SOCIAL INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
THE EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL IMPACT CENTERS

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DEDICATION

For my loving boys—Mitch, Sam, Max, and Luke.

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

– Nelson Mandela
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Exec doc has been a deeply transformational experience that would not have been possible without the unwavering support of my family, friends, and colleagues. I will be forever humbled and grateful for my village that supported me along this educational journey.

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Contemporary social issues, such as poverty, inequality, and climate change, exceed the capacity of a single sector to solve and require the collaboration of the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. In this context, universities play a unique and increasingly comprehensive role in educating students, generating new knowledge, and advancing the social and economic conditions in their communities.

Over the past decade, explosive growth has occurred in social entrepreneurship and social innovation initiatives on university and college campuses. Whether offered through a center, initiative, or program, a groundswell of curricular, co-curricular, and convening activities has emerged that educates and engages students, faculty, and a range of stakeholders in the pursuit of solving pressing social issues in innovative ways.

Using qualitative research methodology and a grounded theory approach, the purpose of this study was to explore the broad phenomenon of and the proliferation of university-based social impact centers in the United States. Through the perspectives and lived experiences of 43 social impact leaders, from multiple higher education institutions, this study developed a grounded theory model which explains the forces driving the emergence and evolution of the university-based social impact centers. The phenomenon can be explained by these “windows of opportunity” where internal, external, and cultural forces intersect, interact, and overlap with one another, within institutional-specific
contexts, to produce new centers. While each institution boasts a unique culture and contextual characteristics, the data demonstrated that mission-driven students, market pressures on higher education institutions, and donor support were the most significant forces driving the expansion of social innovation on college campuses. Akin to the double-bottom line, it was both mission and markets that catalyzed the university-based social impact phenomenon.

While the social impact phenomenon initially evolved out of elite graduate business schools, it has expanded cross-campus into public policy schools and central administrative units, and across all institutional types. Social impact education now expands across and down the curriculum and co-curriculum. Some universities now even have multiple social impact initiatives within their own institutions. Participants described the need to differentiate themselves and to compete for resources, students, and attention given the plethora of existing civic and socially-oriented programs on their campuses.

This study filled a distinct gap in the literature by studying university-based social impact centers, framed in the broader historical context of the evolutionary role of university engagement in their communities, coupled with the recognition of the realities of contemporary market pressures on higher education institutions. Social impact centers exhibit the intersectionality of a host of issues plaguing higher education, such as resource constraints, access, academic silos, specialization, and bureaucracy versus innovation. Finally, social impact centers are a microcosm of the tension that exists between the marketization of higher education and the pressure to hold true to public
purposes—and ultimately, whether or not institutions can effectively mediate those two pressures.
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“Never in my 35 years in higher education have I seen a more pronounced and sustained effort by young people to choose careers that serve society,” wrote Gene Block (2013), Chancellor of the University of California, Los Angeles, in *The Washington Post*. In response to this intense student interest, there has been a proliferation of social innovation and social impact initiatives on university and college campuses over the past 20 years (Oxford University, The Bridgespan Group, & Skoll Foundation, 2017). Whether offered through a center, initiative, or program, there has been a groundswell of curricular and co-curricular activities that engage campuses and their communities in social impact. While the scope, focus, and organizational structure of these centers vary across college campuses, they share the common goal of educating and engaging students, faculty, and a range of stakeholders in the pursuit of solving pressing social issues in innovative, cross-sector ways. What was once seen as a niche concept 15 years ago has now become mainstream and necessary to compete in an increasingly competitive higher education market. Yet, little is written about this important phenomenon.

A notable limitation to this study is the fact that the social impact field is not an established academic discipline and lacks well-developed frameworks, theories, definitions, and concepts, both in scholarship and practice (Oxford University, 2017). Consequently, this study drew from several sources to help explain social impact and ground the study. Northwestern’s Kellogg School of Management’s comprehensive approach to social impact demonstrates the expansive nature of the social impact space and the multiple entrées into the space (see Figure 1). The Kellogg School of
Management describes social impact to include: social entrepreneurship, nonprofits, social enterprises, human and civil rights, public sector, public policy, environmental sustainability, international development, corporate social responsibility, consulting, health, and impact investing.

Additionally, New York University’s (2018) Wagner Graduate School of Public Service provides the following useful examples of the multiple pathways from different sectors into the social impact space:

- Nonprofit and government entities harnessing the power of data and markets for public benefit
- The development and rise of mission-driven, stakeholder-focused businesses
• Microfinance practices blurring the edges of philanthropy and investment through the use of market forces, while delivering financial returns and societal benefits
• “Intrepreneurs” building the infrastructure necessary to improve the operations and management systems of public, private, and nonprofit entities to achieve socially advantageous results

The Rise of Social Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation

In 2006, social entrepreneur Mohammad Yunus was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his pioneering work in microfinance. This moment significantly increased public awareness of the abilities of the traditional triad of the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to work together to address the world’s most vulnerable populations and pressing issues. In the 21st century knowledge economy, where the accelerated pace of scientific and technical advances has driven greater reliance on intellectual capabilities rather than physical inputs, key stakeholders across multiple sectors have signaled discontent with their own inabilities to solve social issues. Some of the most significant societal challenges of our time—homelessness, climate change, and inequality in education, employment, and income—are proving to be intractable through single-sector approaches and strategies (Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008). Unfortunately, these social, economic, and environmental challenges are not going away and are even accelerating in some instances. The Case Foundation (2017) aptly said, “We need all oars in the water—philanthropy, government, and the private sector—to find new and more sustainable solutions to old problems” (para. 1). The gravity and complexity of today’s
social issues necessitates the development, implementation, and resourcing of innovative ways to more effectively and efficiently finance and deliver services (Phills et al., 2008).

Accordingly, there has been a groundswell of social innovation efforts that have swept across all sectors. While some do not agree in the blurring of sectors (M. Friedman, 1970), there has been a recognition that the private sector can and does complement the public and nonprofit sectors by introducing rigor, evaluation methods, management, and much-needed capital. Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business blog fittingly said, “With innovation at the forefront, organizational structures of the future will look nothing like the shadows of traditional non-profit and for-profit models of the past” (Pitre, 2017, p. 1). Higher education plays a unique role in this evolving conversation given its ability to convene, facilitate, and lead across sectors.

Indeed, over the past 20 years, there has been a sustained growth in entrepreneurship and social innovation initiatives across the U.S. higher education landscape. For example, there was a 110% increased growth in MBA schools’ curriculum with social benefit content between the years of 2003 and 2009 (Stid, Stone, Ciccarone, & Deshpande, 2009; see Figure 2). Nearly all of Yale School of Management’s curriculum now contains social benefit content (Milway, 2013). Dozens of universities and colleges, like UCLA’s Impact@Anderson and Santa Clara’s Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship, have established social impact programs to attract students, cultivate donors, build new revenue streams, and raise their institutional profiles. Some higher education institutions have focused on social entrepreneurship or enterprise, while others have deliberately honed in on social innovation. Stanford University’s (2017) Center for Social Innovation in the Graduate School of Business, for example, advocates for social
innovation and defines it as “a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than current solutions [and] . . . the value created accrues primarily to society rather than to private individuals” (para. 1).

While institutions have adopted slightly different semantics and approaches, they manifest in similar focus and function. Despite the proliferation and variation in approaches, higher education institutions are increasingly developing courses, experiential opportunities, and case studies, and convening faculty and practitioners related to social innovation and social entrepreneurship (Milway, 2013; Oxford University, 2017).

A variety of terms are used to describe these university-based activities, such as social innovation initiatives, social entrepreneurship programs, impact labs, or centers for social impact. Acknowledging the broad swath of terms used interchangeably in this field, this study drew from the Oxford University (2017) report, which confirmed the existence of the phenomenon and used the term social impact center to describe the full scope of work in this field, and the multiple routes in which an individual or organization
can engage. The broad use of this term—social impact center—was also confirmed by this study’s findings and will be used throughout the dissertation to encompass the wide range of activity in the university-based social impact space.

**Purpose of the Study**

Using qualitative research methodology and a grounded theory approach, the purpose of this study was to explore the emergence and evolution of the proliferation of university-based social impact centers. The study was guided by the following six research questions:

RQ1. What were the key drivers behind the recent proliferation of university-based social impact centers in U.S. higher education?

RQ2. How are the centers evolving?

RQ3. What is the current landscape of social impact center activities?

RQ4. To what extent, if any, are these centers collaborating with other on- and off-campus partners?

RQ5. Are these centers exhibiting new types of engagement?

RQ6. What are the tensions?

Through the perspectives and lived experiences of 43 leaders from social impact centers in universities across the United States, this study developed a grounded theory model which explains the key forces driving and influencing the phenomenon. An examination of the social impact phenomenon yielded a multitude of findings which are themed in three buckets: (a) how the phenomenon emerged and continues to evolve, (b) an overall understanding of current landscape and cross-institutional trends, and (c) the surfacing of tensions and challenges.
Historical Context and Framing

Historically, higher education institutions have embraced public purposes in the core of their tripartite missions of teaching, research, and service. During the time of land grants at the turn of the 19th century, colleges were seen as the vehicle for social change, the betterment of citizens, and lifelong learning opportunities for the larger community (Lauzon, 2000). Over time, as rural communities developed into industrial ones and technology and globalization changed all aspects of society, university engagement developed into more complex interactions (Roper & Hirth, 2005). Yet, many of the contemporary approaches to university engagement were little more than a continuation of established paradigms of agricultural extension, urban reform, and regional development (Trencher et al., 2013). However, the emergence of co-creative function is “combining various modes of societal engagement into a systematic response” (Trencher et al., 2013, p. 152). Universities are now seen as primary institutions that play important roles in the new 21st century knowledge-based society (Etzkowitz, 2012; Marginson, 2010).

Higher education significantly contributes to the development of a skilled labor force, the creation of new and innovative technology, the provision of important expertise across multiple sectors, and the engagement of students, staff, and faculty in community issues (Enders & Jongbloed, 2007). The complex and strong influences of globalization and technology now exert pressure on higher education institutions to play an even more comprehensive role in their communities through economic development, partnerships, and educating students for 21st century challenges.
The boundaries between “town and gown” are all but disappearing as universities engage with government, industry, and nonprofits to solve social issues (Mero, 2011). Siegel’s (2010) book, *Organizing for Social Partnerships: Higher Education in Cross-Sector Collaboration*, offers a unique higher education perspective. As Siegel explored partnerships and mergers between sectors and the engagement imperative in American higher education, he argued that the most complex societal issues exceed the problem-solving capacities of a single organization or sector. To bring about positive social change, higher education must increasingly play the unique role of engaging cross-sector partnerships. As such, university-based social impact centers are uniquely situated to educate and engage students, communities, and industries on these new multisector approaches to social enterprise, nonprofit management, impact investing, and government performance and innovation.

Ten years ago, establishing a social entrepreneurship program or social innovation initiative on a university campus was seen as a distinctive act. Now, it is perceived as a normal and necessary part of the higher education enterprise to compete in an increasingly competitive market—it has moved from niche to mainstream. However, little has been researched or written on this emergent phenomenon, particularly framed in the broader historical context of the evolutionary role of university engagement in their communities, coupled with the recognition of the realities of the contemporary market pressures on higher education institutions. This study filled a distinct gap in the literature by studying the broader phenomenon of university-based social impact initiatives, recognizing it has now expanded cross-campus beyond elite graduate business schools.
Since the establishment of the first colonial colleges, higher education has sought to educate students and serve a broader public mission. Boyer (1994) famously said, “Higher education and the larger purposes of American society have been—from the very first—inextricably intertwined” (p. 1). Over time, the development of higher education has been influenced by political, economic, and social external forces that have shaped the current forms of curricula, missions, and community partnerships. The emergence of the recent social impact phenomenon is no different. Indeed, given the longstanding and strong notion that universities have the obligation to help solve complex challenges in their communities (Harkavy, 2015), it was important to study the emergence and evolution of the social impact phenomenon on college campuses.
CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

The U.S. government and its higher education institutions are inextricably intertwined (Boyer, 1994). The notion that universities and colleges were created to serve a larger societal purpose has been fundamental since they began (Harkavy, 2015; Hartley, 2009; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Throughout the development of the U.S. democracy, universities have played important roles in educating students, creating new knowledge, and serving society. Today, nearly every university and college mission statement includes some variation of a civic commitment to serve their community and to improve the human condition. Various factors have shaped how countless institutions define their mission and how they purposefully engage with their communities. In the last three decades, the civic engagement movement and the more recent emergence of social innovation and social impact initiatives contextualizes and further informs the contemporary roles of higher education institutions.

**Historical Context of University Engagement and Public Purposes**

Universities and colleges have been called upon to serve various purposes throughout history. The traditional tripartite mission of universities—teaching, research, and service—is a construct that was formalized in the faculty guidelines at institutions in the 20th century and has proven useful to think about university functions. During the Colonial Era, colleges were mainly focused on teaching the elite to sustain the religious and civic leadership in the colonies (Bringle, Games, & Malloy, 1999). Among the founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson was the most ardent supporter for mass education as a fundamental public institution needed to sustain a free, democratic society. In 1816, Thomas Jefferson wrote to Colonel Charles Yancey, “If a nation expects to be ignorant
and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be” (as cited in Pusser, 2002, p. 105). Unlike most leaders and education institutions at that time, Jefferson strongly believed mass education—not just education for the elite—was the only way to preserve the new, emerging democracy. After the American Revolution, and as the nascent republic was forming, there was a renewed commitment to foster knowledge and leadership to identify and ratify a colonial elite to ensure a path forward in the new democracy (Hollander & Saltmarsh, 2000). Higher education shifted from simply teaching students to building a new nation; and therefore, hundreds of colleges were established and the system of American higher education began to significantly develop and expand (Thelin, 2013).

In 1862, the passage of the Morrill Land Act established land-grant institutions and state oversight of higher education—thus cementing the important linkage between states and their communities with higher education institutions. Prominent historian John Thelin (2013) credits this legislation as the genesis of access and “democracies college.” The impetus for the Morrill Land Act, and the subsequent Hatch Act of 1887, grew out of the federal government’s interest in expanding skilled labor in engineering, agriculture, and military science. The land-grant institutions served multiple economic purposes and were a way to both pay war debt and promote economic recovery. Roper and Hirth (2005) explained that “education was the means; revenue was the ends” (p. 4). Still, the establishment of land grant institutions ingrained the notion of public investment into higher education, and the deep connection of colleges to their communities and the agricultural and industrial revolutions.
Leading up to, during, and after the Depression in the early 1920s, higher education institutions began working more closely with industry and the federal government—rather than local communities—to address broader societal and economic needs (Boyer, 1990; L. M. Ross, 2002; Scott, 2006). During World War I, universities proved to be a useful partner in the national war effort by reconstituting hundreds of campuses into hospital settings for intense military training. When the Great Depression hit, President Franklin D. Roosevelt turned to higher education and called upon the academy’s most distinguished scholars to serve as his advisors (Boyer, 1994).

Universities extended this wartime role into World War II and provided a variety of useful expertise in languages, culture, and science to advance American priorities. At this time, universities and colleges showed an untapped eagerness to contribute their expertise to defense-related research and development, national interests, and unprecedented wartime applications (Thelin, 2013). These activities signaled to the U.S. government the effectiveness of universities during crisis and the potential of academic cooperation in large-scale applied research projects. Former MIT president and the director of the federal Office of Scientific Research and Development, Vannevar Bush, famously wrote in his 1945 report, *Science, the Endless Frontier*, that universities helped “win the war,” and could also help win the peace. Bush’s essay influenced a succession of national leaders to support numerous national research projects, namely the founding of the National Science Foundation in 1950 and the enhancements of the National Institutes of Health (Thelin, 2013).

After World War II, the United States for the first time emerged as an engaged leader on the global stage and looked to higher education to advance national interests.
The competitive geopolitical forces of the Cold War and the race to space after Russia’s launch of Sputnik in 1957 stimulated the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958. The NDEA clearly linked higher education to security of the country (Boyer, 1994). Once again, universities and colleges were called upon in a time of crisis to revitalize education and to help secure the nation’s future. The NDEA stimulated federal government investment in universities for federal teaching fellowships and training programs to upgrade the nation’s schools. This investment also funded the advancement of scientific research and technology, and extended support to other large-scale behavioral science, health, social sciences, and foreign language projects (Thelin, Edwards, Moyen, Berger, & Calkins, 2013). Higher education’s contributions to wartime efforts permanently transformed the public missions and funding of American higher education. Universities became indelible partners with the federal government to advance the national interests of military and technological development, which produced university-government partnerships that still persist today.

The G.I. Bill was another historic partnership linking the federal government and higher education institutions. With the memories of the Great Depression and the “Bonus March” by thousands of WW1 disgruntled veterans still fresh on the minds of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Congress, the federal government passed the G.I. Bill in 1944. The G.I. Bill was designed to expand access to higher education for WWII veterans returning from the war to avert civil and economic strife. By 1946, the federal government had paid out in excess of $5.5 billion ($48 billion in 2000s dollars) as G.I. Bill college enrollments surpassed 1 million students (Thelin, 2013). The United States led the world in public investment in higher education until the 1970s, which resulted in
the highest college attainment rates and earning degrees at various levels (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Access to college was greatly expanded through both the passage of the G.I. Bill and subsequent Pell Grants in the 1970s. Almost unknowingly, the G.I. Bill forever transformed U.S. higher education. Enrollments expanded to 2.7 million in the first decade, 3.6 million in 1960, and then doubled again over the next decade to 7.9 million in 1970 (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). The G.I. Bill was yet another example of how external forces have shaped contemporary higher education and the indelible intertwining of the public role of higher education to the larger society.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the civil rights movement called upon higher education institutions to join the national pursuit of human justice (Boyer, 1994). Colleges and universities played a pivotal role in addressing and advancing social issues such as civil rights, antiracism, and equality. Interestingly, the expansion of access to democratic rights has roughly paralleled the timing of access to higher education for certain groups. The women’s and civil rights movements, as well as the expansion of federal financial aid, opened access to higher education for more women and minorities groups—thus creating upward social and economic opportunity to underserved populations. Yet, the protests, marches, and sit-ins on college campuses in favor of civil rights and in reaction to the Vietnam War sometimes caused friction between colleges and their communities. After the culminating violence at Kent State in 1970, some saw higher education (and government) more as a part of the problem and not the solution (Bender & Schorske, 1998). Still, the federal government, under the leadership of President John F. Kennedy in the 1960s, established programs such as the Peace Corps to engage college students to serve their global community. Throughout history,
government has turned to higher education, like in the mid-1800s with the Morrill Act, to help solve the societal and financial issues of the time (Holland, 1999).

1980s and Higher Education Commercialization

In the 1980s, significant political changes and external forces negatively impacted the financing of higher education. Many contend these changes ultimately undermined the public mission of the university (Harkavy & Hartley, 2012; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Marked by a shift in political ideology toward a neoclassical economic approach, the era of Reagan economics reshaped higher education to be more market-driven. The unprecedented evolution of American public investment in higher education came to an end in the 1980s and sustained for the next 30 years. Also at this time, universities and colleges were experiencing financial strain due to decreasing enrollment numbers and soaring competition within the industry. These developments resulted in universities being forced to explore alternative sources of revenue.

Chief among the revenue generating strategies was to raise tuition and rely more on individuals and families to bear the financial burden of higher education (Breneman, 1993; Callan, 2001). To make up for lost revenues, colleges also developed sophisticated fundraising entities and started to rely more on “wealthy donors and private investors” for financial support (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997). The passage of the Bayh-Dole Act in 1980, which allowed and encouraged universities to pursue ownership and to earn royalties from federally funded research projects through licensing private-sector businesses, provided additional new revenue streams. Some viewed these developments as universities turning their back on their public missions of knowledge sharing toward a profit-centered business model with knowledge and products to sell (Axelrod, 2002).
Still, others argued this new business model was especially attractive and necessary due to rising operating costs, decreasing state funds, and unwillingness by higher education to downsize (Goldstein & Luger, 1997). Etzkowitz, Webster, Gebhardt, and Terra (2000) maintained the future role of the global university is entrepreneurial and based on an alignment of economic development with teaching and research as the academic mission.

The 1980s higher education landscape was characterized by competition in the higher education market for students, commercialization, and closer linkages to industry—a sustained shift away from the original public missions of higher education. Scholars contend this is when higher education began viewing students as the customer, and institutions strategically pivoted toward the student customer’s desire for jobs (Bloom, Hartley, & Rosovsky, 2006). Consequently, there was a proliferation of establishing new pre-professional, professional, and occupational degrees tailored to meet the market needs. This era was a turning point when universities and faculty were incorporated into the market, which broke the tacit contract between faculty and society, and put profit above student welfare (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). These programmatic, financial, and structural changes ushered in a new era of the privatization of higher education with lasting effects on institutional missions and more. These distinct post-WWII changes within the academy produced changes that reverberated throughout the system, many of which ignited the cry for universities to return to their public purposes. In reaction to these changes, there was a range of factors, both internal and external to the academy, which sparked a 3-decade movement in higher education to promote civic and community engagement.
Factors That Brought on Community and Civic Engagement

Critique of the Academy

Increasingly in the 1980s and 1990s, the academy felt the significant changes in the higher education industry. The external forces of globalization and the political economy in the last half of the twentieth century destabilized existing academic patterns and created new structures and incentives, which resulted in the encroachment of profit motive into the academy (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). This “academic capitalism,” many argued, has had far-reaching consequences and created increasingly permeable boundaries between the research university and its work force and the market. Massy and Zemsky (1990) described the changing patterns of academic work as an academic ratcheting process that incentivizes research, particularly at the perimeter of the university in entrepreneurial institutes and centers, and adds to the complex administrative lattice. In Universities as a Marketplace, Bok (2009b) famously described these trends as the expansion of commercialization of higher education. Simply put, the financing of higher education migrated from the public sphere into the private, and this shift concerned those who maintained that higher education—as a public good—is a fundamental concept and driver to ensure broad access and equality in education (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011).

As a consequence, university missions started to change. As institutions were increasingly incentivized by federal research dollars and prestige, this shift cemented generic research-driven missions that “became the yardstick by which all institutions would be measured” (Boyer, 1990, p. 12). These changes morphed the once diverse institutional mission—based on local connections and needs—into a generic mission with
research excellence as the leading priority (Holland, 1999). Bok’s (2009a) *Beyond the Ivory Tower*, chronicled the complex societal and financial pressures on higher education at this time. For example, research institutions, in particular, were financially strained, and therefore felt the pressures to seek large grants to bring in additional resources. Yet, Bok and others still maintained the continued need for universities to stay true to their public missions of teaching, research, and service.

Critics of the commercialization of higher education maintained that this dramatic shift from public to private spheres has had harmful impacts on the values and ambitions of college students and faculty (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2011). They argued that commercialization in higher education incentivizes faculty to practice “disciplinary ethnocentrism, tribalism, and guildism” (Benson et al., 2011, p. 67), and for students to pursue career skills in college rather than a liberal education. Institutional prestige and individual tenure became the focus, because they produced the much-needed sponsored research dollars and publications (Boyer, 1990). Professors became more “focused on their own preferences” (Holland, 1999, p. 4) rather than teaching or service. Sullivan (2000) coined the term “instrumental individualism” to describe the shift when faculty’s direct connections to solving societal problems were replaced with individual research agendas, tenure, and prestige.

Historian Thomas Bender (1988) thoroughly documented the torn connection between traditional liberal education versus that of the American academic culture post-WWII. Scholars argued that the introduction of the German university model strained the public purpose of higher education by moving institutions away from democratic purposes toward knowledge production (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Ultimately, the
postwar shift in higher education realigned the academy toward a trajectory more closely tied to the market, research, and entrepreneurial activities—rather than teaching and public interests (Hollander & Saltmarsh, 2000; Sullivan, 2000). And, other scholars noted that when universities are dominated by market interests, there is a “notable abridgement of their roles as public agencies” and a “diminution of their capacity to provide public venues for testing ideas and creeds as well as agendas of public action” (Zemsky & Wegner, 2005, p. 7). Boyer (1994) famously described these changes as “professors get tenure” and “students get credentialed.”

It was no surprise given the drastic shifts in the higher education industry that they came under public scrutiny. The academy became increasingly viewed as elitist, exclusive, and out-of-touch with their local communities (Benson & Harkavy, 2000; Hollander & Hartley, 2000). The public perceived universities at this time as being too insularly focused on irrelevant research and accruing dollars, rather than teaching students and contributing to their communities. For many institutions, teaching had become secondary to research. Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) outlined the above-mentioned concerning trends as the persistence of the ivory tower, corporatization of the university, crisis in undergraduate teaching and decontextualized learning, moral somnolence, and civic disengagement.

Consequently, in the last quarter of the 21st century, there was deep concern that higher education had swung too far toward economic function—thus, disconnecting them from their communities and devaluing teaching. In addition to the critique of the academy, public leaders, academics, and the community became particularly concerned
over the perceived decline of democratic and civic engagement by youth and the broader society.

**Concern about Civic Decline, Youth Disengagement, and Inequalities.**

The critiques of the academy were coupled with a general public concern about civic decline and the disengagement of American youth in the 1980s. Newspapers often juxtaposed the idealistic students of the 1960s against the career-minded students of the 1980s (Hartley, 2009). In *Higher Education and the American Resurgence*, Newman (1985) said there was an imperative for higher education to teach civic involvement on their campuses at a time of troubling heightened self-interest among the youth. Various other works raised concern about dismal political knowledge, lack of civic involvement, and American citizens’ overall disengagement from public life (Galston, 2001; Harkavy, 2015). Other popular works like Putnam’s (2000) *Bowling Alone* continued to chronicle decreases in social capital and the erosion of civic society.

Global events like the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War also had a significant influence on creating a broader climate that reinvigorated democratic community and civic engagement (Harkavy, 2015). However, the emergence of the community engagement movement is best explained by higher education’s response to America’s worsening crime, violence, poverty, and physical deterioration (Harkavy, 2015). In the 1980s and 1990s, Americans’ economic and societal problems were becoming increasingly visible in the very communities where universities and colleges were located, which was ultimately affecting universities’ ability to recruit and retain students and faculty. Universities were largely troubled by this visceral inequality, and their “enlightened self-interest” spurred action by many higher education institutions
(Bender, 1988). Harkavy (2015) aptly described how “after 1989 the combination of external pressure and enlightened self-interest spurred an increasing number of American higher education institutions to begin to engage democratically with their local communities” (p. 42). As a culminating result, community, public service, and volunteerism outside the classroom then became the answer to counter civic decline and fragmentation (Hartley, 2009). This was the beginning of what became known as the civic engagement movement in higher education.

**Civic and Community Engagement Movement**

The community and civic engagement approach sparked an ensuing 3-decade push for more civic and community engagement across higher education. A number of initiatives and organizations were launched to reinvigorate the public and civic purposes of higher education. In Ernest Boyer’s (1990) work *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, written during his influential tenure as President of the Carnegie Foundation, he defined the concept as “scholarship of application.” Boyer (1990) referred to the democratic purpose of higher education as a “civic mandate” (p. 16) and challenged universities and colleges “to serve a larger purpose” (Boyer, 1996, p. 22) in a democratic society. Boyer (1990, 1996) also called on the ivory towers of higher education to produce students who are more engaged and interested in solving society’s issues, rather than pursuing lucrative, self-interested careers. Boyer advocated that this trajectory would require faculty to move away from prestigious associations, self-interested research, and professional accolades toward a career focused on resolving challenges and impacting communities.
The organic development of the university “engagement” movement has taken on a variety of terms over the years. President of the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) Russell Edgerton (1994) coined the term *engaged university*. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASC&U) report used the term *public engagement* and advanced the idea that “the publicly engaged institution is fully committed to direct, two-way interaction with communities and other external constituencies through the development, exchange, and application of knowledge, information, and expertise for mutual benefit” (p. 7). AASC&U maintained that public engagement is essential and demonstrates the responsibility of institutions to serve as “stewards of place” in tackling issues in the community. Later, Saltmarsh, Hartley, and Clayton (2009) further defined and called for the advancement of community engagement into a more impactful “democratic engagement” that would actively prepare students to engage in democratic processes.

This cadre of terms—civic, public, democratic, community engagement—encapsulate a significant movement in higher education to return to the civic and democratic purposes of public education. The movement captures the inextricable linkage between higher education institutions and their communities. The civic engagement movement stems from John Dewey’s dream for higher education to be built upon the premise that American higher education has fundamental democratic purposes to create, educate, and foster a revitalization of democratic society. The core pedagogy is based on Dewey’s, and more recently Kolb’s, concept of experiential learning. At the core, the civic engagement movement grew out of the desire to connect student learning with real-world problem solving (Battistoni & Longo, 2011).
The movement first began with organizations like the National Society for Experiential Education in 1978, the International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership in 1982, and the National Youth Leadership Council in 1983, the Campus Outreach Opportunity League in 1984, and most notably, Campus Compact in 1986 (Hartley & Hollander, 2005). Initially, students played a central role in the early period of the movement (1978-1991) and pushed for campuses to support community service and the integration of service learning into courses (O’Meara, 2011). Yet in the 1980s, faculty and administrators took over the leadership, which placed the focus on institutionalization to both develop and sustain the movement.

