



**Miller Center**  
for Social Entrepreneurship

# Action Research for Social Entrepreneurship Education

By Keith Douglass Warner OFM  
Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship  
Santa Clara University





“Big ideas are not enough. Details matter! Social change, especially through social entrepreneurship, happens by balancing radical, big-picture thinking and painstakingly detailed work on the ground. One without the other means limited social change and success for the enterprise ... My calling is to be actively engaged in the struggle of the poor, sick, and destitute, by living with them and working alongside them to build creative, sustainable solutions around the unique set of challenges they face. The Fellowship immersed me in a setting that allowed me to make my first serious exploration into this concept in a real and radical way. I came out of the experience transformed and with a clarity of purpose that I don't think I could have gotten many other ways.”

NICKY NIENOW BIRCH, 2012, EHEALTHPOINT, INDIA



“The GSBF is truly the centerpiece of my educational journey and narrative. Although the action research that I undertook is quite far removed from what I am doing now, the lessons I learned and the perspective I gained have been invaluable during not only the interview process, but also in the professional world in general. The Fellowship remains the common thread through a set of stories about leadership, project management, driving results, and a host of other qualities/skills that employers look for in recent graduates. But it also prepared me to navigate ambiguous situations and solve projects without immediate direction, something that has enabled me to face the professional world with confidence and a cool head.”

JACK BIRD, 2013, LIFELINE ENERGY, ZAMBIA



“The Fellowship taught me about the importance of empowerment in order to enact social change. I learned that charity may not be as sustainable as assisting a social enterprise to implement a new business strategy, because the latter helps empower the enterprise, its employees, and its customers. The Fellowship also opened new doors of opportunity for me and brought out skills in me that I never knew existed. It highlighted my passion for humanitarian engineering by allowing me to work on a technical project for an enterprise; made me dig deeper about my vocation through the hardships onsite and critical essays in class; and displayed my ability to adapt in unknown environments.”

KACI MCCARTAN, 2014, BANAPADS, UGANDA



“My experience with the fellowship plunged me into a world few see, and fewer understand, but a world I am compelled to return to. Exposure to the creativity of social entrepreneurs in East Africa ... has excited me as social progress continues at a community level. The GSBF is a springboard, it has given me the confidence and skillset to work alongside [social entrepreneurs] to create new solutions through research and business development in the developing world.”

THOMAS WHEELER, 2015, JIBU, UGANDA AND RWANDA



“Prior to the Fellowship, I had never considered a business model as a method to achieve major social change. However, social entrepreneurship is proof that innovative entrepreneurial strategies can create more inclusive, accessible economic opportunities in the most marginalized and underserved communities. These strategies overcome certain systemic obstacles in the developing world that policy change cannot. Social entrepreneurship has transformed the way I approach problem solving.”

LINDSEY M. ALLEN, 2015, SOLAR SISTER, UGANDA AND TANZANIA



# Preface

Santa Clara University's [Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship](#) has a bold vision: to positively impact the lives of 1 billion people by 2020. Focusing on the more than 4 billion people who live without adequate food, clean water, effective energy and healthcare, education, or dignified jobs, Miller Center helps social entrepreneurs address these problems. By doing so, Miller Center unites its Jesuit university values of serving humanity with Silicon Valley principles of innovation and entrepreneurship.

Miller Center accelerates social enterprises through its three departments:

- [The Global Social Benefit Institute](#) (GSBI®) provides the business acumen social entrepreneurs need to prepare their organizations for growth, layered with Silicon Valley executive-level mentors;
- [Impact Capital](#) connects impact investors with social entrepreneurs and innovates new ways to invest for social and financial returns; and
- [Education & Action Research](#) shapes future leaders by providing field-based research opportunities for Santa Clara University (SCU) undergraduates with social entrepreneurs who have participated in a GSBI program.

Within Education & Action Research, Miller Center created the [Global Social Benefit Fellowship](#) (GSBF or “The Fellowship”) and its action research model to simultaneously support rigorous undergraduate student learning and accelerate the scaling of GSBI social enterprise partners.

The GSBF expresses the SCU and Miller Center philosophy of weaving together action research with the formation of students. It is a practice-led approach that emphasizes learning from *working with* social enterprises rather than merely *learning about* social enterprises.

The Fellowship spans the spring quarter of the students' junior year to the fall quarter of their senior year. The spring quarter consists of an intensive course on global social entrepreneurship as a social change strategy; Fellows also design their summer action research projects. During the summer, Fellows spend about seven weeks in interdisciplinary teams in developing countries conducting research with their host enterprises. They return to spend two weeks observing the in-residence portion of the [GSBI Accelerator](#) program on the SCU campus. The fall quarter course mentors the completion of research projects for the host social enterprises, and prompts the critical reflection upon the personal and professional implications of the Fellowship experience.

This paper has two parts. Part 1 describes action research in general and its benefits, drawing from the experiences of Miller Center and the Fellowship. Part 2 provides a “how-to guide” for action research with social enterprises, designed to assist academic institutions interested in establishing similar programs. Together, these parts explain the value of social enterprise action research to universities and the social enterprise movement.



## PART ONE: **Action Research & Value Exchange**

Action research can foster greater collaboration between higher education and the social entrepreneurship movement to advance a more just and sustainable world. It marshals key resources of universities – critical thinking and expert knowledge – and applies these to the practical needs of social enterprises and the economically excluded communities they serve.

Most social enterprises can benefit from practical research projects such as social impact assessment, profiles of beneficiaries, training manuals (e.g., for operations or marketing), or videography. Social enterprises, in turn, can be effective local partners for learning and research in these communities.

Action research projects thus facilitate deep student and faculty engagement with practical initiatives to achieve their universities' social mission. Social enterprises are able to parlay these research products to further scale their impact and attract investment.

Working with social enterprises can help students discover how their knowledge and gifts can address the needs of others, especially the economically marginalized. This collaboration, in turn, challenges students to discover their own skills in social entrepreneurship, and to discern their own vocation to become agents of positive social change in the world. When properly designed and executed, action research projects create more value for all parties; however, these projects require more resources than other forms of community-based learning.

### **ACTION RESEARCH AS PRACTICAL LEARNING.**

Action research with social enterprises draws from – but is distinct from – community-based service learning projects and internships. University student interest in social entrepreneurship programs is surging nationally and internationally; students perceive the social enterprise idea as transcending the false choice between pursuing their social ideals and embarking on “real” professions.

Most practical social enterprise higher education is focused on campus-based incubators of student enterprise ideas. While valuable as a learning experience, very few of these enterprise ideas move beyond the ideation stage. University students – graduate and undergraduate – generally lack the skills, experience, and networks of support to launch an enterprise. Moreover, few university-based social enterprise incubators are positioned to address pressing problems of global poverty and climate change.

