as they ascend the management ranks they will be able to influence their companies to develop business strategies that bring value to society and shareholders. Broadening our course portfolio not only was a way to fulfill our original vision for social enterprise, it also expanded our influence on students who had entered the program with a clear goal of seeking a business career.

See [Appendix 2](#) for a chronology of the activities undertaken under the second pillar.

### *Research*

Generating knowledge was central to building the Social Enterprise program and the field. Since its inception, HBS faculty have produced over 400 social enterprise-related articles, books, chapters, including award-winning and highly cited publications.

The course development and corresponding field-based case research discussed above often led to further research efforts, and, similarly, research projects on specific topics or phenomenon also gave rise to teaching cases. They were at all times synergistic. Another path was faculty members exploring, extending, and adapting their disciplinary frameworks to the distinctive characteristics of organizations in the social enterprise realm. Among the publications are numerous examples of faculty members in areas of accounting and control, strategy, finance, marketing, organizational behavior and general management.

Another important mechanism that we used to focus attention, deepen collective understanding and stimulate research and course development was consultative research forums on social enterprise topics that SEI identified as of high importance. Basically, we convened key practitioners from the relevant sectors and researchers from Harvard and other universities to identify and explore key issues and knowledge gaps. Interested SEI faculty members chaired the events. Often working papers were developed as a basis for discussing the topics. These gatherings repeatedly provided critical guidance to develop new areas of engagement for the SEI. See [Appendix 3](#).

### *A new research experiment: the impact “collaboratory”*

Despite our many successes, because of the relatively small size of the core faculty compared to the disciplinary units (less than five FTE at any time compared to an average of 20 FTE), we felt the need for a different model to be able to continue to contribute break-through ideas for the field. As an experiment, in 2017, we decided to undertake a collaborative research effort on impact investing. The topic itself suggests at least two different entry points to judge its success, the investment side and the impact side. Moreover, the interactions between the two are fertile areas for research inquiry. Given the early stage of the field’s development, we felt that inductive field research would have to precede empirical testing. As such, four faculty members aligned with SEI have pooled our research resources and set up the “collaboratory” to undertake a joint investigation. The collaboration is not just among us, but also with a sample of eight carefully chosen fund managers who represent the impact investing spectrum. We hope this mechanism will allow us to amplify our research voice in the field and our influence on practice, despite our small numbers.

### **Operating model: the other half**

Social enterprise has become an important operating component of the Harvard Business School. Its form as an Initiative was an organizational innovation for the School. Rather than

being a stand-alone department like the existing functional areas, it created a focal point of engagement for faculty members from all the functional areas, while at the same time having a small core faculty to provide leadership and staff major courses. A key element was a very talented administrative leadership of five successive talented Executive Directors (Robert Burakoff, Stacey Childress, Steve Nelson, Laura Moon and the current Director Matt Segneri) who built an administration that leveraged the scarce faculty time and provided leadership and support to the wide range of social enterprise activities aimed at making social enterprise omnipresent at HBS. Our graduate students have a life beyond the courses they take. They engage in summer jobs, do voluntary projects for clients, organize events on campus to support interests of their colleagues and in general bring a vitality to their academic life. And after they graduate as alumni, they continue to participate and extend their interests while keeping in touch with the school. The SEI administrative team has played a leadership role in supporting this portfolio of important student activities.

### **Student engagement**

The primary focus of the SEI has always been on our MBA students. Our approach has been to support them in a multitude of ways that enables them to develop maximally their capabilities and interests in social enterprise. The classroom and field-based courses constitute the academic curriculum, but other learning experiences are also deemed important. We facilitate summer internships at social enterprises by encouraging these organizations to offer such opportunities to the students and we provide monetary fellowships that help both the students and organizations. In 2017, there were 69 summer fellows in 16 different countries, with 1,570 fellows since inception. Students undertaking Social Enterprise Independent Studies could also apply for reimbursement of related costs. The goal is to reduce barriers to meaningful engagements. This also extends into career placement. SEI's administrative team works with the MBA Career Services to encourage social organizations to recruit our MBAs. To encourage and facilitate students' pursuing such opportunities, the School has had a program that forgives a portion of educational loans for students who take jobs with nonprofits, public sector institutions, or social enterprises (including for-profit). Currently, 58 recent graduates have such support. In addition, SEI created in 2001 the Leadership Fellows program in which a small group of graduating MBAs are chosen to work with a highly selective set of outstanding nonprofit or public service organizations in which SEI fully funds students. There have been 190 Fellows since inception with a focus on two key objectives: providing social-sector organizations with access to analytic and strategic talent to deliver high-impact results; encouraging emerging leaders to develop an appreciation for and understanding of the complexities of leading in the social sector. HBS Fellows have worked with organizations as diverse as the City of Boston Mayor's Office, Harlem Children's Zone, Whitney Museum of Art, Mercy Corps, World Wildlife Fund and the US Department of Education.