Lasting from the 1990s to 2000, the second phase of major development in the civic engagement movement involved the integration of service learning into the curriculum as pedagogy and into institutional missions. Service learning is perhaps the most notable and recognizable product of the community engagement push. The rapid growth of organizations like Campus Compact demonstrates the broad-based, national momentum. Campus Compact (2016) now serves nearly 1,100 colleges and universities and has state offices in more than 30 states. Other existing higher education organizations such as American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the ACE also played key roles in supporting the emerging civic initiatives. The AAC&U (2002) produced the seminal report titled *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* and called on colleges and universities to “diligently served in their role as stewards of place, answering the call to join with public and private partners in their communities and regions to take advantage of opportunities and confront challenges” (p. 7).
Other organizations, such as the AAHE, conducted research and measured learning outcomes related to service learning activities. The Kettering Foundation developed a wide network of partners interested in advancing deliberation, democracy, and civic renewal. Furthermore, over the past two decades on college campuses, there has been a proliferation of new centers, institutes, offices, classes, volunteer opportunities, and programs all designed to energize public and civic purpose. The movement has engaged administration, faculty, staff, and students in the areas of teaching, research, and service with public purpose (O’Meara, 2011). To further characterize civic engagement, Holland (1997, 2006a) identified key organizational factors—mission, promotion and tenure, organizational structure, student and faculty involvement, and leadership—as well as four levels of institutional commitment ranging from low relevance to full integration.

When examining what a “civic mission” actually means, some educators link civic responsibilities to the academic functions of teaching and research, while others highlight “public service” and “outreach” as activities (Thomas, 2000). Fear and Sandmann (1995) linked these functions by recognizing them as academic outreach. The idea is that institutions should provide service, research, and their facilities to their external communities, while also producing student graduates that exhibit knowledge and desire to practice active, engaged citizenry. This dual approach to academic engagement can serve a more comprehensive approach to examining university engagement with current societal challenges. Thousands of scholarly articles have expanded the understanding and practices of community and civic engagement in the past three decades.
Additionally, there has been significant financial support for the civic engagement movement through a variety of federal, state, and institutional initiatives, as well as numerous conferences and publications. There were two notable reports during this last phase that set the stage. The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1999) published *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution*, which was the clarion call for higher education institutions to engage with their communities to solve economic and other pressing social problems. Next, at a conference of leading presidents, provosts, and faculty, these leaders produced the well-known report—*Wingspread Declaration on Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University*. The Wingspread report outlined the new strategies needed to launch a renewed focus on the civic purposes of higher education (Boyte & Hollander, 1999). At these meetings and many others, scholars and practitioners developed best practices and recommendations for universities to promote civic and community engagement.

However, the development of broad faculty engagement in this work has slowly developed over time and has varied across institutions due to structures within the higher education system that do not incentivize or reward community work. Scholar Gene Rice’s (1996) work, *Making a Place for the New American Scholar*, outlined how post-World War II faculty work prioritizes certain types of work and how the prestige hierarchy at the top has reverberations down the system. The current assumptive world of academic professionals rewards and prioritizes empirical research and dissemination of peer-reviewed articles over community work. These post-WWII academic structural factors work against the positive valuation of faculty community engagement (O’Meara, 2002). Many scholars have argued the need for New American engaged scholars that can
positively impact communities, conduct collaborative research and knowledge construction, and ultimately use knowledge to improve the world (O’Meara, 2002). Notwithstanding these challenges, there have been productive advancements of engaged scholarship over the past two decades (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011).

Despite incredible momentum and growth in service learning and engaged scholarship, there has been critique of how universities go about engaging with their communities. Specifically, there is widespread concern that many faculty engage with communities in elitist ways (O’Meara, 2011). Too often, faculty (and their students) work with communities in an expert-like, condescending fashion rather than working together as shared partners with shared expertise to contribute. There has been an enhanced focus for civic engagement work to be multidirectional and expertise-sharing with communities (O’Meara & Rice, 2005). Boyte (2008) specifically pointed out that higher education institutions need to become “agents and architects” of democracy and change, and that this type of radical shift would require faculty to change how they see themselves and their work in communities. The 2000 A Dialogue on Partnerships Conference specifically raised the need to address the power dynamics between higher education institutions and communities to enhance the voices of the community. Other university case studies have shown that community building will not succeed unless all stakeholders are equally involved in collaboration and innovation (Maurrasse, 2001).

Building upon previous faculty engagement work, and with an eye toward community, Stanton (2008) identified the three dimensions of engaged research as purpose, process, and product. He said that research universities, due to their top-tier faculty, outstanding students, state-of-the-art research facilities, and financial resources,
are situated “to contribute to community change relatively quickly and in ways that will ensure deeper and longer lasting commitment to civic engagement” (Stanton, 2008, p. 5). A prominent and systemic advancement in the community engagement movement was when the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching officially recognized community engagement by changing their established classification system to now include a new elective community engagement category. In the first year, 76 institutions received the community engagement classification, 119 in 2008, and 115 in 2010. In 2015, 240 institutions received the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification and 83 of these institutions were a first-time designation (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2015). As part of the community engagement movement, faculty and universities have worked with a wide range of key stakeholders at the local and regional levels alongside their communities to identify issues and explore solutions. Areas for engagement include economic, social, and cultural development in city and regional contexts.

While the community engagement movement has built nationwide prominence and momentum, there has still been some confusion over definitions, barriers for faculty, and developments in best practices. The 2002 AASC&U report aptly noted that while civic engagement has become “shorthand for describing a new era of two-way partnerships between America’s colleges and universities and the publics they serve,” it also risks the chance for the term to “say everything and nothing at the same time” (p. 8). Similarly, others have explained that many universities, particularly in urban areas, are now re-examining how they fulfill their public mission through civic service, outreach,
and engagement, but have been stunted by the question of what actually works (Thomas, 2000).

**2000s Economic Development, Entrepreneurship, and Anchor Institutions**

Higher education’s community engagement movement is seen as an important evolution of higher education’s role in the community. Indeed, the civic engagement movement grew out of the desire to connect teaching and learning to solving real-world problems (Battistoni & Longo, 2011). However, this movement did not produce the widespread change many had hoped. Hartley (2011) said, “The salient idea was that universities should be committed to addressing pressing societal problems and fostering enlightened civic and political leadership” (p. 28). It was recognized that pressing social issues—including economic—could not be solved solely by community engagement activities such as student volunteers and service learning courses. In the 2000s, higher education engagement evolved into playing a more comprehensive role in their communities—including in the economic arena.

The shift from service to broader engagement has manifested in tighter economic and strategic partnerships between universities, state governments, and industry. Colleges and universities have become instrumental players in the 21st century economic development of states and their communities by contributing jobs, stability, and service to their communities. For example, higher education was a key driver in major state and regional economic development and research agendas in prominent areas like California’s Silicon Valley and North Carolina’s Research Triangle (Zemsky et al., 2005). Economic development efforts in higher education have emphasized the two-way partnership between academic and business interests. These different types of economic
partnerships include technology transfer activities, joint research projects, and manufacturing and industrial extension services (Walshok, 1995). In the current global neoliberal environment, universities are seen as key drivers in the knowledge economy and are encouraged to make linkages with businesses and industry for entrepreneurial ventures (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

The 1999 Kellogg Foundation report titled, *Third Working Paper: The Engaged Institutions*, included the notions of new, mutually beneficial two-way partnership models that included economic development, and signaled a shift away from faculty-as-experts and the ivory tower of academia. A 2002 survey study titled, “Innovation U: New University Roles in Knowledge Economy,” confirmed this increasing focus of higher education and economic development. Academic, business, and community leaders surveyed explicitly expressed they wanted increased focus and more research on higher education engagement and economic development (Tornatzky, Waugaman, & Gray, 2002).

Indeed, the global economic forces and the rise of the knowledge economy at the turn of century shifted how and in what ways universities engaged in their communities. It was recognized that universities as institutions have three major advantages over other entities in fostering economic development. These strengths include: the concentration of current technical expertise in a variety of fields of knowledge; credibility due to peer review; and a deep pool of inexpensive, talented labor in students (Goldstein & Luger, 1997). Dill (1997) created the business concept of “core competencies” for universities and noted that universities have a distinct advantage and collection of skills, knowledge, and expertise. The mere expansion of academic scholars using business terms to describe
higher education exemplifies the sector’s increasingly closer ties to business both in partnerships and in internal operations. Economic development at the turn of the 21st century had now become a legitimate purpose for higher education (Powers, 2004).

Naturally, economic development efforts by government institutions have increasingly focused on city and regional level to spur economic growth (Brookings Institution, 2012; CEOs for Cities and Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, 2002; CEOs for Cities and Living Cities, 2010). Recent economic development literature emphasizes the importance of place-based notions. The Brookings Institution’s (2012) *Metro Trade: Cities Return to their Roots in the Global Economy* talked about the importance of returning focus to metro areas as the hubs of an increasingly connected global economy. The place-based notion of economic development only amplifies and tightens the connection to universities and colleges with their communities. Brookings specifically talked about how universities play a key role, in partnership with state and regional governments, to drive innovation, technology, and economic value. Simply put, universities are seen as critical *anchor institutions* in their community due to their rich resources and expertise, role as large employers, and ability to enhance the economy through purchasing and production (Howard & Dubb, 2012).

Maurrasse (2007) defined an *anchor institution* as one that contributes to the economy, culture, and vitality of cities. He said an anchor institution represents “sticky capital” that can contribute greatly to the community’s success, smooth tensions between the institution and the city, and most importantly cannot easily move elsewhere. Indeed, anchor institutions are nearly permanent features and control vast amounts of intellectual, human, and economic resources that can enhance the community (T. Ross, 2014). During
the 2000s, American cities experienced varying levels of economic difficulty due to loss of jobs, factory closings, and the Great Recession of 2007. For many of these communities, universities and hospitals were the economic stabilizers in the community.

Anchor institutions—specifically universities and hospitals—have also been referred to as “Eds and Meds” (Bartik & Erickek, 2008; T. Ross, 2014). Eds and Meds institutions bring in new income and talent, raise residents’ earnings and skills, spur economic growth, and encourage other employers to pay higher wages (Bartik & Erickek, 2008). Most major urban cities now boast a large public research university that includes a robust medical school and hospital. Harkavy and Zuckerman (1999) poignantly said, “In an era increasingly dependent on knowledge-based industries, these institutions (Eds and Meds) contribute to a more experienced and educated workforce, a resource desirable in all cities… and their economic activities foster an entrepreneurial spirit and attract additional economic growth” (p. 2). The importance of higher education as anchor institutions in the 21st century cannot be overstated.

Indeed, in many large urban cities, universities and hospitals are now the largest employers. The Initiative for a Competitive Inner City (ICIC) reported that in 66 of the 100 largest inner cities, Eds and Meds anchor institutions are the largest employers (as cited in T. Ross, 2014). U.S. universities and hospitals combined employ 8% of the labor force, spend more than $1 trillion a year, and have endowments in excess of $500 billion (Dubb, McKinley, & Howard, 2013). Myriad studies have examined the vast impacts of university anchor institutions; they have focused on youth development (Harkavy & Hartley, 2009), housing (Cortes, 2004), accessibility to technology and Internet connectivity (Mandel, Alemanne, & McClure, 2012), and early literacy, career training,
and small business support (Urban Institute, 2007). Crane, Harter, and Trehan (2010) also produced a report that pointed out the importance of anchor institutions as drivers of community change in areas like suburban culture, aging population, neighborhood reinvestment, and transitioning workforces. The 2010 CEOs for Cities and Living Cities’ report on *How to Behave Like an Anchor Institution* studied six cases of anchor institution engagement and found there is vast and varying potential for anchor institution activity. This report noted the criticality for anchor institutions to act and make decisions within the context of their individual, unique community needs.

Another important case study of 10 engaged urban universities attempted to gauge true community impact and found that gentrifying neighborhoods sometimes forces out low-income residents and the economic development reaches a level where it is unattainable for many local residents given their income and education levels (Axelroth & Dubb, 2010). From this study, Axelroth and Dubb (2010) created a useful typology of university roles in community engagement that assists in thinking about the ways institutions participate with their communities and across multiple sectors. Axelroth and Dubb’s typology outlines the three university roles as *facilitator, leader,* and *convener.* Higher education as anchor institutions can employ effective strategies to convene key stakeholders, lead initiatives, and create programs to better the social and economic conditions in the communities where they reside (Hodges & Dubb, 2012).

In an extensive review of the anchor institution literature, Taylor and Luter (2013) point to the need for more research on anchor institution activities that engage in public policy and the use of data management and evaluation. Specifically, they point to a need to: (a) incentivize the role of anchor institutions as catalysts and facilitators in building
partnerships to address social and economic development problems in communities, cities, towns, and villages; (b) stimulate interagency cooperation across the federal government and link interagency cooperation to funding streams connected to local social and economic development initiatives; and (c) develop a common set of performance indicators and metrics to measure anchor institutions and civic engagement (p. 15).

As the civic engagement movement developed and the anchor institution literature took hold, a parallel conversation and related university activities began to emerge out of business schools in the form of entrepreneurship and social enterprise. The accumulation of these movements continues to shape university missions and how universities engage with their communities.

**Entrepreneurship in Higher Education**

In the 1990s, *entrepreneurship* emerged as higher education institutions started to play more significant roles in economic development and were encouraged to make tighter linkages with businesses and industry for entrepreneurial ventures (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Scholars contend a confluence of a set of economic forces influenced higher education institutions to adopt entrepreneurship (Breneman, 2015).

Entrepreneurship materialized as a topic of growing interest initially in the 1980s, but has since become a legitimate subject in business schools across the country (Jones & Wadhwani, 2006). Entrepreneurship education has become integral to most business schools and has even expanded to other departments and colleges across college campuses, in part, due to purposeful cross-campus efforts like the Kauffman Campus Initiative (Schneider, 2015). University of Michigan, for example, created the Innovate
The accelerated development of entrepreneurship on higher education campuses immediately revealed a preoccupation with the social and environmental roles of entrepreneurship (Béchard & Grégoire, 2005)—namely, a particular emphasis on entrepreneurs catalyzing businesses that demonstrate a social, environmental, and financial return (Mair & Marti, 2006). Still, the trend toward economic development and entrepreneurship again surfaced the sustained debate within the academy of whether the purpose of higher education is to teach students for future careers or for engaged citizenry.

**The Rise of Social Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation**

As part of this entrepreneurship evolution, social innovation and impact initiatives started to develop out of elite graduate business schools. This trend has accelerated over the past two decades. The rise of social entrepreneurship and social innovation broadly can be explained by the following trends: broad and intense societal focus on addressing “difficult-to-solve” social issues; the blurring and blending of the traditional boundaries between sectors and their gravitation to the social space; and Millennials’ social purpose.

**21st Century Intractable Social Challenges**

Some of the most significant societal challenges of our time—inequality, poverty, and climate change—are proving to be intractable through single-sector approaches and strategies (Phills et al., 2008). Unfortunately, these social and economic challenges are not going away and are even accelerating. The nonprofit sector—which provides interventions and seeks to solve community issues in areas such as education, health,
environment, and employment—faces sustained declines of traditional funding from
governments and philanthropy (Routson, 2011). In addition to inadequate resources, there
has been doubt about the nonprofit sector’s internal challenges and their inability to
deliver widespread successful and scalable interventions (Eisenberg, 1997). The gravity
of today’s inequalities and the complexity of social and health issues necessitates the
development, implementation, and resourcing of new ways to more effectively and
efficiently finance and deliver services (Phills et al., 2008).

Accordingly, there has been a groundswell of social innovation efforts that have
swept across the various private, public, and nonprofit sectors. While some do not agree
in the blurring of sectors (M. Friedman, 1970), there has been a recognition that the
private sector can and does complement the public and nonprofit sectors by introducing
rigor, evaluation methods, management, and much-needed capital. Traditional
organizational structures and boundaries are inevitably transforming.

The Blurring and Blending of Sector Boundaries and Gravitation to Social Space

A host of factors has eroded the boundaries between the private, public, and
nonprofit sectors over the past 30 years (Phills et al., 2008). The term sector-bending has
been used to describe the wide variety of approaches, roles, relationships, and activities
that are blurring the conventional boundaries between sectors (Dees & Anderson, 2003).
The proliferation of terms—such as social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, and social
innovation—that juxtapose the word “social” with traditionally private sector concepts,
are uniquely indicative of this growing cross-sector blending (Phills et al., 2008).

Historically, responsibility for addressing social issues has primarily resided
within the government in social reforms and policies like the 1930s New Deal and the
1960s Great Society. However, in the 21st century, groups and individuals are now arguably better informed and more connected than ever before, and are frustrated by the limitations of bureaucratic structures to solve issues such as, but not limited to, access to clean water, capital, quality education, and healthy foods (Siegel, 2010). Fueled by new technologies, individual citizens, grassroots efforts and organizations, businesses, and educational institutions, have increasingly become more actively involved in the pursuit to solve social challenges. In the past 30 years, there has been a proliferation of social innovations like microfinance, habitat conservation programs, fair trade, community-centered planning, and emissions trading (Stanford University, 2017). The traditional separation of work between public, private, and nonprofit sectors has become blurred as all sectors have gravitated to the social space in the pursuit to solve intractable social problems (Siegel, 2010). Evidence of these emerging trends, Stanford University founded the Stanford Social Innovation Review in 2003 for the very purpose of “dissolving boundaries and brokering a dialogue between the public, private, and non-profit sectors” (Phills et al., 2008, p. 1). Simply put, today’s social innovation approaches and solutions cut across the traditional boundaries that have typically separated businesses, governments, and nonprofits.

**Private sector.** The blurring and blending of sector lines is particularly prevalent in the private sector. Over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase of businesses that have taken up the cause of creating social value under the mantle of corporate citizenship, corporate social responsibility, and socially responsible business (Phills et al., 2008). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, companies like Patagonia, Ben & Jerry’s, and Tom’s Shoes embraced corporate social responsibility (CSR) at the core of
their business branding and practices with the intent to both make money and improve society. Instead of solely pursuing profits, many companies have now purposefully embedded social and environmental causes into their core missions and strategies. Traditionally profit-oriented companies now pursue a triple-bottom line—seeking a social, environmental, and financial return—to create business value and evaluate their performance. Other examples of these trends include the development of benefit corporations (B-corps) and certified benefit corporations. Now in 30 U.S. states, companies can establish themselves as B-corps and benefit from nonprofit-like tax advantages, as long as they focus on positive impact to workers and communities. Social purposes have come to dominate entrepreneurship as well. Prominent businessman and co-founder of America Online Steve Case (2016) argued in *The Third Wave* that society is entering a period in which entrepreneurs will use technology to revolutionize core areas of society such as education, healthcare, and energy.

With the erosion of boundaries between sectors, there is a shifting of values, relationships, roles, and a freer flow of capital between sectors (Phills et al., 2008). Examples of this are socially responsible investing (SRI) which manifests in three ways: investment screenings, such as environmental, social, and governance (ESG) screens; shareholder activism; and community investments directed toward underserved communities. Indeed, the U.S. SIF Foundation (2016), a nonprofit focused on impact investing, reported that sustainable, responsible, and impact investing (SRI) assets expanded from $6.57 trillion to $8.72 trillion from 2014 to 2015, which constituted a 33% increase in year. Now, one of five professionally managed dollars is screened for impact (Clark & Gonnella, 2016). While impact investing currently represents a small
portion of portfolios, J. P. Morgan (2013) forecasted that as wealth transfers to new generations, impact investing could expand from the current $9 billion to $1 trillion by 2020. Simply put, the private sector and assets are becoming increasingly focused on social impact. Similarly, government is also experiencing changes to its traditional approaches.

**Public sector.** Since the 1980s and introduction of neoclassical economic policies under the Reagan Administration, government agencies have changed dramatically (Phills et al., 2008). Both the shrinking willingness to appropriate and the supply of public funding for social services have caused many organizations to pursue income through other avenues such as business ventures and commercial activities. Conversely, the government sector has also introduced new business-oriented approaches to the allocation, procurement, and implementation of government services to seek more efficient and effective use of public funds. Innovative and evidence-based approaches that use business-like performance metrics, data, and indicators have become increasingly prevalent in the government sector (Taylor & Luter, 2013). Examples of this include the Bush Administration’s implementation of standards-based education with the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, the Obama Administration’s launch of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, as well as its creation of the Social Innovation Fund (through the Corporation for National and Community Service [CNCS]), which positioned the government to be able to mobilize private capital to develop, test, and scale effective social interventions.

Indeed, there is a sustained, growing, bipartisan movement in the U.S. government that seeks to improve federally-funded programs to better leverage federal
spending through the use of evidence, innovation, and data (Feldman & Shea, 2017). At a 2012 U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) conference for grantees, the Secretary of HUD, Shaun Donovan, said the rational approach to solving socioeconomic challenges is to employ data measurement and evaluation to ensure the most effective initiatives are funded and launched. Donovan argued that the only effective way to counter political forces seeking to eliminate funding for social programs is to counter with rigorous evaluation methods and data that demonstrates the effectiveness of interventions (Taylor & Luter, 2013).

**Nonprofit sector.** Due to the abovementioned trends and unstable flows of income through government and/or philanthropy, the nonprofit sector has started to adopt some of the values, roles, and approaches of for-profit organizations. Nonprofit organizations, such as National Head Start Association (2017), have launched national campaigns to instill innovation, evidence-based decision-making, and specialized training to educate their leaders to adopt more business-like approaches. Similarly, other nonprofit organizations, including charitable foundations with small, medium, and large family philanthropic offices, have pursued new and innovative financing strategies in an attempt to provide greater positive social impact. For example, in April of 2017, the Ford Foundation announced it would commit $1 billion to investments that “earn not only attractive financial returns but concrete social returns as well” (Stewart, 2017, p. 1). Ford Foundation President Darren Walker stated it was time to bring fresh eyes to endowment management, to not only leverage the 5% of the assets (the program related investments [PRI])—a typical approach of a foundation— but also leverage the other 95% (mission-related investments [MRI]) so that the full power of the endowment could be used to
bring about a more transformational impact (Stewart, 2017). Other prominent foundations have engaged in impact investing as well, such as the MacArthur Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

**Intergovernmental agencies.** Not only have domestic U.S. nonprofits and foundations employed innovative financing structures and evidence-based approaches, intergovernmental agencies across the globe have as well. In 2015, The World Bank stated:

> As one way to meet (these) staggering needs, the international development community is developing new results-focused financing instruments, some of which seek to mobilize untapped private sector capital and knowledge, while repositioning global economic and social challenges into investible opportunities. (p. 1)

An example of this approach is the use of development impact bonds (DIB) to fund international aid. Adapted from the UK and U.S. social impact bond model, a DIB is a global financing mechanism that provides “upfront funding for development programs by private investors, who are remunerated by donors or host-country governments—and earn a return—if evidence shows that programs achieve pre-agreed outcomes” (Center for Global Development, 2017, para. 1). Similarly, in 2015, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)—with increased focus on accomplishing the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—established the Innovation Facility to provide seed funding and technical assistance to improve public service delivery and to facilitate evidence-based policymaking across 45 countries (UNDP, 2016). Intergovernmental and development aid organizations are also looking to new social innovations to assist in their pursuit to solve global poverty and inequality.
In summary, this blurring and bending of sectors has produced global cross-sector shifts that demonstrate three critical mechanisms of social innovation, which include the following: “the exchanges of ideas and values, shifts in roles and relationships, and the integration of private capital with public and philanthropic support” (Phills et al., 2008, p. 40).

**Connection to Higher Education: Millennials Desire to Study, Work, and Live with Social Purpose**

A parallel 21st century trend influencing the emergence of social innovation initiatives on college campuses is Millennials’ desire to pursue studies, careers, and lives that contribute positively to the social good. Millennials are the products of the 1980s and 1990s high schools, which were heavily influenced by higher education’s civic engagement movement, and which strongly encouraged students to engage in service and volunteerism (Milway, 2013). Given the prevalence and focus on community service during their youth, Millennials have naturally grown up to expect to incorporate social purposes in their lives and careers. Technology has also influenced Millennials’ interests in social issues. Millennials are the first generation to grow up being exposed to the atrocities of war and poverty on a daily basis through technology and social media. Social media, through new technologies, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, has delivered images of global poverty and inequality to youth for more than a decade. Social media and crowdfunding sites have accelerated youth exposure, education, and engagement in a broad range of environmental and social issues.

Given the influence of high school education and social media, it is not surprising then that Millennials seek to have a college experience that provides social purpose. They
expect to have curricular and co-curricular experiences that will allow them to better understand and contribute to social issues and pervasive inequalities. Data show that the Millennial generation has clearly signaled a deep interest in careers oriented to the social sector (Deloitte, 2016).

Millennials are acutely aware of a broad range of social issues, and many seek to be part of the solution. Millennials, unlike the idealistic students of the 1960s and the career-minded students of the 1980s (Hartley, 2009), want to pursue lives of “doing well by doing good” (Case, 2016 p. 1). In a 2016 Deloitte Millennial Survey, 87% of Millennials said they believe that “the success of a business should be measured in terms of more than just its financial performance” (p. 1). The survey also found that only 5% of Millennial participants said profit-focused values would ensure long-term success. Millennials strongly value social, not just financial, focus and return. Millennials, more than any other generation, seek to have a positive social or environmental impact through their investments (see Figure 3).

Seventy-three percent of Millennials believe it is possible to achieve market rate returns by investing in companies based on their environmental or social impact. Millennials overwhelmingly express the desire for socially oriented careers, investments, and use of their time. To sum it up in the higher education context, Gene Block (2013), the Chancellor of the University of California at Los Angeles, wrote in The Washington Post, “Never in my 35 years in higher education have I seen a more pronounced and sustained effort by young people to choose careers that serve society” (para. 1).
Social Impact in Higher Education

In part, the birth of the social entrepreneurship wave in U.S. higher education can be traced to the Harvard Business School in 1993, when Harvard professors James Austin and V. Kasturi Rangan pioneered the concept of a social enterprise (Jones & Wadhwani, 2006; Leonard & Rangan, 2014). Shortly thereafter, the Harvard Business School and many other universities started to create MBA-level and executive education courses on social entrepreneurship and social enterprise designed to apply business concepts to the social service and government sectors. Martin and Osberg’s (2007) seminal piece in the Stanford Social Innovation Review argued that the mostly useful way to define social entrepreneurship was to establish its congruence with entrepreneurship and the three elements of creativity, fortitude, and courage. They describe a social entrepreneur as someone that “aims for value in the form of large-scale, transformational benefit that accrues either to a significant segment of society or to society at large” (p. 36).

Proponents of the social entrepreneurship movement pointed to the failure of the public and nonprofit sectors in solving social issues, and argued the need to improve their management, performance, and efficiency. However, some question whether universities
are equipped and or even should teach social entrepreneurship (Wilson, 2016). Kirby (2004) specifically argued that traditional business schools stultify rather than develop the required skills and attributes needed for innovation and entrepreneurism.

This fluidity of the field has exhibited through multiple definitions and approaches to the work. For example, the Nonprofit Finance Fund (2017) defined social impact as “changes in economic, social, cultural, environmental, and/or political conditions due to specific actions and behavioral changes by individuals and families, communities, organizations, and/or society and systems” (p. 1). Epstein and Yuthas’s (2014) book, *Measuring and Improving Social Impacts*, pointed to the need for nonprofits, companies, and impact investors to purposefully measure and improve social impacts.

There are a variety of terms used to describe the broader social impact space. The University of Michigan’s Center for Social Impact uses the term social impact as “a significant, positive change that addresses a pressing social issue” (University of Michigan, 2017). Acknowledging the wide range of terms used interchangeably in the academy and the multiple routes to which an individual or organization can engage, the University of Michigan framed the terms as the Social “Is” and “Es” and contend they are rooted in the following frames:

1. **Social Entrepreneur: Individual** “focuses on the individual personal qualities of people who start new organizations, and it celebrates traits like boldness, accountability, resourcefulness, ambition, persistence, and unreasonableness” (as cited in Phills et al., 2008, p. 35).
2. **Social Enterprise: Structure** “focuses on commercial activities, earned income, and for-profit ventures that give financial and operational support to traditional social service programs” (as cited in Phills et al., 2008, p. 36).

3. **Social Innovation: Novelty/Process** is “the process of inventing, securing support for, and implementing novel solutions to social needs and problems” (as cited in Phills et al., 2008, p. 34).

4. **Social Impact: Results** is “the result or effect an organization’s actions have on the well-being of the community” (Wharton, 2017, para 1).

Ultimately, universities now offer numerous courses and opportunities in social innovation and impact. However, some wonder if colleges and universities should, or are even equipped to, teach social entrepreneurship due to their rigid, bureaucratic structures (Wilson, 2016). Others have asked if all of this hype is a fad. Are higher education institutions being shortsighted in accommodating the whims of Millennials? Or, is this phenomenon merely a passing trend of universities trying to differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive higher education industry?

**Niche to Mainstream: 2017 Oxford University Report on Social Impact**

In January of 2017, an Oxford University report titled, *Onward: Accelerating Impact of Social Impact Education*, verified the existence and sustainability of the social impact phenomenon in higher education. This study—produced by a partnership of Oxford University, Bridgespan (a global nonprofit organization), and the Skoll Foundation (a private California-based foundation)—found that the university-based social impact movement is no longer a niche concept and, in fact, now permeates universities across the globe (Ditkoff & Kelley, 2017). The research team conducted 30
interviews across the globe with center directors and leaders inside and outside the field of social impact; and they specifically conducted a deep-dive analysis of five social impact centers located at Harvard University, Stanford University, Duke University, University of Cape Town, and Oxford University.