Service learning is a practical education paradigm well-established in American universities.<sup>1</sup> Service learning takes students out of the campus context to encounter and serve disadvantaged communities; it helps students learn experientially about society, its diversity, and its problems. Service learning offers college students the opportunity to better appreciate their own privileges and the daily struggles of the poor. It can cultivate an attitude of practical compassion for the socially excluded.

Providing these kinds of learning opportunities for students affords value for many human service organizations that are able to take advantage of the volunteer service hours. However, the application of insights garnered through service learning to classroom-based academic learning on campus is uneven, and requires more programmatic staging than is generally provided.

Internships can offer more opportunities for applying campus-based learning to organizations, but most internships with social enterprises function more as volunteer opportunities than as practical research. While students can learn from internships, the value to social enterprises is limited because the internships are not framed by a deeper understanding of the context in which the social enterprise operate and the fundamental structure of the ecosystem.

## Action Research

Action research offers greater potential value to both students and social enterprises than traditional service learning because it fully utilizes the most important resources universities have to offer: critical thinking and expertise. Action research helps students apply their classroom education and undertake intellectual inquiry to deliver valuable insights and products to social enterprises.<sup>2</sup>

For their research to provide practical value, all Fellows work on interdisciplinary teams. This is how professionals engage in real-world problem solving, and the Fellows learn how to work collaboratively across the boundaries of their emerging expertises. Through their engagement with social enterprises and the communities they serve, students discover that the knowledge and skills that they have developed can be of practical use in advancing the mission of social enterprises. This deeper level of engagement also advances the social mission of the university.

This model of action research is adapted from “Participatory Action Research,” or PAR. PAR emphasizes an approach to inquiry in which communities are not only the intended beneficiaries of the research, but also are authentic partners in all aspects of the research process. Unlike traditional academic research with an academic audience, the audiences for PAR are local communities.

Like PAR, social enterprise-based action research rests on the assumption that the research agenda and research practice are undertaken collaboratively. Whereas PAR often engages broad communities, action research engages specific social enterprises, generally embedded in local communities. By working closely with social entrepreneurs, universities can design research projects whereby students and faculty can engage in intellectual inquiry that advances the impact of the social enterprise.

Action research blends the best of service learning with the best of PAR. Santa Clara University’s Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship believes that social entrepreneurship classroom education, when combined with action research, has the potential to foster integrated education in service to the poor — in a way that is superior to most service learning programs.



**GSBI®**

## **Introducing GSBI: A university-based social enterprise accelerator & open-access learning laboratory**

Miller Center's action research model was made possible by more than a decade of social enterprise capacity development by its GSBI department. Direct work with social enterprises of various sizes – pursuing social change in several different economic sectors across the developing world – has allowed Miller Center to acquire significant expertise in understanding what these organizations need in order to scale.

Put another way, social entrepreneurs have taught Miller Center what they needed; and these needs have informed the design of the action research model. A happy consequence of launching a campus-based social enterprise accelerator has been the creation of an extensive global network of social enterprise partners who have benefited from the GSBI, and are thus open to further collaboration with SCU students and faculty.

Launched in 2003, the GSBI is a pioneer and leader in the field of social enterprise capacity development. The GSBI recruits, screens, and selects social enterprises for its programs. Then, through the GSBI Online and GSBI Accelerator programs, it works closely with them for six or ten months, respectively. Over the past few years the GSBI has diversified its portfolio of program offerings and now serves startup, early-stage, and mid-stage social enterprises with a blend of structured curriculum and customized mentoring. With activities and experimentation that have spanned more than a decade, the GSBI has validated its [capacity development methodology](#).<sup>3</sup> As of this writing, the GSBI has worked with more than 500 social enterprises.

The GSBF was launched in 2012 to simultaneously advance the mission of GSBI social enterprise partners and to provide transformative learning experiences for SCU students. This dual-criteria approach requires careful design of research activities so that both goals can be pursued simultaneously.

# Value Exchange

Miller Center's open-access learning laboratory character is grounded in the principle of **value exchange**, drawn from economic philosophy. In its most basic meaning, a value exchange occurs when two parties, each holding goods or resources that are attractive to each other, trade these to the benefit of each party. Put another way, when parties perceive an advantage of exchanging products, experiences, or expertise, cooperation occurs spontaneously. Social enterprises apply this principle by understanding their customers' needs and what they are willing to pay for goods and services. Miller Center applies this principle: By helping more social enterprises help more people, Miller Center itself succeeds in its mission.

Action research extends the principle of value exchange to the interactions between student/faculty researchers and social enterprises. Once a social enterprise has completed a GSBI program, it has a clearer strategy for pursuing growth and success; action research projects extend the capacity development work of GSBI programs to help the enterprise scale its impact. By applying the principle of value exchange, both parties engaged in an action research project clarify what each is able to derive from their mutual engagement, thus creating more effective collaborations between universities and social enterprises.

## **ACTION RESEARCH IN JESUIT, CATHOLIC EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY**

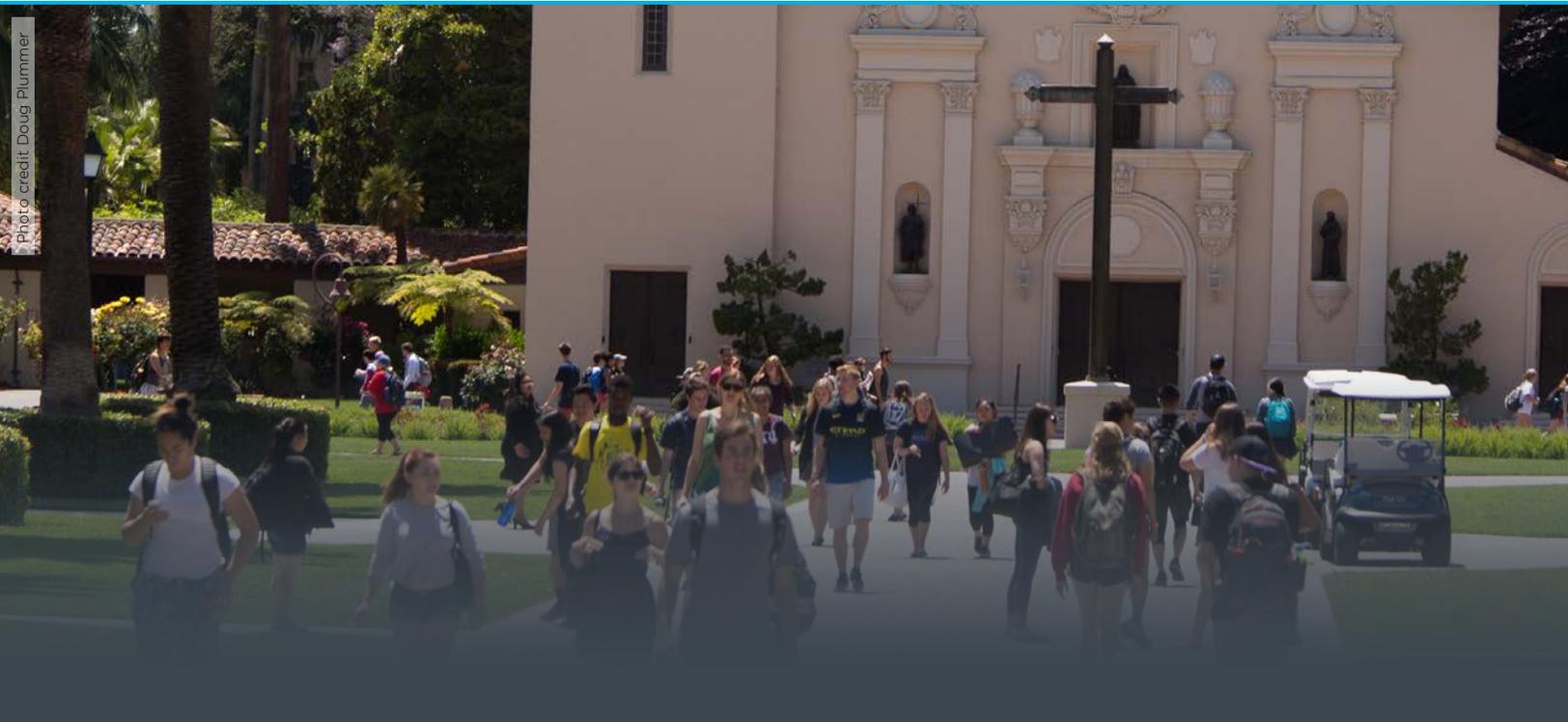
Santa Clara University's Jesuit, Catholic identity provides the intellectual and philosophical foundation for Miller Center action research. The Jesuit, Catholic tradition of higher education embraces the expansion of knowledge – learning and research – but also practical wisdom, or the application of knowledge to live a good life, as an individual or a community. This tradition holds that education always has a cognitive and formational dimension. Jesuit, Catholic higher education aspires to provide more than the acquisition of knowledge. It seeks to fashion whole persons, integrating the development of mind, heart, and conscience of its students.