SEI's student engagement efforts start at the very beginning by focusing on recruitment and admissions of students into the MBA program. SEI opened the door to an entirely new pool of talented individuals with distinctive sets of experiences and perspectives that would enrich the collective learning environment. Consequently, SEI and Admissions teams made efforts to interest and recruit such potential students, frequently providing tuition fellowships. From almost no presence, approximately 10 per cent of the entering MBA class now comes from the social or public sectors.

Another guideline was to empower students to shape the School's Social Enterprise environment in ways that best responded to their needs and interests. They are not simply

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recipients, rather, they are protagonists in shaping the educational process. As part of creating their community of interest, the students formed the Social Enterprise Club, which in 2018 had over 246 members, making it one of the largest clubs on campus. The Club organizes a wide variety of activities to further their learning and career development. They support interest groups in education, international development, for-profit social enterprise, effective altruism, social entrepreneurship and community/social justice in addition to collaborating with other groups at HBS and in the broader community.

There are other clubs that provide additional opportunities for student involvement in social enterprise related areas. On the sectoral side, the Energy and Environment Club and the Healthcare Club organize conferences, career treks, networking events with practitioners. The Government and Public Policy Club provides a forum for students to explore the intersection of and relationship between business, government and politics domestically and internationally. In the applied area, the Consulting for Impact Club strives to provide students with the opportunity to develop and apply their MBA skillset by working on strategic projects with local non-profit organizations and serving on their boards as non-voting members. In the philanthropic area, the Harbus Foundation is run exclusively by HBS students, manages an endowment of over \$1m, and each year it makes grant awards totaling \$50-60 thousand to organizations promoting education, literacy and journalism in the Boston area. The Impact Investing Club aims to provide students with the skills, experience and network necessary to become the next generation of impact investing leaders.

The largest event organized by the HBS social enterprise students in collaboration with their counterparts in the Harvard Kennedy School of Government is the annual Social Enterprise Conference that brings speakers, practitioners, students and academics from all sectors to share experiences, insights, perspectives and views of the future. With an average attendance of 1,169, it is a major social enterprise gathering. While SEI faculty and administrators are supportive of the effort, the students organize and implement it.

### **Applied and experiential learning**

Classroom case-based discussion exposes students to actual organizations and their realities. To enrich this exposure further, instructors often invite SE practitioners who are protagonists in the case to attend class and interact with the students after they have discussed the case. However, engaging students with social enterprise beyond the classroom has always been an integral part of our learning approach. We incorporated into our first course, Entrepreneurship in the Social Sector, a field component in which student teams would spend the latter portion of the semester working with collaborating social organizations on a problem or issue that the organization's leader deemed important. The teams would make final presentations to the organizations and to their classmates. Since 2004, in the Social Enterprise Track in the annual New Venture Competition, 580 student teams with 1,537 students have presented their social venture plans (nonprofit and for profit); 69 teams participated in 2018. Other courses were entirely field-based and another, the Innovation Lab, focused on developing venture plans for their own or other social enterprises. In addition, on average 60 individual students annually take on an Independent Study in Social Enterprise supervised by a professor to pursue a particular topic of interest, usually involving field work.