The Oxford University (2017) report found that social impact centers have accelerated across the globe and are successfully engaging in four main activities: (a) “developing the next generation of social impact leaders” (p. 2); (b) “engaging the wider student body in social impact” (p. 2); (c) “generating actionable insights for practitioners” (p. 2); and (d) “convening practitioners and researchers to support learning and innovation” (see Appendix A). They also reported these centers were in high demand and that center leaders reported feeling pulled to serve a wider range of stakeholders that included students, faculty, practitioners, philanthropists, businesses, and governments. The study confirmed that the university-based social impact movement has progressed from being a niche to being mainstream and recognizes the need for further study to deepen knowledge around best practices and the creation of social impact as a structured academic discipline.

The Oxford study also found that social impact centers are transitioning from the first stage of development and implementation into a second “2.0” stage of growth and evolution. They specifically identified and outlined four areas needed to advance the work more broadly (see Appendix A). They are:

1. To educate a broader, blended range of students across sectors to prepare them for next-gen careers;
2. To drive deep expertise and the creation of specialization in the field through actionable research that blends practical and academic perspectives;
3. To define social impact as a structured academic discipline; and
4. To develop, advance, and track more robust metrics of student impact to counter unproductive behaviors in higher education around rankings.

One criticism of the Oxford University (2017) report was that it focused too narrowly on business schools and social entrepreneurism, failing to recognize the expansion of the phenomenon cross-campus and to broader concepts and understanding of social impact. While the movement initially grew out of business schools and was mainly focused on social enterprise, the social impact movement has matured and evolved to include a much broader set of interdisciplinary, cross-sector, and evidence-based approaches. Some social impact centers, like Georgetown’s Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation, are organizationally housed in other colleges, jointly across colleges, or even out of academic affairs or a provost’s office. This study sought to expand upon the Oxford report to offer a broader picture of the evolving space.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, universities and colleges are key stakeholders in their communities. In 1994, Boyer famously called for a *New American College* that would take special pride in using its robust capacity to connect theory to practice and through to action. He specifically said that this *New American College* “would organize cross-disciplinary institutes around pressing social issues.” Similarly, Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) argued that democratic engagement is a truly dynamic and evolving process rather than a fixed set of activities or a static, rigid dogma. As demonstrated in the literature, social impact
work more broadly has evolved and stimulated cross-disciplinary work, complex
community partnerships, and socially-oriented activities. The emerging university-based
social impact centers are committed to this dynamic work, clearly producing new types of
university and student engagement.
CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

Given the prevalence and increasing importance of social innovation efforts, this study sought to explore the emergence and evolution of initiatives developing out of social impact centers located on university and college campuses in the United States. This study used qualitative research methods to identify and explore the various internal and external drivers behind the creation and development of the centers. It also explored what centers are currently doing and their evolution in terms of partnerships, research, curriculum, and co-curriculum, and built a basic typology of university engagement in social impact work. The study sought to determine if there are new types of university cross-sector partnerships emerging in social impact work. Given that social impact is a nascent field, this study also examined how social impact leaders and faculty define social impact. Last, this study explored to what extent, if any, social impact centers are collaborating with other existing civic engagement initiatives on their campuses and how social impact work maps onto the historical trends of civic engagement.

Research Questions and Study Design

This study was designed to capture a broad range of perspectives and experiences of the leaders and engaged faculty at university-based social impact centers. The research questions were designed to explore how various factors shaped the leadership, strategies, and processes that created social impact centers and the subsequent initiatives and programs that have resulted. Specifically, this study explored the following research questions:

RQ1. What were the key drivers behind the recent proliferation of university-based social impact centers in U.S. higher education?
RQ2. How are the centers evolving?

RQ3. What is the current landscape of social impact center activities?

RQ4. To what extent, if any, are these centers collaborating with other on- and off-campus partners?

RQ5. Are these centers exhibiting new types of engagement?

RQ6. What are the tensions?

Specifically, RQ1 explored the core phenomenon of how the social impact centers were established and the key external and internal drivers that influenced their emergence. It also explored the key stakeholders, the funding sources and structure, and where the centers are located in the organizational structure of the university. RQ2 sought to understand how the centers are evolving overtime and what strategies and conditions influenced their evolution. RQ3 explored what the centers are currently doing, specifically related to partnerships, research, curriculum, co-curriculum, and activities. This question was explicitly designed to capture the range of center activities in order to build out an extensive typology of social impact activities. RQ4 explored to what extent, if any, these centers are engaging with other campus and community partners. RQ5 sought to discover if these social impact centers are exhibiting new types of engagement. Finally, RQ6 sought to gain an understanding of what are the emergent tensions and challenges these centers face.

Given that the purpose of this study was to gain a rich understanding of the complex nature of the emergence and evolution of social impact center initiatives, a qualitative research methodology was used (Creswell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative methods provide the most useful approaches and tools to capture the
perspectives of individuals’ lived experiences in social impact centers (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). This approach allowed me to discover the breadth and depth of data and to contextualize it with each individual. Qualitative research methodology also facilitates the collection of data in a natural setting and the ability to analyze data in both a deductive and inductive way that surfaces themes and patterns (Creswell, 2012).

Specifically, this study utilized grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory is an approach that moves beyond description to generate and discover a theory for an action or process (Creswell, 2012). Grounded theory research design facilitates the development of the theory that might provide a framework or help explain practice for further research. The theory development is done through the exploration of participants who have all experienced a process to develop a “unified theoretical explanation” (Corbin & Strauss, 2007, p. 107). In grounded theory, the research questions asked of participants focus on understanding individual experiences in the process and the steps in the process. Creswell (2012) explained that grounded theory organizes the research questions in four structured categories: (a) core phenomenon, (b) causal conditions, (c) strategies, and (d) consequences.

A prominent idea is that this theory development is generated or “grounded” in the data gathered from participants who have experienced the process—which in this study, was the social impact center leaders and faculty (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Accordingly, grounded theory was a useful approach for this study because it allowed for the generation of a general explanation (or theory) of an action, process, or an interaction formed by the perspectives of a large number of participants (Creswell, 2012). Given that this study sought to better understand social impact initiatives, a grounded theory study
provided a way to understand and explain a “movement,” “process,” or “action” (Creswell, 2012).

Creswell (2012) explained that “grounded theory is a good design to use when a theory is not available to explain or understand a process” (p. 88) and when the theory “is incomplete or does not fully address the variables of interest to the researcher” (p. 88). As demonstrated in the literature review, there is no existing framework or theory; further study is needed to explain the rise and developments of these university-based social impact initiatives. Considering this study sought to understand the individual perspectives of leaders in this space, grounded theory was useful because it provided an avenue to explore how people are experiencing the phenomenon.

**Site and Participant Selection**

When using grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that participants must be theoretically selected to assist the researcher to form the theory. They described theoretical sampling as a means to “maximize opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 201). Charmaz (2006) also described theoretical sampling as the process of data collection that reveals variations and identifies gaps that require further elaboration. Creswell (2012) said that in a grounded theory study, the researcher must choose participants who can best contribute to the development of the theory. Accordingly, this study used theoretical sampling to select leaders of university-based social impact centers that could best inform the research questions. Theoretical sampling also facilitated the selection of key leaders in the space to uncover rich data to draw out themes and comparisons between the centers’ missions, activities, and partnerships.
Grounded theory methodology also meant that I was required at times to do follow-up interviews, emails, and passes in the field until the categories of information were saturated. Snowball sampling was also used as some participants suggested additional social impact leaders who should be interviewed to provide additional helpful information.

A pilot study, conducted as part of the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education Executive Doctorate program, specifically explored the wide range and types of social entrepreneurship, innovation, and impact centers. I conducted website searches and interviews with several leaders and staff in the social impact space. These two activities informed the development of a selection criteria and the eventual participant list below. The selection criteria used in this study included the following center characteristics: (a) must be located on a U.S. university or college campus; (b) has a mission that is focused on social impact, social innovation, social enterprise, and/or social entrepreneurship; (c) contains programming, curriculum, and/or co-curriculum that extends beyond just entrepreneurship into the social sphere; and (d) has been in existence for at least several months.

Specifically, centers that explicitly list “social impact,” “social innovation,” “social enterprise,” and/or “social entrepreneurship” as core to their mission were selected. Centers that focus primarily on “entrepreneurship,” for example, were not selected. Given that this study sought to understand both the breadth and depth of the emergence of social impact centers, it will not use type of institution as a criterion for inclusion; rather, it will seek out the centers that exemplify social impact work that informs the research questions. It should be noted that mid-way through the participant
For the purpose of this study, the term social impact center will be defined according to the Oxford University (2017) report to include university-based programs, centers, institutes, and initiatives that go by a range of names, including social innovation, social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, sustainable business, and social impact. The term social impact center will encompass the range and variation of these activities on U.S. university and college campuses.

The primary data for this study consisted of in-person and phone interviews with key leaders (e.g., executive directors, managing directors) and engaged faculty (tenure- and career-line) at university-based social impact centers in the United States. I interviewed 43 social impact leaders at 28 universities across 38 centers (multiple centers on one campus). Interviewing various actors in the space provided a comprehensive range of perspectives to the research questions. Weiss (1994) said the key reasons for conducting qualitative interviews is to develop holistic descriptions of experiences, realities, perspectives, and phenomena, and to understand and integrate multiple individual perspectives. Table 1 illustrates the list of U.S. university-based social impact centers that were included in the interviews.
Table 1

*University-Based Social Impact Centers for Participant Selection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Center</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American University</td>
<td>Social Enterprise Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown University</td>
<td>Swearer Center for Public Service - Social Innovation Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado State University</td>
<td>Impact Finance Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia University</td>
<td>Tamer Center for Social Enterprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duke University</td>
<td>CASE, CASE i3 Initiative on Impact Investing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerson College</td>
<td>Engagement Lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emory University</td>
<td>Social Enterprise @ Goizueta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgetown University</td>
<td>Beeck Center Social Impact + Innovation Center for Social Impact Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvard University</td>
<td>HBS Social Enterprise Initiative &amp; Impact Collaboratory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Initiative for Responsible Investment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harvard Government Performance Lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana University</td>
<td>Institute for Social Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middlebury College</td>
<td>Center for Creativity, Innovation, and Social Entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIT</td>
<td>Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Central College</td>
<td>Center for Social Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeastern University</td>
<td>Social Enterprise Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwestern University</td>
<td>Social Impact at Kellogg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYU</td>
<td>Undergraduate Program in Social Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Impact, Innovation, and Investment Specialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Clara University</td>
<td>Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Markkula Center for Applied Ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>Center for Social Innovation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society &amp; <em>Stanford Social Innovation Review</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of California, Berkeley</td>
<td>Institute for Business &amp; Social Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of California, Los Angeles</td>
<td>Impact@Anderson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Chicago</td>
<td>Rustandy Center for Social Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Colorado, Boulder</td>
<td>Center for Education and Social Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Michigan</td>
<td>Center for Social Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Wharton Social Impact Initiative Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy Initiative Center for Social Impact Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Texas, Austin</td>
<td>Social Innovation Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Utah</td>
<td>Sorenson Impact Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Virginia</td>
<td>Social Entrepreneurship &amp; Pay for Success Lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yale University</td>
<td>Program on Social Enterprise, Social Impact Lab, Net Impact</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

Characteristic of qualitative research, this study used multiple sources of data collection, including interviews and organizational documents. Creswell (2012) explained that data collection encompasses the gathering, integration, coding, and interpretation of primary and secondary sources from all of the interviews. However, the primary form of data collection in grounded theory is interviews (Creswell, 2012). In-depth interviews allow the researcher to explore complex phenomenon from multiple perspectives. Interviews are considered a mainstay of qualitative data collection and provide rich, deep, contextualized, and individualized data (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Through in-depth interviews with center leaders and faculty, this study sought to understand participant perspectives on the emergence and evolution of social impact work, their center’s partnerships and initiatives, and how this relates to other participants’ experiences and perspectives. Interviews with a variety of key actors was a useful method to better understand how individuals construct reality and the broad range of experiences and perspectives of the phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2015).

As Ravitch and Carl (2015) stated, it is important to delve into each participant’s lived experience and to relate to them, so that the researcher can understand a fuller range of perspectives and experiences about the phenomenon. Grounded theory specifically encourages the researcher to develop a theory or an understanding of something by conducting 20 to 30 interviews based on several visits “to the field” to collect interview data that will fully saturate or inform the categories (Creswell, 2012). Strauss and Corbin (1990) explained that a category is a unit of information that is composed of instances, events, and happenings—which, for this study, is the emergence and evolution of social
impact centers. I conducted onsite interviews at the following universities: Harvard University, Emerson College, New York University, Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Utah. All other interviews were conducted over the phone.

I used a semi-structured interview protocol to interview the participants, which provided the flexibility and freedom for the participant to offer their full perspective, and in some cases, uncovered additional relevant data (see Appendix C for the interview protocol). The interviews were conducted both in person and by phone. All interviews were recorded, which allowed me to focus on building rapport and being fully present and engaged in the interview. Participants filled out informed consent forms and were asked permission to record the interview prior to beginning. Interviews were then professionally transcribed and stored online on a privately protected site.

In addition to interviews, secondary sources were used to uncover historical and contextual data. Organizations, such as social impact centers, are data-rich environments that contain existing data that should be examined (Robson, 2011). Naturally occurring documents are those that already exist within an organization and can be an important source of relevant, contextualized data that act as an important form of data triangulation to interviews (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). This aspect of secondary data collection included: (a) the gathering and examination of official documents (e.g., mission statements, press releases, brochures, and handbooks); (b) participant-generated data (e.g., blogs, photos, social media); and (c) online sources (e.g., websites, press coverage, listservs, and blogs). As Ravitch and Carl (2015) suggest, this study identified, collected, organized, reviewed, and analyzed all of these documents to contextualize and triangulate the interview data,
and, ultimately, to better understand the phenomenon more broadly. By using multiple sources of data, it brought more credibility to the study than if only one source was used (Maxwell, 2012). As such, this grounded theory study used a “zigzag” process, or continual iterations of data collection and data analysis, followed by a return to the field for further data collection (Creswell, 2012).

**Data Analysis**

During the data analysis phase, a variety of techniques were used to understand and analyze the data. The collection and ongoing analysis of data were seen as integral, iterative, and recursive components of the qualitative research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Analyzing text and other forms of data is a challenging task in qualitative research; therefore, I used a strategic system of coding and tagging (Creswell, 2012). Maxwell (2012) specifically emphasizes the need for researchers to read and think about interviews, observation notes, coding strategies, and then apply data into matrices and other visual displays.

I used Ravitch and Carl’s (2015) three-pronged approach to data analysis that includes “data organization and management, immersive engagement with data, and writing and representation” (p. 217). The data analysis process was structured, iterative, and evolutionary (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). As Ravitch and Carl (2015) suggest, this study used a sustained process of reflexivity practices, including writing memos, taking field notes, and creating visuals and other graphic displays to capture and organize the data, which were useful validity strategies and also stimulated analytic insights to draw out major themes.
Another key feature of data analysis in grounded theory is the prominent use of memoing (Creswell, 2012). Memoing was used as data were collected and analyzed to draft out the flow of the process and the timelines, which ultimately assisted in developing a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Throughout the study, there was a continual process of comparing the data gathered from participants with the ideas being formulated about the emerging theory. I used an iterative process of analyzing the interview data, secondary data, and the evolving theory to fill the gaps and further develop the understanding.

More specifically, the analysis of the data developed into three stages that included open, axial, and selective coding. The data was coded and tagged based on the above mentioned major themes as outlined in Table 2: emergence, evolution, current forms, and challenges. These categories and codes drew from Axelroth and Dubb’s (2010) typology of university engagement, which includes three major roles of facilitator, leader, and convener. This higher education anchor institution framework helped to organize the data and the different types of strategies and roles institutions play in various initiatives and partnerships in the pursuit to better the social and economic conditions in the communities where they reside (Hodges & Dubb, 2012).

Additionally, these codes also guided the organization and interpretation of the secondary data sources. This study used the constant comparative method, which takes information from data collection and compares it to emerging categories (Creswell, 2012). First, there was a structured process to code the data for its major categories or core phenomenon, which is referred to as open coding. Next, axial coding was used to identify one open category and then to create subcategories from the core phenomenon.
Table 2

*Codes Developed to Analyze Interview Data*

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<th>Codes</th>
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<td>Emergence</td>
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<td><strong>External Forces</strong></td>
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<td>Donors</td>
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<td>Market Competition</td>
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<td>Societal &amp; Political Events</td>
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<td><strong>Internal Forces</strong></td>
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<td>Students</td>
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<td>Leadership (faculty &amp; admin)</td>
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<td>Institutional Culture</td>
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<td>Evolution</td>
<td>Trends (internal and external trends)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strategies</td>
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<td>Funding (internal and external trends)</td>
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<td>Future</td>
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<td>Current Forms</td>
<td>Funding Structure</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Curriculum</td>
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<td>Co-Curriculum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Community Engagement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mission/Focus</td>
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<td>Challenges</td>
<td>Resource Constraints (internal and external)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Silo</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Competition (internal and external)</td>
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<td>Bureaucracy vs Innovation</td>
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<td>Newness of Field</td>
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<td>Faculty Buy-In</td>
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Strauss and Corbin (1990) recommend that researchers use these specific types of axial coding categories around the core phenomenon: causal conditions, strategies, contextual and intervening conditions, and consequences.
Next, the theory developed out of the intersection of categories, referred to as selective coding. Selective coding is the process of taking the model to develop hypotheses or to build a story that describes the patterns and interrelationships of the categories. The process of open, axial, and selective coding facilitated the formation of a theoretical model of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012).

Once the data was coded and analyzed, grounded theory guided me to use a variety of narrative stories or visualizations to articulate the phenomenon. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that the presentation of data—or the theory in grounded theory—could be presented as a discussion, diagram, hypothesis, or proposition. This study used Strauss and Corbin’s structured approach of presenting visual models, such as a logic diagram or coding paradigm, to identify the central phenomenon and other factors, such as causal conditions, strategies, context and intervening conditions, and consequences. This study utilized a variety of visuals, including maps, timelines, and models, to present the data in the most coherent manner.

**Validity and Ethical Considerations**

This qualitative study was conducted using the utmost ethical and professional standards for research to ensure trustworthiness and validity. I used transparency, triangulation of data, and member checking to achieve validity. Transparency in the research processes establishes validity and rigor (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Triangulation of various data sources help to round out and challenge my understanding of the participants and sites and helped to reduce the risk that my conclusions only reflect one individual or case. Member checking, or participant validation, was used to check in with participants.
to establish credibility, to ensure the validity of data, and to triangulate the data to ensure trustworthiness and validity (Ravitch & Carl, 2015).

Concerning the ethics of research, Creswell (2012) argues that researchers need to write themselves into the study by reflecting on who they are and the people they study. While every effort was made to be objective in the research process, I recognized that my work in the social impact field influenced my research. I worked in a university-based civic engagement institute for 15 years and currently work in a newly established social impact center. My experiences working in these two centers, both in established and nascent phases of the organization, impact my perception of university community engagement. However, the hope is that my experience and time in the field enhanced this study and will help to further inform the growing field of social impact.
Emergence, Evolution, Trends, and Tensions

Over the past 15 years, there has been a proliferation of social innovation initiatives in the United States. Specific to the higher education context, there is notable growth in social impact education and new university-based social impact centers. While the social impact phenomenon is still relatively new and evolving, patterns emerged in the data that demonstrate universities are purposefully establishing social impact centers and they continue to grow in numbers. There are shared national trends of cross-campus and curricular growth and a set of tensions and challenges that centers commonly face.

Emergence of Social Impact Centers

Social impact centers started to emerge on college campuses in the mid-1990s, and since that time, their growth has accelerated with a marked increase in the number of centers. The first centers were established at Harvard University in 1993 and at Santa Clara University in 1995. The emergence of centers was slow and steady during the early to mid-2000s and then accelerated in the late 2000s. Over a 15-year period between the mid-1990s to 2010, roughly 20 centers were established. Then, over the past 7 years, since 2010, 27 new social impact centers have been established. There was a noticeable acceleration in the growth of new social impact centers starting around 2010. Figure 4 provides a timeline of when social impact centers were established.

Figure 5 illustrates that roughly 30% of social impact centers have been in operation for 15 to 25 years and another 30% for 10 to 15 years. Forty-three percent of social impact centers have been around for 5 to 10 years and 36% for 0 to 5 years, thus
Figure 4. Timeline of the establishment of social impact centers in the U.S.

Figure 5. Social impact center years in operation.

demonstrating the significant increase in the emergence of social impact centers around the time of the 2008 Great Recession and after. Sixty percent of social impact centers were established in the last 10 years.
While each institution boasts unique cultural and contextual characteristics, patterns emerged in the data to explain the establishment and development of the phenomenon. Through the perspectives and lived experiences of 43 social impact leaders, the grounded theory model in the following section explains the internal and external forces that influenced the emergence and ongoing evolution of social impact initiatives. Most striking was the influence of students. The interviews clearly revealed that students—exhibited through interest, demand, and purposeful lobbying efforts—are the most significant force influencing the phenomenon. The higher education market competition and donor support are the other most significant influences on the phenomenon.

The emergence of centers can be explained by these “windows of opportunity” where internal and external forces intersect, interact, and overlap with one another within institutional-specific contexts to produce new social impact initiatives. The key forces that impacted nearly every institution interviewed were strong student interest, market competition, and donor support. Figure 6 models the participants’ perspectives of the influencing forces on their center.

**Key Forces**

**Mission-driven students.** The most significant force influencing the development of social impact initiatives on U.S. college campuses was the interest and demand from mission-driven students. The groundswell of grassroots student interest and lobbying on college campuses catalyzed significant bottom-up pressure on university administrators that eventually spurred the creation of a variety of social impact initiatives. Nearly every person interviewed expressed that student interest was driving the phenomenon and was
the main reason their institution developed social impact initiatives. Nick Ashburn, from the University of Pennsylvania, said, “I think students were the number one driver for establishing the Wharton Social Impact Initiative and we’ve only seen demand grow.” Similarly, Christine Mahoney, from Social Entrepreneurship at UVA, said, “Student demand has been the biggest driver. If the student demand hadn’t been there, it would’ve gone nowhere. But the scale of the demand and the activeness of the students has been the major driver.”

Nearly every participant expressed that this phenomenon would not have happened without the bottom-up pressure from proactive student demand. Bruce Usher, from Columbia’s Tamer Center for Social Enterprise, said, “A lot of what’s happened in this program has been driven by student demand, far more than leadership saying this is the future.” For some campuses, the student demand was the only factor driving these
new initiatives. Rishi Moudgil, the founding Director of the University of Michigan’s Center for Social Impact, described how it was the interest and demand of their student body, and they neither had a big donor nor a driving faculty member to help frame it. He described that as both a “curse and a blessing.”

It was also clear from the data that it was not just student demand, but also the students’ purposeful and proactive lobbying of faculty and administrators for new courses and opportunities in social impact. For example, multiple faculty talked about how their students asked for content on social enterprises in their nonprofit management courses. Participants explained how students were proactively learning about social impact concepts on their own outside of class and would then bring the ideas into the classroom. Professor Peter Roberts, from Social Enterprise @ Goizueta at Emory University, explained:

When my students came up and talked about social enterprise in the nonprofit management class, my reaction was I would teach it, but I had never heard of it before. So, I actually conscripted them to help me put together a reading list for the syllabus.

A number of faculty participants described how their proactive students assisted them in the creation and development of new courses.

In response to this student demand, institutions started to develop new social benefit courses that incorporated the budding concepts of social entrepreneurship and social innovation. Participants explained how these new courses would immediately fill, and some would even have waiting lists. At the University of Virginia, for example, they listed their first three social entrepreneurship courses, and within the first week, the courses were full and they had 150 students on the waiting list. Broadly, across most of the centers, the intense interest in social benefit courses signaled to university leadership
that student demand was real and sustainable. Student interest and demand drove the creation of new content and curriculum.

The data also showed that students were being educated, engaged, and trained by external organizations. Students were attending social impact conferences, organized by external groups like Net Impact and Ashoka U, where they would learn techniques and strategies to advance social impact on their own campuses. These external organizations taught students how to create student clubs and social impact ventures and how to organize events. Many participants explained that a major signal of student interest was the blossoming of new student clubs related to social innovation. Bhavna Sivanand, from UCLA’s Impact @ Anderson, said, “I think that the student clubs growing in numbers every year, reaching a broader audience, and having more cross-campus collaboration from a student perspective was exciting and signaled demand.” These student clubs organized a variety of social impact activities, even when their campuses did not offer other social impact opportunities, such as lectures, events, competitions, and networking.

Notably, students gained significant leadership opportunities through these student clubs and exerted influence on the campus and even on some of the staff and faculty. In some cases, these proactive student leaders eventually trained the professional university staff who were hired to run these social impact initiatives. Megan Kushner, who was hired to run Social Impact at Northwestern’s Kellogg School, remarked:

Before we were there, truly the students ran everything. So, when we came on, we learned a ton from the faculty and the administration, but truthfully, we learned most about what was happening in social impact at Kellogg by the two presidents of the Net Impact Club. Because basically it was all on them. The student presidents that year are always going to have a special place in my heart because they really were my onboarding.
At some institutions, students were the ones who proactively developed a competitive landscape analysis of the market to convince faculty and administrators of the need to establish a social impact center. Bhavna Sivandands, from UCLA’s Impact @ Anderson, described how a group of students produced a competitive analysis of the Top 20 business schools for a case competition, and eventually demonstrated that the Anderson Business school needed to formalize their programs to be more competitive in the market and to attract top students. At some institutions, students understood the market and societal shifts long before their institutions did. And, the students influenced their institutions, both through proactive lobby efforts, setting up clubs, and by “voting with their feet” in signing up for new social innovation classes.

Another signal of intense student interest in social impact manifested in entrepreneurship competitions. Participants described how their entrepreneurship competitions have seen increased submissions of socially-oriented projects and/or proposals—a noticeable development. The Yale Entrepreneurial Institute, for example, said that last year, 12 of the 15 submissions were social enterprises. They pointed out that social ventures were not the focus of this competition, but they were clearly the interest of the students. Matt Segneri, from Harvard’s Social Enterprise Initiative, provided the following figures, which demonstrate an increase from 34% up to 77% of new venture competition submissions having a social focus (see Table 3).

This strong theme of mission-driven student interest even manifested in donor giving. Two participants explained how their endowed, named donor families were influenced by their Millennial children’s interest in social impact. The participants described how they felt like that was the major reason for the donors’ contributions to
Table 3

*Harvard Business School New Venture Competition*

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hybrid</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>73%</td>
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<td>vs. nonprofit</td>
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their institution’s social impact initiative. The data clearly showed that student interest and demand was the most significant force behind the emergence of university-based social impact initiatives.

**Market competition.** Another key driver behind the proliferation of these centers is competition across the higher education market. The majority of participants talked about the need to compete with other top schools to attract and retain the top students. Participants described how their institutions recognized the need to create these programs to differentiate themselves in a crowded and competitive market. The data showed that social impact was seen as a niche concept 15 years ago, but is now perceived as being mainstream and necessary to compete in an increasingly competitive market place. Kristi Raube, from UC Berkeley, described how they recognized the need to distinguish their institution in a competitive market, which came down to clearly articulating how they create social impact—this need largely drove their strategic planning and mission. She chronicled how this unfolded:

One of the things that happened with our current Dean is he asked an important question, which was . . . “You know, almost every top business says we create leaders.” He asked us what kind of leader are we creating as Berkley Haas? What does it mean to come here instead of go to Wharton or to Kellogg or to Stanford or whatever? What makes us uniquely us? So, we came up with these four defining principles which all relate to social impact and doing good in the world. They’re very prominently on our website and they literally permeate everything.
Business schools now, more than before, embed social impact and the creation of changemakers into their missions. Further, participants said their social impact initiatives also serve broader institutional recruitment purposes for admissions offices, because their social impact centers provide interesting opportunities that can be used to recruit new students and showcase the institution’s focus on social good. Peter Roberts, from Emory University, aptly explained:

“We are very, very important to the Admissions people when they go out and try to recruit students, because in the modern era, the fact that when people look at what we do… it’s pretty obvious that we’re as engaged, if not more so, than the other similar programs around the country because of how high touch we are. I think a lot of really smart kids, especially the upcoming generations that are excited about the idea of going to business school so they can use business to change the world [are attracted to our program]. I think that’s very, very important.

Similarly, participants also described how they felt pressure to develop more social innovation initiatives to stay current and to better serve their existing students’ interests. Christina Hachikian, from University of Chicago’s Rustandy Center for Social Innovation, described that “any university or business school that wants to attract the best students, needs to have a variety of support structures and programs that really nurture the interest of those students.”

Participants also explained how they benchmark themselves against other top-ranked institutions, and this has motivated them to develop new programs according to market standards. For example, one of the graduate business schools recognized the need to develop a loan assistance program for graduates pursuing careers in nonprofit management so they could better compete in attracting these students. Bruce Usher, from Columbia University, said:

“We are driven by competition for students. It would make material difference to them (the students) that a loan assistance program could make a big difference. Of
course, that’s not all, we then look at the programmatic side and the courses. At the end of the day, it is a little bit of a competition of schools looking to attract the best students.

Participants housed within business schools, specifically, explained how students today are not solely interested in traditional investment banking and consulting jobs, like in the past. Instead, students are seeking to make a difference and have meaning in their careers and lives. Institutions are responding to this trend. Christina Hachikian, from the University of Chicago’s Rustandy Center for Social Innovation, said:

Every school wants the best set of students that it can attract. And the best set of students are interested today in particular, in a lot of things, not just consulting and investment banking. And so, you know, any business school that wants to be competitive, needs to have a variety of support structures for those students. And so, the school has really spent some time thinking about what the assets were in its portfolio, and how it needed to round those out to make sure that it was really being supportive of all the needs of students.