Over the past 50 years, Jesuit higher education has rededicated itself to promoting social justice, grounded in the renewal of its institutional sponsor, the Jesuit religious order. Its universities make this an explicit goal of their educational programs. All Jesuit universities teach courses on social justice, operate service-learning programs, and seek to instill a commitment in their students to creating a more just and sustainable world.

Miller Center<sup>5</sup> was founded in 1997 as one of Santa Clara University's three Centers of Distinction to communicate the distinctiveness of Jesuit education and to express its commitment to justice.<sup>6</sup> These centers are charged with fostering interdisciplinary education and research reflecting these values.<sup>7</sup> Miller Center was founded to bring the values of Jesuit, Catholic education into dialogue with Silicon Valley, and its influence on innovation and entrepreneurship worldwide. Miller Center's work with the global social enterprise movement is a reflection of this commitment to a more just, humane, and sustainable world. It conveys the ethical vision of Jesuit, Catholic education in a way that is engaged, concrete, and contemporary.

Jesuit educational philosophy is guided by the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, a program for integrated spiritual growth and for making life choices. In the 21st century, this is often described as discerning a vocation, or a life calling. This may be religious, spiritual, or neither. Students of all backgrounds find value in the process of reflecting upon what matters most to them and why, and of articulating their own passions and skills with a life project.

So, too, many social entrepreneurs speak of their own work in terms such as “calling” or “vocation.”<sup>8</sup> They report that they entered this field because of some encounter, direct or indirect, with suffering people, and that this redirects the trajectory of their lives. Social entrepreneurship is hard and difficult work, at times quite discouraging, and it requires enormous personal sacrifices. Social entrepreneurs pursue this vocation drawn by the meaning and moral purpose they find in service to the economically excluded. Thus, the vocational discernment process followed by social entrepreneurs is quite consistent with the social ideals of Jesuit education — and this inspires the Global Social Benefit Fellows.<sup>9</sup>



## Jesuit universities and their commitment to the poor

Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría SJ was a Jesuit priest and intellectual leader who elaborated how universities should put their resources at the service of the marginalized. He served as rector (president) of the University of Central America in El Salvador. At the 1982 Santa Clara University commencement he said:

*“...the university should be present intellectually where it is needed:  
to provide science for those without science;  
to provide skills for those without skills;  
to be a voice for those without voices;  
to give intellectual support for those who do not possess the  
academic qualifications to make their rights legitimate.”*

He was seen as a threat by the political leaders of El Salvador and martyred for his work in 1989, along with five other Jesuits and two lay companions. Ellacuría’s vision continues to inspire education for social justice in Jesuit higher education today.<sup>4</sup>



PART TWO:

## How-to Guide for Action Research with Social Enterprises

Global Social Benefit Fellowship action research projects begin with Miller Center staff conducting a needs assessment with a GSBI social enterprise. We offer a menu of types of research projects that may be of interest, to determine whether a project would be of mutual benefit. Potential host enterprises are advised that, as an open access learning laboratory, Miller Center posts all research projects on our webpage, with the exception of sensitive business and customer data. The research projects become publicly available, although partner enterprises can request sensitive information not be posted.

Potential host organizations are selected exclusively from social enterprises that have completed the GSBI Online or GSBI Accelerator programs. The GSBI staff suggest specific enterprises for a Fellowship placement based on their observation of the performance of the entrepreneur in a GSBI program, and often, a field visit.

Experience has taught us that the social entrepreneurs who invest time in providing guidance to our student Fellows receive much more valuable research products. As a general rule, when the social entrepreneur can organize and support student contact with customers/beneficiaries in the field, the Fellowship works well, and useful action research results. When the social enterprise headquarters is at a great distance from the field research site, project coordination can be more challenging.



**Solar Sister:** Since completing the GSBI program in 2011, Solar Sister has scaled its Avon-style woman-to-woman peer sales model for solar-powered lanterns. Solar Sister has trained more than 2,000 micro-entrepreneurs in three African countries. The enterprise requested Fellows to document the various social impacts of women becoming micro-entrepreneurs. Teams of Fellows have worked in Uganda and Tanzania to provide [photos, videos, and customer profiles](#). Solar Sister has parlayed this research into successful grant applications and reports to funders.



**Illuméxico:** Illuméxico is a Mexico City-based social enterprise selling solar home systems and other energy products to poor, rural communities that are beyond the electrical grid in Mexico. The enterprise completed the GSBI Accelerator in 2013, and while in-residence on campus, the CEO discussed his need for greater understanding of customer perceptions of the company and products. Two Fellows spent seven weeks in 2014 conducting more than 250 customer satisfaction surveys using the Net Promoter Score (NPS) methodology in the Mexican states of Campeche and Oaxaca. The Fellows translated the basic NPS framework to survey customers in a Base-of-the-Pyramid (BOP) market, who were in some cases illiterate. In the fall quarter course, the Fellows created [four reports based on their NPS survey work](#). They reported the results as well as their critical analysis of the utility of the NPS in emerging markets.