### **Alumni engagement**

Our alumni are who produce our impact on society. Our connection with them does not end upon graduation. Rather, the relationship continues throughout their career and the bond is

mutual. SEI offered alumni a new dimension for engagement. SEI worked with alumni associations in major cities assisting them in developing further their volunteer consulting services to nonprofit organizations. Called Community Action Partners (CAP), our alumni provide valuable consulting engagements to local nonprofits on a pro-bono basis. Many of our HBS Alumni Clubs, for example Boston, NY, and San Francisco, each run a version of the CAP program to address the unique needs of their constituency. Graduates who entered the social enterprise field were of special interest and support. They created a Social Enterprise Alumni interest group of over 800 that fostered interaction, mutual support, and continuing professional development. In 2017, our alumni created an impact investing interest group to network and be in touch with each other, as also HBS faculty who offered webinars on the topic. Similarly, an education-focused interest group has formed in Boston. To document and disseminate the engagement and impact of its graduates, SEI follows graduates' careers and spotlights their activities in its communications. A 1995 survey documented that 81 per cent had in one way or another engaged with nonprofits with 57 per cent having participated in board positions. About 10 per cent of recent graduates (25-29 years old) had served on nonprofit boards, and after 55 years of age the participation rate was 70 per cent (Austin, 1998).

### **The score card at the end of the second decade**

From one initial MBA elective course in 1994 with 70 students, SEI in 2018 offered seven courses engaging over 410 students. For practitioners, the SEI provided in 2018 four annual open enrollment executive education offerings serving 384 leaders and another four customized programs for specific organizations with 281 participants. The latest custom program is with the Boys and Girls Club of America, the country's largest youth development organization, aimed at training their club leaders and national program officers as they gear up to achieve their 2025 "great futures" plan. On average, we have created almost one new course yearly, with our most recent being Public Entrepreneurship, which focuses on the government manager and how to bring innovation to the work they do. Our latest executive education program is an extension of the nonprofit senior leadership program in India, undertaken in partnership with a local university there. Over the 25 years, we have served in our courses cumulatively 7,565 graduate students and 12,329 executive practitioners.

Since the inception of the SEI, faculty has produced over 1,000 cases and accompanying teaching notes that delineates for instructors its learning objectives, teaching plan and analysis. These materials constitute the field's largest social enterprise case study collection and are available to educators via Harvard Business Publishing.

Because the cases are studies of managerial situations in actual social enterprises, they serve as vehicles to immerse students in the realities of practice. The field based-research needed to develop cases informs and deepens faculty members' understanding of the social enterprise phenomenon. Thus, we are continually learning by producing these pedagogical materials. Each case study enables students to absorb specific content, concepts and skills relevant to social enterprise, but the process itself also deepens their generic managerial capabilities.

See [Appendix 4](#) for the enrollments in the various educational programs at inflection points, and [Appendix 5](#) for the cumulative outputs.

### **Integration**

Social enterprise has become an integral part of the fabric of the Harvard Business School. Its form as an Initiative was an organizational innovation for the School. Rather than being a

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stand-alone department like the existing functional areas, it created a focal point of engagement for faculty members from all the functional areas, while at the same time having a small core faculty to provide leadership and staff major courses, and a small administrative staff to provide vital support. Subsequently, the initiative format has been used to launch a wide variety of other undertakings.

Social enterprise and innovation programs are now widely found in business schools. A Skoll Foundation study by The Bridgespan Group concluded:

The headline is that social impact has entered the mainstream, often led by tremendous demand from students (and increasingly, alumni) for more robust programming and solutions. No longer a niche concept, our research found that university-based social impact Centers (an umbrella term for the purposes of this report) have now successfully moved beyond the “1.0” stage and are increasingly considered must-have offerings on the crowded radar screens of deans and senior faculty sponsors, not to mention wealthy alumni. Increasingly, university leaders are tying these Centers’ missions ever more closely in to their schools’ overall core missions [...] Ten years ago, merely establishing such a Center was a distinctive act of leadership, but now it is viewed as table stakes. (The Bridgespan Group, 2017, p. 5)

Underlying and propelling this growth in academic programs is the dramatic proliferation of social enterprises, which in turn are strengthened by the universities’ increased training and research. While social enterprise creation is still only a small portion of total firm creation, it is one of the dynamic new growth areas (Terjesen *et al.*, 2012). Entrepreneurship programs are increasingly adding social entrepreneurship courses, in recognition of its distinctiveness and importance (Austin *et al.*, 2006).