The mere fact that faculty talk about meeting the supply and demand of students signals the market orientation to this phenomenon and the critical nature of serving the student as a “customer.” Hachikian further explained:

The more faculty and student interest you get, the more you grow and the more interest you get. And so, we’ve been able to ride those supply and demand curves . . . you know, just like a trend, a sort of market wave. But also, [it’s] an internal demand curve that is propelled by the work we’re doing.

One participant’s experience perfectly demonstrates the overarching theme of the competitive influence of the higher education market on the social impact phenomenon. This participant explained how he had been trying for several years to pass curricular changes to create a new concentration in social impact. During the faculty committee meeting to consider the proposal, there was a heated discussion around the interdisciplinary nature and scope of the proposal, and whether it should include topics ranging from environmental issues to human rights. After being bogged down in a long
debate, the dean pointed out their hottest competitor in the business school rankings had a social impact concentration and they did not. The participant described how the dean’s comment immediately shut down the faculty debate, and, “Bang—the gavel! It was approved.” Clearly, increasing competition across the higher education market, pressure to attract and retain top students, and the need to improve institutional rankings, has driven the proliferation of social impact centers.

Donor influence. Donor influence and financial support also surfaced as a key driver behind the development of social impact centers. The data showed that donor support is typically given in the form of private donations from high net worth individuals and/or private foundations. There was a clear pattern in the data that demonstrated the powerful influence of donors. The majority of participants talked about donor support as being transformative in terms of garnering institutional leadership support, providing financial stability, and advancing the work. Participants also described how new donor support simply catalyzes the launch of new initiatives and centers.

In particular, participants expressed that donors who endow centers are largely influential and have contributed to the building of the social impact field. The University of Utah’s Sorenson Impact Center leadership expressed the power of an endowed, committed donor. Utah’s Jeremy Keele said, “Having financial support, not kind of, but significant financial support from Jim Sorenson, both through the endowment, and then additional one-off initiatives, has just been game-changing.” Similarly, Damon Philips, from Columbia’s Tamer Center, said:

About 3 years ago, the Tamer family gave us a gift. It’s been a transformative gift for a number of reasons. They don’t take lightly that there aren’t that many endowed centers and the fact that we are an endowed center at a top university. It comes with both excitement and the sense of responsibility it should come with.
Participants also talked about how large donor gifts can provide leverage for institutional leaders to raise additional support. Some centers have endowed gifts, while others have large named donors who have a term. Georgetown’s Beeck Center has a termed, named donor. Marta Urquilla, from the Beeck Center, explained:

The way we operate is, we try to leverage the gift to extend the life of the gift. So, we raise money against it from philanthropies and private companies . . . half of the annual operating budget is raised from outside of the Beeck gift.

Outside of large endowed gifts, participants expressed that even one-time donations have a powerful signaling effect to administrators and faculty about the importance of the work. Some centers are also funded by private foundation donations. The most prominent foundations mentioned by participants in this study included the Arnold Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the McArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Gates Foundation, and others. Most importantly, donor and foundation gifts were described to catalyze additional institutional and donor support through matches and the desire for the donors/foundations to feel institutional support for the center.

Donor financial support can also unify and legitimize existing work. Rob Gertner, from the University of Chicago, explained it this way:

The Tamer gift really put us on the map, because it was a significant gift and it was from somebody who was interacting with most senior, most philanthropically inclined alums of the school, through his role on our advisory council.

A number of centers, particularly in business schools, evolved from existing courses and programs—such as nonprofit management or business and society—and it was a donor gift that catalyzed the organization and unification of disparate initiatives under one roof—either a named center or initiative. “For about 20 years, Columbia was doing the
nonprofit management and then this gift really catalyzed and solidified our work,” explained Damon Phillips, from Columbia University.

Participants described that donors have varying degrees of involvement with the social impact center’s mission and programming. It was explained that it is really about finding the right fit for the donor and the institution. Having a donor presence can often drive the conversation around specific content areas or geographic focus, for example. However, in some instances, participants explained that the donors can exert significant influence on the mission and even tie support to certain requirements. Strong donor influence can sometimes be helpful, other times challenging, and sometimes both. For example, Mark Meaney, from the University of Colorado, Boulder, explained how their endowed named school donor “wrote into the agreement that there would be a mandate for all students, whether undergraduate or graduate, to have an immersive experience in ethics, social responsibility, diversity, and environmental sustainability.” Initially, this initiative was carried out in the curriculum for education on social responsibility, and it was a department housed within a division. However, in 2005-2006, the lead donor asked that the status of the function be raised to become equivalent to a division within the school. This action spurred the administration to create a new center, which is now called the Center for Education and Social Responsibility.

In several unique instances, faculty and/or practitioner leaders donated their own money to support their work and even launch a center. However, in most cases, it was a combination of a donor and a dean charting out the path for the donation and use of funds. For centers without an endowment or major named donor, they consistently expressed the desire to seek out a big donor to provide operational and programmatic
support to stabilize their budgets. Bhavna Sivandands, from UCLA’s program, explained, “One thing that would very much be a sign of commitment and being able to support the students in their endeavors, would be an endowment or a naming gift. That is definitely the focus of the center.”

Participants who hold faculty positions talked about feeling pressure to fundraise. They were challenged with juggling the demands of a teaching load and the administrative duties of running a center. Faculty participants perceived the critical nature of fundraising and felt the difficulty of effectively executing fundraising efforts. Christine Mahoney, from UVA’s Social Enterprise program, described her donor conundrum:

Really, the only barrier is fundraising. And there are days where I think, I’m bad at this and I don’t know how to get better at it. Then there are other days where I think fundraising is just lucky . . . if the donors decide that they care about something, the golden goose comes . . . we had a donor here at UVA that gave around $20 million for a squash court. And everyone was like, “What? Why haven’t I ever heard about squash?”

Some social impact leaders described deep donor engagement in their center’s work. Thane Kreiner, from Santa Clara’s Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship, explained how he cultivated a number of donors by engaging them in global work. He said his donors describe their experience as “the best investment that they ever made even though there’s no financial return, there’s lots of returns in other dimensions.”

Overwhelmingly, the powerful and catalyzing effect of donor support emerged as a key theme in the participant interviews.

Internal Forces: Institutional Leadership

Next, the data showed the role that the internal forces of institutional leadership played in the creation of social impact initiatives. The emergence and evolution model in Figure 6 illustrates the influence of internal institutional leadership from deans, faculty,
and senior administration. Institutional leadership was described to shape when, where, and how the centers developed. The data demonstrated that deans played the most pivotal role, and then faculty. Faculty were leaders at some institutions and obstacles at others. In a smaller number of institutions, presidents and provosts played influential roles when they adopted social innovation as a priority, which always elevated the center’s status and success.

**Deans.** Institutional leadership, particularly the role of deans, has been a significant influence on the social impact movement. Nearly every center interviewed talked about the key role that the dean plays in either advancing or hindering their work. Given the dean is charged with setting the vision and strategy for their respective school or college, they can either help or hinder efforts. Some participants pointed to the importance of their dean in creating an “entrepreneurial” environment where they were encouraged to innovate and experiment with new initiatives.

For most centers, the dean(s) provided a combination of financial and political support that was critical to launching the initiative. A number of participants talked about how their dean recognized the need to have social impact programs to compete and raise the profile of their institution. These deans would do a number of helpful things, including (a) allocate institutional resources for faculty, staff, and programming expenses; (b) advocate to faculty about the need for new social impact curriculum; (c) initiate donor conversations and development efforts; (d) prioritize social impact in their strategic goals and mission; and (e) publicly highlight social impact in their speeches and social media. However, at some institutions, the deans were apathetic or simply not engaged; this commonly proved harmful to the centers’ ability to solidify support from
faculty and/or donors. If the dean and other key stakeholders in the academic departments did not find value in social impact initiatives, the students and others pushing for social impact found it difficult to advance the initiatives.

The dean’s leadership style, as well as their control of the resources, made them key actors. There is one specific business school dean who has been critical in this space—Dr. Sally Blount. Dr. Blount, a Professor of Management, was Dean of Undergraduate Studies at New York University’s Stern School of Business for 6 years, where she prioritized and pioneered social impact concepts. Her leadership drove the infusions of social impact concepts across the undergraduate curriculum. In 2010, she became the first female dean at Northwestern’s Kellogg School of Management, and the first of any of the M7 business schools. At Kellogg, Blount again prioritized social impact, and the school now has a robust set of social impact curricular and co-curricular offerings. Multiple participants remarked how Blount strategically leveraged her leadership role as dean to advance social impact at their institutions.

In short, the leadership role of the dean proved to be a crucial factor in facilitating and driving the establishment of social impact centers across all institutions. Deans are an important internal force for social impact centers to thrive.

**Faculty.** Faculty have also been an important force in the emergence of social impact work. Faculty have led social impact efforts at a number of institutions. The majority of faculty leaders described how their interest in social impact was inspired by their students’ overwhelming interest in the space. These faculty explained that students would ask questions in class, request meetings, press for more content, and propose new
courses and opportunities. Faculty leaders responded to the student interest and launched a number of social impact initiatives.

Some of the early faculty leaders who pioneered the space include Greg Dees at Duke University, James Austin and V. Kasturi Rangan at Harvard University, Kirk Hanson at Stanford University, among many others. In some institutions, their key faculty champion has since passed away or moved onto other things. These leadership transitions have proven challenging, in some cases, to sustaining efforts.

At some institutions, seasoned, tenure-lined faculty drove the initiatives, and at others, it was a new and/or junior faculty member. Social Entrepreneurship @UVA program was launched by a new faculty member who described being inspired by proactive student leaders. She explained how the timing, and the fact that she was a brand-new faculty member to UVA, made it possible for her to drive change given she did not have preexisting history or institutional baggage.

Participants also talked about how the faculty leader’s background and departmental location was influential in where and how the centers developed. Faculty rank and social capital mattered. In a few cases, distinguished faculty who were being recruited to other institutions negotiated the ability to launch a new center as part of their recruitment package. Indeed, faculty are key stakeholders in how social impact initiatives develop. However, the data also showed that a number of practitioner participants described how faculty have been apathetic and sometimes even challenging to their work, particularly when students and/or practitioners are driving the change. Practitioner leaders commonly described how one of their key challenges was garnering and fostering
faculty buy-in. However, the practitioner social impact leaders recognized the vital need for increased faculty engagement in their work.

**Presidents and/or provosts.** On several campuses, presidents and/or provosts have led social impact initiatives. Georgetown’s Beeck Center and Santa Clara’s Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship are examples of centers that have senior-level engagement and directly report to a provost. This top-level leadership is typically coupled with high-profile donor support, which signals the visibility and institutional importance of the initiative. Some centers enjoy strong central administrative support and report directly to a provost, while the majority are still housed within a school or college. Executive or senior-level leadership was described as being dependent on their institutional leader’s priorities, personalities, and relationships with significant donors engaged in such efforts.

**External Forces**

In addition to the strong influence of students, market competition, donors, and institutional leadership, external forces outside of the institutions also played an important role. The data showed that influential external forces included particular external organizations, alumni, and current and political events.

**Outside organizations.** Participants talked about several key organizations that sit outside of the academy that were influential in building the field of social impact within higher education. These external organizations included Net Impact (first established in 1993 as “Students for Responsible Business”), Ashoka, and the Skoll Foundation. The Skoll Foundation was instrumental in providing initial seed funding for the first higher education initiatives in social enterprise at elite institutions, such as Duke
and Oxford. Net Impact and Ashoka U, in particular, were described as the entities that educated thousands of students on the concepts of social innovation. Most importantly, however, Net Impact and Ashoka U held conferences around the country that trained students on grassroots strategies and tactics to advance social impact initiatives on college campuses. These external organizations educated students on how to lobby faculty and administrators for social impact courses and opportunities. The participants in this study specifically described how their students would return from Net Impact and/or Ashoka conferences energized and armed with strategies to advance a variety of initiatives that included everything from new student clubs, courses, minors, and experiential activities. One participant described it this way:

So, these students went to Ashoka and they were like, what do we do because we don’t have anything at our university? Ashoka told them to find a faculty champion that can help move the work forward because, ultimately, you’ll graduate and there’s only so much student groups can do. So, this kid shows up and it was my first year at my institution, and this rare student helped start our social entrepreneurship initiative.

Specifically, Net Impact trained and resourced student leaders to start student clubs, and Ashoka U pushed the concept of “change makers” and motivated campuses with their campus awards. The majority of participants specifically mentioned these two groups by name and how they had an influence on their students and the development of social impact on their campus.

**Alumni.** At the elite business schools, alumni played a particularly influential role in establishing the early social impact initiatives. Institutions with robust alumni networks and engagement—such as the Harvard Business School and Penn’s Wharton School of Business—have strong alumni engagement that translated into noticeable alumni influence on the emergence of social impact initiatives. Alumni, in part, advocated to
their alma maters about the importance of offering social impact opportunities and even assisted, in some cases, with developing private and community partnerships. Alumni also were described as influential donors and connectors for projects. At some institutions, alumni with relevant practical experience in social entrepreneurship or impact investing would serve as adjunct professors and teach courses.

However, a distinct pattern in the data showed that participants from non-elite business schools—presumably with less developed alumni networks and less time in operation—did not mention alumni as being important influencers in their development. Alumni did not play a significant role in the emergence and evolution at most institutions outside of elite or Ivy League institutions. Yet, the robust alumni operations and engagement at elite institutions was a source of connections, financial support, and expertise that proved useful in launching social initiatives at these particular institutions.

**Societal events and political influences.** Another key theme that emerged in the data was that external political and societal events influenced many higher education institutions to re-evaluate their missions, role in society, and how they educate future generations. These external political and societal events ultimately were only part of the impetus for action and/or strengthened the narrative to implement social impact initiatives. However, participants talked about a number of key societal events over the past 20 years that elevated the need for broader engagement in social purposes, and that ultimately encouraged their institutional leaders to consider implementing social impact concepts. The most common events described by participants included:

- **2008 Financial Crisis.** The most common societal event mentioned in all of the interviews was the resounding influence that the 2008 financial crisis had
on the conscious of higher education institutions. Participants described how broadly, the financial collapse ignited public concern over traditional business practices and the housing crash’s profound negative impact on the global economy. The interviews revealed that business schools, in particular, began to question their part in the financial crash and their role in educating future business leaders. Matt Segneri, from Harvard’s Social Enterprise Initiative, described it this way:

So, I think the great financial recession definitely had a role to play. There’s something even more foundational, which is that you view your responsibility for the consequences of your actions, whether you as a person, university, company or a government. I think there was some reckoning around being more thoughtful and empathetic about all these things we set off and the effect on the world.

- **The “social issue of the day.”** Participants cited that the contemporary social issues that peak in mainstream news and, particularly in social media—such as environmental degradation, the refugee crisis, immigration, etc.—influence conversations, spark interest, and provide momentum for their institutions to adopt social impact initiatives that address specific, thematic issue areas.

- **Obama White House and Social Innovation Fund:** The Obama White House’s focus on social innovation and the Corporation for National and Community Service’s Social Innovation Fund provided funding for projects and research specific to evidence-based policy, performance, and innovation, and social impact bonds provided federal funding that spurred the creation of several centers.
• **2016 Presidential Election**: A few centers described how the heightened focus on the 2016 presidential election brought renewed interest and focus on their center prior, during, and after the 2016 president elections.

• **2006 Nobel Peace Prize**. Several participants described how the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize given to social entrepreneur Mohammad Yunus for his work in microfinance increased public awareness of the abilities of the traditional triad of the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to address the world’s most vulnerable populations and pressing issues. Participants described this event as raising awareness and positively impacting their ability to gain institutional traction with social impact efforts.

**Culture and Context**

_Institutional culture and context_. The data also demonstrated that the institutional culture and context shape the development and focus of the social impact centers. As framed in Tierney’s (1998) seminal piece on organization culture in higher education, key dimensions of institutional culture such as mission, environment, socialization, strategy, and leadership influence change in academic settings—specifically in this case, the development of social impact centers. Participants described how their institution’s history, mission, pedagogical approach, and strengths impacted the emergence and development of their social impact center. One participant described how his organizational home—a professional school—had dramatically shifted its mission towards revenue generation, which ultimately forced his center to change their model to align with the school’s singular focus on revenue generation.
Institutional mission and historical context. Participants talked about how their broader institutional mission mattered, particularly for public institutions. For example, the leader from UC Berkeley explained that their broader institution, as well as the Haas School of Business, has a long history of social justice and a strong public-facing mission where faculty take seriously their belief that education changes people’s lives for the better. The University of Utah leader talked about being at a public institution and how it drives the center’s mission to address issues that impact the most vulnerable populations. Some participants described their institutions as having a strong history of student activism, which naturally supported the advancement of social impact work at their campus.

The Jesuit institutions interviewed in this study—Santa Clara and Georgetown—described how their Jesuit roots and institutional mission including a deep culture of altruism, values, and doing good strengthens their own work. Dr. Thane Kreiner said, “The good thing about working at a Jesuit university is that everyone’s aligned to the same mission of creating a more just, humane and sustainable world. The Jesuits are very much about social justice.” Many participants also referred to building on the historical legacies of coursework and programming in areas such as nonprofit or public management, business and society, and microfinance. They described them as foundational to their development and the forms they currently take. The data clearly demonstrated that institutional missions and history matter.

Centers adopt culture, language, and strengths of their institutions. Participants explained that their initiatives were largely influenced by the culture, language, and strengths of their institutions. The Yale School of Management leader, for
example, described how the founding vision of the school was to not be another business school. Rather, they chose to focus on the intersections of public, private, and nonprofit management, and to train students on the skillsets needed as a manager, regardless of sector. He described how this tight connection between business and society carried through to their development of courses and social impact work. Dr. Robert Gertner, from the University of Chicago’s Rustandy Center for Social Innovation, aptly said, “We built something that was very consistent with Booth culture, a specific way to look at world and a value system.” The leader from the Center for the Advancement of Social Enterprise (CASE) at Duke’s Fuqua Business School emphasized that they are not a typical Wall Street business school and are rather more focused around consulting skills that are compatible with the sectors and ideas of social innovation and entrepreneurship. Similarly, Colorado University at Boulder’s leader stressed that since his institution had the oldest sustainability and environment center in the country, this translated to his social impact and corporate social responsibility work.

Further, the importance of building upon existing institutional strengths and leveraging these assets was a clear pattern in the data. For example, the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business described how their longstanding tradition in finance influenced their Social Impact Initiative to hone in on impact investing as a key strategy to leverage their assets and strengths in this area. A number of institutions talked about having strong programs in entrepreneurship—and they naturally gravitated to launching social entrepreneurship to supplement existing entrepreneurship programs. Other institutions, such as Brown University and Indiana University, have a long history of civic engagement and community service, which partly influenced their leaders to
wrap social innovation initiatives under existing established centers. Clearly, the history and culture of the institution plays an important role in how the respective centers emerge and evolve.

**Pedagogical approach.** The data also revealed that institution’s pedagogical approach was also an influencer. Participants talked about their institution’s focus on applied learning and connecting students to real world experience as being useful in developing social innovation curriculum. Others talked about how their open curriculum and student-guided approach to learning facilitated the rapid adoption of social impact initiatives. At American University’s Social Enterprise program, based out of the School of International Service, one leader explained that their school’s globally focused, multicultural nature facilitated the receptivity to adopting applied learning from the field. He said the program took advantage of the freedom to rethink the social entrepreneurship education from the ground up and gave strong focus to identity-formation and knowledge and skill acquisition. To summarize, the unique cultural and historical features of the institution shape how and what forms the curriculum, and co-curriculum develop to serve their particular stakeholders and environment.

**City, state, and regional context.** The data showed that social impact centers are naturally influenced by their surrounding city, state, and regional contexts. Participants described how their universities have their own institutional history and culture that is shaped by the demographics, economic, and environmental attributes of their surrounding city. For example, the social impact initiatives in New York City described how they are exposed to large refugee populations, which has spurred the implementation of programs focused on this area. Whereas, in Colorado, Colorado University in Boulder has a history
steeped in sustainability and environmental issues, which has influenced their center to have a strong sustainability focus. In Utah, for example, there has been sustained state-wide efforts to address pre-K, homelessness, and recidivism through social impact bonds, and this spurred the launch of a social impact center at the state’s flagship institution—the University of Utah. Georgetown’s Beeck Center geographic location in Washington, D.C., shaped their focus on the intersection of policy and government in social impact.

Whereas in Silicon Valley, Santa Clara has tapped into their vast network of Silicon Valley executives and entrepreneurs to support their social entrepreneurship program. Austin, Texas, on the other hand, has a substantive grassroots culture and boasts more than 6,000 nonprofits, which the UT Austin faculty member described as largely supportive of the launch of their social innovation efforts. Broadly, participants described implementing purposeful strategies to connect with and leverage the strengths and assets of their local communities, such as entrepreneurs or nonprofits. The data showed that center’s surrounding city, state, and regional context influences, impacts, and shapes their center’s development.

**Evolution of Social Impact Centers**

**Evolution Within Institutions: 4 Paths**

In examining the development of university-based social impact centers, the data showed that institutions typically followed one of four paths in how they emerged and evolved over time. While the social impact centers varied in how they developed, the most common path for 23 of the 38 centers was for institutions to launch and develop a completely new organizational unit—a center, initiative, or program focused on social impact. Eight of the 38 centers developed from existing courses—such as nonprofit
management, business ethics, business and society, and public management—and were mainly located in the business schools. Participants described formalizing and repackaging their disparate courses into new programs and opportunities. The least likely paths were for institutions to embed social impact initiatives into existing organizational units or to create new umbrella, coordinating entities. Four of the institutions embedded the new social impact initiative into an existing center that was focused broadly on civic engagement and/or entrepreneurship. Only two institutions have created a new centralizing or coordinating entity to house a handful of socially-oriented initiatives with the goal of centralizing efforts, gaining efficiency, and better serving the students. Figure 7 illustrates the percentage of social impact centers that fall into each of the four evolutionary paths. Next are descriptions of the four evolutionary paths of social impact centers within their institution:

1. **Create new initiative or center.** Of the 38 centers interviewed, 23 centers described themselves as being a new organizational unit—a center, initiatives or program. Centers in this category were built from scratch and developed new curriculum, co-curriculum, and other social impact opportunities. For some centers, they may have had one course or a student club, but they essentially created a completely new center and programming. Sometimes there was a blurry line between what was classified as a completely new center and what is considered as a center that developed from existing course(s).

2. **Evolve from existing courses.** Eight of the 38 centers interviewed described their development as an evolution from an existing course, program, and/or a student
club. These participants explained a process where they built upon existing courses and/or brought together disparate courses and programming to formalize them all into one organized social impact effort. Commonly, a donor, dean, and/or new financial support spurred this action. Others described the genesis for the creation of a more formalized unit as the need for administrative support to promote the experiential nature of social impact-related courses that had clients, projects, and funds—unlike traditional academic courses. Participants described that their social impact center evolved from existing curriculum and co-curriculum in the following areas:

1. Nonprofit or public management (mostly in business schools);
2. Entrepreneurship and then added in social entrepreneurship;
3. Microfinance or socially responsible investing;
4. Business ethics, society, and/or sustainability; and,
5. Civic engagement and leadership.

3. **Embed into existing center.** Four of the centers described using the strategy of “embedding” their social impact initiatives into an existing organizational unit where there was institutional history and strength. This path was more common at smaller, less-resourced institutions as opposed to larger, more well-resourced institutions. It also
occurred at institutions that had a legacy in a particular area like civic engagement or service learning. For example, Brown University embedded their social innovation initiative into the Swearer Center, which is an established community and civic engagement unit. Middlebury College had a Center for Social Entrepreneurship and after three years, they folded it into a larger center and called it the Center for Creativity, Innovation, and Social Entrepreneurship. These institutions described strategically “embedding” their social innovation efforts under an existing organization unit in order to eliminate inefficiencies and cut down on administrative expenses at a time of financial pressure.

4. Create new centralizing/coordinating unit. Two participants, from UC Berkeley and North Central College, shared how they created a completely new umbrella or coordinating unit to streamline diffuse efforts, encourage more collaboration, and to improve outreach and communication of their work to students and community. For example, the University of California, Berkeley, recently created the Institute for Business and Social Impact, which now houses five centers and programs focused on the social sector in the specific areas of socially responsible business, global social venture competition, health management, and gender equity and leadership. The impetus for creating this umbrella structure was described as the need to organize and better communicate to students and researchers the various initiatives occurring within the Haas Business School. North Central College also created a new centralizing campus hub called the Center for Social Impact, which brought together social innovation and social entrepreneurship with civic engagement, service learning, social justice, and sustainability with the intent to transform the student experience and deepen community
relationships. They purposefully integrated the social innovation initiative into the stronger, more established service learning and civic engagement areas.

Figure 8 models out the four paths of how the social impact centers have evolved at U.S. higher education institutions. The $X$ axis represents the spectrum of existing to new. On the existing side, centers evolved from existing courses or were embedded into existing organizational units. On the other new side, institutions created new centers or new centralizing, coordinating units. The $Y$ axis represents the independent to coordinating unit continuum. The data demonstrated that centers either exists as independent units or are strategically part of a larger centralizing, coordinating unit.

**Current Institutional Trends and Engagement**

**Centers Primarily Do Five Things**

Building upon the framework in the Oxford Skoll Foundation (2017) report, which breaks social impact center activity into four categories, the data in this study demonstrated that social impact centers primarily do five things:

1. Develop the next generation of social impact leaders;
2. Engage the wider student body, campus, industry, and community;
3. Facilitate cross-sector projects and capital;
4. Convene cross-sector audiences to support learning and innovation; and
5. Generate actionable insights for practitioners.

While the majority of the centers do the five prior activities, there is a wide variation in the types of activities and programs. Centers also serve a wide range of audiences that include students, faculty, staff, campus community, alumni, industry, and the broader community. These audiences typically engage with the centers in varying
levels from deep engagement to broader educational and networking opportunities.

Figure 9 illustrates the wide range of social impact center activities, curriculum, co-

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**Figure 8.** Model of the four emergent and evolutionary paths of social impact centers.

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**Figure 9.** Social impact center activities framed in levels of engagement and audience.
curriculum, and programs and frames them in terms of *levels of engagement* and *audience*. The X axis represents the *audience*, which ranges from the core students who are deeply engaged and committed to the broader student body and campus community, alumni, industry, and community members. The Y axis represents the *levels of engagement*, which range from deeply committed, time-intensive engagement to broader, more limited levels of engagement.

That data demonstrated that social impact centers typically do not do all of the activities and programs listed in Figure 9, rather they engage in some and not in others. Much of the programs and engagement is influenced heavily by the center’s leadership, funding, and mission. The majority of participants described their desire to do more projects and/or research, but felt constrained by limited financial and personnel resources.

In addition to the wide range of center activities, different audiences, and levels of engagement, there has been a marked development in the development of minors, specializations, and certificates in the space. This finding demonstrates increased institutional and academic recognition of the broad interest and growth in the social innovation and impact space.

**Degrees and Specializations**

There has been a proliferation of institutions developing minors, certificates, and concentrations in social entrepreneurship and social impact across the graduate and undergraduate curriculum. What started in elite graduate business schools has now expanded across and down the curriculum.
**Master’s degree.** American University now offers a Master of Arts in Social Enterprise through their School of International Service. While there are only a few institutions that offer a full degree in social entrepreneurship and/or a related field, this could be an area where there is additional growth and opportunity.

**Minors and certificates.** There are more than a dozen institutions that offer minors and/or certificates in social innovation, impact, or entrepreneurship. Many of these degrees are interdisciplinary and span across the business, social science, design, and policy schools. Minors and certificates in social impact, social entrepreneurship, and social innovation are offered both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Examples of these minors and/or certificates are at NYU’s Wagner School of Public Service in conjunction with NYU’s Stern Business School, UVA Social Entrepreneurship, Northeastern’s Social Enterprise Institute’s interdisciplinary minor in global social entrepreneurship, and Tulane’s minor in social innovation and social entrepreneurship. Further, the data showed there are increasingly institutions that offer minors and/or certificates in entrepreneurship and/or innovation that develop a subset or specialization with a social orientation.

**Concentrations/specializations/pathway/emphasis.** There has been the most significant growth in the creation of concentrations, specializations, pathways, and emphasis tracks in social entrepreneurship, social innovation, and social impact in both graduate level programs (MBA, EMBA, communications, international relations), as well as undergraduate programs (e.g., Stanford GSB’s Certificate in Public Management and Social Innovation, CU Boulder’s Certificates in Corporate Social Responsibility & Socially Responsible Enterprise Certificate, University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton
School’s secondary concentration in social impact and responsibility). For institutions who have or are implementing cross-campus minors in entrepreneurship, there is often a specialization or concentration in social entrepreneurship. Institutions create specializations in social impact in order to answer student demand and interest.

**Designation or recognition.** A few institutions have developed a graduation designation to reward and recognize a student’s efforts in social impact work. Other have developed a “recognition,” which is more informal but also recognizes student’s work in the space and is attractive to students so they can build their resumes, enhance professional development, and opportunities for post-graduation.