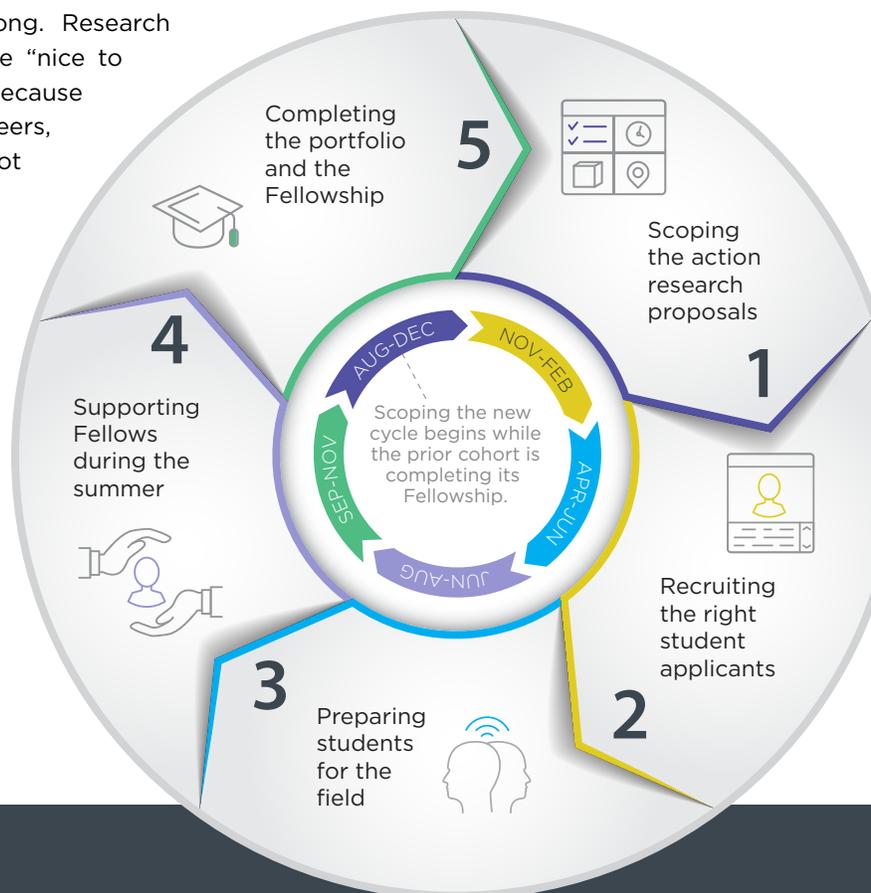
**BanaPads:** Also in Uganda, BanaPads (GSBI, 2012) manufactures affordable, eco-friendly sanitary pads through a simple technology that converts banana pseudo stems, an abundant and free organic waste, into absorbent pads using natural and recycled materials. More importantly, BanaPads engages in village-based health education campaigns to assist women and girls in menstruation management. BanaPads has hosted Fellows to assist with documenting its outreach, sales procedures, and operations manuals. The CEO and founder of BanaPads credits [these manuals](#) with helping him win the African Social Entrepreneur award for 2014.

The action research model has several features that appeal to our GSBI social entrepreneurs, including:

- The Fellowship attracts students with social ideals who are motivated to conduct research in the developing world for a summer, and that requires a 9-month commitment. The demands of the Fellowship set up a self-selection process.
- The Fellowship provides excellent preparation for Fellows, training them to think in the GSBI method so that they are able to begin productive research upon arrival.
- The Fellows arrive in the field prepared with an understanding of the mission of their host social enterprises, the GSBI methodology, and how to conduct research to support scaling.
- Finally, the Fellowship requires a fall quarter course to conclude the program that facilitates the completion of the research project plus critical reflection by the students upon their experiences.

The Global Social Benefit Fellowship may not be useful for some social enterprises. The Fellows are not experienced researchers or consultants. These are undergraduates, working semi-independently, in a new cultural context. Faculty members mentor their preparation and write-up phases, but they are not present in the field with the students. The seven weeks in the field are not enough to gain a full understanding of a social enterprise's needs nor the communities it serves. However, it is an appropriate time frame for an introductory experience of field research, and the Fellows do access the expertise of Miller Center staff.

Some host organizations have said that the time was too short, others too long. Research provided by Fellows should be “nice to have” and not “must have.” Because Fellows are student volunteers, mission-critical research is not appropriate for this Fellowship. The one-year time lag between project initiation and delivery means that the enterprise has to be stable enough to provide long-term support plus be patient enough to wait a year for results. The Fellowship program has to be flexible to respond to the evolution of the host enterprise's needs throughout this time.



## THE FIVE STAGES OF ACTION RESEARCH

## Stage 1: Scoping the Action Research Proposals

*Setting expectations for collaboration, and the first feasibility check*



The GSBI team identifies potential host enterprises based on their current programs or ongoing communication with them, using their performance in a GSBI program to identify research needs and evaluate the enterprise's ability to host student researchers. The team then introduces the social entrepreneur to the Fellowship director.

The initial consultation between the Fellowship director and entrepreneur consists of a needs assessment for the enterprise. Together, they review examples of relevant prior Fellows' work (if available), discuss the structure of the program, and agree upon project requirements in order for the project to succeed. This initial discussion is conducted in-person during the GSBI Accelerator in-residence, with a site visit, or by Skype™.

Next, the director drafts a planning document titled "Action Research Proposal" following a series of prompts. This proposal guides the collaboration between Miller Center and the entrepreneur from the time the project is created (September through November) until Fellows design more sophisticated and complete research plans in the weeks just prior to arrival in the field.

After the proposal is drafted, it is shared with the entrepreneur for review or revision, and approval. This also serves as a test: Is the entrepreneur responsive? If this process takes several weeks, it might indicate that the entrepreneur is too busy to effectively support student research.

Miller Center then conducts its first internal feasibility check: a review session with the director of operations (who serves as health and safety officer), director of administration, and a faculty member. This session addresses the following questions:

- Is this proposed research project viable?
- Can undergraduates actually do the work requested?
- Does the university have faculty expertise on campus to help with this kind of research?
- Is the social entrepreneur responsive to our program needs? Does he or she understand what is required on the part of the organization for this to succeed?
- Can Miller Center safely deploy undergraduate students to this location?

Once the action research project passes through these stages, the action research proposal is posted on the Miller Center's webpage.



