

Inter-University Dialogue on Social Entrepreneurship – New Beginning, New Challenges

This past week we witnessed a milestone event for higher education in Hong Kong. Five visitors from American universities were here to share their experience of social entrepreneurship in higher education. Before we report on this exciting event, let's consider the following:

- *President Obama* invited a number of university presidents to the White House last year. He had a strong message for his guests. He told them bluntly that the way they run their universities was no longer sustainable. The costs were far too high; the priorities were misplaced (too much emphasis on research at the expense of teaching); the changes were too slow. The message was clear: **rethink how higher education should be conducted or....**
- Also in last year, a group of Harvard undergraduate students walked out of introductory economics and wrote **“Today, we are walking out of your class, Economics 101, in order to express our discontent with the bias inherent in this introductory economics course. We are deeply concerned about the way that this bias affects students, the University, and our greater society.”**
- A friend of mine enrolled in a Stanford free, on-line course taught by a famous Stanford professor. To his surprise, there were over **150,000** people from all over the world doing the course at the same time.
- One hundred years ago, Lawrence Lowell, then President of Harvard, had this to say about American universities, **“institutions are rarely murdered, they meet their end by suicide...They die because they have outlived their usefulness, or fail to do the work that the world wants done.”**

The world is changing fast. Crises after crises compel us to rethink our beliefs, our values, our institutions, and our way of bringing up the next generation.

Universities in the US and many parts of the world are facing unprecedented challenges. They cannot afford to bury their heads in the sand. Some universities are spearheading major transformations. Innovations on many fronts are on the agenda: teaching, curriculum design, research, enrollment, organization, funding, use of technology, civic engagement, and many others.

Among the many initiatives, one development stands out: **the promotion of social entrepreneurship and social innovation in higher education.** A growing number of universities are offering courses on these subjects together with programs to provide students with the exposure and practical experience in the field. There are already universities making social entrepreneurship a required subject for all students. Thanks to the effort of organizations such as Ashoka U, there are a number of universities who have reshaped themselves as **Changemaker Universities**, meaning that they are enabling and empowering their students to become changemakers as a campus-wide initiative.

It is against this background that we see the value and significance of the recent visits and sharing by five overseas visitors (four speakers and one student) from the US.

Below was the invitation sent out to prospective participants at local universities. The event was organized jointly by the RS Group and HKSEF, generously sponsored by the RS Group.

Social Entrepreneurship in Higher Education: Stories from U.S. Campuses

An Inter-University Seminar & Roundtable // March 27th, 2012

We live in a world where our own wellbeing is becoming increasingly connected with the wellbeing of our fellow citizens across the globe. Compared with earlier generations, our youth are growing up with a heightened awareness of the social and environmental problems and challenges that now beset humanity. And universities everywhere are responding both to society's need to find solutions for these problems, as well as to the demand of students to better equip themselves to deal with the realities they will be facing after their studies.

In our own universities here in Hong Kong, there are many people – faculty, administrators, scholars – who are similarly working to support their students to become effective changemakers.

It is for those of you who are so engaged that we have designed this event featuring the following overseas speakers, who will be sharing their experiences and perspectives in promoting and supporting social entrepreneurship in American universities:



Marina Kim, Founder and Executive Director, Ashoka U

Melissa Carrier, Executive Director, Centre for Social Value Creation, Smith School of Business, University of Maryland

Alan Harlam, Director of Social Entrepreneurship, Swearer Centre for Public Service, Brown University

Roger Nosaki, Director, Swearer Centre for Public Service, Associate Dean of the College (Community and Global Engagement), Brown University



Our speakers all share a deep belief in the importance of connecting university students with the community they function in, whether at a more localized level or in the broader global sense, to help foster awareness and empathy.

In their respective roles, they have worked to make that happen, as well as to support students and faculty who want to engage more deeply in finding solutions for issues they care about, whether at university or beyond. We hope that this event will be an opportunity to hear about the experiences of our speakers, to dialogue with them about issues and challenges, and to exchange thoughts and ideas.

Visits to Local Universities

In addition to the Seminar and Roundtable (which attracted more than 80 and 25 participants respectively), the speakers also had separate meetings with faculty members of individual universities, including CityU, HKU, HKUST, CUHK, and Lingnan University. Topics covered are wide ranging, including curriculum

design for courses on social entrepreneurship, faculty development, senior administrator commitment building, student programs for experiential learning and community engagement, collaboration with local and global social entrepreneurs, social innovation incubation, funding models for social entrepreneurship programs, etc.

Judging from the response from those who attended the events, it was a huge success. Some of their feedback are indicative of the impact: **“An eye-opener”, “We should have done this earlier”, “Universities are sometimes like looking at the sky from the bottom of a well”, “HK universities could become a hub for social innovation for the region”, “We would like to become the first Changemaker University in HK”.....**

The Next Steps – It’s Actions that Matter

Already some next steps were being explored by a number of local universities.

CityU is perhaps the most advanced on the path of creating major university initiatives on social entrepreneurship. They are about to set up a **Centre for Social Entrepreneurship** and has already advertised the post for a full-time Executive Director. There is already a core group of 10 to 15 faculty members from different disciplines who are keen to work on this area.

A number of universities recognize the urgent need for faculty development, and they find **Ashoka U’s Faculty Institute** for this purpose particularly appealing. It is an intensive program of two to three days duration conducted by two seasoned practitioners from Ashoka U catering up to thirty faculty members (from a single university or multiple universities). Ashoka U has offered this program to a large number of American universities and it has proven to be an effective way to accelerate the development of faculty members for the teaching of social entrepreneurship.

Another program that has caught the attention of many faculty members is known as **Social Entrepreneur in Residence**. This entails inviting a leading social entrepreneur to stay overnight at the university and conduct a variety of activities within two full days. This is a Big Bang event and is ideal for universities about to launch a major social entrepreneurship initiative. The objectives of the program could be fourfold:

1. To generate interest and commitment from the University’s leadership team to create a sustained effort to promote social entrepreneurship knowledge and practice throughout the University.
2. To ignite faculty members’ interest in cross-disciplinary research and teaching on social entrepreneurship.
3. To inspire students and alumni on the potential and challenges of social entrepreneurship as a driving force for positive social change as well as opportunities for alternative careers.
4. To enable support services staff to formulate and adopt a procurement policy that could produce socially and environmentally positive outcomes.

There is already one university talking to HKSEF to explore trying out this program with a local social entrepreneur. If this proves to be effective, it would open up two opportunities: a) do more programs with local social entrepreneurs, and b) invite overseas social entrepreneurs to HK and do programs in a number of universities during the stay. The latter would be a cost-effective way to create a major impact.

Inter-University Dialogue – the Way Forward

HKSEF is committed to supporting local universities in their effort to create and develop programs on social entrepreneurship and social innovation. Given our limited resources we would like to offer our support to all universities. In addition, we firmly believe that there is much to gain (and hardly any to lose) for universities to maintain an active dialogue among themselves in this endeavor. Indeed, the Ashoka U experience has demonstrated that all universities stand to gain a lot when they actively share their practice, learning, mistakes, aspirations and achievements. Let’s celebrate a new beginning and join hands and minds to meet the many challenges ahead.