

Re-Designing, Humanizing and Globalizing Higher Education: Disruptive Strategies for Business School Leadership from the Bottom Up

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Submitted: 15 July 2020; Accepted: 21 July 2020; Published: 24 July 2020

Abstract

This paper highlights disruptive strategies to move students from the classroom and traditional business education to using their skills in impoverished villages in the Third World. Beginning in the late 1990s, innovations were designed by faculty and students to roll out a pro-poor agenda that includes the following: Student-led microfinance NGO spin-offs, accounting school faculty and students offering financial training and services, MPA student initiatives that assist African village leaders, annual social entrepreneurship conferences, the establishing of a campus center for economic self-reliance, and more. We will describe the leadership processes that evolved as these and other campus programs were established and rolled out to effect real social change across the globe. As described below, many of these efforts began at the lower level of the university, among students and professors, not at the top. However, this kind of higher education leadership from below promises exciting and path-breaking new strategies for higher education scholars and practitioners everywhere, especially within the context of schools of management.

Keywords: Leadership, Higher Education, Social Entrepreneurship, Microfinance

Introduction

A major opportunity and challenge of business school education worldwide is that of having administrators, faculty, and students lead their constituents into 21st Century education models that extend awareness of human needs and which can be addressed by innovative universities. While 20th Century higher education leaders focused on training students in the classroom, led the debating of business cases, prepared students with professional skills, and so on, today's programs need to extend to ethics, humanitarianism, and explore ways that future managers can develop greater awareness of and empathy for Third World nations and the struggles of the poor.

Students are clamoring for such new initiatives. Today's Millennial Generation want to build a more fulfilling and equitable society for all. Many do not simply want a career deep in the bowels of big business where they merely have an "8 to 5 job," and then try to find life's meaning after the day's work. They want to utilize their considerable intellect and experience to understand the most fundamental questions of college life--why are they at school and how can they know they are making a difference for the rest of their lives.

In response, new organizations have been popping up to mobilize college students into doing good such as Net Impact which is an association of business students and schools that now totals over 100,000 young adults seeking to use their college business degrees to fight injustice [1]. Likewise, the Skoll Foundation in California's

Silicon Valley mobilizes students and innovative businesses to engage as social entrepreneurs in healing the world. It funds the nonprofit work of students and others in progression "towards solving challenges in climate, health, human rights, refugees, inequality, and injustice" [2].

Social entrepreneurship, an emerging development tool in recent years, reframes traditional for-profit business entrepreneurialism to simply acquire money, and instead emphasizes risk, vision, new social inventions and new services to fight societal problems. Rather than seek business profits only, the objective is to build a genuine civil society where the masses can find fulfillment, as described in Bornstein's book for students, *How to Change the World*. The emphasis here is not on finance and/or profits per se, but instead on social capital. Thus Nobel Laureate, Muhammad Yunus, has declared that the system of microcredit he values "gives high priority on building social capital" [3]. Likewise, the former head of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, argues that social capital is the "glue" that "holds societies together," and it needs to grow throughout the world [4]. Both ideas seem to resonate with today's college students who seek more meaningful careers in their future in which their jobs connect them with people, especially the poor, through work that provides personal meaning and fulfillment.

In response to these trends, business school research over the last decade has inspired students, as well as corporations, to begin working on "Bottom (or Base) of the Pyramid" (BOP) strategies to

lift the world's poor through new, low-cost practices. Perhaps one of the hottest recent development tools is the idea of alleviating poverty through capitalism-for-the-poor by providing goods and services to the 3-4 billion impoverished people on earth who try to survive on \$2 per day, or less. The core idea is that if large multinational corporations could begin to view the poor as value-conscious consumers and begin designing and selling cheaper products to them, whole new markets could be created at the base of the global social pyramid. The argument suggests that entrepreneurial creativity, innovative trade, and emerging prosperity may combine to eradicate poverty through low-end capitalism, a feat not yet attained by governments, NGOs and other nonprofit sectors [5,6]. This simple idea has motivated numerous U.S. and European students to begin inventing new, cheap products wherein large profits are not the objective.

Business schools are also beginning to change as evidenced in major university associations. For example, the Academy of Management, higher education's most important and highly regarded network for business faculty, has begun to shift its traditional themes of big business, profit-driven success, and similarly stated objectives to new areas of research. These changes have been articulated in recent years with such annual convention themes as "Knowledge, Action and the Public Concern", "Doing Well By Doing Good" 2007, "Dare to Care: Passion and Compassion in Management Practice and Research" 2010, and "The Informal Economy" in 2012 [7,8].