#### *Leadership and continuity*

Another dimension of institutionalization is leadership succession and continuity. The launching and guidance of any new program requires individuals who are committed to the undertaking and willing to invest the requisite time and effort. If the program is overly dependent on a single individual, it is fragile. Every founding entrepreneur’s job is to work him or herself out of a job; institutionalization is the true test of success. SEI’s collective approach to leadership and decision-making created broad ownership and its growing centrality to the School’s mission ensured that new leaders would be identified and supported as needed. Austin and Rangan provided joint leadership for the first decade. Prior to Austin’s stepping down, they did a major search and succeeded in having Dutch Leonard, a chaired professor at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, accept a joint, half-time, appointment at HBS and assume the co-leadership with Rangan, which continues onto this day. Austin remained half-time at the school for two more years to be supportive in the leadership transition.

There was also, as is to be expected, turnover of other faculty members who contributed importantly to SEI development. Late Professor Greg Dees moved on to serve leadership roles at Stanford and Duke and the field in general. Several others have followed analogous pathways. While the exit of important SEI contributors always created moments of stress and loss, we feel positive about their ongoing contributions elsewhere to the building of the social enterprise field. The growth of the field also meant that we were able to attract outstanding academics. Internally, there continues to be growing engagement by next generation faculty, both senior and junior. The linkages between Harvard Schools also strengthen with joint appointments. For example, Julie Battilana, a leading expert in hybrid organizations received joint chaired professorships at HBS and KSG, where she also heads the newly founded Social Innovation and Change Initiative.

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At the top, there have been four Deans during the life of SEI (John MacArthur, Kim Clark, Jay Light, and currently Nitin Nohria). Each has provided unswerving support for SEI, which they viewed as an essential enriching part of the School's institutional fabric.

SEI recruited several outstanding social enterprise alumni and other leading practitioners to serve as an Advisory Board. John Whitehead, the originating impetus for SEI, served for many years as the Chair. The current board is chaired by Tom Tierney, who has had a distinguished private sector career and was the co-founder of The Bridgespan Group, a leading social sector consulting firm. The Board meets annually and plays an important role in providing the SEI with an outside practitioner perspective. Practitioners are the teachers of teachers.

#### *Mainstreaming and pervasiveness*

Throughout its 25-year life, we have aimed to mainstream social enterprise into every facet of the School by:

- developing outstanding new courses and learning experiences in the School's MBA and Executive Education teaching programs, and enabling faculty to engage in these teaching activities; in effect, this is the market test of whether your new product can attract students and faculty;
- encouraging and assisting faculty to undertake important and publishable research that will advance the academic field and contribute meaningfully to practice; this is the knowledge generation test;
- providing students with comprehensive support that will enable and empower them to realize fully opportunities to learn and engage in the social enterprise area;
- engaging with, learning from and contributing to social enterprise practitioners;
- connecting with and mobilizing alumni to support and engage in social enterprise;
- collaborating with all HBS operational entities that can contribute to the students' social enterprise experience from admissions through to placement, in effect, a full cycle support system.

#### **Final reflections**

The creation of a vibrant social enterprise program within a university is, at its core, an intrapreneurial process. The creation of SEI identified an opportunity to create new educational and social value, conceptualized an innovative approach, engaged key stakeholders, mobilized required resources, progressed through continual learning and programmatic innovation.

#### *Development stages*

What we have experienced and witnessed over the decades suggest to us that there are five stages in the development of such a program to ensure its success and irreversibility at an institution.

- (1) *Giving birth.* While every program's emergence is unique, they all suffer the labor pains of birth. It is exhilarating but exhausting for the academic intrapreneur. One

