

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

# Project Coach: A Case Study of a College-Community Partnerships as a Venture in Social Entrepreneurship

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*Sixteen year-old Ismael walks into an energetic and bustling group of elementary-school aged boys and girls, puts his whistle to his mouth and gives one short, but decisive tweet. "OK, gather around for the huddle." Twelve boys and girls promptly scamper over and sit in a circle and are joined by Ismael and another teenager also wearing a neat blue tennis shirt emblazoned with "Coach." "Coach DeWayne and I are happy to see you today. Before we begin playing, I have a question for you. What does being a good sport mean to you?" Coach Ismael and Coach DeWayne listen intently as each of the players shares an idea. They ask follow-up questions like, 'How do you think it feels if your opponent celebrates too much after scoring a basket?' Off to the side and listening intently to the conversation is a red-shirted graduate student from Smith College. Coach Greg—who is a former college basketball player from Haverford College – nods enthusiastically and gives DeWayne a thumbs-up signal as DeWayne skillfully elicits responses. After each of the elementary-aged players offers a thought, Coach DeWayne claps his hands, points to a 30' square demarcated by orange cones and says, "OK—everybody grab a basketball. There is the ocean. You are fishies—Coach Ismael and I are sharks. You know the game—LET'S GO!" In an instant the elementary-aged students are tearing around the court chased by their teenage coaches.*

DeWayne, Ismael, and Greg work in Project Coach – an after school program developed and directed by the authors. The program, which is set in a high-need urban community in Springfield, Massachusetts, teaches high school and middle school students to be sport coaches and then to run youth sport leagues for elementary-aged youth in underserved neighborhoods in their own community. The program's premise is that sport coaches must employ a complex repertoire of skills, behaviors, and aptitudes that are associated with high achievement and success across a range of domains including school. Project Coach utilizes coaching as the vehicle to teach and practice key achievement skills such as communications, initiative taking, perseverance, conflict resolution, and other leadership capacities.

This paper describes the story of how eight years ago we began with an academic-based research question about the achievement gap and now find ourselves running a medium-sized youth program that has three significant goals. First, we are a

multi-layered and busy program that operates four afternoons a week with almost eight adult staff, 25 teenagers, and nearly 100-elementary aged youth. Second, we are a Smith College community outreach initiative that provides community service learning placements and other opportunities for numerous college students and research opportunities for other faculty. Third, we serve as a 'laboratory program' for developing curriculum, conducting research, and preparing future educators with the skills and understandings that are applicable to working in the emerging field of out-of-school time. Our experience developing the model and establishing Project Coach as a successful outreach program that is supported by the college and the community offers one lens into the process of designing sustainable partnerships between higher education and local communities. What is instructive and perhaps generalizable about our story to other faculty involved in the development of community partnerships is that we emerged not as a component

of a formalized college initiative, but as an enterprise that grew out of a series of academic and theoretical questions. In reflecting on this journey, we believe that the lens of social entrepreneurship helps explain our development.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INITIATIVES OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Historically, most colleges and universities have a charter that articulates a mission to serve national and community purposes through the production of scholarship and outreach. This mission for service is rooted in the establishment of the land-grant colleges, which were designated by the Morrill Act of 1862 as service universities designed to fill a national purpose focused on conducting applied research and experimental work aimed at improving the conditions of the larger society (Ross, 2002). Despite these values, for most of the last century, the primacy of doing research and publishing scholarly work has subordinated the value of outreach and community engagement (Cuban, 1999). There is evidence that

this is changing. Over the last twenty years, there has been a robust movement in higher education to become more connected to local communities.

Championed by Ernest Boyer in his *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professorate* (1990), this approach called for faculty to rethink their notion of scholarship so universities could become more focused on meeting the needs and solving the challenges facing communities. Boyer's agenda coincided with other initiatives such as the National and Community Service Act of 1990, which provided Federal funds to develop and implement service-learning curriculum. Numerous programs and initiatives were developed to establish what Boyer coined the "scholarship of engagement." These initiatives are often enacted through the establishment of Centers on campus that intend to oversee and nurture comprehensive and systemic partnerships. Smith, like most of our peer schools, also has a center for community engagement.