Organizational Disruption

In 2011, Harvard Business School Professor, Clayton M. Christensen, wrote an important book entitled *The Innovator's Dilemma: The Revolutionary Book That Will Change the Way You Do Business* [9]. It was soon a best seller, and has led to other books on this and related topics, as applied to public education, healthcare, and other areas. His basic theory articulates the need for a "disruptive" approach to leading organizations. Christensen argues that even the most outstanding companies need to change, that they can do everything right and still lose their market leadership, or worse, disappear completely. Is there a possibility this could occur in higher education?

This paper suggests that the same may be true. The argument is that today's universities need to change, and in dramatic ways. They need to move beyond the more insular culture of campuses in the last century, to a new, broader vision, from business school obsessions with Wall Street, to interest in the global poor. From capitalism and making money, to improving the world, especially that of the have-nots.

This author draws on conversations with hundreds of students at his own school, as well as conversations with students where he has guest lectured in recent years. Places such as Stanford, Yale, Boston College, UCLA, Michigan, VA Tech, Harvard, Berkeley, USC, Cornell, and more. From those hundreds of small group discussions in which the author did a great deal of listening, a major takeaway has been that disruptive innovations are increasingly necessary to revolutionize the world of business schools. Today's students, more than those of 10-20 years ago, seek humanistic breakthroughs for bettering society, especially for the less fortunate. They hope to drive change through their college lives, not just later when their careers are in the middle years. Thus, higher education officials should encourage and even fund such ideas.

Brigham Young University Programs

With the brief introductory context above, this paper reports and analyzes the multiple-pronged case of a single university that has tried to gradually change its business school culture in order to foster innovative international outreach and impacts. Known as Brigham Young University (BYU), this institution already has had a number of successful global programs. It hosts the teaching of more than 50 languages, far more than at most other U.S. universities. Yale, for instance used to have the most foreign languages, but it only teaches 26 (vs. BYU's 63 today). It sponsors among the highest number of study abroad programs of any school in the U.S.A. Seventy percent of its 30,000-plus student population already speaks another language than English. Yet some faculty and students have felt more could or should be done to reach the global poor and try to help them improve their well-being through various capacity-building mechanisms. The leadership for doing this in the business school was unusual in that these changes arose from the bottom rungs of the institution, not the top.

After several decades, the institutional leadership at Brigham Young University (BYU), especially within its Marriott School, is finally beginning to be recognized beyond its campus by other U.S. universities, as well as with higher education institutions in Latin America and Africa.

This paper attempts to describe features that will certainly be of interest to other academics, and will perhaps facilitate similar developments at other institutions of higher education as they seek to expand internationally, especially those wanting to benefit society. The paragraphs below summarize such efforts. We then review the efficacies and impacts of these initiatives.

Microfinance Action Research in Asia

The programs below all began with the single launch of a learning project in 1989 by the author, a professor in the Department of Organizational Leadership and Strategy. He and three graduate students in organizational behavior began researching the poverty and socio-economic needs of people in the country of the Philippines in Southeast Asia during the summer of 1989. They worked onsite in the metro Manila area for three months. They collected interview data, met with existing NGOs, and drafted a microfinance feasibility plan to provide student opportunities for on-the-ground education. The hope was to learn in-depth about the problems of poverty and begin designing a new U.S.-based microfinance NGO. Lobbying for support from the dean's office back in the United States, and securing a small amount of outside funding (\$12,000) from alumni, enabled the team to learn in the field and then put together a plan for incorporating as an NGO, called at the time the Philippine Enterprise Development Foundation (PEDF). This activity gradually evolved into the creation of additional NGOs down through the years seeking to reduce human suffering around the globe, especially among the poorest of the poor.

NGO Creation and Spinoffs from University Projects that Became Long-term NGO Programs

PEDF, above, became established in the late 1980s as a registered nonprofit which engaged in economic development research and consulting in the informal economy of the Philippines. It was a country that decades earlier had been the Number 2 Asian economy, but in recent years had dropped to second from the bottom. Following our student-faculty led feasibility study, PEDF was officially

incorporated as an NGO. We raised \$400,000 in initial capital, organized a board of directors, and hired a staff to do training and technical assistance in Manila, the capital city. After four years there were expansions that consisted of two other centers in the Philippines, Cebu and way south in Davao. We then changed the name of PEDF into Enterprise Mentors International (EMI) and established start-up offices in Spanish-speaking Guatemala and Mexico. Each of these new centers led to skill-building for the poor, vocational training and mentoring, culminating in the creation of microenterprises, credit unions, worker cooperatives, and hundreds of families enjoying new jobs and a higher living standard. More on the results of this project will be described below in the section on Assessing Bottom-Up Leadership.