**Curriculum**

A scan of the curricular offerings associated with the social impact centers revealed there has been significant growth in the number of courses developed and offered since the early phase of this movement in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. There have been observable and purposeful efforts in the institutions examined in this study to develop content and curriculum around social entrepreneurship, social impact, and innovation. There are now hundreds of graduate and undergraduate social impact courses offered at institutions across the United States. There are a range of required core courses and elective courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels that focus on equipping students with the knowledge to become “change makers” and agents for positive social change through the use of business tools, market forces, finance, and innovation. The data demonstrated there are three types of courses—*broad, deep,* and *experiential.* Many of these courses are multi- or interdisciplinary in nature and reach into domain areas such as international development, environment, education, policy, and
The courses provide multiple entries or approaches to social impact such as social entrepreneurship, nonprofit management/leadership, public policy/government, impact investing, and corporate social responsibility.

**Broad courses.** Broad courses provide students with the foundational principles and a broad conceptual basis of social impact. These *broad courses* are taught at the undergraduate and graduate levels and are designed to provide students with context-building knowledge. Graduate-level courses are taught not only in MBA programs, but also in public policy, communications, professional studies, and international affairs programs. Some examples of these broad courses include course titles such as: Business and Society, Social Impact, Catalyzing Social Impact, Social Innovation, Social Enterprise, Innovation for Social Change, Social Responsibility of Business in an Age of Inequality, etc.

**Deep courses.** Institutions also increasingly offer advanced-level courses, categorized in this study as *deep courses*. These deep courses are more specialized in nature and encourage the students to dive deeper into certain content areas to master the frameworks and knowledge needed to drive sustainable positive social change. Some examples of these deeper courses include: Advanced Social Entrepreneurship; Microfinance, ESG & Impact Investing; Impact Investing; How to Change the World: Advocacy Movements and Social Innovation; Social Enterprise and Economic Development; Sustainable Business and the New Economy; Innovative Financial Management for Public, Nonprofit, and Health Organizations; Corporate Social Innovation; and Public and Social Sector Innovation.
**Experiential or engagement courses.** Most institutions also offer experiential courses for academic credit that include an applied learning component and engage students in a variety of opportunities ranging from a capstone course, incubator experience, consulting practicum, and/or an internship experience. The participants interviewed in this study explained they give strategic priority and emphasis to providing students with experiential opportunities to learn about the space, seeing them as more effective learning experiences. Participants described the need to prepare “action-oriented doers” with the practical skills to create, organize, manage, lead, and resource social ventures. The participants overwhelmingly explained that students need to be out in the world doing “hands-on work” and solving for-real problems, especially given the pace at which things are happening and need to change. The data clearly demonstrated that the social impact curriculum has a heavy focus on providing experiential learning opportunities.

**A unique curricular approach: infuse across undergraduate business curriculum.** Instead of providing an array of elective courses, NYU’s Stern School of Business has infused social impact across the four required, foundational courses. All freshmen have to take the Business and Its Publics course, which is a combination of small group discussion sections and lectures to provide students with an understanding of the interconnections between business, markets, society, politics, culture, and art. Sophomores are required to take Organizational Communications and Its Social Context, which teaches the social processes of persuasion and influence. Juniors then take Law, Business, & Society that examines the role of commerce and law and how they shape policy, government, and business. Finally, seniors finish the social impact
sequence with the course titled Professional Responsibility. While most institutions create independent courses, minors, and specializations, some of the participants said they feel like it is more effective to infuse social impact concepts across the curriculum, instead of placing it in a silo, like a minor or concentration.

**Executive education courses.** A limited number of centers have noncredit bearing executive education courses that educate and train leaders of social enterprises, nonprofits, socially responsible businesses, foundations, and government officials on a multitude of social impact concepts and strategies. The executive education courses serve as another bridge from the university into various organizations and communities seeking to improve social and economic conditions. Examples of programs include the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Social Impact Strategy’s Executive Certificate in Social Impact Strategy and Duke’s CASE SEAD program for social entrepreneurs. Due to looming funding shortages, some centers reported that they are investing more heavily into the development of additional executive education courses to enhance community outreach, but to also generate additional, needed revenue. In addition to academic courses, social impact centers focus on the co-curriculum which is covered in the next section.

**Co-Curriculum: Serving Students and the Broader Community**

All of the social impact centers provide students with opportunities to engage in social impact outside of the traditional academic curriculum. Centers employ a wide range of co-curricular offerings and activities to engage their core students, the wider campus, community, and industry in social impact. The co-curriculum opportunities range from broad social gatherings or attending a lecture to deeper engagement in a
semester-long consulting opportunity, or leadership in a student club. These opportunities are offered to students to engage both on- and off-campus with social ventures such as nonprofits, mission-driven business, community organizations, and government entities. Many centers also open up their co-curricular opportunities to alumni and industry and community partners. The data showed that centers intentionally engage with off-campus entities to enhance the student-focused mission and to build the field of social impact.

The following list demonstrates the wide range of co-curricular opportunities offered at the social impact centers. However, it is important to note that not all centers offer all of these opportunities, and this list is designed to offer a broad perspective of center co-curriculum:

- Experiential Courses
- Internships & Practicums
- Student Clubs & Leadership Opportunities
- Field Experiences
- Fellowships
- Academic Scholarships
- Grants & Seed Capital
- Competitions & Hackathons
- Incubators & Innovation Labs
- Student-Led Venture Funds
- Mentoring & Career Development
- Workshops
- Forums & Convenings

A strong theme that surfaced in the interviews was participants’ purposeful focus on providing students with experiential opportunities to prepare them for future work. Participants explained that they felt the need to educate and train graduates who will go into the world and be able to interact across multiple sectors, leverage markets for social good, and to make a positive influence. Participants also described the specific need to prepare “employable” students to follow a multitude of paths to either create a new
venture, contribute to an existing social enterprise, and/or to transform existing organizations and systems. Broadly, all of the centers coalesce around the notion that experiential learning opportunities are imperative to provide students with the knowledge and cross-sector skills to engage effectively in positive social impact work.

Community Engagement

University-based social impact centers have a strong, developed sense of public service and expressed feeling the responsibility and desire to solve pressing social challenges. While the engagement with their respective communities takes different forms, and focuses on different populations and domains, the programs are all designed with the overarching goal to address social problems. Social impact centers are microcosms of community engagement situated within their larger higher education institutions. They employ strategies and launch initiatives that engage the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. They facilitate student and social venture engagement, convene key stakeholders across a multitude of sectors, and create programs that better the social and economic conditions in their communities. Drawing from Axelroth and Dubb’s (2010) typology of university anchor institutions roles, this study frames social impact centers’ community engagement efforts in two prominent roles—facilitator and convener.

Facilitator. Social impact centers facilitate connections for their local communities to student talent, expert mentoring, sponsors, capital, networks, and media attention. In particular, the centers serve a unique role of facilitating connections between the social ventures and the undergraduate and graduate students. Wharton’s Social Impact Initiative, for example, focuses in these important industry connections with their
students and alumni. Examples of these partnerships are structured through experiential courses, consulting practicums, field experiences, and internships. Nearly every center interviewed had one or more courses that engaged community and industry folks. The students serve in a variety of roles from sitting on nonprofit boards, providing faculty-guided consulting, and working on special projects. The social ventures are able to benefit from students’ skills, time, and energy. For many of the early stage or resource-constrained social ventures, the students can provide the organizations with much-needed administrative support, staff hours, and specialized website, IT, marketing, and social media skills.

However, developing mutually beneficial partnerships are key to ensuring both the organizations, and students benefit from the arrangement. Other centers facilitate incubators and mentoring for social entrepreneurs, such as Santa Clara’s Miller Center, with experienced executives and entrepreneurs who seek out opportunities to give back to the social impact space. Many centers provide mentoring and career development for students, which also prompts informal facilitation of job placements between organizations and alumni.

Some centers, such as Columbia’s Tamer Center, work to fill the gap in funding by directly funding students and practitioners through scholarships, fellowships, grants, or seed capital. They also facilitate connecting capital with projects. Some centers, like Columbia’s Tamer Center and Northwestern’s Kellogg for Social Impact, provide seed capital for social ventures that are run by students, alumni, and/or local community members, which is awarded in competitions and hackathons. Some centers specifically work on bridging the gap between funders and social impact projects in both domestic
and global settings. These financial investments into burgeoning social ventures connect universities with their local and global communities in meaningful ways. A number of centers engage in global development work—such as American University’s Social Enterprise Program, University of Utah’s Sorenson Impact Center, and Emory’s Social Enterprise @ Goizueta—by providing seed capital to early-stage social ventures, and in some cases, technical assistance and training. These centers work with either impact investors who are investing in early stage, or with entrepreneurs to build capacity and potentially connect them with investors and capital sources.

Some centers have a physical presence in their downtown or surrounding community. These shared workspaces, described by Columbia’s Tamer Center, act as hubs for social ventures and students to gather, network, brainstorm, and to work. Other centers, like North Central College’s Center for Social Impact, are positioned in strategic locations between the campus and community to demonstrate a bridge to the community—essentially serving in a “town and gown” function. Some of the centers described how they collaborate with their local impact hubs, incubators, foundations, and other place-based organizations. Participants explicitly expressed the importance of engaging with these local entities as a key dimension of their mission.

**Convener.** Social impact centers also act as conveners and demonstrate a unique ability to convene and work across multiple sectors. Centers play important convening roles by engaging social ventures, firms, foundations, funders, and policymakers. Examples of this include Santa Clara’s Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship’s GSBI accelerator program for social entrepreneurs at the margins, as well as Duke University’s CASE’s Scaling Pathways program, which brought together international development
agencies, private foundations, and social entrepreneurs to unlock capital and system-level change.

Many of the centers also convene gatherings that range from informal meet ups and socials to more formal speaker series, seminars, and large conferences. The University of Utah, for example, has put on a Winter Innovation Summit for the past five years which gathered more than 700 industry, nonprofit, funds, and academics from across the world. Many of the more established centers also put on business plan competitions and hackathons, such as Northwestern’s Kellogg-Morgan Stanley Sustainable Investing Challenge. More centers are starting to hold trainings and innovation labs designed for multisector groups through executive education courses and seminars. Centers provide workshops to social ventures so they can gather diverse ideas through group brainstorming to help them address specific problems or questions within their social venture. The plethora of convenings in the space bring together social entrepreneurs, alumni, and community leaders on college campuses, so centers can share their knowledge and approaches to effective social impact.

Specific to work in the social impact bond space, several universities—namely the University of Utah and Harvard University—act as objective, convening entities by bringing together city, county, and state governments, as well as nonprofits and funders for Pay for Success projects. Participants talked about providing training to implementers and policymakers on how to become better producers and users of evidence from impact evaluations. The interview and secondary data demonstrated that centers engage with their respective communities in a variety of ways and they act as facilitators, conveners, and funders.
Research

Most of the centers are more focused on student-centric curriculum and co-curriculum, rather than on robust research agendas. Some participants described the difficulty to both serve students and to engage in rigorous research, due to resource and time constraints. However, there are a handful of centers who refer to themselves specifically as “research centers” and/or have adopted research-focused missions. Wharton’s Social Impact Initiative (SII), for example, has narrowed their strategy to prioritize and focus on rigorous academic research to build a deeper understanding in the impact investing space. Wharton SII is building a large data base of primary documents and data to rigorously measure the returns on impact investments across the globe. Further, Emory University has a $2.3 million Global Accelerator Learning Initiative that is linked to their longitudinal Entrepreneurship Database Program that tracks global accelerator programs and entrepreneurs to study the effectiveness of acceleration in early-stage ventures. In 2015, Duke’s CASE i3 launched the CASE Impact Investing Research Group via a LinkedIn group, which seeks to facilitate high quality research, data, and knowledge surrounding the emerging field of impact investing, across geographical, domain, and other boundaries. Georgetown’s Beeck Center has also produced a number of white papers, policy, and research reports designed to advance knowledge in the social impact space.

Naturally, the centers with a heavier research focus were typically located at more research-intense and well-resourced institutions, such as Universities of Chicago, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, as well as Yale and Harvard. A select number of centers have small research grants to incentivize and facilitate faculty research. However, much of the
research produced out of the centers is geared toward practitioner outlets, such as the Stanford Social Innovation Review, as opposed to more traditional academic journals. And, given research agendas are largely faculty-driven and that the number of engaged tenure-line faculty is still broadly limited across all institutions, it is not surprising there is a dearth of academic research in this field. Participants overwhelmingly pointed to the fact that the space needs more data-driven, rigorous research to flesh out concepts and frameworks, and to gain academic legitimacy. When asked about future goals and strategies, many of the social impact center leaders highlighted their intention to enhance their focus on research and to engage additional tenure-line faculty to advance social impact research.

**Unique Models and Engagements**

In addition to the typical student-focused social impact center, there are several other types of center models and engagements that are unique to the space. There are several universities involved with emerging work in the social impact bond space, as well as other universities who have launched student-led funds from within the university, or have a deep engagement in a specific area, such as Duke’s Scaling Pathways program. An examination of the space revealed that in addition to the typical cadre of programs, there are several unique models to discuss.

**Deep community-industry engagements.** In addition to the typical curricular and co-curricular offerings at social impact centers, some institutions have externally-funded *deep engagements*. Duke University’s Center for the Advancement of Social Enterprise has a $12 million grant from USAID, in collaboration with the Skoll Foundation, that created Innovation Investment Alliance (IIA). IIA, through the program
Scaling Pathways, has invested $50 million on eight transformative social enterprises. Duke’s CASE played the pivotal role in developing curriculum and training social entrepreneurs from across the globe to scale their impact. Duke’s Scaling Pathways is a global partnership that deeply engaged the public, private, and nonprofit sectors by collaboratively investing in and training social enterprises to scale their impact.

**Universities engaged in Pay for Success.** Similar to Duke’s federally-funded social entrepreneurship program, two universities are involved in social impact bond work. Harvard University and the University of Utah are deeply engaged in social impact bonds, known in the United States as “Pay for Success,” or PFS, through large federal grants from President Obama’s Social Innovation Fund, run through the Corporation for National and Community Service. In examining the broad landscape of Pay for Success work as part of this study, it is estimated that universities have been involved with more than 100 PFS projects at various stages of development, feasibility, structuring, implementation, and evaluation. The PFS model was founded in the United Kingdom in 2010, and has since spread to the United States in 2012. Social impact bonds are defined as innovative financing mechanisms in which governments enter into agreements with social service providers, such as nonprofits and investors, to fund the delivery of predefined social outcomes (Social Finance, 2011). PFS contracting has been used to test innovative models of social service delivery and to scale up effective interventions and programs (Nonprofit Finance Fund, 2017).

PFS projects typically require multiple organizations across the government, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors, and universities—like Harvard and Utah—currently serve in “intermediary” roles assisting with feasibility, structuring, project management,
and evaluation roles to facilitate these complex projects. The University of Virginia also recently launched a Pay for Success Lab within their Social Enterprise program. Other universities, as listed in Figure 9, have also been involved in select parts of PFS project, mainly serving in the critical role as objective evaluators.

Universities are uniquely situated to serve in the evaluator role due to their research expertise and objectivity—which is a key role in the PFS model—given the financial pay back is structured around successfully hitting predetermined outcomes. The federal funding for the Social Innovation Fund, which funds the intermediaries in Pay for Success Project, has been cut and the future funding is unclear. However, in February of 2018, Congress passed the Social Impact Partnerships to Pay for Results Act (SIPPRA), bipartisan legislation which creates a $100-million federal fund to support outcomes for vulnerable populations created through social impact partnerships or PFS projects. Yet, given the federal funding is waning, the centers engaged in PFS work are currently exploring alternative models and strategies for sustainability around government innovation and performance. Figure 10 provides a matrix of universities engaged in PFS work and the number of projects, roles, and issue areas.

**Student-run funds.** Another unique program or model in the university-based social impact space are student-run funds. Several dozen universities have student-run funds that have launched between the early 2000s to present. These student-led funds often employ different impact theses and focus on different stages of capital, geographic regions, and domains. But they commonly seek to engage students in the sourcing and due diligence of social ventures from early-stage, venture, equity, and debt. These
Figure 10. Universities involved in Pay for Success Projects. Note: This list is not intended to be all encompassing, rather an example of the institutions and types of projects and issue areas.

Student-run funds vary in size from small funds of $150,000 up to multimillion dollar funds. Typically, the funds engage 20 to 50 students in a given semester or year. They often require setting up separate legal entities outside of the university and commonly run into challenges with university policy and bureaucracy. Many of the universities set up separate 501(c)3s to run and manage the fund, while some run it through the university endowments or separate portfolio management firms. Appendix D provides a list of the 22 universities and colleges that have student-run funds. This list is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather a snapshot at the space. Nicole Harmon with the Intentional Endowments Network provided the list. This list reveals there are handful of universities—Columbia, NYU, UVA, and the University of Utah—that have multiple student-centric funds operating within the single institution. However, most higher
education institutions only have one fund and the size, structure, management, and focus varies.

Participants involved with student-led funds described how investors have become increasingly wary of student-run funds that lack professional supervision, and in response there are more student-led funds with professional management that only engage students in certain stages. Once participant explained how they now describe their fund as “student-centric” (rather than student-led or student-run) to ease investor concern, and yet still stay within the confines of the university student-focused mission. Some participants described how they had explored setting up a fund, but after talking to universities who had funds, they decided the time and energy was not worth the hassle to set up a fund. These funds were perceived by participants as being difficult to set up in a university bureaucratic environment.

Cross-Institutional Trends

Social impact centers are now located across the United States. The geographic data demonstrate a heavy concentration of the centers on the East and West Coasts, with a limited number of centers in other parts of the country. Initially, the centers emerged on the East and West Coasts, and the newer centers have developed inside and outside of those coastal areas in the South, West, and Midwest regions. However, there are still far more centers on the East Coast than the rest of the country. Appendix E includes 3 maps which illustrate the geographic locations of 49 social impact centers across the United States, as well as close-up views of the East and West Coasts, where the centers are concentrated.
Mostly Located at Private Institutions

Of the 49 social impact centers examined—38 through interviews and the additional 11 through secondary sources—the majority of centers are located at private higher education institutions. Thirty-four of the centers (70%) are located at private institutions versus only 15 located at public institutions (30%). While the social impact phenomenon has mostly been a private-institution trend, the data does show an increasing number of public institutions are starting social impact initiatives. The 70%-30% ratio of social impact centers at private versus public institutions illustrates there is likely disproportionate access to courses and programming for students from lower socioeconomic statuses. This data demonstrates that students who do not have the resources to attend more expensive private institutions may have less access to social impact opportunities. This finding piques questions about diversity, access, and the lack of engaging students from lower socioeconomic, geographic, and diverse racial perspectives in social impact work. Figure 11 illustrates the geographical locations of the 49 social impact centers and what type of institutional they reside within.

Moving Cross-Campus: Organizational Location Within Institutions

Social impact centers are now located in various schools, colleges, departments, and administrative units across college campuses. The majority of centers are still located in business schools (49%); however, there are now a growing number of centers housed in central administrative units (24%) and public policy schools (22%). There are 18 centers located in business schools and nine centers located in central administrative units such as a provost’s office, academic affairs, student affairs, or undergraduate studies. Some of these centrally located centers have direct reports to the provost or were
initiatives embedded into existing civic engagement centers that serve the campus-wide
community. Additionally, there are eight centers located in public policy schools and
several located in other professional schools. Figure 12 illustrates the percentage of
centers and where they are organizationally located within their institution.

The development of social impact centers in both central administration and
public policy schools is a noteworthy evolution. The fact that senior leaders—such as
provosts—in academic and student affairs offices have social impact centers directly
reporting to them illustrates they have become an institutional priority and align with and
enhance institutional goals and priorities. For public policy schools, social impact courses
and specializations have become an innovative approach to public policy schools, which
was described by participants as a way to assist them with student recruitment. A notable
example of the expansion of the social impact space to public policy schools is at NYU’s
Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. Executive Director Scott Taitel explained
how the addition of the specialization was the first in 10 years at Wagner and showed the real commitment of his institution. He described how his initial social impact investment course was so heavily oversubscribed that they realized there was a logical path to offering a broader social impact curriculum. They did a soft launch of the specialization in fall 2016 with 28 students, and in fall 2017, they admitted over 118 students, which demonstrated rapid growth in the first year.

More broadly, participants who led social impact centers in a public policy school described how their students want to understand the intersection of public and private spheres. These public policy schools are incorporating innovative financing and social impact approaches into their curricula, which one participant described as the trend to blend interdisciplinary approaches to attract those students who want both a Masters of Business Administration and Masters of Public Administration. Scott Taitel, Executive Director of NYU’s Wagner Graduate School of Public Service specialization in social impact, innovation, and investment, aptly described the trend this way:
I think there’s a very big force of professionals, students, and prospective students who struggle between this MBA versus MPA world, particularly those that are most passionate about social impact. I don’t think they necessarily see themselves as “a typical MPA person” or a business person. . . . I think there’s been very few outlets for these types of people in the past.

In addition to the clear expansion of social impact cross-campus, participants also described how their organizational structure and location matters.

**Organizational location matters.** Participants explained that the organizational location and reporting lines of their center mattered and impacted their work. They said the organizational location influenced how they operate, who they serve, and how they are funded. Participants who run centers outside of a business school in a central unit explained there are both advantages and disadvantages to being located in a campus-wide unit. The advantages included their ability to reach a broader audience of students, alumni, and faculty, and their ability to engage central development in their fundraising efforts. However, the centrally located units are challenged by not having their own set of students and designated faculty. Dr. Thane Kreiner, Executive Director of Santa Clara’s Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship, explained:

I think one of the benefits that we have is that we’re not part of a school, and social entrepreneurship, almost by definition, can engage students from any school. Being independent of the school, has the advantage that we can be many things to many different students in many different disciplines. The downside is we don’t have any of our own students and we don’t get any tuition remission.

The leaders located within specific schools described that they are successful in serving and engaging students within their schools, but have ambitions to engage a broader audience on their campus. However, their organizational home often limits their ability to engage the broader campus community. Ultimately, the organizational location
of a social impact center matters and impacts their ability to gain traction with certain stakeholder groups.

**Institutions have multiple social impact initiatives.** The momentum of the university-based social impact space has developed such that individual institutions now have multiple social impact initiatives on their individual campuses. Individual institutions have multiple initiatives that are housed in different schools, colleges, departments, and administrative units. This trend demonstrates the immense growth and student demand in the space. This study included interviews with six institutions that had more than one social impact initiative on their campus. The institutions with multiple social impact centers or initiatives include: Harvard University, Georgetown University, Columbia University, New York University, Stanford University, and the University of Pennsylvania. All of these institutions were early adopters in the social impact space and are well-resourced with large endowments and higher tuition prices compared to other public and smaller institutions. There may be other institutions with multiple social impact initiatives not included in the sample of this study. The fact that some institutions now have multiple social impact initiatives or centers on their campus is a significant evolution of the space that demonstrates significant growth both within and across institutions.

**Center Names: Organizational Terms, Titles, and Focus**

An analysis of the 49 center names revealed there are a variety of terms used to describe both their focus and organizational type. This section presents the organizational terms and names centers use, which typically express their size, funding, scope, and
focus. The most common organizational term used by the various centers is *center*, and the most prominent organizational name used to describe their focus is *social impact*.

**Organizational terms.** Higher education institutions have varying rules and traditions with the naming of programs, initiatives, centers, and institutes. The naming conventions for these units are mostly dependent upon the level of funding that supports the respective effort and the perceived sustainability of such effort. The scale of the work, as well as the politics, longevity, and formality, can also influence which term is used. While there is some uniformity in naming conventions within certain institutional types, there is a lack of commonality across publics and privates and large to small institutions.

While the term center was used in this study to encompass the broad range of social impact initiatives, programs, labs, institutes, and centers, the study examined what organization term the social impact groups used in their official name and what they use to officially describe themselves or externally to talk about and promote their work. An examination of the 49 centers revealed the most common organizational term used for the social impact phenomenon is “center.” The majority—25 of the 49 centers or 51%—used the term center and all have brick and mortar offices where they house staff, faculty, and/or student workers. The next most common term used was “initiative” (12%), and then there were a handful of centers that used the terms lab, program, institute, specialization, or some combination. Figure 13 illustrates the percentage of centers that use each respective organizational term in their official name.

For some centers, they strategically use the term lab to express their particular type of work as being more applied and field-based. Other participants described how their institutions required them to use the term initiative at the beginning because their
institution did not want to commit in perpetuity. There was an understanding that once there was enough funding, activity, and interest in it permanently being part of the institution, then there would be a shift to using the term center and/or institute. Broadly, the terms center and institute typically denoted more formality and permanency in the institution. While there is a wide range of organizational terms, the data showed that “center” is overwhelmingly the most common organizational term used in the university-based social impact phenomenon.

**Organization name and focus area.** The majority of centers use the term “social impact” in their official name. More than 20 of the centers (31%) studied used social impact or some combination of social impact with another term in their title. Eleven of the centers (22%) used some combination of the social “Is “and “Es”—social impact, social innovation, social enterprise, or social entrepreneurship. Ten of the centers (20%) used the term social innovation, seven (14%) used sustainable business, and six (12%) used the term social enterprise or social entrepreneurship. While sustainable business was not initially used as a search term in this study, after a dozen interviews, the term was added and the site selection criteria adjusted. Participants explained that their

![Figure 13. The organizational term/type used in social impact center names.](image-url)
institutions were increasingly using the term “sustainable business” to describe their work because it was a broader term and aligned with terminology coming out of the United Nations and other global organizations.

In examining the broad spectrum of centers across the United States, the data demonstrated that the term “social impact” is the most commonly used term in official center names. When asked why participants named their center using the term social impact, they explained how they viewed the term as broad and the best to encompass the various concepts and programs involved at their center. A few pointed out, however, that this term has evolved to mean everything and nothing at the same time. About a third of participants also talked about how the debate over terminology is exhausting and unproductive. These participants explained how they just want to get on with their work and stop talking about which term is right. Still, an examination of the various center names revealed there continues to be a wide range of terms used to describe the work and the broader phenomenon, and this may cause confusion to students and new stakeholders to the space. Figure 14 illustrates the percentage of centers that use each respective term in their official center name, which also denotes the focus of their center’s work.

Mission and Focus

Upon examining the missions of each center, the data revealed that mission statements varied in focus, scope, and strategy; yet, the centers are commonly serving students and a range of stakeholders across the private, public, and nonprofit sectors with the focus on improving social challenges. Social impact centers primarily focus on their internal audiences of students, faculty, and the campus community. However, most centers also focus heavily on serving the surrounding community and industry partners in
creating partnerships with social ventures, community nonprofits, investors, and policymakers. The interview data revealed that these centers are often pulled in many directions and find it challenging to serve a wide range of stakeholders. Participants expressed it was a challenge to serve a plethora of audiences and to narrow down to a feasible set of projects that fully leverage their resources and align with their center’s mission.

Figure 14 visually represents the statistical text analysis of the top 50 most frequently used words in the social impact centers’ mission statements. This data visualization shows that the most intense focus is on the terms social, impact, students, business, with research, faculty, innovation, and entrepreneurship as some of the other most commonly used terms.

Some common themes emerged in the mission statements that include a heightened focus on educating and developing the next generation of social change leaders, as well as seeking to solve the most pressing social issues. The mission
statements commonly described their work as focused on teaching social impact through classroom and experiential learning, as well as providing career development and building the capacity of their community and industry around social impact concepts.

Figure 15. Top 50 most commonly used words in social impact center mission statements.

**Established centers hone their missions.** Participants who have led centers longer than 5 years described the need to hone their mission. For the more established centers that have been around at least 10 to 15 years—such as Wharton’s Social Impact, Duke’s CASE, Harvard’s Social Enterprise Initiative, Santa Clara’s Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship—they described that they are moving into a more developed phase of organizational maturity. These older centers commonly explained that their
strategy is to narrow their focus and be more strategic in the selection of partnerships and projects. These centers described being approached by numerous organizations to do a variety of projects, and they needed to be more selective given staff and resource constraints. They also described the strain of serving a broad set of stakeholders, from on-campus audiences to wider external stakeholders from nonprofit, for-profit, and government sectors.

Broadly, the data showed that as centers evolved, they tend to hone their focus and go deeper in particular areas where they have specific value-add and expertise. For example, Santa Clara’s Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship narrowed their focus to a sophisticated social entrepreneurship accelerator and describe scaling their impact to more than 600 social entrepreneurs. In contrast, when centers are in the start-up phase, they tend to be more broad, entrepreneurial, and experiment with different things to see what sticks. Dr. Meeta Kothare from the University of Texas, Austin’s new Social Innovation Initiative, put it this way:

I know that the new thing for [an] initiative is to really figure out what they’re good at. We’re in the process of just being really broad right now. Maybe something will emerge, but we’re a startup and we’re treating it like the way we teach our students. Do it lean, do it fast, and determine the minimum viable products that work.

Another common theme for more developed centers was the focus on bridging academics with practice. Participants explained they are trying to build bridges with academic departments to increase the creation of majors, minors, certificates, and concentrations in the social impact field. The advancement of academic opportunities and credentials emerged as a common focus for established centers. In addition to an evolving
mission and honing their focus, participants described funding as being central to the development and strategic direction of their centers.

**Funding Models**

Upon examining the funding structures of the 38 social impact centers interviewed in this study, the data demonstrated that centers have a variety of funding structures and revenue streams that support their operational and programmatic budgets. However, the centers are typically funded through five sources of revenue, which include: (a) university institutional funding, (b) private donations, (c) endowed funds, (d) revenue generating, and (e) grants and contracts.

**Institutional funds.** Most of the centers have some level of university institutional funding to support their efforts. The institutional funds are typically either restricted or unrestricted and come from a dean or central administrative office. The institutional funds are controlled and allocated according to the location of the center, whether that is in a school, college, or central administrative office. Participants explained these institutional funds rarely cover all of their operating expenses, but are essential and demonstrate institutional commitment to their work. Only several centers received tuition dollars; most centers are not academic in nature and therefore do not receive any revenue for academic courses.