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- way or another the creative and persistent intrapreneurs figure out how to get it started.
- (2) *Starting an experiment.* Universities are usually resistant to major changes but are tolerant of experiments. One is given room to fiddle around. Expectations generally are that most experiments will fail, so they are not taken very seriously by the rest of the community. The intrapreneur has to develop immunity to skepticism. This is sort of the Field of Dreams phase of “If you build it, will they come?” But if they build it with you, even more will come. Empower the students, and then get out of their way. They can do amazing things. The academic intrapreneur is trying to find the hot buttons to turn on students, faculty colleagues, funders, and administrators. There is no better hot button than one’s own conviction and passion for the cause. One has to believe in its potential for galvanizing others’ interests, that’s where it all starts.
  - (3) *Gaining acceptability.* The experiments show increasingly positive results: students respond with growing enthusiasm; faculty begin to engage in teaching and research that has the potential for publications; alumni start seeing this as an exciting and important new area for their business school and those alumni who had already ventured out into the social enterprise field find it validating of their career paths; administrators begin to see it as a possible positive addition to the school’s activities. There is usually a tendency in educational institutions to rely on scholars of great reputation to lead them into new areas of interest. While that is always a good idea, it is just as important to have the “intrapreneur” mentality in the founding team to ensure that the initial experiments are successful. Often the available financial and material resources are frugal, yet the intrapreneur has to look for creative ways to engage the most critical resource of all: intellectual resources of colleagues. You must reach a critical mass of grey matter by capturing colleague’s mind share and this happens one professor at a time by creating opportunities that help them see how their distinctive competencies can be applied to the social arena.
  - (4) *Being embraced.* Students start creating additional activities; senior and junior faculty seek out opportunities to participate in the program and new courses are offered for students and social enterprise executives; practitioners recognize the utility of new courses and research; alumni and other funders begin to provide increased financial support; administrators provide growing programmatic assistance. Senior leaders of the institution increasingly refer to this new area of programmatic activity in their communications with external constituencies. The development office, in particular, has new and compelling stories to engage committed alumni who seek to support the school on a higher purpose than just academic programs. The spillover fundraising from SEI to the rest of the institution further fuels its internal support.
  - (5) *Achieving irreversibility.* Social enterprise is viewed as central to the school’s mission. Students expect to have SE as part of a school’s offering and incorporate that into their school selection process. Student clubs are formed and flourish as a campus force. Significant new intellectual capital is produced and published. The field is recognized as a legitimate and important area of study by internal colleagues and external academic associations. SE is integrated into the curriculum and a robust offering created in the electives and executive education programs. The linkages between academics and practitioners and the presence of applied learning expand and deepen.

External funding from alums and others solidifies the financial base. An administrative staff dedicated to the initiative is in place. Admissions staff seeks out students from the social sector, which is viewed as a significant new talent pool, and Placement staff ensures that opportunity paths are enabled upon graduation. SE is presented internally and externally as an important part of the school structure, content and values. Whereas before, the presence of Social Entrepreneurship would be considered unique, at this stage its absence would be notable.

### *Challenges of institutionalization*

While the SEI is now widely considered an important part of HBS with the School actively celebrating this year its 25th Anniversary, it has experienced and will continue to encounter multiple challenges, which we suspect also face other university social enterprise undertakings.

Organizational structure and concomitant staffing is a major challenge. Our intrapreneurial approach was launched as an initiative, which allowed us to attract interested faculty across the School's functional departments. Given that social enterprise is inherently multi-functional and multi-disciplinary, that is an advantage. However, the challenge has been not having a large enough, fully dedicated faculty to expand course offerings. For example, given the large scale of the HBS two-year MBA program (ten sections of 90 students/section), each of the required courses in the first-year need at least five instructors, plus others to teach the simultaneously offered second year elective curriculum. Being a small entity in an emerging academic field has also constrained the pool of new social enterprise faculty willing to embark on a riskier tenure track path. At the same time, colleagues with a social enterprise inclination who gain tenure through the traditional functional units retain obligations to that group. Until we gain adequate scale of fully dedicated social enterprise faculty, we will find it hard to get a space in the first year of the MBA curriculum where every course is "required." That is the space where we see further opportunity to inspire and motivate our entire student body on the various "higher purpose" topics underlying the work of the SEI.