Developing Social Innovation Courses

Roughly three decades ago as a BYU professor, I designed and began offering a new course called “Becoming a Global Social Entrepreneur.” Apparently, it was the first such course in the world. Simply stated, the course objective was to empower students with a vision of how they could take initiatives to address real social problems in poor countries. In the ensuing decades, as an outgrowth of that first course, seven more were created at BYU, using innovative leadership tools to help villagers develop dozens of cooperatives and social enterprises. They included courses entitled Microfinance, Corporate Social Responsibility, Workplace Democracy (Co-ops and Employee Stock Ownership Plans, i.e., ESOPs), Social Innovations, and more.

Faculty Committee to Fight Global Poverty

Starting in 1998, a group of four interested professors from disciplines like Organizational Behavior, Public Administration and the MBA program started to meet weekly in order to begin envisioning how they could plant the seeds for new, innovative work within the Arriott School that would build a narrative on the relationship of business school education to poverty, doing so from the ground up. Over time and with limited support, this group, the Faculty Committee to Fight Global Poverty’s efforts have successfully mentored new student theses, rolled out new faculty publications, launched an annual conference, and fostered a solid research and publishing agenda of journal articles and books. In 1999 two faculty of the group created and began soliciting manuscripts for the *Journal of Microfinance*, the first of its kind worldwide in this newly emerging academic field [10]. Later, in 2006 it evolved into the *Economic Self-Reliance Review* (ESR).

Annual Social Entrepreneurship Conference

One of the first ideas implemented by the Faculty Committee to Fight Poverty was to explore the feasibility of organizing a campus-wide microfinance conference for students and professors throughout the university. The group designed a mix of events and secured funds from the dean’s office to hold a gathering which would be the first of its kind in the United States. The group brought Dr. Muhammad Yunus of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh as keynote speaker, and the conference attracted over 1,100 attendees. Since then, twelve such conferences have been hosted at the university, one each year, emphasizing themes along the lines of women’s empowerment, village self-reliance, Third World education, agriculture, worker-owned cooperatives, healthcare for the world’s poor, microfinance,

and more. Speakers have headlined keynote addresses including leaders of the UN, ACCION Microfinance, USAID, Grameen Bank, International Red Cross, World Bank, Gates Foundation, FINCA Microfinance, the Skoll Foundation, and dozens of speakers from government, churches, other universities, as well as local NGOs reaching out to do anti-poverty work around the globe.

Establish and Secure a \$3 million Fund to Create the Center for Economic Self-Reliance

In 2003, as courses, conferences and NGOs were being created at the university, the faculty committee decided it was time to begin putting the disparate programs of recent years under one umbrella so that they would have more consistent oversight and have a central source of funding and coordination. I, along with support of the then dean and a top student, began exploring potential donors. This led to solicitation of some \$3 million in start-up capital from a wealthy alumnus who agreed to make the donation if matching funds could be achieved over the five subsequent years. With that commitment, the Center for Economic Self-Reliance (CESR) was established and my student who had just graduated became the director. A second former student of mine was hired to run help the center under the watchful eye of the Faculty Committee to Fight Global Poverty. Later, membership and leadership evolved and new professors gradually became the faculty advisory board for the center. In the early years, the center’s director and I proposed making a professional film, a documentary that would be launched by the United Nations in its International Year of Microcredit in 2005. Thus, the film, *Small Fortunes: Microcredit and the Future of Poverty*, was shown worldwide, including some 400 times on U.S. public television. It featured interviews with many leaders of the microfinance movement, and we wrote extensive reading material for two different websites to interact with viewers so they could learn about the issues and debates in this relatively new approach to reducing Third World poverty [11].

Ghana Outreach Program: Master of Public Administration Program

By the year 2011, students and leaders of the university’s graduate program in public administration saw how advantageous it might be to design and roll out a Third World option for MPA students who wanted experience in fighting rural poverty. They could apply their course concepts and tools such as management, strategy, nonprofit organization concepts, HR, marketing, and finance in the public sector. Because the program had three students from Ghana, it was decided to focus there, at least at the beginning. The Ghana Outreach Program’s primary objectives were to provide hands-on field experience in Ghana, as well as to gain experience that would help open doors for future careers with NGOs, having field experience using MPA skills in real world settings. This small one-time experiment succeeded and it has continued to service 20-25 students annually who spend six weeks in summer living in rural Ghanaian village houses with a family, and working each day to strengthen area non-profit firms. A number of MPA graduates have then gone on to successful careers in the world of NGOs.