## Components of the Action Research Proposal:

1. Name of social enterprise
2. Mission statement
3. Webpage
4. GSBI business plan presentation  
*Prospective student applicants view a YouTube video of the social entrepreneur presenting his or her mission, vision, and need.*
5. Headquarters
6. Location(s) of research
7. The challenge  
*The organization conveys what its needs in order to better achieve its mission, and communicates the context of its research needs.*
8. Action research products needed  
*Specific deliverables the social enterprise expects to be provided at the conclusion of the work.*
9. Student skills needed  
*The specific kinds of skills or experience required for this placement are identified, including language requirements, and allows an applicant to imagine whether this is the kind of task she or he is able to fulfill.*
10. Keywords  
*The anticipated themes and topics in the specific placement, which communicate to the reference librarians topics for literature research.*

## Stage 2: Recruiting the Right Student Applicants

### *Outreach, application, and interviews*



We work closely with specific campus programs to recruit appropriate candidates as Fellows. The ideal Fellow will have some exposure to the developing world, the academic preparation to be able to design and conduct a semi-independent research project, and a set of specific professional, technical, or language skills to conduct the kind of research requested. The specific student skills required by particular action research projects help focus outreach to the disciplinary departments of the university most likely to have those skills. Since action research draws on multiple types of expertise, every team is interdisciplinary in composition. The Fellowship program brokers collaboration between students and faculty of different disciplinary departments on campus.

The [University Honors Program](#) is our most important campus partner. SCU has approximately 120 honors students in each year's cohort, and each year about 20% of our Fellowships are awarded to honors students. We are eager to recruit honors students because they are required to complete a senior thesis, and most of them extend their research from the Fellowship into that work.

The Fellowship has had good experiences collaborating with the [Leadership Excellence and Academic Development \(LEAD\)](#) scholars program, which helps first-generation college students succeed. Many of these students are the children of immigrants and have overcome significant life challenges and cultural barriers in order to succeed at university. These students have brought a greater diversity of life experiences to the overall Fellowship cohort. Many also bring multicultural competencies and language skills.

Miller Center actively partners with several academic departments to recruit students. Partnerships are most effective when there is a natural convergence of interests. For example, the Public Health Science Program and the Department of Environmental Studies and Sciences attract students who are interested in, and prepared to conduct, international field research with communities. Their faculty actively recruit students for these kinds of experiences.

Some faculty from departments with which we have partners are consulted during the first feasibility check, and then are requested to nominate students from their departments, based on their experience teaching and advising them. Then, after students have applied but before their interview, rather than requiring faculty to write letters of recommendation, a candidate review session is held with these faculty members, excusing them from the need to write individual letters of recommendation. This allows the faculty to present their candidates and comment on them candidly, which the faculty appreciate.

The bulk of action research proposals are posted online by mid-November. In December and January, Miller Center hosts a series of information sessions to introduce prospective applicants to the field of social entrepreneurship, Miller Center, and the Fellowship. Two Fellows from the prior year share their experiences and answer questions from interested students. The application and interview process is explained.

Because these students are going to work in the developing world for more than seven weeks without an SCU staff or faculty member with them, it is essential that the applicants recognize

the serious nature of the commitment, and simultaneously, we want to get a very good picture of the candidates.

The Fellowship application process is comprehensive, requires a good bit of effort on the part of the applicant, and is completed in parts:

- First, the applicant reviews the action research projects listed for the current year.
- Second, the applicant registers basic information through our webpage: name, majors, email addresses, phone number, GPA, top-three preferred placements with a short statement about what skills he or she could bring to each placement.
- Third, the applicant provides a personal application essay. This essay asks students to identify their motivations for applying to the Fellowship and to provide relevant life experiences.
- Fourth, the applicant solicits three letters of recommendation: from a faculty member, a community service or internship supervisor, and a peer. These are all submitted in digital form.

This process allows us to quickly scan the applications and select the candidates we wish to interview first. Students with one of the following are the first to be invited for an interview:

- Experience traveling in the developing world
- Substantive community service experience
- Specialized skills needed to complete a specific research project
- Field research experience with communities

The invitation to an interview requires students to review U.S. government websites with information about travel safety and health, and to discuss country-specific considerations with their family. Interviews are conducted between late January and the middle of February. Two staff members plus one former Fellow conduct 25-minute interviews. Applicants are asked to describe their motivations and skills, as well as their ability to successfully conduct a specific action research project in the developing world.

We use these questions to guide the selection of Fellows:

1. Does the candidate have the intellectual capability and determination to complete a 9-month research project?
2. Can this person negotiate the ambiguity and uncertainties of working in a developing-world cultural context?
3. Can this applicant function as a productive and responsible member of a team — without direct supervision by an SCU staff member?
4. Can this applicant devise and follow a health and safety plan while in country?

We assess candidates for suitability for the Fellowship, their grasp of social entrepreneurship, and for their ability to contribute skills to a specific action research project. Applicants have to field very direct questions, such as experiences with poor sanitation and challenging health conditions, and prior experience in resolving team conflict. The interview is constructed in such a way as to allow the candidate to reveal something of his or her personality, and strengths and weaknesses as a teammate.

The decision to award a Fellowship is largely dependent upon the interview. If the candidate interviews well, he or she is then tentatively placed on one or more teams, until a full slate for all the projects is filled, with some alternates. Some students might have a good fit with only one placement, others with multiple placements. A great deal of thought is put into forming cross-functional, interdisciplinary teams for each project. For example, a student with a technical skill (engineering) might be placed with a more experienced international traveler. Or, a student with strong research skills might be matched with another with strong language skills.

We initially favored three-person teams, but experience demonstrates that two-person teams are more efficient. With two-person teams, negotiations about sharing workload appear to be more straightforward and result in greater research productivity per Fellow.

Fellowships are awarded after the best matching of candidates for each team has been determined. The award letter confirms the social enterprise that will serve as their hosts, explains the academic component of the Fellowship, describes the summer stipend, and provides a timeline of activities.

Candidates have seven days to decide to ratify the award and accept the Fellowship. The new Fellows sign a student learning contract that outlines the expectations of the Fellows throughout the cycle of the program, allows use by Miller Center and the social entrepreneur of the data (including photos and videos) gathered in the field, and lists post-Fellowship activities, such as recruitment of a new cohort. As of this writing, 57 students have completed the Fellowship in four cohorts.

While the candidates are being interviewed, we reach out to faculty who have certain kinds of expertise, inviting them to serve as faculty research mentors for particular action research projects. The overall goals for their contribution are to:

- Provide additional mentoring in the art and science of research;
- Coach the students in successfully completing a research project; and
- Support the integral learning and development of students, including reflection upon leadership, service, and vocation.

As the Fellowship continues to grow, it has been able to match the specialized knowledge of specific faculty with the needs of student research teams working on projects for our social enterprise partners. This might be scientific expertise (public health), social impact evaluation (social science), or skills (technical writing). There is no one specific activity that must be provided; however, any additional expertise they can provide is helpful. Subject-matter-expert librarians have also been very supportive of the Fellowship program.

The award letter invites the Fellows to a welcome event and to a travel planning meeting, both in March. The welcome event formally launches the Fellowship. New Fellows meet Miller Center staff, former Fellows, faculty research mentors, and subject-matter-expert librarians.