We have often debated internally on the advantages and disadvantages of striving to gain "department/unit," status and have invariably come to the conclusion that the advantages of continuing as an initiative far outweighed the potential positives of being a department discussed above. Apart from the difficulty of hiring and/or developing a full slate of social enterprise faculty, the latter path is far more entrepreneurial. It gives us the opportunity to attract faculty with diverse disciplinary interests at different stages of their career, even if it is only for a part of their time. When talented individuals give a part of their time and attention to programs that are of significant importance to us at social enterprise, it has paid us rich dividends, except with a minor hitch. Our part-time faculty engage in significant intellectual and leadership activities in other areas in their remaining time, and thus are not always available to also engage in institutional building activities for SEI. Almost all the new initiatives at SEI have been initiated and nourished by a small cadre of full time faculty. If we at SEI fall short on this critical aspect of our intrapreneurship, we will not be able to attract talented faculty for some of their time to come embellish and improve our Version 1.0 offerings, and without constant new platforms, our relevance could diminish. The "magnet model" could unravel.

### *Discovering new frontiers: the higher purpose of business*

In closing, perhaps we should not be satisfied benchmarking ourselves with the systems and structures that characterize success at leading academic institutions such as the Harvard



Business School, perhaps we should be looking to the stars for inspiration. Borrowing from Star Trek, “these are voyages of the Starship Social Enterprise; its mission is to go where no one has gone before.” There is much to be discovered. Perhaps there is a radically new model at play, and we are only at the beginning of its evolution. That is the exciting future that awaits us. One vision of that future is to aim for the core of a business school to be transformed to that higher purpose of putting society at the center. Profits and shareholder value are important for many reasons, least of which to spark innovation and investment, but they are only means to a journey, not the end in itself. Imagine if that were the future then we at the SEI should be attempting to take an even more central position by convincing the other disciplines to integrate into our future rather than the other way around.

So, friends, let us all go forth and continue to make the world a better place and smile while we are doing it. Many thanks to all builders of social enterprise education for doing what you do and what you will do to build an even better future.

### Note

1. Ashoka’s founder Bill Drayton had previously set forth the term social entrepreneurship.

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### Further reading

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**Appendix 1. The chronological evolution of SEI in the first decade (1994-2005)**

- 1994. Our first MBA elective course was “Entrepreneurship in the Social Sector” which soon attracted sufficient student interest to become a two-section course.
- 1995. To reach practitioners we mounted a two-week executive education program aimed at nonprofit leaders, “Strategic Perspectives in Nonprofit Management” (SPNM), which was very well-received and has become a core oversubscribed program ever since.
- 1996. The following year, we focused on governance and added the “Governing for Nonprofit Excellence” (GNE) executive education course.
- 1998. We broadened the social enterprise MBA offerings to encompass corporate engagement with the “Business Leadership and Strategic Corporate Citizenship” course.
- 2001. In collaboration with colleagues from the Kennedy School of Government’s Hauser Center on Nonprofits, we responded to a growing practitioner need by creating the more skill-focused executive course “Performance Measurement for Effective Management of Nonprofit Organizations” (PMNO). Also, in that year, within the MBA program we collaborated with our HBS colleagues in the entrepreneurship area to introduce the “Social Enterprise Track in the annual New Venture Competition”, which further integrated SEI into the mainstream curriculum and fostered applied learning experiences. Each year thereafter the SE participation has become more robust and integral to this important activity.
- 2003. We next shifted to a specific high priority social sector: public education. We developed jointly with colleagues from the Harvard Graduate School of Education the “Public Education Leadership Program” (PELP) serving selected leadership teams from major school systems around the U.S. Simultaneously, we launched an MBA course “Entrepreneurship in Educational Reform,” which attracted strong student interest.

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**Appendix 2. Chronological evolution of social enterprise in the second decade (2006-2018)**