Despite the energy to develop large-scale and complex institutionalized partnerships, Project Coach began outside formal channels within our college. Martin and Osberg (2007) describe the entrepreneurial process as beginning when an individual or as is often the case, a pair of individuals discern what they call "suboptimal equilibrium" (p. 35) and see embedded in it an opportunity to provide a new service or process. Once inspired by an idea, entrepreneurs take "direct action, which entails developing small, flexible, and agile solutions. The essence of social entrepreneurship is focused on what Dees (2009) calls "value-creating innovation" that offers a learning laboratory for the development and testing of "innovative solutions to social problems" (p. 12). Martin and Osberg (2007) define social entrepreneurship as mission-driven work where the prime outcome is social benefit. The process of mounting a project consists of three stages:

(1) identifying a stable but inherently unjust equilibrium that causes the exclusion, marginalization, or suffering of a segment of humanity that lacks the financial means or political clout to achieve any transformative benefit on its own; (2)

identifying an opportunity in this unjust equilibrium, developing a social value proposition, and bringing to bear inspiration, creativity, direct action, courage, and fortitude, thereby challenging the stable state's hegemony; and (3) forging a new, stable equilibrium that releases trapped potential or alleviates the suffering of the targeted group, and through imitation and the creation of a stable ecosystem around the new equilibrium ensuring a better future for the targeted group and even society at large (p. 35).

In other words, the process of social entrepreneurship begins with the identification of a social need, followed by the creative design of an invention or program, which leads to the program becoming embedded in the ecology of the community and, ultimately, becoming a model for others to emulate. We believe this conceptual framework is useful for explaining how Project Coach developed and why colleges that seek more expansive and sustainable partnerships in the community might look to stimulate small homegrown projects.

### WORKING WITH IDEAS: HOW DOES PROJECT COACH BEGIN?

As with many initiatives, the genesis of Project Coach can be traced back to a series of circuitous conversations and meetings. A pivotal encounter unfolds in the spring of 2002 when one of the authors of this article, received a call from the executive director of a major foundation in the northeast. The director indicated that her foundation had been engaged in various educational endeavors whose prime objective was to support initiatives that could decrease the academic achievement gap of Black and Hispanic children with their white counterparts. She went on to convey that their commissioned research showed that children in their target population were being dismissed from school as early as 1:30 in the afternoon, and that many of them were participating in a variety of after school programs, with sports based activities being among the most heavily enrolled. Her question

was whether a child's sport involvement could be leveraged to enhance their academic achievement? This, of course, was a version of "the sport question" that faculty and administrators have been asking for many years. Where is the "education" in sports and how does student involvement in them enhance or detract from what they are expected to do in the classroom?

Clearly, answers to «the sport question» have remained elusive over the years, with many people weighing in on it by conveying anecdotes from their own personal experiences and beliefs. For example, the Duke of Wellington allegedly stated that "The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton" and sociologist David Reisman claimed that "the way to the board room leads through the locker-room." But there have also been those who argued against, such as Robert Hutchins, the former President of the University of Chicago who in 1939, abolished its prestigious football program, claiming that students needed to focus their attention on academics rather than athletics, and decried that it was possible for players "to win twelve letters without learning how to write one" (Mayer, 1993, p.138).

The question posed by the foundation officer was fascinating in that it brought together an array of variables crucial to youth and community development. Our default response as academics in a liberal arts college was to assemble an informal group comprised of professors, undergraduate, and graduate students to study the questions. We brought divergent perspectives to the question from those interested in disparities in literacy among different groups of children, others were interested in youth development and leadership, while still others were more interested in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and how it could be deployed to develop resiliency skills in "at risk" adolescents.

In retrospect, this study group was critical to the development of Project Coach, not only because it helped us to sharpen our understanding of the research and the many gaps that exist between the groups of kids that the foundation supporting this work

was interested in helping, but it also built institutional credibility for this evolving project that became a college-community program and partnership. This was due to the work being seen as having academic viability, a body of knowledge based on research, faculty and students from different fields being interested in the various problems, and the potential for fulfilling a component of our institution's mission which connotes not only the education of women within its walls but also doing good in the country and in the world (Smith Tradition, 2010).

From our study group readings and discussions we learned a great deal about the various battles being fought over education in the political realm, what futuristic economists were forecasting with regard to our global competitiveness in light of the education that youth in China and India were getting, and how a narrowing of the public school curriculum in the United States was obscuring the development of skills, problem solving capacities, and dispositions toward work that were deemed critical for success in a 21st century world. These included the ability to "...to think critically and solve problems, work in teams and lead by influence, be agile and adaptable, take initiative and be entrepreneurial, communicate clearly and concisely, access and analyze information effectively, and be curious and imaginative" (Wagner, 2008, pps. 256-257). Such work dovetailed with other theorists whom we were studying in hopes of getting a better handle on the "sport question". Among these scholars was Richard Rothstein whose influential *Class and Schools* (2004) also made the case that much of what has become known as the academic achievement gap was attributable to other sorts of gaps that existed among kids from different socioeconomic strata such as health, housing, employment, and an array of what he labeled as «non-cognitive skills (p. 86).» Rothstein identified such things as: communication skills, interpersonal skills, motivation and initiative, work ethic, and adaptability to change. He along with other prominent theorists such as Robert Halpern (2006) and Reed Larson (2000), con-