**Private donations.** Most centers have some support from private donations. These private donations typically come from high net worth individuals, family offices, and individual donors who are alumni and/or friends of the institution. Most participants talked about the critical role private donations play and the immense pressure to cultivate new donors and fundraise new money to support their efforts.
**Endowed funds.** Approximately 20% of the centers have a large, donor-generated endowed fund that provides a sustainable, long-term funding source. However, endowed funds are limiting in that they only spin off approximately 3-5% of the total fund. This amount typically only covers a portion of their operating and programming expenses. The following centers have named, endowed funds:

- Babson College’s Lewis Institute & Babson Social Innovation Lab
- Brown University’s Swearer Center for Public Service
- Columbia University’s Tamer Center for Social Enterprise
- Georgetown University’s Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation
- PACE University’s Wilson Center for Social Entrepreneurship
- Santa Clara University’s Miller Center for Social Enterprise
- University of Chicago’s Rustandy Center for Social Innovation
- University of Utah’s Sorenson Impact Center
- Tulane University’s Taylor Center for Social Innovation and Design Thinking

**Grants and contracts.** The majority of centers also have some level of grant and contract funding, which comes from private foundations, family offices, and/or state or federal governments.

**Federal.** Several centers have received large, multimillion dollar federal grants that catalyzed growth in staff to fulfill the federal project(s). Example of this include Duke’s CASE USAID grant and the federal government’s Social Innovation Fund grants that support Harvard’s Government Performance Lab and the University of Utah’s Sorenson Impact Center. The centers who have been reliant on federal grants over the past 5 years explained an urgent need to shift their funding model as these large federal grants wind down in 2018.

**Foundations.** Many of the centers have support from family offices and private foundations who are active in the social impact space, such as MacArthur, Ford,
Rockefeller, and Arnold. The level of foundational funding varies and usually only accounts for a portion of the center budgets.

**Revenue-generating.** Some centers are seeking alternative revenue-generating streams to expand their work and/or fill in budget gaps. A smaller number of centers do consulting projects to provide students with practical experience and to generate additional revenue. A few centers have professional staff that perform *fee-for-service* work for a range of clients. There are a limited number of centers pursuing *executive education* programs to produce additional revenue as their large grants wind down. Other centers explained there is a need to pursue alternative revenue streams to sustain their operating expenses and to also expand and enhance their impact. The revenue-generating bucket is perhaps the most flexible and dynamic revenue stream that could see dramatic shifts and increased reliance as centers attempt to diversify and sustain their budgets.

When asked about financial health of their centers, the participants frequently talked about their funding constraints and how they constantly felt pressure to bring in additional revenue to support their existing work and new growth opportunities. There was a common pattern of centers using a diversified portfolio of revenue streams to support the operating expenses, as well as other student, outreach, and programming expenses. In addition to funding structures, centers are largely impacted by where they are located in the organizational structure of the university, and this appeared to influence how they evolve and what types of programming they pursue.

Leadership changes, particularly at the dean level, can also dramatically impact the level of institutional funding. A few participants explained how their new dean did not see social impact as a priority and this negatively impacted their funding. Some of the
centers described the need to stabilize their funding model and to seek out revenue generating activities, which mainly included executive education and fee-for-service work. Other institutions with large endowments did not feel this financial strain. There was a marked difference between the perceived financial pressures of centers located at well-resourced institutions versus centers located at public and less-resourced institutions. Finally, funding for most centers is limited, which namely dictates how they operate, which projects they pursue, and how they perceive their long-term sustainability.

**Leadership Models**

An examination of leadership structures revealed there are three leadership models within the phenomenon: (a) faculty-led, (b) practitioner-led, and (c) co-led by a faculty member and a practitioner.

The majority of centers (43%) are led by practitioner leaders that have at least a master’s degree, and sometimes cases have a terminal degree. The practitioner directors perceived their practical “real world” experience as a genuine strength to their ability to lead and teach. They said they drew on their industry connection and experience to enhance their teaching, community engagement, and fundraising. When asked about challenges, practitioner directors described the difficulty of fully understanding the academy and navigating the bureaucracy of a university. They also found it difficult to get faculty and departmental buy-in.

Roughly 35% of the centers are led by tenured-line faculty members who describe being pulled to the social impact space by students. The faculty directors explained the challenge of managing the administrative duties of running the center, staff and budgets, and fundraising. They described being frustrated with the pressure to fundraise, and the
perceived lack of time and experience in fundraising. The faculty directors explained how it was mostly a challenge to balance their faculty responsibilities with the administrative duties. However, they recognized that it was easier for them as faculty directors to get faculty buy-in and to effectively advance efforts through university systems specific to creating new courses, minors, certifications, etc.

The least common leadership model was the co-directorship model. Only 22% of the centers used both a tenured-line faculty member and a practitioner to co-lead the social impact center. The co-leadership model was more common at well-resourced institutions that could afford the expense, and had the expertise to use a dual leadership model. Participants in this type of model explained how the combination of having a faculty and practitioner leader provided both the strengths of practical experience and connections and the understanding of the academy. However, this model can be challenging if/when the two directors have differing opinions and approaches as to how the center should run. One experienced administrator said tenured faculty are critical because they can translate across disciplines and have credibility because they have gone through the hoops of academia. They also explained that the most effective work is done when a tenured faculty member is paired with an action-oriented administrator who can get things done and builds respect because they are very relationally and action-oriented.

An orange in a barrel of apples. Despite being a practitioner or a tenure-faculty leader, participants commonly described feeling like they do not fit into a “traditional university role.” They do not feel like a regular tenured faculty member, professional staff, or senior administration while serving as the director of a social impact center. One practitioner director aptly described feeling like “an orange in a barrel of apples” because
he was not a traditional faculty or staff director given that he teaches courses, conducts research, and runs the center. These directors feel like they hold unusual combinations of administrative and academic responsibilities. One faculty director described his experience like this:

I find myself increasingly alienated from the institution in that I have a faculty position, not an administrative one. And yet, I’m doing a lot of administrating. I have no ability to officially mentor or oversee faculty. It’s strange.

Most poignant in the leadership data is that these nontraditional leadership structures and roles cause the center directors to feel like their university colleagues do not fully understand their roles or what their centers actually do. They feel like misfits as they do not fit into traditional academia, professional staff, or research roles. Figure 16 visualizes the three leadership models and the challenges and strengths that come with each type.

**Leadership heavily influences the evolution of centers.** How social impact centers evolve is heavily dependent on their leadership and whether it is a practitioner or faculty member. The study uncovered a difference in how faculty and practitioners approach the work. Centers with practitioner executive directors are more external facing and develop experiential opportunities that engage industry and community partners. Centers with faculty directors gravitate towards more internal campus activities, such as academic courses, the development of minors and specializations, and research. Through interviews and examining secondary sources, centers differ in their approach and activities depending upon whether their leader is a practitioner or tenure-line faculty member. This is not surprising given the difference in backgrounds, experience, and connections between faculty and practitioners. Of note is the pressure on tenure-line
Figure 16. The three leadership models used at university-based social impact centers.

faculty to gain tenure and the administrative duties of directing a center running counter to that pursuit. Running a center does not typically fit into the tenure process and incentive structures. Some of the younger faculty interviewed in this study described how their faculty colleagues discouraged them from being involved in the space because it would distract them from gaining tenure.

**Former student leaders now run centers.** The leadership data also showed there are a number of former student leaders who ran student-led social impact initiatives during their graduate programs that are now serving in leadership roles at social impact centers. One of these former student leaders, Matt Segneri, is now the director of Harvard’s Social Enterprise Initiative. He described his experience this way:

I was thrilled to come back 3 years ago when this leadership role opened up. Harvard’s Social Enterprise Initiative had been such a strong part of my MBA
experience and I was deeply engaged in it as an alum. I was thrilled about the opportunity to move back to Boston and help take the helm of SEI, which was a very new concept in business schools, at large, when it started 25 years ago. But now, it really is a core priority and essential part of the HBS. So, it felt like I was stepping into something that wasn’t peripheral, but at the beating heart of the school.

This study interviewed six directors who were once social impact student leaders and that have now returned to their institutions as full-time professional staff to run the programs that they helped launch as students. Examples of former student leaders now running social impact centers include the University of Michigan, University of Virginia, UCLA, Harvard, and the University of Chicago. This particular finding enforces the notion that mission-driven students were instrumental in the emergence and the ongoing evolution of social impact centers on college campuses.

**Staff Size**

The staff size at each social impact center ranges from two to 30. The majority of centers interviewed (51%) had a staff of less than 10 people. The majority of the centers operate with a relatively small staff and expressed the need to be selective with their projects and partnerships given their lean staff size. Twenty-seven percent of the centers had staff sizes in the range of 10 to 20 people. And, only 22% of centers had more than 20 people on staff. Most of the centers have affiliated faculty who also engage and contribute to the center’s work, but are funded by their respective academic departments and are not counted as full-time staff and represented in this data set. An examination of the staff sizes revealed a wide range of staff sizes and structures, and a lack of uniformity of how centers staff their operations. Figure 17 illustrates the percentage of centers within the three ranges of staff size.
Figure 17. The percentage of centers within each range of staff size.

**Broad Cross-Institutional Trends**

Based on the interviews and secondary data analysis, the data yielded a set of broad cross-institutional trends and key takeaways from the larger phenomenon. The following list includes the main trends that have evolved in the university-based social impact phenomenon over the past 20 years.

- Student interest, higher education market competition, and donor support mainly drive the phenomenon.
- Social impact has moved from niche to mainstream.
- The majority of social impact centers are located at private institutions.
- Centers started at elite institutions, but now transcend across all higher education institutional types.
- Centers have now expanded beyond just business schools to other public policy and professional schools, central administrative units, and are also housed within other coordinating institutes and civic engagement centers.
• Around 10 institutions now have multiple social impact initiatives on their campuses that are housed in different departments, schools, and colleges.

• Social impact courses have dramatically increased in number and now extend out and down the curriculum and co-curriculum for graduate and undergraduate students.

• The funding models vary across the centers, yet there are pressures and questions around the ability of centers to grow and sustain in the coming decade.

• Centers are serving a wider range of on- and off-campus stakeholders.

• There was accelerated growth in new centers emerging after 2008.

• As centers evolve, leaders described a desire to “hone their focus,” “codify their approach,” and to articulate “their specific value add” to the space.

• Social impact leaders also seek to scale their programming to reach a wider audience.

• Centers are trending toward focusing on solving social challenges in their local communities rather than being focused on global development issues.

**Tensions and Challenges**

Specific to RQ6, this study sought to uncover the emergent tensions and challenges that social impact leaders currently face. The data yielded a common set of tensions and challenges that transcend institutional type and the organizational location of the centers. The main tensions include the issues associated with working in silos and competition between centers and initiatives, the institutional ranking schemes, and bureaucracy versus innovation. The challenges that emerged in the data were resource
constraints, the newness of the field, and gaining faculty buy-in. The following sections expand upon the emergent tensions and challenges.

Tensions

Cross-campus competition and silos. Social impact center leaders described that they often feel like they are competing against other centers and programs for resources, attention, and students within their own institutions. One third of the centers talked about the difficulty of working with their own development offices and fighting to be a priority for fundraising efforts. Participants talked about how they compete with other centers for priority status in development officers’ portfolios, and this has made it difficult to gain donor attention. Some centers talked about shifting from educating individual donors to educating their internal development teams on their mission to increase fundraising efficacy. Some centers are completely reliant on their central development offices for fundraising, while others have more fundraising autonomy. Participants also described that they are competing to get attention from their senior leadership teams.

The data showed there is little coordination between the respective social impact initiatives and other social- or civic-oriented centers. Participants talked about how their institutions operated in silos, which made it hard to collaborate across schools and departments. Certain funding models (e.g., RCM) also inhibited center directors’ ability to create innovative programs that transcended the administrative lines. Participants described that they are just trying to meet their own students’ demands, and while they say there is not territory, it becomes tricky, especially if they are holding a large collaborative conference and one entity gets all of the attention and credit. One participant plainly said that schools and/or centers at his institutions do not want to lose,
whether it is a student changing their major, losing the tuition dollars from a cross-listed course, or the public attention for a particular convening. This participant said despite their best efforts to collaborate, colleges and departments often clash.

One participant described how his social impact center, located in a business school, became the successful launch pad and spun out social impact entities across their campus in the schools of public health, information systems, music and dance, and art. This strategy eventually hurt his center. These lean social impact operations spun out of the original center and ultimately took resources, attention, and momentum away from their original incubating center. He described how his center had helped to infuse social impact across the campus, which ultimately lessened his center’s impact due to the diffusion of energy and resources.

Center leaders also talked about the need to differentiate themselves amid a plethora of programs and offerings for students. They described the challenge of navigating through what their center’s role was on their campus and asking themselves where and how they fit in with what else is going on around their campus. Most participants explained that their campuses already had entrepreneurship, innovation, and civic engagement initiatives. They described the pressure to be thoughtful in how to communicate their missions and programming, so as to not overlap and/or collide with these other existing programs. The deluge of opportunities for students and competition among centers has caused several institutions to create new centralizing, coordinating umbrella units which are designed to house these multiple, disparate social impact initiatives. The participants that created new centralizing units explained that they needed to create a new umbrella entity to facilitate collaboration, create administrative
efficiencies, and provide clear communication to students about the institution’s various social impact initiatives.

**Institutional rankings.** About half of the participants, mostly those located in business schools, talked about the tensions around business school rankings. Participants described how business school rankings heavily weigh post-graduation salaries as part of the ranking formula. The post-graduation salary metric disincentivizes the scaling of social impact programs given that graduates of social impact programs are more likely to go into social sector career tracks that will pay lower salaries. Participants described that while their deans are mostly supportive, they also recognize that if their programs grow too large, then there may be too many students pursuing social sector jobs upon graduation, which could ultimately lower their school’s job placement and salary data and lower their ranking. The institutional rankings versus social sector salaries emerged as a tension impeding the growth and scaling of social impact in higher education business schools.

**Bureaucracy vs. innovation.** Participants described how university bureaucracy often stifled their ability to develop and implement innovative programs, partnerships, and funds. A participant located in school of education described how she had to strategically work with their legal counsel to set up the legal structure to establish an educational technology fund within her institution. A number of other participants described setting up student-led venture, debt, or equity funds, and emphasized the difficulty of navigating university bureaucracy and legal structures to set up such innovative financial instruments. Practitioner directors who came from industry and/or entrepreneurial backgrounds, in particular, pointed to the frustration of working within a
university bureaucracy. These practitioner directors described how they have pushed the traditional bureaucratic boundaries of their university’s administrative units in areas such as human resources, budget, IT, and others because their centers are doing things “outside the box.” Some of the center directors described bringing in revenue and contracts that did not fall within one of the three traditional buckets of university funding—contracts, donations/gifts, or sponsored research projects—and having to rethink how they could do business. They said doing entrepreneurial projects within a university setting is often challenging.

One practitioner director located in a public policy school described how they partnered with another school within their institutions to teach courses, and the administrative burden of cross-listing nearly halted their collaborative effort to bring students, content, and a course in an interdisciplinary lens. Simply put, they said the revenue conundrum was too challenging. Instead of trying to split tuition revenues and navigate the bureaucratic red tape, the two professors ultimately decided to keep their two separate classes in their own colleges and just scheduled the two courses at the same time and had them meet together. They uniquely worked outside of the university bureaucracy to accomplish their goal.

In addition to the tensions impacting social impact centers, the following challenges emerged as common themes across the various centers: resource constraints, the newness of the field, and faculty buy-in.

Challenges

Resource constraints. The most pressing challenge for the social impact centers is resource constraints, specific to financial and human capacity. Almost all center leaders
talked about the challenge of financial stability and a lack of sufficient financial resources to sustain current and future goals. Participants explained they are continually challenged to balance their budget with the right mix of institutional, grant, and donor funding. Some centers were seeded with limited institutional resources with the expectation they would eventually get external funding for long-term sustainability. Other centers were initially funded by external donor(s) and were still seeking more internal institutional buy-in and resources. These 100% donor-reliant initiatives are sometimes called “cliff programs,” and can be vulnerable if a dean, chair, and/or senior leadership did not see them as a priority. And, there are others centers that are heavily reliant on large federal grants that will eventually end, forcing the centers to either downsize staff and/or find other grants or revenue-generating activities to sustain their expenses. Given the mix of funding sources and the volatility with each revenue stream, the data revealed concern with financial stability across the majority of social impact centers.

Overwhelmingly, social impact leaders feel pressure to fundraise for additional revenue to supplement their current budgets. One participant described feeling like he could “never settle down” and felt pressure to constantly fundraise to “keep the place afloat.” For centers who do not have a large endowment, they commonly talked about the desire to cultivate a large, named donor to establish an endowment to stabilize their long-term financial needs. However, among participants, endowments were not always perceived as the right funding strategy due to their limited annual financial returns, which typically do not generate enough revenue to support annual operating expenses. Some participants talked about the relatively new pressure to develop new revenue generating activities, such as executive education or certifications, as a crucial and needed
supplemental stream of revenue. Additionally, participants recognized that a change in leadership in the dean’s office can be severely disruptive to institutional levels of support.

Participants also talked about the challenge of running a new, entrepreneurial center that demands attention to a variety of pressures including under-resourced staff, operations, and administrative tasks. Some centers are constrained by physical space—particularly the urban, landlocked institutions—which has limited their ability to grow and hire new staff. Several leaders described their operations as “busting at the seams” and they have a need for additional space to accommodate their student and staff needs.

Social impact centers used a variety of strategies to combat these financial and capacity constraints. Many of the centers described how they lean heavily on their students to provide the much-needed labor to help with events and programming. Students were described as being crucial to backfilling or supplementing the resource-constrained, full-time staff. While some centers turned to increased student engagement to assist their staff with administrative and programming, other centers described doing just the opposite. These centers purposefully downsized their student engagement to focus on other priorities such as research or industry partnerships.

Another strategy to combat resource constraints that emerged in the data was for centers to strategically position themselves under the broad umbrella of “social impact.” Some leaders described intentionally taking this broad view to attract a wider audience that could cut across all sectors, domains, and issue areas. They also explained this strategy allowed them to go both wide and deep on issues, so they could pivot their projects and partnerships as the space develops and to where the resources gravitate.
Center leaders also described being pulled in various directions by a range of external and internal stakeholders to take on new projects. The older, more established centers described having a large network of alumni and engaged partners continually asking them to do projects. Their challenge was to strategically select the projects that fit within their institutional mission, values, and goals. Conversely, the newer centers were still seeking out and developing new programs and partnerships. Still, most all of the participants, despite being new or more established, described the difficulty of sorting through what projects they should and should not do given the scope of their mission and their financial and capacity constraints.

**Newness of the field.** Throughout the interviews, participants pointed out that the newness of the social impact field has made it difficult to accomplish their goals. The newness of the field has made it hard for participants to gain institutional traction and buy-in across campus. The newness of the field challenge manifested in several ways. First, participants described the challenge to educate on-campus stakeholders given the nascent field and the lack of common terms, definitions, and frameworks. The social impact space lacks an established lexicon and academic rigor. Participants recognized that many of their colleagues do not see the social impact field as legitimate or important for the majority of people on their campuses. They described faculty and administrators as being “skeptical” of their work. One participants explained, “The biggest challenge for me is definitely legitimizing social impact engaged learning in the eyes of the greater community, especially faculty.”

Many of the center leaders described initially struggling with the perception that they were the “service,” “community engagement,” “donation,” or “volunteer” center for
their respective business school. They explained having to strategically educate their colleagues on the substance of social impact concepts, and that they were not the “charity drive” drop-off location for the elite business school. Some of the centers described doing learning tours and information sessions to educate staff and faculty. Participants also explained that the fast-moving pace of the field also makes it is hard to keep up with current trends and topics. About half of the centers described the challenge of staying current and the ability to build programs and courses that accommodate shifting student interests. One participant specifically said it is difficult to know how much you need to know and what topic to narrow down on unless it’s faculty research-driven, donor-driven, or student demand-driven. But the participants pointed to the fact that student demand changes every year and it is difficulty to stay in front of their interest with their 2-year programs.

**Faculty buy-in.** Closely related to the challenge of the newness of the social impact field is the lack of faculty buy-in on many campuses. Almost all of the participants described the need to gain broader faculty engagement. Participants explained that faculty engagement has been one of their main challenges, and they recognized it as critical to advancing the work. For centers with a faculty director, it was less of a concern than for centers with practitioner leaders. However, even centers with faculty directors still described a need for more faculty buy-in. Some faculty directors described that their older faculty colleagues are steeped in their ideology and are not open to new fields, such as entrepreneurship, and let alone social entrepreneurship. One faculty director said, “I’ve had faculty say I don’t believe in social entrepreneurship. I’ve said okay, that’s fine. You can believe it or not—it exists—so you can study it or not.”
Broadly across the centers, there is still heavy reliance on adjunct practitioners to teach the courses, which has resulted in fewer tenure-lined faculty teaching and engaging with social impact topics. There are inherent systematic challenges within the tenure review process that do not reward the more practitioner-orientated publications and engagement. The ability of social impact centers to engage faculty remains a significant challenge to advancing their work and the larger space.
CHAPTER 5 – ANALYSIS

This study filled a distinct gap in the literature by studying university-based social impact centers, framed both in the broader historical context of university engagement in their communities and the realities of contemporary market pressures on higher education institutions. Social impact centers exhibit the intersectionality of a host of issues plaguing higher education, such as resource constraints, access, academic silos, specialization, and bureaucracy versus innovation. Social impact centers sit at the crossroads of shifting funding models, disruption of the sector, and also areas of great opportunity. An examination of these centers illustrates that universities continue to evolve and take on new forms in the 21st century through teaching, research, and community engagement.

Field-Building: The Emergence of Social Impact Centers

This study found that field-building organizations outside of the academy can and do influence universities, curricula, and organizational structures. There are myriad internal and external forces influencing the academy; however, it takes these specific forces converging at the right time with purposeful leadership to produce “windows of opportunity” that allow for new initiatives to materialize.

Windows of Opportunity

The emergence of the social impact phenomenon can be explained by these windows of opportunity where the right timing and the confluence of internal and external forces intersect, interact, and overlap with one another—within institutional-specific contexts—to produce new university-based social impact initiatives. As previously mentioned, the combination of mission-driven students, market competition, and donor support mainly drove the phenomenon. However, it is the coming together of
various elements at an opportune time that spurs action for change. For example, the University of Chicago’s Rustandy Center for Social Innovation’s Executive Director, Christina Hachikian, aptly described this at her institution:

It was the confluence of a donor who wants to give a lot of money, a dean that’s supportive of it, and a student body and faculty that are supportive of it . . . I mean, all that stuff has to come together. It’s hard work, some thoughtful leadership, and most importantly, it has to be the right place and right time.

In short, the timing is critical. The establishment of new social initiatives hinge on these windows of opportunity where the appropriate stakeholders and resources come together at the right time to enact change. Sometimes this is engineered by a visionary leader, and sometimes it happens more organically. Windows of opportunity often presented themselves when there was a combination of two or more of the following situations: an effective stakeholder group pushing for change (e.g., in this situation, it was student leaders), new financial resources to fund the idea, institutional leadership support (e.g., if in a school/college, a dean), faculty support, and/or a leadership change (either at the dean or executive level, or a new faculty member).

Further, times of leadership change can be particularly powerful because they open up the opportunity to harness new energy, motivation, and resources. Higher education leaders can also effectively strategize to create these windows of opportunity by identifying and seeking out support from the right set of stakeholders and raising the financial capital to support the new initiative. Windows of opportunity not only come when a center or initiative is new, but may also present in the form of a new partnership, or a large foundation or federal grant for more established centers. As the university social impact space evolves and the more established centers enter into the 2.0 phase,
these windows of opportunity become critical for leaders to recognize and leverage in order to sustain and advance their centers.

**Purposeful Field-building by External Organizations.**

An unexpected finding of this study was the clear role that external field-building organizations played in the establishment of new social impact centers. External organizations, such as Net Impact and Ashoka, developed and executed powerful field-building strategies—such as convening large groups, training student advocates, and creating institutional award systems—that successfully influenced the proliferation of university social innovation centers. Their conferences and workshops not only educated practitioners, faculty, and students on social innovation topics, but most importantly, trained students on how to effectively establish student clubs, find faculty champions, and lobby for additional social impact courses and opportunities. These field-building organizations were highly effective because they energized and trained students to effectively advocate for social impact on their campuses.

These social impact student leaders proved that student demand, interest, and voice matters in higher education. Students can push traditional academic fields to consider adding new concepts, courses, and degrees into the curriculum. The examination of this phenomenon also illustrates the dramatic need for higher education institutions to be responsive to new student interests; yet, it also reveals the tension of balancing new trends—which may or may not sustain—with traditional academic fields and concepts. Perhaps, much like the development of interdisciplinary majors and fields like sustainability and gender studies, the higher education industry will continually be forced to adapt and evolve in how they educate students in order to stay relevant and to compete
for students and revenue, especially given the accelerated pace of change in technology and data in the new global knowledge economy.

This particular unexpected finding illustrates the prominent role that external forces play and the pressure they can exert on the academy to innovate. The Skoll Foundation, Ashoka, and Net Impact clearly recognized the wave of Millennials’ interest in social impact before the academy. These organizations wanted to promulgate social entrepreneurship and social innovation and knew that, for these concepts to gain traction more broadly, they had to get higher education institutions to legitimize it. Some could argue they used universities and colleges as a legitimizing mechanism for concepts they wanted to grow, knowing higher education would play a critical role in advancing the field. These organizations effectively galvanized higher education institutions to respond, create social impact opportunities for students, and thus help to launch a new field. Yet, we know that some within the academy are still skeptical of the social impact and innovation field.

Looking toward the future, these social impact organizations external to the academy will continue to convene and educate large numbers of student, faculty, industry, and practitioner audiences. They will continue to influence the dialogue and shape the future of the space. While this particular finding illustrates the effective nature of broad-based field-building efforts, it also spurs additional questions around when, how, and whether or not external organizations should influence the academy to adopt new curriculum. Are there other incidences where external field-building organizations have influenced the academy to create new courses, majors, minors, and programs?
Sustainability of Social Impact Centers

Next, it was evident that the phenomenon is moving from a nascent to an established phase, which stimulates questions around its sustainability and future path. Based on the findings from this study, leadership and funding are clearly the most important factors to consider when analyzing the future of the space.

Luminary Leaders

Given the newness of the phenomenon, the leadership of the centers has, in large part, been personality-driven by dynamic founding directors. Much of the energy and momentum of the centers hinge on these pioneers who have advanced the work based on their passion, research, connections, and reputations. So, what happens once these prominent leaders are no longer leading their center? Can the second and third generation of executive directors sustain the momentum and impact?

Some of the more established social impact centers are undergoing their first leadership transitions now. It will be interesting to see how these leadership transitions unfold and how they will impact the centers and their sustainability. It is still mostly unknown whether the centers that lose their founding luminary leaders have sustainable financial models, operating structures, and broader institutional support to sustain their efforts. One example of a successful transition is at Duke’s Center for the Advancement of Social Enterprise. Greg Dees, largely known as the “father of social entrepreneurship education” and co-founder of Duke’s CASE, passed away in 2013. Around the time of Greg Dees’ passing, CASE had already secured a multimillion dollar USAID grant, which has largely sustained them over the past 5 years. Erin Worsham and Cathy Clark have successfully led CASE since Dees’ passing and have demonstrated success and
sustainability. However, not all centers have the institutional brand, resources, and support that CASE has at Duke’s Fuqua School of Business. Centers undergoing a leadership transition that do not have financial viability and institutional leadership, donor, and/or faculty support may not fare as well.

The question remains: What do these leadership transitions mean for the larger social impact space? Can university social impact centers survive and thrive with a second and even third generation of leaders just as the newness of the field wanes? Upon examining the various funding structures of centers, the shifting financing of higher education, and the increasingly crowded higher education landscape for social impact initiatives, these centers are vulnerable. They could easily go away or be enveloped into other institutional units over time without an effective influential leader at the helm and strong donor and/or institutional support.

**Budget Realities**

The data showed that centers have various funding models and structures, and that financial constraints largely drive the strategic direction for a center. The varied state of funding sources and structures peaks questions on what is the ideal funding mix for university social impact centers? What funding model will provide the most sustainability overtime given the shifting financial models and pressures in higher education? There is likely not a one-size-fits-all approach for social impact centers; rather, it would depend upon the institutions, whether or not they have endowed funds, and the level of institutional support. Figure 18 demonstrates the five broad buckets of revenue sources university social impact centers can rely on for revenue, which include: (a) institutional
Figure 18. Five funding sources for social impact centers.

funds, (b) private donations, (c) endowments, (d) grants and contracts, and (e) revenue generating.

The reality is that the majority of social impact centers are still located at private, medallion institutions with large endowments that are buffered from financial pressure. However, as more and more social impact centers are established at public and less-resourced institutions—as the data demonstrated is happening—these social impact centers are more vulnerable to financial pressures and will be pressured to diversify their revenue streams.