Organized by the director of operations, the travel-planning meeting orients the new Fellows to all the activities that need to be undertaken prior to the Fellows' departures. Miller Center assigns the date of departure and return, and explains what is needed to obtain a visa, if required by the host country, and what vaccinations are prescribed. The health and safety planning for the Fellowship is benchmarked against international companies preparing their employees for the field. This is a form of professional mentoring for the Fellows. We prepare them to write their own safety plans. We provide resources, but they have to create the plans — and we invite them to share their plans with their parents.

Once the students have accepted their Fellowship, a letter is sent to the host enterprise to confirm the action research project, restate expectations about cooperation, and provide more specific information to help its staff prepare for the Fellows' field research. This letter includes:

- Basic information about the Fellows (names, majors)
- Confirmation of arrival and departure dates, and port of arrival
- Confirmation that the host enterprise will arrange local housing
- A description of the original scope of work and research deliverables, with an invitation to refine them at this point
- Request for information on transportation, and translation (if needed)
- Request for high-resolution pictures, which are used for marketing



## Stage 3: Preparing the Students for the Field

### *A crash-course in social entrepreneurship and action research*



The required spring-quarter course is designed to prepare the Fellows for conducting semi-independent research in the developing world on behalf of social enterprises. Many Fellows describe this as the most academically challenging course that they take at Santa Clara University. “Seminar in Social Entrepreneurship” has three parts. Nearly all of the assignments are formulated and submitted as teams to prepare the Fellows for working together effectively in the field.

**Part One** of the course requires the Fellows to understand the context of their action research projects. A brief introduction to sustainable development and social entrepreneurship as a development strategy provides this context. In teams, the Fellows craft short profiles of the countries where they will work, with attention to socio-economic development indicators. As individuals, Fellows write short essays posted on a blog to introduce themselves to their host social enterprises, and others supporting them in the Fellowship experience. These essays respond to the query: “Who I am and why am I a Fellow?” To better understand themselves and their team dynamics, the Fellows take Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality assessments and discuss the results.

**Part Two** of the course analyzes the social entrepreneurship strategies of the host enterprises. This portion of the course analyzes fundamental concepts in the field of social enterprise, using the business model canvas as a tool for mapping major components of each enterprise’s strategy.

- The first assignment requires each team of Fellows to conduct a comparative analysis of two other social enterprises — and their business models — operating in the same sector (but not the host enterprise).
- The second assignment requires the Fellows to retrace the business model canvas of their host enterprises. Fellows study materials provided to the GSBI by the social enterprises, which helps them better understand their mission and operational structures. Whenever possible, the Fellows are introduced to the executives who mentored the social enterprise through the GSBI program. These mentors extend their service to the social entrepreneur by helping the Fellows understand the scaling strategies of their host enterprise.<sup>10</sup>
- At this point, the Fellows are introduced to their host enterprises using their blog essays. The Fellows share the business model canvas exercise with their host enterprises, which becomes the basis of their first Skype conversations. These interactions signal to the hosts that the students are preparing themselves to understand the needs of their host enterprises. If appropriate, the Fellows are introduced to the original GSBI mentors to help them understand the strategic direction and research needs of the social enterprises.

These assignments prepare the Fellows to understand the core challenges facing the enterprises, and to have a meaningful conversation with their hosts about the contributions they can make to their missions. As a result, the Fellows develop credibility in the eyes of the host enterprises.

**Part Three** of the course requires the Fellows to prepare in-depth action research plans to guide their summer field placements. At the first Skype meeting with the host enterprises (described above), the Fellows review — and if necessary, update — the goals of the research projects. Informed by these conversations, the Fellows meet with subject-matter-expert librarians to construct annotated bibliographies that support their research into similar, prior efforts to address the specific social needs.

The next task is to formulate plans for how they will gather data in the field. Because social impact assessment (in various forms) is the most common research activity, the course gives special attention to field data collection. However, because there is a great diversity of cultural contexts, of enterprise needs, and of data collection activities possible, we draw on the expertise of faculty research mentors to help tailor the plans.

To further hone the action research plans, the Fellowship hosts a “methodology clinic” during which all the faculty mentors participate. In pairs, faculty hold back-to-back 20-minute consultations with three teams to offer suggestions for identifying data as well as methods to collect data in the field. The methodology clinic exposes the faculty to the breadth of action research activities on behalf of social enterprises, and also allows them to share their expertise to make practical contributions to Fellows’ research. The Fellows report that this kind of “speed dating” approach to learning about methods is valuable as they work on their action research plans.

Armed with background information on the social enterprise; a literature review of similar, prior efforts to address this social need; and a first draft of a methods paper, the Fellows are prepared to craft their team interdisciplinary research plans. The action research plan draws from all the work done throughout the quarter to guide the summer fieldwork. The Fellows develop their plans as a reference to keep them on track while in the field. Each plan serves as the basis for research activities and, if needed, to renegotiate certain research activities in-country with the host enterprise or others. The interdisciplinary research plans are submitted during the final week of spring quarter classes.

A pre-departure meeting is held with each team, the Fellowship director, and director of operations during the last few days before the Fellows depart. At this meeting, each team reviews its communication plan for the transition to the field, obtains its university purchase cards/credit cards, checks out equipment (e.g., cameras), and discusses last-minute adjustments to the research plan.



Photo credit: Santa Clara University



## Sample assignment prompt: Team Interdisciplinary Research Plan

This assignment integrates learning from the entire quarter to create a plan that guides research activities in the field. Here is a sample assignment:

1. Executive Summary  
*-Two paragraphs. Write this last.*
2. Profile of the social enterprise and its research needs  
*-Three paragraphs. Summarize the value proposition, key enterprise attributes, and research needs. This will be updated in your online portfolio in October.*
3. Research product(s) you will share with your enterprise in October  
*-One paragraph per product. Here, you should describe in as much detail as possible what you anticipate delivering to your enterprise. You may share one integrated product or multiple products.*
4. Core issue(s) in the field of social entrepreneurship that your action research project will address  
*-One paragraph. Draw from class resources. Consider the needs of your social enterprise partner in the context of all the challenges in the field of social entrepreneurship. Describe the core issue you will address in the context of the broader field of social entrepreneurship. For example, many projects help enterprises enhance, measure, or document their social impact, so you might consider impact measurement as a cross-cutting issue in the field.*
5. Research questions  
*Review the questions you prepared for the methods paper, and incorporate feedback from your host enterprise and ecosystem of support.*
6. A description of the data you will gather and how you will gather it  
*This description should be a condensed, revised, and updated version of your research methods paper. You should share the paper you submitted with your research mentor(s) and ask for help to improve it. Identify which team member is taking the lead on which data collection activity. The description should include:*
  - a. What data will you gather?
  - b. Who (or what) will you gather data from?
  - c. How will you gather that data?
  - d. How will you store it and ensure it is available to you in the fall?
  - e. What forms will that data collection take?
  - f. What do you anticipate doing with this data in the fall?