Additional NGO Spin-offs from Courses

After the early success of Enterprise Mentors International in the Philippines, faculty and student leaders in subsequent years began

to initiate more NGO projects. They did so by providing expertise from social innovation courses, master theses, course papers, etc. to the design and incorporation of such programs as SOAR China Microfinance, one of the first NGOs taking microcredit to the People's Republic. Also we began to roll out a kind of University Peace Corps that recruited, trained and sent 40 or so students to nations after natural disasters to help rebuild schools, and houses, strengthen families, provide healthcare training, form women's solidarity groups, teach English, help establish family gardens, and so forth. Such programs eventually grew to hundreds of students annually that provided major humanitarian efforts such as Wave of Hope following the 2004 Asian tsunami, HELP International following Hurricane Mitch's 1999 destruction in Honduras, Sustain Haiti after the devastating 2010 earthquake, and so on [10,12]. Many such projects gradually evolved to become international development organizations working year round to combat the effects of poverty. With these grass root leadership initiatives from below, eventually university faculty and administrators began to support, help fund, and so forth. Thousands of students have spent their summers working throughout the world in the trenches with the poor.

Micro Franchise

One of the Marriott School's most well-known innovations is its MicroFranchise Development Initiative (MFDI). It moves beyond the simplicity of a traditional microenterprise strategy that gives a \$90 loan to a budding necessity entrepreneur who invents her own little family business. Instead, MFDI adopts the franchise model of doing business that is typical in industrialized nations. But it focuses on business replication as a method to use to spur economic improvements among the global poor. Through MFDI, practitioners examine and develop replicable business models for small businesses operating in developing economies, and with start-up costs of \$300 to \$1,000. Franchising a good business allows the tiny enterprise to use proven methods and achieve success rapidly. BYU faculty member, Jason Fairbourne, developed this approach and new products such as the *Microfranchise* Toolkit, comprised of a book and other informational materials that address franchise issues such as customer service, funding, and franchising legal agreements.

Accounting Outreach in Africa

BYU has enjoyed being ranked in the top three accounting programs across the U.S. A few students at the school had occasionally volunteered with the NGO activities described above, but not many. That changed when student leaders began to try and secure their own African outreach program designed just for them. Rather than simply do village development work or rebuild houses, they sought to use their accounting skills for Third World non-profits. Ultimately, the dean of accounting and a faculty group connected with NGOs in West Africa about offering accounting skills to organizations that would never have the funds to hire professional firms, but badly needed technical assistance to set up effective book keeping methods and so forth. So two professors and ten students went to West Africa in 2012 to carry out a pilot project. It was so successful that the Accounting School now conducts two summer programs for students to spend a month volunteering their services in Africa, followed by a four week course of debriefing and evaluating their work so as to be more effective when others volunteer in Africa the following year.

Grantwell Program

Leaders among faculty and students of the MPA program began

a social investing program in 2009 to give students opportunities as a kind of learning laboratory by advising wealthy families in the area so the Grantwell program was established. It is a student-run, faculty-advised nonprofit and foundation consulting program at the university. With a board of directors and executive team composed of students, Grantwell gives students the opportunity to be leaders in the public and social sector, and allows them to work with real nonprofits and foundations to gain valuable experience. Its mission and vision aim to become the premier graduate-level experience for training future nonprofit leaders through appropriate values of philanthropy. There are three types of projects students are trained in through courses, and then given hands-on experience. They include volunteer service as 1) Grant Allocation teams that evaluate grant proposals, select the best project, and present findings to the foundation donating the funds. The allocation process includes conducting financial analysis and rating a project's potential impact based on the values and mission of the foundation. 2) Strategy teams work as consultants for nonprofits, helping them to develop programs and processes that better fulfill the mission of the organization. 3) Evaluation teams perform efficiency and effectiveness assessments, using quantitative and qualitative data to measure how well programs and activities are achieving the desired results.