tended that the above attributes are best developed in out of school programs in which youth development is a primary focus. This conceptual framework then became the basis for our understanding of the "sport question" and the subsequent design of Project Coach.

### EXPANDING THE CONVERSATION: CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITY

In conjunction with our study group, we embarked on a series of conversations with local educators, coaches, and community members. We had no overarching conceptual method or approach to arranging these conversations other than to meet individuals working at the interesection of education, athletics, health, and community. In the course of these discussions, two key learnings emerged: first, no matter how grim the 'statistics' were involving poverty, academic achievement, or health in a particular community or neighborhood—people were proud of their community and believed that positive momentum was occurring. Second, community members were deeply suspicious of our academic affiliation. College and community partnership may mean one thing in a faculty committee, but to community members accustomed to academic researchers who arrive, extract their data, and vanish—there is rampant skepticism about the motives and commitment of representatives from the academy.

After months of study and conversations, our plans for operationalizing a program eluded us. The breakthrough moment came during one of our conversations with a local principal who suggested that we speak to the neighborhood parks and recreation director – who he described as a "legend in the community." We met the parks and recreation director in an office covered with pictures of youth playing sport and he took us on a tour of the neighborhood complex, which includes an elementary school, a middle school, a library and a health center. When we walked over to the middle school, he said, "Let me show our pride and joy." He took us out and showed us three well-greened soccer fields. "We are so proud of these fields. Five years ago

these fields were abandoned and overgrown. They had all kinds of junk on them and car wrecks and it was a favorite hangout for all sorts of dangerous characters including drug dealers. This was no place parents wanted their kids around, but we received a federal grant and transformed them." We responded by saying, "You must be so thrilled to see your youth playing on those fields now." He paused and then replied, "Actually—these fields get used more often by the elite soccer teams from the suburbs. The kids from the neighborhood don't usually use them." Surprised, we asked, "Why not?"

"I have interest from the kids," he said. But I can't find coaches. I just can't find a core of parent volunteers to serve as coaches. If I could find enough coaches, I could use the fields." His response triggered a set of ideas and connections and conversation from which our program developed. We asked, "Do you think you could find high school students who would want to get paid to be coaches." He responded by saying, "Absolutely. I know so many kids who would love to."

### AFTERSCHOOL CONTEXTS: A NATURAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Out of this conversation the idea for Project Coach emerged. Martin and Osberg (2007) describe the quality of 'alertness' as being a crucial quality possessed by entrepreneurs. In this case, we were alert to the need, but also we quickly ascertained that the after school world was a setting where we could make an impact. From the college perspective, becoming involved in after school programming is attractive for several reasons. First, and not insignificantly, for partnerships to work effectively between a college and a community there needs to be an authentic need within the community. Over the last few decades, the social ecology surrounding children has changed in ways that affect the development of youth (Riggs and Greenberg, 2004). High rates of family mobility, changing patterns of adult employment, media themes of violence and sexuality,



higher rates of technology usage including online and video gaming, and the deterioration of neighborhoods and schools have weakened the formal and informal supports available to families (Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Riggs and Greenberg, 2004). The hours immediately after school have been identified as the most risky for children due to the lack of adult supervision.

As a result of these changing demographic and societal trends and awareness of how vulnerable children are during out-of-school time, after school programs have been proposed to provide youth with supervised and constructive activities. Despite the fact that there is overwhelming support on the part of parents and educators for after school opportunities, there continues to be substantial shortages in programs. More than a quarter of the nation's schoolchildren are on their own in the afternoons, and the parents of 18 million children say they would enroll their kids in afterschool programs if programs were available, a number that is rising because of the economic downturn (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). In the community of Springfield, MA the number of children enrolled in after school programs is somewhere around 25%. In other words, our program addresses an acute need in our local community.