Still, there is a level of financial vulnerability across all centers as they try to strategically balance the right mix of institutional, donor, grant, and revenue-generating funding streams. Sherryl Kuhlman, Managing Director of the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton Social Impact Initiative, astutely said, “There’s no denying that if you get funding, it’s like the Velveteen rabbit. You’re more real if you get funding than if you don’t.” She continued to describe the reality for most institutions, asking:
But with all of the competing programs, buildings, scholarships, etc., how are these social impact initiatives going to be able to get sustainable funding in order to continue to do something that I think is probably among the most important things that a university does?
With waning public support, changing demographics, and increased competition in the higher education market, centers cannot be solely dependent upon institutional funds to sustain their operations. Rather, a diversified funding strategy will likely be the most effective for the majority of centers. However, this study surfaces questions on whether individual donors, institutional funds, and/or grants will continue to largely fund the field as it shifts from being new and innovative to now mainstream. Will donors and foundations still be drawn to the space as it mainstays? Effective resource management will continue to be a primary challenge for university-based social impact centers.

Further, for institutions with multiple social impact, sustainability, and/or civic engagement initiatives that look and feel similar, the development of a centralizing unit may be a model of the future. A centralized coordinating entity could be an effective strategy for institutions that face budgetary constraints and that are seeking ways to cut costs and increase efficiencies by sharing administrative support and physical space across centers. Kristi Raube, the executive director from the University of California, Berkeley’s Institute for Business & Social Impact, described that they found this centralizing approach to be effective. They brought various social impact initiatives into one administrative unit and said this strategy broke down silos, enhanced the work across the centers, and provided students and stakeholders with a one-stop-shop and clear communication for all social innovation efforts. While centralization might be an effective strategy for some institutions, it can also come at a cost. Centralization can often stifle innovation—the very strength and momentum these centers claim to have.
Additionally, this study revealed that a number of centers are already being pushed to be self-sustaining. The financial landscape points to a future trend where centers will be forced to seek additional revenue streams to diversify their revenue and to provide financial sustainability and opportunities for growth. This means some centers are already pivoting toward revenue-generating activities that, in practice, do not always align with educational missions. These revenue-generating efforts include executive education and trainings geared toward multiple sectors, issues, areas, and topics, as well as consulting and/or fee-for-service work. Yet, these advisory services strategies do not typically align with public university practices and can run counter to some institutional missions, structures, and processes.

Centers that seek out alternative revenue streams will almost certainly run into bureaucratic barriers and will surface tensions between the revenue needs of the center and the traditional university’s bureaucratic structures and missions. Social impact centers will increasingly face financial pressures that will inevitably influence their operational and programmatic trajectories. The need for revenue will push centers to innovate, and only time will tell how their institutions will respond to these alternative revenue-generating activities.

Specialization Trend in Higher Education

Massive expansion and specialization of courses, degrees, and centers has created a dynamic, but crowded and often disjointed, environment on university and college campuses. Social impact centers are but one more example of the specialization in higher education that creates a plethora of curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students and the wider community.
The Addition of Social Entrepreneurship and Social Impact Education

The momentum of the university social impact space has developed such that some universities now have multiple social impact initiatives on their campus. And, most higher education institutions already have similar innovation, entrepreneurship, civic engagement, and/or socially oriented initiatives on their campuses. The study found that social impact centers and other socially related initiatives are housed cross-campus in different schools, colleges, departments, and administrative units. However, the combined growth of social innovation and other existing efforts represent the broader specialization of the curriculum and co-curriculum that has exerted strain on the existing systems for achieving integration and academic coordination (Dill, Massy, Williams, & Cook, 1996). The proliferation of undergraduate and graduate social impact courses, degrees, and certificates is representative of the broader higher education trend of academic specialization.

Given this explosion of courses and experiential learning opportunities, it is no surprise that social impact center leaders talked about the need to differentiate themselves amid a plethora of programs and offerings. It is often difficult for social impact centers to articulate what they do, given the newness of the field, as well as distinguish themselves among all of the campus offerings. They described the challenge of navigating through what their center’s role is on their campus and knowing how they fit into broader campus initiatives. Participants explained how their campuses had existing entrepreneurship, innovation, and civic engagement initiatives, and they had to be thoughtful of their own missions and programming to not overlap with these other existing programs.
With the marked increase in specialization of curricula and the proliferation of new centers and institutes, universities have created campus environments where faculty and staff are increasingly competing against each other for resources, students, and attention. Moreover, students have a difficult time navigating a crowded and disjointed landscape of curricular and co-curricular opportunities, which could be part of the challenges around retention and college completion. This study further illustrates what Massy and Zemsky (1990) argued more than 20 years ago—that university curricula offer a smorgasbord of options with little coherence.

Given the increasing number of programs and shrinking resources, universities have not only created incoherent curricula, but also environments where entities are fighting over the same students, institutional funds, partnerships organizations, and public attention. Universities are additive institutions; they rarely cut programs, which has produced overcrowded, disjointed environments. The competition for resources and students—coupled with the challenge of institutional silos—creates major barriers to the scalability of the social impact work and broader collaboration among campus communities. Institutions that prioritize social innovation and public service need to be thoughtful and strategic about how to structure, organize, and communicate social impact on their campuses. Currently, there are a lot of well-intentioned, socially oriented initiatives and curricula that collide and compete on college campuses.

**The Role of Centers as an Organizational Unit within Universities**

This study also demonstrated the distinct organizational role that centers, initiatives, and institutes play within higher education institutions. Marta Urquilla,
Deputy Director of Georgetown’s Beeck Center Social Impact + Innovation, fittingly said:

For Georgetown, with our relationship with the provost and others, our senior administration definitely leverages the R&D role that we play. At Beeck, we’re flexible and nimble and able to move in between the hard lines and spaces of the university. It’s not a small thing, particularly as they’re thinking about the way we need to design, structure, and finance ourselves for the future.

There is a dearth of literature about the roles of university-based centers, institutes, and initiatives as organizational units within the academy and the contemporary roles they play, particularly in a time of the marketization of higher education. This study surfaced several important functions that centers play in the changing higher education landscape. First, centers/institutes/initiatives provide an organizational unit—outside of traditional academic departments—that allows for flexibility and innovation. They provide a nimbleness and outlet for experimentation not found in traditional academic departments, schools, or colleges. A fitting example of this is the acceleration of centers providing the increasingly important elements of the transformative student experiences—like experiential learning, internships, and research and interdisciplinary opportunities—that are responsive to student interests, market demands, and student success efforts.

As institutional advancement and fundraising efforts continue to expand, centers and institutes also provide opportunities for senior administration to directly engage key donors. They provide additional opportunities for donors to support the institutional mission outside the traditional scholarship, faculty chairs, and capital projects. If centers continue to be an effective development tool, then there will most likely be more and
more centers on college campuses, thus exacerbating the already overcrowded and sometimes incoherent curricular and co-curricular opportunities.

Further, centers/institutes/initiatives were clearly the organizational unit or vehicle that higher education institutions used to meet the market demand of Millennials for social entrepreneurship education and opportunities. This trend is much like the proliferation of research institutes post-WWII with the influx of federal money to fund research and development in higher education, as well as the development of university research parks and technology and commercialization efforts in the 1980s and 1990s with changing federal policy that motivated universities to commercialize their research. These all illustrate higher education’s continued evolution of organizational structures, their generation of new knowledge, and their education of citizens.

**Infusion Across the Curriculum versus Isolation in a Center**

While most universities used the strategy of creating an initiative, center, or institute to house their social impact opportunities, a few institutions strategically avoided this strategy. Instead, they purposefully infused the social impact concepts across the curriculum, rather than siloing them into a center. The selection of an “infusion” strategy versus an “isolation” strategy is noteworthy. Some center directors described that they do not want to be partitioned off anymore and need to integrate into the traditional academic system to scale their impact. This is much like the debate over the past 20 years around how institutions can best adapt to globalization and infuse internationalization across the campus and curriculum.

The notion of infusion versus isolation in centers raises questions around the most effective approach to scaling social impact in universities. For institutions that believe in
educating their students on social innovation—particularly in business schools—the infusion strategy could have far wider impact than keeping the opportunities siloed in a center. Future research could study which approach proves more impactful and successful over time. This notion also peaks questions around who get access to social impact opportunities.

**Who Has Access to Social Impact Opportunities?**

The examination of the broad university social impact phenomenon surfaced a major issue that plagues nearly every aspect of contemporary higher education—access, diversity, and inclusion. The heavy concentration of social impact centers in private institutions likely means underserved students and students of color have less access to participate in social impact initiatives. Given less than one third of social impact centers are located at public institutions, less students from diverse backgrounds are involved in these courses and opportunities. For example, only the elite graduate business schools offered loan forgiveness programs for those seeking nonprofit careers, and they clearly had more scholarship opportunities to support experiential learning opportunities than their public institution counterparts. And, we know that elite, private institutions that offer the most financial support are the least likely to enroll students of color and students from underserved, rural, and lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Additionally, there is a severe lack of diversity of faculty and staff in the university social impact space—much like the rest of the academy. Of the 42 participants interviewed in this study, only four participants were people of color. This data point alone clearly demonstrated a lack of diverse representation in leadership and faculty roles at social impact centers, and likely in the other professional and administrative staff roles.
at these centers. About one third of the participants specifically noted the need to diversify their own staffs to advance their work and better represent the voices of the very populations they sought to empower and serve.

The very nature of social impact work requires the input and perspectives of individuals from diverse racial, gender, religious, geographic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. If universities are not providing access to social impact opportunities to underserved students, then who is? Social impact work cannot be fully realized without the inclusion of diverse voices. For university-based social impact centers to have great influence, there must be a conscious effort to increase the diversity and inclusion in student engagement and faculty and staff hiring.

**Analyzing the Findings in the Context of the Existing Literature**

**Civic Engagement and Social Impact**

The last two research questions in this study explored how centers are interacting with on- and off-campus partners. Data from these two questions surfaced issues around how these social impact initiatives are developing in relation to the existing on-campus civic engagement, entrepreneurship, and innovation work; to off-campus community partnerships; and ultimately, how it maps onto the rich history of the university engagement in their communities. To treat the social impact phenomenon as wholly new—even though it evolved out of business schools and remains somewhat concentrated there—would be shortsighted and dismissive of higher education’s larger, sustained commitment to public service and advancing the human condition. Participants clearly recognized the existence of other social and civic efforts on their campus and its impact on their work. To fully understand the place of social innovation on today’s
In response to commercialization, concern over the civic decline of youth, and the deterioration of communities, the higher education civic engagement movement started in the 1980s and remains a powerful actor on college campuses today. Fairly similar to the development of the civic engagement movement, entrepreneurship emerged in the 1990s as higher education institutions started to play a more significant role in economic development and were encouraged to make tighter linkages with businesses and industry for entrepreneurial ventures (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

What I observed through this study is that there was somewhat of a merging of these two movements in the 2000s, which resulted in a new trajectory—social entrepreneurship, social innovation, and social impact. The social impact phenomenon involves key thematic approaches that build upon, but are different from, traditional entrepreneurship and/or civic engagement work. While civic engagement and social impact approaches have similar missions to educate and empower students to “make a difference” in the world, they have different terminology, foci, and approaches (Enos, 2016). Namely, social impact contends that organizations can simultaneously achieve both financial and social return—a concept that pushes traditional financial concepts and the established boundaries of the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. Social impact also incorporates the added concepts of innovative financing models, public-private partnerships, and evidence-based approaches all designed to solve pressing social issues.

Many of the concerns raised by social impact leaders in this study, and in the social innovation literature in the past several years, are reminiscent of the rich 30-year
dialogue in the community and civic engagement literature. For example, social impact leaders in the literature are now talking about a variety of issues: (a) the need to put community first in social impact work (Harlam, Pollock, & Gonzalez, 2017); (b) the need for more interdisciplinary collaboration and pedagogical changes for greater access and inclusion (Urquilla, 2016); (c) calling for more collaboration and collective wisdom (Papi-Thornton & Warriner, 2016); and (d) the difficulty of engaging tenure-line faculty (Clark & Gonnella, 2016).

McBride and Mlyn (2015) worried that “we are creating a generation of students who view social change as synonymous with innovation, yet who are not learning the fundamental civic skills necessary for social change” (p. 1). Papi-Thornton (2016) also argued that heropreneurship—“the promotion and hero-worshipping of entrepreneurship as the ultimate sign of success” (p. 1)—has produced a proliferation of repeated and disjointed efforts by well-intentioned, but often ill-prepared, individuals. She argued the need to move beyond the individualized nature of the “social entrepreneur” to a more sustained, collaborative, and outcomes-driven, system-level approach.

Similarly, in this study, Matthew Johnson, the executive director of Brown University’s Swearer Center for Public Service, which houses their Social Innovation Initiative, said:

Many colleagues are saying, “Hey, wait a second. You social innovation folks are trying to do what we [e.g., civic engagement leaders] have been trying to do for decades, but you’re trying to do it in a way that is unjust, inequitable, and undemocratic and actually is probably making things worse in many areas.”

In AAC&U’s Summer 2016 issue of Diversity & Democracy, the authors explored how universities and colleges are connecting social innovation and civic engagement work. In the first article, McBride and Mlyn (2016) said that social innovation efforts could learn a
lot from the hard-earned work of civic engagement and that more collaboration is needed.

Next, Enos (2016) examined 10 campuses that had both Carnegie Civic Engagement classification and the Ashoka U “Changemaker” recognition for social innovation, and found that there were multiple forms, approaches, and organizational structure in this work, and the similarities in both approaches were mainly situated in the co-curriculum and the difficulty in engaging tenure-line faculty. While this study did not specifically compare civic engagement and social impact, the data showed that social impact centers are influenced by existing centers and programs on their campuses and are often siloed and/or are competing with such efforts. On some campuses, the new social innovation initiatives were even embedded within the more established civic engagement institutes. To treat these two movements as completely separate is shortsighted.

Observations from this study confirm Enos’ (2016) notion that higher education “should be helping students understand that different social problems require different approaches, and not every social problem is best addressed by creating a new business plan or recruiting more volunteers” (p. 5). Similar to the AAC&U’s series, this study demonstrated the evolving higher education landscape of social innovation and civic engagement and the need for more research to understand the landscape to improve best practices and avoid tensions and competition. Higher education institutions would do a far better job educating students—and serving vulnerable populations and society at large—if there was better coordination within and across institutions to produce students who understand both social innovation and political and civic engagement. Indeed, this study confirmed the need for increased coordination, learning, and the breaking down of silos between social impact and civic engagement.
CHAPTER 6 – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Over the past two decades, there has been a proliferation of university-based social innovation and social impact initiatives across the United States in both private and public institutions. Using qualitative research methodology and a grounded theory approach, this study broadly explored the emergence and evolution of these university social impact centers. Through the perspectives and lived experiences of 42 social impact leaders, this study developed a grounded theory model which explains that the key forces driving the phenomenon are mission-driven students, market competition, and donor support. The emergence of social impact centers can be explained by these windows of opportunity where internal, external, and cultural forces intersect, interact, and overlap with one another—within institutional-specific contexts—to produce new social impact initiatives.

While each institution boasts a unique culture and contextual characteristics, the data demonstrated that mission-driven students—exhibited through interest, demand, and purposeful lobbying efforts—were the most significant force driving the expansion of social impact on college campuses. External organizations’—such as Ashoka U and Net Impact—purposeful field-building efforts equipped students with effective strategies that advanced social impact in the higher education sector. Increasing competition across the higher education market, the pressures to attract and retain top students, and the desire to improve institutional rankings also motivated institutions to establish social impact centers. Individual donors notably played a critical role by providing funding which catalyzed the development of new initiatives and/or enhanced existing efforts. Institutional senior leadership as well as faculty were critical to launching and sustaining
social impact efforts. It was typically not just one of these influencing forces, rather a combination of them happening at an opportune time that allowed for innovation at the higher education institution.

University-based social impact centers are no longer niche. They have become mainstream, and even more striking, are used as a specific strategy for universities to differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive higher education market. Institutions now use their social impact centers as an enrollment recruitment tool to attract new students to their campus. Some universities now even have multiple social impact initiatives within their single institution. Matt Segneri, executive director of Harvard’s Social Enterprise Initiative, aptly described the evolution of the space this way:

I look at other top business schools and increasingly at other universities—whether they are located centrally or in one of the professional schools—and social impact, with social innovation and social enterprise initiatives, and it appears they take a lot of different names and forms. But, now it’s almost par for the course. What seemed at the time [launching a social impact initiative] a little crazy, now seems like it’s essential to have.

Most universities and colleges establish new centers; however, some have embedded new social innovation initiatives under existing civic engagement centers or have developed a new centralizing, coordinating unit to house multiple socially and civically oriented initiatives together. While still being concentrated on the East and West Coasts, the phenomenon has spread across the United States and there are centers in the South, Midwest, and Intermountain West. The majority of social impact centers are still located at private institutions, but in the past 10 years they are increasingly being established at public institutions and small liberal arts colleges.

A smorgasbord of social impact curriculum and co-curriculum has developed. Social impact education now expands across schools and departments, and down the
curriculum from the graduate to undergraduate level. Yet, social impact education still lacks established academic frameworks and research. The proliferation of these new social impact initiatives is additive to an already crowded university campus environment, where there already exists a plethora of community, civic, entrepreneurship, and innovation initiatives. The social impact phenomenon is representative of the specialization trend in higher education, which has created a slew of disjointed courses and crowded curricula. As a result, the executive directors and engaged faculty described feeling like they have to compete within their institutions for resources, students, and attention from senior administration and donors. The executive directors also explained that they have to be strategic about their mission, focus, and how they communicate their value to students and stakeholders in order to ensure they distinguish themselves and do not overlap with other campus initiatives. The newness of social impact also impeded centers’ ability to effectively educate and outreach to their various stakeholder groups both on- and off-campus.

The manner in which the centers evolve is heavily dependent on their funding and leadership. Centers with tenure-line faculty leaders tend to be more internal facing to campus, concentrating on academic courses, research, and the development of minors and specializations. Centers with practitioner executive directors are more external facing, and have developed experiential learning opportunities that engage students and industry and community partners. Faculty directors expressed feeling pressured to fundraise and difficulty with balancing both faculty and administrative duties. The practitioner directors conveyed the distinct need to garner more faculty buy-in and support on their campuses. Examination of leadership trends also revealed that many of the social impact centers are
still led by their founding directors, who tend to be influencers and pioneers in the social impact space. Participants expressed concern over the sustainability of the centers given they are dependent on these influential founding directors. The question remains, what will happen to university social impact work when this set of founding luminary leaders moves on?

Social impact centers have a range of funding models—consisting of a varied combination of institutional funds, private donation, endowed funds, grants and contracts, and revenue generating programs—which largely influences their operations and programming. Most executive directors described feeling constrained by limited financial sources and the pressure to fundraise and/or create new revenue generating programs to bring in additional revenue to support basic operational expenses and the expansion of new programs. However, many of the social impact centers, particularly the ones run by practitioners, described the challenges of operating within institutional bureaucracy when they ventured into innovative models, programs, or structures. The tension between institutional bureaucracy and innovation at the center level is palpable at some centers.

Indeed, social impact centers are a unique platform within universities that play distinctive convening and facilitating roles with a broad spectrum of interdisciplinary and cross-sector stakeholders. Given this cross-cutting element, some social impact centers appear to have the ability to make valuable connections across department and disciplines on-campus, and off-campus with industry, nonprofits, and philanthropy—thus bridging the gap between universities and their communities. While the form, focus, and functions of these social impact centers vary in terms of geographic focus, issues area, and approach, they have the common goal of educating students and engaging a range of
stakeholders in the pursuit of solving pressing social issues in innovative ways. They are doing this through offering myriad of courses, clubs, practicums, internships, fellowships, seed capital, competitions, incubators, convenings, and executive education. Compared to other existing socially oriented programs in higher education, the social impact centers distinctly offer the added elements of markets, financing, and data that have not been included in previous community engagement efforts.

Tony Sheldon, Executive Director of Yale’s Program on Social Enterprise, described that university social impact programs are distinctive and reflect the broader hybrid trend of using business disciplines and markets to address social issues, which had been previously relegated to the nonprofit and government sectors. Finally, social impact centers broadly facilitate student and social venture engagement, convene key stakeholders across a multitude of sectors, and create programs that seek to better the social and economic conditions in their communities.

**Discussion Summary**

Through a grounded theory approach, this study sought to broadly understand the emergence and evolution of university-based social impact centers and to tease out the current tensions and challenges. With the increased prevalence of social impact centers on college campuses, higher education institutional leaders have a vested interest in understanding the phenomenon and how it can serve larger institutional aims. What was once a unique, differentiating initiative is now considered mainstream and necessary to compete in an increasingly competitive higher education market. Plus, more established centers are now facing funding and stagnation concerns. Long-term sustainability and how these centers will evolve within their campus environments remains a question given
the tensions with funding, crowded campus environments, and as the newness of the field. For these reasons, the findings from this study provide insights for higher education senior administration and leaders of social impact initiatives. Based on the study findings, the following five conclusions are offered:

1. Social impact center leaders must be strategic about future funding models and structures to ensure sustainability.

2. Effective social impact centers are built upon their institution’s and local community’s strengths, values, and priorities.

3. Increased faculty engagement and rigorous research activity are essential to legitimizing the field and providing sustainability in the academy.

4. As social impact centers evolve in crowded campus environments, purposeful efforts, linkages, and collaboration must be made towards other entrepreneurial, civic engagement, and innovation initiatives.

5. Universities and colleges should develop new and/or use existing social impact centers more effectively to assist with larger institutional aims of enrollment management, student success, and exploring innovative models for academic and student affairs.

These findings and the following recommendations should be of value to institutional leaders who wish to understand the phenomenon, create new centers, and/or improve their existing social-oriented initiatives.

Recommendations

The findings from this study have implications for the field of higher education, social impact centers, and the social innovation space at large, from which the following
recommendations were generated. The recommendations are geared specifically towards presidents and senior administration, founding center directors, and the second or third directors in the role.

**Recommendations for Presidents and Senior Administration**

**Leverage social impact centers for larger institutional aims.** Higher education leaders should leverage the visibility and expertise of these social impact centers to enhance larger institutional aims around: (a) enrollment management for the recruitment and retention of students; (b) connecting to new community, philanthropic, and industry partners; (c) developing new donors and support; (d) developing and resourcing social impact experiential learning opportunities to enhance student success retention and completion efforts, particularly for students from underserved backgrounds; and (e) exploring innovative financing models to address college affordability, student loan debt, and completion.

**Implement social impact in public policy and law schools.** Universities and colleges should develop new social impact curricula, co-curricula, and initiatives in public policy and law school—or partner with their business schools—to both enhance the relevancy of their curricula and to attract and retain top students. The strategy of developing social impact into colleges and professional schools outside of business schools appeared to be effective for institutions in this study, namely to heighten enrollment, student success, innovation, and relevancy.

**Intentionally create entrepreneurial environments.** The study showed that senior leaders who created a culture and environment that encourages faculty, students, and practitioners to be innovative and entrepreneurial results in new initiatives.
Participants in this study specifically described feeling empowered by their campus culture to innovate and try new things. Senior leadership should cultivate an entrepreneurial environment in order to engage all campus stakeholders to explore creative ways for the higher education industry to innovate, particularly given the pressures of shifting funding models, the need to demonstrate return-on-investment of a college degree, the changing landscape of digital learning, and increase in performance-based funding models.

Recommendations for Founding Directors of New Social Impact Centers

**Adopt institutional and community values and strengths.** When establishing a new social impact center, leaders should properly explore and assess their university and community values and strengths in order to align their mission and leverage existing strengths and assets. This strategy promotes collaboration with on- and off-campus partners and brings relevancy to the center with a multitude of stakeholders. Most importantly, it leverages existing assets to enhance the center’s ability to make a positive impact. Aligning with campus and community culture proved to be critically important for successful social impact centers.

**Organizational location on campus matters.** Social impact center leaders should be mindful that where the center is organizationally housed on campus matters, and ultimately affects the center’s funding model, student outreach, and faculty engagement. Each organizational home has strengths and challenges. For example, a center that is housed out of the provost’s office most likely has enhanced institutional visibility and ability to do outreach, recruit student, and engage faculty across the institution. However, they also may be limited given the fact they do not have a direct tie
to an academic department, and do not have students, faculty, or curricula of their own. Centers housed within a professional school or college typically have closer ties to an academic department and better ability to attract students and engage faculty. They are however highly dependent on the support from the dean. In short, new leaders should give thoughtful consideration as to where they are located on campus and leverage the location that makes the most sense given the leadership dynamics, donors interest and support, and faculty engagement level.

**Must have donor and dean support.** Whether housed at a school, college, or at an institution level, centers are dependent upon senior administrative support for funding. During leadership transitions with deans, senior administration, and/or presidents, centers are vulnerable to funding cuts and the question of whether their center will align with the priorities of a new leader or administration. This illustrates the importance of building broad, cross-campus partnerships, faculty engagement, and collaboration, so as to mitigate dependency on one senior level administrator or funding source. Garnering strong support from influential donors is also helpful to enhancing stability and buffering from times of leadership transition.

**Secure an endowed donor and diversify your funding.** Endowed funds, while restrictive due to their limited annual revenue stream, provide centers with much-needed operating funds. New leaders should continually look for ways to cultivate and secure a large, multimillion-dollar donation to endow their center. An endowed center is more likely to garner support from senior administration and faculty and, most importantly, to ensure sustainability long-term. Smaller donors and foundations typically do not want to fund operational costs and would rather support new programs and exciting initiatives,
which are not possible if a center does not have the operational resources to execute such programs.

**Develop strong campus partnerships and faculty engagement.** New leaders and centers should purposefully develop partnerships that cut across departments, schools, and colleges in order to cultivate buy-in from campus communities and to assuage the tendency of academic institutions to be siloed and compete for students and resources. New center leaders, if not a faculty member, should engage tenure-line faculty in the creation of the center. By engaging faculty early in the process, they will feel more ownership and buy-in and provide legitimizing forces with other faculty. Centers built and operating separate from faculty struggle to full integrate with campuses and academic goals. Collaboration with a multitude of campus stakeholders is key to long-term effectiveness and sustainability. In short, as Damon Phillips from Columbia University’s Tamer Center for Social Enterprise aptly said:

> When you are doing things across campus in the university world, there are just even symbolically some meetings where having someone who is a full professor in the room speaking on behalf of it is helpful. Having engaged tenured-full professors is helpful for a lot of things. It really symbolizes the seriousness of the work.

**Create or recognize windows of opportunity.** Social impact leaders need to recognize that universities are complex environments with multiple stakeholder groups. Windows of opportunity, where the appropriate internal and external forces converge at the right time to produce a new initiative, are critical. To effectively launch a university-based social impact center, the leader must recognize these windows of opportunity and that they are shaped by a complex landscape of internal, external, and cultural forces as demonstrated in this study’s emergence and evolution model in Figure 6.
Recommendation for Second and Third Directors of Established Centers

Most of the recommendations for founding directors are still highly applicable to the second and third directors of social impact centers. Below are additional recommendations for social impact leaders assuming leadership of an established center in order to develop strategies for sustainability and scaling their work.

Avail diverse revenue streams and purposefully fund structures. As centers mature, leaders need to be mindful of diversifying their revenue streams so they are not dependent upon one source. As mentioned early, leadership transitions in higher education can drastically change resource allocation and if centers are solely dependent upon institutional funding, they are susceptible. Cultivating a mix of multiple donors, grants and contracts, executive education, and endowed funding is likely the funding model for sustainable social impact centers, particularly given disruption and shifting funding models in higher education.

Hone your mission and find your niche that aligns with your community.

Upon taking over the leadership of an established center, the new executive director should evaluate and identify existing strengths at the center—as well as at the school/college/or academic unit, institution, and community where they are located—in order to purposefully hone their mission, find their niche, and make it relevant to their campus and community setting. While new centers are typically exploring multiple foci and paths to social impact, more established centers should actively focus their mission and values. Depending upon funding sources and stability, the activity of clarifying mission and values may be largely driven by future funding sources. Still, center leaders should align their center with institutional and community assets in order to leverage and
amplify their own work. Simply put, a social impact center’s niche should complement those of the institution and surrounding community.

To this point, Christina Hachikian, executive director of the University of Chicago’s Rustandy Center for Social Innovation, said:

We’ve built something that was very much Booth. The Booth School has a particular way of looking at the world and way of thinking about ideas. It's got a culture and a value system, that if you don't understand, it will be very hard to be successful inside that organization. And I think that's the case at any school. Even though every business school probably looks from the outside very similar, in many ways, business schools and others on the inside, are very different.

*Cultivate partnerships with other established social impact centers.* Thus far in the university-based social impact space, there has been relatively little partnership between centers at different institutions. As established centers hone their missions and expertise, directors should explore mutually beneficial partnerships with social impact centers at other institutions. While institutional partnerships and memorandums of understanding can sometimes be difficult to establish, there may be untapped opportunities of potential collaboration, shared learning, and partnerships between social impact centers at different campuses. To this point, Marta Urquilla, deputy director of Georgetown’s Beeck Center Social Impact + Innovation, asked:

How are we measuring our success, and how do we hold ourselves accountable? I think that that’s an interesting place of work for centers to engage with one another. If you connect all the dots, and add up all these efforts, what does it translate into in terms of outcomes for society? Can we tell that story? What do we need to be doing to be able to tell that story?

*Purposefully elevate your work to enhance your institution’s goals.* Social impact centers should elevate their ideas, expertise, and impact their institution’s goals. Purposefully engaging senior leadership in your work will build additional partnerships,
potential funding, and relevance of your center for the broader university. There is also ample opportunity to enact social innovation for the broader field of higher education.

