



# Social Engagement as Entrepreneurship

by E. KINNEY ZALESNE

To build on the tremendous progress Hillel has made over the last decade in engaging Jewish students, we are developing plans to take the organization to the next level. To do that, we are exploring the latest thinking in nonprofit and business strategy — what leading-edge nonprofit thinkers call “Social Entrepreneurship.”

What is Social Entrepreneurship, exactly? And what could it mean for Hillel?

## Social Entrepreneurship

It is best to consider Social Entrepreneurship in comparison to its more traditional nonprofit counterpart, sometimes known as “service provision.” Let me give an example from the non-Jewish, nonprofit world.

Before coming to Hillel, I was President of College Summit, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing the college enrollment rate of low-income students. When College Summit started in 1995, most nonprofit organizations in the

college access space were “service providers.” The trajectory of such organizations usually went something like this:

1. See a critical need to help more low-income students go to college.
2. Design programs to offer college access services (tutoring, test prep, college counseling, financial aid) to as many low-income students as possible.
3. Realize quickly how expensive — and varyingly successful — this work is.
4. Scale back the organization’s focus to a smaller group of students — usually the academic top tier.
5. Feel significant ambivalence regarding the rest of the students. Lament that they aren’t being served. Subtly (or not so subtly) start blaming funders for giving too few resources to reach those students in the deep ways they need. Even more disturbingly, start blaming the students themselves — or their schools, parents or society — for the overriding, complex social problems we can’t possibly be expected to solve.

**The End Result:** Services (often good ones) to the academic top tier. Sporadic, anecdotal services to the rest. Frustration among professionals that although they do great work, they are not truly making change. Diffuse finger-pointing at funders, families and society. And ultimately, failure of the mission: no significant increase in the college enrollment rate of low-income students.

Frustrated by that cycle, College Summit’s founder tried a different approach, called social entrepreneurship. The essence of this approach is as follows:

1. Identify the problem to be solved. (For College Summit, the under-enrollment of low-income talent.)
2. Formulate a strategy, based on in-depth research and experience, to advance a solution. (College Summit went after the mid-tier students, since they had the most to gain in terms of college enrollment and were most likely to influence the overall culture of college attendance.)
3. Set clear measurements of success, to which the organization holds itself

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**HILLEL IS AIMING TO STRENGTHEN JEWISH IDENTITY TO THE POINT WHERE STUDENTS ARE NOT ASKING "IS JUDAISM WORTH LIVING?" BUT "HOW DO YOU LIVE YOUR JUDAISM?"**

accountable. (For College Summit, the lead metric was college enrollment, with a host of “sub-indicators” such as partner school and college return rates, funds raised, employee satisfaction, etc.)

- 4. Measure success regularly — and adjust, or celebrate, accordingly.

**The Results:** It worked. College Summit students now enroll in college at nearly twice the rate of low-income high school graduates nationwide, and they stay in college at the remarkable rate of 80 percent. (And these were the *mid-tier* students.)

Funders swooped in. Between 1999 and 2004, College Summit’s budget grew from under \$500,000 to over \$7 million — mainly because we now spoke and acted like the investors we wanted to attract. We always led with the heart — there is no more stirring story than disadvantaged youth beating the odds — but now we could offer funders *more* than just faith.

And, of course, staff morale soared. Professionals had always been drawn to College Summit for the mission, but once they also had a clear sense of what was expected of them and how their roles fit into the larger organizational strategy, employee satisfaction, productivity and teamwork rose to levels that stunned even us.

**What Does This Have to Do with Hillel?**

Hillel is not starting where College Summit did. Far from it. Hillel is already a

mature organization that has undergone remarkable growth and transformation over the past ten years. But as Hillel thinks through how to move to the next level, particularly with regard to engaging more students, it is valuable to examine the merits, and the limitations, of the Social Entrepreneurship approach.

The parallels are compelling. For example:

- Both Hillel and organizations like College Summit seek *culture change*. College Summit seeks to boost college attendance among low-income youth to the point where students are not asking each other “Are you going to college?” but “Where are you going to college?” Similarly, Hillel is aiming to strengthen Jewish identity to the point where students are not asking “Is Judaism worth living?” but “How do you live your Judaism?”
- In the areas of both college access and Jewish identity, it is tempting to start from student needs, and quickly become overwhelmed by the desire (or sense of responsibility) to satisfy them all. But that approach too often results, as described above, in programs for the easiest-to-serve. It also engenders a maddening cycle — for professionals and funders alike — of hope, frustration, blame, resolve, exasperation and finger-pointing all over again.
- In both cases, social entrepreneurship

brings a great deal to the enterprise. After all, entrepreneurship is about seeing value where others don’t. Just as College Summit works because it sees value in low-income students that colleges don’t see, can Hillel be the engine that shows Jewish college students the tremendous value in Judaism that today they do not see?

But there are limitations to the model, too:

- First, organizations like College Summit had the luxury of choosing their targeted, strategic interventions because other programs already existed that served low-income students. By contrast, Hillel has both the blessing and the responsibility of being the locus of the entire Jewish community’s expectations for services to college students. (If not us, who?)
- Second, college access has a built-in measure of success: college enrollment. We could count within eighteen months of College Summit’s engagement with students whether the students had enrolled. By contrast, it is very difficult to agree on what success looks like vis-à-vis Jewish “intervention” in college.

**What Hillel is Doing About It**

To wrestle with these questions, among many others, Hillel has begun a comprehensive, year-long strategic planning process involving all of our stakeholders and as many college students as will talk to us.

Given the rapid changes over the last generation both in Hillel and in the Jewish student population, towards what should Hillel deploy its tremendous assets in order to deliver for the future? In other words, what core problem is Hillel trying to solve?

How can Hillel gather the profound, varied wisdom of professionals, funders, advisors and students to determine the most strategic ways to maximize Jewish life on campus?

What is success? And how will we know whether we are on the right path to get there?

These are the types of questions that well-run businesses are very familiar with, and that nonprofits have begun to ask themselves both in order to run better and to compete more effectively before funders who want to engender both community and measurable results.

Stay tuned. Offer up your best thoughts and ideas. Imagine with us what new progress Hillel might achieve in the next decade. Hillel’s ability to answer these questions wisely may well make a significant difference for the Jewish future. ✿