7. A description of the ethical issues raised by your work with people.  
*If you are asking people to share information with you, you have ethical obligations to ensure they are not harmed (socially or economically) by you sharing what they tell you. Some people you interview may be vulnerable to harm if the information they share with you is made public.*
  - a. *Who are you interviewing and who might be vulnerable? Why might they be vulnerable?*
  - b. *Carefully distinguish between data captured informally (e.g., participant observation) or using analogue means (interviews recorded in notes), and data that is captured digitally (e.g., photo, audio, video).*
  - c. *How will you gather informed consent? How will you ask for this? How will you store a record of this consent?*
  - d. *How will you determine whether to keep the name of the interviewee anonymous to protect them?*
  - e. *If the interviewee is to remain anonymous, how will you ensure this?*
  
8. The vocational discernment and professional development goals you hope to achieve for yourself through these research activities.  
*-One paragraph per Fellow, identified with your name. You should discuss these with your teammates and write them as a dialogue on paper with each other. What personal vocational questions do you anticipate being challenged to address?*
  
9. A summary of key issues presented by the national and cultural context of your work.  
*Here, summarize the opportunities and challenges you anticipate facing in the context of your placement.*
  
10. A bibliography *Adapted from the prior assignment.*
  
11. A work plan.  
*This should be a week-by-week schedule with as much detail as possible. Arrange for your second (or third) Skype call with your host to review, or discuss this with your host after you turn this in. The work plan should describe:*
  - a. *What you will do, and when. Write at least a sentence about each in-country partner who will help you with your research project.*
  - b. *What technologies you will need to do this work.*
  - c. *How you will travel to various locations and negotiate cultural and linguistic barriers.*
  - d. *Who you will ask for help for various needs, in-country and back in the U.S. This should include a plan for communicating with your research mentors.*
  
12. Your team's safety plan  
*Include this after approved by the director of operations.*

JUNE — AUGUST

## Stage 4: Learning With and From Social Enterprises

*Facilitating action learning in the field and on campus*



The spring quarter activities described above are designed to provide comprehensive preparation for undergraduates traveling overseas for field research. This preparation allows the teams to be able to operate semi-independently to the fullest degree possible, and maximizes the probability that any additional logistical or research support will be minimal, by emails and Skype calls. Each team is required to communicate with the director of operations the day of arrival and each of the next two days, and then weekly throughout the field experience.

After the first full week of research, each team arranges for a Skype call to discuss adjustments to its plan. By that point, the Fellows have crossed many different kinds of social, cultural, and organizational boundaries, and they have to reconsider some of the operative assumptions that guided their research planning:

- Sometimes new research opportunities emerge
- Some research activities become evidently infeasible
- Some research activities become more narrowly focused

Problems that have arisen in the past include: difficulties in accessing the customers/beneficiaries/patients; problems finding adequate translation services; inadequate communication internal to the host organization resulting in contradictory behavior toward the Fellows; and challenges with transportation.

The conversation after one week in the field allows Fellows to discuss issues and problems, and for the Fellowship director to offer suggestions and additional resources. However, as a general approach, Miller Center wants to avoid “rescuing” the Fellows from difficulties, confusing experiences, or frustrations arising from working in the developing world. As long as the Fellows are healthy and safe, struggles with the research process and the host culture are considered normal and part of the learning experience. In several cases, student teams have had to experience weeks of frustration in the field before new insights are gained. At times, key moments of discovery take place in the final week in the field.

### RE-ENTRY, REFLECTION, & OBSERVATION DURING THE GSBI ACCELERATOR IN-RESIDENCE

We arrange for the Fellows to return to campus several days before the 10-day in-residence portion of the GSBI Accelerator begins at SCU.<sup>11</sup> We use this occasion to gather the Fellows together as a cohort to reflect upon their field experiences, to observe our on-campus work with the social enterprises participating in the in-residency program, to acquire a breadth of perspective of the social enterprise movement, and to prepare them for completing research projects in the fall.

As they are about to return from the field, we invite each Fellow to select and share two photos, one that conveys the mission of the enterprise and one that depicts the experience of research. Upon their return, we ask the Fellows to first focus on getting over jetlag and catching up on sleep. After several days, we convene them to share stories with the entire cohort that emerge

The student learning goals for this two-week, re-entry period are to:

1. Describe, explain, and share experiences in the field with the host social enterprise and the communities it serves, and to initiate reflection upon these experiences (to be continued fall quarter).
2. Observe, learn from, and (to a limited extent) participate in the GSBI Accelerator in-residence program.
3. Prepare plans for completing the research products for the host social enterprise.

from those pictures. There is great value in providing informal time for the Fellows to catch up with each other. The importance of facilitating sharing among teams of Fellows about their cross-cultural and action research experiences cannot be overstated. A hike in the woods provides a refreshing context for discussions, especially for the Fellows who worked in polluted environments. Other Fellows provide a frame of reference for an individual's experience.

The field placement and re-entry process function like a prism, refracting coherent experiences into an array of feelings and responses. Fellows express a wide range of strong emotions upon re-entry, including zeal for more time in the field, disappointment and frustration, and a large range in between. At times, individual Fellows report feelings that vacillate between the extremes. An individual may express admiration for the host enterprise or host culture, alternating with criticism. Unrealized expectations can be a source of sadness, or even feelings of resentment. The superabundance of American consumer culture can be disorienting, especially after working in resource-constrained environments. Some Fellows return with various travellers' illnesses. By meeting with each team and individual Fellows, Miller Center staff provide space for the Fellows to begin to frame their experiences, and to discuss their emotional responses to their reentry processes.

The GSBI Accelerator in-residency exposes Fellows to greater breadth in the social enterprise movement by affording opportunities to observe a cohort of 14-to-18 social entrepreneurs. Part of the entrepreneurs' in-residency experience is to prepare an investor pitch. While the Fellows have limited opportunities for direct interaction, there are some, especially for Fellows who wish to help improve the digital slides or the financial models for the entrepreneurs in-residence. Some Fellows are enthusiastic about working late into the night to help the entrepreneurs, while others want and need time to recover, to distract themselves, or to attend to personal needs.

The Fellows are required to attend several cohort meetings during the in-residence period, to help them understand and interpret what is transpiring with the GSBI Accelerator program in real-time. These meetings also serve as working sessions to help the teams of Fellows process their data (including selecting the best photos and providing captions for them), finalize their lists of research deliverables, and communicating the plans for project completion to their host enterprises.

Around the third week of August, the in-residence program is completed, and the Fellows are released for four weeks until the fall quarter starts. The Fellows are urged, however, to spend one of those weeks processing their data (e.g., interview transcriptions) and beginning to write their research, which helps make their fall quarter easier.

## Stage 5: Completing the Portfolio & Fellowship

*Accountability to the enterprise and the integration of life lessons*



The fall quarter class is essential to the value exchange of the Fellowship. It provides the academic structure to ensure that the students complete their research projects and share them with their host enterprises. Were this class not required, some Fellows would not have the discipline on their own to complete their projects at or near a professional level. The instructors ensure the students stay on task and provide critical reviews of several drafts before they are shared with the host enterprises. This course is also essential for the Fellows to reflect upon what they experienced in the field and to apply this to their own life and life choices.

