

# Transformative Learning through Social Entrepreneurship at Community Colleges

By: Amy Schulz

Education focused on social entrepreneurship and innovation prepares students for an ever-changing workforce and arms them with the skills necessary to address contemporary global and local challenges. At community colleges, such education takes a variety of different forms. While some community colleges have launched recent efforts to provide formal instruction in social entrepreneurship, many have been dabbling informally in this arena for decades. At the National Association for Community College Entrepreneurship (NACCE)—a member organization of over three hundred community colleges representing nearly two thousand presidents, educators, administrators, and center directors—many of our members are focused on inciting entrepreneurship in their communities and on their campuses. NACCE has two main goals: to empower community college leaders to approach the work of leading their institutions with an entrepreneurial mindset, and to grow the role of community colleges in supporting job creation and entrepreneurship within their local ecosystems. NACCE has seen a recent surge in interest in social entrepreneurship among its members and is responding by expanding its programming and leadership related to social entrepreneurship efforts at community colleges.

## Valuable Skills and Mindsets

Within higher education, entrepreneurship is traditionally associated with business departments. But over the years, educators and the public have begun to recognize the value of entrepreneurial skills and mindsets in disciplines beyond business, including computer science, the arts, and the career technical disciplines. Employers have acknowledged that skills and characteristics associated with the entrepreneurial mindset—including problem solving, opportunity recognition, self-motivation, and resilience—are abilities and traits that they seek among their employees. Entrepreneurship education encourages the development of the diverse talents and creativity necessary for success in the twenty-first century (Zhao 2015).

Social entrepreneurship differs from traditional entrepreneurship in its focus on working within complex social and environmental systems in addition to economic systems. Social entrepreneurs need a unique skill set that includes empathy and active listening in order to address the needs of multiple stakeholders and account for how those stakeholders might be affected by a business or other venture (Worsham 2012). Community colleges are helping students build these relational and soft skills through new courses, service-learning projects within existing courses, student clubs, and projects that require students to address complex issues using multidisciplinary perspectives.



A strong experiential learning component ties together all these efforts. Students gain entrepreneurial skills and mindsets through experiential learning and application, and social entrepreneurship education in its many forms exposes students from all disciplines to opportunities for addressing relevant challenges within their own communities. Whether through formal classroom instruction or student-led grassroots movements, NACCE members are integrating social entrepreneurship into student experiences across campus with impressive results.

## **Changing the Curriculum at Miami Dade**

Miami Dade College is pioneering social entrepreneurship as part of a broad effort that will reach over three hundred programs of study. Rahnuma Ahsan, assistant professor in the School of Business at Miami Dade's Kendall Campus, described the particular role of social entrepreneurship at a community college: "Social entrepreneurship fits the community college narrative because of the population we serve. The challenges that community college students face are astronomical. Community college students are better equipped [than some of their peers] to identify and face issues and problems in social entrepreneurship, such as student homelessness, hunger, family, and life issues."<sup>1</sup>

Under the leadership of President Eduardo J. Padrón, Miami Dade College has prioritized changemaking as a framework for helping students develop the mindsets and skill sets that will lead to new solutions for today's challenges. Padrón believes that education focused on changemaking "is an attempt to connect the traditional foundation of liberal arts and sciences to a practical awareness of society's challenges today while also supporting economic growth. We need changemakers in a community like Miami that is fueled by small business enterprise and that also is in the process of reimagining itself."

Miami Dade College has translated this vision into action with a college-wide initiative focused on helping all students build a toolkit of skills associated with changemaking. Honors College Dean and MDC Ashoka U Change Leader Pascale Charlot said, "The objective is for MDC to make this toolkit available to all students. Thus, the strategy features a menu of options for a multidisciplinary approach that includes social entrepreneurship and innovation to meet a diverse range of students' learning goals while also serving the community." The college is committed to enriching existing curricular and cocurricular pathways by maximizing applied learning opportunities such as service learning and by creating new experiences through a certificate in social entrepreneurship that students can earn for college credit. Changemaking is featured in the college-wide strategic plan, which encompasses all eight Miami Dade campuses and serves over 165,000 students. Because of these efforts, Miami Dade was the first community college to receive the Ashoka U Changemaker Campus designation, indicating that it has embraced the challenge of cultivating a cross-campus culture to educate changemakers and of embedding changemaking in existing academic programs (Brock 2011).



Within this ecosystem, faculty members like Ahsan have engaged in curriculum development related to social entrepreneurship. Ahsan has both incorporated social entrepreneurship into existing courses (Business Capstone and Organizational Management) and designed a new course (Starting and Growing a Social Venture), the latter of which is part of the new certificate in social entrepreneurship. In Ahsan's Business Capstone course section, piloted in fall 2015, students worked in teams to design business plans that address current social issues in their own community, using statistical research to identify areas of challenge and opportunity. Through the lens of social entrepreneurship, they were exposed to empathy and the "triple bottom line" (people, planet, profit). At the end of the semester, students presented their business concepts to a panel of judges for feedback. Students have responded positively to the course. One student summarized the experience in the exit survey: "This course ... has made me more aware of the issues and how we can work together to help for a better cause. You don't have to be a nonprofit corporation to help the community grow and become better."

