Becoming social Entrepreneurs
A day’s discussion on social justice in business and economics at
Seton Hall University in New Jersey

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Signs everywhere point to a thirst for a new approach to economics and business education. A May article in *The Economist* highlighted the changes being made to the nation’s leading business schools curricula. New leadership in institutions such as Harvard Business School and the Booth School at the University of Chicago are setting course toward practice-oriented education that provides students with space to explore business principles guided by ethics, not just the bottom line.

Business education is beginning to embody a global approach that further emphasizes practice over theory, whereby academia offers a greater variety of courses and programs concentrating on “social entrepreneurship,” a kind of economic activity that uses business principles to address a social problem and manages business ventures to make social change.

Social entrepreneurship highlights measures of performance other than profit. While profit is not rejected, this form of entrepreneurship looks at ways that business activity might yield social capital or networks of relationships that further social and environmental goals.

While social entrepreneurship as a concept has most commonly been associated with the voluntary and not for profit sectors, there is a growing recognition that these concepts are not incompatible with making a profit. Students, academics and professionals alike demonstrate a desire for initiatives that are increasingly open to principles of ethics and aimed at a purpose that goes above and beyond the maximization of profit.

A panel held at the Bernard J. Lonergan Institute and the Micah Institute for Business and Economics at Seton Hall University April 24 brought this to light when a large and engaged crowd gathered to examine “Contemporary Movements for Social Justice” in business and economics. A number of presenters discussed new paradigms for economics and business, centering on the work of Jesuit philosopher-theologian Bernard Lonergan.
I personally knew nothing of Lonergan prior to the program’s opening remarks, presented by Canadian theologian and economist Darlene O’Leary. I found myself captured by Lonergan’s ideas of a “pure cycle” of economic activity—a harmonious relationship between production, consumption, finance and a standard of living that reflects the common good. The audience probed Lonergan’s economics while looking at his ideas through the lens of various contemporary movements, particularly the Focolare’s Economy of Communion in Freedom (EoC) and the Community of Sant’Egidio. It was as if with each insightful question and experience shared, we were just beginning to scratch the surface of a world of refreshing perspectives on the contemporary challenges to social justice.

The EoC initiative was well-received as a model for business and economics. EoC panelists discussed its foundation, namely the communion of material goods that Chiara Lubich put into practice during the origins of the Focolare in Italy. Presenting structures that provide a means for profit distribution within the EoC, the panel highlighted the EoC as a business lifestyle centered on the human person and on building communion. Life experiences demonstrated how EoC businesses were taking a radical approach to engaging with stakeholders and, in particular competitors. Emphasizing relationships over profit, these businesses are not only successful profit making ventures; they have a positive and notable difference in their work cultures and local communities.

Additional panels addressed other movements for justice such as the Haiti Solidarity Network of the Northeast, Centesimus Annus Pro-Pontifice and the Community of Sant’Egidio. Lively dialogue encouraged personal experiences from the various panelists, with thoughts on the future of economics and social justice. These movements have given birth to initiatives that could very well be classified as part of the social entrepreneurship movement, but seemed to offer something more.

We experience community before we can bring it about; love must first be received before it can be generated among others. Perhaps that’s the unique contribution offered by these contemporary movements—by creating new relationship-based structures in society, they provide space and community in the realm of economic activity. These encounters in turn provide a powerful witness of a lifestyle that builds a more just and equitable society.

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