**Diversify your faculty and staff.** The field of social impact lacks diversity in leadership and student engagement. Social impact directors should purposefully hire staff, faculty, and engage students who come from underserved populations and represent diversity of socioeconomic status, race, religion, sexual orientation, and geographic location. Diversity and inclusion of broad perspectives is the only way to effectively develop innovative solutions that appropriately serve and empower all citizens.

**Strengths of the Study**

Contemporary social and economic conditions show there are widening gaps in income, inequality, and access to opportunities across the rich/poor, immigrant/non-immigrant, religious/secular, urban/rural, and racial divides. These divides became overwhelmingly apparent during the 2016 presidential election cycle and appear to be intensifying in our current political climate. Strikingly, in 2017, 82% of wealth generated in the world went to the richest 1% of the global population; while the 3.7 billion people that make up the poorest half of the world saw no increase in their wealth (Ratcliff, 2018). With the massive accumulation of wealth in the top 1%, it is imperative to seek solutions and policies to unlock this private capital to better serve the broader population, which is the key aim of many social innovation efforts. Given the increasing prevalence and importance of social innovation efforts, this study uniquely filled a gap in the literature about university-based social innovation and offered a distinctly broad perspective on the phenomenon.
Broadly, the social impact space is keenly focused on entrepreneurial, policy, and technology innovations that will engage the private sector and enhance the effectiveness of the social sector in the pursuit of assisting the most vulnerable populations. Social innovation efforts coupled with drastic societal changes in data and technology in the 21st century global knowledge economy, further illustrates the relevance of this study and the necessity of higher education institutions to adapt and incorporate these new approaches. In this context, understanding the evolving capacity of higher education institutions to educate future leaders and to engage cross-sectors stakeholders in social innovation is a matter of universities serving their public role of solving society’s most pressing social issues, particularly at this time of disruption and widening inequality.

**Limitations to the Study**

While the research design used for this study sought validity and trustworthiness, there are inevitably limitations to this study. First, this study was focused on a nascent field that lacks established academic literature, frameworks, definitions, and understanding specific to social impact and social innovation. The new nature of this subject in the academy is both a strong rationale for the need for the study and a limitation. While every effort was made to draw parallels and frameworks from university, community, and civic engagement and social entrepreneurship literature, there will inevitably be limitations to fully understand and analyze the phenomenon given the newness and lack of development. Additionally, social impact centers are relatively new and limited in number, which restricted the ability to gather expansive and in-depth data across all institutional types and a variety of geographic locations. Given this limitation,
the research methodology was designed to draw out broad themes to increase the usefulness and relevance of the findings.

An additional limitation of this study is the pressure on social impact center leaders to preserve their institutional reputations. Higher education institutions are operating in extremely competitive environments, so participants may have been reticent to share challenges, weaknesses, funding structures, and obstacles to protect their institutional reputation and place in the market. Other secondary data gathered in this study, such as marketing materials, online blogs, and organizational documents, may also have reflected a particular attention to institutional image and cannot be considered totally unbiased.

Lastly, my role as both a researcher and practitioner in the social impact field must be taken into consideration. Given that the number of social impact centers is still relatively small and could be considered competitive, my professional affiliation with my center at the University of Utah could be considered a limitation because it may have impacted my interactions with study participants. Participants may have been reluctant to share “trade secrets,” and therefore, the data may present certain limitations. In addition to my dual role as a practitioner and researcher in the social impact field, my conscious and subconscious biases and preconceived notions of the work may have skewed my research approach, collection, and analysis of the data. As a researcher, I made every attempt to frame my research in grounded theory research methodology and used the triangulation of data to mitigate personal biases. However, my role in the social impact space and these potential personal limitations must be acknowledged.
Implications for Future Research

This study stimulated myriad of thoughts, tensions, and challenges that necessitate further study to deepen knowledge and understanding of social innovation in higher education. The clear role of external field-building organizations in the social impact phenomenon, and the role of centers and institutes in crowded campus environments that have added to incoherent, disjointed curriculum and co-curriculum warrant further study, to name a few. Specifically, there is a need for future research, particularly around the notion of these centers exhibiting a new type of engagement—coined in this study as social impact engagement. And, it can be further explored whether, if in this context of social impact engagement, there are any universities utilizing their social impact centers to address much-needed innovation and change within their own institutions and the broader higher education sector at large.

Field-building Literature

The university-based social impact phenomenon would be an interesting case study to further inform literature on effective field-building efforts. This study surfaced the clear finding that the field-building organizations of Ashoka, Net Impact, and the Skoll Foundation used successful strategies to provide financial support, educate, and train students to lobby universities and colleges to adopt social innovation. Future research could include a deeper analysis into the specific strategies, networks, and funding that was used over the past 20 years to advance social entrepreneurship and social impact in society and in higher education. Further, future research framed in the context of social movements and field-building could examine the broader emergence of
the social innovation movement in society and its utilization of the higher education sector to galvanize the movement, which would demonstrate larger higher education institutional roles in society.

**Specialization in Higher Education Curriculum**

Upon examining the overall landscape of social impact centers across the various institutional types, despite having energy and momentum, it became clear that centers operate in crowded campus environments and often have to compete within their institutions for resources, students, and attention. This study uncovered a glimpse into the challenges of the specialization of the higher education curriculum, and further study is warranted to more fully understand how this specialization is impacting the broad range of initiatives, student success, retention, and completion. Further study in this area would enhance the understanding of proliferating centers, courses, and specialization of the curriculum, particularly at a time of disruption, shifting funding models, and resource constraints in higher education.

**A New Type of Engagement—Social Impact Engagement**

Based on the literature review and the data from this study, I propose that social impact centers potentially demonstrate a new type of university engagement—which I coin as *social impact engagement*. Building upon community, civic, and democratic engagement literature, social impact engagement exhibits the added element of leveraging markets and private capital and cross-sector approaches to solving social issues—namely the notion that social ventures can simultaneously achieve both financial and social returns. Social impact engagement involves key thematic approaches that build upon, but are different from, traditional civic and community engagement and
entrepreneurship work—specifically the infusion of data science, innovative financing models, public-private partnerships, and evidence-based approaches in the pursuit to solve pressing social issues.

An increasing number of universities are educating and engaging their students and their communities—often through these social impact centers—around the notion of a double-bottom line and the useful application of business innovation, data science, and innovative financial structures. Social impact engagement is shaped by 21st century trends, such as the blurring and blending of the public, private, and nonprofit sectors; Millennials’ deep interest in social purpose; innovative financing models; and the development of new technology and data science which have ultimately produced new social ventures and engagement. As anchor institutions in their communities, universities exhibit a distinct advantage to playing an increasingly comprehensive role in this new landscape of blurring sectors and the need for institutions to demonstrate leadership, convening power, research and evaluation expertise, and resources.

Universities mounting role as anchors institutions are proving to be particularly useful in serving in objective education and research roles, and bringing together state and local governments, nonprofits, philanthropists, and private sector investors to structure and implement social impact projects. For example, organizations such as Harvard University’s Government Performance Lab and University of Utah’s Sorenson Impact Center are engaged in the feasibility, structuring, project management, and evaluation stages of complex social impact bonds (e.g., Pay for Success). Social impact bonds are defined as innovative financing mechanisms in which governments enter into
agreements with social service providers, such as nonprofits, and investors to fund the delivery of pre-defined social outcomes (Social Finance, 2011).

While in their infancy, experts are cautiously optimistic that social impact bonds, along with other emerging innovative financing tools, can provide creative ways for governments and service providers to fund, experiment, and gain more knowledge about the most effective and efficient social interventions (Gustafsson-Wright, Gardiner, & Putcha, 2015). These innovative approaches necessitate complex cross-sector partnerships—involving business, government, and nonprofits sectors—that require rigorous measurement and evaluation. University faculty are engaging in applied academic research through these social impact bond projects that allow faculty to connect theory to practice and test knowledge in real-time in the social sector.

Other types of social impact engagement may include: (a) universities acting in intermediary, convening, and facilitating roles in social impact project; (b) social impact centers facilitating partnerships and the connection of capital to social entrepreneurs to launch new social ventures; (c) social impact centers providing common spaces for incubation and innovation of new ideas focused on solving social issues; and (d) universities working across levels of government, nonprofits, and philanthropy to educate and enhance their social sector interventions. Traditionally, in the past, universities engaged in two-way partnerships with university-industry or university-government. Now they appear to engage in rather complex, cross-cutting partnerships like university-government-nonprofit-industry that appear to be evolving and new. For example, venture philanthropy groups now engage and resource universities to incubate ideas; it is no longer just the federal government investing in university research or the development of
research parks. And, in this new social impact engagement space the intent is to improve the social sector, not just spin-off technology for commercialization aims. Perhaps it is a combination of traditional university community engagement, entrepreneurship, and technology and commercialization with the added social aim towards advancing the social sector.

Further study into universities engaged in innovative financing tools, such as social impact bonds and impact investing, as well as nonprofit innovation, and broader government performance and innovation projects could further illuminate this notion that universities play a distinct role of social impact engagement in the emerging social impact space. Social impact centers’ work is evolving, morphing, and appears to be taking on new forms of student and community engagement that also illustrates a microcosm of larger societal trends and blurring of sectors, while still being part of this longer arc of university community engagement and public purpose. Indeed, social impact centers now engage with a distinct set of cross-cutting stakeholders from the private, public, and nonprofits sectors driven by this concept of the ability of social ventures to simultaneously achieve financial and social benefit.

Yet, much of the social impact work is so new that there is limited scholarly work, frameworks, and definitions. Social impact centers’ increasing presence on university campuses appears to demonstrate a significant interest in the space and long-term sustainability, thus enhancing the need for more understanding. What roles are universities playing in this shifting world of blurring sectors and disruption in their community’s governments, nonprofits, and businesses? How are they educating students for a future world that necessitates the skills to operate in multiple sector contexts,
diminishing public investment in the social sector, and increasing private sector influence? Indeed, how do we better understand the fact that universities can serve distinct anchor institutions roles of facilitation, convening, education, and leadership for students and communities across sectors to incubate ideas and solution to solve social issues? Social impact engagement should be considered noteworthy of future study to fully understand how it is similar, differs, or converges with existing types of community, civic, and democratic engagement, and how this work informs teaching, research, and service.

**Conclusion**

If the social impact space truly exercises a commitment to the mission of social good, these centers must include and engage a broader set of diverse perspectives and voices. Given the centers are heavily located in private institutions, this is a striking challenge. Plus, these social impact centers exist within larger institutional systems that are plagued with issues of access, affordability, and inclusion of underserved student populations. Complex social issues not only demand multi-sector approaches, but also the inclusion and leadership of a diverse set of people across racial, socioeconomic, and geographic locations. Currently, our centers fall short. What is the core purpose and the ability to enact inclusive and effective change, if university-based social impact centers do not include the very voices and perspective of those most impacted by our most complex social challenges? Higher education institutions must do better.

However, at a time of disruption and shifting funding higher education models, social impact centers illustrate change is possible. Much like the advent of research institutes and interdisciplinary degrees, social impact centers are a mark of innovation
within the academy—a response to Millennial interest and social sector need. Social impact centers located in business schools are bringing in the nonprofit and philanthropic angle to market-oriented business curriculum, while public policy schools are adding in concepts of innovative financing and market principles to enhance the public and nonprofit sector-oriented frameworks. In some cases, schools and colleges are collaborating to create joint minors and specializations to match student interest and social demand. In some cases, this phenomenon appears to be blurring the lines between public, private, and nonprofit spheres, but also the academic boundaries within university units, curricula, and co-curricula.

University-based social impact centers are still relatively new and evolving organizational units within the academy—representative of the need to have structures within higher education institutions that can be nimble, flexible, and responsive to student interest. It is not only the innovative concepts in the social impact field that push traditional boundaries, but also the organizational unit of a center/institute/initiative that provides pathways for higher education institutions to respond to the market with innovation and flexibility. The subject matter layered on with the organization unit offers up a contemporary view of the cascading pressures and inflections within higher education institutions. Social impact centers exhibit the intersectionality of host of issues plaguing higher education, such as resource constraints, access, academic silos, specialization, and bureaucracy versus innovation. Also, through their strong focus on co-curricula transformative learning experiences, the sustained debate of whether the purpose of higher education is to educate students for future careers or for purposeful engaged citizenry. Maybe, social impact engagement teaches students they can do both?
Indeed, social impact centers are symptomatic of the recognition that higher education exists in a market place and will continue to be pressured to respond. Perhaps the social impact phenomenon reflects the acknowledgement of market pressure, against the backdrop of diminishing public finance, and the sobering reality of a shifting financing model. An examination of this phenomenon forces us to ask an important question: how does the academy square the shift towards the market with a fundamental institutional commitment to serving the public good? Social impact centers are a microcosm of the tension that exists between the marketization of higher education and the pressure to hold true to public purposes—and ultimately, whether or not institutions can effectively mediate the two pressures.

Ultimately, it was mission-driven students and institutions responding to market competition that drove the social impact phenomenon at U.S. universities and colleges. Representative of the double-bottom line—it was both mission and markets that propelled this movement in higher education. Considering the energy and newness of the social impact phenomenon, it is tempting to categorize it as new or separate—a thing unto itself. By definition the phenomenon almost depends on the newness, the innovation, and being cutting edge—it would be cognitive dissonance to think otherwise. However, to claim the phenomenon is wholly new would be to miss the broader picture and holistic understanding of how higher education institutions have evolved over time in educating students, advancing knowledge, and serving their communities. The social impact phenomenon does bring in the new notion of the ability to simultaneously achieve both financial and social return with innovative elements of cross-sector approaches, financing, and the use of data.
However, it takes a certain level of organizational humility to recognize that these university-based social impact centers are part of the sustained, broader arc of historical university engagement to serve a larger public purpose. In order for university-based social impact centers to enact system-level change, in both historical and future contexts, they should be more purposeful in utilizing their expertise for social innovation and social impact engagement within their own institutions. Looking forward, particularly given shifting funding models, disruption of the higher education sector, public concern with college affordability, and widening gaps in inequality and degree completion, social innovation in higher education is essential.
Appendix A

University-Based Social Impact Centers From Skoll Center Report

### UNIVERSITY-BASED SOCIAL IMPACT CENTRES CURRENTLY DO FOUR PRIMARY THINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Develop the next generation of social impact leaders</th>
<th>Engage the wider student body</th>
<th>Generate actionable insights for practitioners</th>
<th>Convene practitioners and researchers to support learning and innovation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Invest in the highest-potential students and alumni who are most likely to be leaders and senior managers in the field of social impact</td>
<td>• Educate a large portion of the student and alumni population in how to engage in social impact activities over the course of their lives</td>
<td>• Establish international networks of researchers and practitioners to explore key challenges and disseminate findings</td>
<td>• Provide a space and structure for practitioners and knowledge generators to exchange ideas both within, and across, institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Full scholarships for aspiring or veteran practitioners</td>
<td>• General academic courses</td>
<td>• Case studies and other curriculum development materials</td>
<td>• Conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Specialized elective courses</td>
<td>• Specific topics (e.g., philanthropy, board membership)</td>
<td>• Articles for practitioners (e.g., in magazines)</td>
<td>• Talks/webinars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Business plan competitions</td>
<td>• Clubs</td>
<td>• Applied research on key topics</td>
<td>• Executive education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Incubators and innovation labs</td>
<td>• Advisory networks for students</td>
<td>• Creating international networks of researchers and practitioners for collaboration</td>
<td>• Alumni outreach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Targeted mentoring and coaching programs</td>
<td>• Internships</td>
<td></td>
<td>• General awareness and advertisement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Post-graduate fellowships</td>
<td>• Alumni outreach</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Loan forgiveness</td>
<td>• Cross-school enrollment courses for social enterprise topics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Seed capital</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Alumni outreach and mentoring</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

### ALL BENCHMARKED CENTRES ENGAGE IN A BROAD SWATH OF ACTIVITIES THAT SUPPORT SOCIAL IMPACT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case competitions</th>
<th>Seed funding</th>
<th>Social impact fellowships</th>
<th>Incubator spaces</th>
<th>Career advice and support</th>
<th>Loan forgiveness</th>
<th>Internships and consulting projects</th>
<th>Funding for experiential learning</th>
<th>Social impact courses</th>
<th>Academic research</th>
<th>Case writing</th>
<th>Magazine articles</th>
<th>Conferences</th>
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<tr>
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</table>
Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. Participant Background Questions
   a) What is your background?
   b) What brought you to the center?
   c) What is your current role?

2. Emergence of Center
   a) Can you tell me about how your center was established?
   b) External drivers?
   c) Internal drivers?
   d) Key stakeholders?
   e) Funding structure?
   f) How does funding influence initiatives?
   g) Organizational structure in HED institution?
   h) Mission?

3. Current Forms
   a) Initiatives?
   b) External Partnerships?
   c) Research?
   d) Curriculum?
   e) Co-curriculum?

4. Evolution
   a) How have initiatives evolved at the center?
   b) What influenced these changes?
   c) Have strategies changed over time? And, why?
   d) Change in leadership?
   e) Changes in funding structures?

5. On- and Off-Campus Engagement
   a) To what extent, if any, do you interact with other similar on-campus partners?
   b) To what extent, if any, do you interact with other similar off-campus partners?
   c) What are your most pressing challenges? Emergent tensions?

6. Social Impact
   a) How do you define social impact?
   b) What term is most useful to describe the work you do?
## Appendix C

### List of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Center</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robert Tomasko</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>American University</td>
<td>Social Enterprise Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marina Kim</td>
<td>Co-Founder and Executive Director</td>
<td>Ashoka U</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathew Johnson</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Brown University</td>
<td>Swearer Center for Public Service – Social Innovation Initiative within Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzie Pollack</td>
<td>Associate Director, Social Innovation Initiative</td>
<td>Brown University</td>
<td>Swearer Center for Public Service – Social Innovation Initiative within Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie Gripne</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Colorado State University</td>
<td>Impact Finance Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damon Phillips</td>
<td>Co-Director</td>
<td>Columbia University</td>
<td>Tamer Center for Social Enterprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce Usher</td>
<td>Co-Director, Professor of Professional Practice</td>
<td>Columbia University</td>
<td>Tamer Center for Social Enterprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy Clark</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Duke University</td>
<td>Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Gordon</td>
<td>Founder and Director</td>
<td>Emerson College</td>
<td>Engagement Lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Roberts</td>
<td>Academic Director</td>
<td>Emory University</td>
<td>Social Enterprise @ Goizueta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marta Urquilla</td>
<td>Deputy Director</td>
<td>Georgetown University</td>
<td>Beeck Center Social Impact + Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Trybus</td>
<td>Managing Director</td>
<td>Georgetown University</td>
<td>Center for Social Impact Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Wood</td>
<td>Director of IRI Initiative</td>
<td>Harvard University</td>
<td>Initiative for Responsible Investment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Koenig</td>
<td>Director, Strategy &amp; Operations</td>
<td>Harvard University</td>
<td>Harvard Government Performance Lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt Segneri</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Harvard University</td>
<td>HBS Social Enterprise Initiative &amp; Impact Collaboratory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Asbury</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Indiana University</td>
<td>Institute for Social Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia Rabesahala</td>
<td>Faculty Director for Social Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>Middlebury College</td>
<td>Center for Creativity, Innovation, and Social Entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason Bauman</td>
<td>Policy Manager</td>
<td>Massachusetts Institute of Technology</td>
<td>Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly Sluis</td>
<td>VP of Student Affairs</td>
<td>North Central College</td>
<td>Center for Social Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara Minard</td>
<td>Executive Professor of Entrepreneurship &amp; Innovation</td>
<td>Northeastern University</td>
<td>Social Enterprise Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Title</td>
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<td>Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Megan Kashner</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Northwestern</td>
<td>Social Impact at Kellogg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt Statler</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>New York University</td>
<td>Undergraduate Program in Social Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott Taitel</td>
<td>Director, Clinical Professor</td>
<td>New York University</td>
<td>Social Impact, Innovation, and Investment Specialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirk O. Hanson</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Santa Clara University</td>
<td>Markkula Center for Applied Ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thane Kreiner</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Santa Clara University</td>
<td>Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neil Malhotra</td>
<td>Faculty Director</td>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>Center for Social Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim Meredith</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society &amp; Stanford Social Innovation Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noopur Vyas</td>
<td>Associate Director</td>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>Center for Social Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristi Raube</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>University of California, Berkeley</td>
<td>Institute for Business &amp; Social Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhavna Sivanand</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>University of California, Los Angeles</td>
<td>Impact@Anderson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christina Hachikian</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>University of Chicago</td>
<td>Rustandy Center for Social Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert H. Gertner</td>
<td>Faculty Director</td>
<td>University of Chicago</td>
<td>Rustandy Center for Social Innovation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark Meaney</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>University of Colorado, Boulder</td>
<td>Center for Education and Social Responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rishi Moudgil</td>
<td>Founding Director</td>
<td>University of Michigan</td>
<td>Center for Social Impact</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dennis Culhane</td>
<td>Director &amp; Professor</td>
<td>University of Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sherry Kuhlman</td>
<td>Managing Director</td>
<td>University of Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Wharton Social Impact Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ariel Schwartz</td>
<td>Director, Distance Learning</td>
<td>University of Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Center for Social Impact Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nick Ashburn</td>
<td>Senior Director for Impact</td>
<td>University of Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Wharton Social Impact Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meeta Kothare</td>
<td>Managing Director</td>
<td>University of Texas, Austin</td>
<td>Social Innovation Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeremy Keele</td>
<td>President &amp; CEO</td>
<td>University of Utah</td>
<td>Sorenson Impact Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christine Mahoney</td>
<td>Director of Social</td>
<td>University of Virginia</td>
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<td>Pay for Success Lab</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tony Sheldon</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Yale University</td>
<td>Program on Social Enterprise, Social Impact Lab, Net Impact</td>
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Appendix D

List of U.S. Universities With Student-Led Funds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Name of Organization</th>
<th>Established Date</th>
<th>Legal Structure</th>
<th>Fund Size</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brown University</td>
<td>Socially Responsible Investment Fund</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Endowment</td>
<td>$13,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bryant University</td>
<td>Archway Investment Fund (AIF)</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td></td>
<td>$1,300,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Columbia University</td>
<td>Columbia Impact Investing Initiative</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>501(c)(3)</td>
<td>$80,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Columbia University</td>
<td>Micromedia Fund</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>501(c)(3)</td>
<td>$250k for current ESG fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSU Northridge</td>
<td>Class - FIN 491BH A &amp; B</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>501(c)(3)</td>
<td>$100,000+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dartmouth</td>
<td>Social Venture Fund</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>DAF Account</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duke University</td>
<td>Case i3</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Univ. endowment</td>
<td>$1.74 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emory University</td>
<td>Emory Impact Investing Group</td>
<td>2014</td>
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<td>$75,000</td>
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<td>Harvard University</td>
<td>Harvard College Impact Investing Group</td>
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<td>Haverford College</td>
<td>Microfinance and Impact Investing Initiative (MEI)</td>
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<td>$160,000</td>
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<td>Indiana University</td>
<td>Kelley School of Business Hoosier Social Impact Fund</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>501(c)(3)</td>
<td>$250k for current ESG fund</td>
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<td>NU Impact Investing Initiative (NUIII)</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>NYU</td>
<td>NYU Impact Investing Fund</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Univ. endowment</td>
<td>$1.74 million</td>
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<td>NYU</td>
<td>NYU Stern Investment Analysis Group</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Separately managed portfolio through external brokerage account</td>
<td>$30,000, but some held as cash</td>
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<td>Santa Clara University</td>
<td>Impact Capital, Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>1997</td>
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<tr>
<td>Simon Fraser University</td>
<td>The Beedle Endowment Asset Management (BEAM) Fund</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Impact Assets holds assets, administers funds based on student &amp; I.C. rec.</td>
<td>$16.7 mm for SIAS (graduate) $6.4 mm for BEAM (undegrad)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>GSB Impact Fund</td>
<td>2015</td>
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<td>Evergreen fund, initial grant of $50k; seeking additional funds to create self-sustainable fund</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Dayton</td>
<td>Hanley Sustainability Fund (HSF)</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td></td>
<td>$115,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Michigan</td>
<td>Social Venture Fund</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Wharton Social Venture Fund (WSVF)</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>$150 million in equity crowdfunding</td>
<td>$100M Funding comes from equity crowdfunding from OurCrowd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Wharton Impact Investing Partners (WIIP)</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Utah</td>
<td>Sorenson Impact Center (University Venture Fund I &amp; II, Sorenson Global Impact Investing)</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Sub-committee of the Investment Committee of Dwight Hall</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Virginia</td>
<td>Darden Impact Venture</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td></td>
<td>$60,000 (2 Jefferson Trust of the Virginia University, 30,000 award)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Virginia</td>
<td>Darden Impact Ventures</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td></td>
<td>$250,000-$750,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yale University</td>
<td>Dwight Hall Socially Responsible Investment Fund</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

*This list is not intended to be all encompassing, rather an example of the institutions with student-led funds.*
Appendix E

Maps of Social Impact Center Locations

Geographic location of social impact centers.

Close-up map of social impact centers on the East Coast.
Close-up map of social impact centers on the West Coast.
Appendix F

Glossary

**Benefit Corporation**: A benefit corporation is a new class or corporation that voluntarily meets higher standards or corporate purpose, accountability, and transparency. Benefit corporations: (a) have a corporate purpose to create a material positive impact on society and the environment; (b) are required to consider the impact of their decisions not only on shareholders but also on workers, community, and the environment; and (c) are required to make available to the public an annual benefit report that assesses their overall social and environmental performance against a third-party standard.

**Corporate Social Responsibility**: Corporate initiative to assess and take responsibility for the company’s effects on the environment and impact on social welfare. The term generally applies to company efforts that go beyond what may be required by regulators or environmental protection groups.

**Data Driven**: Data driven refers to a process or activity that is spurred on by data, as opposed to being driven by mere intuition or personal experience.

**Development Impact Bonds**: Results-based contracts in which private investors provide pre-financing for social programs and public-sector agencies pay back investors their principal plus a return if, and only if, these programs succeed in delivering social outcomes.

**Due Diligence**: Research and analysis done to verify the financial and programmatic capacity of a company or organization in preparation for an agreement or transaction.
**Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG):** a set of standards for a company’s operations that socially conscious investors use to screen investments for socially responsible practices in environmental, social, and governance.

**Evidence-Based Programs:** A program is judged to be evidence-based if evaluation research shows that it produces the expected positive results. Programs that use scientific or quasi-scientific methods to drive organizational improvement.

**Feasibility:** Prior to launching a Pay for Success transaction, stakeholders frequently conduct a formal inquiry regarding the prospective use of PFS financing mechanisms. Outcomes, evidence, and potential savings are assessed with the goal of achieving consensus as to whether and how to proceed with structuring a project.

**Impact Investing:** Impact investing is a strategy that works to leverage the power of capital to create positive change. Impact investing specifically is investing capital with the objective of achieving measurable positive social and/or environmental impact alongside financial returns.

**Public-Private Partnerships:** A long-term contract between a private party and a government entity, for providing a public asset or service, in which the private party bears significant risk and management responsibility, and remuneration is linked to performance.

**Social Benefit Content:** Content included in higher education courses and curriculum that contains a focus on social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, social innovation, and social impact.

**Social Entrepreneurship:** The pursuit of sustainable solutions to problems in society. Social entrepreneurship is a process that can take place in different organizational
contexts: a charity, a commercial organization, a government organization, a community organization, or through a new social venture. It is characterized by a set of principles that are typically present: focus on value creation not capture, focus on innovation not the status quo, focus on sustainable solutions not sustainable organizations, and focus on empowerment of participants not control.

Social Enterprise: A social enterprise is an organization that applies commercial strategies to maximize improvements in human and environmental well-being, rather than maximizing profits for external shareholders. Social enterprises do not aim to offer any benefit to their investors, except where they believe that doing so will ultimately further their capacity to realize their social and environmental goals.

Social Impact Bonds: A public-private partnership in which investors provide upfront capital to scale prevention-focused social interventions. Government repays the upfront capital ploys a modest return only if the intervention produces measurable social impact.

Social Impact Center: An umbrella term to describe a variety of university-based social initiatives, programs, curriculum, activities, centers, and institutes.

Social Innovation: A social innovation is a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than current solutions. The value created accrues primarily to society rather than to private individuals.

Social Impact: Changes in economic, social, cultural, environmental, and/or political conditions due to specific actions and behavioral changes by individuals and families, communities, organizations, and/or society and systems.
Social Return on Investment (SRI): SRI is an outcomes-based measurement tool that helps organizations to understand and quantify the social, environmental, and economic value they are creating.

Socially Responsible Investing: Socially responsible investing typically refers to a subset of the field of investing where publicly traded stocks are removed from a portfolio (screening) when they do not meet the environmental, social, or governance goals of the client. Conversely, equities can be sought out for inclusion in the portfolio that supports the client’s social or environmental mission.

Social Venture: A term used to describe a broad spectrum of organizations that seek to do social good. Social venture may include a socially-focused for-profit business, a benefit corporation, an innovative nonprofit with earned income stream, and philanthropy that could do venture philanthropy or impact investing.

Triple Bottom Line: An accounting framework for sustainability, attributed to John Elkington, which takes into account social, ecological, and financial dimensions. The Triple Bottom Line is often referred to as “people, profit, and planet.”

Definitions taken from the following sources:
http://www.confluencephilanthropy.org/Impact-Investing-101#Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)
http://ppp.worldbank.org/public-private-partnership/overview/what-are-public-private-partnerships
https://www.techopedia.com/definition/18687/data-driven
http://socialimpact.umich.edu/about/mission-purpose/

https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact


https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_venture
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