Discussion: Assessing Bottom-Up Leadership Impacts as a Platform for Socio-Economic Change

In attempting to evaluate the results of these initiatives, an open, honest look suggests considerable success. The type of leadership described may be termed "disruptive" in the sense that, as Christensen's writes, dramatic change is essential. A writer about the book declares: "In this revolutionary bestseller, innovation expert Clayton M. Christensen says outstanding companies can do everything right and still lose their market leadership—or worse, disappear altogether. And not only does he prove what he says, but he tells others how to avoid a similar fate" [9]. The same may be true of higher education, as well.

So with this overview of Brigham Young University's pro-poor innovations, we turn to briefly summarize today's results:

The case of Enterprise Mentors, now simply Mentors International, has led to significant impacts. By 2012 there were five offices of this NGO in Asia, two in Guatemala, and one each in Mexico and El Salvador. Over 10,000 jobs were created or expanded in that year alone, benefiting over 40,000 family members. Equally important, some 36,000 microentrepreneurs received management training on an annual budget of \$1.3 million. University students and faculty provided much of the training in the organization's early years, plus ongoing evaluations of systems and results, expenses which the NGO itself could not fund. By 2015, the impacts were even more substantial. This nonprofit, which began as small PEDF has over the years raised a total of \$53 million in loans, working capital and administrative overhead expenses. It now has a staff of some 415 employees running its programs in seven countries, along with headquarters in the U.S.

With respect to designing new social innovation courses at BYU over the decades, the number has increased from merely one course per academic year with only 25 or so students to seven different courses of study currently in which several hundred students register each semester. Collectively, 62 course projects have led to the creation of 41 NGOs as 501(c) 3 non-profit organizations that are formally registered and operating in over 30 countries. Approximately

7.2 million micro businesses have received funding, training, or other support, and over 3,000 students have voluntarily utilized their skills and innovation throughout the world. As a result of these courses, a diverse set of initiatives and projects have been undertaken, including various programs in the U.S. and abroad that provide microcredit to millions of female microentrepreneurs in India, jewelry cooperatives operating in Uganda, microbusiness training in Honduras, agricultural innovations in Brazil, and tsunami-relief efforts in Thailand. Roughly speaking, some \$30 million is raised annually to support projects and organizations that originally sprouted from the campus courses. Perhaps equally significant, many students have gone on to careers with leading NGOs based in the U.S. and in some cases, working for NGOs headquartered in Africa or Asia.

The Faculty Committee to Fight Global Poverty eventually worked its way out of business. As courses, NGOs, and CESR, the new center came into being, the bulk of the committee's roles were shifted to academic departments and other institutions within the business school, making the group unnecessary.

The Annual Social Entrepreneurship Conference grew over a decade to becoming a huge event with up to 1,000 participants annually. It was the first university in the U.S. to sponsor large scale social entrepreneurial events, as well as conferences specializing in microfinance. However, eventually, the numbers dropped as the microfinance movement became well known across the U.S., and many other universities started their own gatherings. The amount of time and energy to host such large events declined in favor of smaller symposia, campus TED Talks, and other initiatives that could generate more personalized and greater depth of discussions.

The Center for Economic Self-Reliance (CESR) has continued to expand and succeed. With more donors, the name was eventually changed to become the Ballard Center for Economic Self Reliance, using the name of a highly respected Mormon leader of a hundred years ago who served Utah's poor. From its small beginning in 2003 with a \$3 million private grant, it has grown to a \$12 million fund that lives off its principal, spending approximately \$600,000 annually. It currently hosts a variety of programs including an annual documentary video contest for NGO projects, participates in the Ashoka University Social Entrepreneurship conferences, and has received a number of awards for excellence. One of its major activities is conducting several annual social enterprise competitions with various formats and objectives. The center typically receives between 40-50 submissions from student teams on campus and from across the nation. The top 20 are invited to present to judges who ultimately award prizes to the most exciting and viable proposals, along with start-up cash amounts ranging from \$4,000-\$6,000 to the winning teams.

Both the MPA and Accounting programs' one-time experiments to train and take student teams to African villages succeeded in the first year, and ever since they have continued to offer resources and each

serve 20-25 students annually who spend six weeks of summer living in rural village with families, while learning the culture, language, and working each day to strengthen area NGOs.

The MPA Grantwell program has continued to expand slowly but surely. It provides considerable hands-on experience to student seeking careers as wealth advisors for so-called Purpose Impact clients—those who want to use their money not only to do well financially, but to also do good, thereby improving the quality of life for others. So far the student teams have allocated \$1.5 million to non-profit firms and foundations. They are now advising faculty and students at a dozen other American universities who seek to do similar work.

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