- 2005. We added for our corporate constituency a “Corporate Social Responsibility” executive education course, in which we also introduced the concept of Corporate Social Entrepreneurship. Also, in 2005, to address more directly global poverty issues we focused on microfinance and created an executive education program in partnership with ACCION, for leaders of those social enterprises around the world.
- 2006. We followed by incorporating a “Business at the Base of the Pyramid” as a two-section MBA elective course, which soon went to three sections by 2010.
- 2007. The elective “Commerce and Society” was introduced as another iteration in the corporate engagement portfolio.
- 2008. “Leading and Governing High-Performing Nonprofit Organizations” entered the elective curriculum.
- 2010. Health was added as another priority area in our sectoral portfolio and “Managing Global Health” entered as an MBA elective.
- 2011. “Leadership and Management in the Face of Large-Scale Risk” was added.
- 2012. While some of our existing electives had field experience components, we mounted the “Social Innovation Lab” in which student teams develop business plans for their own social enterprise or solve a strategic problem of a client(s). A second applied learning opportunity field course introduced that year was “Social Impact Investing,” focused on this increasingly important source of social enterprise capital.
- 2015. We explicitly encompassed the public sector into our institutional perspectives with the introduction of the “Public Entrepreneurship” MBA elective.
- 2016. “Strategic Leadership in Financial Inclusion” designed for the microfinance industry.
- 2017. “Investing for Impact” was offered as a half-course, and quickly scaled to a full course by 2018.
- 2017. Our flagship executive education course SPNM was offered in India as Strategic Nonprofit Management (SNMI) in partnership with a local academic partner, Ashoka University. It quickly scaled to two sections by 2018.

In addition to these SEI courses, there are another seven courses highly relevant to social enterprise that were incorporated by faculty members into the MBA curriculum, for example, building sustainable cities and infrastructure, creating shared value: competitive advantage through social impact, immersive field course: Africa; building cities, managing change and transformation, power and influence, reimagining capitalism, the role of government in market economies. These courses in 2017-18 served another 653 students. Indirectly, SEI has contributed to a curricular environment more open and conducive to socially relevant issues and areas.

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**Appendix 3. Research forums**

- Business leadership in the social sector (1997) under the leadership of Professor Rosabeth Kanter brought together business and community leaders and academics to explore new roles for business to generate social value.
- Social enterprise research forum (1998) brought together 55 experts who came to present papers and explore the question, “Can the models used to manage in the private sector be adapted to help nonprofits operate more effectively and strategically?” The attendees were a diverse cross-section of academics from sociology, political science, economics, business and public affairs, from more than a dozen universities, while a quarter of the participants were practitioners. In 2000, the two leading nonprofit academic journals, *Nonprofit and Volunteer Sector Quarterly (NVSQ)* and *Nonprofit Management and Leadership (NML)*, published special editions, from which emerged seminal articles.
- Consumer-driven health care (1999). Professor Regina Herzlinger, a member of the Social Enterprise Interest Group, and colleagues produced major papers and convened over 200 experts. Herzlinger noted, “The conference provided a wonderful kick-off for the consumer-driven health care movement. The movement gained depth and momentum from the distinguished conference participants, each of whom approached the subject from his or her unique perspective.
- Global poverty: Business solutions and approaches (2005) brought together 120 academics and business, nonprofit and government leaders from around the world, resulting in a book, an MBA elective course and an executive education program for leaders in the microfinance industry.
- Public education leadership forum (2007). Key leaders, alumni, school superintendents, were convened to debrief and discuss how to carry the lessons and research from ongoing programs to the policy sphere.
- High-impact philanthropy (2009); social impact investing (2011); venture philanthropy (2013); business for social impact (2014) provided an extended sequential set of conferences of practitioners and academics on these related areas that enabled the development of social enterprise impact investing in the SEI portfolio.

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**Appendix 4. Enrolled in educational programs**

 Social  
enterprise  
education

First pillar nonprofit strategy, management and leadership	Second pillar business for social impact	Enrollment in 1994/1995	Enrollments in 2004/2005	Enrollments in 2016/2017
MBA-Elective courses on Social Enterprise topics including K-12 education		100	225	210
Executive Education courses on Nonprofit Strategy, Leadership and Governance		50	240	299
MBA Career Programs*		30	145	290
	MBA-Elective courses on the topics of Business for Social Good		50	200
	Executive Education courses on Microfinance and Financial Inclusion			85
	Custom Executive Education for select groups and organizations		52	281

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**21**
**Table AI.**


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**Appendix 5. Social enterprise cumulative output (1994-2017)**

Number of cases published	1,050
Number of books published	10
Number of articles published	250
MBA enrollment (cumulative total)	7,565
MBA Career Programs*	3,200
Executive Education enrollment (cumulative total)	12,329

**Note:** \*includes social enterprise track of the new venture competition and the summer Fellowship and Leadership Fellows programs

**Table AII.**


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