As Project Coach evolved both conceptually and structurally over the years we also learned a great deal about the alliance of service learning initiatives for college students and the rapidly developing sector of out of school education. First, in contrast to times when college students and faculty are more heavily scheduled for classes and laboratories, after school hours are a better match for faculty and college student schedules. Most college students at our residential liberal arts college have classes that end mid-afternoon, and they can flex their schedules to work with us in Project Coach. Thus, afterschool hours provide us with an opportunity to staff our program with undergraduate and graduate students. A second reason that higher education is compatible with the after school world is the flexibility of the latter to offer diverse programming. This

flexibility stands in contrast to schools – particularly schools that serve low income children—where explicit curricular constraints and testing expectations drive academic programming. In contrast, the after school world, has diverse and broad outcome aspirations and it is not, as Halpern notes, a “mass institution.” Instead it serves to complement the primary institutions of school and family by providing a broad array of developmental experiences in a “range of domains that schools lack time for and that low-and moderate-income families may lack resources to purchase in the marketplace. These include, of course, the visual and performing arts, humanities, civics, physical activities and sports” (Halpern, p. 129). The flexibility for creative programming provides college faculty and students opportunity to design, develop, and experiment with an array of approaches, foci, and methods.

### LAUNCHING PROJECT COACH: FROM CONCEPT TO LIVE PROGRAMMING

The second stage of development according to the theory of social entrepreneurship encompasses the design and execution of a program. It entails doing something rather “than waiting for someone else to intervene or trying to convince somebody else to solve the problem, the entrepreneur takes direct action by creating a new product or service and the venture to advance it” (Martin & Osberg, 2007, p. 33). Using the initial funds from the foundation, we launched a program in which we trained local adolescents as coaches of elementary aged children, who would, in turn, run sports leagues during the after school hours for these kids. Importantly, our initial overtures to have the college support the initiative and integrate our fledgling program into the established outreach system was rebuffed. We were told that funds were limited. At the time we were discouraged, but in retrospect our independence provided us with enormous autonomy, which resulted in our being able to be extremely flexible and adaptive during the startup phase.

Our guiding principle flowed from our conclusion that there was really

nothing magical about sports that promoted youth development, but that it was what transpired within it that had the potential to foster or inhibit growth (Orlick, 1974). From our perspective, the job of a coach is to teach others to achieve, and that a program with an explicit and deliberate curriculum to do this would help adolescents to internalize the lessons that they were teaching their players. For example, communications' skills have been identified as being critical for succeeding in school and work environments. But, it is also a fundamental skill required in coaching. Coaches need to think clearly and concisely, and to be able to inspire and instruct their players in an array of practice and competitive settings. They also need to set and fulfill goals, problem solve, show initiative, focus attention, control emotions, and manage time effectively. Consequently, our hypothetical answer to the “sport question” became that of using coaching as a means to teach a cluster of achievement attributes that had great transferable value to academic work, citizenship and family life.

To contemplate and theorize about how to run such a program is one thing, but to actually operationalize it is quite another. From our experiences, colleges do not typically make decisions about allocating resources and running programs in their local communities from the top down; the major focus has always been to provide intellectual development to their students. But, now, Smith College could accomplish its primary mission through Project Coach, as well as fulfill its more ethereal mission of supporting development in neighboring under-resourced local communities. Project Coach had the potential to be a stimulus and laboratory for college students and faculty interested in urban education, sociology, psychology, economics, and public health. It also had the potential of providing opportunities for adolescents, who were often perceived to be problematic, to develop capacities that not only benefited them, but could also be used to teach physical activity and healthy lifestyles to younger children in their communities. Seemingly, this envisioned partnership was a “win-win” en-

tity. Nonetheless, a critical point in the unfolding of this college-community partnership is that it did not germinate from a directive from above (e.g., from a college administration or a funding agency), but from grass-roots efforts of faculty engaged in an intellectual problem along with local community leaders. Clearly, the relationships that were built at this level became stronger and more trusting as faculty and community members realized that the partnership was mutual, and that each constituency was more interested in giving than taking. Simultaneously, we built support inside the college by doing academic presentations to colleagues, involving students, and publishing research. Additionally, we received several grants from philanthropic foundations that served to validate the program's value. Lastly, several media stories were written and filmed about our program, all of which portrayed Project Coach as program of Smith College. While we may have begun as an initiative outside the 'system' at Smith we had become publicly recognized as a primary example of Smith's commitment to community enrichment and social justice.

### ESTABLISHING A MODEL: SERVING AS A LAB PROGRAM FOR THE AFTER-SCHOOL WORLD

The third component of social entrepreneurship involves developing a proposed solution that is viable, cost-effective, scalable, and represents an improvement in the status quo for local constituencies and for what Martin and Osberg (2007) call the "society at large." We believe this describes the development of our work from a small direct service project staffed by two faculty members, which we describe as a lab project within the emerging field of after school programming that not only provides direct service to the children and families of the Springfield community, but also serves as a training and demonstration site.