During the first weeks of the fall course, the Fellows refine their description of research project deliverables. A research clinic is organized during the second week of the quarter with all of the faculty research mentors, akin to the one in May, and each team rotates through three stations to receive expert consultations on how to best analyze and present their data in their research deliverables.

The report writing begins in earnest. These research projects are considerably more sophisticated than any prior writing assignment undertaken by these students, and they need a good bit of coaching and encouragement to complete them. The Fellows are recommended to consult with their faculty research mentors, as well as the GSBI mentor that coached the organization initially. The Fellows are generally motivated to do so by their devotion to their host enterprises, but they need external reviewers to hone their findings and recommendations so that they are of practical value to the enterprises. Only after the director of the Fellowship has reviewed these reports and projects are they shared with the host enterprises, which then has 10 days to appraise them before they are posted on the Miller Center website. All research products are assembled into an e-portfolio that showcases the work the Fellows did for their enterprises.

Vocational discernment constitutes 30% of the course activities and grade. Fellows write three essays as part of the vocational discernment portion of the fall course. They are asked to use these to describe the impact the Fellowship experiences have had on them, as well as their self-awareness, desires, and understandings of (in)justice in the world. They are directed to include the expressions “I feel” and “I believe” to make this a whole-person essay, and they are free to incorporate spirituality or questions of faith, ultimate meaning, and moral vision. The Fellowship also takes advantage of LinkedIn® to help Fellows develop their professional persona and networks.

**The first essay**, due the first week of fall quarter, asks the Fellows to reflect upon key life lessons learned in the field over the summer. They are to reflect in a personal way upon their experiences working with social enterprises and the communities they serve. This essay should convey the experience while in the field: their encounters, thoughts, and feelings while meeting people in need and those responding to them. The essay is intended to focus the attention of the Fellows back on their field experiences, and to articulate how they make meaning of those experiences — and also to reflect critically upon their own reactions and the implications for their own lives. Each essay is submitted on a blog, with pictures.

**The second essay** is a practical tool to help the Fellows consider potential professional expressions of their vocation. The Fellows are instructed to describe three professional pathways they might wish to pursue, and to write a reflection that briefly describes each. Examples might include graduate school, private sector employment, an internship, or another Fellowship. These reflections should include a description of why each is attractive and what core talents would be exercised in it. This essay is used to help the Fellows identify professionals (e.g., alumni) in the field with whom they might conduct an informational interview. We encourage the Fellows to use LinkedIn to help them identify potential interviewees, but also to apply what they have learned about how to express their aspirations on LinkedIn.

**The third essay**, the last assignment in the Fellowship, challenges students to reflect upon how their beliefs have changed as part of the Fellowship: beliefs about themselves and the field of social entrepreneurship. To the extent they are comfortable, the Fellows are invited to consider how the Fellowship has shaped their beliefs.



## Sample assignment prompt: Concluding Vocational Reflection Essay

The concluding reflective essay assignment: What I believe about social entrepreneurship and my vocation. This essay should help explain to family and friends what the Fellows will take away from this Fellowship, and how the Fellows look at the world differently than a year ago. The essay encourages Fellows to address, in a personal way, the following questions:

1. What did you learn about the kinds of social engagements that are best for you? Do consider the role of entrepreneurial thinking in addressing the world's most pressing needs, but if you discovered that you do not want to be involved in entrepreneurship, state that and explain why. Why do these forms of social engagement make sense to you? How are your gifts, skills, and desires aligned with them?
2. Describe a vocational decision you have made or will make this year, and how an insight from the Fellowship might play a role in that decision.
3. As a result of this Fellowship, what do you believe is different than a year ago? This could be a belief about yourself, about the world, about the nature of justice, the ability to discern vocations, or the spiritual dimension of your life.

This assignment is supported by numerous classroom discussions about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the social enterprise movement, and how social entrepreneurship compares to other strategies for promoting justice in the world. These discussions invite the Fellows to articulate how their own beliefs have been shaped by their experiences.

# Conclusion:

## The strengths of this model



The action research model of the Global Social Benefit Fellowship was developed because Miller Center wanted to simultaneously support rigorous, transformative undergraduate student learning and the scaling of our social enterprise partners in other countries (which requires extensive planning). These goals, and the constraints that they impose, demanded a program structure that would guide and support distributed work over a 15-month program cycle. This organizational structure supports the value exchange described in part one of this paper; however, it is resource-intensive and has some limitations:

- The global character of this Fellowship means that it is costly, and it would not exist without the support of a generous benefactor. It requires a substantial effort by two staff members plus considerable resources devoted to international field research. This kind of global program could not succeed were financial resources not already in hand.
- The Fellowship requires a significant time commitment on behalf of the students. The 9-month duration of the program and the dedication of the summer before senior year are deterrents to some students.
- The Fellowship requires patience on behalf of the social enterprises. There is a year-long gap between needs assessment and research deliverables. Many enterprises cannot wait that long, or the circumstances in their organizations shift dramatically between project initiation and completion.

On the other hand, there are many distinct advantages to the action research approach:

- The social enterprise receives research products of genuine value.
- The students are able to apply their university-level knowledge and skills in the practical promotion of justice.
- The students have their ideals challenged by working with inspiring social enterprises that struggle daily with resource constraints.

This combination of factors stimulates the students to develop their moral imagination beyond what internships or service learning are ordinarily able to provide, and provides grist for vocational discernment. Action research is thus able to engage faculty in a more substantial way than service learning, for it invites the faculty to do what they love: teach and mentor students in research.

While Miller Center has some unique assets, such as its GSBI alumni social enterprises, this paper highlights the value of the action research model in general — and the value of university-based social enterprise accelerators. These kinds of programs build capacity with social enterprises, and they provide an immensely valuable educational resource for students, faculty, and the university community.

# Endnotes

1. Bennett, C., and Papi, D. (2014). "From Service Learning to Learning Service." Stanford Social Innovation Review. April.
2. Although this paper is about action research with social enterprises, much of the information could be applied to action research in partnership with any organization with a social mission.
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4. Ellacuría, I., SJ (1982). [Commencement Address at Santa Clara University](#)
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7. The other Centers of Distinction are the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education and the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics.
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10. See Lieberman, Roussos, and Warner, cited above.
11. See Lieberman, Roussos, and Warner, cited above.





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**Miller Center**  
for Social Entrepreneurship

Founded in 1997, Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship is one of three Centers of Distinction at Santa Clara University. Miller Center accelerates global, innovation-based social entrepreneurship in service to humanity. Its strategic focus is on poverty eradication through its three areas of work: The Global Social Benefit Institute (GSBI®), Impact Capital, and Education and Action Research. To learn more about Miller Center and its social entrepreneurship programs, please visit [www.scu.edu/MillerCenter](http://www.scu.edu/MillerCenter).