## **Enacting Change at Feather River**

Feather River College, located in the rural Sierra Nevada mountains in northeastern California, adopted a hybrid approach to social entrepreneurship through a one-credit course titled Project-Based Learning with Enactus. Enactus ([www.enactus.org](http://www.enactus.org)) is a student organization in which participants apply entrepreneurial principles to address social and environmental challenges. Several Feather River students had joined Enactus to work on social entrepreneurship projects, and as interest grew and it became apparent that participating students were gaining important skills, the college created the course so students could earn credit for their efforts. Students who enrolled in the course focused on both global and local projects, working in teams to identify needs and challenges, develop sustainable solutions, and implement those solutions. Culminating activities included regional and national competitions in which the Feather River College team competed with teams from other colleges and universities, each presenting on their social impact for the year. Over the seven years in which the course was offered, the Feather River students mentored local foster youth, contributed to business and economic development during times of high unemployment, and participated in a series of projects with a partner village in southwestern Uganda.

Through these projects, students developed deep ties within various communities. Whether working in Uganda or in their own small town, they applied the same principles of community development and stakeholder engagement. For example, in Mabare, Uganda, a delegation of Feather River College students partnered with a grassroots community development organization to work as allies with village leaders to identify community needs and develop solutions. On their first trip to the village, students witnessed a small child suffering from a malaria-induced seizure and were told that she was not expected to survive. Upon their return to Feather River College, they began raising funds for mosquito nets and eventually raised enough money (matched by aid organizations) to provide a net for each family in the village. Over four years, students also worked with villagers to manually dig a water pipeline, awarded microloans through business plan competitions, and installed low-tech hand-washing stations to reduce the spread of disease. In the



process, they formed deep friendships with the residents of Mabare, and both students and residents viewed their work as a partnership in development, not a charity.

The projects had positive effects not only on the communities, but also on the students, who experienced personal development that lasted long past their graduations. Shelbie Mathis, a 2012 alumna and kinesiology major, credits her recent acceptance into a top physical therapy doctoral program to the lessons she learned and skills she developed on the Enactus team, which gave her a competitive advantage over other candidates. For instance, during her interview process, Mathis exercised networking and presentation skills that she gained through hands-on project-based social entrepreneurship. Her work on social entrepreneurship projects at Feather River College also made her more comfortable with ambiguity—an outcome that served her well in her path to graduate school. After completing her doctorate in physical therapy, Mathis plans to start a nonprofit organization to assist spinal cord injury patients by providing therapeutic equipment and home conversions to accommodate mobility issues. Mathis said, “Throughout my life, I have always desired to be a leader of change. I falsely believed that to be a leader you had to be overtly powerful. Through Enactus, I discovered that true leadership is in empowering others, an idea that was powerful in and of itself.”

## **Seeking Systems Transformation at Paradise Valley**

Caron Sada, resident psychology faculty member at Paradise Valley Community College in Phoenix, Arizona, has adopted a grassroots, bottom-up approach to social entrepreneurship. Sada has spearheaded a cross-campus social entrepreneurship movement to inspire students to discover their own passions and design actionable projects to pursue those passions. Sada and her students founded Club Zeitgeist (Club Z), “where creativity and action are always in style.” Through Club Z, students develop projects based around their own interests, incorporating the principles of social entrepreneurship by addressing challenges in the community. For instance, a theater student formed an improvisation group to raise funds for a local theater.

Sada is passionate about giving students a platform to practice and express their interests in a creative way. While Club Z started as a student organization, the ethic it supports is starting to take hold across campus as Sada partners with like-minded educators in the arts, sustainability, and technology. Together, these educators are working to change educational culture by empowering students to design their own educational experiences. Sada explained, “Social entrepreneurship education helps higher education become entrepreneurial to create transformational learning experiences for all of our students and prepare them for the real world, as they are going to exist as entrepreneurs or intrapreneurs” (where one applies an entrepreneurial mindset and skill set as an employee).

Club Z has chosen sustainability as a theme for the 2016–17 academic year. During this time, students will conduct a campus garden project, host a farmers’ market, and hold two sustainability business pitch competitions. While leading projects and working together, students will incubate



their ideas and develop their identities as creators, innovators, intrapreneurs, and entrepreneurs. Their work will also be connected to the curriculum, as faculty will integrate club activities into course content. For example, in Sada's Psychology and Culture course, students will assess whether the club's vision, mission, values, and strategy statements align with the values of mainstream culture. In other courses, including Computer Information Systems, Developmental Psychology, and Painting, faculty will incorporate social entrepreneurship projects into reflection assignments and as extra credit.

Through the creative process, students are gaining the skills they need for the workforce they are entering—one where employers are hiring employees for what they can do as much as for what they know. Club Z allows students to try projects, work in teams, practice collaborative skills, and give back to the community. Students can focus on their strengths and talents while building portfolios of competencies.

## Conclusion

The mission of community colleges is to serve their local communities, and social entrepreneurship education presents ample opportunities for students to make a lasting impact in those communities while learning and gaining applicable skills. Social entrepreneurship gives students opportunities to practice relevant skills, such as communication, empathy, and critical thinking, while empowering members of their own and other communities. Students thrive on the relevancy that social entrepreneurship brings to their education. Community colleges have found many ways to bring these learning experiences to their students, whether through leadership-endorsed formal instruction or grassroots student-led projects. This trend is likely to continue as colleges innovate their own brand of bottom-up social entrepreneurship.

*To learn more about NACCE, visit [www.nacce.com](http://www.nacce.com).*

## Note

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all direct quotations in this article were collected in interviews with or on behalf of the author.

## References

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**Amy Schulz** is vice president of education and membership at the National Association for Community College Entrepreneurship.