University/college lab schools trace their origins to John Dewey's tenure at the University of Chicago where faculty could develop educational ideas and practices in a school

context. As Dewey proposed to the President of the University of Chicago:

The conduct of a school demonstration, observation and experiment in connection with the theoretical instruction is the nerve of the whole scheme. Without this no pedagogical department can command the confidence of the educational public it is seeking to lay hold of and direct; the mere profession of principles without their practical exhibition and testing will not engage the respect of the education profession (1967, p. 434).

Our mission at Project Coach has evolved from attempting to answer «the sport question» to include testing approaches of practice in the after school world, training of graduate students and undergraduates, serving as a research site, and being a demonstration site where other practitioners come to observe and participate in professional development. We take seriously, Dewey's belief that lab schools need to be models of what good education should be, based upon educational research and practical experience.

### HOW PROJECT COACH BENEFITS FROM OUR ASSOCIATION WITH SMITH COLLEGE

In any urban community, there is a multitude of small, enterprising community-based programs that have similar mission and commitment as Project Coach. One of the core and enduring challenges facing small community-based programs is sustaining funding and staffing. Over the years we have come to believe that our association with the college provides us with a range of unique benefits that differentiate us from other community-based agencies. First, we derive a financial benefit being associated with Smith. While the College does not provide us with funds for our operating budget, we have received gifts from alumnae who have learned about the work through the development office or by being featured on the college website or other media. Second, our scholarly work has focused on Project Coach. We have taught classes on top-

ics associated with our work in Project Coach and published and presented it in journals and at conferences. Third, the in-kind contributions to the project are substantial. The college provides us with vans, classroom space, connections with college admissions officers, and other formidable resources that have strengthened our work. Lastly, and most importantly, the college is a source of human capital and talent. Graduate and undergraduate students serve as staff, mentors, tutors, and program leaders. The quality of our staff is superb because of this ongoing addition of new people.

### SUMMARY

What started with a relatively innocuous question about the possible connection between sports involvement and academic achievement, became «the sport question," which in turn stimulated a study team that evolved into a program group that formed a relationship with several community members that wished to address common theoretical and applied problems. Clearly, in the beginning, we had no preconceived notion about where the "sport question" would lead us. As our project unfolded it seemed as if we were peeling away the layers of an onion through which we continued to see and understand different aspects of the problems faced by underserved youth in their schools and in their communities.

It is evident that having a conceptual framework for what we are doing is critical for success, but our direct experiences working in an underserved community that faces daily challenges has also helped us to better understand the limits of theory. We are also learning that the challenges of working in a real world setting that has real world problems is not only humbling, but tremendously edifying and fulfilling to us, our students, our coaches, and our community partners. There is little doubt that we have made significant progress on "the sport question", but we also realize that the complexity of what we are learning will keep us engaged for many years. Dees (2009) contends that the contribution of social entrepreneurs is to offer the world

a 'learning laboratory' to develop, test, and revise innovative solutions to social problems. As we go forward this is how we see and plan our work.

**Sam Intrator** has a Ph.D. from Stanford University. He became a professor of Education and Child Study at Smith in 1999 after more than a decade of teaching and administrative service in public schools in New York City and California. He founded the Smith College Urban Education Initiative—an educational outreach program that engages students in intensive service-learning experience by placing them in urban school settings during their

winter term. He is the author of five books, including *Tuned in and Fired Up: How Teaching Can Inspire Real Learning in the Classroom* (Yale University Press), which was a finalist for the Grawemeyer Award in Education. He is the co-founder of Project Coach, a model youth sport after school program that teaches high school students to be youth sport coaches.

**Don Siegel** has an Ed.D. from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He is in his 35th year as a professor of Exercise and Sport Studies (ESS). He helped develop and also served as the director of Smith's ESS graduate program that specializes in training

college coaches, the only program in the country accredited at Level IV by the National Council for Accreditation of Coaching Education. He has also been an urban youth sports program consultant for the Barr Foundation and was instrumental in developing several youth sports initiatives in Boston and Northampton. He has published widely in the areas of sport psychology, motor learning, exercise physiology, sport sociology, computing, and professional aspects of sport and physical education. He is the co-founder of Project Coach, a model youth sport after school program that teaches high school students to be youth sport coaches.

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